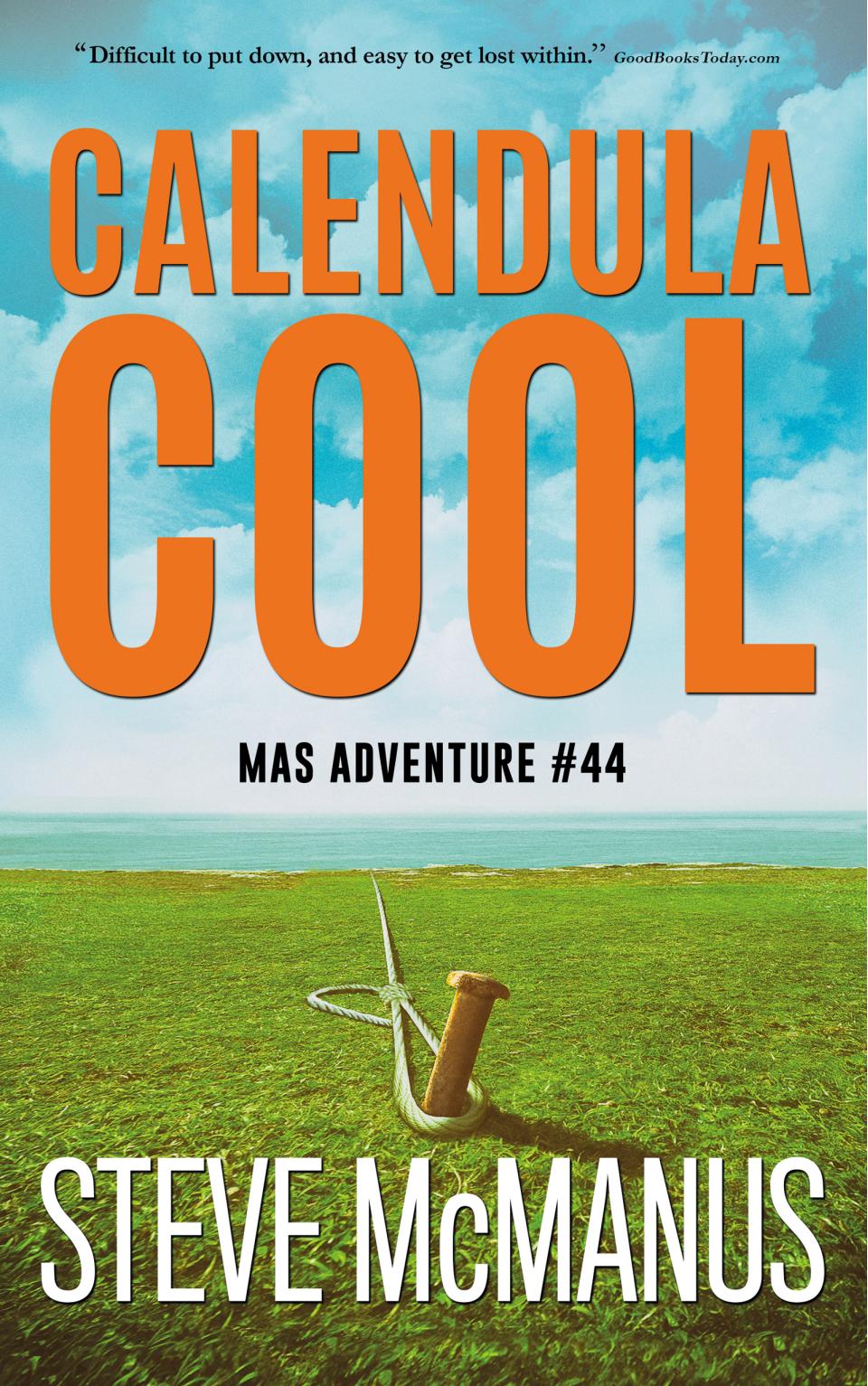


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CALENDULA COOL

MAS ADVENTURE #44



STEVE McMANUS

CALENDULA COOL

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by

Steve McManus

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Red Flag (2015)

Seven Devils (2018)

Thanks to my family.

for Polo

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PROLOGUE—THE GHOST GIRL

In the diminishing twilight of a warm summer evening, a girl ran flat-out through the woods.

