

CHAPTER ONE

Pierson looked at the problem from at least a hundred different ways, but the answer kept coming up the same. He sat with his back against the trunk of the tall hickory tree and pulled at the lush, new grass. There were two weeks left of school and, as far as he was concerned, two weeks left of life as he knew it. There had to be good points to this; there had to be! But he kept coming back to the same conclusion—the summer was going to be a total washout, a waste, a disaster. Yup, his life was about to be ruined by a crazy notion that struck his parents as *marvelous*. His family intended to spend the summer getting back to basics, back to nature. For three months they would live in a cabin in a remote area of Pennsylvania. Dad had said there would be limited luxuries.

“Is electricity classified a luxury?” Pierson had inquired. “How about air conditioning?”

His dad hadn’t answered, adding fuel to Pierson’s worst fears. Under those circumstances, Pierson was afraid to ask about the important things: T.V., video games, civilization. Forget the luxuries, how about the basics? Don’t parents know that a twelve-year-old kid can’t manage without the basics?

Pierson looked at the pile of grass he had pulled from his dad’s manicured front lawn. There was an ugly brown patch where the dark green had been. He knew his dad would be annoyed but what was the difference? Dad killed him then or the vacation killed him later.

Disgusted, he rolled onto his stomach. He picked up a long, wide strand of grass and pulled it taut between his thumbs. Blowing smoothly, he made a shrill whistling sound. A robin in the tree above him answered his call.

“I’ll bet no one is telling you where you have to spend your summer,” he called to the bird. The bird warbled again. “Yeah, right. A cabin in the woods? You’d probably love it.”

He aimlessly played with a thread on the cuff of his freshly pressed shirt, twirling it in and out of his fingers. Abruptly he jerked it free, wound it into a ball, jumped up and lobbed it with perfect form into an imaginary hoop.

“And the crowd went mad as he sank it,” he said into his fist-made microphone. “A crucial two points, ladies and gentlemen—“

“Hey, Pierce,” Kevin called from next door.

“Over here.”

Kevin was one of his classmates and a good friend. Bouncing his basketball, Kevin appeared in the driveway.

“Play a game of one on one?” Kevin asked.

“You must like losing!”

“I’ve got you by three inches and twenty-five pounds. Yesterday’s win was a fluke,” Kevin said with a grin.

Pierson stole the ball, ran down the line and laid it in. He caught the shot, dribbled it through his legs and went up for a jam. “I may be small but I’m fast!”

Okay, Mr. Small, let’s see how fast you can put the balls away and get ready for dinner,” said Pierson’s mother from the doorway. “Hi, Kevin. Want to join us?”

"No thanks, Mrs. Chandler. Mom's already fixing our dinner, and I have to be home soon anyway."

"All right. Pierson, dinner will be on the table in ten minutes. It's your favorite—meatloaf and hash browns," she said. Her tall figure disappeared into the large stucco house.

"See you, Kevin," Pierson called to his retreating friend.

"See you. Remember, I still want that rematch!"

Pierson pushed open the heavy oak door. Through the hallway he could see his mother busily setting the table for dinner. "How could you have come up with such a harebrained scheme to the summer, Ma?" he muttered to himself.

His dad joined his mother. A deep voice filled the air. "*Meatloaf?* I was expecting *Duck à l'orange*, especially on the one night I get a home-cooked meal."

"The meeting at school lasted longer than expected," his mother answered. "This is the best I could do at the last minute. Do I hear a complaint? It's either meatloaf or take-out from the taco shop down the street."

Dad pointed to his chest. "Me? Complain? I know the complaint department is closed at this hour." He cleared his throat. "Allow me to start over. MMM—everything smells great. Want me to carve and serve this delicious cuisine?"

Another question whizzed through Pierson's head. How could his Dad have agreed to this summer exile? His parents were definitely not acting like themselves. Maybe they had been invaded by alien beings! Pierson remembered seeing a horror movie in which aliens invaded people's bodies while they slept and took over their personalities.

"This meatloaf looks juicy," Dad cooed.

His mom hip-checked his dad. "Don't try to win me over with your smooth talking. I know you were expecting something mouth watering."

Meatloaf! Pierson shuddered. Two minutes ago his mother said it was his favorite dinner. He hated meatloaf, and she knew it. He was truly suspicious now. Wow! Aliens posing as his parents! That would explain this crazy idea of occupying a cabin in the woods. Maybe they want to be away from other people to perform weird experiments.

"Pierce, are you ready for dinner?" His mother's voice brought him out of his daydream.

"I'll be there in a minute," he yelled back while zipping up the stairs.

As he washed his hands, he glanced into the mirror. His root beer brown hair was standing up like Frankenstein's monster. Being wavy, it frizzed when he got sweaty. He tried to smooth it down with the brush so his mother wouldn't be upset and tell him he looked like a mad Chopin. It did no good; as usual, his hair had a mind of its own. The small birthmark under his left eye glared at him; he hated it. But the doctor had said, short of surgery, there wasn't much that could be done about it. It turned lighter in the winter, but the summer sun turned it an intense brown. There were days when the kids ribbed him about it.

"Pierce, dinner's on the table and it's getting cold!" Amazing how fast a mother's voice could become shrill. But at least *that* voice sounded familiar, judged Pierson on his way downstairs. He decided to keep his eyes open for any

differences in his parents. Their being aliens was the only logical explanation for their weird decision.

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