

# SPOOKSVILLE



THE  
SECRET  
PATH

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

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# THANKS

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For Pat, my editor

**F**or Adam Freeman, moving to Spooksville wasn't something he'd planned. But being only twelve, he hadn't a lot to say in the matter. They had to move, his parents said, because of his father's job. Of course, when they told him about Spooksville, they didn't call it that. Springville was the proper name of the small oceanside town. It was only the local kids who called it by the scarier, but more accurate, title. It was only kids who knew how weird the place could get after dark.

Or even during the day.

That was the thing about Spooksville.

Not all its monsters waited until the sun went down to appear.

Unpacking the moving van and carrying his stuff up to his new room, Adam wasn't thinking of monsters or the supernatural. But that was soon to change. Oh, yes, in a big way.

"Adam," his father called from inside the truck. "Can you give me a hand with this love seat?"

"Sure," Adam replied, setting down the box of clothes he was carrying. He enjoyed helping, even though his muscles were still sore from loading the truck two days ago in Kansas City, Missouri. His father, who was something of a nerd, had driven straight through to the West Coast town. Adam had slept on a rubber mat in the back of the truck. The road had been rough.

Adam was small for his age, but he was growing steadily and figured he'd catch up soon. The problem was he had no one in particular to catch up to now that all his friends were over a thousand miles away. Adam thought of Sammy and Mike as he climbed into the truck. He wondered what they were doing right now. His father paused to stare at him.

"What's that look?" his dad asked. "Are you homesick already?"

Adam shrugged. "I'm OK."

His dad ruffled his hair. "Don't worry. You'll make new friends soon. Not all the cool guys live in the Midwest." He smiled as he added, "Not all the cool girls live there, either."

Adam frowned as he leaned over to pick up his end of the short sofa. "I'm not interested in girls. And they're definitely not interested in me."

"It's when you're not interested in them that they start to chase you."

"Is that true?"

"Some of the time, if you're lucky." His father leaned over and picked up his end. "Let's lift on the count of three. One—two—"

“Why is it called a love seat?” Adam asked. He was curious about many things, even things he pretended to have no interest in.

“Because it’s only big enough to fit two lovers. Are you ready? One—two—”

“You know I didn’t really know any girls in Kansas City,” Adam added hastily.

His father stood up again and stretched. “What about Denise? You saw her all the time.”

Adam felt his cheeks redden. “Yes. But she was just a friend. She wasn’t a . . .” He struggled to find the right word. “She wasn’t a *girl* girl.”

“Thank God for that.” His father leaned over again. “Let’s just lift this thing and get it over with. One—two—”

“Three!” Adam said as he yanked up hard, catching his father by surprise.

“Ahh!” his father exclaimed and dropped his end. He clutched his lower back and his face twisted with pain.

“Did you hurt yourself?” Adam asked, thinking what a stupid question it was. His father waved him away as he limped down the ramp of the truck.

“I’m all right. Don’t worry. Just a pulled muscle. We need a break anyway.”

“I’m sorry.”

“It wasn’t your fault.”

Adam was concerned. “Are you sure you’re all right?” His father wasn’t exactly in perfect shape. In the last couple of years he had grown a fair-size belly. Too many doughnuts and sodas, Adam thought, even though those were two of his favorite foods, too. That was one of the things that made his dad sort of a nerd—he liked junk food as much as kids.

“I’m fine,” his dad said. “Let’s stop and have a drink. What would you like?”

“A Coke,” Adam replied, following him down the ramp.

“I don’t think we have any Cokes in the refrigerator.”

“I don’t think we have a refrigerator,” Adam said. He pointed to the large white container at the rear of the truck. “We haven’t unloaded it yet.”

“Good point,” his father said, sitting down on the lawn.

“Should I tell Mom you’re hurt?”

“Leave her, she’s busy.” He pulled a twenty from his back pocket and handed it to Adam. “Why don’t you run down to the 7-Eleven on the corner and get us a cold six-pack.”

