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**CHAPTER 2**

On Tuesday night Jamie found his list of instructions under his pillow pinned to his pajamas. His first instruction was to forget his homework; get ready for the trip instead. I wholeheartedly admire Claudia's thoroughness. Her concern for delicate details is as well developed as mine. Her note to Jamie even included a suggestion for hiding his trumpet when he took it out of its case. He was to roll it up in his extra blanket, which was always placed at the foot of his bed.

After he had followed all the instructions on the list, Jamie took a big glass of water from the bathroom and sat cross-legged on the bed. He bit off a large corner of the list. The paper tasted like the bubble gum he had once saved and chewed for five days; it was just as tasteless and only slightly harder. Since the ink was not waterproof, it turned his teeth blue. He tried only one more bite before he tore up the note, crumpled the pieces, and threw them into the trash. Then he brushed his teeth.

The next morning Claudia and Jamie boarded the school bus as usual, according to plan. They sat together in the back and continued sitting there when they arrived at school and everyone got out of the bus. No one was supposed to notice this, and no one did. There was so much jostling and searching for homework papers and mittens that no one paid any attention to anything except personal possessions until they were well up the walk to school. Claudia had instructed Jamie to pull his feet up and crouch his head down so that Herbert, the driver, couldn't see him. He did, and she did the same. If they were spotted, the plan was to go to school and fake out their schedules as best they could, having neither books in their bags nor musical instruments in their cases.

They lay over their book bags and over the trumpet and violin cases. Each held his breath for a long time, and each resisted at least four temptations to peek up and see what was going on. Claudia pretended that she was blind and had to depend upon her senses of hearing, touch, and smell. When they heard the last of the feet going down the steps and the motor start again, they lifted their chins slightly and smiled at each other.

Herbert would now take the bus to the lot on the Boston Post Road where the school buses parked. Then he would get out of the bus and get into his car and go wherever else he always went. James and Claudia practiced silence all during the ragged ride to the parking lot. The bus bounced along like an empty cracker box on wheels ?almost empty. Fortunately, the bumps made it noisy. Otherwise, Claudia would have worried for fear the driver could hear her heart, for it sounded to her like their electric percolator brewing the morning's coffee. She didn't like keeping her head down so long. Perspiration was causing her cheek to stick to the plastic seat; she was convinced that she would develop a medium-serious skin disease within five minutes after she got off the bus.

The bus came to a stop. They heard the door open. Just a few backward steps by Herbert, and they would be discovered. They held their breath until they heard him walk down the steps and out of the bus. Then they heard the door close. After he got out, Herbert reached in from the small side window to operate the lever that closed the door.

Claudia slowly pulled her arm in front of her and glanced at her watch. She would give Herbert seven minutes before she would lift her head. When the time was up, both of them knew that they could get up, but both wanted to see if they could hold out a little bit longer, and they did. They stayed crouched down for about forty-five more seconds, but being cramped and uncomfortable, it seemed like forty-five more minutes.

When they got up, both were grinning. They peeked out of the window of the bus, and saw that the coast was clear. There was no need to hurry so they slowly made their way up to the front, Claudia leading. The door lever was left of the driver's seat, and as she walked toward it, she heard an awful racket behind her.

"Jamie," she whispered, "what's all that racket?"

Jamie stopped, and so did the noise. "What racket?" he demanded.

"You," she said. "You are the racket. What in the world are you wearing? Chain mail?"

"I'm just wearing my usual. Starting from the bottom, I have B.V.D. briefs, size ten, one tee shirt . . . "

"Oh, for goodness' sake, I know all that. What are you wearing that makes so much noise?"

Twenty- four dollars and forty-three cents."

Claudia saw then that his pockets were so heavy they were pulling his pants down. There was a gap of an inch and a half between the bottom hem of his shirt and the top of his pants. A line of winter white skin was punctuated by his navel .

"How come all your money is in change? It rattles."

"Bruce pays off in pennies and nickels. What did you expect him to pay me in? Traveler's checks?"

"O.K. O.K.," Claudia said. "What's that hanging from your belt?"

