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WHEEL OF KATARNUM

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To my family, especially to Josephine, who inspired
Rob and Bobbel in their first adventures.

*I don't know who my grandfather was; I'm much more concerned to
know what his grandson will be.*

— Abraham Lincoln

Chapter One

Lost Hope

Haunted Hawkins.

It's what people all over town called my family. And it was all my father's fault. His parting gift -- before he deserted us.

Now somebody had even carved it in my stupid desktop.

I traced the hated letters with my pencil and let my long hair hang down like a straight, black curtain, a futile attempt to shut out my teacher, Miss Weatherby. Sadly, even my thick mane was lousy insulation against the squeaky voice of Daisy Duckface, as the kids called her. You'd need a brick wall to stop that voice.

Just forty-five more minutes -- then no more Duckface, no more eighth grade, no more school for three glorious months.

"Rob? Rob Hawkins!"

I jerked in my seat and knocked something to the floor with a loud *whap!* Smirking at me from the next desk, Mary Jo Sims picked up my Social Studies book and handed it to me.

"Daydreaming again, are we?" Miss Weatherby peered at me over her granny glasses.

"Uhhh -- no, Miss Duck-- uhhh -- Miss Weatherby."

"Then I'm sure you can answer the question for us."

Oh, man. Duckface strikes again. "Could...could you repeat it, please?"

A sadistic smile came over Miss Weatherby's face. She had a big, flat nose and painted-on eyebrows. If you squinted your eyes, you could really imagine an oversized waterfowl standing there.

"Why certainly," she quacked. "Who was it that had such a big influence during this period?"

A drop of sweat crawled down my cheek. A big influence? During *what* period? Clueless, I stole a glance at my friend Hamp, sitting in the next row. Hamp mouthed something behind his cupped hand that looked like "King." My brain was whirling. *King?* Just a few days before we had talked about Elvis having a big effect on the youth of the fifties. People used to call him the "King of Rock 'n Roll," or something dumb like that.

Miss Weatherby tapped her finger on her open book. "I'm waiting, Robert."

Nothing to do but go for it.

"Uhhh... Elvis Presley?"

A shower of snickers rained down on me. Miss Weatherby rolled her eyes, but even she couldn't keep from smiling a little.

"Nice try, wrong 'King'. Elvis was not one of the most important civil rights leaders of the 20th century, Martin Luther King was." Miss Weatherby took a step closer to me and stuck her duck bill right in my face. "Just because it's the last day of school doesn't mean I'll condone daydreaming in my classroom. I've got some desks to move around after class today. Why don't you help me with that, and we'll use that time to discuss who Dr. King was."

"On the last day of school?"

"You'll survive."

When I finally burst out of the front doors of Misty Grove Middle and High School, it was after 3:30. I paused on the sidewalk, breathed in the smell of lilac and liberty, and smiled. I had a whole summer of sleeping late and basketball ahead of me. There was no way Duckface could ruin that.

"There's the poor little Indian boy now," said a familiar female voice. "Let you out on good behavior, huh?"

I turned. "Hey, Sam. You waited for me?"

"Had to." She shook her head disapprovingly, her ponytail bobbing back and forth. "Didn't want you to get in any more trouble with Daisy." She stood there for a second, hands on hips like a disgruntled drill sergeant. Then a lop-sided grin spread across her chestnut-colored face. "Besides, we were going to celebrate and play some ball today. And I'm planning to start the summer by beatin' your puny, little --"

I let out a guffaw. "Whooa, little squaw have heap big mouth!"

Sam batted her eyes. "Chief Red Face soon find out!"

Something bumped me hard on the shoulder from behind.

"I bet the little black girl can beat your redskin rear any day, Frog Eyes." A muscly, red-headed boy strutted by, not even looking back at me. Lance Cradder, basketball jock and total jerk.

I scowled at Lance's back, trying to think of a brilliant comeback. It was amazing the way Cradder could -- in one sentence -- put down my Native American heritage, my basketball ability and my eyes, which unfortunately were about the color of one of those tropical lagoons in travel ads.

"Oh yeah?" I finally spat out. "I'll take you on any time!"

Lance glanced around and shook his head. "See you at Patoma, then, Robby Boy. Lookin' forward to it."

Man, would I love to wipe up the pavement with his backside.

