

whale done

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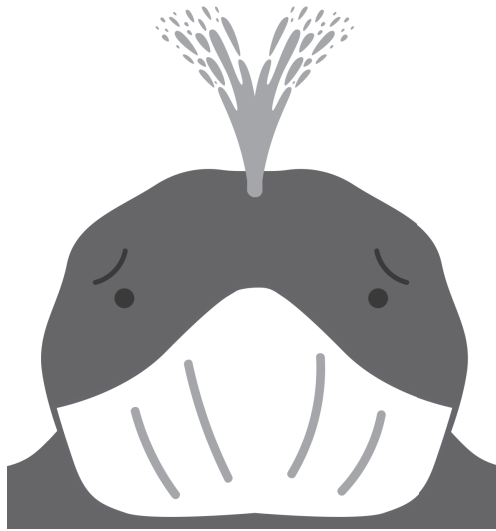
Once Upon a Tim

The Labyrinth of Doom

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STUART GIBBS

whale done

A **funjungle** NOVEL

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An imprint of Simon & Schuster Children's Publishing Division

1230 Avenue of the Americas, New York, New York 10020

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Interior design by Lucy Ruth Cummins

Map art by Ryan Thompson

The text for this book was set in Adobe Garamond Pro.

Manufactured in the United States of America

1223 OFF

First Simon & Schuster Books for Young Readers paperback edition January 2024

2 4 6 8 10 9 7 5 3 1

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Gibbs, Stuart, 1969– author.

Title: Whale done : a FunJungle novel / Stuart Gibbs.

Description: First edition. | New York : Simon & Schuster Books for Young Readers,

[2023] | Audience: Ages 8–12. | Audience: Grades 4–6. |

Summary: While visiting his girlfriend Summer in Malibu, Teddy stumbles upon two mysteries involving a blown up whale explosion and a string of beach sand thefts, but his investigation is sidetracked by a rumor that his girlfriend is dating a celebrity, leading him to question their relationship.

Identifiers: LCCN 2022023911 (print) | LCCN 2022023912 (ebook) |

ISBN 9781534499317 (hardcover) | ISBN 9781534499324 (pbk)

ISBN 9781534499331 (ebook)

Subjects: CYAC: Mystery and detective stories. | Stealing—Fiction. |

Beaches—Fiction. | Dating—Fiction. | LCGFT: Detective and mystery fiction. | Novels.

Classification: LCC PZ7.G339236 Wh 2023 (print) | LCC PZ7.G339236 (ebook) |

DDC [Foc]—dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2022023911>

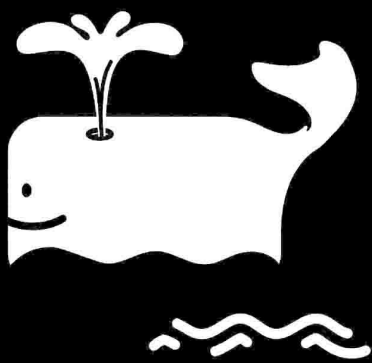
LC ebook record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2022023912>

For Marc Zachary, who knows more about theme parks (and plenty of other stuff) than just about anyone. Thanks for all the advice over the years.

WHALE DONE



1





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THE ESCAPE

I would never have seen the whale explode if a kangaroo hadn't burned down my house.

The kangaroo was a four-year-old male named Hopalong Cassidy, and the fire wasn't entirely his fault. It's not like kangaroos go around plotting arson. All that Hopalong was truly guilty of was trying to escape.

I know this because I witnessed the entire event.

My name is Teddy Fitzroy. I'm thirteen years old, and I live at FunJungle Wild Animal Park.

FunJungle is the most popular tourist attraction in all of Texas, an enormous theme park and zoo featuring many of the finest animal exhibits ever built. Both my parents work there—my mother is the head primatologist, while my father is the official photographer—and because their

jobs require them to be at FunJungle at all hours, we have employee housing.

But while FunJungle had spared no expense to create incredible habitats for the animals, with state-of-the-art facilities and innovative designs, the park had really skimped when it came to providing lodging for humans. The public relations department had named the staff housing area Lakeside Estates, but it was merely a group of mobile homes haphazardly arranged in the woods behind the employee parking lot. They were supposed to be deluxe models, but my father suspected they were actually defective merchandise that the dealer hadn't been able to sell. (J.J. McCracken, the billionaire owner of FunJungle, also owned the mobile home company.) Our home was slightly lopsided, with bargain-basement appliances and walls so thin you could hear what neighbors were watching on television. Even worse, the utilities were barely functional. The septic system often smelled worse than the elephant house, and the electricity conked out on a regular basis.