Adam pocketed the bill. “Yeah, I’ll just tell them I forgot my ID, but I really am over twenty-one.”

“I meant a six-pack of Coke.”

“I know.” Adam turned away, “I’ll be back in a few minutes.”

His dad groaned as he leaned back on his elbows and stared up at the sky. “Take your time. I don’t think I’ll be going anywhere anytime soon.”

## 2

It was while Adam was returning from the store with the sodas that he met Sally Wilcox. She sneaked up on him from behind. A pretty girl about his age, she had long brown hair and a sticklike figure that somehow made her look like a doll that a fairy queen had brought to life with a wave of a magic wand. It was a hot day, and her long legs poking out of her white shorts were tan and bony. She had the widest brown eyes Adam had ever seen, and she didn't look a thing like Denise back in Missouri.

"Hello," she said. "Are you the new kid in town?"

"I suppose so. I just got here."

She stuck out her hand. "My name's Sara Wilcox, but you can call me Sally. It's easier to remember."

Adam took her hand. "I'm Adam Freeman."

Sally practically shook his fingers off. "What should I call you?"

"Adam."

She nodded to his Coke cans. "Are those cold?"

"Yes."

"May I have one, please?"

It wasn't as if he could say no, being the new kid and all. He gave her a Coke, which she promptly opened and drank. She didn't even let out a loud burp afterward. Adam was impressed.

"You must have been thirsty," he remarked.

"I was." She studied him for a moment. "You look depressed, Adam."

"Huh?"

"You look sad. Are you sad?"

He shrugged. "No."

Sally nodded to herself. "You left someone special behind. I understand."

Adam blinked. "What are you talking about?" This girl was weird.

Sally waved her hand as if what she was saying was obvious. "You don't have to be embarrassed. You're a good-looking guy. You must have had a good-looking girlfriend wherever you came from." She paused. "Where was that anyway?"

"Kansas City."

Sally nodded sympathetically. "She's a long way away now."

"Who?"

"I just met you, Adam. How would I know her name?"

Adam frowned. "My best friends in Kansas City were named Sammy and Mike."

Sally tossed her long hair impatiently. “If you don’t want to talk about her, that’s OK. I’m going through an identity crisis myself.” She paused. “But you couldn’t tell that just by looking at me, could you?”

“No.”

“I hide it. I suffer in silence. It’s better that way. It builds character. My aunt says I have a face full of character. Do you think that’s true?”

Adam resumed walking toward his house. The Cokes were getting warm and Sally was making him dizzy. But it had been nice of her to say he was good-looking. Adam was a little insecure about his looks. His brown hair, similar in color to Sally’s, was not nearly so long. His father cut his hair, and the man believed in closely trimmed lawns as well as heads. Nor was Adam as tall as Sally, who seemed to him to have stilts sewn on to her legs. But people told him he had a handsome face. At least his mother did when she was in a good mood.

“I guess,” he replied to her last question about the character in her face.

She followed him. “Are you going to introduce me to your family? I always like to meet parents. You can get a good idea of what a guy is going to become by looking at his dad.”

“I hope not,” Adam muttered.

“What did you say?”

“Nothing. How long have you been living here?”

“Twelve years. All my life. I’m one of the lucky ones.”

“You mean, it’s really neat living in Springville?”

“No. I mean I’m lucky to be alive still. Not all kids last twelve years in Spooksville.”

“What’s Spooksville?”

Sally spoke in a serious tone. “It’s where you’re living now, Adam. Only adults call it Springville. Kids know the real story of this place. And let me tell you it deserves to be called Spooksville.”

Adam was bewildered. “But why?”

She leaned close, telling him a great secret. “Because people here disappear. Usually kids like us. No one knows where they go, and no one talks about the fact that they’re gone. Because they’re all too afraid.”