"My compass. Got it for my birthday last year."

"Why did you bother bringing that? You're carrying enough weight around already. "

"You need a compass to find your way in the woods. Out of the woods, too. Everyone uses a compass for that."

"What woods?" Claudia asked.

"The woods we'll be hiding out in," Jamie answered.

"Hiding out in? What kind of language is that?"

"English language. That's what kind."

"Who ever told you that we were going to hide out in the woods?" Claudia demanded.

"There! You said it. You said it!" Jamie shrieked.

"Said what? I never said we're going to hide out in the woods." Now Claudia was yelling, too.

"No! you said 'hide out in, ' "

"I did not! "

Jamie exploded. "You did, too. You said, 'Who ever told you that we're going to hide out in the woods?' You said that."

"O.K. O.K." Claudia replied. She was trying hard to remain calm, for she knew that a group leader must never lose control of herself, even if the group she leads consists of only herself and one brother brat.

"O.K.," she repeated. "I may have said hide out in, but I didn't say the woods."

"Yes, sir. You said, 'Who ever told you that . . . ' "

Claudia didn't give him a chance to finish. "I know. I know. Now, let's begin by my saying that we are going to hide out in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City."

Jamie said, "See! See! you said it again."

"I did not! I said, 'The Metropolitan Museum of Art.' "

"You said hide out in again."

"All right. Let's forget the English language lessons. We are going to the Metropolitan Museum of Art in Manhattan."

For the first time, the meaning instead of the grammar of what Claudia had said penetrated.

"The Metropolitan Museum of Art! Boloney!" he exclaimed. "What kind of crazy idea is that?"

Claudia now felt that she had control of herself and Jamie and the situation. For the past few minutes they had forgotten that they were stowaways on the school bus and had behaved as they always did at home. She said, "Let's get off this bus and on the train, and I'll tell you about it. "

Once again James Kincaid felt cheated. "The train! Can't we even hitchhike to New York?"

"Hitchhike? and take a chance of getting kidnapped or robbed? Or we could even get mugged," Claudia replied.

"Robbed? Why are you worried about that? It's mostly my money," Jamie told her.

"We're in this together. Its mostly your money we're using, but it's all my idea we're using. We'll take the train."

"Of all the sissy ways to run away and of all the sissy places to run away to. . . ." Jamie mumbled.

He didn't mumble quite softly enough. Claudia turned on him, "Run away to? How can you run away and to? What kind of language is that?" Claudia asked.

"The American language," Jamie answered. "American James Kincaidian language." And they both left the bus forgetting caution and remembering only their quarrel.

They were not discovered.

On the way to the train station Claudia mailed two letters.

"What were those?" Jamie asked.

"One was a note to Mom and Dad to tell them that we are leaving home and not to call the FBI. They'll get it tomorrow or the day after."

"And the other?"

"The other was two box tops from corn flakes. They send you twenty-five cents if you mail them two box tops with stars on the tops. For milk money, it said. "

"You should have sent that in before. We could use twenty-five cents more . "

"We just finished eating the second box of corn flakes this morning, " Claudia informed him.

They arrived at the Greenwich station in time to catch the 10:42 local. The train was not filled with either commuters or lady shoppers, so Claudia walked up the aisles of one car and then another until she found a pair of chairs that dissatisfied her the least with regard to the amount of dust and lint on the blue velvet mohair covers. Jamie spent seven of the twenty-eight-and-a-half railroad miles trying to convince his sister that they should try hiding in Central Park. Claudia appointed him treasurer; he would not only hold all the money, he would also keep track of it and pass judgment on all expenditures. Then Jamie began to feel that the Metropolitan offered several advantages and would provide adventure enough .

And in the course of those miles Claudia stopped regretting bringing Jamie along. In fact when they emerged from the train at Grand Central into the underworld of cement and steel that leads to the terminal, Claudia felt that having Jamie there was important. (Ah, how well I know those feelings of hot and hollow that come from that dimly lit concrete ramp.) And his money and radio were not the only reasons. Manhattan called for the courage of at least two Kincaids.