Which was why I wasn't home during the fire. The mobile home park had suffered a power failure—on the hottest day of the year, no less.

Central Texas is known for being hot and humid, but that mid-August day was brutal. The state was suffering through its worst heat wave in a decade, and that afternoon it had been

116 degrees in the shade. Even animals that lived in deserts, like the camels and fennec foxes, seemed to think this was too much and refused to go outside. Despite this, the park was still busy; it was the height of tourist season, and parents who had built up the trip for weeks didn't have the heart to tell their children they weren't going. (In addition, many guests had prepaid for nonrefundable park admission packages.) But everyone who had dared to venture outdoors looked miserable. They slouched about in the heat, gulping down overpriced sodas to stay hydrated and griping that none of the animals were doing anything but napping. The Polar Pavilion, which was refrigerated to arctic temperatures for the polar bears and penguins, had a two-hour line to get inside.

I had spent most of the day with my best friend, Xavier, and my girlfriend, Summer, trying to find ways to stay cool. Xavier was a junior volunteer at FunJungle, and though his shift at the giraffe feeding station had been canceled due to the heat, he still came to work because he was a wannabe field biologist, and FunJungle was his favorite place on earth. Meanwhile, Summer was the daughter of J.J. McCracken. All three of us had befriended many FunJungle employees over the past year, so we were able to finagle our way into the VIP lane for the Raging Rapids ride, which we went on so many times in a row that I lost count.

After repeated drenching, our clothes were so waterlogged,

we thought we might be able to stay cool enough to ride out the rest of the afternoon in my trailer, even with its anemic air-conditioning. Lakeside Estates was located only a short walk from the theme park rides at FunJungle. But as we approached my house, the power blew.

We could tell by the sound. Everyone who was home had their air conditioners going full blast. One second, the machines were all humming so loud, it sounded like we were inside an enormous wasps' nest—and then, suddenly, everything went silent. Two seconds after *that*, the profanity began. We could hear everyone through their paper-thin walls as they cursed the lousy power system, the cheap air conditioners, and Summer's father, who had skimped on building the place.

We happened to be directly outside the trailer of Drew Filus, the chief ornithologist, when he unleashed an extremely long stream of insults about J.J. McCracken, and then made a few shocking suggestions about what J.J. could do with the crummy air conditioners he had bought. It went on for a good three minutes.

"Sorry you had to hear that," I said to Summer, once it had finally ended.

She shrugged, unconcerned. "I've heard far worse than that about Dad."

Even though it was getting late in the afternoon, it was

still miserably hot. My clothes had already dried out, save for my soggy shoes and damp underwear. Evidence of the drought was all around us: the ground was parched, the grass was brown and brittle, and the tiny pond that FunJungle public relations amusingly referred to as a lake had completely evaporated, leaving only a stretch of dried-out mud.

“Guess the trailer is out of commission,” Xavier observed morosely. “Where to now?”

“Maybe my dad’s office?” Summer suggested. “I’m sure the administration building still has air-conditioning. The whole park has backup generators.”

“Except employee housing,” I grouched. The administration building was all the way on the other side of FunJungle, a twenty-minute walk through the heat. Standing around and griping wasn’t going to make things any better, though, so we started back through the desiccated woods toward FunJungle’s rear employee entrance.

Our route took us through the staff parking lot, a wide stretch of simmering asphalt that felt like the Sahara as we crossed it. Numerous employees were headed home for the day, but their cars were so hot after baking in the sun for hours that no one could get right in and drive away. Instead, most had started their vehicles and were letting them run with the windows open and the air-conditioning cranked, waiting for them to cool down.

Kevin Wilkes was standing in the shade of his rusted pickup truck, killing time by setting off leftover fireworks from the Fourth of July.

Kevin was one of the dimmer FunJungle employees. He had originally been hired as a security guard but had lost that job after I discovered he'd been unwittingly feeding the giraffes local plants that were making them sick. Now Kevin had been demoted to janitorial work in the FunJungle Emporium, as it was about as far away from the animals as you could get.