Adam smiled uneasily. “Are you pulling my leg?”

Sally stood back. “If I was pulling your leg, you wouldn’t be standing. I’m telling you the straight truth. This town is dangerous. My advice to you is to drive out of here before the sun goes down.” Sally paused and put a hand on his shoulder. “Not that I want to see you leave.”

Adam shook his head. “I’m not leaving. I don’t believe a whole town can be spooked. I don’t believe in vampires and werewolves and junk like that. I’m surprised you do.” He added quietly, “I think you *are* going through an identity crisis.”

Sally pulled back her hand and regarded him gravely as she spoke. “Let me tell you the story of Leslie Lotte before you decide I’m crazy. Until a month ago she lived down the block from me. She was cute. You might have been interested in her

if you met her before me. Anyway, she was great at making stuff: jewelry, clothes, kites. She was really into kites. Don't ask me why. Maybe she wanted to be a bird when she grew up. Anyway she used to fly her kites in the park by the cemetery. Yeah, that's right. In Spooksville the park is next to the cemetery, which is next to the witch's castle—which is a story in itself. Leslie used to go to the park by herself, even close to dark. I told her not to. Last month she was there all alone flying her kite when a huge gust of wind came along and blew her into the sky. Blew her right into a dark cloud, which swallowed her whole. Can you believe that?"

"No."

Sally was exasperated. "I'm not lying! I may be confused about my personal values at the moment, but the truth is still very important to me."

"If she was flying the kite all alone in the park, how do you know what happened to her? Who told you?"

"Watch."

"Watch what?"

"Not what. Watch is a who."

"Who's Watch?"

"You'll meet him. And before you get worried, I want you to know that our relationship is not and never has been romantic. We're just good friends."

"I'm not worried, Sally."

She hesitated. "Good. Watch saw Leslie disappear into the sky. He wasn't in the park but in the cemetery. So you see, technically, Leslie was in the park all alone."

"It sounds to me like your friend Watch has a vivid imagination."

"That's true. He can't see very well, either. But he's not a liar."

"What was he doing in the cemetery?"

"Oh, he hangs out there a lot. He's one of the few kids who lives here who enjoys Spooksville. He loves mystery and adventures. If he wasn't so weird I'd be attracted to him."

"I like mystery and adventures," Adam said proudly.

Sally wasn't impressed. "Then you can camp out in the cemetery with Watch and tell me what it's like." She stuck out her arm, pointing. "That's not your house down the street with that chubby nerd on the front lawn?"

"Yes, and that chubby nerd is my father."

Sally put her hands to her mouth, "Oh no."

"He's not that bad," Adam said defensively.

"No. I'm not upset about your father's appearance, although you're going to have to watch your diet and the amount of TV you watch as you get older. It's your house that's no good."

"What's wrong with it? Don't tell me someone was murdered there?"

Sally shook her head. "They weren't murdered."

"Well, that's a relief."

"They killed themselves." Sally nodded seriously. "It was an old couple. No one knows why they did it. They must have been going through an identity crisis. They just hung themselves from the chandelier."

“We don’t have a chandelier.”

“They were fat old people. The chandelier broke when they strung themselves up with the ropes. Someone told me they didn’t leave any money for a proper funeral. Their bodies are supposed to be buried in your basement.”

“We don’t have a basement.”

Sally nodded. “The police had to fill it in, in case you found the bodies.”

Adam sighed. “Oh brother. Do you want to meet my father?”

“Yes. Just don’t ask me to stay for lunch. I’m a picky eater.”

“Somehow I’m not surprised,” Adam said.

### 3

**H**is mom and dad were very impressed with Sally, Adam was surprised to see. Of course, Sally kept her remarks to a minimum and her identity crisis private while she spoke to them. Sally did not have an opportunity to meet Claire, Adam's seven-year-old sister, because she was asleep on the floor in one of the back bedrooms. His father hadn't set up the beds yet. From the way he was hobbling around holding his lower spine as if he were a monkey with a sore tail, he looked like he needed one. His father winked at Adam and told him to go out and play with Sally. He said that neither of them would be doing any more heavy lifting that day.

