



THE NIGHT BEFORE
MIDDLE SCHOOL

By Thomas M. Tufts
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By Thomas Martin Tufts II

CHAPTER ONE: "Fear Itself"

I don't really remember exactly when this whole thing started, but I think it was around March of the fifth grade. My friend Billy, who lived two houses down the street, and who was the tallest kid in our school, Sunset elementary, and I were throwing spears we had made out of broomsticks at lizards in his backyard. Billy had just nearly konked one, and it sprinted up the ficus tree at Mach One when he turned to me and said, "Jay, I'm scared!"

"Scared of what?" I asked.

"Scared of going to middle school, dude," he answered.

I hadn't even thought about going to middle school because it was half a year away, and I still had to pass fifth grade. That wouldn't be hard to do because last year that kook, Jason Lure, went on to middle school. He was pretty dumb, and he passed. Once he was gone, Billy and I ruled the school. We were so happy just to get 'Chasin' Lure out of the way. 'Chasin' lure made him sound like the fish that he was. Of course, I didn't call him that to his face because he was

already hanging out with the seventh and eighth graders in our neighborhood, and he was just a sixth grader. And they were like, kind of, well, let's say bad.

So I told Billy to chill and that there were more important things to think about, like movies, TV, video games, weekends, the summer and lots more.

“You just think too much, Billy,” I yelled at him.

“I don't care. I'm going to get knocked down the first day of middle school. I'm starting to beg my mom to let me go to private school.”

“Man, shut up. You're getting me thinking about it.”

“Yeah, well, I've been wishing time would start going backwards.”

“Cool! If time did reverse itself, in just a few years you would be a real baby. That's what you're acting like now.”

“Yeah! You're such a tough guy. Aren't you scared of anything?”

I was waiting on that, and I, being the bright child that I am, and honest, too, so truthful that I couldn't tell a lie, replied, “I guess I'm scared of night noises. I didn't use to be, but we watched this movie back around Halloween in Mrs. Spear's class. It was called ‘Tell-tale Heart,’ by this author, Edgar Allan Poe. It was about a madman who worked for this rich, old guy who had this stupid-looking weird eye. That's what got me scared,” I confessed.

“So, what frightened you?” Billy asked.

“It was the noises the old man heard at night. Since I saw the movie, now I hear all kinds of noises at night that I can’t explain, so I make up stuff that they might be, but it doesn’t work. The old man in the movie did the same thing. He’d hear a noise while he was in bed, and he’d say that it was a rat or a mouse, but it was this guy who was going to smother him with a pillow!”

“Enough,” Billy commanded.

With that command, Billy, who was the leader of our neighborhood army, and I picked up our sticks and began once again to seek out lizards, or LEEZARDS as we called them.

What I didn’t tell Billy was that I was super scared of noises in the dark and that sometimes I would freak out and run to my parents’ bedroom only to be yelled at by them and told that it was nothing. But to me it was everything, and I had trouble sleeping. It sure made daylight something to look forward to. I guess I should’ve told Billy the extent of my fear. I mean, he was our leader, and he admitted that he was afraid of going to middle school. Anyway, he got me thinking about it, and in a very short time, it became my second greatest fear.

CHAPTER TWO: “The Army”

We had the most radical neighborhood army that there ever was. Tall Billy was our General. He was almost six feet tall and towered over all of us. Some kids called him ‘Billy Boy’ at school because his name was Billy Boynton. I kind of felt sorry for him at times when kids would tease him and ask him, “How’s the weather up there?” I know he had to get tired of all the stupid tall jokes and other stuff. I know one thing. Billy was lucky in a way. The girls all seemed to like him. He never let that cause a problem though. The army always came first. We all, well, we kind of “looked up” to him, if you know what I mean.

Billy and his dad were always building stuff. They had this really neat garage packed full of every kind of woodworking tool you might ever need. His dad was a carpenter at Homestead Air Force Base, in Homestead, Florida, where we lived. I thought it was cool having Billy around because if you needed something built, he could do it.

Susan Jamers was our second in command. She was the brains of our army. If you disagreed with her, you would end up losing the argument every single time. She was the kind of person that every kid should try to copy. She never cut on anybody and always tried to help people. I thought she was really pretty, too. She had beautiful brown hair, green eyes, and a super smile.

Timo Nelson was our major. He had lived in our neighborhood for just over two years. His mom and dad both worked at Homestead Air Force Base. His mom won the 'Miss Black America' title and was really famous. She was so beautiful. Timo said that she had traveled all over the world during the year she won the title. The Nelsons were awesome!

I was really close to Timo. He was very bright and a super athlete. We spent the night at each other's houses all the time, and we pretty much understood each other. We had the most outstanding street hockey games that you could ever imagine. Timo was Mr. Rollerblade. He could ice skate, too. He had learned when he lived in Minnesota. I guess it gets really cold up there, or so he said anyway.

I don't know much about cold weather. I was born in Homestead in south Florida where it very seldom ever gets cold. It's so warm in Homestead that we grow vegetables in the wintertime and all kinds of fruits. My mom and step dad, Bruce, were vegetable freaks. We ate so many that I thought someday I'd turn into one. I know that they are really good for you, but come on; all the time is too much!

Anyway, I shared the rank of Colonel with Susie. My step dad said that our army had too many leaders and not enough followers, but that was okay. In each

other's eyes we were all equal in rank. We just made that all up to make it sound like a real army.

The fifth member of our group was Lieutenant Lazaro Cruz. We called him 'Laz' for short. He was the neatest person I had ever known. I remember the day that he moved to our neighborhood just like it was yesterday.

Laz came from New Mexico with his mom, dad, and baby sister. Everyone was psyched about the kid. The real estate lady told my mom that the new family had a boy about our age. We were all waiting for the moving van the day he moved in. It pulled up in front of the wrong house, and we all showed this big ole guy who was driving the right house. We asked him where the new kid was, and he said he didn't know, he was just working for a living.

"Working for a living. Duhhhh," I thought.

As he was unloading the furniture with a helper half his size, who had a really neat earring in his nose, a station wagon pulled up behind the van, and there the new kid was in the backseat. We all watched carefully as his mom, a baby in her arms, and his dad got out of the car. The kid just stayed in the backseat.

"What's with him?" Susie asked me.

"I dunno. Maybe he's checking us out. I mean, we're checking him out."

Just then his dad walked to the back of their brown station wagon, popped the lid on the back and pulled out a wheelchair. Then we knew why the kid didn't get out, and we all felt a little weird.

His dad helped him into the chair, and he wheeled up the walkway to his new house. We were all staring at him when he stopped and yelled, "Que pasa?"

We all just looked at him, and I yelled back "Not much. What's up with you?" and he wheeled up the cement ramp by his front doorstep into his new home.

General Billy ordered us all to the command post in his backyard to discuss the new kid. We obeyed, and in a minute we were sitting, legs folded, in the itchy green grass, staring down, not saying a word.

"Are you disappointed, Colonel?" Billy inquired of me.

"Nah," I stated.

"You're supposed to answer 'No sir, General!'" he snapped back. "What's your thinking, Susie?"

"He's cool, General," she answered. "He asked us what was happening in Spanish. I know he's cool. Just imagine how he feels with all of us staring at him. He is brave just to have spoken to us."

"I say, General, let's go introduce ourselves and try to get him to join our ranks," Timo blurted out.

The General ordered, “All in favor say ‘aye.’” We all answered ‘aye’, and then we lined up to begin our march to the new kid’s house. Little did we all know that we were about to meet the bravest, neatest person anyone could ever wish to have as a friend, Lazaro Cruz – ‘The Laz!’

CHAPTER THREE: “Laz”

In a somewhat broken single-file line, our army paraded out of the General’s backyard, through the iron fence gate, into the street, and right up to the new kid’s walkway to his front door.

“Troops halt!” the General shouted. “Colonel Susan, it’s your duty to get the kid to the door.”

“Do I have to? Do I really have to? I’ve got to do everything you guys are scared to do. I’m tired of it!” Susie protested.

“Ok, ok, Colonel Jay, go for it,” the order was given.

I thought for a second, “This is not going to be so easy to do.” I didn’t know how grouchy his parents might be, or even if they might be escapees from some facility for the criminally insane, or even serial killers posing as a family. I knew better than to argue with Billy, so up the steps I went. Halfway to the door I had this feeling that everything would be easy because Susie had said he was cool, and she was usually right about everything. “At times I wish she was our General,” I thought as I gently tapped on the front door.

“Just a minute,” a voice rang through the empty rooms of the house.

Just then the guy with the nose ring said, “Look out gang,” as he wheeled a chest up the ramp, and the door opened for him as if he were the one who knocked.

In the doorway stood a man who looked like he was a weightlifter. He had a dark moustache, dark hair, and with a voice that was kind of hoarse-sounding asked us, "Yeah, what do you guys want?"

I hadn't expected that, and I had to think about how to answer, since I couldn't tell if the guy was cool or uncool.

"We, uh, we, we want to meet your son," I stammered.

"My son's in Pasadena, California, kid," the man replied.

Just then I remembered that this guy was the moving van driver, and that he opened the door for nose ring, his helper.

"We want to see the new kid," I said in an apologetic sounding voice.

"Okay, I'll get him," Mr. 'working-for-a-living moving-man' replied.

The door opened, and nose ring appeared again with his two-wheeled moving thing he called a dolly. Right behind him was the new kid, at last.

"Hi," I said and stepped backwards as the new kid wheeled down the ramp by the steps. The ramp was already there because Mr. Bivens, the old guy who used to live in the house, was also in a chair, and he had it built. I guess that's why the new family rented the house.

Anyway, he wheeled down the walkway and split our army into two groups on each side of him. I quickly said that I was Jay Stewart and my friends were Billy Boynton, Susie Jamers, and Timo Nelson.

He smiled and told us that his name was Lazaro Cruz and that he was in the fifth grade. He went on to say that his father was in the Air Force and had been transferred here from a base in New Mexico and that his dad was a pilot. This fact made him extra special to us because, being army officers ourselves, we felt a sense of closeness to our Air Force brother and sisters.

He asked us what games we liked to play. I explained that we were all members of a very important group that we called 'The Army.' He wanted to know if we ever went into battle against our enemies, and I told him that we had been attacked a couple of times by this kid Jason Lure and his group of bad kids. They didn't really have an army. They were kind of like a gang. I went on to confess that we were all pretty scared of Jason or 'Chasin' as we called him, and we ran whenever his gang attacked us.

"Would you guys let me join your army?" he asked, with this big smile on his face.

"You'll have to first prove yourself, and then we'll have to vote you in. All members must say 'aye' for you to join our ranks."

"How do I prove myself?"

"By just hanging out with us. We'll be able to tell if you're fit to enlist."

He asked what ranks we held, and we explained to him that we were all officers and that there were no troops below the rank of lieutenant. Billy said that

if he was accepted by our army that he might have to start as a private and work his way up to lieutenant, just like in the real army.

He said that was cool, and he had no problem with it at all.

“Great!” I replied. “Let’s play street hockey!”

Everyone agreed and sprinted home to get their rollerblades. On the way through my living room, I remembered that I’d left my blades at Timo’s. I went back out the front door, across the street, and up to his window. I tapped on it with a stick and he cranked it open.

“Timo, bring my blades out, dude.”

“OK,” he yelled from the closet. “Hey, Jay, what about Lazaro? How’s he going to play street hockey?”

I hadn’t even given that a thought since the kid was so cool. I completely forgot about his chair. “I know, let’s let him be goalie,” I answered.

“We just won’t ask Susie’s little sister to tend goal today. Get your little brother to play the other goal,” I told Timo.

I figured it was my job to go back to Lazaro’s house to get him out again. On the way there I hoped Mr. working-for-a-living moving man and his sidekick, nose ring, had vanished into the sunset. When I walked around to the front of Timo’s and looked across the street, I saw no van and was very happy. Those guys kind of gave me the creeps. I dashed across the road, and as I walked up Lazaro’s

ramp, I wondered how it felt always having to use a ramp to enter anything. This time I rang the doorbell, and the father, a real pilot, answered the door.

“Can Lazaro come play street hockey with my friends and me?” I bravely asked.

“Sure,” the father answered, and he called to Lazaro to come to the door. He was on the couch in the living room. I saw his chair in front of him. I wondered how he would get into it without help. But, he did. He slipped into it so quickly that I was amazed. He was in front of me in no time.

“Hey, Lazaro, you want to play street hockey, dude?” I inquired.

“Sure, how am I going to wear rollerblades?” he snapped back sarcastically.

“You’re not. You’ll be a goalie. Can you handle that?”

“Yeah. You got an extra stick?”

“Sure,” I said.

“Let’s go, Amigo!” he called out.

Lazaro told his mom and dad that he was going out to play. I could tell by the look in their eyes that they were thrilled he made friends so quickly, and that the friends had accepted him as one of their own. I’d seen the same look in my mom’s eyes before when she was super proud of something I’d done. It was a great feeling. Lazaro must’ve felt good, too, because he beat me into the street. I introduced him to Timo’s little brother, Boz, and explained to him that he would be

my goalie, and Boz would play for the other team. I also added that the teams were always the same, Susie and I against Billy and Timo.

With that, everybody touched sticks, and Boz put the ball in the middle of the street and positioned himself in front of the net. Lazaro did the same as Susie and Billy faced each other over the little orange puck. All agreed that the first team to reach ten points would win, and then both boy and girl put their sticks across the ball. To the count of ‘one-two-three’ and ‘whack,’ Susie stroked the orange sphere with a shot that rebounded off Boz’s forehead and bounded back into the middle of the street. Billy quickly skated to the puck and slapped it directly at Lazaro’s goal. I watched as it shot straight at the side of the net. Lazaro leaned hard right to block the shot with his glove. His move was so swift he turned over in his chair onto the pavement and fell flat on his face. The chair flew off, hit the curb and landed on its side in the grass. Susie was the first person to skate to his side.

“Are you OK, Lazaro?” she exclaimed. At that moment we all surrounded the skinned-up goalie. He looked up at us with a half smile on his face and said, “I almost blocked that shot, didn’t I?”

“You sure did,” I replied.

By then Boz had skated over to the curb, waded through the grass, and returned with the chair. Timo leaned over to help Lazaro up. He steadied the chair

as the goalie heaved himself into it. His arm was bleeding slightly, and his head was pretty skinned up, so I asked him if he wanted to go home and get cleaned up.

“No way, let’s play!” the brave warrior answered. So the game went on.

During the entire episode I could see Lazaro’s mom at her front window, watching her son. Her hand was pressed over her mouth, a look of care and love all over her face. You know, she never came outside to baby him or offer any help.