In the month before Independence Day, fireworks stands sprouted like weeds along highways all through Texas. Kevin had blown an entire week's pay on several crates, planning to put on an epic fireworks display to impress a woman he liked at his apartment complex, but the complex had banned him from doing it, rightfully fearing disaster. They also refused to let him store the fireworks in his apartment, as it was a violation of three dozen safety codes. So Kevin had been stuck with several thousand low-quality fireworks, which he kept in the bed of his pickup.

When we came across him, he had just lit a few spinners, which were whirling and sparking on the asphalt. "Hey!" he called out to us. "Want to set off some fireworks?"

"You shouldn't be doing that," Summer told him. "The woods around here could catch fire in an instant."

Kevin frowned, although he appeared more upset that we had rejected his offer than he did about being dressed down by a fourteen-year-old girl. “That’s why I’m only setting off spinners, rather than bottle rockets or fountains. I’m not an idiot, you know.”

Summer and Xavier both looked at me in a way that said they didn’t agree with that statement.

“Even the spinners could start a fire,” I warned Kevin.

“How?” he challenged. “The woods are all the way over there. And I’m being super careful. See?” He lit a string of poppers and made a show of being vigilant in case of trouble.

The poppers were extremely cheap fireworks that were basically just tiny packets of gunpowder. All they did was make a series of loud bangs.

I had to admit the blasts were relatively small and contained and probably not capable of reaching the woods in the distance. However, the sudden noise created its own problems.

Several keepers who were waiting for their cars to cool down mistook the sound for gunfire. They screamed and dropped to the ground.

Hopalong Cassidy was startled by the noise as well.

My friends and I had been too distracted by the heat and Kevin’s fireworks to notice that a kangaroo was being delivered to the park.

Normally, zoos try to time the delivery of animals after official hours, so there aren't tourists around, but FunJungle stayed open much later than normal zoos, and, while the truck that was delivering Hopalong was air-conditioned, the veterinary staff still didn't want to keep an animal locked inside a vehicle on a hot day any longer than they had to.

In recent years, zoos across the United States had recognized that kangaroos—and their close relatives, wallabies—were so docile that they could be displayed in a way that most other animals could not: in large enclosures that visitors could actually walk through. FunJungle had quickly jumped on the bandwagon and was modifying its Australian area to feature an exhibit like this. The Land Down Under would allow guests to wander a path right through the marsupial habitat. It was scheduled to open in the fall, and in the meantime, FunJungle was trying to acquire every kangaroo and wallaby it could.

Hopalong was a western gray kangaroo who had been born at the Milwaukee Zoo. At four years old, he was already mature, six and a half feet tall and 120 pounds. He had a reputation for being good-tempered and comfortable around humans, although the FunJungle staff was still taking every precaution to ensure that nothing went wrong. Hopalong had been delivered in a specially designed trailer with plenty of room for him to move about during his long drive from Milwaukee, but the truck was too big to drive through the

park to the Land Down Under. So Hopalong was being transferred into a crate on a smaller truck in the employee parking lot, which would then take him through the behind-the-scenes area to his new home. Luring Hopalong from his comfortable, air-conditioned trailer into the crate out in the heat was a delicate process. In their natural habitat in Australia, wild kangaroos could occasionally face temperatures as hot as it was that day, but Hopalong was used to the milder weather of Wisconsin. The keepers were trying to coax him with biscuits that had been developed in the FunJungle kitchens to appeal to kangaroos.

Hopalong had just been edging from the trailer into the crate when the poppers went off.

Not only was the kangaroo startled, but his handlers were too. They quickly took cover, leaving the crate unsecured in the back of the truck. It shifted slightly, so that it was no longer flush with the trailer. Instead, there was a gap of a few inches.

Hopalong immediately took advantage of this.

A kangaroo's huge hind legs are incredibly strong. The animals can cover twenty-five feet in a single leap, jump six feet vertically, or travel at thirty-five miles per hour for short bursts. Hopalong wedged one of his enormous feet into the gap and, with a quick flex of his leg muscles, sent the crate skidding back into the truck.

Then he dropped to the ground and bounded across the parking lot, fleeing for the woods.

His route took him directly toward me and my friends.

Summer, Xavier, and I scrambled out of his way. You never want to stand in the path of a big animal. An herbivore can really hurt you if it runs into you at full speed.

Kevin, on the other hand, didn't even see Hopalong coming.