Adam didn't know what the wink was supposed to mean.

He wasn't interested in Sally. Not as a girlfriend.

He had no desire to have a girlfriend before seventh grade.

But school didn't start for another three months, so he had a whole summer full of monsters to look forward to.

Not that he believed a word Sally had told him.

"Let me show you the town," Sally said as they stepped out of his front door. "But don't be deceived by what you see. This place looks perfectly normal, but it's not. For example, you might see a young mother walk by wheeling her newborn infant. She might smile at you and say hello. She might look real, and her baby might look cute. But there's always the possibility that that young mother is responsible for the disappearance of Leslie Lotte, and that her baby is a robot."

"I thought you said a cloud swallowed Leslie."

"Yeah, but *who* was in the cloud? These are the kind of questions you have to ask yourself this afternoon as you check out the scene."

Adam was getting weary of Sally's warnings. "I don't believe in robots. There are no robots. That's a simple fact."

Sally raised a know-it-all eyebrow. "Nothing is simple in Spooksville."

Springville—Adam refused to think of it by any other name—was tiny. Nestled between two gentle sets of hills on the north and south, it had the ocean to the west. To the east a range of rough hills rose sharply. Adam was inclined to call them mountains. Naturally, Sally said there were many bodies buried in those hills. Most of the town was set on a slope that only leveled out as it neared the water. Close to the shore, at the end of a rocky point, stood a tall lighthouse that looked out over the hard blue water as if in search of adventures. Sally explained that the water in and around Springville wasn't safe, either.

“Lots of riptides and undertows,” she said. “Sharks, too—great whites. I knew a guy—he was out on his boogie board only a hundred feet from the shore, and a shark swam by and bit his right leg off just like that. If you don’t believe me, you can meet him. His name’s David Green, but we call him Jaws.”

*This* story had a ring of truth to it, at least.

“I don’t like to swim all that much,” Adam muttered.

Sally shook her head. “You don’t even have to go in the water to have problems. The crabs come right up on the sand to nibble on you.” She added, “We don’t have to go to the beach right now if you don’t want to.”

“Another time might be better,” Adam agreed.

They did head in the direction of the water, though. Sally wanted to show him the arcade next to the movie theater, which, she said, was owned by the local undertaker. Apparently it showed only horror movies. The theater and the arcade were located next to the pier, which, Sally said, was about as safe as a single plank set above boiling lava. Along the way they passed a supermarket.

Parked out front was a black Corvette convertible, with the top down. Adam wasn’t into cars, but he thought Corvettes were cool. They looked like rockets. He stared at the car as they strode by, for a moment blocking out Sally’s rambling. Like so much of Springville, the market parking lot was built on a hill. Adam was shocked to see that a shopping cart had slipped loose from its place near the front doors and was heading for the car. He hated to think of such a beautiful car getting a dent in it, and jumped forward to stop the cart. Sally screamed behind him.

“Adam!” she cried. “Don’t go near that car!”

But she was too late with her warning. He stopped the shopping cart only inches from the car door, feeling as if he had done his good deed for the day. He noticed that Sally was still standing where he’d left her. She seemed afraid to approach the vehicle. As he started to move the cart to a safe place, a soft yet mysterious voice spoke at his back.

“Thank you, Adam. You have done your good deed for the day.”

He turned toward the most beautiful woman he’d ever seen. She was tall—most adults were. Her black hair was long and curly, her eyes so dark and big, they were like mirrors that opened only at night. Her face was very pale, white as a statue’s, her lips as red as fresh blood. She wore a white dress that swept past her knees. In her hands she carried a small white purse. She must have been in her late twenties, but seemed ageless. It was a warm day, yet she had on gloves, as red as her lips. She smiled at his shocked expression.