Her second-hand sneakers pounded the dry dirt path. With every step the duffel bag bumping against her back grew heavier. Her fists punched the air as if it was purposely resisting her. She gripped a porcelain figurine so tightly her knuckles were white inside work gloves that were too big for her.

A snarl of branches slapped her. She stumbled but stayed upright, stayed moving. The salty ocean smell was strong.

The muscles in her legs burned. Her lungs felt like someone was pouring sand into them. Hot tears blurred the trees into a thick curtain that was about to smother her in inescapable blackness.

Finally, she stumbled into a clearing atop a cliff with a view of the island. Its lights shimmered like a mirage. Rocks wide enough to sit on encircled an old overgrown fire pit. Glass bottles and crushed cans glinted in the grass. The waves crashing against the base of the cliff sounded like the applause of the opposing team's fans.

A boy in a black and red Chicago Bulls t-shirt stood with his back to the sea. His eyes bulged at the sight of her hurtling out of the trees at him, a flash of arms and teeth and hair.

At the sight of *him*, the girl screamed and dropped the figurine. The boy screamed too, high and shrill as a choirboy. He tossed what he'd been holding into the air, and scampered behind the nearest sizeable tree.

The girl skidded to a stop. Panic rushed up her throat—she couldn't see the figurine on the ground, and there was *no time*. Shrieking with frustration, she lunged toward the salty air and the sunset.

The bumpy bark poked the boy roughly through his t-shirt. His mind raced—where did she come from? What was she doing here? Why did she scream at him?

Hearing nothing over his panicked breathing and the pounding of his heart in his chest, the boy peeked around the tree.

She wasn't there.

The girl was gone.

He looked around the darkening clearing to the edge—and the cliff dropping away from it.

“Oh no,” he whispered.

He jumped at a sound in the trees.

Footsteps—coming this way fast.

The boy ducked back around the tree, his heart thumping fast as a gym class full of basketballs.

Twigs snapped and angry, labored breathing entered the clearing.

Terror surged through his bones. The boy ran blindly into the darkening woods, avoiding the trunks but oblivious to the smaller branches reaching for him. He fled the desolate clearing and the ghost girl, and the monster that tried to catch her, but missed.

CHAPTER 1

The bell erupted over the loudspeakers, and classroom doors burst open. Students spilled into the hallways in a noisy, colorful collision of voices, clothes and backpacks.

Books were swapped for brown bags and lunch boxes, and the students either migrated outside, or into the cafeteria building under the big green *WE ARE ALL CRICKETS!* banner. Like all of the notices and posters for school events and teams and summer programs papering the walls, it would be torn down when the 1990-1991 school year ended in two days.

At one end of the cafeteria were the display cases of plastic-wrapped prepared food and the hot lunch serving area. The rest of the space was filled with long rectangular tables with attached bench seats. After decades of use by thousands of students, they had been marked up and mottled—initials and symbols carved into the lacquered surfaces and edges like fossils.

Officially, students could sit wherever they wished for meals, but in practice congregated at tables with their own grade, unless they were especially cool or had inherited legacy coolness from an older sibling.

Today, as the predictable social groupings assembled, a quartet of eleven year-olds who were repeating fifth grade clung like barnacles to the end of one of the cool tables in the far corner of the cafeteria. Stuart, Brandon, Jason and Brad hunched together over their lunches like hyenas. It was their usual place, cool but just barely, under a colorful poster the third graders had made promoting the spring regional spelling bee: *BEE THE BEST YOU CAN BEE!*

Stuart's longish hair was movie star-quality, and his air of invincibility was infectious in all the wrong ways. Girls talked about his full lips and his swagger. Boys talked about his missing dad and quick temper.

Stuart watched Brad picking listlessly at his lunch, biting his lower lip instead of his sandwich. “What’s the matter, Bradley? Did your mom decide three kids is one too many and pack you peanut butter?”

Brandon and Jason snickered. Everyone knew Brad had one of those allergies that would kill him if he even *looked* at a peanut.

