

# THE ADVENTURES OF BEN AND LANE



*Lynn Gathright*

**THE ADVENTURES**  
**OF**  
**BEN AND LANE**

**Book One**

*Written by Lynn Gathright*

January 1 – March 1, 2026

**COPYRIGHT PAGE**

© 2026 Lynn Gathright All rights reserved.

This is a work of fiction. Any similarities to real people, living or dead, are purely coincidental.  
No part of this book may be reproduced without permission from the author.

Printed in the United States of America

# About the Author

Lynn grew up in a small Texas town where faith, family, and community shaped every corner of life. The stories told around kitchen tables, the lessons learned in church pews, and the adventures shared with siblings became the foundation of a lifelong love for storytelling.

*The Adventures of Ben and Lane* draws deeply from those memories—summer days spent riding bikes across dusty fields, the warmth of neighborhood cookouts, the unshakable belief that people are meant to help one another, and the quiet moments when God’s presence feels unmistakably near. Lynn writes from a place of gratitude for the simple, powerful experiences that formed a childhood filled with wonder, responsibility, and faith.

Many of the events in this book echo into real moments: the joy of discovering new friendships, the courage found in unexpected storms, and the belief that angels sometimes show up when they’re needed most. Through Ben, Lane, Dyson, and Mary-Kate, Lynn preserves the values passed down through generations—kindness, bravery, compassion, and trust in Jesus Christ.

Lynn continues to write stories that honor family history and celebrate the beauty of small-town life. *The Adventures of Ben and Lane* is the first in a series dedicated to capturing the heart of Texas, the strength of faith, and the legacy of love that binds families together.

# Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my Family for their Love, Belief and Support for Me my Entire Life!

**ALL Glory to God**

**HIS Creative Gift on Loan**

**Praise Be To Jesus Christ**

# **TABLE OF CONTENTS**

**Chapter 1 – Ben and Lane Encounter Dyson**

**Chapter 2 – Memories**

**Chapter 3 – Ben Accepts Jesus**

**Chapter 4 – Mom Learns Of Dilemma**

**Chapter 5 – Boys Head To Barn**

**Chapter 6 – Mary-Kate and Dyson Blessing**

**Chapter 7 – Bike Ride Back Home**

**Chapter 8 – Dyson and Mary-Kate Talk**

**Chapter 9 – Dyson Childhood**

**Chapter 10 – Mary-Kate Spiritual Background**

**Chapter 11 – Ben Novel Daydream**

**Chapter 12 – Stormy Drive**

**Chapter 13 – Dyson Calf Rescue**

**Chapter 14 – After The Storm**

**Chapter 15 – Storm Angels**

**Chapter 16 – Ben Football Practice**

**Chapter 17 – Jr High School Football**

**Chapter 18 – Goat Hill, Camp Stewart, Kerrville, Texas**

**Chapter 19 – Camp Stewart, Kerrville, Texas**

**Chapter 20 – 2 Weeks After The Storm**

**EPILOGUE**



## Chapter 1

### Ben and Lane Encounter Dyson

It was pushing 5:30 on a sweltering late-July evening in their dusty South Texas town, the kind where heat waves shimmered off the asphalt and cicadas buzzed like a freight train in the live oaks. The massive orange sun hung low, a blazing ball sinking toward the horizon, casting long, lazy shadows that stretched like fingers across cracked sidewalks and faded lawns. Ben, all of eight years old and bursting with that restless energy only a summer kid can muster, kept stealing glances across the quiet street. His trusty Sears and Roebuck bike leaned against a fence post, tires caked in red dirt from an afternoon of aimless exploring.

*There... over there,* Ben thought, squinting at the scene unfolding by an old rusty pickup truck parked crookedly in front of a rundown complex. A little kid—no taller than four feet, barely five years old—was wrestling with the last stubborn box, his tiny arms straining like pistons, face red and scrunched in determination. Sweat plastered his shirt to his skinny frame, but the box mocked him, too heavy, too high for the truck bed.

Ben nudged his younger brother Lane, pedaled up beside him on a newer sting-ray bike. Lane, seven, wiry with a mop of unruly blond hair, squinted too. “What’cha starin’ at, Ben?”

“There,” Ben said, pointing with a dirt-smudged finger, his voice laced with that big-brother conviction. “That squirt’s been at it forever. Look at him go—he’s givin’ it everything, but he ain’t gettin’ that box up.”

Lane grinned, mischief sparking. “Kid’s tougher than he looks. But yeah... we can’t just watch.”

Ben felt it deep in his gut—that determined fire, the one Dad always talked about. *Texans don’t stand by when folks need a hand. Help first, ask questions later.* He’d pulled splinters for neighbors, chased off stray dogs from yards, mowed grass, and even helped old Mrs. Jenkins fix her gate once. “We’ve gotta help him, Lane. C’mon.”

“Beat ya there!” Lane hollered, exploding off like a rocket, bike tires squealing as he darted across the street without a glance—pure little-bro chaos.

Ben smirked. Shorter by a smidge but a year wiser and lightning-fast, he kicked off hard, pedals blurring. Wind whipped his face, hot air thick with the smell of grilled burgers from somewhere nearby and distant rain on parched earth. He blew past Lane mid-street—“Eat my dust, slowpoke!”—skidding to a stop by the truck, kicking up gravel.

The little boy froze mid-shove, box teetering but unyielding, his dark eyes wide with surprise and exhaustion. He wiped his brow with a grubby forearm, confusion etching his freckled face.

“Hey, buddy—can I help you with that?” Ben asked, hopping off his bike, already sizing up the box like a football tackle.

The kid blinked up at him, suspicious. “Why would you help *me*? You don’t even know me.”

Ben drew out the word with a grin, crouching to eye level. “Beeeeeecause, little dude, you look like you could use a hand... *duh*. We’re right here, strong hands and all. What’s a box between friends?”

The boy hesitated, then a shy smile cracked through, tension easing from his shoulders. “Um... okay. Thanks.”

Lane screeched up seconds later, panting like he’d run a marathon, cheeks flushed. “Y’all started without me? Rude!” He ditched his bike and grabbed the box’s edge. “’Bout time you caught up, dufus,” Ben teased, ruffling Lane’s hair.

“On three!” Ben commanded. Together—the three musketeers now—they yanked the box down to the ground with a *thud*, repositioned it smart-like on its side, and crouched low, muscles tightening.

“One... two... *three!*”

Grunts echoed, sweat beaded, small bodies heaving in unison. The box wobbled, scraped, then—*victory!*—slid into the truck bed with a satisfying *scrape*. They collapsed against the tailgate, high-fiving, chests heaving.

Lane wiped his brow dramatically. “Dude... what’s even *in* there? Bricks?”

The boy chuckled, catching his breath. “Nah, just some things my momma asked me to grab from the old place. Clothes, pots, a few toys. Uncle Clyde—” he jerked a thumb at a lanky man tinkering under the truck’s hood across the lot—“offered to haul it for us.”

He paused, shuffling his sneakers in the dirt, voice dropping to a whisper. “We... we got kicked outta our apartment this week. Owner said we owe two months’ rent. Momma swore she paid, but he claimed she didn’t. We don’t have the money anyway, so... here we are.”

Ben’s heart twisted. He shot Lane a look—*This ain’t right*. “Man, I’m sorry, little dude. That stinks. Y’all got a place lined up?”

The boy shrugged, embarrassment coloring his cheeks. “Kinda. Uncle Clyde says there’s a barn at the old McDonald place up the road. We’ll throw down blankets in the hay, make do till Mom finds work.”

*A barn?* Lane’s eyes widened. Ben clenched his fists. *No kid should sleep in hay like that.*

“Need help with anything else?” Lane asked, voice earnest despite the heat.

“No, sir. Just waitin’ on Uncle Clyde to finish. Mom’s packin’ the last little bit of our stuff. Gonna be a hay-bed tonight.” The kid forced a grin.

Lane snorted. “Stop callin’ me *sir*, squirt.”

Ben punched Lane’s arm—*not hard*. “Dude—why you be callin’ him squirt? You don’t even know the guy!”

Lane winked. “Just pullin’ his *pierna*, bro.” (Spanish flair)

The little boy burst out laughing, tension shattering like glass—pure, belly-shaking joy. Ben grinned; mission accomplished, even for a minute.

Right then, Ben and Lane locked eyes. *We’re doin’ more. Mom’ll know what.* Texans stick together.

“Well, good luck, little dude,” Ben said, fist-bumping him. “Don’t let the hay bugs bite—or if they do, punch ’em back!”

They waved, hopped on bikes as Uncle Clyde waved thanks. “Dyson!” the boy yelled after them. “Name’s Dyson! We’ll be at the McDonald barn up the road. Thanks a million!”

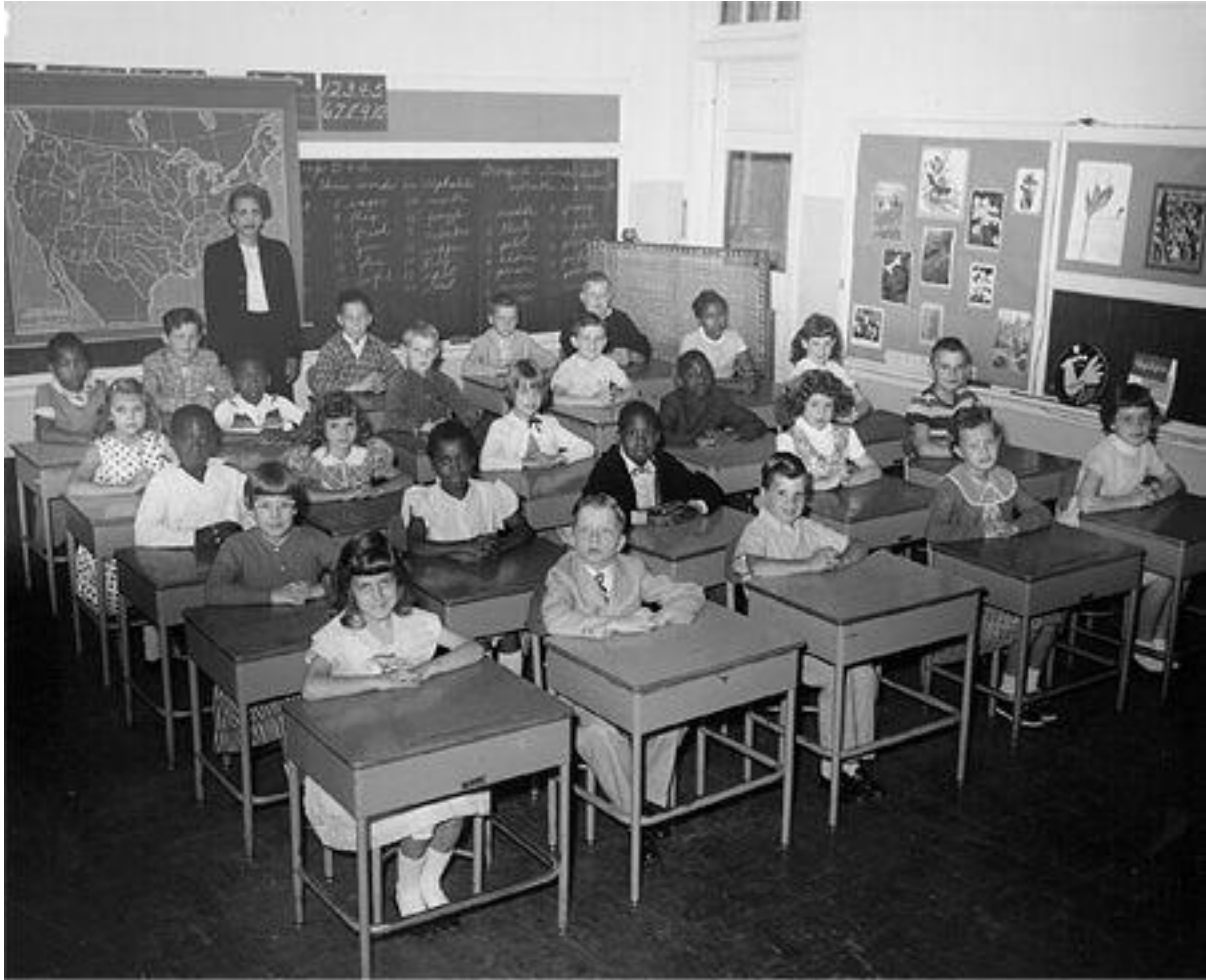
“See ya soon, Dyson!” Ben hollered back.

