

Chapter 2

"Whap! Whap!" A cord banged against the wall, swatted by a white cat with Siamese markings.

Randy squinted as cruel sunlight announced the new day, grudgingly forcing a single eye fully open. Groaning, he turned to read his unexpectedly blank alarm clock. His cat held its cord in her mouth, shaking the life out of it.

"Kritters!" Randy yelled. She glanced up at him with what looked like a guilty look.

He glanced at his watch. "Crap!" Forty-five minutes until school. Hygiene would have to take a day off or he'd be late—again. He opened a drawer and pulled out a pair of pants and a T-shirt. Quickly he dressed. He grabbed his leather backpack and tossed in his MP3 player, an art pad, a binder, and his math book. He chose a light jacket from his walk-in closet, and then headed out the door. His bedroom door swung shut and narrowly missed squashing Kritters.

He rounded the corner and then headed down a flight of stairs, bounding down every other step. Kritters wove in and out of his feet. He almost tripped as she zipped past him and then planted her feet to stop when she ran out of steps. Her momentum sent the little Oriental rug at the bottom of the stairs careening, the cat riding it toboggan-style down the hallway's hardwood floor. Just as she was about to run into a wall, Kritters nimbly jumped off the carpet and landed on a suede couch, digging in her claws.

Randy's mother, Tressa, stopped pouring her organic cereal into a bowl. In Randy's opinion, one might as well substitute the word 'organic' with something more descriptive and honest, like 'tastes like straw'.

Tressa looked up and scowled. She headed across the room, picked up the Oriental rug, placed it in its proper spot, and smoothed it flat. She went back to her cereal and poured milk into the 'healthy' stuff.

"Have I mentioned that I hate that cat? Your father knows I can't bear them. I'm certain that's why he bought it for you."

"Hey, be nice to Kritters. She's my buddy." Randy picked up his cat and held her up to Tressa's face. "Come on, Mom. Kiss and make up."

Tressa rolled her eyes. Her scowl turned into a bemused smile. "Not likely."

Randy gave his overactive Siberian cat a smooch on the head and a vigorous 'scratchins' on the belly. He glanced at his watch, an anxious look on his face.

"I have to run. You off to save the world again today?"

"Actually, Mister Smarty-pants, for your information, I'm working on a case that *will* save the world—for a few thousand nesting water fowl near San Fran. My cab for the airport should be here any minute. So what do you have going tonight?"

"Git and I have scheduled a night of fine theatre." His mom raised a doubtful eyebrow. "We're watching Kung Fu reruns at eight. You be back by then to join us? We'll be serving M&M's over buttered popcorn, your favorite."

"As tempting as a night of David Carradine is, I'm afraid I won't be back until late."

"We all know you find Mr. Carradine tempting—but you're only human."

"You have that right, mister." Tressa glanced at her watch, and then began wolfing down her cereal.

Randy picked up the milk jug from the table and put it in the fridge. "Still, Kill Bill was his best work."

"Right you are. Anyway, I'll catch the red eye back later tonight. On the upside, I won't have to stay overnight in a hotel again. I can never get comfortable in any bed but my own. Speaking of beds—"

"Were we?" Randy turned to look at her, eyebrows raised.

"Randy, can you do an old worry-wart a solid and not bring Bridgette into your room when nobody's around? I know you're a good boy and all, but I'm not ready to pit your claim that you're 'just friends' against raging teen hormones. Believe it or not, I was once young, too."

"Mom, it's so cute how you get all old-fashioned on me like that. Really though, I just don't think of Bridgette like that. We don't even hold hands. That would seem—weird."

"Well, you cling to that. I'm not ready to be anybody's 'Grandma Tressa' any time soon. By the way, you used to call her 'The Git'. When did you start calling her Bridgette?"

Randy shrugged. He picked up his mom's now-empty cereal bowl. He walked to the dishwasher and put her bowl and spoon inside.

"You had better get moving, mom. Those cabbies won't wait long if you're not ready."

A horn blared out front. Startled, Kritters darted across the room and scampered up a very expensive set of velvet drapes.

Tressa grabbed a long coat from the hall closet. "Dang it! The cabbie is early. You behave while I'm gone."

"Yes, warden."

Tressa shot him a little smile, and then planted a peck on his cheek. "Take care of you. I love you lots. See you tonight, son." As a last thought, she added, "Be sure to lock up before you leave."

