

Chapter 1: The Morning After

The video was viral before Johnny even woke up. The footage, taken from a snack-bar security camera between Crooked Creek's fifth and sixth holes, showed the twister dancing across the golf course and then, somewhere behind the fifth green, picking up a young boy and carrying him away. In addition to a record number of hits on the internet, pictures and clips from the video appeared in newspapers and on television across the country. Within a day, who "The mystery boy from Mystic" was, became a national obsession, and then, just about as fast, the story faded from the front pages and was all but forgotten. The boy was never identified. Most people, if they thought about it at all, presumed he'd been shredded to oblivion, dead and unidentifiable. Others thought it was some kind of hoax, or optical illusion. No one thought he survived.

They were wrong.

Three-hundred-yards southeast of the Crooked Creek Golf Course, the twister adopted a no passengers policy and discharged its lone patron into the darkness. The boy ended up in the middle of a freshly poured concrete foundation filled to the brim with rolls of pink insulation. It was a soft landing to be sure, but the ride, short as it was, had been more than a little rough. By the time Johnny came to the next day, the sun was high and he felt like an NFL running back on Monday morning—with the added pleasure of having played on a field of poison ivy. The itching was dreadful. Not to mention the ten wide-eyed Pink Panthers glaring at him, tongues wagging. He tried to run, but when he stood up his brain went all fuzzy and dizzy, and he fell back into the fluff. When he woke up an hour later, the panthers had slinked away, merging back with their respective rolls of insulation, harmless as pictures. And he realized: *they are pictures, and I am alive*. This time he waited a few minutes before trying to get up. He took it slow and easy, looking at the ground as he gradually rose up to his full height. He waited. The dizziness was gone, so he lifted his head up and looked around. For just a beat, it felt like he was falling again, that he wasn't as steady as he thought. Then Johnny understood. This time, it wasn't him. The world was out of kilter.

Storm-felled fences lay in twisted sheets, spiraling down lot-lines like strands of DNA; trees, uprooted, and carried along for two and three hundred feet or more, had

been cast aside; shingles littered the landscape like confetti. At one point, he saw a winged, pastel-colored cartoon-creature—the bottom of a child’s plastic swimming pool—hanging in the broken branches of an old oak, peering out as if from some exotic bird’s nest. It looked like a scene straight off the page of one of those Dr. Seuss books.

Across the street was total devastation. Instead of million-dollar estates with fancy gardens and expensive cars, were piles of rubble. In the midst of the destruction, he found the occasional oddity of something left eerily whole, such as a lone door or window frame. In one yard, a birdbath remained intact, the little stone boy still peeing water into its basin as if nothing had happened. The house, not twenty feet behind, was shredded to toothpicks save for a naked staircase rising up four stories out of the rubble. A stairway to heaven. A brand-new SUV was in its usual place in a driveway, except now it was upside down, as flat as Johnny’s NASA mouse pad.

He might have kept walking and gawking indefinitely had he not heard a faint whimpering sound coming up from the rubble. He stopped. “Arooooooo,” it came again, this time a bit louder, a half-howl-half-cry. Johnny recognized the sound at once.

“Barney, where are you?”

“Aroooooarooooowwarooooowwoowwoo.”

“I’m coming, old boy, hang on.”

Barney, a twenty-eight-year-old Bassett Hound—that’s 125 dog-years—belonged to Henry Mayfield, his seventy-eight-year-old faithful human. They were one of those adorable pet-owner look-alike pairs, both with huge, floppy ears and jowls hanging down to the sidewalk, flapping in the breeze as they teetered their way through the neighborhood. Johnny and Barney were well acquainted. The boy had never actually met Henry, leastwise not in a face-to-face, how-do-you-do-kind of a way. Still, because his father, Jack Abel, and Henry were good friends, he felt like he knew the old man. Johnny often eavesdropped on their conversations. Henry was part of the world outside of 4217 Mystic Lane—a place as foreign to Johnny as Mars—and the boy liked hearing the old man talk. But the chit-chat only bored Barney, and, instead of hanging with Henry, who generally ignored him at these times, the cagey hound would sniff out the boy to play with, and the two had become fast friends.

Johnny carefully extricated the hound. “Are you okay, boy?” Barney barked his thanks then hobbled off, looking and sniffing until he found a nice puddle of water.

Johnny laughed, watching, while Barney slurped the liquid with his huge hound-dog tongue.

“It’s sure good to see you,” said Johnny, dusting off his friend and scratching behind his huge ears. “You’re the only person I know outside of home,” He paused for a moment and laughed. “Even if you are just a dog.” Barney, panting happily, water dripping off his shiny, wet tongue, was apparently done with the drink. “Man, I bet you’re hungry too. Come on now, let’s go.” Johnny started walking towards Henry’s house. Barney did not follow the boy. Instead, he looked up, his big, brown eyes pleading. “Oh, so you want to be carried? Well, I guess you probably are exhausted from being outside all night.”

“Rark.”

“Okay, here we go.” Johnny, who was still plenty sore, bent down wincing and put his hands under Barney’s belly, prepared to scoop him up. “Damn,” he said, double clutching, “I never realized you were so big.” He grunted and tried again. This time he picked the dog all the way up. “You are one heavy old hound dog.”