“Nothing,” he mumbled. Brad wasn’t repeating fifth grade. His mom had held him back a year in kindergarten, thinking he’d be a leader in grade school, but so far that wasn’t happening. With his droopy eyes and offset chin, Brad looked pouty even when he was

pleased. He had freckles and chestnut bangs down to his eyebrows. His sandwich was turkey with cheese, the same sandwich his mom packed he and his brothers every day, but he didn't feel like eating.

"Is it the girl?" Stuart asked, ignoring his own lunch of a single slice of leftover pizza.

"Everyone's talking about it." Brandon liked to wear his oldest brother's concert t-shirts, and his sunglasses were tucked into his unkempt blond hair. Brandon's stepmom took a lot of aerobics classes and often wore shirts with slogans like *I Practice Kindness*, even though none of her sons did.

Stuart smirked. "Leave it to Bradley to have a crush on a rumor."

Brad blushed. "Who's everyone?"

"I heard it from Wallace." Jason had shaggy brown hair, and his mouth was pinched to one side as if no choice he was being offered was a good one. His boyish face was still mostly cheeks, and he had the habit of eating with his mouth open.

"I heard it from Leo," Brandon said.

"I heard it from *you*," Stuart said to Brad. "Who'd you hear it from?"

Brad picked at his bread. "I just heard it."

"Word spreads fast when it's about a girl," said Stuart. "Even a *ghost* girl."

"Which is as close as Brad will ever get to one," Jason said.

Brandon laughed and made spooky *ooooooooo* sounds.

"Forget I said anything," Brad said.

"Can't, now that *everyone's* talking about it." Stuart looked around, and lowered his voice. "I want to see the body."

Brandon blinked. "Body?"

"If there's no body we'll know the story is bogus." Stuart looked hard at Brad. "And we'll know the person who started it is too."

"I didn't start it," Brad said. "I only told you 'cause I thought it was...oh whatever."

"Let's go," Stuart said. "Right after school, before anyone else gets the chance."

"To what?" Brad asked.

"Find the *body* Bradley, can't you keep up?"

Brandon chugged an entire carton of chocolate milk and finished it off with a loud burp. "Wouldn't the tide sweep it out to sea?"

"Yeah, it's probably long gone," Brad agreed.

“Whatever gets swept out, the tide brings right back in somewhere else,” Stuart said. “If it isn’t still at the base of the cliffs it’ll float into the marina today or tomorrow.”

“Or get caught on the breakwater,” Jason said.

Stuart smiled. “We could get right up close to it.”

Brad pushed away his uneaten lunch. “Guys, I don’t know.”

“Don’t know how afraid of ghosts you are?” Brandon asked.

Jason snickered. “You still sleep with a teddy bear too?”

“All good questions.” Stuart cocked his head at Brad. “Seriously Bradley, you have something better to do?”

“We have to study for the math test,” Brad said.

Jason barked a laugh like a sea lion.

“If that’s your decision, go home and study for the math test,” Stuart said. “It *is* the responsible thing to do. It’d make your mom happy. The rest of us will meet up at the bike racks.”

Brad said, “No, I’ll come.”

“Are you sure you can carve some time out of your studies for the ghost girl? Since you *were* the one who told us about it?”

“I’ll come,” Brad said again.

Brandon nudged Stuart. “Heads up.”

A quartet of girls were making their way up the aisle in a flurry of cute, brightly-colored outfits and dramatic hair tossing, bathed in the glow from the cafeteria skylights. Other students couldn’t get out of their way fast enough.

Lola, Jessica, Brittany and Tiffany were fifth graders on the fast track to mega-coolness because they’d be joining the cheer squad in middle school next year. When you were a cheerleader the whole school lay at your feet like a dog wanting its belly scratched. High school boys already knew their *names*.

Stuart put on his bored face as the girls stopped at their table. “Oh hi Lola.”

Lola’s brown hair was parted in the center. When she smiled—which she currently wasn’t—she smiled with her mouth open, a warm smile that hinted at the friendly girl at the soft core of the pretty one. “Hi Stuart.”

Brittany and Tiffany, fiery redhead and chilly blond respectively, surveyed the boys with practiced but transparent indifference. Jessica wouldn't take her big brown eyes off Brandon, who was looking anywhere but at her.

"Want to eat with us?" Stuart asked Lola.