For over an hour the game went on. Timo and Billy beat us 10-6, but we all played our hearts out. I learned a lesson in bravery that day that I’ll never forget. I had a great teacher—Lazaro Cruz.

That was our first experience with Laz. I had no idea then, nor did any of the army, that he would turn out to be our real leader, and that he would teach us, me especially, more about life and all its changes than any adult ever possibly could.

CHAPTER FOUR: “The Fort”

The summer before 6th grade started off just like an exploding firecracker. There was lots to do and plenty of daylight to do it in. We had already voted Laz (we now called him that for short) into the army as a Lieutenant, and all together we were a pretty radical group of kids. Chasin Lure and his group of thugs had crossed our paths twice by the end of June. The first time we all exchanged dirty looks and words, but the second confrontation was pretty nasty.

Chasin and two of his fish buddies were hiding in the woods behind Billy’s house. There was a golf course directly down a one hundred foot path through the woods, and Chasin had been on the course, either stealing people’s golf balls or getting them out of the pond by the fifteenth green.

The army was meeting on the steps of Billy’s back porch. We were discussing the construction of a tree fort in the large ficus tree that grows directly on the edge of Billy’s property in front of the strip of woods that separated Billy’s lot from the golf course. All of a sudden three golf balls hit the side of the house and bounced back into the yard.

“Some crazy golfers!” Susie cried out.

“That was no golfer,” I replied. “I bet that’s Chasin Lure. You guys take cover. Laz, get around to the side of the house.”

“I’ll give the orders,” Billy snapped. You guys on your bellies. Get those golf balls and return fire.”

Timo was the first to retrieve a ball. He scooped it out of the grass and held it tightly in his hand. Susie and I picked up the other two.

“I saw the bushes move!” Laz cried out. We all swung around to catch a glimpse of just who I thought, Chasin Lure, ready to chuck another one.

He did, too. He fired one right at Laz, who had disobeyed orders and was right in the middle of this firefight with us.

The ball struck Laz on the left leg, and he didn’t even flinch. I guess he had no feeling in his legs. He leaned over and picked up the little white grenade. Another fish had appeared on the edge of the woods and was ready to fire another rocket when Laz let go of that ball like I’d never seen anyone do. From a seated position, he flung that missile as if he had a slingshot. It struck the fish in the face and knocked him down. By then we were all brave, and Susie and I chucked our golf balls at the bushes directly behind the wounded fish.

“Cease fire!” Billy commanded. “That kid’s hurt,” and he was. Chasin and his other buddy came out of the woods and dragged the wounded kid off into the bushes but not before they had called us names and promised they’d be back. But that we already knew.

We won that battle, but deep down I knew that this meant war. We reconvened on the grass for a command post discussion of the battle. Laz was found guilty of disobeying orders and had to eat a peeled lemon as a penalty. He scarfed it in, too! He made the funniest faces as he chewed it. We all rolled in the grass laughing and holding our sides. He was also awarded a silver star for unparalleled bravery in the face of direct fire and was allowed to wear the star we bought for him at the Army/Navy store. He wore it proudly all summer.

“We must begin construction on our tree fort,” Billy insisted. “The money for lumber and nails will be taken out of our savings account. Colonel Susan, what’s our account balance?” General Billy demanded.

“Zero dollars and seventeen cents, Sir!” Susie retorted.

“Oh yeah, I forgot. We bought that medal for Laz and these sodas with our money. What will we do now? We’ve got to have materials. Where will we get them?”

Timo, who was pretty much a know-it-all kind of guy, spoke up. “I’ve got it!”

“Got what?” I asked.

“An idea. You know that big, big house they’re building on the 18th hole of the golf course?”

“Yeah,” I replied.

“Well, do you remember that stack of scrap lumber by those dumpsters in front of the house? Let’s go ask those workers if we can have those boards,” Timo said, with a big grin on his face.

We took off like it was the last day of school right at the bell at the end of the day. Laz went first, wheeling over the bumpy terrain as fast as the four of us could walk. We crossed through the woods and bolted across the golf course. We must’ve made quite a sight as we dodged golf carts, chased squirrels, and flying balls. One old man yelled ‘fore’ at us. I guess that meant ‘watch out’ in golfer talk. Anyway, I yelled back, “five!”

We finally arrived at the construction site. It was a total mess. There were piles of lumber everywhere. Six guys wearing white plastic hats were running all around, shouting, pounding nails, and listening to loud rock and roll music that was blasting from a black boom box perched on a windowsill that still had no window.

“Watch for nails, kids,” a voice rang out over the music.

We turned around, and there was a man in khaki trousers with a tight-fitting white T-shirt with ‘Rogers Construction’ on it. He had on a white plastic hat that said ‘Foreman’. We were in luck.

Billy whispered, “Susie, ask!”

“Ask what?” she whispered back.

“You know. Be sweet and ask for that scrap lumber.”

“OK,” she agreed.

Susie walked up to guy with the sweetest smile a little brown-haired, green-eyed girl could muster up, and looking up at this big man asked, “Sir, can we have that scrap lumber over there?”

“No, go away!” he shouted.

‘What a guy,’ I thought to myself.

“What’s up with him?” I asked Timo.

“Please, please sir?” Susie begged. “You see, there’s this kid Jason Lure, and he’s got this gang of mean kids, and they threw golf balls at us and hit my friend Laz over there. He’s the kid in the chair,” Susie added.

The foreman looked at Laz, and Laz had such a sad look on his face that I could see the guy was going to at least listen to Susie.

“We need the lumber to build a fort for our army so we can see Jason and his band of meanies from the land of meanies when they come to attack us. We’ll be safe up in the air,” she explained.

We all chorused, “Please?”

“OK, OK, take what you need. You’re going to need nails, too. Here, take those two boxes over there.”

We picked up the nails, and boy, were they heavy! Lazy held them in his lap. We said ‘thank you’ about five times to the foreman, picked up as many boards as we could carry, and off we went.

It took six trips and four sweaty hours, but we stacked enough lumber in Billy’s backyard to build a house ourselves. We had enough nails to reach from here to China.

Billy’s dad totally flipped out when he got home that afternoon. We almost had to take all the stuff back, but we explained to him the whole situation. He listened to the story, and then gave us one week to build the fort and clean up our mess. So, we went to work.

CHAPTER FIVE: “Constructors”

I had had a picture of the fort in my mind for weeks. Lots of times as I sought out the fang-toothed, fiery-eyed, spotted LEEZARDS as they scurried up the gray bark of Billy’s ficus tree, I had gazed up to the parallel limbs and thought, “What a perfect spot for a tree fort!”

I could draw fairly well, so I drew a picture of what I figured our fortress should look like. It had to be strong enough to support us all and also needed walls to ward off an attack that was sure to come from the band of meanies. I showed the picture to Timo’s dad, an engineer at the base about two miles from where we live. He told me that it needed more support from beneath. I drew some braces in different places beneath the main platform. He said that they looked OK and that we should use the pieces of two-by-four since they were the strongest boards we could scrounge from the scrap pile.

There was one other thing we had to consider, Timo’s dad said. We all knew that we would have to climb a ladder to get into the fort. We also were aware that the ladder had to be pulled up once we were all on the platform. “But,” he added, “What are you kids going to do about Laz? He can’t go up and down a ladder.”

Once again, I'd forgotten about the challenges that Laz had to face. I guess I just accepted him as one of us. I didn't mean to dis him at all, but I couldn't think of any way possible to get Laz up and down from the platform in the tree. So I did what I always do when I'm confronted with a problem that I personally couldn't resolve, I asked my step dad, Bruce.

Now, Bruce was a really smart dude. He married my mom about two years after my real dad, a trial attorney, left my mom for his twenty-one-year-old secretary. I didn't like Bruce at first, but after about a million discussions with my mom about him, I realized that he wasn't going away, and neither was I. So I gave accepting him my best shot, and I tried to like him. Guess what? It worked! He turned out to be cool, and I found out that at times he could really help me with my problems.

Bruce was a diesel engine mechanic and a good one, too. He made decent money and always seemed to be working. Anyway, I told him about Laz, and in less than a minute he had it figured out for us.

He asked me to take him to the ficus tree, and that I did. We walked into Billy's backyard and looked up to the branches where our fort would rest.

"See that big branch right there?" and he pointed to a thick limb that stuck way out from the tree above the platform.

"Yeah," I said.

“Well, I’ve got this old pulley at my shop that I use to pull large engines out of trucks. I’ve also got some very strong cable. All we have to do is hook the pulley to that limb with a piece of chain, design a seat for Laz, hook the cables to the seat, and you’ll be able to easily hoist Laz up and down, to and from the fort,” he most brilliantly uttered.

“Way cool, Bruce! Way, way cool! I know Laz will go for it. He’s up for anything. You’re a swell step dad.”

“Thanks, Jay. You’re a great stepson. Anyway, I’m out of here.”

“Thanks, Bruce. I’m going to tell the army.” With that I was off to Billy’s backdoor. He was in the kitchen making a grilled cheese sandwich as I knocked. I told him what was up, and he called the rest of the gang to come over. In five minutes we had assumed our command post discussion position in the grass and were talking about our future fort.

The fourth of July was only five days away, so we set that day as our goal to at least have the floor constructed. From that vantage point we would all be able to watch the fireworks without having to fight the crowd downtown in Homestead.

We began to build the next morning at seven o’clock. Susie measured and steadied the boards. Laz sawed them. We first built a ladder. Then we nailed it to the branches that would support the platform. Susie continued to measure, Laz to

saw, Timo handed the boards to Billy and me, and we nailed them in place. By dark we had the platform finished and the framework for the walls.

That afternoon, as we admired our ability to build, Billy said that we were “Constructors.” It made us sound like we were some kind of robot army, but it was a good name for us – Constructors, one and all.

Susie said that we needed a lookout tower in the top of the tree so that we could see over the strip of woods to the golf course. This would prevent a surprise attack by fishman Chasin and his band of meanies.

We all agreed to build the tower after we completed the wall sections the next morning.

We all went our different ways home to dinner. I had trouble sleeping that night for some reason. I guess it was the noises I heard because I did hear something.

The next morning I awakened to Timo tapping on my window.

“Get up, dude!” he excitedly shouted.

“It’s not seven, Timo! Go home! I’ll be out in a minute or two,” I yelled back.

“Come here, Jay!” he screamed through the closed glass window.

I pulled on my jeans, slipped on a T-shirt and barefooted, ran to the front door.

“Follow me!” Timo bellowed out. I ran, right behind him, through Billy’s gate and into his backyard. By the time I got to the rear of the house I could already see what Timo was so jazzed about. The tree fort was totally wrecked. I mean it was trashed, torn up, demolished! There was a skull and crossbones spray-painted on the ficus tree. There was no doubt as to the artist.

“The band of meanies struck last night.”

“Yeah, they struck big time,” I replied. “I’ll bet that’s what I heard early this morning. Let’s go get the other kids.” By then Billy was staring sleepy-eyed at the devastation in his backyard. Boards were thrown across the yard, nails were scattered everywhere, and our handsaw was bent into a bow. You could see the disappointment in the General’s eyes as he gazed at the mess.

“Didn’t you hear all this, Billy?” I asked. “I thought I heard something from my house.”

“Nah! My parents and I were out until one o’clock. They were playing cards at the Patricks’ house. I fell asleep on their couch, and my dad carried me to the car. I was so sleepy when I got home I didn’t notice a thing. The meanies must’ve seen us leave last night, or at least did it while we were asleep,” Billy answered.

“Timo, go get Susie and Laz,” Billy ordered.

Timo blasted toward the gate to Susie's. When the three arrived at the scene, Billy and I were stacking boards. Neither Susie nor Laz spoke. Words couldn't put our fort back together again, but we could. We set out with a determination to rebuild and to let no obstacle stand in our way. We didn't even need to call a command post discussion. Timo and Susie began to pick up the nails while Laz held the box on his lap. Once again we were "Constructors."

CHAPTER SIX: “Constructors Once Again”

The band of meanies did a thorough job of wasting our fort, and somehow again I knew that there would be more confrontations. When Laz threw the golf ball at the fish kid, he was probably doing the wrong thing. To him, I guess, it seemed like the only natural response—fight violence with violence. We all certainly paid for the whole incident, but we had to get on with our lives, for there were only so many summer days left. We banded together tighter than ever, got Timo’s dad to help us, and we became “Reconstructors.”

The best part of the entire incident was that the meanies used steel bars to pry up the boards. When they pried them up, the nails just popped out of the holes in the branches. We took the claw of a hammer, pulled out the old nails and put new ones in the old holes. That saved a great deal of time. Susie and Laz only had to saw a few boards, and most of the work in the tree was done easily by Billy and me.

At the end of the first day we had the mess cleaned up and the floor sections rebuilt. Timo’s dad rebuilt the braces beneath the floor. Billy’s dad had the greatest of all ideas. He rigged up a tripwire around the base of the tree. We knew where it was, but ‘Chasin’ and the meanies didn’t. The wire was hooked to a buzzer on Billy’s back porch. He attached the wire to two stakes at about six

inches from the ground. If a meanie tripped on the wire around the fort, a buzzer alarm would sound and the porch light would come on.

The first night was a bad one for Billy's dad. The cat set the wire off first, and then later an opossum walked into it, setting the alarm off again. One thing was for sure, the thing worked, and Billy's dad didn't seem to care.

The next morning he raised the wire up a foot. He said that would allow most small animals to walk under it, and only large animals would set it off. Animals like fish might also swim right into it, too!

The second day we had to go back to the construction site on the 18th green. We needed plywood for our floor. The old holes in the branches of the tree wouldn't hold the new boards so we had to pound the nails into new holes on the branches in different spots. This left a gap between some of the boards, so we found a lot of plywood scraps that the roofers had discarded on the pile of junk and used them to cover the boards. At the end of the day we had the floor down.

When Billy's dad got home from work that afternoon, Laz met him in the driveway and asked if he would come view our accomplishments. He was amazed at our new floor and offered to put some outdoor carpet on it for us. We all gave him a big cheer when he told us.

The third day was a Saturday, and Billy and Timo's dads worked with us all day. Billy's father kept his promise. He measured the floor, bought the carpet and

tacked it down. It was so neat that it's hard to find words to describe it. Timo's dad worked ten hours on Saturday, and we were all right there with him. It didn't even seem like two hours since we were so busy. He rigged up Laz's pulley with the cables and materials my step dad gave us.

