

Chapter 43

"We weren't always homeless," Zero said. "I remember a yellow room."

"How old were you when you . . ." Stanley started to ask, but couldn't find the right words. ". . . moved out?"

"I don't know. I must have been real little, because I don't remember too much. I don't remember moving out. I remember standing in a crib, with my mother singing to me. She held my wrists and made my hands clap together. She used to sing that song to me. That one you sang . . . It was different, though . . ."

Zero spoke slowly, as if searching his brain for memories and clues. "And then later I know we lived on the street, but I don't know why we left the house. I'm pretty sure it was a house, and not an apartment. I know my room was yellow."

It was late afternoon. They were resting in the shadow of the Thumb. They had spent the morning picking onions and putting them in the sack. It didn't take long, but long enough so that they had to wait another day before heading down the mountain.

They wanted to leave at the first hint of daylight, so they'd have plenty of time to make it to Camp Green Lake before dark. Stanley wanted to be sure he could find the right hole. Then, they would hide by it until everyone went to sleep.

They would dig for as long as it seemed safe, and not a second longer. And then, treasure or no treasure, they'd head up the dirt road. If it was absolutely safe, they'd try to steal some food and water from the camp kitchen.

"I'm good at sneaking in and out of places," Zero had said.

"Remember," Stanley had warned. "The door to the Wreck Room squeaks."

Now he lay on his back, trying to save his strength for the long days ahead. He wondered what happened to Zero's parents, but he didn't ask. Zero didn't like answering questions. It was better to just let him talk when he felt like it.

Stanley thought about his own parents. In her last letter, his mom was worried that they might be evicted from their apartment because of the smell of burning sneakers.

They could easily become homeless as well.

Again, he wondered if they'd been told that he ran away from camp. Were they told that he was dead?

An image appeared in his head of his parents hugging each other and crying. He tried not to think about it.

Instead he tried to recapture the feelings he'd had the night before — the inexplicable feeling of happiness, the sense of destiny. But those feelings didn't return.

He just felt scared.

The next morning they headed down the mountain. They'd dunked their caps in the water hole before putting them on their heads. Zero held the shovel, and Stanley carried the sack, which was crammed with onions and the three jars of water. They left the pieces of the broken jar on the mountain.

"This is where I found the shovel," Stanley said, pointing out a patch of weeds.

Zero turned and looked up toward the top of the mountain. "That's a long way."

"You were light," Stanley said. "You'd already thrown up everything that was inside your stomach."

He shifted the sack from one shoulder to the other. It was heavy. He stepped on a loose rock, slipped, then fell hard. The next thing he knew he was sliding down the steep side of the mountain. He dropped the sack, and onions spilled around him.

He slid into a patch of weeds and grabbed onto a thorny vine. The vine ripped out of the earth, but slowed him enough so that he was able to stop himself.

"Are you all right?" Zero asked from above.

Stanley groaned as he pulled a thorn out of the palm of his hand. "Yeah," he said.

He was all right. He was worried more about the jars of water.

Zero climbed down after him, retrieving the sack along the way. Stanley pulled some thorns out of his pant legs.

The jars hadn't broken. The onions had protected them, like Styrofoam packing material. "Glad you didn't do that when you were carrying me," Zero said.

They'd lost about a third of the onions, but recovered many of them as they continued down the mountain. When they reached the bottom, the sun was just rising above the lake. They walked directly toward it.

Soon they stood on the edge of a cliff, looking down on the dry lake bed. Stanley wasn't sure, but he thought he could see the remains of the Mary Lou off in the distance.

"You thirsty?" Stanley asked.

"No," said Zero. "How about you."

"No," Stanley lied. He didn't want to be the first one to take a drink. Although they didn't mention it, it had become a kind of challenge between him and Zero.

They climbed down into the frying pan. It was a different spot from where they had climbed up. They eased themselves down from one ledge to another, and let themselves slide in other places, being especially careful with the sack.