“Rark, rark.” Johnny wasn’t sure if dogs could grin, but right then it looked like Barney was. The hound seemed quite pleased with himself.

As slow as Johnny was moving it was still only a five-minute walk. A note on the front door said to please go inside and give Henry a call if you had any news about Barney’s whereabouts. Because the land lines were down, he’d left a cell phone on the kitchen table along with a number where he could be reached. Johnny hesitated. He wasn't used to walking into someone else's house. In fact, as far as he knew, outside of emergency room visits, he’d never been outside of 4217 Mystic Lane. Until yesterday. Even then, he’d only managed to escape by decking his father. He recalled the feel of his fist smashing into Jack’s jaw. For all the countless beatings Johnny had taken in his young life, it was the first time he’d ever fought back. It felt good. I’ll have to do that more often. Then his smile faded. When Johnny got home today there would be hell to pay. Jack would be ready for him, and Johnny was too tired and too weak to do much about it. He considered not going home at all, but then looked at himself. His clothes were torn and grungy. He had no money. *No nothing. Next time, he thought, I'll have to plan better*, which would be easy enough, because this time he hadn’t planned anything. It had all been spontaneous. He’d only wanted to go outside, to see . . .

“Rark, rark!” Barney, who apparently had a definite and immediate plan for what he wanted to do, began pawing at the door. “Rark, rark, rark!”

“Oh, right. Sorry about that, boy. I must have drifted off. Okay, let’s do this.” Johnny opened the door. Barney made a bee-line for the kitchen and picked up his doggie-bowl. The boy filled it with some kibble then paused, trying to decide whether or not to have a look around. *I’m already inside*, he reasoned, and *Henry is famous*. What could it hurt? Henry “Coach” Mayfield was indeed a celebrity. Of sorts: the winningest basketball coach ever in the state of Indiana. His major claim-to-fame happened in 1963 when he led the Mystic Marvels to a state championship—quite an accomplishment with only sixteen boys in that year’s senior class. Johnny tiptoed through the living room, down a short hall where he peeked in the two bedrooms, and then circled back to the kitchen. He was disappointed. The air was stuffy and a bit sour smelling. The decor looked like something off the set of a 1950’s rerun. It was not what he’d envisioned a celebrity’s house to look like. Johnny shook his head then picked the phone up off the table and dialed the number.

“Hello, Coach here.”

“Ah, hello. I’m here in your house. I found your dog.”

“Is he alright?”

“A little dusty, and hungry, but, yeah, he’s fine.”

“Where’d you find him?”

“He was buried under a bunch of trash, so I dug him out and carried him home.”

“Thank God, and thank you, too. I can’t tell you how much this means to me.”

“No problem, I’m just glad Barney’s alright.”

“You know him?”

“Ah, not until just now.”

“It kind-a sounded like you might have-”

“No. Anyway, I’d better go.”

“Wait a second. If you don’t know him, then how’d you know his name? or where to bring him?”

Johnny hesitated, “Ah . . . a man . . .” Think quick Johnny Moonbeam. “Right, an elderly man, bald, with big bushy white eyebrows, he told me.”

“Hmm. Could be Jimmy Jacobs, I guess. Well, all right then, but at least tell me who you are and where you’re from.

“I’m Johnny,” he said, catching himself just in time before the Abel came out, and he turned it into a throat clearing. “Excuse me. Anyway, like I was saying, my name is Johnny, and I’m from . . . Broad Ripple.”

“Well thanks, Johnny from Broad Ripple. I’d like to give you some kind of reward.”

“That’s all right. I don’t need anything.”

“Why don’t you just hold on young man. I’d like to thank you personally for finding my dog. Tell you what. I’ll pick us up a pizza on the way home. What kind do you like?”

“Ah, that’s all right,” said Johnny, even though pizza sounded mighty good. “I have to be getting home.”

“Oh, is someone there to pick you up already or something? I’d be glad to take you home myself when I get there.”

“It’s not that far, I’ll just walk.”

“Not far? I thought you said you was from Broad Ripple?”

Oops, think fast Johnny Moonbeam. “Ah, well, I mean it’s not a far walk to the bus stop.” *Anyway, I hope it’s not that far.*

“Well, I guess if you got to go you got to go. But I sure would like to meet you. It may sound funny to a young boy like you, but, since the wife passed away a couple of years ago, that dog means everything to me.

Johnny wanted to tell him who he really was, that he lived just around the corner and had lived there for nearly fifteen years. But something told him that maybe this wasn’t the right time. Although Henry was Jack’s friend, Johnny thought he was a good person. It would probably be all right to tell him, but still, it was something he needed to think about first.

“Oh, it’s no big deal. I’m just glad you have your dog back.”

“Well it sure was to me, young man. Thank you again, and would you mind writin’ down your name and leavin’ it on the table. If there’s ever anything, and I mean anything, I can do for you, you just let me know.”

“Well, bye,” said Johnny, and at the bottom of Henry’s note, he drew a picture of a rocket with a word balloon stemming from the cockpit. Inside the balloon, he wrote

Johnny Moonbeam was here, and then headed for home—where the biggest surprise of Johnny's life awaited him.