

Chapter 1

Twelve-year-old Sam stared out the school bus window on the last day of school. He dreaded the long summer ahead of him with nothing to do. Nothing ever happened in his town. The most fun he had was watching the grass grow. Yes, the name summed up his town completely. Boring, Maryland.

He passed the Boring Volunteer Fire Company and twisted in his seat. He passed the Boring Post Office with the statue of their namesake, David Jeremiah Boring, the first Postmaster. He twisted in his seat again and his curly brown hair flopped onto his forehead. He looked out the window at his lifeless town and sighed heavily.

“Hey, what gives?” his best friend, Rex, asked. “You’re practically dancing in your seat.”

“Summer.”

“Summer? The most wonderful time of the year? How can summer get you down?” In spite of its name, Rex did not find his town boring. He patted the top of his freshly-shaved buzz cut.

“Eric’s staying at college. Some internship thing.” Eric was Sam’s older brother. “And my parents are working at a camp. I’m going to be miserable all alone.” Sam shifted the backpack in his lap and folded his arms across his chest.

“Hey, whadya mean all alone?” Rex frowned. “I’m here. And my mom’s gone all summer too. She’s visiting Yaya’s relatives in the old country.” Yaya was Rex’s grandmother, who lived with them. “Strange thing, every time my dad mentions it, he has this funny look on his face.”

“I’m sure he misses his wife just like I miss my brother,” Sam huffed.

When they stopped, Sam slowly moved toward the front of the bus. He glanced back just as Rex tripped over a backpack in the aisle and tumbled down the steps. He shoved Sam out the door.

“Hey, watch out!” Sam’s dark eyes glared with caution as he landed on his feet.

Rex tumbled onto the pavement. He grinned and reached up, “Give me a yank, will ya?”

Sam obliged and pulled his friend up with a swift tug.

“Yeah, sorry about that. Barrett’s backpack tripped me up.”

A swarm of gnats buzzed around Sam’s head. He swatted at the annoying pests and grabbed a few in his fist. He wiped their guts on his shorts. He would never dirty his shirt because it had the logo of his favorite video game, Force Field. His entire summer wardrobe consisted of shorts and video game t-shirts. While he dwelled on being shoved and swarmed, he proceeded across the street.

The boys headed toward the two-story whitewashed building that housed the only business in town that refused the Boring name, the General Store. Rex grabbed Sam’s arm. “Dude, stop.”

Sam yanked his arm out of Rex’s grip. “What’s wrong with you today?”

Rex remained still and glanced in the direction of the store, “Look!” He pointed and squinted as if he wouldn’t be seen if he made his eyes smaller.

Several bicyclists pulled up to the store. It was a popular stop for cyclists riding along the country road needing a drink or snack. Nothing unusual about this group of bicyclists caused Sam alarm. “What? They’re stopping for a soda. Just like we’ve seen ‘em a bazillion times before. Come on.” Sam took a step toward the store.

“No, Sam,” Rex grabbed his arm again. “You can’t go in there. Can’t you see? The one carrying the water bottle. Look at his arm; he’s rigged with a listening device. They’re with the CIA or FBI or ...”

Sam glared at his friend. On a good day, he barely tolerated his wild imagination and penchant for making up stories. But since he was already irritated with Rex, he could hardly stand it. “That’s an arm band for his MP3 player, you idiot!”

“KGB,” Rex whispered. “Move in slowly. Let’s listen to their accent.”

Sam marched toward the entrance of the store. He passed the General Store’s sign where Boring had been painted over many years ago in white, but was now showing through from wear. He stormed past the bicyclists and up the steps. He stood on the porch, while Rex made small talk with the cyclists.

Sam rolled his eyes and stormed inside the store, letting the screen door slam behind him.

Mr. Patel, the shop’s owner was behind the counter in his usual white apron wrapped around his middle section. Sam liked the man; he was always smiling, and would sneak a piece of candy to him and Rex when Mrs. Patel wasn’t watching.

“Good afternoon, Samuel. Have a nice day at the school?” Mr. Patel’s white teeth gleamed against his dark skin. He wore his usual attire—a dark gray business suit and tie.

“Yup.” *And then I had to come home.*

“Where is your good friend today? Mr. Rex?”

Sam pushed the air toward the front door with his hand, “Oh he’s coming. Talking to the CIA outside.” Mr. Patel held his stomach while he gave a hearty laugh, “Oh you boys have so much imagination. One day your stories may come true.”

Sam shrugged. He didn't think much of Rex's crazy ideas.

"One day your stories will get you in lot of trouble," Mrs. Patel predicted.

Where'd she come from? She was always popping up right at the wrong time. Usually when her husband was handing out free candy.

Sam turned around to find the petite woman who wore a blue sari and a continuous look of disapproval on her face. Her hands were glued to her hips. "You two need to keep your head on ground and mind your own business."

