

Chapter 1

The Rescue

Kids with normal lives were probably too excited to sleep three days before their thirteenth birthdays, thinking about presents and parties and all that stuff I never got, no matter how many chores they'd done that day. It was hard for me to sleep all right, but not for any of those reasons. I was just cold.

I pulled my tattered blanket around my chin and curled up to try to soak up my own body warmth, but it didn't really help. I shivered and tried not to think about Miss Stern in her big warm farm house with all those empty bedrooms while I froze in the old cook house out back.

"Christopher Byrde! Get in here right now! And hurry!" Whether she yelled or just talked never made any difference. Miss Stern always shrieked. "Get your butt in here right now! It's an emergency!"

If I had thought she was really in any danger, I might have moved faster. Then again, maybe I wouldn't have. But I knew I'd better get up and see what she needed or she'd come knocking and then I'd really hear about it. Sometimes it's easier to give in and avoid the fight. So I pulled on the remains of my ragged coat and ran out into the rain.

In the dark, with the moon behind it, the big farmhouse--Alexander called it a Victorian and he usually knew about that kind of thing--loomed over Eucalyptus Cove like a demon. Muck oozed through the holes in my shoes as I plashed across the mostly dead back lawn. The cold rain bit into me so I didn't slow down that much to push my feet into the mud and enjoy that slimy feeling.

I went around to the front of the house and took the steps to the porch two at a time. She always yelled if I walked in, even if she'd called me, so I lifted the heavy iron knocker and let it fall. I waited on the porch, listening to my teeth chatter while streams of water ran from my hair into my eyes. She didn't answer my knock, but I could hear her yelling inside so I wasn't too worried, or hopeful. I knocked harder.

"Don't just stand there in the rain like a stupid little boy!" Although muffled by the door, her voice sounded as shrill and unpleasant as it would if I had to watch her face say it.

I opened the door.

Miss Stern stood on a stool in the hall outside her sitting room. Her face was as pale as it could look behind all that makeup. In her yellow bathrobe with lacy fringe, she looked like a moldy grapefruit.

"What took you so long, you little wretch?" Her head twitched and her wide eyes scanned the ground around her.

I stayed in the doorway. I didn't want to get any closer to her than I had to. "I heard you scream."

"What? Stop that mumbling. Speak up! Came to see if I was dead, most likely. And I could have been, the time it took him to get here. Look at yourself! You're dripping all over the floor."

She was as happy to see me as I was to see her, so I knew she didn't really want me to hurry. Maybe there was an emergency, but then it seems like she'd try to get out of the house, not stand around on a chair.

"I tried to run between the raindrops so I wouldn't get wet but it didn't work." I knew she wouldn't like me talking that way, but I didn't really care. I'd almost frozen to death and it must have been ninety degrees in that house with the fire roaring like it was. Still I would rather have been in my shack than in any house with Miss Stern in it, even if it was warm. "Is something wrong?"

"Is something wrong, he asks." She always talked about people like they weren't there, like she gabbed with an invisible friend or something. "No, I just wanted to see his smiling face. Of course there's something wrong. You think I'd voluntarily look at you if it wasn't an emergency? There's a mouse in the corner of my sitting room, a disgusting, dirty little creature, even worse than you. Kill it."

"Show me where it is and I'll take care of it."

"You're ten years old! Find it yourself!"

"Twelve."

"Eleven then. Think he knows better than I do. Find it!"

"Almost thirteen."

"I don't like your tone! Such a hideous beast in my sitting room. Probably has rabies and all kinds of deadly diseases. Does he care, after all I've done for him? Find it! And hurry up, before my tea gets cold."

"But what if it moved from the corner?"

"Then you'll search the whole house. Do you have to be so stupid? I hope it bites him and

gives him the black death so I won't have to waste my time anymore."

"Then who will catch mice for you?"

Miss Stern sneered through her nose. "Thyen hoo will kitch mice fer nyu? Don't get smart with me or I'll give you a smack you won't soon forget. That's the trouble with children these days. Nobody hits them properly anymore, spoiled little brats." She wagged her finger toward the sitting room. "Get--the--mouse! Now!"

I didn't worry about her hitting me. She made me live in a run-down cook house without enough food and was always neglectful, but she had never actually laid a hand on me. She seemed afraid to touch me, like I'd rub off on her. Fine with me. Just the thought of her hand on me made me want to puke.

I tried to maneuver around her to get inside, but her bulbous body blocked the way. "Can you get down? I can't get by."

"And put my delicate feet on the same floor as that loathsome rodent? There's plenty of room. I have twice the figure of a woman half my age. Stop stalling and get in there and kill the beast."

I closed my eyes and squeezed through. Rolls of fat pressed against me. I tried not to think about which body parts I was rubbing against. I felt like a stick getting squished through a marshmallow before it's toasted. Only at least there's something good about a marshmallow. This was Miss Stern's body all around me, in my face, and against my cheeks. I had a sudden urge to take a bath.

"Hurry," she whined. "Tea doesn't get any warmer while it sits there."

"Unless it's ice tea."

She opened her mouth to say something, then cocked her head and stood there with her

face blank, frozen, like she was trying to figure out what I'd said.

I looked around the sitting room. A gray mouse quivered in a corner, across from the fireplace, next to shelves of books covered with dust and cobwebs. If I had that many books, I would have read them all before they had a chance to get dusty, like Alexander did. It looked like Miss Stern had never picked one up for as long as she'd lived there.