He was busily lighting some sparklers and backed directly into Hopalong's way. The kangaroo pivoted to avoid a head-on collision, but his powerful tail thwacked Kevin in the chest.

A kangaroo's tail is almost as powerful as its legs. Hopalong's was a thick club of taut muscle, and it sent Kevin reeling backward. The sparklers flew from Kevin's hand and landed in the bed of his truck. . . .

Right in a crate of unused fireworks.

"Uh-oh," Kevin said.

"Get away!" I yelled, then grabbed Summer's hand and raced across the parking lot.

Xavier and Kevin were right on our heels.

Behind us, the crate of fireworks erupted. Hundreds of roman candles, fountains, and aerial repeaters went off at once. Spinners crackled and poppers burst while rockets and colored balls of light blasted into the sky. So many fireworks

were detonating that the truck trembled as though it were at ground zero in an earthquake.

All the noise spooked Hopalong even more. The kangaroo bolted out of the parking lot and down the road that led to the park exit.

Kevin had sprung for a few expensive fireworks—the type that professionals would use in their shows—and those now exploded in the air high above, creating floral blooms and starbursts. The sizzling embers rained down around us. A few landed in the drought-parched woods that surrounded employee housing.

Which was how the forest fire began.



THE INFERNO

The forest around FunJungle was a tinderbox.

The ground was covered with a thick carpet of dead leaves and dry grass. All it needed to ignite was a spark—and thanks to the impromptu fireworks display, there were plenty of those. Dozens of small fires sprouted within seconds, and those quickly merged into larger and larger blazes.

It was immediately evident that this was going to be a problem.

Most of the FunJungle employees who had been waiting for their cars to cool off decided it was time to go. They leaped into their vehicles and raced out of the parking lot. In their haste, several banged into one another, scraping the sides of their cars and shearing off rearview mirrors, but no one bothered to stop. Kevin was among them. He foolishly

sped off in his truck, apparently forgetting that fireworks were still going off in the bed. They continued to spew out and explode, setting off more fires along the exit road.

The original fire was growing quickly on the edge of the parking lot, threatening to cut off access to the employee housing. Thick smoke billowed into the air, and the crackle of flame was so loud, we had to shout over it.

“We need to warn everyone in Lakeside Estates about the fire!” Xavier yelled. He started toward the woods, but Summer grabbed his arm, holding him there.

“It’s burning too fast!” she warned. “If we go that way, we’ll get trapped!”

Both of them turned to me, waiting for my opinion.

I considered the growing blaze carefully, then shook my head. “Summer’s right. It’s too risky.” I felt terrible about saying it, but I also knew that we had no training for how to survive in a fire like this.

“But there’s people in danger!” Xavier protested. “They need to be warned!”

I pointed to the thick column of smoke rising into the air. “I think they already know.”

A second later, the emergency alert system at FunJungle activated. Throughout the park, there were thousands of speakers. Most of the time, they played recorded noises like frog croaks and bird calls to enhance the feeling of being in

nature—or local cultural music to match the nearby exhibits, like Maasai tribal chants in the African plains or wailing didgeridoos in Australia. Now they blasted a series of short, loud alarms to get the attention of all guests, followed by an urgent announcement:

“This is an emergency alert. It is currently necessary to evacuate FunJungle Wild Animal Park. Please proceed calmly and slowly to the closest emergency exit. You are in no immediate danger, so please do not panic.”

The announcement had been recorded by a woman who had an exceptionally soothing voice so that guests would not freak out when they heard it.

It didn't work.

The moment the announcement ended, shrieks of terror rang out from all over the park. Many guests could already see the smoke from the fire, and now that the emergency announcement had sounded, they went into the exact sort of panic that we were hoping to avoid. Crowds stampeded toward the front gates, even though there were plenty of other emergency exits. People pushed one another aside, trampled shortcuts through the landscaping, and shoved over any obstacles in their path: trash cans, food kiosks, and the unfortunate employees dressed as mascots.