"I await your return, milady." Randy swept his arm in front of her and bent at the waist in a mock bow, then said, "I love you too, Mom. Have a good flight."

Tressa gathered her things. "I never understood that saying. What can I do to make it a good flight? Climb in the cockpit with the pilot and give him advice?"

She draped a beige London Fog overcoat over her arm. She opened the door and began to head out as the impatient cabbie's brake lights went off and he started to pull away. She brought her thumb and index finger to her lips and whistled, shrill and piercing. She waved frantically and the car stopped. She loaded her things into the cab, waved to Randy over her shoulder, and then got in. The car's tires spun on the wet leaves that clung to the cobblestone circular driveway. When the wheels caught hold, the car lurched away.

"Well, it's just you and me, Kritters."

She strutted over to the dish full of 'dietary balanced cat food.' She sniffed at it and then looked pleadingly up at Randy. She yowled at him.

"I know, Kritters. She's trying to poison you. Well, I got your back."

Randy opened an alder cabinet door above the marble counter. He pulled out a large can of tuna. The can opener whirred for a minute. Then he dumped the entire contents over the cat food, burying it.

"Just don't tell Mom, OK? She wants us to be as health-conscious as she is, but we'll have nothing to do with that, now will we?"

Kritters wolfed down the fish. She settled into a thrumming purr as Randy stroked her soft fur.

Randy walked into the adjacent family room and turned on a huge flat-screen TV that topped an oak entertainment center.

"Animal Planet good for you today?" Randy said, as he turned on the mammoth television and selected a channel. On the screen, a cougar chased down a long-eared hare in deep snow. Kritters looked around the counter to see. She put her head against the bowl and pushed it, scooting the bowl forward across the tile kitchen floor. She looked up, satisfied that she could see the TV over her morning breakfast, and went back to eating, looking up occasionally.

Randy put on his jacket and threw his backpack over his shoulder. "Don't watch that all day, sweetie. It will rot your brain."

Randy stepped out the door. With a few taps on a numeric keypad, he locked the door and set the home alarm. He leaped down the stairs, almost falling when he landed on the wet, slippery red and orange leaves.

Rather than follow the driveway left to the street, he headed toward the forest straight ahead. He almost thought he caught some motion out of the corner of his right eye, where his grandpa Cajur's

stone home stood on a well-kept lawn. An assortment of painted garden gnome statues posed, some at work gardening, one holding a pipe and smiling at a female gnome who was bent over, holding a hoe. An ancient-looking brass sundial rose from a granite base. White rocks radiated out in neat lines across the lawn, branching out like lightning arcs.

Randy had always admired the overall effect, at least until he had to mow and trim the lawn, a job that his mom was all too quick to point out that his grandfather paid him triple what the other neighborhood boys would charge to do the job.

"He's a good boy, and I'll spoil him if I want to. When I pay him too little, then you'll have cause to gripe," Cajur had said to her. It was one of the few times his mom and grandfather had disagreed about anything related to Randy.

Randy pulled his cell phone out of his jacket and turned it on. Its background image was messed up, a jumble of random patches of color. Some of the icons were missing.

Danged phone is all messed up, he thought. I probably shouldn't install so many applications on it. One of them probably had a virus. I'll have Trode look at it later.

He managed to call Bridgette, though he had to press the dial button a few times before it worked. She picked up on the first ring.

She spoke quickly, running her words together. "Hey, tall, dark and handsome."

"No Bridgette, it's me, Randy."

"Yeah. What I said. We meeting at the tree fort?"

"Sure, Git. I'm almost there."

"See you in a minute, then."

Randy cut across Cajur's lawn, heading toward a gnarled giant of a black walnut tree. A multilevel tree house perched in its massive limbs—but Randy called it a 'tree fort'.

"Tree *houses* are for little kids playing house," Randy had reasoned to Bridgette when they first discussed building it. "Robinson Crusoe wouldn't stoop to living in a 'tree house.' He lived in a tree fort, a place of protection from the evil outside."

And that is what his tree fort had been for Randy in past years. It was a shelter, a place where he could come, and know his parents wouldn't follow. A place where he could be with his thoughts when he didn't want to share them with anyone. Anyone but Bridgette, that is. She had shared difficult moments when his parents first began to fight, troublesome hours when Randy didn't know if his mom and dad would stay together, painful days after his father left.

Randy climbed the rough rope ladder. Atop the wraparound deck, he reached for the doorknob of the fort. "Pirates only!" announced red letters across the door. He had painted that four years ago, when only eleven, shortly after he and Bridgette had built the tree fort.

