

# 1

Sam Bixby was a curious boy. He loved to touch things, run his hands over them and feel their texture. When he went with his father to his piano teacher's tiny apartment for lessons he picked up a drum, books from the floor, odd shaped pencils in a glass on the table and plucked an African stringed instrument hanging on the wall until his teacher, a patient grey-haired woman of sixty had to say, "Sam—stop!"

He was a slim, nine-year-old bone-white boy with fine hands, brown eyes and a mop of wavy, copper-colored hair. Freckled too. They crept up his hands to his arms and crawled from his feet to his knees. Wherever the sun touched, he was speckled.

Sam's father was named Jack, his mother, Kate. They divorced when Sam was two. The boy had few memories of his parents together.

They lived a short ferryboat ride west of Seattle on Vashon Island. Jack had taken countless fishing trips to northern Minnesota when he was a boy and decided that Sam was finally old enough for them to

go together. That summer Jack booked a flight to Minneapolis and rented a cabin on a small lake where the fishing was supposed to be excellent.

When they arrived, Jack rented a car and they took off for northern Minnesota; land of lakes, sky blue water, schools of northern pike, bass, muskellunge and, of course, mosquitoes—millions and millions of them.

“Put down your Gameboy,” Sam’s father said, when they were fifty miles outside of Minneapolis. “Get a load of this land.”

Sam reluctantly turned off the chirping box in his hand and set it on the seat beside him. He had been giving his electronic dog Maisy instructions, teaching her to fetch. He looked out the window. The land was flat with low rolling hills in the distance. They passed by white farmhouses, weathered barns and clumps of huge trees. A flock of ducks rose up out of a cattail marsh like a speckled black cloud.

“We used to come up here when I was a boy,” Jack said, nodding to Sam in the back seat. “That’s what we did for family vacations—fish.”

“Uh-huh,” Sam said, glancing at his Gameboy. He longed to pick it up but decided against it. He stared out the window and saw signs for pick-your-own blueberries and a worn billboard with Indians in a canoe harvesting wild rice. There was something about the land that seemed bleak, empty and even a little scary.

A long, silvery lake came into view. There was a figure in a canoe lit from the back, silhouetted. A man, Sam guessed, with an odd, round hat. Something about the figure struck him, as if the fellow was considering Sam from a distance. The man raised his hat in salute and waved, his black arm flapping like the wing of a bird.

“Jeeze,” Sam exclaimed, “d’you see that?”

“See what?” his father asked, his eyes on the road.

“Some guy in a boat tipped his hat at me and...and...*waved*.”

Sam’s father laughed. “Maybe he knows you. Or maybe you’ve already made a friend and we’re not even there yet.”

Sam pressed his nose to the window. His warm breath made a small damp cloud on the glass. He brought his face back from the window and watched the cloud melt. “I dunno...it’s weird.”

They picked up supplies and food at a local grocery store and made it to the cabin as the sun was setting. Jack unpacked the car, brought their things inside and snapped on the light.

Sam noticed the place was old-fashioned and funky. There were a few beat-up wooden kitchen chairs and a worn-out couch. He zipped around the place touching things, picking them up. He switched on lights, checked the bathroom and bedroom. In the bedroom he found old sportsman magazines on a low table. The covers featured guys bagging ducks on the wing and men landing huge fish leaping out of the water beside their boats. Underneath the magazines he found a treasure—old comic books. *Superman*, *Batman*, *Green Lantern* and *Sergeant Rock and Easy Company*. On the cover of that one, Sergeant Rock was braving enemy fire. Explosions were bursting all around him. His face was shiny with sweat, his expression grim. He hadn’t shaved in days. “Move out, Easy Company,” he growled through clenched teeth.

“Cool,” Sam yelled, snatching up the comics and sprinting to the kitchen where his father was unpacking groceries. He plopped in a chair and held up the comics. “Hey Dad, look what I found.”

Jack turned and laughed. “Well I’ll be. Looks like the kind of stuff I read as a kid. That Sergeant Rock is a tough old rooster. They’re fun. ’Course that stuff has nothing to do with real life...those guys never lose. In real life the bad guys win. Not all the time, of course, but plenty.”

“You hungry?” Jack asked.

“Nope.”

“You probably will be in the morning.” Jack slid a pound of hamburger meat into the ancient white refrigerator.

Sam woke to the sizzle of bacon and smell of coffee. He came out of the bedroom in his T-shirt and underwear rubbing his eyes. "I'm hungry," he said.