When it came time to try it out, it is very difficult to describe the look on Laz's face as he shifted from his chair to the seat on his "lift," as he called it. Then Susie hoisted him up easily to the floor of the fort. He was so happy. I have to admit that I had tears in my eyes as he shifted from the seat to the carpeted floor and then leaned back against a support post.

We could never have done this pulley system without our parents. It was neat having them involved in this entire project. I mean, I would have never thought of the pulley system or even the floor. The support turned out to have a dual purpose, too. Laz could hold one of the posts as he was lifted up and down from the fort. This kept him from swinging around.

The fourth day, Sunday, was the 4th of July. We worked until noon. The rail was up, and for the most part the project was finished. We still had to build the lookout tower in the top of the tree, but that could wait.

Billy's family had us over that afternoon for a barbecue in his backyard. Every family member and some aunts, uncles, and cousins of our army members attended. We ate hotdogs, hamburgers, and all kinds of salads, sodas, and chips.

But the best part of the whole afternoon and evening was the guided tours of our new fort. The adults all seemed so proud of us as they gazed in wonder at our handiwork. Laz's parents were the most proud when we demonstrated our pulley system. There were like thirty people all watching as Susie pulled him up to the fort. When he shifted from his seat to the floor, everyone applauded loudly and cheered him. Once again, I had tears in my eyes. What a brave kid he was.

The fireworks that evening were extra special. We all pretended that the colorful explosions in the evening sky were all to honor us--the army, the radical army--and all that we had accomplished.

When the evening was over, everyone went home full and very proud. The army met in command post discussion to go over the events of the day and to discuss future plans. We decided that we would name our fort. We called it 'Fort Nacho.' I know that sounds funny, but it was Laz's idea. He said that he loved nachos, and he loved the fort, so he asked us if we loved nachos. We answered, "Yes!" to our lieutenant, voted on the name, and unanimously agreed to name it 'Fort Nacho.' It was a cool name!

CHAPTER SEVEN: “Lazy Days”

The rest of the summer passed without much happening. We built the lookout tower and took turns on watch every day. It was cool and very breezy up there. I really liked to spend my time in the tower. You could be alone to think. What I thought about mostly was going to middle school. It usually only crossed my mind when Billy brought it up. One day as we were all just lying on the carpet on our backs gazing up through the canopy of green leaves, Billy spoke up and said, “Gang, I’m getting pretty nervous.”

“About what?” I inquired.

“Middle school.”

“You’ve told me that, Billy. I’ve heard you. There’s nothing you can do about it. You’ve got to go. You know your mom’s not going to let you go to private school. Besides, you’re not the only person here who’s nervous,” I added.

“Jay, that little speech didn’t help me at all. I’m still going to get slammed, probably on the first day. Chasin Lure has told everyone at Lakeside Middle that I’m a target for destruction. How about you, Susie? Are you nervous?” Billy anxiously asked.

“Yeah, but for different reasons,” Susie honestly replied. “My biggest fears are, number one, what I’m going to wear every day.”

Laz began to laugh so hard that we all cracked up.

“Cut it out, guys!” Susie screamed at the top of her squeaky voice. “Number two, I’m very afraid that I’ll get lost on the first day when I change classes. I’ve had this dream that I don’t find my classes, and that I’m late to every one of them. I always end up in the principal’s office, and I wake up just as I’m getting suspended. Fear number three is how I look. I don’t know how I should wear my hair or what kind of make-up I need.”

“That is very stupid!” Timo shouted.

Susie slapped him so hard on his back that they probably heard it on the fifteenth green.

“It’s not stupid, Steamo. Your back’s all sweaty!” she snapped. “What are you afraid of, tough guy?” Susie shot back.

“I’m not afraid of much, just, well, I guess being small. It’s kind of like being a minnow in a school of hungry sharks. I don’t want to get in fights with Chasin, the meanies, or anyone for that matter. I have these dreams where I get into fights, and I get punched, then as I swing back, I’m in slow motion.”

“Yeah, I’m always in slow motion when monsters are after me in my dreams,” Billy spoke up.

“What’s that got to do with fighting?” Laz asked.

“I don’t know. It just reminded me of scary dreams I’ve had. How about you, Laz, are you afraid?” Billy asked.

“Sure I’m scared. Barriers are my biggest fear. Stuff like curbs, doorways, steps, or anything that might make my passage impossible. I’m really frightened of that. What if I get a class on the second floor? How am I going to get up there? What if I’m the only physically challenged student at Lakeside? Everyone will stare at me. How about getting through crowded hallways in a chair? That won’t be easy. You guys think you’ve got problems; just think about me!” Laz explained.

“I guess you do have concerns,” I told Laz.

“I surely do, but how about you, Jay? What’s up with you?” Laz asked me in a very excited-sounding voice. It was kind of like he wanted me to not be afraid, but I was.

“I dunno. I guess it’s probably--I already went over this with Billy back in March. He’s been bugging me about it since then. You guys just didn’t know about it. I told him all about my fears.”

“Well, tell *us*, Jay,” Susie demanded.

“OK, OK. I used to be afraid of night noises. I guess I still am, but I don’t know how to cure the fear. Now, listening to Billy and all of you, it’s time that I

confess. I'm afraid of brain failure. What if I just quit thinking, and I get straight F's?"

"Boy, that's dumb," Timo said.

"Shut up, Timo. I didn't say your thing was dumb."

"What are you really afraid of, Jay?" Billy asked.

"OK, I don't want to get picked on verbally. I know kids are going to say mean stuff to me. Like, at Sunset, I'm a superhero, but at Lakeside, dudes, I'm nobody with a capital 'N!' Now that I'm confessing, I guess I'm frightened of the mean teachers that are there. I've heard there are some real creature teachers at Lakeside. I'm also concerned with the fact that we won't all be in the same classes, and I'll have no friends at all. I think I'll forget to do stuff, and my grades will drop. How's that for honesty, gang?"

"Super," said Susie.

"Yeah, super," Billy added.

"Super," Timo chorused.

"Commendable," Laz replied. "You know, listening to all of this has made me think," Laz put in his two-cents worth. "You guys remember the time that I was court-martialed and had to eat a lemon?"

"Yeah," we all replied.

“Well, at first I didn’t tell you this. At first I was going to just tell you guys what you could do with your lemon torture. Then I was really mad because I thought I saved you all. After that I was mega-afraid to eat the lemon because I didn’t think that I could do it. But I just gathered all my strength and did it. Then I began to feel good about myself. I ate the lemon, and it was easy.”

“So, what’s your point?” Susie asked.

“My point, Susie, is that I was scared, and when I faced my fear, it turned out that it wasn’t so bad after all. I mean, I don’t want to chow on another one, but it wasn’t that bad,” Laz stated.

“Was that the first time you ever really faced a fear, Laz?” Timo inquired.

“I guess since today is confession time at Fort Nacho, I’ll tell you guys the truth. I’m in a chair because when I was seven, I fell from a tree in my backyard. My legs are paralyzed. That means I have no feeling in them, and I cannot use them at all. I go to therapy once a week to try to help myself.

“What do you do there?” Billy asked.

“I swim and work on weight machines to strengthen my upper body.”

“So, that’s why your throwing arm is so strong!” Susie realized.

“Exactly, Susie. How do you all think I felt when Bruce came to the fort that day and described the pulley system? I was petrified, totally zonked with fear. But, guess what? You saw me do it, didn’t you? I didn’t whine about it or back

away. I almost threw up when Susie first hoisted me up there. I faced my fear again, and it wasn't as bad as I thought it would be. It's kind of like the saying that goes, 'Today is the tomorrow that you worried about yesterday.' Think about that. Things are just never as bad as sometimes we imagine they will be."

"I'm starting to understand," I told him. And I was. As I took my seat in the lookout tower, where across the tops of the trees and houses I could see the middle school itself, I began to realize that I had some pretty hefty fear-facing to do myself. Just then I saw the bushes move on the edge of the Riley's yard that was two lots down. "I saw movement, General!" I called out at the top of my lungs.

"Prepare for possible attack!" Billy screamed.

Before the words were even out of his mouth, four meanies bolted out of the bushes and chucked balloons filled with some kind of stinky liquid at the fort. They splattered everything and everybody.

"Little good the tower did," Billy yelled up to me.

"Yeah, well I told you I saw motion down in the Riley's yard. You saw they had on camouflage outfits. I couldn't see them until it was too late, Billy."

"Look at me!" Susie yelled. I've got this sticky stuff all over me. What is it?" she asked.

"Smells like, uh, I don't want to say," Timo said with a look of total disgust on his face.

“Susie, help me down. I’ve got it all over me,” Laz pleaded. “I want to wash this junk off.”

“Wait a minute, Laz,” said Billy. “Command post discussion time. Members of the army, this is serious. We must prepare our fort for future attacks against us. We must defend ourselves. The band of meanies led by the toadfish Chasin Lure must be dealt with. All in favor of declaring full-scale war against the meanies say ‘Aye!’”

“Aye!” said every member.

With that, we declared that we were formally at war with the band of meanies.

CHAPTER EIGHT: "Prepare for Battle"

I was up just after daylight the next morning. I put on my old jeans, shirt, socks and sneakers, tiptoed down the hall so as not to wake my mom or Bruce, and into the kitchen I went. I grabbed an apple and two oatmeal cakes and headed out the door to Timo's. I woke him up with a rap on the window, told him to hurry, and then I went to see if Laz and Susie were awake. They both were, and then I returned to Timo's to find him tying his shoelaces on his front steps. We met Susie and Laz at the corner just as Billy came out of his house. The general ordered us to the backyard, and there we met in command post discussion. The topic was fortifications. Our fort must change from simply a passive position to one that was clearly defensive as well.

Susie spoke up, "What do you guys mean by defensive? Does that mean that we are going to fight back if we are attacked?"

"It most certainly means just that, Susie. We are not going to take this anymore. I hate to be the officer to give the order, but I see no other way to stop the band of meanies," Billy spoke, in the most determined voice I had ever heard.

Billy meant business, and so did we. The first defensive device we created was Susie's idea. It was an inner tube pinecone launcher. We took the tube from a truck tire at Bruce's shop and sliced it. We now had a straight piece of tube. In

both ends we poked holes and tied each end to a support post in the fort. This giant rubber band launcher turned out to be totally awesome. We built a small wooden box that would hold about twenty-five pinecones and attached two handles on the bottom of the box. We then tacked the box to the tube and poked two holes through the tube for the handles. We filled the box with pinecones, Billy grabbed the handles, pulled back on the tube, way back, until it was stretched to the max, and he let it go. The pinecones sprayed all over Billy's backyard. I mean they shot out of the box like little wooden cannonballs. Susie called it a super sling since it looked like a giant slingshot.

What an idea this was! It was the best that Susie had ever had. However, it had one little thing wrong with it. When Billy let the tube go, it shot back at him, struck him, and knocked him almost out of the backside of the fort. Only the railing saved him from falling. Susie had an instant remedy to the problem. She poked a hole in each end of the 5-foot piece of inner tube and put a piece of rope through each hole. Then she knotted the ends so that the rope wouldn't pull through. After that, she re-attached the tube launcher to the support posts in the middle of the platform and tied the rope to the front post. She left three feet of slack in the rope so that we could back up that far before we let go. This prevented the tube from knocking down the person launching the cones. Billy tried it again, and it worked just as well. He stretched it back until the safety ropes were tight, let

the handles go, and out sprayed the pinecones, once again covering Billy's backyard.

"Wow, dude, I hope the meanies are all standing in Billy's yard when we fire our cones at them. They are going to sting, and I mean "steeee-ingggg"! Oh, yeah!" Susie shouted.

"That's some giant slingshot!" Laz told the group.

"We need to put the railing back up on the front just in case," I suggested.

"Yeah," Billy replied to my idea. "Let's put hinges on the bottom and use ropes to lower it when we want to launch our super sling, and then we can raise it back up after we've run out of pinecones."

"We're never going to run out of cones, dude," said Timo. "Look at all these pine trees. I'm going to use brown paper bags from the grocery store to keep them in. My mom's got about fifty of them. I'll load up as many bags as I can get in a plastic garbage bag."

"What will keep the cones from spilling?" Laz asked.

"I'll put one staple in the middle of each bag so they don't spill," Timo told him with a big smile.

"Yes!" Billy blurted out. "Yes! That way we'll have pinecones stored away, and the paper bags will stay dry in the plastic bag."

“That’s the idea,” Timo once again proudly stated. “I’m going now to scoop up pinecones. See ya!”

“Yeah, see ya,” we all chorused.

“I know,” Laz added. “Let’s build a box about four-by-four out of plywood.”

“What for?” Billy blurted out.

“Shut up, and I’ll tell you,” Laz went on. “We’ll fill the box with that black dirt in the woods. Then fill about twenty milk jugs, the gallon kind, with water and stack them in the back of the fort. When the meanies attack, we’ll mix the water with the yucky dirt and presto, it will become yucky mud. Next, we’ll scoop the mud up in buckets, and then when they come anywhere near the platform - ‘Blup!’ - they get it on the head.”

“Capital idea, Lieutenant Lazaro Cruz!” General Billy uttered, with great praise to our buddy, Laz.

Personally, I couldn’t wait to pour mud on all those fish fellows who were members of the band of meanies. Chasin Lure, the big toadfish, would be a prime target. We still needed more defensive devices, so we continued to rack our brains to create them.

The General had ordered that the army was responsible for creating defensive devices, and we were prepared to obey his command. Susie and Laz had come up with supercreations. Now it was time for Billy, Timo and me to put our

brains to work. I sat there for about an hour in the tower, trying to come up with something unique. I thought of soda bottles with bottle rockets all around the fort, like a hundred of them, but that would set the woods on fire, so that brilliant idea was history.

Timo and I continued to think, and then, right out of nowhere, an idea that couldn't be topped, popped into my brain. Timo and I would build a tennis ball launcher from a big piece of pipe. I took my idea to Bruce, who, as usual, said, "That's easy, Bubba."

Timo and I went to Bruce's shop. He found an eight-foot pipe on a pile behind the shop. He took a tennis ball (he and mom played tennis, and we had dozens of balls they used to practice with), and he rolled it through the pipe to make sure it would fit. It did, so he took a piece of sheet metal and cut it the size of the end of the tube. He then drilled a hole in the round plate and welded it to the end of the tube.

"Why'd you do that?" I asked.