Sam touched my shoulder. "Don't let that moron ruin the start of vacation, Rob. Come on, let's go by your place and get your new ball."

I glared after Lance a moment longer, then sighed and nodded. To be honest, Lance's taunt about Sam was not far off the mark. Even though Samantha Falcon had the slight disadvantage of being a girl, she was only a little shorter than me and had quicker moves than any boy I knew, not to mention a killer jump shot. There was always the chance I really would get my rear kicked when we played one-on-one. Probably one reason we were such good friends.

We walked past the school and turned left onto Grizzle Road, a long, rambling street that became a country lane before it wound by my house. Just about the point where the pavement turned to gravel, I saw my eight-year-old, well-fed neighbor Teddy Smidgens puffing toward

us, his face as red as an Arkansas strawberry. Something was definitely up -- this was the first time I had seen Teddy run anywhere.

Now it hit me. Sam and I were supposed to pick up our little sisters at Teddy's house after school. Sure, we were thirty minutes late, but no real harm done. Nothing serious enough to make Teddy take up sprinting anyway.

Teddy skidded to a stop in front of us. "Come --- quick!" he said between gulps of air.

Sam looked worried. "What's wrong, Teddy?"

Teddy put his hands on his knees, wobbling unsteadily. "They never showed up!"

"What do you mean?"

"Hope and Josie -- they was supposed to be at our place -- at quarter to three, but they never came." Teddy's beady little eyes sparkled with excitement.

I felt my chest tighten. This was crazy. Where could they possibly disappear to on a sunny day like this?

Of course, I hadn't dreamed my dad would vanish last winter, either.

I glanced at Sam. "Probably just got like -- side-tracked," I said, trying to sound offhand and failing. "You know what space cadets they are sometimes."

Still bent over and panting, Teddy looked up at me. "We called your mom -- and she went straight home. Mama said she's about to have -- a cow."

The drawstrings in my chest tightened a little more. My mother must be flipping. "Thanks, Teddy." I gave him a quick pat on the shoulder. Sam and I broke out in a sprint.

"Hey, wait for me!" Teddy yelled. He wobbled again and collapsed in the grass.

Sam and I raced around the last curve and past the ancient Post Oak Cemetery that flanked my yard. I jumped all three steps onto the front porch and stopped, panting, with Sam right behind me. The front door of the old Victorian-style house stood open. I stared at the screen door

for a moment, a familiar bitter taste forming in my mouth, as if I'd just bitten into a crabapple.

Mom appeared at the door with the telephone receiver in her hand, her face the color of cold ash. I could see all the trouble of the last year creased in that face; she looked older than I could remember.

"Rob, where have y'all been?"

"I -- I had to stay after school."

Mom shut her eyes and put a hand to her forehead.

I felt like disappearing myself. "I'm sorry, Mom. But don't worry, we'll find them."

"I don't understand," my mother said. "Where could they be?" Tears formed thin, watery rims on her eyelids. "I already looked in the cemetery. Even went up to Wheeler Woods. But there was no sign of them. Oh, Rob --."

She clutched my arm, a wild look in her eyes. I suddenly felt dizzy, but shook it off and pulled my thin frame up to a little more than its five-feet-ten. "We'll look in the woods again. I'll bet anything they just got to playing and went a little too far in."

"I'm sure they're all right, Mrs. Hawkins," Sam said, but her voice quivered a little.

My mother nodded stiffly. "Go. Hurry. I'm calling around to see if anyone's seen them. Sam, I couldn't reach your father yet, but I'll keep trying." She bit her lip. "If we don't find them by the time y'all get back, I'm calling the police."

The desperate expression on my Mom's face gave me a queasy déjà vu feeling, like the nightmare of my dad's disappearance was starting all over again.

Chapter Two

Mr. Fleetag

Sam and I jogged across the sprawling front yard and past the cemetery. In a minute we stood in front of the woods, a 40-acre patch of forest belonging to one of the big-shot Misty Grove families, the Wheelers.

"So we need a plan," I said, looking nervously at Sam for help.

Sam stared defiantly into the woods. "When we find them, Josie's dead meat." Then her expression melted, and she looked more like a five-year-old who'd just lost her teddy bear. "We are going to find them, aren't we?"