“You wonder how I know your name,” she said. “Isn’t that so, Adam?”

He nodded, dumbstruck. She took a step closer.

“There isn’t much that happens in this town that I don’t know about,” she said. “You just arrived today. Isn’t that so?”

He found his voice. “Yes, ma’am.”

She chuckled softly. “How do you like Spooksville so far?”

He stuttered. “I thought only kids called it Spooksville?”

She took another step forward. “There are a few grown-ups who know its real name. You’ll meet another one today. He’ll tell you things you might not want to listen to, but that will be up to you.” She glanced at her car, then at the shopping cart still in his hand, and her smile broadened. “I give you this warning because you have done me a favor this day, protecting my car. That was valiant of you, Adam.”

“Thank you, ma’am.”

She chuckled again, removing her gloves. “You have manners. That is rare among the young in this town.” She paused. “Do you think that is one of the reasons they have so many—problems?”

Adam gulped. “What kind of problems?”

The woman looked in the direction of Sally. “I’m sure your friend has already told you many frightening things about this town. Don’t believe half of them. Of course, the other half—you might want to believe.” She paused as if sharing a private joke with herself. Then she waved at Sally. “Come here, child.”

Sally approached reluctantly, and then stood close to Adam. She was so close he noticed she was shaking. The woman studied her up and down and frowned.

“You don’t like me,” she said finally.

Sally swallowed. “We’re just out walking.”

“You’re just out talking.” She pointed a finger at Sally. “You watch what you talk about. Every time you say my name, child, I hear it. And I remember. Do you understand?”

Sally was still shaking, but a sudden stubbornness hardened her features. “I understand very well, thank you.”

“Good.”

“How’s your castle ‘keeping’ these days?” Sally asked sarcastically. “Any cold drafts?”

The woman’s frown deepened, then unexpectedly she smiled. Adam would have said it was a cold smile if it hadn’t been so enchanting. This woman held him spellbound.

“You’re insolent, Sally,” she said. “Which is good. I was insolent as a child”—she paused—“until I learned better.” She glanced at Adam. “You know I have a castle?”

“No, I didn’t know,” Adam said. He liked castles, although he’d never seen one, much less been inside one.

“Would you like to visit me there someday?” the woman asked.

“No,” Sally said suddenly.

Adam glared at Sally. “I can answer for myself,” he said.

Sally shook her head. “You don’t want to go there. Kids who go there, they—”

“They what?” the woman interrupted. Sally wouldn’t look at her now, only at Adam. Sally seemed to back down.

“It’s not a good idea to go there” was all Sally said.

The woman reached out and touched the side of Adam’s face. Her fingers were warm, soft—they didn’t feel dangerous. Yet Adam trembled beneath them. The woman’s eyes, as she stared at him, seemed to pierce to the center of his brain.

“Nothing is the way it looks,” she said gently. “Nobody is just one way. When you hear stories about me—perhaps from this skinny girl here, perhaps from others—know that they’re only partially true.”

Adam had trouble speaking. “I don’t understand.”

“You will, soon enough,” the woman said. Her fingernails—they were quite long, and so red—brushed close to his eyes, almost touching his lashes. “You have such nice eyes, did you know that, Adam?” She glanced over at Sally. “And you have such a nice mouth.”

Sally gave a fake smile. “I know that.”

The woman chuckled softly and drew back. Reaching out and opening her car door, she glanced back at them one last time. “I will see both of you later—under different circumstances,” she said.

Then she got into her car, waved once, and drove away.

Sally was ready to throw a fit.

“Do you know who that was?” she exclaimed.

“No,” Adam said, still recovering from the shock of meeting the woman. “She didn’t tell me her name.”

“That was Ms. Ann Templeton. She is the great-great-great-great-granddaughter of Mrs. Madeline Templeton.”