The mouse was surrounded by shoes and papers and pieces of trash. Miss Stern had apparently thrown everything at it that she could reach. I think she hit it too, because it looked stunned. It stood still, its sides moving in and out really fast when it breathed.

"Have you killed it yet?"

I turned and looked at her. Not that I wanted to. "I'm working on it."

I picked up the mouse and carefully wrapped both hands around it. Poor little thing was shaking. I'll bet it didn't expect to see something like Miss Stern when it came into the room. No wonder it was scared.

"And don't you leave any disgusting stains where you've smashed it!"

I peeked between the thumbs of my clasped hands. "Don't worry. I won't hurt you." I walked out to the hall with my hands behind my back.

"What did you do with it?"

"You told me to get rid of it."

"I hope you smashed it to a million bits and cleaned it up afterwards."

"Yes, Miss Stern. I caught it and stomped on it and cut it into little pieces, then I stomped on it some more and threw it into the fire and watched it fry. You won't have to worry about that mouse anymore."

"Don't take that tone." She wrinkled her nose like she smelled a piece of bad cheese.

"What do you have behind your back?"

"You didn't want me to leave it where it was, did you?"

"You picked it up? You're more disgusting than I thought! Get rid of that thing and get out my sight. You have to get up early to do your chores, you know. Don't think you can sleep in just because you stayed up late. Go on. I can't stand the sight of you. You're almost as revolting as that furry ball of disease in your hands."

"Yes, Miss Stern."

I walked out the front door toward the trash bins, like I was going to throw away the carcass. When the door slammed, I found a dry spot near some bushes and set the mouse on the ground.

"Go find a safe place, and stay out of the house. If she sees you again, she'll probably hit you with a frying pan."

The mouse wiggled its nose at me, then scampered for cover.

I hurried back to my room and dried my hair on an old shirt. The mouse was too interesting for sleep to be possible, and it seemed even colder now that I'd been in the house, so I decided I might as well work on my half-finished essay about the voyages of Sir Francis Drake. I wrote until I reached the end of my sheet of paper. "I wish I had more to write on," I said.

I squeezed as many words as I could onto the single sheet, writing into the margins and between the lines. Alexander would have trouble reading it, but he'd just have to deal with it because it was all the paper I had. I'd just about used the last bit of space when a mouse dragged another piece of paper through the space under the door and left it by my feet before scurrying under the bed.

I looked at the paper. I wanted to pick it up, but I was afraid to touch it. It wasn't every

day that a mouse brought a boy a piece of paper so this seemed like a good time to not rush into things. Plus, it was still raining outside and the paper was dry. If Alexander had been there, he'd have said it was one of those things that makes a guy sit up and say "Hm." A lot of things made him say "Hm" that didn't do anything for me, but if he said it now I'd have to agree with him.

I poked the paper with my big toe, but it just lay there like any other well-behaved piece of paper. It looked safe enough.

I squatted for a closer look. It was folded and there was writing on the other side. I tried to read the scratch marks from the writing, but couldn't. This was getting silly. It was a piece of paper, that's all. I sucked in a big breath and picked it up and unfolded it.

It was a letter, and it was addressed to me.

Dear Mr. Byrde,

Mr. Byrde? Maybe whoever wrote it must have meant to send it to my father and didn't know he was dead. They probably got our names mixed up for some reason.

Greetings. We hope this letter finds you well. It is curious that you have not answered the letters we've sent over the past few months.

I had never seen any other letters. There must have been a mistake.

As stated in our previous, unanswered correspondence, it has come to our attention that you are nearing your thirteenth birthday, the time that was specified for you to come into your inheritance. You are aware, of course, that your parents were wealthy when they tragically disappeared.

What did that mean? It seemed like years since I'd gotten any mail. I almost forgot what a letter looked like. Miss Stern probably kept them or burned them. And if my parents were rich I wouldn't be living in some run-down shack behind an old ranch house. I checked the address again. It said Christopher Byrde, Eucalyptus Cove, which could only be me. Plus, whoever wrote

it knew I was going to turn thirteen.

We are very grateful to Miss Portense Stern for the loving care with which she has raised you.

Right. Loving care. Good one.

She assures us that you are doing very well and are in no need of intervention. Nevertheless, it is our duty to administer your inheritance as prescribed in your parents' last will and testament.

The problem is, our copy of the will was badly damaged when our office burned down a few years ago, and cannot be read with any certainty. However, we are sure that Miss Stern, God bless her, has kept your parents' copy in the house, or that it has been in your safekeeping.

We will visit you on November the second of this year, your birthday, with greetings, and will be prepared to administer the will at that time. We hope you have it. Otherwise, the Court will have to decide how to distribute your parents' estate.

Sincerely, with the utmost in Good Wishes, yours truly,

Willaby Just, County Judge

I stared at the letter, then read it again to make sure the words didn't change. I sucked in a bunch of air because I couldn't quite catch my breath. My head spun. My parents were rich? But Miss Stern had always told me that they were dirty swineherds who didn't have anything and had to rely on other people just to eat. What could I inherit?

Miss Stern wouldn't let me inherit anything. Then I'd actually have something. She'd want it for herself, whatever it was. She wouldn't get it, not if I could do anything about it.

But where was the will? The judge said he was coming on my birthday. Only three days!