"Just wait," he replied. He looked around his shop until he found a very large spring that fit into the tube. He found a good one, too! He dropped it into the pipe. It fell to the other end and was stopped by the piece he had welded in the end. He now took the other round piece of sheet metal and put it on his grinder until it fit inside the pipe. Then he drilled a hole in it, right in the middle. By now,

I was starting to get it. Bruce placed the new round piece of metal into the tube. It fell down until it was stopped by the spring. Next he took a piece of cable and put it through the hole of the round metal, through the spring on the inside of the pipe and out the hole on the other end. After that he tied a piece of strong cord to the end of the cable and pulled the cord through the entire pipe. Meanwhile, he tied a large knot on the outside of the tube so it wouldn't pull through. I really got it now. I couldn't wait to try it. We took it outside after he tied a wooden handle to the end of the cord that was hanging out of the bottom. He put a tennis ball in it and had Timo and me steady the pipe as it rested on the fence. He aimed it above the building next to him, pulled the cord with the handle all the way back, and then let go of the handle. "Boom!" Let me tell you that this thing worked! That tennis ball shot out of our spring-loaded cannon, and I'll guarantee that it landed ten blocks away and probably bounced ten more. I couldn't wait to get back to the fort to demonstrate it to the officers of our radical army.

When Timo and I arrived at the fort with my most formidable device, we could barely contain our excitement. We wanted to shout to all the neighborhood, "Hey, look at our creation!" We didn't need to because as soon as we emerged into Billy's backyard, the entire army was upon us like flies on a two-day-old dead fish. I mean they pounced on us.

“Show me! Show me! Show me how you use that thing,” Susie demanded of us, as she grabbed the pipe and nearly pulled me to the ground.

“What’s up with you, girl? Chill! Will you please?” I ordered.

I walked to the fort, my escorts on both sides of me, climbed the ladder, and laid the cannon against the railing.

“Now,” I said, “I’ll explain to you how to work our tennis ball launcher. You see, you take this ordinary everyday tennis ball, and you place it in the end of the tube – like so. Next you allow the ball to roll down the tube. Now, you have someone brace the pipe firmly against the railing. After that, you pull back on the rope as far as possible. Finally, aim at your target, and let go of the rope,” I explained in exemplary expository fashion.

I pulled back on the rope, aimed at Billy’s house and let go of the wooden handle. The ball shot out of the cannon, traveled one hundred feet through his bedroom window, and it did not bounce out.

“Golly, what a launch device, Jay!” Susie bellowed out.

“Yeah,” cried Laz.

“What’d you break in my bedroom, Jay?” Billy blurted out as he scrambled down the ladder and sprinted for the door.

Billy returned in two minutes with a crushed lampshade, which I replaced the next day, and the tennis ball that had done the damage.

After Billy got over his anger, he decided that we needed another launcher, so Timo and I proceeded to manufacture one the following morning. We mounted them both on the side walls of the fort, on a base that swiveled. This was so we could blast moving targets.

“I can’t wait to bounce the first ball off of Chasin’s head!” I exclaimed.

“Yeah, I hope I get to be first!” shouted Timo.

“I’m dumping mud on his lead head!” added Laz.

“I’m gonna cone him!” said Susie. “He’s gonna be a conehead!”

“What’s your invention, Billy?” Laz inquired.

“I’ve been waiting for you to ask, Lieutenant,” Billy shot back. “It’s in my garage. Come help me carry it out,” the General ordered.

We all walked around the house to the front, crossed the driveway and into the garage. In the far left corner stood a piece of eight-inch, PVC plastic pipe, about four feet long. There was a rope with a handle on it hanging out the bottom.

“What is it, Billy?” Susie excitedly blurted out.

“I call it a ‘Mighty Marvelous Marble Mortar’,” said Billy very proudly.

I looked down inside it and quickly saw that Billy had borrowed my spring-launch invention but only on a larger scale.

“You ripped off Timo and me, Billy!” I shouted.

“Come on, Jay. I only improved on your invention, Bubba. Check it out. What happens when you tilt your launcher downward? Huh? The ball rolls out of the tube, right?”

I didn't answer. Then I mumbled, “I guess.”

“Well, Thomas Edison, I just built a better mousetrap. Your device is for long range. My mortar is for both. I can launch marbles from one to one hundred feet and lots of them. Let's try it out, gang,” Billy suggested once again, very proudly.

We carried the mortar to the tree fort. Billy tied it to Laz's seat, and I hoisted it up to the platform. Billy pulled a bag of marbles from his pocket, loaded about twenty in the mortar, and aimed high above the treetops towards the golf course. As Laz and I gazed in wonder, Timo steadied the mortar, Susie pulled the cord until it stopped, and Billy commanded, “Let it fly!”

Boy, did they fly! There were about five seconds of silence while the marbles shot towards the clouds then marbles started peppering or more like raining down all over the woods.

“Way cool, Billy” Laz exclaimed, and we all cheered loudly.

“I hope we never have to use any of these in anger. Our wish is that the meanies choose not to attack us,” Billy proclaimed as we all showed our agreement by nodding our heads.

I guess I was hurt deeply inside that Billy had borrowed our idea, but I'd get over it. I was most hurt by Susie's reaction to it. Probably at the time I was starting to like her just a little, but I was trying not to. I knew Billy liked her too. Lots of times at night I'd call her and get a busy signal, and Billy's number would be busy also. It didn't mean they were talking, but it sounded a little fishy. Anyway, middle school was just days away, and we were all getting antsy as could be. None of us felt prepared, and we had the threat of an attack hanging over us like the dark clouds of a hurricane.

CHAPTER NINE: “Andrew Who?”

The days passed very quickly as the summer wound down towards the beginning of school. We were in the fort most every day awaiting what we thought was a certain battle. Most definitely we were prepared to the point that you might say we were anxiously awaiting trying our new weapons on the band of meanies.

Just before school was to begin Billy and I decided to go fishing in the canal that was just on the other side of the golf course. We often went there when we were bored and just plain tired of standing watch in the fort. Timo and Laz were on the platform. Susie was listening to the radio while on watch in the tower. From the canal we could see her easily. She was under orders to raise a red bandanna on the flag post that rose twelve feet above the top of the tree if Chasin and the meanies chose to begin an attack on our fortress.

There was a boat ramp with a wooden dock on each side that was our favorite place to fish for catfish and bream. We would stand on the dock with a loaf of bread and toss pieces of the bread into the water. We'd always roll up the pieces into little round balls with our fingers. This made the bread sink to the bottom. The bream would see it falling, and they would come around in schools to eat our chum, as we called it. I guess the catfish were attracted to it too, because

they would also come around. It was a pretty neat place to fish. There were shade trees of all kinds: mango, black olive, coconut palms, and even an orange tree packed with juicy oranges that we often picked and ate as we fished.

This particular day as we were fishing, a boat with two middle-aged men pulled up to the dock at the ramp. One guy stayed with the boat, and the other went to get their car. The guy in the boat had this big potbelly and kind of grayish hair. He was wearing a T-shirt, jeans, and an Atlanta Falcons hat. He was staring at us as we fished, and I could tell he wanted to say something. As his buddy in the Jeep backed the boat trailer down the ramp to load the boat, he said, “You guys are in the fifth grade, aren’t you?”

“Yeah,” I answered.

“What’s he, a mind reader?” Billy mumbled to me under his breath.

“Quiet, Billy, he looks weird.”

“Yeah, he looks like a teacher at Lakeside I’ve seen before,” Billy stated, again in a low whisper.

The guy kept looking at us and then out of nowhere blurted out, “School starts Monday, kooks! Are you guys ready?” he asked.

What kind of dude was this fat guy, I thought, as I looked at the big red cherry nose on his Santa Claus face.

“Yeah, we’re ready,” Billy replied.

“Are you scared of middle school?” he wanted to know.

“I guess we are,” I stated.

“Well, let me guarantee one thing, dudes, you guys are going to get worked the first day,” the fat guy told us.

You mean the teachers give you work on the first day?” I blurted out.

“No, dude, worked, worked over, slammed, blasted, smacked,” he laughed, and his big belly began to jiggle. He kept laughing, almost insanely. He laughed until his shirt came up, revealing a belly button that could’ve held a golf ball.

“Knocked out, guys! Neither one of you could bust a grape. How are you going to fight back? Lakeside’s the toughest school in South Florida, boys!” he told us.

We already knew that, and I couldn’t believe that all summer long we had been working on this fear, and then just before middle school we have to meet this blob. I could see Billy’s eyes watering up, and I knew what was coming.

“Jay, what are we going to do?” Billy cried.

“Shut up, Billy. Hey, old man,” I spoke up. I was ordinarily never disrespectful, but this madman chump really pushed my button. “What’s your problem? You’ve got my friend terrified. We’ve been trying to deal with this since last March. Thanks a lot, you fat pig!” I screamed.

Instead of becoming angry, the old dude just laughed louder and harder. By then his buddy had gotten out of the Jeep and walked down the ramp to the edge of the water.

“What’s so funny, Tom?” he wanted to know.

“These guys are starting middle school and in three days they’re going to Lakeside. You know what that means,” Fatboy told his buddy.

“Yeah,” he replied.

“They are history, done for, kaput!” Bigun shouted.

“Kersplat,” his buddy added.

“What’s with you two morons? Let’s go, Billy. We’re out of here,” I said.

By now they were both laughing out of control, and we could still hear them in the middle of the golf course.

“Shut up!” I screamed back.

“Shut up!” they loudly echoed.

What weirdos, I thought, as we entered the strip of woods and walked down the path, poles and bucket in hand, towards Fort Nacho.

When we arrived, the other three army members were on the platform, leaning against the railing, talking. Laz saw us first and yelled out. “What’d you catch, amigos?”

“We caught a couple of loonies!” I shouted back.

“What do you mean?” he asked me.

“I’ll tell you when I get up there,” I said.

“Hurry,” said Susie, “we’ve got something important to tell you!”

I knew whatever Susie had to say was important. I could tell by the serious look on her face. We leaned our poles against the tree and quickly ascended the ladder.

“What’s up?” I asked, as I caught my breath and plopped down on the carpet.

“There’s a hurricane,” Laz was the first of the three to speak up.

“So,” Billy said, “there’s always a hurricane somewhere in August and September, Laz. This is Florida, boy. You’re not in Arizona.”

“Yeah, and I’m not a boy either, son.” Laz angrily responded. “If you would have let me finish my sentence, I could’ve told you. Now I don’t want to tell you.”

“Chill, dude. It’s nothing but a thing. Don’t get so upset. What about the hurricane?” Billy let go.

“It’s in the Caribbean. The radio says it seems to be tracking right at Florida,” Timo added. “The Air Force Base at Homestead is watching it closely because of the threat to the aircraft.”

“My dad may have to fly a fighter to Patrick Air Force Base up coast, or he might have to take it to Marietta, Georgia, outside of Atlanta to the base there,” Laz told the group.

“My dad says that when a hurricane is headed this way we have to watch each advisory very closely. There’ll be one tonight at 11:00. We better all watch it,” Susie ordered.

“Man, what if it hits right before middle school or the day of? That would be just perfect!” Timo shouted.

“Timo, you guys are all from different states. Let me tell you. You’d rather go to school than go through a major hurricane. Believe that!” I spouted to the group.

“You’ve never been through one. How do you know so much, Jay?” Susie demanded.

“My step dad was born right here in Homestead in the 1940s. He’s been in several hurricanes, all in different areas of South Florida. My entire life he has told me about what it’s like and it’s no fun. You remember the worst storm you’ve ever been in?” I asked.

“Yeah,” they all nodded their heads in agreement.

“Well, multiply the intensity of it times ten and make it last for two hours and ‘presto,’ you’ve got a hurricane,” I lectured. “It literally blows everything away.”

“Whatever, its name is Hurricane Andrew, and most of the coast is under a hurricane watch,” Susie told the group as she gazed upward at a bright blue southern Florida sky.

“What’s a hurricane watch?” Laz inquired.

“It means start to ‘batten down the hatches.’” “You know, get supplies like batteries, water, canned food, stuff that won’t spoil in case the place gets wasted and there’s no food, water, or electricity,” I informed the group. “My father was on the west coast of Florida in 1960 when Hurricane Donna hit. It tore up all kinds of stuff. People were without food and water for the longest time. Hurricanes are serious business, gang,” I continued.

“I see,” Billy said.

“Yeah, I guess you’re right,” Laz replied to my speech.

“We better all get home to see what’s up,” Susie commanded.

“Yeah, Timo, you and Jay pick up all this loose junk lying around and put it in my garage,” Billy blasted.

“Yes Sir, General,” and with that Timo and I gathered everything that was not nailed down and carted it to the garage. Laz and Susie helped too, and when

we were finished, we all went our separate ways to watch the advisories and see what our families were doing.

CHAPTER TEN: “It’s Called ‘The War’”

Middle school was only one day away, and we were all pretty scared. No one even mentioned it all day. Preparing for the hurricane was a job we were all involved in now. There were windows to be shuttered and plywood to be nailed in place on the sliding glass doors of all our houses. My house was easy to do because Bruce had all the materials ready in our garage. I went to Laz’s house to help his family since they were new to this area.

When I got to Laz’s, his mom told me that Laz’s father was called to the base. He had to fly a jet to Atlanta because the hurricane was so close to Florida. It was blasting the Bahamas and officially was called ‘Andrew.’ She went on to say that hurricane warnings were posted from Titusville to the Keys.

“It looks like it’s going to hit West Palm Beach,” she declared.

“My step dad says you never know where those big storms will hit,” I stated. “Why don’t you and Laz and the baby come to my house tonight just in case?” I asked.

“That’s awfully kind of you, Jay,” she replied. “We’ll see what the storm does. The landlord is sending a crew to board up the house. We’ll be safe.” she told me.

“Well, just in case it comes at us, you are welcome to come over,” I offered.
“I’ll tell Bruce. Where’s Laz?” I inquired.

“He’s in his room talking on the phone to someone,” she answered. “Go on in and see him.”

“Ok! Don’t forget to come over,” I shouted, as I walked down the hall towards Laz’s room. As I entered his room, he had his back to me and was busy trying to explain something to somebody on the other end of the line. I took advantage of his preoccupation with the telephone to scare the wits clean out of him. I screamed, “Look out, dude!” Man, he came out of his chair three feet! He pulled the phone off the dresser, knocked over the lamp, and nearly broke a ceramic monkey that was on the table next to the lamp.

“What’s up with you?” he screamed at me. “You wanna kill me or something? I was talking to the principal at Lakeside, you idiot. You caused me to hang up on him.”

“Call him back,” I said, as I tried to control my laughter. There was something about scaring people in that way that I found extremely fun. I guess it was stupid, but I called it “scattoring” someone when I made them jump. I did it all the time. This time I had made Laz like triple angry, and I wished I hadn’t done it. The damage was done, so I offered to explain to the principal, Mr. Edwards,

what I did. Laz refused my offer and told me why he had called the principal in the first place.