He opened the door. He stooped over to avoid hitting his head. He hadn't been this tall when they built the fort. Bridgette had been the first to complain about the low ceiling. Randy shot up in height a year after she did.

He sat on a well-built wooden stool he had made in shop class two years before, and glanced around a room full of memories. A makeshift table made by cutting up an old door held the treasures of years past—collector cards, dice stolen from some board game, and a smashed Ouija board, which had creeped Git out when they tried it. Randy wasn't as unnerved, since he noticed that the spirits beyond seemed to make the same spelling errors that Git did.

A carved walking stick leaned against the wall, its end worn from countless walks through the woods surrounding his home. It was kept close at hand, "To protect us from intruders," a 12-year-old Randy had reasoned.

Then there was The Git's stuff. In the beginning, it was the same stuff Randy liked. But her dog-eared comic books gradually gave way to Seventeen Magazine and later Vogue. Her posters evolved from bands they both enjoyed to ones with hunky guys and whiny girls as their lead singers.

But one thing remained the same. They both loved fantasy books and movies. They sought out the best the genre had to offer. Beginning with J.R.R. Tolkien and the adventures of a furry-footed halfling, they graduated to more hardcore fantasy, the stuff of Jordan and Goodkind.

"Yo! Randy! You coming down? We do have that *school* thing in twenty minutes."

Randy poked his head out the tree fort door. Looking down at Bridgette, he smiled. She always made him smile. She always had. Some friendships were like that. *Why wasn't Mom and Dad's relationship like that?* he wondered for the umpteenth time.

"Yeah, let's do that." Randy grabbed a thick rope that dangled down to the ground below. Hooking his feet around it and grabbing it with one hand, he held the other out in a grand gesture. He turned round and round as he descended, his feet following the twist of the heavy nylon rope.

"Nice you could accompany me, sir. Shall we?" Bridgette pointed to the path leading from the tree fort, a dirt track they took each day on their way to school. Not that it was shorter than walking the sidewalk the short distance to school. It wasn't. But it avoided the crowds of students headed the same way. Besides, Randy preferred the company of squirrels and foxes—and Bridgette.

Their little-traveled path joined one that ran along the edge of a little creek, or "crick" as Randy's dad would say. He was from Idaho. They said things like that there. They also "worshed" their car, rather than washed.

Randy looked down, spotting something metallic glinting in the early morning light. "What the—" Randy bent down and picked up a large-caliber bullet lying in the mud. It rested in a deep footprint, whose waffle-like pattern closely matched that of a pair of hiking boots he owned.

"What is it?" Bridgette took in the muddy cartridge. "Another poacher, you think?"

"I don't know. This doesn't look like a standard hunting load." He looked at the tip. "Hollow point. You'd never use this on game you wanted to eat afterwards. These basically explode on impact, which would ruin a lot of meat. Doesn't make sense."

One hand on her hip and a skeptical look on her face, Bridgette said, "How do you know so much about high-powered rifles? You're not just making this up to impress me, are you?"

"Naw," he said. "My dad tried to get me into hunting, but the thought of killing a deer turned me off. His name *is* 'Hunter', so I guess it shouldn't come as a surprise that it's his thing. The hobby runs in his family. Anyway, he took me out once before we moved here. We went to all the hunter safety classes and everything. He even got me an orange vest and camo pants and shirt."

Bridgette took the bullet and turned it over in her hand, and then handed it back. "What are you going to do with it?"

"Well, I'm certainly not going to leave it where some kid can find it." Randy pocketed the shell, intending to ask his grandfather about it when he got home from school. "Hey, you ready for that algebra test in Mr. Frankel's class?"

"Like I need to study for that. Cinchy stuff," Bridgette said.

"Well, brainiac, it doesn't come so easy for all of us."

"You just act dumb so I'll come over and help you study. By the way, what was with your mom last night?"

"How do you mean?" Randy asked.

"Did you see her face when you said we were going upstairs to your room to study?"

"She's probably just afraid that you'll give in to my manly charm if we're all alone up there." Randy held up his arms and flexed his muscles. "It's not like anyone could blame you for giving in to *this*."

Bridgette playfully socked him in the shoulder. "I'll try to control myself."

Randy put his arms down and rubbed his shoulder, an exaggerated pout on his face. "Brat!"

Bridgette shrugged. "Like that's news."