“Who’s that?”

“The woman who founded this town about two hundred years ago. A witch if ever there was one. Witchery runs in their family. The woman you just met is the most dangerous creature in all of Spooksville. Nobody knows how many kids she’s killed.”

“She seemed nice.”

“Adam! She’s a witch! There are no nice witches except in *The Wizard of Oz*. And one thing Spooksville sure doesn’t have is a yellow brick road. You have to stay away from that woman or you’ll end up as a frog chirping in the stagnant pond behind the cemetery.”

Adam had to shake himself to clear his brain. It was almost as if the woman had cast a spell on him. But a pleasant spell, one that made him feel warm inside.

“How did she know my name?” he muttered out loud.

Sally was exasperated. “Because she’s a witch! Get a grip on reality, would ya? She probably just had to look in a big pot filled with boiling livers and kidneys to know everything about you. Why, I wouldn’t be surprised if she sent that shopping cart flying toward her car just so you could run over and stop it. Just so she could stop and bewitch your tiny little mind. Are you listening to me, Mr. Kansas City?”

Adam frowned. “The shopping cart wasn’t flying. It never left the ground.”

Sally raised her arms toward the sky. “The kid has to see a broom fly across the sky before he’ll believe in witches! Well, that’s just great. Be that way. Get yourself changed into something gross and disgusting. I don’t care. I have problems of my own.”

“Sally. Why are you always yelling at me?”

“Because I *care*. Now let’s get out of here. Let’s go to the arcade. It’s pretty safe there.”

“None of the games are haunted?” Adam asked to tease her. Sally stopped to give him another one of her impatient looks.

“A *couple* of games are haunted,” she said. “You just can’t put quarters in them. Of course, knowing you, you’ll head straight for them.”

“I don’t know,” Adam said. “My dad wanted his change back from when I bought the Cokes. I don’t have any money.”

“Then thank your dad for a small favor,” Sally said.

## 4

**T**hey never got to the arcade. Instead they ran into Sally's friend—Watch. He was an interesting-looking fellow. About Sally's height, with blond hair the color of the sun and arms that seemed to reach to the ground. His ears were big. Adam saw in an instant where he got his nickname. On each arm he wore two large watches, four that Adam could see. Maybe he had a couple in his pockets that Adam didn't know about. The lenses on his glasses were thick—they could have been swiped from the ends of telescopes. Sally seemed happy to see him. She introduced Adam.

"Adam's from Kansas City," she said to Watch. "He just got here and is finding the change of scenery painful."

Adam frowned. "It's not that bad."

"What are your favorite subjects in school?" Watch asked.

"Watch is a science nut," Sally said. "If you like science, Watch will like you. Me—I don't care if you flunked biology. My love is unconditional."

"I like science," Adam said. He gestured to Watch's arms. "Why do you wear so many watches? Isn't one enough?"

"I always like to know what time it is in each part of the country," Watch said.

"There are four time zones in America," Sally said.

"I know that," Adam said. "Kansas City is two time zones ahead of the West Coast. But why do you want to know what time it is in all these places?"

Watch lowered his head. "Because my mother lives in New York. My sister lives in Chicago, and my father lives in Denver." Watch shrugged. "I like to know what time it is for each of them."

There was sadness in Watch's voice as he spoke of his family. Adam felt he shouldn't ask why everyone was so spread out. Sally must have felt the same way. She spoke up again.

"I was just telling Adam how dangerous this town is," she said. "I don't think he believes me."

"Did you really see Leslie Lotte get swallowed by a cloud?" Adam asked Watch.

Watch looked at Sally. "What did you tell him?"

Sally was defensive. "Just what you told me."

Watch scratched his head. His blond hair was kind of thin. "I saw Leslie get lost in the fog. And then none of us could find her. But she might have run away from home."

"The fog, a cloud—what's the difference?" Sally said. "The sky ate her, it's as simple as that. Hey, Watch, what are you doing today? Do you want to go to the

arcade with us?"