Stanley could no longer see the Mary Lou, but headed in what he thought was the right direction. As the sun rose, so did the familiar haze of heat and dirt.

"You thirsty?" Zero asked.

"No," said Stanley.

"Because you have three full jars of water," said Zero. "I thought maybe it was getting too heavy for you. If you drink some, it will lighten your load."

"I'm not thirsty," said Stanley. "But if you want a drink, I'll give you some."

"I'm not thirsty," said Zero. "I was just worried about you."

Stanley smiled. "I'm a camel," he said.

They walked for what seemed like a very long time, and still never came across the Mary Lou. Stanley was pretty sure they were heading in the right direction. He remembered that when they left the boat, they were headed toward the setting sun. Now they were headed toward the rising sun. He knew the sun didn't rise and set exactly in the east and west; more southeast and southwest, but he wasn't sure how that made a difference.

His throat felt as if it was coated with sandpaper. "You sure you're not thirsty?" He asked.

"Not me," said Zero. His voice was dry and raspy.

When they did finally take a drink, they agreed to do it at the same time. Zero, who was now carrying the sack, set it down and took out two jars, giving one to Stanley.

They decided to save the canteen for last, since it couldn't accidentally break.

"You know I'm not thirsty," Stanley said, as he unscrewed the lid. "I'm just drinking so you will."

"I'm just drinking so you will," said Zero.

They clinked the jars together and, each watching the other, poured the water into their stubborn mouths.

Zero was the first to spot the Mary Lou, maybe a quarter mile away, and just a little off to the right. They headed for it.

It wasn't even noon yet when they reached the boat. They sat against the shady side and rested.

"I don't know what happened to my mother," Zero said. "She left and never came back."

Stanley peeled an onion.

"She couldn't always take me with her," Zero said. "Sometimes she had to do things by herself."

Stanley had the feeling that Zero was explaining things to himself.

"She'd tell me to wait in a certain place for her. When I was real little, I had to wait in small areas, like on a porch step or a doorway. 'Now don't leave here until I get back,' she'd say.

"I never liked it when she left. I had a stuffed animal, a little giraffe, and I'd hug it the whole time she was gone. When I got bigger I was allowed to stay in bigger areas.

Like, 'Stay on this block.' Or, 'Don't leave the park.' But even then, I still held Jaffy."

Stanley guessed that Jaffy was the name of Zero's giraffe.

"And then one day she didn't come back," Zero said. His voice sounded suddenly hollow. "I waited for her at Laney Park."

"Laney Park," said Stanley. "I've been there."

"You know the playscape?" asked Zero.

"Yeah. I've played on it."

"I waited there for more than a month," said Zero. "You know that tunnel that you crawl through, between the slide and the swinging bridge? That's where I slept."

They ate four onions apiece and drank about half a jar of water. Stanley stood up and looked around. Everything looked the same in all directions.

"When I left camp, I was heading straight toward Big Thumb," he said. "I saw the boat off to the right. So that means we have to turn a little to the left."

Zero was lost in thought. "What? Okay," he said.

They headed out. It was Stanley's turn to carry the sack.

"Some kids had a birthday party," Zero said. "I guess it was about two weeks after my mother left. There was a picnic table next to the playscape and balloons were tied to it. The kids looked to be the same age as me. One girl said hi to me and asked me if I wanted to play. I wanted to, but I didn't. I knew I didn't belong at the party, even though it wasn't their playscape. There was this one mother who kept staring at me like I was some kind of monster. Then later a boy asked me if I wanted a piece of cake, but then that same mother told me, 'Go away!' and she told all the kids to stay away from me, so I never got the piece of cake. I ran away so fast, I forgot Jaffy."

"Did you ever find him — it?"

For a moment, Zero didn't answer. Then he said, "He wasn't real."