"We're eating outside." Tiffany punctuated her announcement with a sweep of her white-blond hair.

"What are you doing after school?" Stuart asked.

"Nothing," said Jessica quickly.

"Studying for the math test," Lola replied.

"Won't do you geniuses any good," ginger-haired Brittany smiled sweetly to the boys, "even the second time around. Or is it the third?"

Jason and Brandon fake belly-laughed. Brad felt even less like eating.

Stuart yawned and stretched. "We're riding over to Ward Forest if you want to come. Won't take long, there'll be plenty of time for the people who need extra preparation for that solid B minus," he said to Brittany, who rolled her flinty green eyes.

"Why are you going?" Lola asked him. "Because of the girl?"

"The *ghost* girl," Brandon said, with a mischievous wiggle of his eyebrows.

"I heard about that too," Jessica said.

"If she's a ghost," Stuart said. "If she *isn't* there might be something to see."

Lola clucked her tongue. "You're disgusting."

"And childish," said Brittany.

"Come on, *somebody*'s going to find her," Stuart said. "Why not us? We can be heroes."

Brittany groaned, as if her brain was seeping out of her ear just by being this close to the boys. "Let's go," she said to Lola.

"You'll miss out," Stuart baited Lola.

Lola spotted someone across the crowded lunch room. "Have fun being disgusting."

"And childish," Stuart reminded her as the girls walked away.

"I'll catch up to you." Lola left her friends and walked quickly to intercept a boy from her class. He was snaking his way through the bustling students to a table in as uncool an area of the cafeteria as you could get, a place inhabited by academic award-winners, non-athletic types and overall social fringe-dwellers. He was skinny and taller than the rest of the boys in class, with short dark hair and a nose that was a little crooked, though he'd never broken it.

Lola pivoted into the aisle in front of him, and he accidentally dropped his lunch bag.

“Danny,” she said flatly, more like an announcement than a greeting.

His brain fizzed like Coca-Cola. “Hi Lola.”

“Did you hear about the girl?”

“What girl?” His voice sounded higher than his natural one, like a rubber band pulled tight and plucked.

“The ghost girl in Ward Forest last night,” Lola said. “You heard about it right? Sounds interesting, doesn’t it? Stuart’s going there after school. He wants to see if there’s a *body*.”

“But I thought she was—”

“A ghost?” Lola’s severe look made him shrink. “I don’t intend for this summer to *not* be interesting, Danny.”

“So...are you going with him?”

Lola’s eyes sharpened to arrowheads. “*No*,” she said without blinking, “I am not *going* with him. Why would you *say* that?”

Everyone in the cafeteria was watching him wilt in front of Lola Kendricks. Danny, the dork they called *Cashew* because his last name was *Kasho*, and not only did it practically rhyme but his head kind of looked like one.

Flustered, Danny picked up his lunch bag. “I, I don’t—I’m sorry, I—”

“Are you going or not?” Lola demanded.

“I—I don’t know. The math test—”

“Fine.” Lola turned on her heel and walked briskly away, scattering a clutch of first-graders like bowling pins. Brittany and Tiffany made sure Danny saw them *not* looking at him before they all went outside to eat together on the quad.

CHAPTER 2

Danny's friends Matthew, Jeremy, Gustavo, and Michael burst into applause as he finally made it to their table.

Danny sat down, feeling dozens of pairs of eyes on him and wishing he was invisible. "Cut it out guys."

"Come on Kash, that was *awesome!* Lola Kendricks talked to you! On *purpose*, not just because she had to for class!" Gustavo returned to the second lunch his mom had packed. Goose prided himself on being big for his age, and his mom was doing all she could to facilitate his ambition. He'd recently discovered hair gel, and his sandy hair was spiked straight up on top, while the sides were combed down over his ears like a bird's wings at rest.

"What did she want?" Matthew was the shortest of the group, but Main Event—Matthew loved watching wrestling on TV—had a big man's courage in a wiry little body. On any adventure, facing any challenge, Matthew always stepped up first. His smile had a gap in his upper row as fleeting baby teeth made way for forever grown-up ones.

Danny's bag lunch was a warm can of Sprite and an under-spread PB&J on *wheat* bread that looked as appetizing as their cat's litter box. Obviously mom hadn't gone shopping. "She said Stuart and them are going to Ward Forest after school."