“I called to ask what problems I might have getting around at school tomorrow. He was in the middle of telling me that Lakeside was prepared to have physically-challenged students attend classes there. I don’t need to call him back. He was almost finished anyway. What are you up to?” he asked me, with a look of forgiveness on his face.

“Not much. I came over to see if you and your mom and the baby could stay at my house in case the hurricane comes this way. It’s tearing through the Bahamas right now. It looks like it will hit somewhere north of here in Palm Beach or Martin County, but you just can’t tell,” I stated.

“Yeah, with Dad gone that would be cool! When would we know?” Laz asked.

“Know what?”

“Know when it’s going to hit.”

“Sometime tonight, late.”

“Yeah, if it hits here, it’ll strike on the night before middle school,” Laz blurted out.

“Yeah, there might not be any school tomorrow if it strikes us. There might not be any school, period. It might waste the entire campus,” I said with a grin.

“What if we went to school and there was nothing there but a big ole field? What if it blew Lakeside to Alaska?” he happily added.

“Yeah, what if?” I replied. I wasn’t really happy because I knew what might happen if it struck land in Homestead, and the thought wasn’t a pretty one.

“What are the rest of the guys doing?” Laz asked me.

“They are all busy helping board up their houses,” I replied.

“What about our fort and all of our awesome defense devices?” Laz wanted to know.

“If Andrew strikes here, my friend, Fort Nacho will not be much more than a pleasant memory, Laz. It’ll probably wind up in the Naples/Fort Myers area on the west coast,” I told him.

“We should’ve built it stronger. Like double nails and stuff,” he suggested.

“Nah, the wind could rip that tree right out of the ground easily. Bruce said he’s seen trees bouncing along the ground going a hundred miles an hour during a hurricane. You don’t have a clue about these giant storms, Laz,” I lectured.

“I guess I don’t,” he admitted.

“Well, dude, I’m outta here. I gotta cruise home. Come over if the going gets tough,” I called as I walked through the hallway on my way out of the house.

On the way home I thought about school tomorrow and what it was going to be like. Truthfully, I was scared. I knew everybody else was, too, and that made me feel better. I just wanted to get that first day over with.

When I got home, it was time to eat dinner. I could tell by the smell coming from the kitchen as I opened my front door.

“Mom, what’s for dinner?” I shouted from my bedroom.

“Something good,” Mom gave her usual answer.

Why is it that she never, ever, ever tells me what’s for dinner when I ask, I wondered?

At dinner Bruce said that Andrew had hit the Bahamas with 130 mile-per-hour winds and that the airport in Fort Lauderdale was closed. He said people were jamming up the highways heading north.

“Oh yeah, I invited Laz and his family to stay at our house if the hurricane hits here,” I blurted out with a mouth full of meatloaf.

Oh, that’s nice. You might have asked us first,” my mother said, with a stern face.

“Mom, I knew you wouldn’t care. Besides we have two extra bedrooms. Laz’s dad had to fly a jet to the base in Atlanta or somewhere near Atlanta,” I told her.

“I guess you’re right. We should try to help the Cruz family,” Bruce added.

At about 9:00 p.m. that evening they closed the Miami Airport. Andrew was one hundred miles east of Miami. I called Laz's house to tell them to come over, but no one answered. Just as I hung up there was a knock at the front door, and I ran to see who it was. I couldn't believe it. It was Laz, his mom, and the baby, and boy, did they look afraid!

"What's up, dude? Come on in," I told the group.

"Jay, dude, they called school off for tomorrow," Laz told me as he wheeled into my room.

Bruce welcomed Laz's mom and showed them the room they'd be sleeping in.

"Laz can stay in Jay's room, if he wants, and if it's okay with you," Bruce told Mrs. Cruz, as she placed her belongings on the floor in front of the guestroom closet.

As Laz was putting his stuff down, I was thinking about how now we'd all have to go through another night before middle school. Oh, well, I thought, we'll have to live through this Andrew thing. That's what's most important. It was now about 11 o'clock, and you could hear the wind begin to pick up outside as a garbage can that I forgot to bring in blew over right outside my window.

"Flip on the TV and get the 11 o'clock advisory," I told Laz, who was lying back against the wall playing with my hand-held video game. He put down the

game and picked up the remote. The TV flashed on with a very serious-looking weatherman telling us to get ready. Andrew was only ninety miles away and heading right at us. He said on a scale of five it was a category four hurricane and that we were under a tornado watch as well.

We called Susie, Timo, and Billy just to make certain they knew there was no school. Timo was already asleep, and Billy and Susie's lines were busy. I found that interesting since it was pretty late, but it could've been their parents; it didn't have to be a late-night conversation.

"Man, Timo's asleep," I told Laz. "About 3 or 4 in the morning he'll be up. I double your money-back guarantee it." Just as I said that, Bruce opened the door and told us to turn out the lights and go to sleep.

"You'll need the rest, guys. There's going to be one great big mess to clean up tomorrow around here," he advised.

Boy, was he right! We didn't have any idea what was on its way. It was heading right straight at us. Anyway, we talked for a few minutes and then fell off to sleep.

I guess it was about 3 o'clock. I woke up when I heard the wind outside. It was howling like it was alive. I mean it was ultraloud. Louder than you could ever imagine the wind could be. I awakened Laz, and we both just lay there listening. We were just a little frightened, but the thought of having our families there in the

house with us was reassuring. We had the lights on, and the streetlights were on, but that didn't last. I looked out the window, and there was rain. Lots of rain! Then the trees bent almost over and touched the ground. The streetlight flickered a couple of times, then went out. The lights in the house went out at the same time. Man, it was dark, really dark. It was a purple color of dark; you couldn't see anything. The rain, the rain was pounding the house like bullets from the sky. They were striking everywhere. Machine guns from above were firing the first shots of the war.

Bruce knew to have a generator ready, so we had electricity. He called us into the living room, and we all sat together watching through the living room window. He had not boarded the window because it was too big. He put two-by-fours like an X over the window, and then he nailed wire mesh to the boards so flying objects couldn't break the window. It helped a lot having a step dad who had been through hurricanes. He knew what to do. Anyway, we were listening to him on the porch starting the generator, and it was a big generator. You could hear it running in the house. The lights and the refrigerator came back on, and we all felt relieved.

Bruce came back into the house soaked to the bone. When he opened the back door, you could hear the raging storm three times as loud as it was with the door shut.

Suddenly Laz's mom cried, "Look outside!"

We were sitting on the couch gazing through the window that wasn't boarded, when this tree, a big palm tree, came bouncing down the street. Actually it was flying down the street like a giant B-52. It just kept on going. I don't know what its final destination was, but it left our block in a hurry.

Bruce was filling the tubs and sinks with fresh water, and my mom was giving food to Laz's little sister. I went over to where my mom was to get some food. I had some chips and soda and was sitting at the table when I heard this really loud crack. I looked outside, and this big palm tree across the street snapped right in two and fell into the neighbor's pool. The sound it made was like the biggest firecracker you could ever imagine. This whole thing was like a dream, a bad dream, a nightmare, but it was really happening!

We all just sat there staring outside. The wind was roaring like I guess a T-Rex would've roared, even louder than before, when all of a sudden it just got quiet. I mean really quiet. The wind and rain just quit. It wasn't even as dark outside. We had been through hours of wind and rain and now nothing.

"It's over!" Laz's mother cried. "Look, the wind stopped!" she blurted out to the house.

"It's only the eye passing over us. This just means we're halfway through thing," Bruce told us as he went outside to gas up the generator.

I ran to the door, stuck my head outside, and saw the eerie calmness of the eye of this monster. I looked around and saw most every tree in the neighborhood leaning all the way over. It was weird. I knew then that Fort Nacho was gone for sure. There were no leaves on any of the beautiful hedges in anyone's yard. Those hedges had been a great place to hide during neighborhood hide-and-seek games. Now an ant couldn't hide in one. They were bare. Leaves were lying everywhere. There were sticks, branches, limbs, and even a big bent-up aluminum sign lying in the middle of the road. I could barely wait for all the work I had to do when this thing was over.

This scary calmness only lasted like twenty or thirty minutes. All of a sudden the wind started blowing but not as hard, the rain came again, and then the storm blast returned from a different direction with even more fury. It was much louder and its intensity seemed to double. There were these loud thumps hitting all over the side of the house. I had no idea what it was. Bruce went over to the only window in the house that wasn't boarded up to look outside.

"It's avocados!" he shouted. There were hundreds of them on the next-door neighbor's tree. They were pounding our house, exploding like cannon balls against the side of our wooden fortress. I wondered why they hadn't blown off before the eye passed. I guess they were somehow protected from the wind.

Bruce watched the incoming fruits as one crashed through the window, breaking the glass. Bruce started hopping around like an injured rabbit. He had been cut by a piece of flying glass, and the blood was dripping from his hand like a leaky faucet.

“Get a bandage,” he cried.

Everybody just stood there. I was frozen in fear. Mother was crying. Lazaro’s mom was frantically looking through the medicine cabinet for a bandage. Bruce was cut badly for there was a pool of blood on the floor by his feet. Laz was the only cool head in the house. He wheeled over to the counter and picked up a dishtowel. He returned to Bruce, who had now sat on the floor in front of the window where the wind was blowing water through as if someone were standing outside with a hose spraying it into the house.

Laz put the towel directly on the wound. “Hold this tightly,” he screamed above the wind that now sounded like a passing freight train. “If you don’t, he’ll bleed to death.”

Mother was sobbing even louder. I couldn’t believe that the baby was sleeping through all of this, but she was. The noise was maddening. Mother helped me apply pressure to the wound as Bruce lay back against the wall. Laz’s mom finally found the gauze and tape and came running back into the living room screaming, “Here, here, tape it up!”

Laz took the towel away and quickly taped the gauze on the wound. The bleeding had pretty much stopped, and by the time Laz professionally taped the wound it had stopped altogether.

Lazaro had saved my step dad's life. None of us would've known what to do at all.

"How did you know that?" I asked Laz as I was helping Bruce up from the floor.

"I took a Red Cross lifesaving course last year in Arizona," he replied. "Everyone should take one. You never know when you'll need the skills they teach."

"Well, thank goodness you did," Mother preached. "You are a real hero, Laz."

"You've got to patch that window," Bruce yelled as he made his way to the couch. "Jay, go outside to the shed if you can make it and get a piece of plywood."

Bruce just wasn't thinking at all. There was no way that the shed was still there, and there was no way I could've walked through a 160 mile-per-hour wind, much less carry a piece of plywood large enough to put over that particular window. I was right, too. The shed was blown three blocks away. All that was left was the concrete slab. I could see it through the crack of the kitchen window where two boards didn't quite fit together.

The rain was really pounding the house now. The shrieking wind was still blowing it through the open window as if it were shot from a fire hose.

The carpet in the living room was soaked, and something had to be done. Laz wheeled into the guest bedroom where his mom was staying and called me. “Jay, come here!”

I ran to the room to see Laz wrestling the sliding door of the closet from the track it rested on.

“Help me with this door,” he commanded.

I lifted the door out of the track and set it against the wall.

“Now what?” I asked.

“Go get a hammer and nails out of the utility room and nail that door over the window before the house fills up. Hurry, Jay!”

I ran to the utility room and luckily, by the washer, there was the same bucket with the hammer and nails we used to board the windows. I picked up the bucket and ran to the living room. Bruce was regaining his senses now as the bleeding had completely stopped. He told us to get that door up fast.

Mother and Mrs. Cruz had already carried it into the living room. They held it against the window. It wasn't easy because the wind was forcing them backwards. Laz joined in, and with his tremendous upper body strength, he held it tightly against the wall.

I began to nail as furiously as I could swing the hammer, and in a bout a minute I had it tacked securely to the wall.

Mother later said that it took much longer than a minute, but I guess in a situation like that time speeds up.

After this we just all sat on the couch staring as the war continued in all its fury. It seemed the wind had been blowing for days even though it was only about 5 o'clock, and it all started around midnight. It did sound like the wind was calming down somewhat, but it may have been that the window was now covered, and you couldn't hear the battle raging outside as much.

I'll never forget that monstrous howling wind, nor will I ever forget that night. It's etched into my memory forever and ever. All I know is that when it got light and we could see outside, what we saw was unimaginable.

CHAPTER ELEVEN: “Devastation”

It was starting to break day and was light enough to be able to see through the cracks in the boarded-up windows. As Laz and I peered through the openings, we couldn't speak at all.

“You can forget Fort Nacho. It's history,” Laz stated, as he wheeled his chair around and faced the front door. “Let's go outside.”

“Yeah, look at the junk piled against the front door. I don't know how we'll ever get outside. And the fort, it's now on the west coast,” I added.

“Guaranteed!” Bruce shouted. “Let's try to get out through the living room window. We'll never get the door opened.”

“Try the back door,” Laz said.

“It's boarded too tightly because of the window in the top half of the panel. If we're to get outside, it's going to be through the living room window,” Bruce told us, with a worried look on his face.

“Bruce, you're hurt. Let me do it,” I pleaded.

“Ok, Jay, we've got to help our neighbors. We were lucky. I'm sure there are others in great need. The emergency vehicles will be held back by the downed power lines on the road.”

Just then I had this light bulb pop on in my head. “Bruce, try the garage door. Maybe it’ll open.”

“Yes, Jay, it might.” He dropped the crowbar he was going to use to pry the boards from the living room window and walked through the kitchen to the garage. Since there was no electricity to lift the door because we had run out of gas for the generator, he grabbed the handle on the door and pulled up with what strength he could muster.

“Jay, come help me,” he shouted.

“Bruce, I’m right behind you. Don’t shout.” I was kind of in a daze. I was tired from being awake all night while the demon from below did his dirty deeds, but mostly I was afraid, afraid of what I was going to see when that door opened.

When he pulled on the door, I pushed up with all my might. The door creaked but wouldn’t budge. Laz was at the garage door trying to get his chair into the garage but couldn’t because of the drop from the kitchen to the garage floor.

“Jay, come help me,” he asked. “I’ve got an idea.”

I helped him to the garage by turning him around and bracing the wheel with my foot. A gentle tug and down to the concrete garage floor he came.

“Jay, get me that piece of board over there,” he demanded.

I picked up a stout piece of two-by-four and handed it to Laz.

“You guys lift up again,” he said. “As you were trying before I saw light at the bottom of the door. If I can get this board under the door and use it to pry up, we might be able to get it open. There is obviously something leaning against it on the outside,” he lectured.

