

## Chapter 1

Jeremiah Stokely sat straight up in bed and leaned forward to look out the window. He caught a glimpse of an ancient red pickup truck rattling into the cemetery behind the First Baptist Church. For two weeks, workers had been building a cement block tool shed. Their equipment, mowers, shovels, rakes and wheelbarrows waited under a big plastic sheet, which sparkled with drops from last night's spring rain. It wasn't the new shed, but the old one, that fired Jeremiah's imagination. It now stood abandoned just outside the cemetery fence.

He threw down the old *National Geographic* he had been reading. Of the dozens he owned, it was one of his favorites. This issue, March 1991, had a story about New Mexico's Lechuguilla Cave. He bounced across the room for a closer look.

As he watched, three men began moving tools into the new shed. He could no longer contain his curiosity. He jumped into his jeans and T-shirt, slapped on his Cincinnati Reds baseball cap and spun it around backwards. A whiskbroom of blond hair stuck out the hole in front. He connected the black fishing line to activate his homemade burglar alarm and ran down the stairs, two steps at a time.

He stuck an apple in his pocket on his way through the kitchen and bounded out the back door. He raced seven steps down the sidewalk before the screen door slammed behind him. Not bad. His record was eleven steps. He had to admit,

though, that the wind had been blowing when he set the record and maybe it wasn't really official.

Jeremiah race-walked up the hill in the vacant lot between his house and the cemetery. When he was little, he had been an Indian most of the time. He had sneaked up here, treading softly in the beaded moccasins his dad bought for him on their last family vacation. He would peer from behind the horse chestnut tree to make sure no one had seen him. Now that he was nearly twelve, he ran or walked but never crept.

He still climbed the tree, though. He pulled himself onto the lowest branch. It had been a hiding place for him since he was little. From here his vivid imagination had launched hundreds of imaginary adventures. It had been a fort, Mount Everest, a space ship headed for Alpha Centauri, and an Indy 500-race car.

From the lowest branch, he could see much of his world. Behind him was the house where he and his mother lived. Beyond that, down the alley, he could see the burnt-orange tile roof of the stone house of Ruth and Bill Loker. He had to climb to the next higher branch to see Bill's antique repair shop.

From there, he could see over the scrubby trees at the edge of the cemetery and across the playground of the shabby housing projects. Jeremiah and his mother might have been living in the projects if Bill hadn't helped them find a house after his dad left.

From this vantage point, he could get a better look at the abandoned storage shed. He had never paid attention to it before. It wasn't really a shed at all, but the kind of building Bill Loker called a storm cellar, a remnant of some bygone time when all this land was a farm. The sight of it now made him lapse into a fleeting daydream in which a farm family of the past huddled inside the structure to wait out an Indiana tornado.

The building was constructed with red tile blocks and arched up to the center, like a giant igloo covered with dirt. The decaying trap doors opened outward, exposing steps that led into the ground. A heavy board that swiveled on a rusty bolt and slid into an iron catch served as a lock. Grass, just turning green, grew over the top.

The cemetery workers were nearly finished organizing their tools in their brand new shelter. Jeremiah slid out of the tree and strolled down the slope to the edge of the cemetery. He leaned nonchalantly against the fence.

Jeremiah knew one of the men. Everyone called him "Shorty," an odd nickname, Jeremiah thought, for a person nearly as tall as David Robinson. Some of the kids in town said that Shorty used to play in the NBA. Jeremiah didn't know whether to believe that or not.

Shorty did odd jobs around town and had once repaired the engine on Mrs.

Lennis's mower. He returned it while Jeremiah was there raking leaves. Mrs. Lennis had given him four dollars, but Jeremiah could tell from the expression on Shorty's face that he was expecting more.

"I like your new building," Jeremiah said to Shorty.

"Thanks," Shorty said. "Had to do it. Old one leaks real bad, and you can't get the mowers up and down the dang steps."

Shorty handed a stack of leaf rakes to one of the other men. He turned to Jeremiah.

"You're the kid who mows Mrs. Lennis's lawn, right?"

"Yeah. I do other stuff for her, too."

"She's an odd old biddy. People say she's loaded. Owns about half the buildings downtown, they say. Don't surprise me if she's rich. She sure knows how to hold onto it." Shorty said with a deep laugh that almost shook the ground. One of the other men chuckled and nodded agreement.

"What are you going to do with the old shed?" Jeremiah asked.

"Nothing. The church don't own it. It belongs to the guy who owns this vacant

property."

"Do you think he'd care if I used it for a lab?" Jeremiah asked.

"Lab? You some kind of scientist?" Shorty said with a laugh.