"Thought so," his father replied, bending over a cast iron fry pan with a spatula in his hand. "Did you have any dreams?"

Sam sat in one of the rickety chairs and stared out the window blinking at the light as if it was the first sunlight he'd ever seen. "I dreamed I was in a boat in the middle of a lake. I'd come from my Mom's and I was rowing to your house. You lived in a lighthouse on the other side. It was getting dark and my arms were tired. I wanted you to turn on your light but you didn't know I was there."

"What happened then?"

"I woke up."

"I guess I better leave the light on all the time."

"Why?" Sam said, blinking.

"So you'll know I'll always be where you can find me, even if your arms are tired."

Jack piled their plates with scrambled eggs, bacon and toast with raspberry jam and brought them to the table. He poured a glass of milk for Sam, warmed his coffee and sat down opposite the boy. They bowed to each other and the food, a ritual they'd observed for years. "Don't just stare at it, Sam, it won't bite you. You've got to bite it."

They ate silently for a few minutes. Finally Sam looked up from his eggs. "What are we gonna do here, Dad?"

His father laughed. "Plenty. Fish. Play cards. Go exploring. Read aloud to each other by the lantern at night. Look for agates. See if we can discover some local critters."

"Snakes?"

"There are probably some snakes around here. No poisonous ones though. Frogs and turtles too. Listen, we're gonna be here a week. I've got some things to take care of today. I need to rent a boat and get the life jackets squared away. You're welcome to come with me if you want, or—"

“What?”

“If that’s too boring, you can do a little exploring. But you’ve got to promise me something.”

“What?”

“Stay here by the cabin, OK? I can’t have you wandering off. Understand?”

Sam nodded.

“I mean it. If you’re not sure, you’ve got to come with me.”

“I’m sure.”

His father studied Sam carefully. “Since you like to say ‘trust me’, I will. But you’ve got to pay attention and stay close by. OK?”

“Gotcha.”

Jack laughed, downed the last slug of his coffee, and got up from the table. He kissed the top of Sam’s head, a rat’s nest of auburn hair. “I’ve got *you*, too.” He brought his dishes to the sink and ran hot water over them. “Bring your dishes over here, pardner. We’ve got a big day ahead of us.”

Sam brought his dishes to the counter and headed to the bedroom. He came out with comics and sat at the table. His father finished the dishes, wiped his hands on a dish towel and came over to the table where Sam sat. He knelt in front of the boy. “I don’t believe I got a hug or a kiss from my favorite son this morning.”

“Your *only* son,” Sam said, looking up.

Jack wrapped his arms around Sam’s shoulders and squeezed. He tried to kiss him on the cheek but missed, and kissed his warm neck. “Both,” he said. “My favorite *and* my only.” He got up and headed for the door. He turned, framed by the light. “Remember—close by.”

Sam heard the slap of the door and looked up to see his father’s back grow smaller through the screen. Then he turned back to his comic book.

The Krauts were giving Easy Company what for in the Ardenne forest. Sergeant Rock was pinned down. Things looked grim. A tank

burst into flames thirty feet from him. Bill Fredericks was *in* that tank. Something snapped in Rock's head. He'd had it with the Krauts, his commanding officer Morton, that pencil-necked geek, the whole damn enchilada. Bill was a good friend, maybe his best friend. Rock was a man of action and the time for it was now. He jumped out of his foxhole with a Thompson sub-machine gun in one hand and a grenade in the other. "Give me your best shot, you clowns!" he shouted into the incoming fire.

Sam heard a slap and looked up. It was the screen door. Almost as if someone had slipped in. A chill ran up his back. Probably just a breeze, he thought. He stared at something floating behind the fly-speckled screen and recognized it at once from his book: *Insects of North America*. A Zebra Swallowtail butterfly! He left the comic book open on the table, ran to the door and yanked it back. He was outside in a flash. He chased the butterfly across an overgrown lot



through tall dry grass and weeds. Seeds swirled up in his wake. The butterfly sailed over the grass unaware of the boy chasing it. Sam and the butterfly passed into a stand of trees where the air was cool

and moist. They came out the other side and continued up a low hill through another grass-covered lot. Sam was winded when he reached the top. He stood there panting as the butterfly climbed higher. He watched until it disappeared into the dark leaves at the edge of the field. The one and only time he'd ever seen a Zebra Swallowtail in his life. "Wow," he said.