They pedaled hard into the encroaching dusk, streetlights flickering on, cool evening breeze startin to chase the heat away for the evening.

Ben leaned over his handlebars, shouting over the whir of tires. “Lane—we’re tellin’ Mom tonight. Gotta do somethin’ for Dyson and his mom. Bring ’em food? Fix the barn? Somethin’!”

Lane huffed, pedaling furiously to match. “Yeah! But... what? Mom’ll have ideas. She always does.”

Brothers united, adventure sparked. Little did they know, this chance encounter was the first thread in a tapestry of miracles, storms, angels—and unbreakable bonds.



## **CHAPTER 2**

### **Memories 1964 Jr. High**

Dad was a schoolteacher and didn't make a whole lot of money. But somehow the boys always had what they needed. Having taught the kids, the same age as the "Hippie Group" causing problems in the Liberal States, Dad knew the frustrations they voiced. Some of the protests he agreed with, but in a position of Authority, he could not speak about it.

Mom and Dad did not talk with the Family very much about the civil unrest happening across the country. As a Christian, NO ONE wants WAR. Whether you agree or disagree with some of America's Governmental Policies, we were taught to Stand Up For Your Country. The Greatest Country in the World- Under God with Liberty and Justice For All.

Even though the decade of 1960s – 1970 was a pivotal point in the History of The United States, there is no other Country in the world that cares for those in need more than America.

Teachers in the '60s cared deeply about their students—but then the school boards along with the federal government, started pushing new policies that Dad disagreed with.

He talked very little about it, and had to keep trusting in God, that things would work out. He went on to become Principle of two Elementary schools. The second Elementary School Dad was principal of, was a brand-new school, built in a very new part of town.

Respect was starting to breakdown, in the Independent School Districts, and the History of The United States of America, wasn't being taught truthfully. Most importantly, the Federal Government was planning to remove prayers from schools.

Ben started thinking about a regular day in Middle School.

The mornings followed a routine. After the bell rang two times we must be seated in class:

“Good morning kids. Please stand for the “Pledge of Allegiance.” We hold our hands over our heart and say “The Pledge” aloud. Then a student over the intercom would say a prayer for the day. After that a few announcements, then class would start.

Ben and Lane lived in a friendly neighborhood across from the high school. People gathered often for backyard cookouts, laughter and children chattering drifted across Poplar Avenue.

During summer vacation, Mom was always a host for our block parties. Food and games were always ready long before anyone arrived.

And she never missed a chance to talk about Jesus Christ.

Ben learned lessons that Mom and Dad taught them his whole life. For the first time, he wondered what they looked like outside their own front yard.

At Christmas, Poplar Avenue became “Candy Cane Lane.” Every house displayed an 8ft tall red-and-white striped candy cane made from stovepipe, tilted toward the street, and lit each night.

One year, the family entered the city lighting contest. The whole display idea: Santa was hanging from the roof, after getting caught on the TV antenna. His toy bag spilled across the yard. Little kids were happily picking up the presents. It took weeks of work cutting out the figures from plywood and painting every detail. It took a lot of effort, but we all enjoyed every minute. That year they won Honorable Mention and Fifty Dollars. Their house even made the front page of the newspaper.



## CHAPTER 3

### Ben Accepts Jesus

Mom and Dad always made Ben and Lane go to Church. Every Sunday.

Ben would never forget that one Special Sunday morning.

Sitting in the back pew with the other kids, something stirred deep inside him. His eyes filled with tears. He was losing control of himself.

Nine-year-old Ben felt something move deep inside. After deciding it wasn't his stomach acting up, he began wondering, *What is going on?*

Suddenly he started crying uncontrollably. His whole body was shaking. Startled, he stood up and quickly walked out of the service.

He hurried as fast as he could out the back door, down the Sunday school hallway, and into the first classroom he could find.

There it was. On the wall to his right was a picture of Jesus Christ—His arms stretched wide open. A look of “Follow Me” was staring at Ben.

Ben sat down in the front row and stared at the picture... He broke down sobbing even harder. He didn't know what was happening, but he knew—this moment was going to change his life.

Looking up at Jesus, he prayed: “My Lord Jesus, I have this beautiful, overwhelming feeling that I need You. I know what’s right and what’s wrong. I want to do good. I don’t want to sin anymore.

Jesus, as I look at You, with Your arms wide open, I accept that You died on the cross for me. You love me that much.”

He kept thanking Jesus again and again. Slowly the shaking stopped and the tears eased.

Ben stood, shook himself for a minute and walked back to the service. He entered just as the preacher said:

“If anybody wants to accept Jesus into their heart and be baptized, come to the front.” Ben felt something brand-new in his heart... so he walked forward.

The preacher smiled. “I’ve been expecting you. “When everyone else sat, Ben realized the preacher and himself, were the only one’s still standing. “I’m proud that you accepted Jesus into your heart, Ben,” the preacher said. “Let’s pray.” Afterward he added, “We’ll have your baptism two weeks from today.”





## CHAPTER 4

### Mom Learns of the Dilemma

Ben couldn't shake Dyson from his mind. The little boy's wide eyes and dirty clothes haunted him, even hours after they'd parted ways at the tracks. *Did Dyson have a brother or sister?* Ben wondered, picturing a whole family huddled in that crumbling barn. *What if it was us? What if Dad lost his job, and we had nowhere to go?*

He paced the kitchen, the worn linoleum squeaking under his sneakers. Outside, the gentle wind hummed through the windows, carrying the faint scent of woodsmoke from neighbors' backyard grills. But for Dyson and his mom, Mary-Kate, there'd be no warm fire tonight—just scattered hay and shadows in the old McDonald Barn.

The news blared from the living room TV, a grim reminder of the world's chaos. "The government shutdown drags on amid *Political Arguing*," the anchor droned. Food stamps? Frozen. Rent assistance? Cut off. All that Federal Government "Help" Americans relied on? Vanished like morning mist. Elected officials bickered on Capitol Hill, more interested in "Playing Political Games" than feeding hungry kids or sheltering families on the brink. Ben clenched his fists. *How could they? Dyson's not playing games—he's starving.*

"Mom?" Ben's voice cracked as he burst into the kitchen where she stood chopping carrots for stew. Lane, his younger brother, looked up from the table, his drawing tools scattered around a half-finished drawing of a superhero barn.

Mom wiped her hands on her apron, her face lined with the day's worries. "What's up, buddy?"

"Do we have food we can take to a family up the road?" Ben blurted, his heart pounding.

Mom's knife paused mid-air. "Who needs help?"

"A little boy and his mom we met across the tracks. About 15 miles from here. Dyson and his Mom. They got kicked out of their apartment—couldn't pay rent with everything shut down." Ben's words tumbled out. "They're staying out at the old McDonald Barn. I don't think they have a stove or anything. No AC, no nothing."

Mom's eyes widened, the color draining from her cheeks. "That's terrible," she whispered, setting the knife down with a clatter. She pulled out a chair and sank into it, rubbing her temples. "Evicted? No AC? In this heat? With a child?" For a moment, silence hung heavily, broken only by the TV's distant murmur of partisan finger-pointing.

Ben held his breath, waiting. *Please say yes. Please.*

Finally, Mom nodded, her voice steady but soft. "Of course we'll help. God put them on your heart for a reason, Ben. Let's see what we've got."

Relief flooded through him like sunlight breaking through clouds—but it was fleeting. A few cans wouldn't fix this. They wouldn't magically reopen the apartment or restart the government checks. Dyson needed more than charity; he needed hope.

"Lane, put those pencils away," Mom said, already rummaging through the pantry. "We're on a mission." Let's gather up some stuff to take em.

The three of them dove in together. Ben grabbed an old backpack he didn't use for school and so did Lane. Mom handed him 2 cans of tuna, beans, peaches in syrup—anything that didn't need cooking or a fridge. Lane packed a jar of peanut butter and a box of crackers, chattering excitedly about "helping the barn kid."

"Think they like applesauce?" Lane asked, holding up a couple of pouches.

"Everybody likes applesauce," Ben replied with a grin, though his mind raced ahead. *How often do we do this? What if the barn floods? What if this summer hits hard?*

As the backpacks filled up, Mom paused to tuck a handwritten note inside: *"From friends across the tracks. You're not alone.* She sealed it with tape, her hands trembling just a bit.

Ben's worry lingered like a shadow, but for the first time that day, he felt a spark of action. Food was a start—a bridge across the tracks. But deep down, he knew the real dilemma was bigger: a world where kids like Dyson slipped through the cracks while leaders argued. *We can't fix Washington*, he thought, *but we can show up for our neighbors.* Little did Ben know, this box was just the beginning.



## Chapter 5

### Boys Head to the Barn

Late Saturday afternoon, the relentless Texas sun beat down like a forge hammer, turning the air thick and golden. Ben and Lane were back on their bikes, backpacks strapped tight and sagging heavy against their shoulders—stuffed to bursting with Mom’s care packages: peanut butter jars, crackers, apples, even a stack of crayons and notebooks pilfered from their own school stash. “Y’all take these to that barn family,” Mom had said that morning, her eyes soft with that quiet faith. “The Lord uses little hands like yours.”

Ben pedaled out front on his shiny new Sting-Ray bike, the Christmas gift gleaming banana-seat red with ape-hanger handlebars perfect for tricks. He felt like a king, wind slicing through his hair, even as the backpack tugged him back. Lane trailed close, huffing on his own Sears & Roebuck 502 (5500) 937725 '63 model Sting-Ray—the one from last year, scuffed from a hundred jumps and scrapes. Back in those golden days, city streets were playgrounds; kids roamed free in packs they called “bike gangs,” no helmets, no fuss—just rules like *stay on the sidewalk* and *watch for cars*. Folks waved from porches, hollered friendly warnings. Safe as church.