Jeremiah ignored the teasing. "I'm an inventor."

"An inventor, are you now? Just what have you invented?"

"Well, nothing you would know about, but some day..."

"I bet you'll be as famous as Thomas Edison," Shorty said with a grin.

Jeremiah ignored that remark, too.

"Mom's getting awful tired of all the stuff in my room. You know, if no one's going to use the shed, maybe I could get permission from somebody. I wouldn't hurt the place."

"Get permission? The guy who owns it lives in Florida." Shorty tied a string around a coil of garden hose. His face became serious. "I wouldn't be worried about you hurting the place. I'd be worried about the place hurting you."

"What could happen?"

"You don't know what might happen. Kids hanging around always spells trouble. If I owned it, I'd put up no trespassing signs all over the place." Shorty fumbled in the pocket of his denim jacket for the keys to the truck.

"I'd keep the grass mowed," Jeremiah offered.

The men had completed their job and were loading the last reel of garden hose into the back of their truck.

Shorty looked very stern and pointed a threatening finger at Jeremiah. "You're asking for trouble if you hang around here. If I see you here, I'll run you off myself."

As they drove toward the street, Shorty put his head out the window and shouted, "You know what they do to trespassers, don't you, kid? They arrest them."

Jeremiah nodded and walked slowly toward the vacant lot. He watched the old red truck struggle down the drive and disappear behind the church. As soon as the truck was out of sight, he sneaked back to get a better look at the shed. He stopped twice and looked toward the street to make sure the workers were really gone. Convinced he was alone, he pulled back the latch and opened one of the slanted doors. The rusty hinges moaned in protest.

The dark space inside was musty smelling. A trickle from last night's storm dripping on a discarded metal bucket pinged rhythmically. As Jeremiah walked down four crumbling steps, the murkiness surrounded him like a dream. In an instant, his imagination transported him into the depths of Lechuguilla Cave. The eerie formations gleamed in the sliver of light from the cave's entrance.

He stooped to enter the underground domain.

A child's voice echoed in the cave. "Jeremiah, I'm five today."

He spun around. The cave faded and he found himself back at the entrance of the old tool shed, back on Saturday morning, back of the vacant lot behind his house.

"I *said*, I'm five today. What are you looking at?"

"Oh, Molly. Where'd you come from? You scared me. You say you're five?"

"Uh-huh. Today." Molly Batson, a little girl from the nearby housing project, smiled proudly and held up five dimpled fingers. Her tattered jeans were too tight and her T-shirt was inside out. Jeremiah suspected that she had dressed herself.

"Five, huh? Five what?" he said.

Molly's dirt-streaked face turned to deep thought. She chewed a lock of frazzled hair and drew a circle in the damp earth with the toe of one worn-out canvas shoe.

"Five nothing. Just five."

"No, Molly. When you say you're five, you mean you are five years old. Shouldn't you be home?"

"You got any Kleenex?" She rubbed her nose on her shoulder.

"Don't have any. Does your mother know where you are?"

Molly pointed to the small grassy spot behind her apartment building several yards south of where they stood. Molly's mother Sylvia slouched in a lawn chair reading. Every time Jeremiah had seen her, she was reading one of those cheap magazines she bought at the checkout counter at Mason's Supermarket, where his mother worked.

"Whatcha doing, Jeremiah?" Molly asked.

"Just looking."

"A scary animal lives in there," she said, taking a careful peek into the darkness.

"I don't think so, Molly."

"Yes, it does. Mama says so."

Jeremiah figured Mrs. Batson had told Molly that to keep her from wandering out of the yard. The threat didn't work. Everyone in the neighborhood knew Molly. More than once Jeremiah had found her playing in his front yard, almost a block from her house. Mrs. Johnson, who lived across the street from the church, complained to the authorities after she found Molly in her porch swing at six o'clock one morning.

"Well, maybe," he said. He wasn't about to take sides against someone's mother.

Jeremiah walked farther into the shed with Molly right behind, holding onto his leg.

"Let go, Molly. There's nothing in here."

Suddenly Molly shrieked, "I see its eyes!" She screamed and ran stumbling up the steps and out the door. Jeremiah watched as she scrambled through the

high grass, scooted through the stunted shrubbery and stood fearfully near her mother. Mrs. Batson didn't look up from her magazine.

Jeremiah turned to see what had frightened her. In a shaft of light from a crack in the door, he saw for just an instant the sparkle of two eyes. The eyes blinked and disappeared. Jeremiah was startled. He put his back against the other door and pushed it open. He stood there a moment, then cautiously descended into the cave once more.