Watch brightened. "I'm going to see Bum. He's going to show me the Secret Path."

Sally shuddered. "You're not taking the Secret Path. You'll die."

"Really?" Watch said.

"What's the Secret Path?" Adam asked.

"Don't tell him," Sally said. "He just got here. I like him, and I don't want him to die."

"I don't think we'll die," Watch said. "But we might disappear."

Adam was interested. He'd never disappeared before. "How?" he asked.

Watch turned to Sally. "Tell him about it," he said.

Sally shook her head. "It's too dangerous, and I'm responsible for him."

"Who made you responsible?" Adam asked, getting annoyed. "I'm my own person. You can't tell me what to do." He turned to Watch. "Tell me about the path. And tell me who Bum is."

"Bum is the town bum," Sally interrupted. "He used to be the mayor until Ann Templeton, town witch, put a curse on him."

"Is that true?" Adam asked Watch.

"Bum was the mayor," Watch agreed. "But I don't know if he became a bum because he got cursed. It may have been because he got lazy. He was always a lousy mayor."

"What exactly is the Secret Path?" Adam asked again.

"We don't know," Sally said. "It's a secret."

"Tell me what you do know," Adam said, getting exasperated.

"There's supposed to be a special path that winds through town that leads into other dimensions," Watch said. "I've searched for it for years, but never found it. But Bum is supposed to know it."

"Who says?" Adam asked.

"Bum says," Watch said.

"Why is he going to tell you the secret?" Sally asked. "Why today?"

Watch was thoughtful. "I don't know. I gave him a sandwich last week. Maybe he just wants to thank me for it."

"Maybe he wants to get you killed," Sally grumbled.

"It wasn't that bad a sandwich," Watch said.

"When you say the path leads into other dimensions," Adam said, "what do you mean?"

"There is more than one Spooksville," Sally said.

"Huh?" Adam said.

"This town overlaps with other realities," Watch explained. "Sometimes those other realities blur into this one."

"That's why this is such a weird place to live," Sally added.

Adam shook his head. "Do you have any proof that this stuff exists?"

"No direct proof," Watch said. "But a man on my block was supposed to have known about the Secret Path."

“What did he say about it?” Adam asked.

“He disappeared before I could ask him.” Watch paused to check one of his watches. “Bum is waiting for me. If you want to come, you have to decide now.”

“Don’t go, Adam,” Sally pleaded. “You’re young. You have your whole future in front of you.”

Adam laughed at her concern. He was interested in the Secret Path, but he couldn’t say he believed it really existed. “I have a long boring day in front of me. I want to see what this is about.” He nodded to Watch. “Let’s go find this Bum.”

## 5

Sally ended up going with them, complaining all the time about how they could get stuck in a black hole and squashed down to the size of ants. Adam and Watch ignored her.

They found Bum sitting by the pier on a concrete wall, feeding the birds from a pile of nearby seed. On the way to the water Watch had stopped and bought a turkey sandwich at a deli as a gift. Bum accepted it hungrily and didn't even pause to look at them until he'd finished eating.

Bum was dirty with a long scraggly gray coat that looked as if it had been dug out of a garbage can. His face was unshaven, his cheeks stained with grease and dirt. His hair was the color of used motor oil. He could have been sixty, but maybe cleaned up he would have looked closer to forty. Although he was thin, his eyes were exceptionally bright and alert. He didn't look drunk, just hungry. Finished eating, he regarded them closely, searching Adam up and down.

"You're the new kid in town," he said finally. "I heard about you."

"Really?" Adam said. "Who told you about me?"

"I don't reveal my sources," Bum replied, throwing the final crumbs from his sandwich to the birds that flocked around him as if he were Father Bird. Bum continued, "Your name's Adam and you're from Kansas City."

"That's right, sir," Adam said.