The boys hit the dusty backroad, tires *churning* up puffs of sandy dirt that trailed like comet tails, coating their sneakers and calves.

Scrubby mesquites flanked the path, crickets droning a lazy chorus, distant cattle lowing. Sweat trickled down Ben's back, but he pushed harder, legs pumping steadily. *Dyson and his mom... livin' in a barn?* The thought gnawed at him since that first box-lift. Nights in hay? Bucket baths? No real roof or fridge? *It ain't fair*, Ben reflected, *Dad says hard times build strong folks, but kids shouldn't hafta build alone. We're gonna show 'em they ain't.* Faith flickered too—Dad's Bible stories he read to the family on a regular basis, weighed heavy on Bens mind.

Lane, a year behind but full of fire, panted louder with every bump. "Ben! Are we *there* yet? This bag's crushin' my spine—heavy as Uncle Burt's toolbox!" His backpack bounced wildly, straps digging in, face flushed cherry-red.

Ben glanced back, grinning despite the burn. "Almost, and quit whinin'. We're about two miles out—remember? This builds character, Lane. Like when we helped old man Thompson with his fence. It hurt for a minute and felt good later."

Lane groaned dramatically but pedaled faster. "Yeah, well... you think Dyson's okay? Barn life don't sound so good. No brothers to wrestle, no yard for kickball. What if they got hay fever or somethin'?" His voice softened, reflection creeping in. *Dyson's tough, he's still laughin' even when he's down. But me? I'd hate it. But I'm sure glad Ben drags me into this stuff—makes ya feel... warm inside.*

Ben nodded, wind whipping words. "He's there. Tough as boot leather. And his mom? Gotta be scared, but strong. Where else they goin'? We'll help em make it better—food now, maybe help em straighten the barn up a bit. Team Ben and Lane Right!"

By 6:30 p.m., the sun started to fall and was painting the sky peach, when they rounded the final bend. The old McDonald barn loomed—sagging but sturdy, the hayloft door ajar like a welcoming surprise opening of a new found cave. Bikes skidded to a halt, dust settling.

"Think Dyson will even still be there?" Lane asked, squinting into the glare, backpack sliding off with a *thud*. A flicker of worry crossed his face—*What if they're gone? What if we're too late?*

"Of course," Ben said firmly, heart thumping with hope. "Where else can they go? C'mon—let's unload and surprise 'em." Backs aching but spirits soaring, the brothers walked up to the barn door. "Dyson" Ben yelled "you here?" Adventure—and compassion—awaited inside.



## Chapter 6

### Mary-Kate and Dyson Blessing

The late afternoon sun filtered through the barn's weathered slats as Ben and Lane set the backpacks down once they got up to the Wide open Barn Door. Sure enough, there was Dyson, crouched near the hayloft like a tiny mechanic, his small hands smudged with grease as he tinkered with a rusty wheel on an ancient tractor. The air hung heavy with the earthy scent of hay and machine oil, a humble symphony of survival. When Dyson spotted them, his face—dirt-streaked but bright—lit up with pure, unguarded surprise, eyes widening like he'd seen saviors.

“Hey!” “Up here” he shouted, scrambling to his feet, wiping his hands on threadbare overalls. “What are y’all doin’ *here*?”

Ben spoke up first, as he sat his bulging backpack on the ground next to Dyson, heart swelling with quiet resolve. “We figured y’all could use a few things,” he said softly, he pointed to it like an offering. “Mom packed ’em special—pe-made tuna fish sandwiches, applesauce, peanut butter, cookies... and some cake. Thought it might brighten the day.”

Dyson’s eyes flickered, his gratefulness showed with a flicker of embarrassment. His lower lip trembled, just a touch, and Ben could see it—the weight of pride versus the ache of need.

*Poor kid*, Ben thought, *holdin' it together like a champ*. Lane, ever the softie, stepped up and gave Dyson a gentle nudge on the shoulder, brotherly and warm. “Hey, buddy—no shame in this. Everyone needs a hand sometimes. We’re just blessed to have enough to share. Means we get to be the helpers today.”

Lane nodded, voice steady with the lessons etched in his soul. “Dad and Mom drilled it into us: *Whatever ye do to the least of these... Always share, always care.*”

Dyson swallowed hard, blinking fast, then grabbed both backpacks with a grunt. “Man, these are *heavy*,” he said, muscles straining as he hauled them toward the center of the barn. His small frame disappeared inside, but a moment later, a woman emerged—Mary-Kate, kind-faced and about twenty-four, with weary eyes that sparkled like hidden stars. Her apron was patched, hands calloused from hard days, but her smile wrapped around them like a quilt.

“Y’all...” she breathed, voice catching as she peered into the bags—fresh bread, canned goods, that chocolate cake peeking out. Tears brimmed, but she dashed them away with a laugh. “You sweet, sweet boys. Please, tell your mom we can’t thank her enough. This... this is so caring and unexpected”

Dyson, rummaging already, grinned ear to ear at the cake. “Mom! Can I have a piece? *Please?*”

Mary-Kate ruffled his hair tenderly. “Course, sugar. You ain’t had cake in... well, too long. Let’s all share.”

They settled on hay bales and turned makeshift seats, the barn's golden light cocooning them. Mary-Kate sliced the cake with a pocketknife, passing crumbly pieces that melted sweet on tongues. “Not too many folks help each other these days,” she said softly, studying the boys with quiet wonder. “World’s gone hard. Why’re y’all doin’ this for *us?*”

Lane leaned in, eyes earnest. “Cause our parents preach it morning and night—share what you got, lift each other up.” Ben finished, “And trust Jesus to guide the rest. He multiplied loaves once; maybe He’ll multiply our kindness too.”

Compassion swelled in the air, thick as the hay dust mites dancing in sunbeams. Lane, sensing the moment, asked gently, “Y’all got a stove or somethin’ to cook on?”

Dyson shook his head, cake crumbs on his chin. “Nah—can’t risk a fire. Too close to all this hay. Sparks’ be bad news.”

“Water?” Ben pressed, voice laced with care, not judgment.

“Cistern out back,” Dyson said matter-of-factly. “Haul it in buckets. Works okay.”

“And... bathroom?” Lane ventured, cheeks pink.

Mary-Kate shrugged with resilient grace, no self-pity—just facts. “Bucket for now, privacy curtain. We make do. Always have.” She smiled warmly. “I’m Mary-Kate, by the way. But y’all can call me ‘Mom’ too—plenty of love to go ’round.”

Ben beamed, heart full. “I’m Ben, and this is my ugly brother Lane.”

Lane feigned offense, punching Ben’s arm lightly. “I may be a year younger, but I can still whup ya, old man!”

Ben laughed, shoving Lane playfully into a soft hay pile. “Oh yeah?” They tumbled into a whirlwind wrestle—arms flailing, giggles exploding, hay flying like confetti. Dyson dove in, whooping with delight, while Mary-Kate clapped, her laughter ringing bright and healing through the barn’s dusty rafters.

In that joyful chaos, walls crumbled. Compassion wove them tighter—strangers no more, but family forged in cake crumbs and kindness.

**Sears & Roebuck model: 502 (5500) 937725 (1963)**



# Chapter 7

## Bike Ride Back Home

The Texas sun dipped low over the vast open field, a fiery orb bleeding golden hues across the endless grass and wildflowers, stretching shadows like God's own brushstrokes. Bluebonnets and Indian Paint Brushes, with a few Pink Buttercups here and there. Dusk brought promises of cool relief after the day's bake, fireflies already twinkling faint rehearsals in the trees. Ben and Lane lingered a beat at the barn door, hearts full of cake and some hay-tumble laughter, waving to Dyson and Mary-Kate. "We better get goin...we have church in the morning." "Y'all take care now!" Ben yelled, voice carrying through the barn. "We'll come back out soon as we can—promise!"

With backpacks lighter (snacks shared) and their spirits soaring, they mounted their bikes and took off. Ben led on his Brand-new Sting Ray. Lane's bike, a year older, was just as smooth as he rode loyal to his brother beside him. They had a long ride home—about 15 miles of dirt trails and empty streets—but back in the innocent '60s, no cell phones buzzed in their pockets with parents frantic about knowing where they were. They trusted them. Kids ruled dusk till the stars came out, free-range and wild with housekeys on strings. *Safe? Born safe. America safe!*

Pedals blurred at full throttle, tires devouring the rutted path across the—raw empty field. Years later that same field was paved into a sprawling mall, in the name of progress, swallowing the boyhood stompin grounds. Familiar turf from the endless Little League treks back and forth: while sportin batter's box bruises, stolen bases, post-game root beer floats. Dust clouds billowed behind them as wind roared joyfully in their ears, whipping their shirtsleeves. Mesquite thorns snagged em as they rode under branches stretchin across the trail. Always aware of the horny toads—those spiky little dinosaurs—that got scuttled from fire ants. The little the red warrior-ants scrambled everywhere as the boys tried to run through as many fire ant mounds as they could. Lane yelped as a horny toad darted in front of him, and his brakes locked-up short. A quick look, then off again.

"See that ditch up ahead?" Ben hollered over at Lane, while Lane was racing to catch up. Ben was pointing with his chin, his eyes full of mischief.

"Watch *this!*" He banked sharp, swooping down the embankment like a stunt pilot—stomach dropping—pedaling frantically while pulling up the other side. Front wheel lifted, caught *air* in a perfect arc... *landed smooth* dead-center in the trail, rocks and dirt spraying triumph.

Lane whistled. "Not too shabby, old man!"

"Who you callin' *old?*" Ben fired back, laughing while wind-tossed, and surging ahead in mock race. Their banter babbled on, like glue of brothers, but underneath? A shared current, electric.

Lane pedaled with a slow cruise, a frown creasing his forehead, his voice cutting seriously through play.

“Ben... can you *believe* it? A mom and her boy right here in our town, crashin’ in a *barn*? No stove, bucket to do tha do, haulin’ cistern water like pioneers. This is the '60s, man—*space age*! Jets overhead, TVs in color... and they’re roughin’ it hay-style?”

Ben’s jaw tightened, his pedal stroke evenly. *Hits hard*. Memories flooded: Dyson's laugh is hiding hurt, Mary-Kate's shrug is masking fear. *How many nights alone? Bugs crawlin’, storms rumblin’? Remembering Dad telling them about children all over the world going through stuff like that*. “I know, Lane. Breaks my heart. The kid’s tougher’n than both of us combined, but... still young and small. He’s scared under it all. Mary-Kate too—be she seems to be a strong lady, but her eyes are sad.”

Lane nodded fierce, eyes stinging desert-dry. *Makes ya ache inside*. *Dyson wrestlin’ like family already... we can’t let ’em down*. “It feels wrong, we have to leave ’em. Like passin’ by a hurt puppy and leaving him there.”

“We *gotta* do more,” Ben vowed, voice steel resolve. Glances locked mid-ride—a wordless pact, brothers blood-bound. “Talk to Mom and Dad tonight. Church tomorrow—maybe Pastor knows jobs? Neighbors with extras? We’ll rally the gang. “Let’s *pray* too,” Lane added soft, faith Mom planted, now blooming. “Jesus fed the crowds—He’ll feed ’em.”