I gulped. I thought of the last time my mother had sent me here to find Hope over a year ago. She had been playing with a friend at the edge of the woods, still in sight of my front porch. But with darkness coming on fast, they had disappeared. That time was different, though. That time I was more worried about missing my favorite TV show than finding my sister. It never occurred to me back then that she could vanish forever.

"Of course we are!" I said a little too loudly. "Look, let's separate. We can cover more ground that way. I'll cut through here and you go the other way. We can criss-cross and meet at the back of the woods."

Sam nodded. "Ok, let's go."

We parted, and I ran diagonally into the woods, loudly calling for Hope and Josie. With the afternoon sun filtering through the huge oaks

and elms, I could see a fair distance. But the only living things around were a few squirrels and blue jays chasing each other in and out of the splashes of sunlight.

After a few minutes, I met Sam at the back boundary of the woods, marked by a fence of decaying logs. She held up her hands. "Nothing -- not a soul."

I kicked at a fallen limb and leaned against the old fence. The rotten log gave way and I landed on my butt before I could blink.

Sam gave me her hand. "You OK?"

I pulled myself up and swore. "That old caretaker of the Wheelers must not do squat."

An idea hit me. I looked at Sam and knew she was thinking the same thing. "Yeah -- what about old Fleetag? His house is not far."

"But he must be like a hundred years old by now, if he's even still alive."

"Oh, he's alive all right," I said. "I saw him last week in that old red truck of his."

"Well, I haven't seen him since forever," Sam said, an uneasy edge to her voice. "I remember, when we were little, Bobby Towerman telling us Fleetag was a leprechaun and would turn us into toadstools."

I nodded. "Yeah, we ran like mad when we saw him. At the 4-H campout a couple of years ago, one of the guys was telling a story about Fleetag stewing kids in a big, green pot."

"Stupid stuff," Sam said. Her lower lip slid forward. "He *is* a creepy little guy, though. Hope and Josie wouldn't go over to his place, would they?"

"Who knows, but he's the only one living in the woods." I gazed into the lengthening shadows. I knew I was grasping at straws, but right now I needed *something* to hold on to. "Maybe he's seen them, or --"

"Or what?" Sam's eyes grew large.

"Come on! We just have to follow this fence row to his road."

The road leading to Mr. Fleetag's old cottage ran from Grizzle Road along one side of the Post Oak Cemetery and continued to the back edge of Wheeler Woods. After jogging for a few minutes, Sam and I

came upon it, wild and overgrown, not much wider than a foot path. A washed-out, crooked sign read "Private -- Keep Out."

I felt something lurch in my stomach. "Uhh...maybe we better...like kind of check things out first."

Sam's brow furrowed. "OK, better safe than sorry, I guess."

We continued down the road, moving as silently as possible. After a minute, I held up my hand and then put my index finger to my lips. Sam and I stepped behind a large oak. I pointed toward a small patch of red shining through the dense foliage. "There's Fleetag's truck." The ancient vehicle looked like a reject from a junk yard. Amazing it would still run. "Ok, let's split up here. You circle around to the left and I'll go to the right."

Sam frowned at me. "All this sneaking around is giving me the creeps. Why do we have to split up?"

"Haven't you ever like, seen any Westerns? Maybe we'll catch him off guard. We'll meet on the other side of the house. If you get into any trouble, just yell."

Sam rolled her eyes. "OK, Big Chief Red Face. You da boss."

We separated. I kept my eyes trained on Fleetag's cottage. After a few moments Sam vanished in the thick underbrush. I licked my suddenly dry lips and felt a bead of sweat trickle down the side of my face.

When I had gone about fifteen yards around the perimeter, I saw a ramshackle old tool shed standing directly in my path. I headed for it, scampering from bush to bush in a sort of half-squat, like a giant crab. Still crouching, I peered around the edge of the shed and got a clear view of the cottage. Oddly, it was built in old English style like some I'd seen on TV, with half-timbered stucco walls and a thatched roof. Chunks of stucco were missing here and there, and the moldy roof was so high and crooked it looked in danger of crashing down any second.

I wondered if old Fleetag was in there now. And what about Hope and Josie? Were they in there, too? A shot of adrenaline wound me up tight as a spring.

Then I felt a tap on my shoulder.

My heart shot into my throat. I wheeled around and a pair of stern, green eyes stared at me. Staggering backwards, I fell over a stump and

landed dead center in a large honeysuckle bush. The owner of the green eyes raised a crooked black stick and pointed it directly at my nose, like he was covering me with some sort of weapon. I couldn't move a muscle, not even to yell.