It wouldn't do any good for Sam to explain that he'd planned to do just that. And that it was Rex who'd been the nosy one. He'd tried time and time again, but Mrs. Patel labeled them both the same. There was no changing her mind.

When the screen door slammed, distracting the woman from any more lecturing, Sam was grateful. Rex had entered with one of the cyclists.

Sam moseyed over toward his friend who stood next to the deep ice chest with the Coca Cola logo on the sides.

"And if you keep going down this main road," Rex motioned toward Old Hanover Road, "you'll run into a town that has Babushkas." Rex looked intently at his suspect for a reaction.

The man paid little attention, but rather dug deep into the chest and withdrew a sports drink. "Ah, just what I need," he sighed.

Rex stood on his tiptoes and peered at the man up close. Sam was thankful when the man walked away without noticing Rex's strange behavior.

"What are you doing?" Sam snapped.

"Babushka is a Russian word," Rex explained. "If he even flinched," Rex slapped his palms together as if squashing a fly, "I would have caught him."

Sam shook his head in disbelief.

"But alas," Rex bowed his head, "they were too clever. They must have been trained well."

"What are you talking about? They're not Russian. They didn't even have Russian accents."

Rex put a hand on Sam's shoulder. "My dear friend, do you really think the KGB is going to just send spies out looking like Russian spies? They aren't stupid. American accents would make the perfect cover-up. No one would ever suspect."

Sam blew out a breath of exasperation, "Come on." He dug deep into the chest, pulled out a Cherry Smash and a root beer. He handed the root beer to Rex.

Rex hugged the bottle as if it were a long lost friend, "My sarsaparilla!"

"Are you ever going to stop doing that?"

Rex ignored the question. The boys took their drinks to the register and stood in line behind the cyclists.

The man with the sports drink paid first and stepped aside to wait for his friends.

Rex boomed, "Hey Sam, Yaya's making," and then spoke even louder, "wiener schnitzel for dinner. Wanna come over?"

The cyclists ignored Rex, but Sam gave him a curious look. "What? You know it's tradition on the last day of school for Mom to make sloppy Joes and school bus cake. And while I personally think I've outgrown school bus cakes, it's still the best cake in the world. Why don't you come over and have dinner with us?"

Rex whispered, I've got no idea what my grandmother's really making for dinner. It's a ploy to catch the spies. If they'd turned around, then that proves they're working for Interpol." Rex moved closer to the cyclists and stared at the backs of their heads.

Sam jabbed his elbow in Rex's side.

"Hey!" Rex protested.

"What are you *doing?*"

Rex ignored his friend as the second man and woman placed a Coke and a Sprite on the counter.

"Very good choices," Rex blurted out. The adults turned around to see Rex smiling all over himself. "You see, my name is Rex Coak and by purchasing from the Coca-Cola Bottling Company, you are supporting my college fund.

Mr. Patel grinned as he rang up their order.

"It's not spelled the same, you dork," Sam said.

Rex shot him a look.

"Well, it's not! Your name is Coak but you're not related to the company." Sam hated when Rex tried to fool people into thinking he was related to the Coke company.

The adults seemed mildly amused and turned back to the register to pay for their drinks.

"And you're not related to the famous golfer, Sam Snead, either!" Rex shot back.

"I never pretended I was."

"Oh yeah? What about in third grade, when Mrs. Attaboy asked you if you were related to Sam Snead and you said yes. Huh? What was that about?"

"I thought she was talking about my grandfather. We have the same name. How was I supposed to know there was some other guy in the world with my same name? I was in *third* grade!"

"You boys ready?" Mr. Patel asked.

"Wait, where'd the spies go?" Rex glanced around the store.

Mr. Patel pointed to the exit. "Left. While you were having your conversation."

"Probably half way to Russia by now," Sam snickered. "And what was up with that whole wiener schnitzel thing anyway?"

"I was trying to trip them up. Break them. You know, some craving for food from the mother country may just have been the trick." Rex took a huge swig of his root beer. "Ah...spicy!"

"That's just great, genius. Just to let you know, wiener schnitzel is not Russian. It's German." Sam was

proud he knew something Rex didn't.

“And you think there aren't German spies in this country? Well, think again.”

Sam laughed at Rex's ridiculous insinuations about totally innocent strangers.

“Well, if they got away with any secrets, it's your fault. You wouldn't listen,” Rex waved his hand in Sam's direction.

“What kind of secrets could anyone possibly hope to get from this drab place?”

“Oh, you never know, Sam. This place is going to surprise you one day. And when it does, I hope I'm right there with you,” Rex raised his eyebrows in anticipation of a high adventure. “To save you, I mean.”

“If it's okay with you, I'm not gonna hold my breath.”

“Suit yourself.”

The boys exited the store, plopped down on the top step and slowly drank their bottles of soda. Rex reached his hands behind his head, which had recently been shaved into a buzz cut., and leaned back.

As Sam sat, he dwelled on how much he dreaded the long and boring muggy summer ahead as they swatted at gnats and mosquitoes.