FunJungle had a dozen different animal characters, each with its own costume, which actors would wear to amuse

young children. It was one of the worst jobs at the park, as the costumes were bulky, heavy, and hot on a normal day; on a scorcher like this, they were practically torture devices. It was difficult to even walk in the top-heavy outfits, let alone run, and now the poor actors found themselves swarmed by fleeing guests. Zelda Zebra was upended into a copse of lavender bushes, Eleanor Elephant was smashed into a wall so hard that her trunk came off, and Larry the Lizard was knocked into the duck pond, where he was immediately besieged by angry mallards. While fleeing a crush of stampeding tourists, Kazoo the Koala literally lost her head: the bulbous object tore off the costume and rolled down a hill, traumatizing several kindergarteners who mistakenly believed that their favorite FunJungle character had been decapitated.

But while the tourists' behavior was deplorable, the FunJungle Fire Department acted heroically.

J.J. McCracken had been concerned about fire from day one, given that his park was located on the edge of several square miles of drought-prone wilderness. So FunJungle had its own fire department (as well as its own security force and medical team). There was also an elaborate system of water lines and hydrants, and each animal habitat had twice the regulated number of fire sprinklers. (These could also be used to keep the animals cool on hot days,

and so had been in repeated use over the past week.) In addition to the five full-time firefighters, much of the FunJungle staff had extensive training for fire safety, and two dozen employees were deputized as volunteer firefighters—including my father. Due to these precautions, there hadn't been a major blaze at FunJungle since the park had opened. (Although careless guests had started a few small ones, usually by tossing lit cigarettes into the garbage.) Except for drills, both of FunJungle's fire trucks had never been used—until that day.

The fire station was located in the rear of FunJungle in order to be close to the forest, and thus, the biggest threat of fire. So it wasn't long before the engines pulled into the employee parking lot, sirens wailing. The firefighters went right to work hooking hoses to the hydrants. But even in that short span, the blaze had grown surprisingly fast. The trees along the edge of the lot were blazing, and thick curtains of smoke rolled across the asphalt.

Xavier, Summer, and I hurried through them to talk to Chief Benson, who was a tough, no-nonsense woman in her fifties. She shouted at us as we approached. "You kids shouldn't be anywhere around here! The best thing you can do to help is to leave this to us!"

"There's still people in employee housing!" Xavier shouted back. "Over there!" He pointed through the flames.

Chief Benson immediately grew concerned. “Any idea how many?”

Xavier, Summer, and I looked to one another, unsure. “We don’t know,” I admitted. “Drew Filus was definitely in his house. And we heard a few others.”

“Maybe five or six?” Summer suggested.

“We’ll get them out.” Chief Benson spoke so confidently that I believed her. “Now leave this to us!”

We nodded in agreement and hurried back across the parking lot while the chief bravely led a team into the inferno.

Between the heat of the day and the heat of the fire, I was as hot as I had ever been in my life. My skin felt as though my entire body had just touched an iron. I was amazed that the firefighters could even function in their heavy fireproof clothing.

My phone buzzed in my pocket. I wasn’t surprised to find that it was my mother. I answered. “Don’t worry. I’m safe.”

“Please tell me that you’re nowhere near that fire.”

I didn’t even consider lying to her; Mom could always tell. “Actually, I was right nearby when it started. . . .”

Mom sighed heavily. “Of course you were. Any time there’s trouble, you’re right in the middle of it.”

There was no point in denying this. Ever since we had moved to FunJungle, I had attracted trouble like a magnet.

At first, this had been my fault, as I had taken it upon myself to investigate the murder of FunJungle's mascot, Henry the Hippo, not realizing how much danger I would end up in. However, I had solved that mystery, which led to my involvement in several others—and lots more danger. Even when I did my best to be cautious, I still ended up in plenty of peril.

"I'm not in the middle this time," I assured my mother. "I'm just on the sidelines."

"It certainly *sounds* like you're in the middle of it. And I'd like you as far away as possible. Come to my office. It's safe here."

Mom's office was in Monkey Mountain, a building filled with primate habitats in the center of the park. It certainly would have been a good place to escape the fire—and as a bonus, it was very well air-conditioned—but to get there meant heading back into the park again. Passing through the employee entrance would have been almost impossible, as hundreds of people were streaming out through it, after which we would have to face the hordes of panicked guests rampaging through the park.

"I'm not sure I can get to you," I told my mother. "I think the tourists might be more dangerous than the fire."

"That's a good point." Mom spoke with the resigned tone of a woman who regularly chastised park guests for tormenting the monkeys. "How crazy is it out there?"