Stanley thought again about his own parents, how awful it would be for them to never know if he was dead or alive. He realized that was how Zero must have felt, not knowing what happened to his own mother. He wondered why Zero never mentioned his father.

"Hold on," Zero said, stopping abruptly. "We're going the wrong way."

"No, this is right," said Stanley.

"You were heading toward Big Thumb when you saw the boat off to your right," said Zero. "That means we should have turned right when we left the boat."

"You sure?"

Zero drew a diagram in the dirt.

Stanley still wasn't sure.

"We need to go this way," Zero said, first drawing a line on the map and then heading that way himself.

Stanley followed. It didn't feel right to him, but Zero seemed sure.

Sometime in the middle of the afternoon, a cloud drifted across the sky and blocked out the sun. It was a welcome relief. Once again, Stanley felt that destiny was on his side.

Zero stopped and held out his arm to stop Stanley, too.

"Listen," Zero whispered.

Stanley didn't hear anything.

They continued walking very quietly and Stanley began to make out the faint sounds of Camp Green Lake. They were still too far away to see the camp, but he could hear a blend of indistinct voices. As they got closer he occasionally could hear Mr. Sir's distinctive bark.

They walked slowly and quietly, aware that sounds travel in both directions.

They approached a cluster of holes. "Let's wait here, until they go in," said Zero.

Stanley nodded. He checked to make sure there was nothing living in it, then climbed down into a hole. Zero climbed into the one next to him.

Despite having gone the wrong way for a while, it hadn't taken them nearly as long as Stanley had expected. Now, they just had to wait.

The sun cut through the cloud, and Stanley felt its rays beating down on him. But soon more clouds filled the sky, shading Stanley and his hole.

He waited until he was certain the last of the campers had finished for the day.

Then he waited a little longer.

As quietly as possible, he and Zero climbed up out of their holes and crept toward camp. Stanley held the sack in front of him, cradled in his arms, instead of over his shoulder, to keep the jars from clanking against each other. A wave of terror rushed over him when he saw the compound — the tents, the Wreck Room, the Warden's cabin under the two oak trees. The fear made him dizzy. He took a breath, summoned his courage, and continued.

"That's the one," he whispered, pointing out the hole where he had found the gold tube. It was still about fifty yards away, but Stanley was pretty sure it was the right hole.

There was no need to risk going any closer.

They climbed down into adjacent holes, and waited for the camp to fall asleep.

Chapter 44

Stanley tried to sleep, not knowing when he'd get the chance again. He heard the showers and, later, the sounds of dinner. He heard the creaking of the Wreck Room door. His fingers drummed against the side of the hole. He heard his own heart beat.

He took a drink from the canteen. He had given Zero the water jars. They each had a good supply of onions.

He wasn't sure how long he remained in the hole, maybe five hours. He was surprised when he heard Zero whispering for him to wake up. He didn't think he'd fallen asleep. If he had, he thought it must have just been for the last five minutes. Although, when he opened his eyes, he was surprised how dark it was.

There was only one light on at camp, in the office. The sky was cloudy, so there was very little starlight. Stanley could see a sliver of a moon, which appeared and disappeared among the clouds.

He carefully led Zero to the hole, which was hard to find in the darkness. He stumbled over a small pile of dirt. "I think this is it," he whispered.

"You think?" Zero asked.

"It's it," said Stanley, sounding more certain than he really was. He climbed down.

Zero handed him the shovel.

Stanley stuck the shovel into the dirt at the bottom of the hole and stepped on the back of the blade. He felt it sink beneath his weight. He scooped out some dirt and tossed it off to the side. Then he brought the shovel back down.

Zero watched for a while. "I'm going to try to refill the water jars," he said.

Stanley took a deep breath and exhaled. "Be careful," he said, then continued digging.

It was so dark, he couldn't even see the end of his shovel. For all he knew he could be digging up gold and diamonds instead of dirt. He brought each shovelful close to his face, to try to see if anything was there, before dumping it out of the hole.