Bum grinned wolfishly. "No one calls me sir anymore, kid. And to tell you the truth, I don't care. I'm Bum—that's my new name. Call me that."

"Did you really used to be mayor?" Adam asked.

Bum stared out to sea. "Yes. But that was long ago, when I was young and cared about being a big shot." He shook his head and added, "I was a lousy mayor."

"I told him that," Watch said.

Bum chuckled. "I'm sure you did. Now, Watch, what do you want? The secret to the Secret Path? How do I know you're qualified to learn it?"

"What qualifications are necessary?" Watch asked.

Bum asked them to lean in closer. He spoke in a confidential tone. "You have to be fearless. If you walk the Secret Path and find the other towns, then fear is the one thing that can get you killed. But if you keep your head, think fast, you can survive the road. It's the only way."

Adam had to draw in a breath. "Have you taken the Secret Path?" he asked.

Bum laughed softly, mainly to himself. "Many times, kid. I've taken it left and I've taken it right. I've even taken it straight up, if you know what I mean."

“I don’t,” Adam said honestly.

“The Secret Path doesn’t always lead to the same place,” Bum said. “It all depends on you. If you’re a little scared, you end up in a place that’s a little scary. If you’re terrified, the path is like a road to terror.”

“Cool,” Watch said.

“Cool?” Sally said sarcastically. “Who wants to be terrified? Come on, Adam\* let’s get out of here. Neither of us is qualified. We’re both cowards.”

“Speak for yourself,” Adam said, getting more interested. Bum had a powerful way of speaking—it was hard to doubt his words. “Can the path lead to wonderful places?” Adam asked.

“Oh yes,” Bum said. “But those are the hardest to reach. Only the best people get to them. Most just get stuck in twilight zone realms and are never heard from again.”

“That wouldn’t bother me,” Watch said. “I love that old show, *The Twilight Zone*. Please tell us the way.”

Bum studied each of them, and even though the smile left his mouth, it remained in his eyes. Adam liked him but wasn’t sure if he was a good man. The words of Ann Templeton, the supposed witch, came back to haunt him.

*“There are a few grown-ups who know its real name. You’ll meet another one today. He’ll tell you things you might not want to listen to, but that will be up to you. I give you this warning because you have done me a favor this day.”*

“If I tell you the way,” Bum said, “you have to promise not to tell anyone else.”

“Wait a second!” Sally exclaimed. “I never said I wanted to know the secret.” She put her hands over her ears. “This town is bad enough. I don’t want to fall into a worse one.”

Bum chuckled. “I know you, Sally. You’re more curious than the other two. I’ve watched you this past year. You go out looking for the Secret Path all the time.”

Sally pulled down her hands. “Never!”

“I’ve seen you searching for it,” Watch said.

“Only to block it up so that no one else could find it,” she said quickly.

“The Secret Path cannot be blocked up,” Bum said, and now he sounded serious. “It’s ancient. It existed before this town was built, and it will continue to exist after this town has turned to dust. No one walks it and remains the same. If you choose to take it, you must know there is no going back. The path is dangerous, but if your heart remains strong, the rewards can be great.”

“Could we find some treasure?” Adam asked, getting more excited. Bum stared him right in the eye.

“You might find wealth beyond your imagination,” Bum said.

Sally brightened. “I could use a few bucks.”

Bum threw his head back and laughed. “You three are a team, I see that already. All right, I’ll tell you the secret. After you promise to keep it secret.”

“We promise,” they said together.

“Good.” Bum asked them to come close again, and he lowered his voice to a whisper. “Follow the life of the witch. Follow her all the way to her death, and

remember, when they brought her to her grave, they carried her upside-down. They buried her facedown, as they do all witches. All those they are afraid to burn.”

Adam was confused. “What does that mean?” he asked.

Bum would tell them no more. He shook his head and returned to feeding the birds.

“It’s a riddle,” he said. “You figure it out.”