“Duhhh, Laz. I mean obviously!” I sarcastically replied.

Bruce and I pushed and pulled with every ounce of energy in our worn-out bodies.

“A bit more!” Laz cried. “More! More! Okay, I’ve got the board under,” he yelled as he slipped the thick two-by-four under the door. “It’s under,” he exclaimed

“Jay, you and Bruce pull now, and let me pry with the board,” Laz ordered.

I wiped the sweat from my forehead and grabbed hold of the door. Bruce and I pulled while Laz gave his support by shouting, “Pull, pull, pull!” as he pried with all his great strength.

All of a sudden the door shot upward so hard it slammed against the back of the garage with a bang. There was the top of Mr. Garcia’s Norfolk Pine tree on the ground. It was the culprit that was holding the door shut.

I wiped my tired eyes and walked over the debris into the front yard. What I saw is difficult even now to describe. My step dad was on his knees praying. Laz was staring outside just like I was, and neither of us could even speak.

The first thing I noticed was that there was not a roof on a house on our block. Ours was miraculously the only roof remaining.

“Look, Laz, our roof made it!” I cried.

Bruce finished praying and was walking through the yard. “Look,” he shouted. The Garcias’ piano was lodged against our front door with pieces of what looked like an aluminum sheet plastered against it. “Help me get this piano off the door, so the others can come out,” Bruce asked.

Bruce and I pulled the piano to the side and stacked the other junk in a pile. Laz opened the door and called to our moms to come out.

As our mothers stepped into the garbage pile that was once our front yard, the look on their faces was beyond my explanation. It was a look of hurt, of pain, and a look of great sorrow for our neighbors all rolled up in two tearful faces. “We were blessed,” Laz’s mom stated.

“A guardian angel was with us,” my mother added, with a voice that was very shaky and quite different from her usual commanding tone.

“This town is shredded!” Laz exclaimed. “Look, man, look? There are no leaves on the shrubs, trees, or anything. The trees are broken, battered sticks pointing upward to the sky, the sky that brought Andrew. Where is the green? Where are our friends?”

As I scanned our wasted neighborhood, I was so stunned that I completely had forgotten about Timo, Billy, and Susie. I prayed that they were okay, for the neighborhood looked like the aftermath of an atomic explosion.

“Hey, Bruce, Laz and I are going to go find out if our friends are safe.”

“You are going nowhere, Jay.”

“Why, Bruce? Please?”

“No! Come help me with this.” A piece of what looked like a door of a mobile home was jammed into the roof.

“How did that happen, Bruce?” I asked.

“Who knows? Who knows? Look over at Mrs. Espero’s pool,” he ordered.

You could see right through her house. The walls were completely gone. She lived next to Mr. Garcia, whose home used to be directly across the street from ours. I hoped so for Mr. Garcia to be okay. If he was home, he was surely dead. Anyway, Mrs. Espero’s pool had three broken telephone poles in it. Their wires were all jumbled up in a terrible mess.

“You see those wires?” Bruce asked in a voice that you just knew he was using to get ready to warn us to stay home.

“Yes,” Laz and I both answered at the same time.

“Well, those are electrical wires.”

“Duhhh,” I disrespectfully thought.

“If you guys go looking for your friends, you may get electrocuted.”

“Okay, Bruce. Let’s pull that aluminum out.”

We yanked and tugged at the aluminum missile, but it was there forever, it seemed. As we tugged, I knew that I was going to sneak away as soon as Bruce went into the house. Our mothers had not stayed in the yard long. I guess the destruction was too much for them. What we didn’t know then was that not only our neighborhood was gone, vanished into the night, carried off by the monster to its lair, wherever that was, but Homestead Air Force Base and most of Homestead were gone, also.

Mother was listening to the radio inside. Bruce was still tugging at the piece of stuck metal when Laz’s mom yelled from the living room for him to come listen to the radio. The announcer was telling of the extensive damage to southeastern Dade County. Bruce hurried down the ladder and sprinted into the house.

Very seldom do I disobey my stepfather, but sometimes in life you do things you know you’re going to get into big trouble for, but you do it anyway because of what’s in your heart, not your head. This was one of those times.

“Laz,” I whispered.

“What?” he answered.

“Let’s go.”

“Go where?”

“To check on the army, that’s where.”

“No, I’m not.”

“Well, I’m blazing you, dude.”

Laz didn’t know that it was Susie I really wanted to check on. I knew then that I loved her. I mean I really knew it now.

“I’m out of here, Laz.”

“You’ll get killed, Jay.”

“Then I’ll get killed, okay!”

“See ya.”

With that I left the yard on my way to Susie’s house. I hadn’t gone ten feet when I heard a noise behind me. It was the wheels of Laz’s chair crunching over the debris.

“Jay, push me,” he pleaded.

“Sure; let’s go.”

“Might as well die together, buddy.”

“Shut up. We’re not going to die,” I told him reassuringly and off we went.

CHAPTER TWELVE: “Let’s Go for a Walk”

I guess that it took this catastrophe to make me realize two things. First was that Laz was the bravest, neatest kid in the entire world. Second, he was the best because without blinking an eye, he was off with me down this path of awesome destruction. When he couldn’t wheel over the piles of metal, roof shingles, branches, palms, and tons of other junk, I’d tug and push until I got him over. I was so inspired by his determination.

Laz didn’t know it, but I wasn’t going on a mission to save the people of the neighborhood. I was on my way to Susie’s. I had a lot of time to think as the demon Andrew did its dirty deeds, and mostly I thought about her. I wondered if she was thinking about me. I so hoped that she was. I would daydream that she was trapped beneath a fallen wall and that I would lift it off of her, and she would kiss me and tell me she loved me. I didn’t want her to be hurt, but I surely wanted to rescue her.

The sounds were incredible as we forged our way through the trash heap. There were sirens and shouting and crying, and at times there was eerie silence when everything just seemed to fade away. I tried to picture the neighborhood as it used to look but couldn’t. No nightmare in my life was ever this wild.

Just as we turned the corner and started down what used to be Palm Street, I heard a cry for help. “Laz, did you hear that?” I asked.

“Yeah, listen,” he replied.

We stopped and perked up our ears in the direction of the pleas.

“Help, help, please help!” came out from under an enormous pile of wood, aluminum, and downed trees.

“Laz, whoever that is, he is buried under that pile,” I shouted. “Let’s get him out.”

“Jay, you’d need a steam shovel/bulldozer combo to do that. Let’s go get help now.”

“There’s no help to get, Laz. There are too many people hurt.” We hadn’t seen one person in the last two blocks. We could hear them far away but saw no one. I guess we were the only stupid people in the area. Anyway, we had a mission now.

“Jay, help me pull this tree over,” Laz ordered. A queen palm was our first task, and we moved it off the pile with great ease. As we did, the cry for help beneath the rubble became very clear. “Helppppp me, I’m hurt!” blurted through the cracks in the debris.

“Hold on, kid. We’re on our way. Hold on,” I shouted down into the pile. Laz was throwing junk aside like a madman. He was a bulldozer on his own. I felt

like I couldn't move a muscle, but as I watched him throwing stuff aside, I'd caught my second wind and kept chucking junk from the pile.

"Hey, kid, we're almost there. Hey, kid!" I screamed. There was no reply. "Laz, my God, the kid may be dead! Kid, kid, kiiiiid! We're coming! Hang in there!" I bellowed.

"Hurry, Jay. Hurry," Laz commanded.

We went back to work. We knew the kid was still alive. We just knew it. His voice sounded so strong when we first heard it. It had to be a boy about our age, who we might know. It didn't matter, so we kept flinging.

After what seemed three hours but was probably three minutes, we could make out a blue striped T-shirt and a boy about thirteen or fourteen in a pair of cut-off jeans.

"I see him," Laz shouted. His eyes are closed, and there's blood all over his face, Jay. Jay, who is it?"

"Lazaro, I don't have a clue who it is!" I answered, as I flung shingles behind me like so many machine gun bullets flying from a gun barrel. "I'm almost there, Laz. Help me get this board off."

Laz grabbed the piece of wood with one hand and moved it aside. I stuck my hand down into the space where the kid was trapped by another board and felt for his arm.

“Laz, I’ve got his arm,” I cried.

“Feel for a pulse, Jay. Feel for a pulse.”

I slid my hand down the arm as I lay on my chest, reaching through the rubble. I got to the wrist and pressed as hard as I could with my four fingers. I prayed aloud for a pulse. There was none.

“Laz, I don’t feel one. I don’t feel one.”

“Hurry, Jay. Move that junk!” yelled Laz, who was now sobbing and screaming at the same time. “We’ve got to start CPR. It’s only been a few minutes since the last cry for help. Hurry, Jay! There’s still time to bring him back!”

I moved faster than I had ever moved in my life. It’s unreal what your body can do in a situation like this. And Laz doubled my effort. In less than a minute we had enough junk cleared to get to the kid. It was plain that he was dead, but there was still hope.

“Jay, get in there and start CPR,” Laz bellowed.

Laz, I don’t know if I remember how,” I shouted back. Coach Smith had made us all take CPR, and boy, was I glad now. But I couldn’t remember what to do. “What do I do, Laz, what?”

“Clear his airway with your finger,” Laz shouted down into the space where I was crouching over the boy.

I took off my shirt, wiped the blood off the kid's face and felt inside his mouth. The face, though battered and bruised, looked familiar. As I swished my finger around in the kid's dry mouth, I suddenly realized who this was. It was Jason Lure!

“Laz, it's Jason Lure!” I screamed. “It's Jason Lure!”

“Who cares, Jay? Who cares? Save him.”

I never thought that I'd be touching Chasin Lure with anything other than my fist, but I was. It all came back to me, and I began the procedure. Four big breaths of life-giving air I forced into his lungs as hard as I could. His chest heaved with each puff, and I knew the air was in his lungs. I then began my compressions. Everything I'd learned from Coach Smith was so clear to me now. With both hands firmly on his chest, I began to press down with the force of Superman.

“Press, Jay. Press, press, press!” Laz shouted in perfect rhythm.

I don't know how long I kept this up, but I do know one thing. I was in a state of suspended animation. I guess someone had contacted the fire department because when the paramedics finally arrived, I didn't even hear them. I just felt this hand on my shoulder, and this big guy with huge arms and tight-fitting blue shirt say kindly, “I'll take over, son. Move aside. Hurry.”

I climbed out of the hole in the trash where I had worked on Chasin and collapsed onto the ground next to Laz. There were now five paramedics all working on Chasin with a fury. I lay on the ground like a plastic toy soldier who'd just been toppled over and was staring face up at the bright southern Florida sky when I heard a voice shout. "I've got a pulse. I've got a pulse. Look out; we're coming up!" came the cry of the paramedic from the bottom of the heap where Jason lay.

They brought him out and put him on a stretcher. The lady paramedic started an IV needle and off he went across the wreckage, carried by two very strong men. I wondered what Jason was doing in this part of the neighborhood. He didn't live here. It was Kenny, a meanie, who lived here. Kenny's parents, I later found, had gone to Key West to pick up a relative. When the storm hit, they decided to stay in Key West. Kenny was staying at Jason's house. Their fatal mistake was to wander out of Jason's house during the eye of the storm to go to Kenny's to check on his dog. Kenny and Jason were trapped when the storm rage returned. Anyway, Jason's friend Kenny was later found buried in the same pile and was dead. A flying concrete roof shingle had crushed his head, and they said he never knew what hit him. A wind gust of 175 miles per hour had plastered those cement bombs over the whole area, and one had found a human target. I hated the meanies. I mean I hated them, but I didn't want any of them to die. I felt sorrow

for the kid's family but sorrier for Jason. He almost lost his life, and now he'd lost his best friend to Andrew, the new meanie.

The paramedics disappeared, and Laz and I started trudging our way back home. We knew that we were in mega big trouble when we got there, but it didn't matter. It didn't matter at all. I had saved the life of my worst enemy, and I felt, well, I felt good. I felt like a real man!

“Good job, Jay. You saved Jason, dude!”

“Yeah,” I modestly answered, and then I saw my step dad coming straight at us. He screamed at me like you wouldn't believe. It went, as usual, in one ear and out the other, and when Laz told him what had happened, he began to hug me, and all three of just sat there in the middle of the road and cried. Yeah, cried. It was a cry of relief, a cry of joy, and a cry of thanks. Thanks for rekindled life and thanks that Andrew had gone, vanished, on its way toward the Louisiana coast, fed up with southern Florida, now hungry for the bayou country.

As we walked to the house, I knew I was in trouble for disobeying Bruce, but you know after I told him the entire story, he was proud and not mad at us at all. I was extremely grateful for that. He could have really punished me. I promised never to disobey him again, and we got on with our lives.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN: “Broken Lives”

Like putting together so many pieces of the world’s largest jigsaw puzzle, we began the arduous task of reassembling our neighborhood, our city, and our lives.

People came from all over the country to help. Most were from Florida, but still the nation pitched in to assist with the massive clean up. Two hundred thousand homes were destroyed, and the loss of life was terrible but could’ve been much worse if the storm had hit Miami. As it was, we all made the best of the bad, and time flew by. Tent cities popped up everywhere. Eventually they brought mobile homes in to shelter the homeless, but at first it was tents, hot canvas houses filled with mosquitoes. There wasn’t much for the families to eat, but with great difficulty they survived. We were the fortunate ones. Our house and roof made it with very little damage.

Three weeks after the storm a man came from the newspaper to interview my step dad. The reporter asked him questions about our house, and Bruce told him that when our home was built he saw to it that the strictest measures were taken to ensure his family’s safety in case of a hurricane and that every house should be rebuilt to the same standards. I guess a lot of people read the article

because people from everywhere began to visit our house to take a look at our fortress.

Speaking of fortress, Fort Nacho was an empty space in Billy's backyard. The tree that held the platform wasn't even there. All that was left was a giant hole in the earth where the roots of the ficus tree had once anchored Fort Nacho to the ground.

Billy's, Susie's, and Timo's houses were totally wiped out, and all were either staying with relatives somewhere or in a tent city, for Laz and I searched for them for days with no luck. Finally, we met up with Susie at a Red Cross food distribution center on a Sunday afternoon.

Laz and I were patiently waiting in line, melting from the September heat of 95 degrees when Laz said, "Dude, there's Susie!"

"Where?" I shouted excitedly.

"There, in the other line at the end," Laz answered loudly.