As he made the hole deeper, it became harder to lift the dirt up and out. It was five feet deep before he even started. He decided to use his efforts to make it wider instead.

This made more sense, he told himself. If Kate Barlow had buried a treasure chest, she probably wouldn't have been able to dig much deeper, so why should he?

Of course, Kate Barlow probably had a whole gang of thieves helping her.

"You want some breakfast?"

Stanley jumped at the sound of Zero's voice. He hadn't heard him approach.

Zero handed down a box of cereal. Stanley carefully poured some cereal into his mouth. He didn't want to put his dirty hands inside the box. He nearly gagged on the ultra-sweet taste. They were sugar-frosted

flakes, and after eating nothing but onions for more than a week, he had trouble adjusting to the flavor. He washed them down with a swig of water.

Zero took over the digging. Stanley sifted his fingers through the fresh piles of dirt, in case he had missed anything. He wished he had a flashlight. A diamond no bigger than a pebble would be worth thousands of dollars. Yet there was no way he'd see it.

They finished the water that Zero had gotten from the spigot by the showers.

Stanley said he'd go fill the jars again, but Zero insisted that he do it instead. "No offense, but you make too much noise when you walk. You're too big."

Stanley returned to the hole. As the hole grew wider, parts of the surface kept caving in. They were running out of room. To make it much wider, they would first have to move some of the surrounding dirt piles out of the way. He wondered how much time they had before the camp woke up.

"How's it going?" Zero asked when he returned with the water.

Stanley shrugged one shoulder. He brought the shovel down the side of the hole, shaving off a slice of the dirt wall. As he did so, he felt the shovel bounce off something hard.

"What was that?" Zero asked.

Stanley didn't know. He moved his shovel up and down the side of the hole. As the dirt chipped and flaked away, the hard object became more pronounced.

It was sticking out of the side of the hole, about a foot and a half from the bottom.

He felt it with his hands.

"What is it?" Zero asked.

He could just feel a corner of it. Most of it was still buried. It had the cool, smooth texture of metal. "I think I might have found the treasure chest," he said. His voice was filled more with astonishment than with excitement.

"Really?" asked Zero.

"I think so," Stanley said.

The hole was wide enough for him to hold the shovel lengthwise and dig sideways into the wall. He knew he had to dig very carefully. He didn't want the side of the hole to collapse, along with the huge pile of dirt directly above it.

He scraped at the dirt wall, until he exposed one entire side of the box-like object.

He ran his fingers over it. It felt to be about eight inches tall, and almost two feet wide.

He had no way of knowing how far into the earth it extended. He tried pulling it out, but it wouldn't budge.

He was afraid that the only way to get to it was to start back up at the surface, and dig down. They didn't have time for that.

"I'm going to try to dig a hole underneath it," he said. "Then maybe I can pull it down and slip it out."

"Go for it," said Zero.

Stanley jammed the shovel into the bottom edge of his hole, and carefully began to dig a tunnel underneath the metal object. He hoped it didn't cave in.

Occasionally he'd stop, stoop down, and try to feel the far end of the box. But even when the tunnel was as long as his arm, he still couldn't feel the other side.

Once again he tried pulling it out, but it was firmly in the ground. If he pulled too hard, he feared, he'd cause a cave-in. He knew that when he was ready to pull it out, he would have to do it quickly, before the ground above it collapsed.

As his tunnel grew deeper and wider — and more precarious — Stanley was able to feel latches on one end of the box, and then a leather handle. It wasn't really a box. "I think it might be some kind of metal suitcase," he told Zero.

"Can you pry it loose with the shovel?" Zero suggested.

"I'm afraid the side of the hole will collapse."

"You might as well give it a try," said Zero.

Stanley took a sip of water. "Might as well," he said.

He forced the tip of the shovel between the dirt and the top of the metal case and tried to wedge it free. He wished he could see what he was doing.