Over the fence, I watched the tourists streaming past. Some were screaming. Some were crying. Many were shoving their fellow humans out of the way. One frantic father was swatting everyone else with a Henry Hippo plush doll. I overheard the radio of a nearby security officer, where a report came in that dozens of tourists fearing the fire had leaped into the dolphin pool, unaware that Snickers, one of the male dolphins, liked to steal people's shorts. So now, in addition to being frightened by the fire, they were also freaking out because they'd been pantsed.

"On a scale of one to ten," I said, "it's a hundred and twenty."

Mom groaned. "All right. Stay away from the crowds. *And* the fire. Your father's probably going to be there soon."

Sure enough, Dad was exiting the park at that moment, on his way to join the other volunteer firefighters. I waved to him while telling Mom, "I see him."

"Make sure he doesn't do anything stupid either," Mom said, only half joking. Then she added, "I love you."

"Love you too." I hung up as Dad came over.

"I should have known you'd be in the thick of this," he said.

"Mom already gave me an earful," I told him. "And I've kept my distance."

"Doesn't look like it." Dad ran a finger down my face, then

held it up to show me that the tip was now coated with soot.

I hadn't realized how dirty I was. I looked to Summer and Xavier and realized they were both coated in soot as well.

"Teddy's telling the truth," Xavier insisted.

"Right," Dad said, obviously not believing him. "Stay over here. If this thing gets any worse, we might need your help to start evacuating animals." He raced over to the fire engines, where the firefighters had already hooked the hoses up and opened the hydrants.

Torrents of water gushed into the flames, which were burning so hot that the water seemed to instantly turn to steam. Still, the firefighters managed to clear a path through the blaze and then keep the inferno at bay on both sides.

Six people emerged through the smoke with Chief Benson at the lead: the other residents from employee housing. They were black with soot and coughing from the smoke but otherwise seemed okay.

A cheer went up from the gathered crowd.

But the battle wasn't over yet. Not by a long shot.

It would take until nearly six o'clock the next morning before the firefighters fully doused the blaze. To do it, they needed the help of four local fire stations, a squad of smoke jumpers, and three forest service helicopters, which scooped up water from the fake lake around the Raging Rapids ride and dropped it onto the flames.

Their heroic efforts protected the entirety of FunJungle. Not a single animal had to be evacuated—although hundreds of tourists had been hurt in the panicked flight to the exits. (None badly, thankfully; it was mostly bruises, scrapes, and one broken arm.) There was some damage to FunJungle's landscaping, mascot costumes, and a few kiosks, but overall, the park came out well.

However, the forest nearby was an entirely different story. The underbrush had been incinerated, and the trees had been torched. Hours before, the woods had been so thick with growth that much of it was nearly impenetrable; now there was nothing but barren ground and gnarled, blackened tree trunks. Ash rained down for miles around, but the thickest accumulations were in the burned forest, where great swaths of ground were carpeted in white, making it look bizarrely as if it were a snowy winter day, rather than a sultry summer one.

The blaze had been so hot when it tore through Lakeside Estates that almost nothing remained of our homes. The aluminum sides of the trailers had melted, and almost everything inside had vaporized, so all that was left were the warped metal hulks of our appliances and the concrete foundations.

Luckily, my family hadn't lost much—because we didn't own much to begin with. The first ten years of my life had

been spent in a tent camp in the Congo while Mom studied primates, and we hadn't accumulated many possessions since moving to America. All our furniture, cookware, and appliances had been provided by FunJungle. My parents had kept their computers and Dad's photographic equipment in their offices, fearing exactly this sort of disaster—as well as thieves. (FunJungle had far better security than Lakeside Estates did.) So our losses were mostly limited to clothes, games, and books. But even so, as I stood among the wreckage the next day, I felt violated.

I had never been a big fan of the trailer, but still, it was home.

And now it was gone.



THE BEACH

There were two weeks until school started, and I didn't have a place to live.

Mom had work, and Dad was leaving for Argentina in two days to photograph guanacos for *National Geographic*. The resort hotels at FunJungle were booked solid, and the next nearest places to stay were some cheap motels along the highway twenty miles away. Mom figured that, in a pinch, she could put an air mattress in her office, but it wasn't big enough for two people. Xavier said I could stay with him, but he lived in a mobile home as well, with his parents and two younger sisters, so I knew that it was a big imposition for me to stay there. My next closest friends, Dashiell and Ethan, were away at football training camp for another week. And while the McCrackens had plenty of room at their home,