I squinted from the glare of the sun coming from the sea of food trucks that were parked next to the tents and caught a glimpse of what looked like my sweet, sweet Susie. I ran toward her like a deer being chased by a pack of hounds. As I sprinted, I knew exactly what I would say. I was going to ask her out immediately before she even had time to speak.

Well, when I got to the line of people, I quickly put on the brakes because she was standing with her mother, little sister, and grandmother. There went my chance to ask her out! So I, being the polite young man that I always am in the presence of an adult, asked her how she had been and if she was hurt in the storm. She told me that her father had fallen from what was left of their roof and had been in the hospital for three weeks. His back was injured, and he had undergone two painful surgeries. She went on to say that Jason Lure was on the same floor and that he had severe head and internal injuries but was getting better. He said that he wanted to see me as soon as possible because he was scheduled for some pretty serious surgery.

I really hadn't thought much about Jason since the incident. I mean, I did a little bit the day they buried his friend, Kenny. I saw the funeral procession on Howard Boulevard. There were cars stretched out for what seemed like a mile. But I had since put Jason and the meanies in the past.

Susie told me that she, her mom, grandma, and little sister were living in a tent and that for weeks she had eaten cereal, cereal, cereal, and more cereal, and there was nothing in her future but even more cereal.

I asked about Billy and Timo just as Laz was wheeling up behind me.

“What's up, Susie?” Laz happily asked.

“Not much, Laz. Man, I missed you!” she told him as she hugged him like there was no stopping.

Wow! I wanted a hug like that. But I didn’t get it. I did get the prettiest smile I had ever seen from the prettiest sparkling eyes I’d ever seen, and that would last me for another few days, but no hug.

As we stood in the blazing hot sun next to the olive green army tent in what used to be a supermarket parking lot, I thought about the future. Susie told us that Billy and his family had gone to Boca Raton to live with his aunt and uncle. He was already enrolled in Boca Middle School and was doing fine. I wondered how she knew all this. Anyway, she said that Billy told her middle school was the easiest thing he had ever done and that none of his fears about going, not one, had come close to being true. That made me feel a little better.

Timo was in Islamorada in the Florida Keys. She wasn’t sure of the school he was attending, but he was with his grandmother and as far as she knew, he was doing okay. That made me feel better.

“Well, Susie, Laz and I are together at my house. His home was wasted in the storm. His mom and baby sister have been with my family, and his father is stationed in Marietta, Georgia. They are going to join him in a couple of weeks,” I told her. “I am soon going to lose the best friend anyone could ever have,” I said.

“No, dude, you’re the best friend anyone could ever have,” he put in.

“You are,” I added.

“You are.”

“You guys get quiet,” Susie ordered.

“I’m a colonel, Susie,” I commanded.

“You were,” she said.

“What do you mean, ‘were’?” I asked.

“Billy said the army was disbanded since we had all gone our different ways,” she answered.

“Andrew tore up or city, destroyed our fort, and now busted up our army!” I exclaimed. “I’m not believing this!”

“Deal with it, dude. It’s real life. This is no soap opera. It is not your life on a stage,” Laz philosophized.

I invited Susie over for dinner Tuesday night to eat something besides cereal. Her mom said that she could come, and Laz and I both were super stoked. We could hardly wait for Tuesday to arrive. We headed home, completely forgetting the food we had come for.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN: “What’s Cooking?”

It was difficult to sleep Sunday night and impossible Monday. When Tuesday finally arrived, I was so happy. My mom had prepared a huge turkey that my step dad brought from Miami, and we were going to give thanks before November this year.

It was 11:00 a.m. when Bruce, Laz, and I picked up Susie from the tent city. She was wearing a white T-shirt, denim shorts, and a pair of brown leather sandals. She looked fantastic, but she always looked fantastic to me. Laz said that she was cute, but not as cute as I made her out to be. I didn’t care. ‘Beauty is in the eye of the beholder’ I think is the saying. Anyway, to me, she was the ultimate.

On the way to my house, she suggested we visit Jason in the hospital and her father, too. Bruce said he would drive us there after dinner, as he pulled into our driveway.

“You didn’t get much damage,” Susie stated, as we pulled in.

“Yeah, Bruce built the house to survive a hurricane,” I proudly told her.

“Is the fort still there?” she wanted to know.

“That’s a joke, right?” Laz sarcastically remarked.

“No, really, is it?”

“Yeah, it’s there in memory only. There’s a hole in the ground where the ficus roots used to be. But the fort is scattered across the golf course and beyond,” I told her.

“The woods behind the fort are even gone,” Laz added. “The trees are just giant toothpicks pointing to the sky. There are no branches, no leaves, nothing but wooden monuments to Andrew’s anger at nature and man.”

“What are you, Laz, some kind of English professor?” I asked.

“No, I’m just a free thinker, and someday I’ll be a famous writer.”

“That’s a bet!” Susie blurted out.

“Mom called us to the table, and after giving thanks, we chowed on some pretty awesome food.

“This beats cereal by about a million zillion,” Susie told my mother, as she reached for another helping of mashed potatoes and gravy. “I’ve had four bowls of cornflakes a day for twenty-two straight days, and I hate it!”

“That’s eighty-eight bowls of delicious mouth-watering cereal,” mathematician/author Laz calculated.

“There you go again, Laz,” I jealously interrupted before he could extend his brilliance into metaphorical proportions. ‘Wooden monuments to Andrew’s anger’ was too much, not this? Was he trying to win Susie’s heart, I wondered?

Laz's mom, who was sitting next to my mom at the table, broke into the conversation with an announcement that hurt me deeply inside.

"Laz, the baby, and I are moving to Atlanta next week. We want to thank you all for your kindness and hospitality. I don't know how we will ever repay you. They are going to close down Homestead Air Force Base because it would cost too much to rebuild it. We have no choice," she sadly told us.

I already knew this, but it was the reality of it all that made me suddenly very, very sad. It hurt. I mean it really hurt. My eyes watered up, and I almost cried. If Susie hadn't been there, I would have. I had a lump in my throat that was the size of a huge jawbreaker, and I couldn't have swallowed if I had wanted to.

"You don't have to repay us," Bruce told Mrs. Cruz. "Your friendship is worth more money than there is in the world."

"Repay us," I thought. I'd learned more about growing up and becoming a real person from Laz than I would probably learn the rest of my life. His bravery, intelligence, strength, and personality had taught me to face any challenge that life could bring. Laz didn't let his physical challenge stop him from living the fullest life possible and I was going to let nothing stand in my way. I no longer feared middle school. I survived Andrew; I could survive anything.

"Jay, you're going to have to start school next week," mom interrupted my thoughts and brought me back to earth.

“Where?” Susie asked.

“Kendall,” mom replied.

“That’s where I’m going,” Susie proudly exclaimed.

“At least I’ll know one person,” I added.

“I wish I could go with you guys,” Laz said.

“You’ll be in Atlanta, dude,” I reminded him.

“Yeah, I know.”

“You guys want me to take you to the hospital, don’t you?” Bruce broke in.

“Yeah, Bruce, we do.”

“Let me do a couple of things. You guys meet me outside,” he ordered, as he finished his last bite of turkey.

“We’ve got key lime pie for dessert,” mom tempted from the kitchen, where she was preparing dishes for the dishwasher.

“When we get back, mom,” I called out as the three of us moved through the house and out into the front yard.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN: “Surprise!”

As we walked down the steps outside, I walked faster than Susie. I helped Laz by placing a piece of plywood Bruce had measured and cut into its frame. I quickly wheeled him down the makeshift ramp into the driveway for I had something very important on my mind. Laz got in the rear seat of the car, and we folded his chair and put it in the trunk. It always amazed me how he smoothly transitioned from his chair to the car. I closed the back door and now for a brief space of time I could talk to Susie. I knew Laz was going to crank down the window quickly, so I had to speak up.

“Susie?” I whispered.

“Yeah?” she answered.

“Will you go out with me?”

“Jay, didn’t you guess?”

“Guess what?”

“I’m going out with Billy.”

“Billy!” I exclaimed.

“Yeah, Billy.”

“He doesn’t even live here,” I shot back at her in a kind of angry voice.

“Yeah, but he said he’d be back. He promised that he would.”

“What’s he coming back to? His house isn’t even there anymore,” I belted out.

“I told him that I’d wait.”

“Wait on what?” I asked. Then I realized I’d better stop. I certainly didn’t want her mad at me, so I apologized for kind of shouting and let the whole thing just drop.

By the look on my face, Laz could see we were discussing something important, and he kept the window rolled up. I had waited like forever to get to talk to her alone, and I was glad that he realized that. I just wished that the conversation would have been different! Just then Bruce came out the front door, and we got in the car and headed for the hospital.

On the way I just sat and thought. No one said anything. I began to feel sorry for myself. I’d lost the fort, Laz, my neighborhood, my Susie, and was quickly losing my mind. In my heart I had known she liked Billy. I bet they were going together for months, and I was the last person to find out. Well, here was another challenge for me. We would be riding the same bus, and I was going to steal her from Billy if it was the very last thing I ever did!

With that thought firmly embedded in my brain, we pulled into the hospital parking lot and parked near the front entrance. It didn’t seem like anyone was in a hurry to get out of the car, but we finally did. As we headed toward the entrance, I

could think of nothing but Susie. She was right beside me as we walked. That's where she belonged, right beside me. Billy couldn't protect her. He didn't even live here. I was her protector. As I walked toward the front of the hospital, a line from a song, "I am going to make her mine!" stuck in my head and remained there for a long, long time.

My daydream came to a halt as the automatic door opened, and we walked into the hospital lobby. It was big and cold and kind of scary looking. There was a lady wearing a pink striped uniform, sitting behind a desk. She asked if she could help us and we told her that we were there to visit Susie's dad and Jason Lure.

"It is ok to visit Susie's dad, but Jason Lure is only allowed family visitors," the lady said.

"What's up with that?" Laz asked.

"May I speak to your father please?" she inquired, with a look on her face that was hard to figure out.

"You guys wait by the elevator," Bruce ordered.

Laz and I maneuvered slowly toward the elevator. Susie walked directly behind us. I turned when I got there to look at Bruce, who was having a serious conversation with the lady. He was nodding his head as he listened. He may have good news I thought as I curiously watched the two.

"What's up?" Laz wondered aloud.

“I don’t know, but we are about to find out,” I said, as the lady got out of her seat and walked toward the lobby. Then, Bruce beckoned to us with a hand motion.

“You kids come over here and sit down,” he ordered.

“I am sitting down,” said Laz, kind of in a joking way, while wheeling towards Bruce.

Bruce grinned big time as Susie and I sat in a cold, straight-backed maroon leather couch with Laz beside us and waited for whatever he had to offer.

“Hey, guys. I’ve got some really great news!” Bruce blurted out. “Jason came out of surgery and is doing fine. He’s in intensive care now. That’s why we can’t see him. His doctors said that he is going to fully recover. Isn’t that great?” he inquired.

Why didn’t the lady just tell us all the news? Sometimes adults are really hard to figure out. Aside from that, I was like blown totally away by the entire situation. I had been through so many changes. At first Jason was the enemy and it was very difficult dealing with him and the attacks and all. Then, Laz and I saved his life and now he’s going to fully recover. Would he round up a whole new band of meanies and start all over again? I wondered as I answered Bruce, “Yeah, that is great news.”

Susie didn't say a word, she just had this kind of strange look on her face. A look that seemed to say, "I need a hug." And, did I want to be the person giving her that hug, but I knew better. This wasn't the time nor the place for me to show my affection for her. I mean, I could have disguised the hug as a friend merely consoling another friend who had been through so much, but it wasn't happening. Anyway, she said she was going upstairs to see her dad, so Bruce, Laz, and I started towards the parking lot.

Laz had no reaction to the whole situation. He just silently wheeled himself along by our side through the lobby towards the large automatic doors at the front of the hospital.

As the doors opened, I took over and pushed Laz outside as my stepdad walked through the parking lot towards the car. I wasn't ten feet from the door when Laz turned and said, "I don't need help, Jay. I'm a big boy." "Ok," I replied and let go of my hold on his chair. On the way there, Bruce, who was in front of us, was stopped by a lady I'd never seen before. They talked for a minute, and then both started walking back toward us.

"Another lady, what's this about?" Laz wanted to know.

"I don't have a clue," I said, as I wondered how old you had to be before adults let you in on their conversations.

Just then Bruce and the lady approached us.

“Jay and Laz, this is Mrs. Lure. She wants to talk to you two. She came here to see Jason, of course, and was going to come to our house to see you guys later. Since we are all here, it will be easier for her to tell you now.

She looked so tired, so rundown, but still managed to speak to us in a voice that was quite hoarse. You could tell she’d been crying tears of joy for the rekindled life that Jason would now be able to have.

“Boys, I guess you’ve heard about Jason?” she started in a very low voice. “Before he went into surgery this morning, he told me to thank you, Jay, for what you and your friend, Laz, did for him after the hurricane. He wanted to tell you personally, but, he didn’t know if he’d see you. I know that you guys weren’t the best of friends, but what you two did was wonderful. You saved my son’s life,” she tearfully told us.

“Mrs. Lure,” I interrupted, “We just kind of played war in the neighborhood. We had this army, and Jason was kind of like the leader of the army we were fighting. It was just a kid thing,” I said as I tried to contain my emotions.

“Well, boys I hope when Jason comes home that you two can come over and we all will have a very important conversation,” she told us as you could she was anxious to get home and rest.

“We certainly will come over when Jason comes home, Mrs. Lure,” Laz replied as we all said good-bye and started towards our cars.

I knew in my heart of hearts that I would never see Jason again. I mean, I wasn't holding a grudge or anything. I just couldn't see us ever being friends, but who knows what the future will hold for us all? I wondered as I watched Laz get into the front seat of Bruce's car.

One thing I do know. I will be forever grateful to Coach Smith for teaching me CPR. I can still hear him telling the class that he hoped we would never have to perform it, but if we did, we had a good chance of saving a person's life. I owe Coach a big thank you. At that time, I decided that I would go to visit him in the afternoon once school got underway and thank him in person.

Susie joined us in the parking lot after a few minutes or so. I couldn't tell you exactly how long it was for I had completely lost touch with time. She said that her dad was ok and after that, we drove home without speaking. Bruce dropped Susie off, and I told her that I'd see her the first day of middle school on the bus. She thanked my stepfather, told us good-bye, and walked slowly towards her tent. She was so beautiful, I thought as I watched her walk till we drove out of sight.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN: “See Ya”

The night before Laz was leaving for good, we stayed up very late talking. We relived our lives together from the day he moved into the neighborhood, right up until the present. After that, we both agreed that we'd write often and call when we could. We also talked about changes and how much growing up we had done, during and after the hurricane. Dealing with the changes one must endure during a lifetime seemed to be a recurring theme for us lately in our conversations. We came to the conclusion that making wise decisions was the most important thing you could do to help yourself along life's bumpy highway. I guess you could say that it was a very deep discussion for kids our age, but we were gifted. At least we thought so. I don't remember precisely when it happened but, we finally turned out the light and both pretended to go to sleep.