He worked the end of the shovel, back and forth, up and down, until he felt the suitcase fall free. Then he felt the dirt come piling down on top of it.

But it wasn't a huge cave-in. As he knelt down in the hole, he could tell that only a small portion of the earth had collapsed.

He dug with his hands until he found the leather handle, and then he pulled the suitcase up and out of the dirt. "I got it!" he exclaimed.

It was heavy. He handed it up to Zero.

"You did it," Zero said, taking it from him.

"We did it," said Stanley.

He gathered his remaining strength, and tried to pull himself up out of the hole.

Suddenly, a bright light was shining in his face.

"Thank you," said the Warden. "You boys have been a big help."

Chapter 45

The beam of the flashlight was directed away from Stanley's eyes and onto Zero, who was sitting on his knees. The suitcase was on his lap.

Mr. Pendanski was holding the flashlight. Mr. Sir stood next to him with his gun drawn and pointed in the same direction. Mr. Sir was barefoot and bare-chested, wearing only his pajama bottoms.

The Warden moved toward Zero. She was also in her bed clothes, wearing an extra-long T-shirt. Unlike Mr. Sir, however, she had on her boots.

Mr. Pendanski was the only one fully dressed. Perhaps he had been on guard duty.

Off in the distance, Stanley could see two more flashlights bobbing toward them in the darkness. He felt helpless in the hole.

"You boys arrived just in the nick — " the Warden started to say. She stopped talking and she stopped walking. Then she slowly backed away.

A lizard had crawled up on top of the suitcase. Its big red eyes glowed in the beam of the flashlight. Its mouth was open, and Stanley could see its white tongue moving in and out between its black teeth.

Zero sat as still as a statue.

A second lizard crawled up over the side of the suitcase and stopped less than an inch away from Zero's little finger.

Stanley was afraid to look, and afraid not to. He wondered if he should try to scramble out of the hole before the lizards turned on him, but he didn't want to cause any commotion.

The second lizard crawled across Zero's fingers and halfway up his arm.

It occurred to Stanley that the lizards were probably on the suitcase when he handed it to Zero.

"There's another one!" gasped Mr. Pendanski. He shined the flashlight on the box of Frosted Flakes, which lay on its side beside Stanley's hole. A lizard was crawling out of it.

The light also illuminated Stanley's hole. He glanced downward and had to force himself to suppress a scream. He was standing in a lizard nest. He felt the scream explode inside him.

He could see six lizards. There were three on the ground, two on his left leg, and one on his right sneaker.

He tried to remain very still. Something was crawling up the back of his neck.

Three other counselors approached the area. Stanley heard one say, "What's going — " and then whisper, "Oh my God."

"What do we do?" asked Mr. Pendanski.

"We wait," said the Warden. "It won't be very long."

"At least we'll have a body to give that woman," said Mr. Pendanski.

"She's going to ask a lot of questions," said Mr. Sir. "And this time she'll have the A.G. with her."

"Let her ask her questions," said the Warden. "Just so long as I have the suitcase, I don't care what happens. Do you know how long . . ." Her voice trailed off, then started up again. "When I was little I'd watch my parents dig holes, every weekend and holiday.

When I got bigger, I had to dig, too. Even on Christmas."

Stanley felt tiny claws dig into the side of his face as the lizard pulled itself off his neck and up past his chin.

"It won't be long now," the Warden said.

Stanley could hear his heart beat. Each beat told him he was still alive, at least for one more second.

Chapter 46

Five hundred seconds later, his heart was still beating.

Mr. Pendanski screamed. The lizard which had been in the cereal box was springing toward him.

Mr. Sir shot it in midair.

Stanley felt the blast shatter the air around him. The lizards scurried frantically across his very still body. He did not flinch. A lizard ran across his closed mouth.

He glanced at Zero and Zero's eyes met his. Somehow they were both still alive, at least for one more second, one more heartbeat.