Silence fell then, a thoughtful blanket over the chatter. No need words; emotions *shared*—compassion churning like dust devils, determination solid as oak. As the sun slipped behind the live oaks, the sky came alive with streaks of orange, pink, and purple—a canvas mirroring the boys stirred souls. Fireflies lit the trees, while stars started sparkling in the clear sky. Home lights twinkled as the horizon faded. The distant church bells chimed the faint promise of a new day tomorrow.

The boys bikes continued on, heroes in motion, the adventure's first leg closing... but oh, so much road ahead.



## Chapter 8

### Dyson and Mary-Kate Talk

The barn's golden hush wrapped them like a lullaby after the boys' whirlwind departure—hay scattered from wrestling romps, cake crumbs a sweet testament to unexpected joy. Dyson, still grinning wide from his second slice (chocolate heaven melting slow), licked a finger and looked up at Mary-Kate. Her lap was his safe harbor, as always. Fading sunbeams slanted through cracks, dust motes dancing halos around her gentle face.

“How long we gotta stay in this barn, Mom?” he asked quietly, voice small but steady, little hand squeezing hers. No whine—just trust, pure as South Texas gentle wind.

Mary-Kate pulled him closer, apron smelling of hay and faint cake sugar, her heart aching tender. *My brave boy*. She stroked his tousled hair, voice trembling like a leaf in breeze. “Not sure, honey. A few weeks, maybe more. Gotta save for a deposit—so we can get into a real place with walls, not hay bales. I can’t scout apartments right now because the truck’s not running right.

The times are tougher’n dirt—government offices are shut down tight, no federal help comin’ our way. School’s startin’ soon... and you need clean clothes, new notebooks, pencils that ain’t broken and just stubs. I just... don’t have it, Dyson.”

A tear escaped, tracing salty path down her cheek, splashing silently on his overall. *Oh, Please No Lord, not in front of him.* Their present hardship clawed at her heart—and the eviction embarrassed and hurt, the single-mom—but Dyson's eyes held her up.

He wiped her cheek gentle with his thumb, face full of love all serious like a Big Guy. “It’s okay, Mom. *We’ll* be fine.” He paused, drawing strength from whispers he’d caught—from the playground Jesus tales, and now from Ben and Lane's shining example. “Kids at school talk ’bout Jesus. He *loves* us, Mom. He feeds birds, He clothes little flowers. He’ll provide—just watch.”

Mary-Kate nodded, throat tight, smiling through watery eyes. Dyson's words, so small-yet-mighty, anchored her storm-tossed soul. *Five years old, comforting me?* Faith she'd sown as a young girl started coming back to her: Sunday school songs, bedtime prayers. “You’re right, sugar. Jesus *is* our rock. And those boys today? God-sent angels in sneakers. Their mama’s heart beat all through that cake.”

Dyson leaned into her side, melting her fears. “They’re good people, Mom. Like us. We’ll get through—together.” He beamed, remembering her soothing singing when he was a baby: *If Family Sticks, God Will Fix.*

She hugged him hard, kissing his forehead—love's unbreakable vow. “Always, baby. You and me forever.”

Dyson tilted back, her warm breath kissing his face, his freckles glowing. Small? Sure. Life hard as rusted tractor parts? Absolutely. But trust burned bright—in Mom's arms, Jesus' promises, good folks' kindness. *Good people and God'll guide us.* The horizon is bright, this barn is no prison... it’s just a pit stop.



## CHAPTER 9

### Dyson's Childhood

Dyson had an inquisitive mind—some might say brilliant. From an early age, he displayed a curiosity about the world that was both profound and unique. Diagnosed with autism as a baby, he grew up during a time when many people misunderstood the condition. They often labeled him as undisciplined or “crazy,” but Dyson wasn’t misbehaving; his mind simply processed information differently and at a much faster rate than most.

Neuroscience tells us that individuals on the autism spectrum often have brains that are wired in a distinctive way. Research indicates that their neural pathways can be more efficient in certain cognitive tasks but may also lead to sensory overload and heightened emotional responses. This unique wiring contributed to Dyson's brilliance but also meant that he experienced the world in ways that were sometimes overwhelming.

People often struggle to understand young minds that are still developing, especially those lacking a solid moral environment.

Society's perception of discipline is frequently influenced by personal upbringing, which can lead to flawed judgments about children like Dyson and their parents. Many don't realize that behavior perceived as challenging often stems from an unmet need or a sensory overload rather than a lack of discipline.

As a baby, Dyson cried constantly, his tiny body overwhelmed by physical discomfort that few could comprehend. At that time, the medical community was still learning about the broader implications of autism, and his pain went largely unrecognized. Certain parts of his body did not heal as quickly as they should, causing him immense discomfort. It was a silent struggle for both him and his mother, who felt helpless.

Yet, by God's grace and through a mother's and grandmother's unwavering love, she never gave up. Mary-Kate dedicated herself to understanding Dyson's needs. She poured every ounce of love and patience she had into him, learning about sensory processing and emotional regulation as she went. She discovered that certain environments could either soothe or agitate him, and she worked tirelessly to create a nurturing space where he could thrive.

As a result, Dyson grew into a smart, perceptive little boy, his mind a kaleidoscope of thoughts and ideas. He developed a keen interest in the natural world, often asking profound questions that revealed his deep understanding of complex concepts. "Mom, why do leaves change color in autumn?" he would inquire, his eyes wide with curiosity. Such questions reflected not only his intelligence but also his desire to connect with the world around him.

Through his mother's guidance, Dyson learned that emotions—much like scientific phenomena—could be explored and understood. He discovered that it was okay to feel overwhelmed, that it was a part of being human. Mary-Kate taught him to articulate his feelings using simple, relatable language, helping him navigate the emotional landscape he encountered daily.

In Dyson's world, love and science intertwined seamlessly. His childhood was not merely about overcoming challenges; it was about embracing the beauty of his unique perspective and the profound connections he formed with those around him. Through his journey, he became a beacon of hope, demonstrating that understanding and compassion could bridge the gap between perception and reality.



## CHAPTER 10

### Mary-Kate's Spiritual Background

In the dim glow of a lantern flickering against the barn's weathered walls, Mary-Kate pulled Dyson close, whispering a bedtime prayer. *Lord, give us strength tomorrow.* Her faith wasn't loud or showy—it was the quiet anchor that had carried her through personal doubt, relationships, and shattered dreams. Mary-Kate believed in Jesus, deeply. But she did not fully comprehend the magnitude of how Jesus was working for her each day, although it had been woven into her life from the start.

Growing up in a modest very old house that was always under construction, Sundays as a young girl meant church with her family. Dressed in comfortable dresses for south Texas, she'd file into the pews alongside Mom, and her two siblings. Dad was either playing in the band on stage or mixing the sound for the service. The preacher's voice boomed about salvation, but at home, the real lessons came from her parents' weary smiles after long days. "You can be Christian and believe in Jesus as your Savior," they'd say, "but to *survive*, you've got to *work hard* and be *consistent*." Nothing wrong with that—*except you also need faith*, Mary-Kate would think often think about that, even then, sensing the missing piece.

For several years, Sunday School became her sanctuary. Colorful chalk boards depicted Bible heroes, and simple songs etched verses into her heart. It built the foundation of a *solid moral belief system*. She knew right from wrong like the back of her hand—no gray areas. She never touched drink or drugs, steering clear of the temptations that snared so many classmates.

And her heart? It brimmed with genuine care for others, a quiet compassion that made her the first to share lunch or lend a listening ear.

Mary-Kate often chose the back row in class, not out of shyness, but to observe. She watched the bold kids disrupt lessons, the quiet ones fade into shadows. *What works? What doesn't?* Learning from the actions—or inactions—of others shaped her present-day thoughts. It taught her wisdom beyond her years: watch, learn, choose wisely.

### **Hebrews 11:1**

*Faith is the realization of what is hoped for and the evidence of things not seen.*

That verse, scrawled in her childhood Bible, became her lifeline. Parents worked endlessly—Dad on the road, Mom working fulltime teaching Cosmetology—to keep the lights on. They juggled the needs of three kids, but time and money stretched perilously thin. Mary-Kate's childhood blurred with half-remembered band concerts and birthday cakes from the discount store. *They did their best*, she'd remind herself. *And I learned from it.*

As the youngest of three, she soaked up lessons from her older brother and sister like a sponge. Big brother taught her resilience after his sports injuries; sister showed her poise under pressure in band and cheerleading. Following that pattern, Mary-Kate tried out for the Jr. High School football cheerleading squad, just like her sister. Pom-poms in hand, she flipped, chanted, and smiled through Friday night lights. More than being “head strong,” she was *incredibly determined*. She liked keeping things in order—schedules neat, routines unbreakable. Chaos? She tamed it.

Now, huddled in the barn with Dyson snoring softly beside her, those roots ran deep. Faith hadn't erased the hardships, but it fueled her fight. *Work hard, stay consistent*, her parents' voices echoed. *But trust the unseen*, Hebrews whispered. As the gentle wind whispered outside, Mary-Kate clung to both. Little did she know, help was crossing the tracks—sparked by a boy's kind heart.



Noi Bai International Airport, Hanoi, Vietnam — 1968

## **CHAPTER 11**

### **Ben Novel Daydream**

Jimmy watched the nearly empty streets whip by. The airport, located north of the capital, was normally a 40-minute drive, but with their Vietnamese police escort pushing the vehicles faster and faster, they had made it in half the time. Speeds had climbed from the usual 30 miles per hour to well over 60.

It was too easy, and Jimmy wasn't complaining—just stunned. The Vietnamese—and, more accurately, the Russians—were sticking to their agreement.

The drive was long but uneventful, giving him plenty of time to think—or more accurately, to worry about Niner. Dawson hadn't been able to contact him directly about their imminent departure. Though he hated leaving their fellow operator behind, he agreed it was the right call: Atwater and the civilians were the priority.

Still, Jimmy believed firmly in the no-man-left-behind doctrine. That was why he hoped they'd be able to return quickly to extract Niner if anything went wrong.

He kept his eyes glued to the route, scanning for any sign of Niner. At these speeds and in the dark, it was possible he could have missed him. But if something had happened to his friend, Jimmy knew he'd never forgive himself.

He checked the GPS on the dash and activated his comm. "ETA less than four minutes."

He knew the actual ETA was shorter—the GPS assumed speed limits, and they were far exceeding them. The police in front weren't happy, their motorcycle bumpers hovering just a few feet ahead. Jimmy had no intention of tolerating delays.

"Three minutes," he said—and it had only been thirty seconds. The airport was clearly visible, planes taking off and landing steadily against the night sky.

"Two minutes."

Less than a minute now. "ETA less than two minutes."

Brake lights flared in front of him, and the motorcycles split off. Jimmy cursed. Two police vehicles blocked the road, at least a dozen officers behind them, weapons drawn.

"Roadblock ahead. Can you go through?" Dawson asked over the comm.

"Affirmative. At least a dozen hostiles with weapons."

"Do it." "Everybody hold on."