Randy laughed. "Right before you came over, she actually said, 'Bridgette is blossoming into quite a young lady.' Really, who talks like that?"

"So, do *you* think I'm blossoming?"

"I'm just saying—uh, what?"

Bridgette giggled nervously. To break the awkward silence, she pulled one of her favorite tricks. She ambled over to one of the rain-laden aspens bordering the trail. When Randy looked the other way, she gave the tree trunk a solid kick with her high-top shoes, and then dodged out from under it. The heavily-laden leaves shed their burden, cascading water onto Randy.

"Oh Git! Bad idea!" Randy took off his coat and shook it at Bridgette. "You *must* be loved, Bridgette."

"Oh? Why's that?"

"You must be. That's the only reason I can come up with why I didn't throw you in the creek."

"Love, huh?" she said.

"Must be."

Bridgette's shoulders sagged. "Can't be. Because if it *was* love, you'd be the last to know."

As Randy wound up with a retort, Bridgette broke in with a question. "So, we picking up Trode?"

Completely losing his train of thought, Randy answered. "Someone has to pick him up or you know he'd space off school."

"What's it this time? A hot lead on a mess of photos proving we didn't really land on the moon?"

"Old news. He said this was really big this time."

"Isn't it always?" she said.

They shared a knowing smile. Trode could find a conspiracy in his breakfast cereal, a secret, insidious organization behind every news story. Randy and Bridgette often felt they acted as ambassadors between their friend Trode and the real world. They wondered if he was just as happy when lost in his own thoughts, but he always seemed glad to see them, and they all enjoyed joking around and hanging out together. Randy didn't kid himself, though. He knew that if aliens offered to take Trode away, the best he and Bridgette could hope for would be a postcard from Alpha Centari.

"Well, we're here. Lone Gunman Central. I always feel silly doing this," Randy said, pointing to a tree bordering the path. For anyone who cared to look, they would find a wire snaking up the backside of the tree to a transmitter box high in the pine. Randy couldn't help looking around to see if anyone was watching before pushing on the bark of the tree with his pointer finger. Nothing happened. He moved his finger to the right and pressed again. At last, he found the right spot and heard a little click. A section of bark popped loose, which served as a well-hidden wooden door on brass hinges. Randy reached inside, where a little keypad was mounted. He pressed four numbers, and then snapped the door shut.

"Come on in, guys!" announced a voice, which came from a speaker Randy had never been able to find.

Randy and Bridgette plowed through the tall grass of Trode's back lawn. Well, it *had* been a lawn once. Now it was more of an untamed clearing in the forest that was slowly losing a battle with the woods that fought to reclaim it. Once the pride of its former owner, and the envy of the neighbors, Trode's family had totally let the home's exterior go to pot. Ivy climbed up the once-stately stone home in a tangled mess, completely growing over an upstairs window of one of the rooms that Trode's family didn't use. The back porch hadn't been repainted in several years. Its red paint peeled in the sun.

When Randy had mentioned the state of the back yard, Trode had explained that his family never spent any time there. He played video games and avoided outdoor activities. He had joked that, "If I went outside, how would I keep up my pasty, vampire-like complexion?"

Trode explained that his dad had to keep the front lawn maintained to keep up appearances, since he often had clients over to the house in the evening, but he didn't really care about the back yard, since they'd never see it. One of his few chores, Trode was responsible for keeping the front lawn looking presentable, which he did by paying the kid next door a portion of his generous allowance to do it for him.

The back door swung slowly open by itself, driven by some gadget or other that Trode had hooked up, powered by a garage door opener.

"You sure you two weren't followed?" Trode asked.

Bridgette flashed him a bemused smile. "By who? You don't mean those black helicopters we saw overhead?"

Trode looked up in a panic. "Seriously?" Concern spread over Trode's pudgy face.

"She's messing with you, Trode." Randy gave him a reassuring pat on the back.

Trode held up his pointer finger, a menacing look on his face. "Don't even joke about that, man!"

Randy and Bridgette followed him inside. "You said you were onto something big when we talked earlier," said Randy. "What's the conspiracy *de jour*?"

"I just picked up the biggest EMP spike ever, not far from here. A smaller one spiked last night. Unknown source."

"EMP?" Randy asked.

Trode led them into his room. "Electro Magnetic Pulse. They're energy spikes that travel through the air. They can knock out computer equipment as small as Deniese here ..." Trode pointed to his best friend, an expensive gaming computer, "... to your iPod. They happen when a nuke goes off, but this one was much smaller."