"Because of the girl who vanished?" Jeremy went by Jersey, and was as serious as Matthew was cavalier, the byproduct of a home life where laughter and creativity were discouraged. Jeremy tried not to let it get him down, and it made him always fight for the underdog no matter what.

"I heard she was being *chased*," Gustavo said dramatically as he ate. This had been his first year in drama, and he was saying a lot of things dramatically.

Michael was African-American and one of the smartest kids Danny knew. Out of all of them, Michael was the most responsible with time, deadlines and curfews. He was also the only one who didn't go by a nickname. Michael was Michael. "Chased by who?" he asked.

"Escaped criminals," Jeremy said.

"Homicidal maniacs," said Matthew.

"Homicidal *cannibal* maniacs," Jeremy amplified.

“Come on,” Michael said. “Whoever started the rumor was just trying to scare the little kids. The *little* kids. Besides, cannibal maniacs would eat each other before they caught anyone else.”

“So why is Stuart going if it’s just a rumor?” Matthew asked.

“Cause he’s bored. We aren’t.”

“*And* we have a math test tomorrow,” Gustavo said. “Stuart already saw it last year, but it’ll be new to us.”

“But doesn’t it sound—” Danny couldn’t help but think of Lola—“interesting?”

“Sounds like a waste of time to me,” Michael said. “If Stuart and the goon squad want to pull a *Mystery of Al Capone’s Vaults* in front of everybody, let them. They get to take tests over and over again. Does that sound like fun to you?”

Gustavo held up his pillow-y hands. “Guys, guys! Please don’t unplug your brains! If there really is a body and something really did happen to someone, the cops would be looking for her and everyone would know about it. We can’t be there for that, my mom would kill me!”

“I say we go,” Danny said. “Right after school. We can beat Stuart there.”

“How about *after* the math test tomorrow?” Gustavo suggested. “If I don’t get an A my mom said she’ll put me in Evergreen Math Camp for the summer.”

“She always says that,” Jeremy said.

“Yeah, she’s bluffing,” said Matthew.

“Again,” Michael added.

“You get good grades anyway, why does she bug you about it?” Jeremy asked.

Gustavo puffed up his chest. “So my horizon stays as boundless as my appetite.”

The other boys howled with laughter.

“What, it’s true!” Gustavo said. “Mom says big plans need a big kid to make them!”

Danny and Matthew shared a look. Gustavo’s mom equated love with food, and in that respect Goose’s cup overflowed.

Frowning thoughtfully, Matthew said, “If we go, we’ll have to use stealth mode. It’s the only way to beat Stuart there.”

Danny smiled to himself. He could always rely on Main Event. “You’re the tie-breaker, Jersey.”

“Am I the only one with a math test tomorrow?” Gustavo said. “No, Goose, *everybody* has a math test tomorrow. My mom expects me to do better than Stuart and his pals, go figure.”

“We’ll study together after, I promise.” Danny looked at Jeremy. “Go or no go, Jersey?” Jeremy thought it over first, then nodded. “Go.”

“Go,” said Michael ruefully.

Gustavo, typically the hardest one to dislodge from his daily routines, finally sighed. “Go, but my mom will kill me if I don’t get an A tomorrow. I’m serious, guys.”

Matthew declared, “I accuse Goose’s mom in the living room with the cookie dough!”

“Ha ha, guess who isn’t getting any next time he’s over?” Gustavo said.

The bell rang, and kids across the cafeteria started collecting their things.

“Stealth mode means no pit stops after last bell,” Danny reminded his friends. “Make sure you go before we go.”

“Yeah thanks *mom*,” Gustavo said.

Stuart and his gang lingered, glaring at Danny before they headed back to class for the afternoon.

The picturesque seaside city of Calendula (pronounced Ka-len-*doo-la*) occupies the southern curl of Camino Bay, in California’s rugged central coast. Unlike its cross-bay rival San Sebastian, with its notable university and fine aquarium, Calendula relies almost exclusively on tourism, especially during the summer.