Jimmy leaned forward and hit a custom-installed dash button, disabling the airbags and fuel-cutoff features for the impending collision. He was driving a large, heavy Ford SUV against two much smaller Vietnamese vehicles.

He laid on the horn, giving the officers a final warning that he had no intention of slowing down. They didn't move until he was within ten yards—then scattered.

Gripping the steering wheel lightly, he braced against the headrest, muscles tense, ready for impact. The DSS agent beside him and the passengers in the back did the same.

They hit hard. The back end fishtailed for a moment, and the civilians panicked briefly, but Jimmy was trained for this. He eased off the gas, steered into the skid, and calmed his breathing, mastering the adrenaline surge. Once traction returned, he straightened the wheel and regained control.

He hammered the gas again, blasting through gates that were closing, the Secretary's airplane clearly visible in its cordoned-off secure section.

A company of troops surrounded the area, but few vehicles blocked his path. Glancing in the side-view mirror, he saw the motorcade still behind him. He braked hard, turning onto an access road to the tarmac, eliciting screams from the back as he executed a hard left

He was heading straight for the plane now, the soldiers—police—scattering out of the way. DSS agents were stationed around stanchions marking the diplomatic exclusion zone: American soil.



## CHAPTER 12

### Stormy Drive

“Ben! Wake up... We gotta go!” Lane shouted, shaking his brother with urgency, which cut through the haze of sleep.

Ben blinked, disoriented. “What? What’s going on?” He rubbed his eyes, desperately trying to get his bearings. He had been lost in the thrilling high-speed chase of the latest J. R. Kennedy thriller, *The Riddle*, when sleep had overtaken him.

“Sorry! I got caught up in the story,” he mumbled, shaking off the remnants of his dreams. The world of spies and CIA missions had entranced him, and he could almost feel the adrenaline of living the life of a secret agent for the GIA—God Intelligent Agency. *One day I might be a spy*, he dreamed.

“We’ve got to check on Dyson and his mom,” Lane insisted, urgency lacing his voice. “There’s a storm coming, and the Guadalupe River might flood! The storm is heading right towards Mission Valley. That’s close to their barn!”

“Mom,” Ben said, sitting up straight and feeling the weight of reality pressing on him, “will you drive us out to the McDonald place? We need to check on Dyson and his mom.”

“This storm looks bad,” Mom replied, her brow creased with worry. “We might get caught in some flooding if we don’t leave now. Better grab flashlights, rope, and some blankets.”

They jumped into the Rambler, the vehicle’s interior a familiar space of comfort as they headed out on the fifteen-mile trip. Outside, the atmosphere shifted dramatically. Black clouds swirled ominously overhead, casting an eerie green glow over the landscape.

“I’ve never seen it this dark this early,” Ben murmured, his heart racing with a mix of excitement and fear.

Mom took a sharp left onto Mission Valley Road. “Six more miles,” she said, her voice steady despite the chaos brewing around them.

Suddenly, the sky opened, unleashing a torrential downpour that sounded like a thousand drummers pounding on the roof. Lightning cracked overhead, illuminating the darkened sky, and then—without warning—a blinding bolt struck the car.

The Rambler shook violently, as if caught in a grip of a giant’s hand. Ben and Lane screamed, their voices swallowed by the roar of the storm. Mom fought the wheel, her knuckles white as she turned into the skid, desperately regaining control.

“Y’all okay?” she yelled, her voice trembling slightly.

Still shaking, Ben managed, “Yes ma’am... I think so.”

“Mom... did we just get struck by lightning?” Lane asked, wide-eyed.

“I’m pretty sure that’s what it was,” Mom said, her disbelief mingling with awe.

“Wow! I didn’t see that coming!” Lane said.

“No one sees lightning coming, goofball,” Ben chuckled shakily, trying to lighten the mood.

As they approached the Guadalupe River bridge, the scene turned ominous. Water was already filling the ditches on both sides of the highway. Wind gusts howled like wild animals, bending the massive Pecan and Cypress trees, while sheets of rain lashed across the road.

“This is not good,” Mom said, determination creeping into her tone. “Seatbelts on. Watch for high water.”

Over the next rise, they saw water rushing across the far side of the bridge, a torrent that threatened to sweep everything away.

“What are we gonna do?” Ben asked, a knot forming in his stomach.

“We have to keep going,” Mom said firmly. “We can’t go back.” Ben’s eyes glistened with tears as he whispered, “First—we pray.” Ben took a deep breath and prayed aloud for protection... and for Dyson and his mom.

The relentless rain became a curtain of chaos, obscuring their view of the road ahead. The fury of the water rushed over the road, creeping closer to the car.

Mom pressed her foot on the gas, inching the Rambler forward, determination etched on her face. *I’ve gotta keep the car moving or it could flood out and carry us downstream.*

The boys could see the left side of the road that was lower on the turn getting deeper fast.

“Mom, the water is up to the bottom of the car!” Lane screamed, his voice rising in panic.

“Lord, please keep us moving forward,” Mom prayed aloud, her grip tightening on the wheel. “Just let us make it up that small rise ahead!”

Just then, the water reached halfway up the slow-moving Rambler, and panic surged through the car. Just then the motor started stuttering. “Oh No” Mom screamed!

Ben yelled “Alright, here’s what we do, Lane! Roll your window down on your side and let’s jump out and push!”

“No!” Mom cried, but it was too late.

Ben and Lane crawled out of the windows into the raging torrent, the gushing violent water engulfing them instantly, chest deep and surging. The raw power of the current threatened to knock Ben off his feet, but he gritted his teeth caught hold of the door handle and fought his way to the back of the car, adrenaline coursing through his veins. He was on the low side of the car over chest deep.

Lane on the high side followed suit, and the boys reached each other at the trunk, just as the car began to float in the rising water.

“Push! Push” Ben screamed, fear mingling with desperation. “I am” screamed Lane as his muscles begin to strain with his efforts.

Mom kept her foot on the gas, her eyes focused on the horizon, as the car started floating precariously drifting closer to the ditch from the rushing water.

“Keep pushing!” Ben yelled, the current pulling at their legs, threatening to sweep them away.

Out of nowhere, a heavyset bearded man appeared, charging into the chaos. He slammed his shoulder into the rear of the car, a determined look in his eyes.

“Come on! We got this! We got this...Push harder!” Lane shouted, his spirit ignited by the stranger’s presence.

“I’m not napping over here!” Ben yelled back, a shaky laugh escaping his lips, as Lane smiled grateful for the humor amidst the life-threatening crisis.

With the man’s help, they pushed with all their might. Little by little, the car began to move into shallower water, inching up the rise of the sweeping left-hand turn.

Mom kept her eyes focused on the road, praying fervently that the boys were okay because they were out of sight behind the car.

Finally, the tires caught grip again on the pavement, and the Rambler surged forward, breaking free from the clutches of the flood. After what felt like an eternity, the car pulled to a stop just up the rise, out of the rushing water.

Dripping wet and gasping for breath, Ben looked over at Lane. “You okay?” he asked, his heart still racing.

Coughing and spitting water out Lane said “Yeah, I’m alright,” a mix of relief and adrenaline rushing through him. “Let’s go thank that guy!”

Exhausted but fueled by adrenaline, Ben turned to thank the man who had helped save their lives. But to their astonishment, there was no one there.

He scanned the stopped cars nearby, searching for any sign of the heavyset man, but saw no one walking towards them, or away from them, no one within a hundred feet of the entire open area.

“Where is he?” Lane asked, confusion etched on his face.

“I don’t know,” Ben replied, shaking his head in disbelief. “He was right beside us pushing, and then he just... vanished.”

By this time, Mom had leapt from the car, grabbing both boys in a fierce, crushing hug. “I was so worried,” she whispered, her voice trembling.

“I can’t explain it, Mom,” Ben said, still trying to wrap his mind around the mysterious disappearance. “He was right next to us, pushing with all he had, and then he wasn’t there.”

“Who was he?” Mom asked, her brow furrowing.

“That man,” Lane replied, wide-eyed. “The guy who helped us push the car out of the water!”

“Well, I don’t know who ‘HE’ is, but I sure do thank him for saving our lives,” Mom said, gratitude filling her voice.

After assuring the folks in the other cars still trapped with no way to cross the road, that they were ok, Ben asked if they had seen the man who helped pushed the car out of the torrent.

Nobody saw anyone.

Totally baffled, Ben and Lane exchanged glances, trying their best to figure out what had just happened. But no explanation came to mind.

Ben’s heart swelled with gratitude as he began thanking Jesus right then and there. In his heart, he felt they had witnessed something extraordinary—a miracle, perhaps, with the help of an angel sent by God.

With a look of concern on his face, he said, “We got to get to the McDonald barn and see if Dyson and Mary-Kate are okay.”

Mom and the boys paused for a moment, offering a short prayer of thanks before they sped off toward the barn, hearts pounding with anticipation and hope.



## Chapter 13

### Dyson Calf Rescue

“Mom, these clouds don’t look good,” Dyson shouted over the rising wind, his voice barely cutting through the thickening air. The sky was a brooding mass of dark, roiling clouds, so low and heavy they seemed to press down on the earth, as if you could stretch out your arms and brush their stormy underbellies with your fingertips. Lightning flickered silently in the distance, a warning of the fury about to unleash.

The old McDonald barn stood about a mile from the river, hunkered beside what was usually a pathetic little runoff stream—dry as a bone most days, a mere trickle after light rains. But today, the atmosphere hummed with menace. Suddenly, the sky cracked open with a deafening thunderclap, a jagged bolt of lightning split a nearby tree in half. The wind—fierce straight-line gusts howling like a banshee—slammed into the weathered structure with brutal force. Boards creaked and rattled violently, the entire barn shuddering as if it might tear itself apart.

Mary-Kate and Dyson screamed in unison, their cries swallowed by the roar of the tempest!

A massive tree branch, ripped free from some ancient oak nearby, hurtled through the air like a spear and smashed into the barn wall with a sickening *crack*. Splinters flew, dust and dirt erupted in choking clouds, filling the air with the sharp tang of splintered wood and damp earth.

In the chaos, a terrified calf in the nearest stall panicked. Its wide eyes bulged with primal fear as it thrashed against the weakened boards. With a splintering snap, it burst through the broken slats and bolted out into the maelstrom—pounding wind, sheets of rain lashing the pasture like whips.

Dyson's heart pounded in his chest, adrenaline surging. Without a second thought for the mortal danger—the lightning, the floods, the flying debris—he cried out, “Mom... I've got to get it! That calf's gonna die out there!”

“No—Dyson! Stay inside!” Mary-Kate yelled desperately, lunging to grab his arm. But he was already scrambling through the jagged gap in the barn's side, the storm swallowing him whole.

The rain hammered down in relentless sheets, so thick it blurred the world into a watery haze. Dyson could barely see two feet ahead; branches whipped past like deadly missiles, hay bales tumbled end over end, and the wind clawed at his clothes, trying to fling him off his feet. Mud sucked at his shoes with every step, but his eyes locked on the calf. There—near the swollen, raging stream!