"Glad that didn't happen. I'd hate to face Ms. Sedlehec without tunes. The way she drones on about worthless details of history, it's my only defense against death by boredom. Still, that's not as bad as when she writes on the board. She must have lost a lot of weight at one time, because arm skin hangs down and wobbles like a turkey's gobbler when she writes on the board."

Randy put his finger in his mouth and made gagging sounds like he was throwing up. "Gross, man." He pointed at a bank of computers and electronic equipment with wires running everywhere, which burdened a desk buried somewhere beneath it all. "So what do you think you picked up?"

"What part of 'unknown source' is puzzling you? I wish I knew. I have never seen one that big before, not even during the peak of the sun storms a while back. Could be a power transformer blew out or something, but two within 24 hours? Unlikely. Also, the lights didn't flicker or anything, so that doesn't make sense."

"To the Mystery Machine, Scooby!" Bridgette swept her arm toward the front door.

"Randy, I really don't get why you put up with this one," Trode said.

Bridgette put her arm around Randy's shoulders. "I hate to break up this little pow-wow, but we really do need to get to school. We'll be late if we don't hustle."

"Oh yeah... school." Trode picked up his backpack and slung it over his shoulder, an oversized bag with who knows how many pockets and compartments. It even had built-in speakers with a rechargeable amp to plug into an MP3 player. Randy's was an exact duplicate of the backpack. He and Trode had picked them up at an electronics fair a few months earlier.

Trode grabbed his smart phone, its large screen emblazoned with the logo from his favorite online game. He donned a pair of dark sunglasses, waggling his eyebrows comically. "For better hallway vision."

Bridgette rolled her eyes as she turned away. "Trode, do you have any clue how much of a dork you are? Well, I would hesitate to be seen with you, but I'll come down a rung or two on the social ladder and make an exception, but only if you're driving."

"Wouldn't miss it. Dad's out of town again. He left me his Benz. Let's motor." Trode led the way into the garage, a cavernous four-car wide, double-deep affair with room for six cars plus an RV, though the back half was home to Trode's dad's wood and metal-working tools. He strode past his mom's Porsche, a cherry-red midlife-crisis-mobile. Next was his dad's powerful Valkyrie motorcycle. Trode looked it over admiringly and ran his hand over it. "Someday, my love."

His dad's Hummer was gone, leaving Trode's favorite car, a mid-90's Mercedes Benz 400 series, which he called his "rocket sled" or just "the sled." His dad had bought it when he made his first million, back when his dot-com startup had gone public. It was the first of many beautiful cars.

"Hop in!" Trode opened a watery-glossed black door and slid in.

Bridgette hesitated, before climbing in the back. "Can we try to keep the speed down a bit? The sonic booms irritate the neighbors."

Trode opened up the glove box between the front seats—which actually contained *gloves*—tan leather driving gloves. He ceremoniously stretched them onto his hands and wiggled his fingers in anticipation. The car roared to life and Trode revved the engine a few times. A smile spread far too widely across his beefy face.

"We're going to die," Bridgette stated flatly.

Trode turned around. "Not today, dear. You are destined to die of boredom, so I figure that I'll stay safe, as long as you're riding in the car."

"Well, if you blaze past my mom like you did last week, you'll only *wish* for a boring death," Bridgette said.

She fastened her seat belt. Without thinking, she crossed herself. Though she wasn't terribly religious, she always said that she could use all the luck, fortune, and divine intervention she could call down when Trode was behind the wheel.

Trode put the car into reverse and hit the gas. The tires chirped. He careened down the long, curved driveway. He swerved around his brother's skateboard. He narrowly missed colliding with the brick mailbox, and then pulled out onto the street. The dash-mounted St. Christopher bobble-head doll flailed wildly. Trode rubbed the belly of a Buddha doll that dangled from the rearview mirror for good luck, and then squealed the tires as he accelerated.

In a huge picture window, his mother stood, holding a drink. She parted the curtains. Trode put three fingers to his forehead in a mock salute. The blonde-haired lady shook her head in resignation, and took a swig of her morning 'pick-me-up' cocktail.

Bridgette shifted nervously in the back seat. "Trode, doesn't your mom care that you drive like a maniac?"

"Yeah, but not enough to let it distract her from her games shows and getting her buzz on. Besides, she probably won't even remember what happened, by the time Dad gets home."