Mr. Sir lit a cigarette.

"I thought you quit," said one of the other counselors.

"Yeah, well, sometimes sunflower seeds just won't cut it." He took a long drag on his cigarette. "I'm going to have nightmares the rest of my life."

"Maybe we should just shoot them," suggested Mr. Pendanski.

"Who?" asked a counselor. "The lizards or the kids?"

Mr. Pendanski laughed grimly. "The kids are going to die anyway." He laughed again. "At least we got plenty of graves to choose from."

"We've got time," said the Warden. "I've waited this long, I can wait another few . . ." Her voice trailed off.

Stanley felt a lizard crawl in and out of his pocket.

"We're going to keep our story simple," said the Warden. "That woman's going to ask a lot of questions. The A.G. will most likely initiate an investigation. So this is what happened: Stanley tried to run away in the night, fell in a hole, and the lizards got him.

That's it. We're not even going to give them Zero's body. As far as anybody knows, Zero doesn't exist. Like Mom said, we got plenty of graves to choose from."

"Why would he run away if he knew he was getting released today?" asked Mr. Pendanski.

"Who knows? He's crazy. That was why we couldn't release him yesterday. He was delirious, and we had to keep watch over him so he wouldn't hurt himself or anybody else."

"She's not going to like it," said Mr. Pendanski.

"She's not going to like anything we tell her," said the Warden. She stared at Zero and at the suitcase. "Why aren't you dead yet?" she asked.

Stanley only half listened to the talk of the counselors. He didn't know who "that woman" was or what "A.G." meant. He didn't even realize they were initials. It sounded like one word, "Age-ee." His mind was focused on the tiny claws that moved up and down his skin and through his hair.

He tried to think about other things. He didn't want to die with the images of the Warden, Mr. Sir, and the lizards etched into his brain. Instead, he tried to see his mother's face.

His brain took him back to a time when he was very little, all bundled up in a snowsuit. He and his mother were walking, hand in hand, mitten in mitten, when they both slipped on some ice and fell and rolled down a snow-covered hillside. They ended up at the bottom of the hill. He remembered he almost cried, but instead he laughed. His mother laughed, too.

He could feel the same light-headed feeling he felt then, dizzy from rolling down the hill. He felt the sharp coldness of the snow against his ear. He could see flecks of snow on his mother's bright and cheery face.

This was where he wanted to be when he died.

"Hey, Caveman, guess what?" said Mr. Sir. "You're innocent, after all. I thought you'd like to know that. Your lawyer came to get you yesterday. Too bad you weren't here."

The words meant nothing to Stanley, who was still in the snow. He and his mother climbed back up the hill and rolled down again, this time on purpose. Later they had hot chocolate with lots of melted marshmallows.

"It's getting close to 4:30," said Mr. Pendanski. "They'll be waking up."

The Warden told the counselors to return to the tents. She told them to give the campers breakfast and to make sure they didn't talk to anyone. As long as they did as they were told, they wouldn't have to dig any more holes. If they talked, they would be severely punished.

"How should we say they will be punished?" one of the counselors asked.

"Let them use their imaginations," said the Warden.

Stanley watched the counselors return to the tents, leaving only the Warden and Mr. Sir behind. He knew the Warden didn't care whether the campers dug any more holes or not. She'd found what she was looking for.

He glanced at Zero. A lizard was perched on his shoulder.

Zero remained perfectly still except for his right hand, which slowly formed into a fist. Then he raised his thumb, giving Stanley the thumbs-up sign.

Stanley thought back to what Mr. Sir had said to him earlier, and the bits of conversation he'd overheard. He tried to make sense out of it. Mr. Sir had said something about a lawyer, but Stanley knew his parents couldn't afford a lawyer.

His legs were sore from remaining rigid for so long. Standing still was more strenuous than walking. He slowly allowed himself to lean against the side of the hole.

The lizards didn't seem to mind.