I just lay on my back thinking. I couldn't even close my eyes. The neatest kid in the whole world was leaving my life at noon, and I was going to be left alone in Homestead. Well, at least Susie would be there. That would help. But even my affection for Susie couldn't compare to my feelings for my best friend, Laz.

I learned so much from Laz, I thought as I lay awake. I mean, I now understood the difference between an acquaintance and a friend. You know a lot

of people but you have just a few real friends. Laz was a genuine friend. He proved it by his actions and words. He made me realize that I was challenged, not him. He had overcome his condition, and I, well I was a big baby who still had a long way to go to reach maturity. You know, the events of the last few months had helped me somewhat, but I knew the path that lay ahead would be easier because Laz had shown me the way to navigate it.

I guess I fell asleep at some time during the night because we both awoke at the very same time the next morning. We could smell the bacon cooking in the kitchen, and both of us agreed that we were starving. We hurried to the dining room and took our places at the table. I tried not to think about my buddy leaving as I sat there with mother, Bruce, Laz's mom and baby sister, and of course, Laz.

None of us said much; for what words were there that could mend our broken hearts? I didn't cry that morning. I was supposed to be growing up, but my eyes really felt teary. I snapped my head up as it started to slump towards my chest when my mom exclaimed, "Jay, you'll see Laz again soon. Cheer up." She could clearly see I was upset and was trying to console me with her sweetest voice. That gave me the strength to sit up straight and to finish my breakfast.

Moms are so cool, I thought. They can be the meanest person in the world, at times, and also the sweetest person on earth. This was one of those sweet times, and I needed it.

After breakfast we all sat in the living room and talked for about an hour. At 10 o'clock we packed Bruce's car, loaded up, and headed out towards Miami International. The trip took about an hour, and at 11 we were walking into the terminal. Laz allowed me to push him the entire way. It felt good to help my brother. He would usually never allow me to do this, but this was one of those special times. A poet named Samuel Coleridge once wrote that friendship was a "Sheltering tree." I didn't understand that when I first read it, but I surely did now.

Laz's mom picked up their tickets, and we started off toward the jet. Laz was allowed to board first, so we quickly said goodbye, and tried our best to deal with the situation. I didn't hug Laz, but I really felt like it. It didn't seem the manly thing to do. Instead, we shook hands with our traditional brother shake. After the handshake, we tightly locked our curled fingers together. With that symbolic farewell over, off he went to the awaiting silver bird.

I asked Bruce if we could leave; I couldn't stand the sorrow anymore. He nodded ok and I booked it out of the airport as fast as I could walk. On the ride home I just stared out the window with my head resting against it and thought. I thought about middle school. It started tomorrow, and I had to face it alone without Laz, without Billy, without Timo, but, at least, Susie would be there. That was the best part of all of this. Then, my thoughts, once again, returned to dealing with changes. Going to middle school from elementary was a change, that at just

that moment I resolved I was going to conquer no matter what and I began to feel a little better. I had learned from Laz that you have to be positive when dealing with life's surprises, because having a negative attitude only makes matters more difficult. Plus, tomorrow was the first day of school. My attitude had to be mega-positive!

As we pulled into the driveway, I decided that I would go to my room and read. Reading always helped me think more clearly. It also was responsible for my advanced vocabulary. My elementary teachers always told me that I had a superior command of the language. That had to be a great help with middle school subjects. It certainly couldn't hurt.

After reading for a while, I turned out the light and tried my very best to fall asleep. It turned out to be a very long night before middle school.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN: “Middle School Rules!”

The next morning, I was up before daylight and was sitting in the rocking chair in the living room in the dark for over an hour. I just didn't know what to expect at school. I wasn't afraid. I had conquered fear. It was more like I didn't have a clue about where to go to get to class, or where Phys Ed was, the gym, or anything for that matter. My attitude was positive though and I had narrowed my “concerns” down to just a few from a lot of what once were “fears”.

Finally, mom got up and asked if I wanted to eat. I told her no, and goodbye, and with that I was off to catch my bus. A long walk to the bus stop lay ahead of me, which gave me even more time to think. I felt a little bit better knowing Susie would be there, but when I arrived, there was no Susie.

I recognized this girl, Maria, who I knew was staying in the same tent city as Susie because I had seen her the day Laz and I went there.

“Maria, where's Susie? Did you see her this morning?” I asked.

“Jay, she's outta here. Gone. She left for Ft. Myers yesterday morning. Her dad got out of the hospital and the whole family took off. She's going to North Ft. Myers Middle School,” she blurted out.

“Cool,” I said sadly.

“Why, did you like her or something?” Maria wanted to know.

“Yeah, a little,” I lied.

Just then the bus pulled up and about thirty kids that had gathered at the bus stop boarded the yellow carriage, and we were off to the land of the unknown. I really wanted to get this trip over with, but the ride seemed like it took twenty years. The kid I was sitting next to didn't say a word the whole way to school and neither did I.

At last, we got to school. Thank goodness I thought as I got off the bus. A man wearing a gray suit was shouting loudly over a megaphone, “Sixth graders report to the gymnasium now!”

I didn't have a clue about where the gym was. I guess I should've come to school a week early and found all the buildings like my mom wanted me to, but I didn't. However, I would recommend it to any of my fifth grade friends because going to visit before school started, getting a map, and checking the place out would really help with being scared, or having a concern about getting lost on the first day.

Anyway, I followed Maria and two other girls to the gym. Man, it was huge! As I entered, an assistant principal wearing a badge with his picture on it greeted us at the door. He told us to look for a table with the first letter of our last name on it. Glancing around the room, I quickly found the “S” table, waited in line, and picked up my schedule.

“Now what?” I muttered to myself as I turned from the table with my schedule in hand and walked towards the gymnasium door. No sooner had I said that when a voice on a megaphone said to go to our first period class. Sure, where’s that I wondered? It was as if the megaphone man read my mind because he suddenly blasted out that there would be teachers in the courtyard to give us directions.

Well, I started off towards where I thought my first hour class was located and to tell the absolute truth, I got totally lost. There were no promised teachers in the courtyard to point you towards your class. They might have been somewhere, but I couldn’t see them. There were like hundreds of kids all going different directions and each looked like he or she knew exactly where to go. Thinking I had to do something pretty quickly I took out the map of the school that I had folded and put in the back pocket of my jeans and seriously began to study it. I, again, resolved not to be afraid. Let the bell ring. So I’ll be tardy the first day. Probably a lot of kids would. I turned the map all different ways trying to figure out where I was because there was no little red dot on it that said “You are here,” like the one on the map in the mall, when suddenly a voice behind me said, “Hey, Jay!” I turned around and could not believe my eyes. It was none other than Jason Lure!

“Jason, you’re well!” I exclaimed. “I mean you’re out of the hospital!”

“Yeah, I’m tough. My side is still banged up from the operation, but I’m okay. I wouldn’t be here today if it weren’t for you, and your buddy Laz.” he thankfully told me. “Where’s Laz?” he wanted to know.

“Oh, he moved. Yeah, I’m glad you are ok. Jason, can you tell me where room 3-101 is?” I asked.

“Sure, follow me.” he replied.

“Won’t you be late?” I inquired.

“So what. Let’s say I owe it to you. Let’s go,” he ordered.

This was like unreal! As we walked towards my first period class he told me that he ate second lunch. I looked at my schedule and it said I had second lunch also. We agreed as we arrived at my first hour classroom door that we would meet right after my third hour class and walk to lunch together. He also invited me to sit at his table. It was so cool. He said he would introduce me to his seventh and eighth grade friends. That would be great I thought as I said, “See you after third period.” Just then the tardy bell rang. As I walked into the class, the teacher said that it was understandable for a new sixth grader to be tardy on the first day and told me to choose a seat. That certainly was a welcome relief!

It was so awesome! I didn’t get yelled at for being late. The Social Studies teacher, Mr. Skinner, was so nice and he made certain that every single kid in the class knew where his or her classes were located before the period was over. He

had time to do this because the principal came over the intercom and said first hour was extended today to provide time for the teachers to do their orientation speeches. That allowed plenty of time to copy all the rules, and for all of us to find out where our classes were.

This all had worked out so well. None of my earlier fears had come true, not one of them. Plus, I had met Jason and was going to be introduced to older kids at lunch and sit at their table. It just couldn't have been any better except for two things. I so wished that Laz was with me, and I wanted Susie to be at my school instead of in Fort Myers. I knew that someday I might see Laz again because his mom promised she'd bring him to see me. But Susie, she would probably turn out to be a childhood sweetheart that I would sit around and talk about when I got old.

Anyway, the rest of my first day of middle school went by so quickly that I hardly even realized it. I was on the bus going home in what seemed like a couple of hours. I had successfully found my way to every class, met all kinds of new kids, and seven teachers. The bus ride seemed like a tenth of the time it took in the morning I thought as I hurriedly walked home to tell my mom about my super fabulous day.

As my house came into view, I began to walk even faster. Arriving in my yard, I lugged my now heavy book bag full of books up my front steps and opened the door to find mom standing in the living room.

“How was your day?” she eagerly asked me.

“Mom, it’s a long story. Sit down, please,” I excitedly blurted out as I plopped my book bag on the floor of the entrance foyer and walked across the tiles to the soft carpet of the living room. Mom sat down in the blue chair and I sat on the leather couch to tell my whole story.

“It was so easy!” I exclaimed, as I took off my new shoes and rubbed my tired, aching feet. I got lost and out of nowhere Jason Lure showed up and walked me to my first period class,” I told a very surprised looking mom.

“Jason Lure, wow, he got better in a hurry!” she excitedly replied.

“He sure did and he came to my third hour class and picked me up after it was over to show me the way to lunch. And, get this, Mom, I sat with him and a bunch of older kids at their lunch table. On top of that, they all talked to me. I felt like a king.” I proudly told her.

“Yes, but you did save his life, Jay. What a nice way for him to show his gratitude,” she explained.

“Mom, you have to hear what happened during my fourth hour science class. While we were all busy copying rules this kid had his hand up for, like, a really long time. He kept fidgeting in his seat like something was really bothering him. Finally, the teacher, who had been writing something in his gradebook looked up and asked the kid what he needed.”

“I got to go to the bathroom, sir,” the kid said in a really urgent sounding voice.

The teacher told him to wait a second while he wrote a hallway pass.

The kid replied, “I got to go now, sir!”

“We were trying not to laugh but none of us could hold back. It was funny the way he said it, Mom. Anyway, the teacher gave him the pass and the kid dashed out of the classroom like a rocket. We all went back to copying our rules for there were quite a few in this science class. After about ten minutes the kid hadn’t returned from the bathroom. The teacher was becoming concerned. You could tell because he was looking at the door every few seconds. He finally sent this kid, Tony, I knew from my fourth grade class at Sunset, to go to the restroom to see if the kid was there. Mom, this is where the really funny part starts. Tony comes back in like a minute and says you can hear the kid inside the stall in the restroom calling for help. He told the teacher you could hear him all down the hallway. Then the teacher asked Tony what was wrong. This is where we totally lost it. Tony said the kid was stuck in the stall with no toilet paper. The entire class went off when we heard that. I laughed so hard I almost choked. My side was even hurting. The teacher was even bent over laughing. The teacher sent Tony to get a janitor to remedy the problem. While he was gone, the teacher warned us that we better not laugh when the kid came back to class. He finally

returned and no one even looked up from their work. You could see a few kids holding it back but nobody cracked.”

“It was the most hilarious thing of my life, Mom!” I exclaimed.

“Well, I guess it wasn’t so funny to the poor little boy, Jay.”

“Yeah, well, it taught me a lesson. I’ll always look first, Mom,” I replied.

“Middle School Rules, Mom.”

“You mean you know the rules?” she inquired.

“No, silly. That’s twenty-first century talk, Mom. It means it’s the best. I mean I’m going to love it. Mom, my day went by so fast. I am kind of tired though.”

“I’ll bet. How were the rest of your teachers?”

“Cool, really cool. A couple of them looked like they might be strict, but so what, I’m going to be good. I’ve got my goals all set out in my brain, mom. Nothing can stop me from achieving them.” I lectured. “The only really bad thing that happened was Susie moved to Fort Myers I found out from this girl Maria.”

“Oh, I’m sorry to hear that, Jay.” Mom replied as if she were truly sorry for me. “I do have some good news that may brighten your day,” she added.

“What, mom?”

“Laz’s mom called today.”

“What’d she say? What’d she say?”

“If you’ll let me finish, I’ll tell you what she said, Jay. She said that they are going to start to rebuild Homestead Air Force Base and that they are moving back here.”

“When, mom, when?” I shouted.

“She didn’t know, but they are coming.” She answered.

I couldn’t help but cry this time. Man or no man, I was crying tears of joy, tears of absolute happiness. My best friend ever was coming back. I thanked my mom for the great news and all of her support, wiped my wet cheeks with the back of my hand, and went to my room to think. First, I thought about Laz and how I would show him around the school when he got here. Laz once told me that you never knew what was going to happen next if you were a military family. This was wild. He just left and now he’s coming back. Then, I thought about Jason and how nice he was to me and how none of the kids at the lunch table were any of the old meanies. I remembered Billy and Timo and daydreamed that one day we would all meet again as officers in the real United States Army. Then, my daydream came to a screeching halt as my mind turned to Susie. How could I possibly ever see her again? Just then I heard a knock on my door and mom’s head appeared in the space between the door and the wall.

“Come in, mom. I’m just thinking about my life.” I told her.

“You know, Jay. I was thinking too. Bruce has an aunt who lives by herself on the west coast of Florida. You’ve met her at the family reunion, remember?” she asked.

“Yeah, I remember. What about her?” I wanted to know.

“Well, I’ll bet she would like a visit for a few days from us during the two-week holiday vacation in December this year.” She went on to say, “She might even like some company this summer since she lives alone and all. You really might want to visit her. She’s got a huge house right on the water. There’s a dock to fish on and she has a boat that I’ll bet needs a captain just about your age.” She told me.

“Wow, Mom, that sounds awesome!” What city does she live in?” I excitedly asked.

“Fort Myers.” She answered.

The End