With the ocean at its doorstep and the mountains at its back, the city’s weather is mild—winters are cloudy, rainy and cool, while summers are warm, breezy and dry. Nearby wineries serve visitors with discriminating tastes, while world-class Paloma Beach attracts golfers from around the country. Calendula’s marina offers gift shops and restaurants. A short ferry ride away is the island, a popular attraction with its arched and columned hotel towering over small cottages and shops boasting even more opportunities for shopping, lodging, dining and relaxing. Officially known as Blue Island back to the early 1800s, it was marketed as Old Calendula or O’Cal, but known to locals simply as “the island”.

Most of Calendula’s children attend the public K-5 Mulligan Elementary and 6-8 Hatherly Middle schools, located on the same campus, followed by the 9-12 Calendula High School down the road. The remainder are divided between two charter schools, one on the north side and one on the south, and Pepper Ridge Prep, a tony private school on the far eastern

edge of town. Everyone knew someone who went there, but no one, as far as Danny knew, was actually *friends* with them.

At the final bell of the afternoon, he and Matthew hustled out to the bike racks behind the school, where Gustavo, Jeremy, Michael and his sister Taylor were waiting.

“Hey Tay-Tay,” Matthew said to her. “Joining us today?”

“Like I’ve got a choice? And stop calling me Tay-Tay.” Taylor’s permanently peeved pucker was no indicator of her mood—her grandmother had the same surly expression and was the sweetest lady ever. Taylor was in fourth grade and already almost as tall as her brother, with the budding build of an athlete.

Everyone but Michael called her Tay-Tay, for Tag Along Taylor. Their mom had two jobs so it fell to Michael to watch his sister, which meant she was around the gang a lot. Taylor insisted she was old enough to be with her friends and didn’t need Michael looking after her, and Michael agreed. Their mom, unfortunately, did not.

Her older black chrome Schwinn was heavier than Michael’s newer black and blue Mongoose—the only gift he ever got from his dad, so he kept the bike pristine—and her left pedal had a tendency to loosen and slide off, but Taylor could push the bike fast enough to keep up with boys.

Gustavo was the slowest rider but got the flashiest bike last Christmas—silver and red, with a red saddle, red grips and red striped sidewalls on the tires. Matthew’s bike was a hand-me-down twice over but it had front and back pegs on the forks, so with his Oakland A’s hat turned backwards and his tongue lolling out of his mouth, he was endlessly practicing tricks—nollies, wheelies, bunny hops, bar turns, endos. Consequently, Matthew usually sported a couple Band-Aids each on his knees and arms. Even the patches on his jeans needed patching.

Jeremy unlocked his bike as Danny retrieved his own, also a brotherly hand-me-down that was among his most prized possessions. At once the gang was off—five boys in t-shirts, jeans and sneakers, and one girl in a white cotton blouse, skort, pigtails and bejeweled flip-flops.

They maneuvered between kids and the car line for pick-up, half-biking and half-walking, then accelerated over to Via Vista. It was the fastest route away from school because the top half of the street was downhill. Cars were few enough that they could ride side by side as they sped down it.

Via Vista made a Y at the baseball field and they banked fast into the left fork, letting momentum carry them before they had to start pedaling again. Danny and Jeremy rode beside

each other, as did Michael and Taylor. Matthew did jumps off driveway aprons and Gustavo, huffing determinedly, brought up the rear. His seat was too low, so his thick legs were bent like foam columns, but he wouldn't listen to the rest of them when they told him he was making it hard on himself.

The streets between the houses became narrower. Balancing between speed and caution, they rolled through the four-way stop signs and took the descending S-curve of Veterans Drive thrillingly fast. Each of them was acutely aware of how flawlessly their wheels and bearings—and brakes—had to perform to keep them from turning into that eighth-grade kid two summers ago. Michael stayed with Taylor to make sure she did it right—she always did. They all knew it wasn't going to be Taylor who wound up in an emergency room.

The line spread out with Matthew in front and Gustavo at the back. Between the trees they could see the bay sparkling in the sunshine. They avoided their own streets to keep from being spotted and forced into some fun-killing chores.

As they biked along, Danny thought about the word *interesting* and just what exactly Lola meant by it. And why she told *him* about it, as if it was somehow *his* responsibility to make sure her summer was *interesting*. Lola and her friends spent their summers in bikini tops and jean shorts along the waterfront where the summer boys gathered—the ever-changing rotation of faces visiting Calendula for a day or two, thousands a day at the peak. The boys gawked at the girls and the girls basked in the attention even more than the sunshine.