What had been a lazy trickle moments ago had morphed into a monstrous torrent: eight feet deep, churning with frothy brown water choked full of debris—twisted branches, fence posts, even entire bushes tumbling helplessly. It overflowed its banks in a rampaging flood, smashing aside rocks, eroding the earth, carving a path of destruction through the pasture.

“Over there... it's right over there in the water,” Dyson muttered to himself, wiping rain from his eyes. “Why is it struggling so much, but not going anywhere? Come on, little guy!”

The calf was trapped—its hind leg hopelessly tangled in a snarl of barbed wire that the floodwaters had ripped free from some forgotten fence. The wire glinted wickedly through the murk, cutting deeper with every frantic kick. The poor animal bawled in terror, its body half-submerged, strength ebbing fast.

“I've got to save that calf,” Dyson said aloud, his voice fierce with determination. No time to think about the risks—the current that could sweep him away, the lightning cracking overhead, the barbs that could shred him. Heart racing, he leaped into the raging water.

The flood hit him like a freight train—murky, muddy, powerful, unrelenting flood water. It yanked him under immediately, tumbling him in a violent spin. Dyson was a decent dog-paddler from summers at the lake, but this was no lazy pond. He kicked furiously, arms flailing, desperately fighting to keep his head above the churning surface. Debris battered him: a branch gashed his cheek, drawing blood that mixed with the rain.

The current swept him straight toward the calf. Gasping, Dyson dove under, lungs burning, and latched onto the calf's leg. His hands closed around the wire—razor-sharp barbs tore into his palms and fingers, sending white-hot pain lancing up his arms. Blood clouded the water, but he gritted his teeth and held on. “I got you! Hang on, buddy!” he yelled as the calf thrashed wildly, hooves churning the foam.

They were sucked under again and again—dark, suffocating plunges into the muddy abyss. Dyson gagged on the filthy water, choking, his vision on seeing black as his muscles screamed in protest. His grip weakened; exhaustion clawed at him. *This is it*, he thought in a flash of panic. *We're done.*

Then—piercing through the howl of wind and roar of rain—he heard it...

“I got you.”

A voice. Soft, gentle, impossibly calm amid the apocalypse. Dyson couldn't believe it—his mind playing tricks? Hallucination from drowning?

He shoved his head above water one last time, sputtering, and there it was: a strong hand, steady and sure, reaching down from the bank through the chaos.

With the final dregs of his strength, Dyson lunged, seizing the hand like a lifeline. He clung to the calf with his other arm, barbed wire biting deeper, as an unseen force hauled them both from the deadly current. They sprawled onto the muddy bank, gasping, alive.

The calf shook itself, lowing weakly, then scrambled up to higher ground on trembling legs.

Dyson collapsed, chest heaving, rain still pelting his face. He whipped around, blinking through the downpour. “Hello? Who...?” But no one was there. Just empty pasture, battered by the easing storm. The wind dropped a little to a whistle, and the thunder was rumbling farther and farther away. *What the heck?* he thought, a chill racing down his spine.

Mary-Kate burst from the gloom, splashing and sliding through the muck, her face a mask of terror. “Dyson! Oh God, Dyson—are you okay? Dyson!” She dropped to her knees beside him, pulling him into a fierce, soaking hug, checking for injuries with frantic hands. “I'm... I'm fine, Mom,” he rasped, wincing at the bloody gashes on his hands. “But we need shelter before this picks up again.”

She nodded, eyes wide. “This way—the old shed up their held up” she pointed. They stumbled together toward the sturdy outbuilding, its roof miraculously intact, a dry haven amid the wreckage. Inside, they huddled on straw bales, the storm slowly fading to a steady drum on the tin roof.

“We have to thank that man,” Dyson insisted, his voice shaky but firm, scanning the rainy pasture outside.

Mary-Kate frowned, wrapping a torn rag around his wounded hands. “What man, honey? There's no one here. You must've been seeing things—the shock, the water. You're lucky to be alive.” Dyson stared out at the retreating clouds, the rescued calf safe in view. Lucky? Or something more? *Who was that man and how did he get here so fast.* A shiver gripped him, deeper than the storm's chill. Something—or someone—had been there. And he wasn't letting it go.



## Chapter 14

### After the Storm

The storm had passed, leaving behind a world transformed into a soggy battlefield. Sunlight pierced the breaking clouds in golden shafts, casting a surreal glow over the devastation: uprooted tree limbs sprawled like fallen giants, shattered fence posts jutted at odd angles, and puddles stretched into shallow ponds mirroring the clearing sky. The air hung heavy with the fresh, earthy scent of rain-soaked soil and, a mix of destruction and renewal.

“There it is!” Ben shouted triumphantly to his mom, gripping the dashboard as their old Rambler splashed through the muddy road leading to the McDonald barn. Tires churned ruts into the muck, spraying gritty water in all directions.

“Man, I hope they’re okay,” Lane added, his younger brother’s voice tight with worry, peering through the streaked windshield. “After what we just went through, I hope they didn’t get hurt”. The barn loomed ahead, its walls battered but standing, roof sagging slightly from the onslaught.

Trees were down, branches and hay scattered everywhere.

Ben leaped out first, boots sinking into the mud. “Dyson! Mary-Kate!” he screamed, his call echoing across the ravaged pasture.

“Over here!” Dyson’s voice rang back, hoarse but relieved. He and Mary-Kate emerged from the sturdy shed, blinking against the sudden brightness, their clothes plastered to their skin, faces streaked with mud and exhaustion.

Ben, Lane, and their mom hurried over, their clothes muddied and wet. “You alright?” Ben asked Dyson, his eyes widening at the bloody gashes on his friend’s hands, the makeshift rag wrappings already soaked crimson.

Mom didn’t hesitate. “Hold still, sweetie—I’ve got the first aid kit in the car.” She dashed back through the slop, returning with a red box and white cross, clutched in her arms.

“I’m okay, really,” Dyson assured them, though he winced as Mom gently cleaned the wounds with antiseptic wipes. The sharp sting made him hiss. “It just stings a little. I’ll be all right. He saved us—you won’t believe it.”

“Who did, honey?” Ben and Lane’s mom asked softly, her brow furrowed in concern. She glanced at Mary-Kate, who nodded knowingly, her own face pale with remembered fear.

“That man,” Dyson said, his voice gaining strength, eyes lighting up. “The angel. He pulled us right out of the flood. Grabbed my hand when I couldn’t hold on anymore.”

Ben’s jaw dropped. “Where is he?” he said looking around.

Dyson shrugged, a wondrous smile breaking through the pain. “Oh, he’s not here. Probably back in heaven by now.”

“You saw an angel too?” Ben exploded with excitement, grabbing Dyson’s good arm. “No way! We just had a man help us a while ago—our car got stuck in the floodwaters down by the river. He was right there, pushing with me and Lane, strong as an ox. We turned around, and poof—he was gone. Vanished!”

“WOW!” Lane hollered, jumping up and down in the mud like a frog on springs, splattering everyone. “Two angels in one day! Helping all of us! That’s epic!”

“I can’t believe it. God is so great!” Ben shouted, pumping his fist skyward, his face radiant with awe. The boys clustered together, buzzing with shared miracle, the storm’s terror forgotten in the glow of divine wonder.

Mary-Kate wiped tears from her cheeks, pulling Dyson close. “We’re just grateful you boys got here to help us.”

Ben and Lane’s mom finished securing the bandage—neat white gauze wrapped tight around Dyson’s hands.

“We are just so glad y’all are safe and okay,” she said warmly, her eyes sweeping over Dyson and Mary-Kate, checking for other hurts. Then, with a beaming smile, she opened her arms wide. “C’mere, all of you.”

The group piled into a massive, muddy hug—arms entangled, laughter bubbling up amid sniffles. Wet clothes squished, but no one cared. In that moment, they were family.

“There is one thing left to do,” Mom declared, releasing them with a gentle push. They bowed their heads right there in the shed’s doorway, hands clasped. Her voice led strong and sure: “Thank You, Lord Jesus! Thank You, Lord Jesus! Your angels have saved us and our new friends! Thank You, Lord, thank You, Lord—for Your protection, Your power, and this beautiful day of miracles after the storm.”

Amens rippled through the group, hearts full.

“Now,” she said, clapping her hands, “get in the car! We’re taking you back to our house to get dry, warm towels, iced tea and Hot Coffee. I’ll whip up a big supper—fried chicken, mashed potatoes, the works. No arguments!”

As they piled into the car, laughing and chattering about angels and miracles, the calf lowed contentedly from its safe spot. The sun started peeking out from the dark clouds again, promising clearer skies ahead—just like the faith binding these strangers turned friends.



# Chapter 15

## Storm Angels

The warmth of Ben and Lane's modest house wrapped around them like a comforting quilt, a stark contrast to the wild fury they'd just escaped. The storm's remnants left behind, and inside the house, the air smelled of simmering gravy, fresh cornbread baking, and the faint, clean scent of laundry drying in the laundry room. The boys—Dyson, Ben, and Lane—had changed into borrowed oversized pajamas and flannel shirts, their damp clothes slung over chairs. Dyson's bandaged hands ached dully, a reminder of his heroic plunge, but the sting was easing in the cozy back room. They sprawled on a threadbare rug amid scattered toys and comic books, faces flushed with the thrill of survival and shared secrets.

"Were you scared?" Lane asked, his wide eyes fixed on Dyson, hugging his knees as if the storm might sneak back in.

"Well, kinda," Dyson admitted, flexing his wrapped fingers experimentally. He leaned back against the wall, staring at the ceiling where sunlight now danced through lace curtains. "But it was weird—like, really weird. I had this strange calm wash over me, like invisible 'Loving Arms' were wrapped around me, holding me up above the water no matter how hard it tried to drag me under. I knew deep down I was gonna be fine. All I could think about was holding on to that calf, not letting go. It was like... God Himself was whispering, *I've got you.*"

Ben nodded slowly, his usual cocky grin softened by awe. "Kinda like what you said, Dyson. When that man appeared out of nowhere and started pushing our car from behind—boom, right in the thick of the flood—I felt this calm peace settle over me that I just could not explain. The water was roaring, tires spinning uselessly in the rushing water, but suddenly it was like everything slowed down. Peace, man. Pure peace. I looked back once we were out of the deep water, when the tires gripped solid ground again... and the man was gone. Vanished. No footprints, nothing."

Lane shivered dramatically, goosebumps prickling his arms despite the room's cozy warmth. "Gone, just like that? Creepy... but cool."

"All I can say is they *had* to be angels," Dyson declared firmly, slapping his good palm on the rug for emphasis. His voice carried the conviction of someone who'd stared death in the face and blinked.

Ben and Lane nodded vigorously in agreement, the three of them exchanging looks of pure, boyish wonder. For a moment, silence fell, broken only by the distant clatter of pots in the kitchen, moms talkin' mom stuff—the miracle sinking in, binding them tighter than blood.

Then Ben's eyes twinkled mischievously. "Boy, when that lightning bolt hit our car—*ka-blam!*—smoke everywhere, the whole car shaking like a tin can—Lane was screaming like a little baby seein' a spider for the first time! 'Ahh! We're fryin'! Mom, save me!'" He mimicked his brother's high-pitched wail, clutching his chest theatrically.