His gaze traveled down to an abandoned farmhouse nestled in the hollow below. The walls were standing but the wooden shakes on the roof were gap-toothed and gray. The chimney still stood and there were a few out buildings in various stages of collapse.

He walked toward the farmhouse, passed a metal plow and pounded the seat with the flat of his hand. It made a satisfying *whannng*, sprang back and vibrated with a metal rattle. He laughed.

When he got to the house he noticed the KEEP OUT signs tacked to the chipped white siding. He ignored them and climbed the cement steps to the front door. He opened it and slipped in.

His heart beat faster. He looked over his shoulder through the open door and remembered his father's words, 'close by'. "I'm just gonna take a quick look around, then I'll go," he said to no one.

A nest of mud daubers circled in a corner. Sam stood still until they settled. The place smelled of dry moss and musty linoleum. Flowered wallpaper curled from the ceiling and made its way slowly down the walls toward the floor. There was a dusty plaid couch against the wall. A broken lamp, its shade ripped, leaned over it.

Sam slipped carefully into the living room, testing each board with his feet to make sure they would hold his weight. He walked into the kitchen. The stove was filthy, a cast iron fry pan on one of the rusty burners. There were still plates in the sink. Someone's old white coffee mug sat on the kitchen counter as if they left it there, went out to plow and never came back.

Sam heard a rustle behind him and turned quickly. He glanced at the ceiling. "Yikes," he said, "you *scared* me." A barn swallow had made a nest of mud and straw in the corner. It fluttered at the lip and looked

down at him. He paused and heard the high pitched squeaks of baby birds. He studied the nest and could see their beaks moving.

His eyes traveled down the wall and stopped at a circus poster. It was an odd, old-fashioned thing with heavy black type on thick orange paper. The date on it said August 24th. Sam stared. "Wow...August 24th—my birthday." Beneath the words *Coming Soon to a Town Near You* was an illustration of a huge bear with a funny cone-shaped hat riding a tiny bicycle. As Sam gazed at the poster the bear began to move! He pedaled in precise figure eights, head down, concentrating on his feet on the pedals. He didn't notice Sam watching him. Sam was about to say something when he heard a sharp squawk at his back and whirled around. It was a crow at the window, perched on the sill, his beak open, glaring at Sam through one of the broken panes.

"Scoot!" Sam yelled, waving his arms at the bird. The crow leapt from the sill and flapped away. Sam turned back to the poster. It was the same as before, the bear no longer moving. "Whoa," he said, wiping his damp forehead with the back of his hand. "Don't know what the heck's going on here. Must be seeing things. I could swear that thing just came to life."

He shook his head and glanced at the poster one more time. Satisfied it wasn't going anywhere, he turned and walked through the kitchen. There was a staircase leading up to the second floor. Several steps were missing. He decided it wasn't safe and headed down a short hall. Not much in the bedroom. A caved-in dresser. Mattress on the floor. He crossed to the dresser and looked out the window through broken panes at the path he'd made through the tall grass to the farmhouse. He saw insects rising, flying in the morning light. He remembered his father, kneeling on the old linoleum floor after breakfast. His eyes were brown and serious. "Stay close," he'd said.

"Shoot," Sam said, "he might be back with the boat right now. I'll just—" He noticed an old cement path that was overgrown leading to a heavy door. Must be the cellar, he thought. "I'll just check this out and head on back."

He stepped around the mattress, over broken glass and newspapers and took the hallway to the back door. He opened it, stepped lightly on the wobbly wooden steps and descended to the cellar door. The paint on it was almost gone. He grabbed the rusted handle and pulled. It was heavy. He used both hands and put his weight behind it. The door creaked open and then swung back carrying him with it. He let go and pulled his leg back before the door came down with a crack and split in the middle.

“Yeesh,” he said. “That was close.”

The cellar was dark except for slivers and flecks of light from cracks in the floor and foundation. A cool, moist smell came up from it. He could make out a couple of wooden boxes a few feet from the bottom of the stairs. I’ll just take a look, see what’s in those boxes and then head back to the cabin, he thought.

He stepped down. His tennis shoe settled on the splintery wood. It creaked. Then another step, then another. His palms were clammy, his breathing quick and short. So far, so good, he thought. Then he lowered his right foot to the fourth step. It was there for a moment, then gone. It gave way to space, falling and blackness. Then a strange, long, floating moment followed by a sharp pain in the middle of his forehead.