The expectancy of the summer, how *close* it was, gave Danny butterflies in his stomach. So much excitement—so much *freedom*—was almost within reach. No more school. No more homework. No more *tests*. Endless possibilities awaited.

But he couldn't help worrying that this ghost girl rumor was a bad omen. How would they be able to have fun and play if a girl was really *dead*? If strangers were coming to look at her *body*?

There *can't* be a body, he thought.

"What body?" Taylor asked.

Danny realized he'd said it out loud.

"Aww, man." Michael shook his head.

"What body?" Taylor asked again.

"Nothing," Gustavo said.

"Nothing yourself, Goose," she said. "What body?"

“It’s nothing,” Michael said, “just a stupid rumor—”

Taylor squeezed both brakes and skidded to a stop, losing her left pedal and forcing Matthew to swerve to avoid colliding with her. He bounced up the curb at a sharp angle but managed to stop before he ran into a fence.

The rest of the gang stopped and looked back at Taylor, who was straddling her bike in the middle of the street.

“Michael,” Jeremy said, “she’s your sister.”

Michael groaned. “What’s up, Taylor?”

She crossed her arms over her chest and put on her Ain’t Gonna Budge look they all knew, and dreaded.

“Tay-Tay come on!” Gustavo implored. “We’re in a hurry here, we’ve got a math test tomorrow!”

“Somebody’s body’s in Ward Forest?” Taylor asked.

“Maybe,” Jeremy and Matthew said together.

“No.” Michael got off his bike and went to retrieve his sister’s pedal.

Taylor looked at Danny.

Danny sighed. “Supposedly somebody saw a girl disappear at the Ward Forest clearing last night.”

“Very supposedly,” Michael said.

“Disappear?” Taylor held her bike steady as Michael put the pedal back on.

“Right in front of him,” said Gustavo. “The Ghost Girl.”

“Who was it?” Taylor asked.

“Nobody knows, because she isn’t real,” Michael said.

“I mean who saw her?” Taylor asked.

Gustavo shrugged. “They.”

“We’re just going to look around,” Danny said.

“To see a body of a girl?” Taylor asked.

“There’s *no* body of *any*boby,” Michael said. “There’s nothing there, we’re just out for a bike ride, okay?”

His sister considered for a moment, then pushed off with her bike and rolled past the boys, pedaling confidently.

They cruised along three and three, alternating between sunny stretches and patches of shade thrown from the old trees arcing over the street.

“What evidence would there be of a ghost?” Jeremy asked.

“Ectoplasm,” said Gustavo.

“What’s that?” Taylor asked.

“Goop,” Michael answered. “And not all ghosts leave it. Most don’t.”

“So why go if there’s nothing to see?” Taylor asked.

“Exactly,” said her brother.

“Because it’s interesting,” Danny said. “And we’ve got time.”

“Less and less of it to study for the math test,” Gustavo noted.

Jeremy’s expression drooped. “My dad says I might have to go to math camp.”

Unlike Gustavo’s mom, they all knew he meant it. When Jeremy’s dad made up his mind about something—especially something Jeremy didn’t want to do—there was no changing it.

It seemed to Danny that lining up a summer free from their parents’ misplaced good intentions was more stressful than the whole school year. The stakes were high—nobody wanted to be stuck in some dumb school-type camp with kids they didn’t know, with whom they only had unhappiness in common. They wanted to be out with their friends doing whatever they could think of, so good grades were important—good grades got rewarded, and summer was time to pay up.

Danny called over to Jeremy. “Jersey—lead us in if you please!”

“Aye aye, cap’n!”

Jeremy stood up on his pedals to take the lead as Ward Forest appeared ahead of them. Riding single-file, they sped through the last intersection, up the short slope on the side of the road, around the big rock, between the two halves of a tree trunk felled and split long ago, and into the high grass beside the gate which kept vehicles out.

They followed the gravel service road for only a hundred feet before angling onto a dirt path, a thin vein into the body of the dark woods, and one by one, the six kids disappeared from sight.

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