"And what brings ya to me 'umble 'ome, Mr. 'awkins?" Mr. Fleetag said in a thick Irish accent. He sounded like he was greeting his next-door neighbor.

I moved my mouth, but no sound came out.

"Ya wouldn't be lookin' for two little girls, would ya now?" Mr. Fleetag displayed a sly little smile and stroked his beard, which came almost to his waist.

Relief, fear, and anger washed over me at the same time. "Have -- have you got them?"

"I beg your pardon, Mr. 'awkins!" Mr. Fleetag said, shaking his walking stick at me. "What could I possibly want with those young ladies? Don' tell me ya believe those ridiculous stories the young ones tell about me?"

"I -- but then how did you know we're looking for them?"

"Ya'd be surprised, Mr. 'awkins, how much I know about what goes on in these parts. And other parts as well, yessiree!" He straightened his bright yellow tie and smoothed his green velvet vest. "Now if ya'd get out of that silly bush, I might be able to 'elp ya."

"You what?" I struggled to my feet.

"First," Mr. Fleetag said, pointing with his stick, "please call your friend. She's 'iding behind that rock over there, I believe."

I looked back over my shoulder and caught a glimpse of a dark head of hair disappearing behind a small boulder about thirty feet away.

"OK, Sam," I said, "come on out. He's already seen you, anyway."

"I thought we were supposed to yell if there was trouble," the boulder said.

Sam emerged from her hiding place and approached, eyes narrowed. She looked like a young wildcat sizing up its foe.

Mr. Fleetag chuckled, his plump mid-section jiggling. "Don't worry, miss, I 'aven't turned anyone into a toadstool in years."

Now that I was standing, I realized just how tiny Mr. Fleetag was – Sam and I both towered over him. Still, he somehow had a commanding aura about him, like someone you didn't want to mess with. His face looked tough and weather-worn, but ageless. I couldn't tell if he was closer to sixty or a hundred and six.

"Well," Mr. Fleetag said, "I think we're all together now -- that is if I am correct in assumin' there's no one else hiding in the underbrush."

"Look, I'm sorry we barged in like this, but we thought you might have...like..."

"Ya thought I might've locked your sisters in me gingerbread 'ouse?"

I glanced over at the old cottage. They could *really* be in there right now, and this midget was playing games. "Look, we just didn't know where else to look. My mother is going to call the police any minute, so do you know where they are, or not?"

"Of course, your mother would be concerned." Mr. Fleetag's brow wrinkled. "The truth of the matter is, I just saw the two lassies over at Post Oak Cemetery."

I shot Sam an incredulous look. "Hope's not supposed to go in there. My dad banned us from the graveyard since forever."

"We don't always do what we're supposed to, do we, lad? If ya don't believe me, just stroll over to the main Wheeler monument on the west side o' the cemetery. You might still catch 'em."

"You mean the big one that looks like a mini-version of a medieval church?" Sam asked.

"That's the one, Miss Falcon. Ya can go through the back gate -- it'll save ya a bit 'o time."

"But, Mr. Fleetag," I said, "I don't understand. How --?"

"As ya said, Mr. 'awkins," Mr. Fleetag interrupted, "ya don't 'ave time for explanations now. Now that we're acquainted, ya two will have to come back soon and we'll continue our discussion over a cup o' bumbleberry tea. Now, away with ya!"

Was this guy telling the truth, or was he just trying to get rid of us?

"I sure hope you're right," I said, trying to read the little man's eyes. But they glittered like a pair of rhinestones, green and unfathomable. "If she's not there, we'll be back."

Ignoring my threatening tone, Mr. Fleetag nodded and wagged his walking stick for us to get moving. Sam and I took off at a trot down the overgrown road.

"What a wacko," I said, once we were out of earshot. "What did he want us to drink? Bumblebee tee? Oh, brother."

"But he must've really seen them," Sam said.

I nodded. "Yeah, he knows something. That's what's got me worried."

Actually, except for the fact that my mother had already looked there, it wasn't too far-fetched that the girls could be in the graveyard. It was right next to my house, and we had caught Hope playing among the tombstones a couple of times, even though my dad had declared the place strictly off limits. The little dork actually seemed to *like* the graveyard, instead of being afraid of it.