Lane's face turned beet red. He lunged forward, punching Ben square in the arm—not too hard, but enough to elicit a yelp. "I was *not!* Shut up! You were yellin' too, Mr. Tough Guy!"

"You were too—right, Mom?" Ben hollered toward the kitchen, doubled over laughing, tears streaming down his cheeks.

"Leave me out of this, boys!" their mom called back, her voice laced with amusement as she stirred the gravy and went back to the mom discussion with the new mom friend. "Y'all are worse than a couple of wet puppies wrestlin'!"

Dyson and Mary-Kate burst out laughing, the sound infectious, clutching his side. The room filled with their goofiness, the tension of the day dissolved into pure joy.

"Okay, okay" Lane said—"I was pretty scared while I was in the water, though," he confessed wiping his eyes. "Underwater, choking, barbs ripping my hands... yeah, my heart was pounding. But that voice? That hand? Boom—peace again."

"Well, boys," Mom announced, poking her head around the doorframe, apron dusted with flour, cheeks rosy from the stove's heat. A savory aroma wafted in, making their stomachs growl in unison. "It's time to eat. Supper's hot and ready—fried chicken crispy as can be, creamy mashed potatoes, green beans with bacon, cornbread slathered in butter. Y'all hungry?"

"Yes ma'am!" they shouted as one, scrambling to their feet in a tangle of limbs and excitement, racing to the dining room like a herd of stampeding calves.

Mom said..."Ben will you say a Prayer" Ben prayed like never before thanking Jesus for the food, the Angel Miracles and the new friendship that had developed in the past couple of days.

Mary-Kate smiled from her seat by the window in the kitchen, joining the procession. As they gathered around the laden table—plates steaming, hearts overflowing—the angels' visit lingered like a promise, turning a stormy day into a feast of gratitude.



## Chapter 16

### Ben Football Practice

The afternoon sun blazed down on the dusty practice field behind the middle school, turning the grass into a patchy patchwork of green and brown. The air buzzed with the sharp *crack* of pads colliding, coaches' whistles piercing the shouts of exertion, and the earthy scent of sweat-soaked turf. Green-and-white jerseys clashed in a full scrimmage—offense versus defense, no mercy. Ben huddled low in his stance at the cornerback position, heart hammering, eyes locked on the line of scrimmage. At five-foot-two and a scrawny 135 pounds, he knew he was the underdog, but heart made up for horsepower.

*Snap!* The ball was in play. And there he was—Kenneth Shaw, the monstrous running back, exploding from the backfield like a human bulldozer. Two hundred twenty-five pounds of pure, chiseled muscle, tight toned body rippling under his pads, legs pumping high and powerful, churning up clods of dirt. His eyes burned with that feral gleam—pure, unyielding determination to plow through anything, anyone, for those precious yards and a first down.

*I'm gonna go right through you,* Kenneth mouthed, lips curling in a taunting snarl, helmet glinting as he barreled straight at Ben.

Ben's pulse thundered in his ears. He flicked a desperate glance left—Tim, their hulking defensive end, was supposed to seal the edge, take out the lead blocker, Robert Gonzalez. Tim engaged with a thunderous clash of pads, grunts echoing, but as Ben snapped his head back... no dice. Tim was locked up, Gonzalez shoving him back like a wall. No help coming. The edge was wide open.

*What am I gonna do?* Panic flickered, but Ben shoved it down. Years of drills, endless reps, Coach's voice barking in his mind: *Contain! Protect that edge!*

Kenneth charged like a freight train off the rails, football tucked tight against his ribs, shoulders hunched for impact. The ground seemed to shake under his cleats.

No choice. *I must contain. He is NOT getting around this end.* Ben's muscles coiled like springs. He feinted left—dodging the brewing pile-up between Tim and Robert—then exploded right, a blur of green jersey. *Here he comes... now!*

Ben dove low, all sinew and fury, launching himself at Kenneth's knees like a heat-seeking missile. *I've got to contain him!* His helmet cracked against thigh pads, arms wrapping desperately. For a split second, the world slowed—roar of teammates, whistle imminent, Ben's world closer to the takedown.

Then—*WHAM!* A cataclysmic impact. Kenneth's momentum was unstoppable; he powered through like a tidal wave, rolling right over Ben's dive. Ben felt the world flip—air whooshing from his lungs, ribs compressing, turf rushing up to meet him. He flew backward five feet, slamming flat on his back with a bone-jarring *thud*. Stars exploded in his vision, breath locked in his chest, gasping like a fish on dry land.

Kenneth lumbered on, shrugging off the gain—twelve, fifteen yards easy—before teammates swarmed him. The play whistle blew. First Down

“Ben! You okay, man?” Teammates piled around, helmets off, faces a mix of worry and adrenaline. Hands patted his shoulder pads, slapping his face, voices overlapping in a cacophony.

Still groggy, the world spinning, Ben felt sharp slaps on his cheek—someone trying to bring him back. “Stop it! Stop it! Quit slapping me!” he croaked, swatting weakly, coughing as air finally rushed back in.

“What happened?” Ben wheezed, propping on elbows, grass stains smearing his face. “Where'd that freight train come from? How'd it even get on the field?”

A teammate snorted, helping him sit. “That wasn't no freight train—that was just Kenneth. You're at practice, dude—green-and-white practice. 'member? Snap out of it!”

*Oh, right.* Reality crashed back: the huddle, the snap, the charge. Ben shook his head, vision clearing. He was the little scrawny cornerback, David versus Goliath in cleats. Kenneth Shaw—the biggest, baddest eighth-grader in school, a beast who lived for pancaking defenders.

Coach blew the whistle again, jogging over. “You good, Ben? Shake it off—next rep!”

Ben staggered to his feet, teammates slapping his helmet in encouragement. Yeah, it hurt. Yeah, he’d been flattened like roadkill. But as he jogged back to the line, eyes narrowing on Kenneth—who flashed a cocky grin—Ben felt that fire ignite. *You got me this time, big guy. But next play? I’ll get you.* Underdog grit burned brighter than the sun. He’ll get him next time.



# CHAPTER 17

## Jr. High School Football

*We had fun as little kids*, Ben thought, riding in the yellow school bus down the road toward Matty Wilder High School stadium, the memory warming him like summer sun. *Playing football with my brother, one year younger than me*. Tossing a worn pigskin in the backyard, dodging Mom's laundry lines—pure bliss. They both ended up playing junior high football at Bain Jr. High. That came after a short stint in Pee Wee League, which they had to quit because Mom and Dad just *couldn't afford the fees*. Life's realities hit early: work shifts, bills piling like blocking sleds. Still, the brothers rode their bikes to practice every Saturday at 8:00 a.m., wind whipping their faces, legs burning—but free. Sometimes Mom and Dad needed them home to babysit the house, sweeping floors or minding the chores, teaching sacrifice alongside sprints.

Middle School football—*boy, that was fun*. You suited up in the Middle High School colors: gleaming green and white helmets, shoulder pads bulky as knight's armor, the scent of fresh leather and cut grass filling the locker room. During warm-up, the team crackled with energy: first-string *greens* on offense slamming against first-string *whites* on defense. Grunts echoed, whistles pierced the air, grass flying in clumps. Ben thrived in the chaos, muscles hardening, brotherhood unbreakable.

“Coach, who do we play for the game today?” Ben asked one muggy Thursday afternoon, wiping sweat from his brow.

Middle High School Varsity games fired up Thursdays after Jr. Varsity games. Coach's gravelly voice boomed: “Cuero. Red & White against our Green & White.”

“I'll be ready, Coach,” Ben pledged, fists clenched. “I'll get that running back, contain the right side. If he's any smaller than Kenneth, it shouldn't be a problem.”

Thursday afternoon at Matty Wilder High School stadium, the air hummed electric. Cuero was their *biggest rivalry*—small-town blood feud. 1,500 fans packed the stands: parents hollering, cheerleaders pom-poms shaking, the scent of popcorn and hot dogs mingling with fresh-cut grass. Kickoff at 6:00 p.m. Middle school might've been small-time elsewhere, but here? *The big time*. Lights blazed like stadium stars, hearts thumped like bass drums.

Ben starred as tailback *and* defensive back, snagging punts and kickoffs with hawk eyes. First kickoff: out with the first string, deep in the end zone. The ball spiraled high, sun-glared, thundering footsteps pounding turf like an avalanche. *Here it comes*. He tracked it—perfect catch in stride. Exploded forward: 20 yards, 25, hitting the 30 as Cuero defenders swarmed the sidelines like wolves. Five more—sharp cut right. Three—juke left.

*Bam!* Two blindsiders hammered from the right, like unseen torpedoes. World spun, pain exploded, but Ben clutched the football like life itself. Yards gained—mission accomplished. Teammates hauled him up, slapping pads.

Three plays later: “4-2 right on *three*,” QB barked. Ben’s hole as tailback. Staring him down was a *monster*—red jersey, white pants, 350-pound defensive lineman, eyes malice-black. He mouthed, “*I got you, punk.*” That play dove straight into the beast. Ben’s pulse raced—*Lord, give me strength* (a quick Philippians 4:13 prayer).

“*Three hut!*” Snap. Ball in hands, gripped vise-tight. He burst toward the sliver gap: blocker holding... almost...through...then a *huge hand snagged him*. Down—with a giant crashing down on him, four more piling on like a scrum. He was pinned, breathless.

Then—the worst: a vicious pinch on his butt, not playful, but *squeezing skin raw*. “Stop it! Quit! *Stop it!*” Ben roared. The giant bellowed laughter. The ref blew the whistle; the pile cleared. Ben got up slow, with his rear end throbbing fire, and jogged off—humiliated but head high. *Shake it off. Bigger things ahead.*

He’d never forget that. Halfway through, Coach growled: “Ben, defense. Pass likely—flank out to the flat.”

Snap: backpedal right—tight end fakes, stops. Ben pivots. QB scans... spots receiver solo. Ben *rocketed*—just in time. “You’re *not* gettin’ this!” Leap—three feet skyward—*interception!* Cut left, midfield blaze. QB lunges—juke right, hop left—gone! 30 yards: *touchdown Green Jr. Varsity (Bain)*. Field erupted; teammates mobbed him, all bruised and grinning with slaps on the back. More than football: *teamwork, discipline, rising up.*

Next kickoff: knees coiled. Ball arcs—Ben runs under it, dodge left, juke right, spin past tacklers. Flying! Crowd *roars*, carrying him. Near the end zone—one final defender—twist, dive—*touchdown!*

Team exploded: high-fives thundering, even Cuero coach nodding respect.

**One hour earlier:** Lane, powerhouse fullback for White Jr. Varsity (Bain Jr. High). Mid-third quarter: handoff, cuts left—*hole!* One safety—dives low, Lane *hurdles*—open field: *touchdown White Jr. Varsity.*

Two brothers, same stadium, same turf—*touchdowns*. “Good job, Lane!” Ben yelled, helmet askew, eyes fired. “Way to break through!”

“You too, Ben—that was *insane!*” Lane grinned, breathless.

They walked off the field together: laughing, Lane still amazed at what just happened. Ben realized: *It’s not size, speed, strength—it’s heart, grit, and no-quit.* After the game: water was guzzled, and all the players were talking and bragging about plays made, as the sun dipped under the horizon. The short ride in the bus, back to the Middle school, was a time of reflection, even though Mom/Dad were absent (because of work), their pride imagined.

Football drilled *courage, persistence, family bonds*. Lane nudged: “Next time, *I’m* getting that 350-pounder for ya.” He joked...

All Laughter—no revenge, just growth, game-joy. Ben leaned back, helmet lap-bound, and thought about; the stadium symphony swelling cheers, chatter, victory songs. *Why does he love it? Pushing limits, brother-side by side, memories together.*

In that glow: The *Challenges ahead—field or life—I’m ready, Ben realized. Heart, family, faith.* Perfect bridge to bigger adventures, like rallying the town for Dyson.



## **CHAPTER 18**

### **Goat Hill, Camp Stewart, Kerrville, Texas**

**(Four Years Earlier)**

I was terrified. Straight ahead loomed the dreaded “Bridge of the Devil.” At just five years old, my imagination was a wild beast of its own, and I could feel its claws digging into my heart as I stood paralyzed by fear.

It was a scorching summer day at Goat Hill, where my mom and sister Karen were visiting during a break from the camper routine. The creek bed I wandered through was about thirty feet deep, flanked by steep dirt walls that seemed to rise like ancient sentinels. The sandy bottom, always dry due to the relentless Texas sun, felt more like a desert than a creek.

But it wasn't the dry creek that made my heart race; it was Karen's terrifying story that echoed in my mind. She had spun a tale about the "Bridge Devil," a massive, dragon-like beast with slashing teeth that emerged from the shadows whenever a camper passed beneath the bridge. According to her, the Bridge Devil had an insatiable hunger for little campers, and it would leap out without warning, devouring them whole. *The Bridge Devil eats Little Campers*, she'd taunted, her voice dripping with mischief.

Scared to death, I kept glancing in every direction—front, back, left, right—my pulse quickening with each rustle of leaves or snap of a twig. My break was over, and I had to return to camp. The stories danced in my mind like fireflies in the twilight, illuminating the dark corners of my imagination. I could almost see the Bridge Devil lurking in the shadows, waiting for its next victim.

With determination surging through my small legs, I took off running as hard as I could. The sandy ground kicked up behind me, as if the earth itself was warning the Bridge Devil of my approach. My heart pounded like a drum, each beat a reminder of the urgency to escape. I ran faster, adrenaline propelling me forward until I was nearly flying.

"You're gonna have to catch me, Bridge Devil!" I shouted defiantly, my voice echoing off the canyon walls, a mix of challenge and fear. I could practically hear the creature's growls reverberating through the air, a haunting reminder of my sister's warning.

As I neared the entrance to the bridge overpass, the shadows deepened, and the air grew heavy with anticipation. Ten feet... five feet... I could see the light illuminating the other side, a beacon calling me to safety.

Then, with one final burst of energy, I sprinted forward, my legs pumping furiously beneath me. The world around me blurred, and for a moment, I felt invincible, as if nothing could harm me.

Whoosh—I was under! I burst out onto the freedom of the opposite side, my lungs gasping for air, heart racing with exhilaration. I had made it! I was alive. Not eaten. Whew.

A wave of relief washed over me, but it was quickly followed by a surge of anger. I whirled around to face the bridge, as if expecting to see the Bridge Devil rise from the shadows, only to find nothing but the quiet rustle of trees and the gentle flow of the creek.

"I have never forgiven you for that prank, Karen!" I shouted into the empty air, my voice a mix of frustration and lingering fear.

But I couldn't shake the feeling that I was still being watched. The shadows seemed to stretch and twist, and the creek's gentle gurgle now sounded like sinister laughter.

I turned away from the bridge, my heart still racing, and ran back toward camp. Each step felt lighter now that I had conquered the Bridge of the Devil, yet the thrill of the experience clung to me like the summer heat. I was a little hero, having faced down my fears, but deep inside, I knew that Karen's tale would haunt me for years to come.

As I approached the camp, the laughter and chatter of my fellow campers greeted me, a comforting reminder that I was safe and sound. But even amid the joy, I couldn't shake the feeling that the Bridge Devil was still out there, lurking in the shadows of my imagination, waiting for the next unsuspecting little camper to cross its path.



# Chapter 19

## Camp Stewart, Kerrville, Texas

The summer sun baked the rolling hills of Kerrville, Texas, turning the air thick with the scent of wildflowers and pine.

Nestled along the sparkling Guadalupe River, Camp Stewart was a paradise whispered about in schoolyards—a legendary boys’ camp where dreams were forged in the great outdoors. But for our family, scraping by on Dad’s odd jobs and Mom’s iron will, it might as well have been a distant fairy tale. Until that fateful night when everything changed.

I’ll never forget it. I was just four years old, small enough to hide behind Mom’s skirt, peeking wide-eyed from our cramped living room. Dad sat at the rickety kitchen table, nursing a lukewarm coffee, when a knock rattled the door like thunder. In stepped a sharp-dressed man—tall, tanned, with a salesman’s gleam in his eye and a stack of glossy brochures under his arm. He was a recruiter from Camp Stewart, hat in hand, voice smooth as river stones.

“I’ve heard a lot about you sir” he began, spreading the colorful pamphlets across the table like a treasure map. Dad was the coach of the 5<sup>th</sup> grade football team. Pictures leaped out: boys galloping on sleek horses across sun-dappled trails, crafting intricate leather belts by lantern light, diving into crystal-clear pools, cheering in raucous dodgeball wars. “This is Camp Stewart—the finest boys’ camp in Texas. Imagine your sons, Ben and Lane experiencing it all. *Free of charge*. All we ask is that you serve as a counselor. Help wrangle these lads, lead a few activities. It’s a calling, sir—a way to give ’em the world.”

Dad’s eyes widened. There was no way he could ever have afforded it. Camps like this? They were for the elite, the oil barons and ranch owners who jetted in from Dallas and Houston. Free? It was a miracle wrapped in opportunity. By night’s end, Dad shook the man’s hand, sealing the deal. We were going to Camp Stewart.

It was strictly a boys’ camp, a fortress of fun on one side of the highway, so Mom and my big sister Karen pitched camp at Goat Hill Cabins across the way—a humbler spot with creaky porches and river views, buzzing with girls’ camps nearby. But oh, Camp Stewart? That was “Rich Boys’ Camp” through and through. Parents from all over Texas rolled up in gleaming Rolls-Royces and polished Cadillacs, chrome flashing like jewels in the sun. Liveried servants—real ones!—sprang forward to unload monogrammed trunks, while chauffeurs tipped their caps. These kids arrived with custom rods for fishing, monogrammed saddles, and attitudes to match.

One camper stood out like a king: Howard Edward Butt Jr., heir to the H.E.B. grocery empire. Polished boots, easy confidence, the kind of kid who owned every room. Karen, ever the romantic at fifteen, developed an instant crush. She’d sneak peeks across the highway, giggling with her friends, whispering, “He smiled at me during the dance!” Mom just rolled her eyes, but we all teased her mercilessly.

The camp was a whirlwind of adventure, every day exploding with activities designed to build boys into men. Mornings kicked off with horseback riding—galloping herds thundering across dusty trails, wind whipping your face, the salty tang of horse sweat mingling with leather polish. Afternoons dove into leathercraft: hands sticky with dye, carving belts and holsters under shaded pavilions, the rhythmic *thwack* of mallets echoing like war drums. Contests ruled—tug-of-war over muddy pits, archery showdowns where arrows *twanged* into straw targets, riflery crackling on the range.

Evenings brought the thrills: dances with the girl camps up the road, awkward shuffles under string lights to twangy country tunes, hearts racing faster than feet.

I remember sittin in my cabin, across the way hearing the song from the gym “I Can’t Get No...Satisfaction” by “The Rolling Stones for the very first time. I was too young to attend the dance. Only teenagers. Dodgeball tournaments turned the gym into a battlefield—rubber balls *whizzing* like cannon fire, cheers deafening victors. Hiking trails wound through cedar thickets to hidden waterfalls, while overnight campouts under star-blanketed skies crackled with campfire tales, marshmallows toasting golden, guitars strumming hymns and tall tales.

And the Guadalupe River? A shimmering serpent carving the camp’s heart, with three legendary pools scooped from its bends: the Senior Pool, deep and daring for cannonballs and races; the Junior Pool, perfect for dog-paddling packs; and the Bathtub, a shallow scoop where wee ones like me splashed without fear. That’s where I learned to swim—flailing at first, Dad’s strong hands buoying me, chlorine-free waters cool against sun-hot skin. “Kick, son! Arms like wings!” he’d holler, until one glorious day, I stroked across solo, whooping triumphantly. From terrified toddler to river rat in a summer. Over time I passed each test at the Junior Pool (swim all the way across and back without stopping) And then the Senior Pool, a wide deep section of the river that we had to swim halfway, stop at the life-raft, and then to the other side. Then swim back!

Camp Stewart wasn’t just a place; it was a launchpad—a gift that bridged our humble world to horizons we’d never dreamed. Angels came in brochures that night, and they delivered paradise.

# Chapter 20

## 2 Weeks Later

Two weeks after the storm's fury had reshaped their world, the little town settled into a profound quiet that evening—the kind of sacred stillness where crickets hummed a gentle hymn and the fading sun painted the horizon in strokes of yellow and orange. Smooth white clouds glided lazily across the sky, like angels keeping watch, a divine reminder of mercies past. Ben and Lane trudged along the dusty road, arms laden with bulging grocery bags, the weight pulling at their shoulders after a solid forty-five-minute hike. Bikes were no good for this haul—too much to balance, too precious to risk tumbling.

“Mom will be happy we got everything she asked for,” Ben said, pausing to shift his load and gaze upward, awe softening his features. “Look at that sky, Lane. It’s like God’s saying, *I’ve got it all under control*. After the angels, the storm... feels like He’s still watchin’ over us.”

Lane kicked a loose stone, sending it skittering into the roadside weeds, his young face furrowed with concern. “Yeah... but you think Dyson’s mom is gonna manage until they find a proper place? Livin’ in that barn ain’t easy. No real kitchen, no beds... just hay and hope.”

Ben nodded solemnly, clapping his brother on the back. “She’s strong—like Mom. And tougher than most. But we’re gonna help every day if we have to. That’s what Jesus taught, right? ‘Whatever you did for the least of these, you did for Me.’ God provides through us, Lane. We’re His hands now.”

The words hung between them, stirring a quiet fire in their chests—a mix of boyish determination and budding faith, forged in floodwaters and miracles.

They reached the weathered fence surrounding Dyson’s makeshift home—the barn, patched and sturdy, a testament to resilience. From inside, the warm, golden glow of a single lantern spilled through cracked boards, dancing shadows across bales of hay like flickering prayers. The savory scent of boiling beans wafted out, humble but inviting. Dyson’s mom, Mary-Kate, moved with weary grace, setting a small wooden table with mismatched plates for their simple dinner. Dyson peeked around the corner, his eyes lighting up like stars at the sight of his friends.

“Hey!” Ben called softly, waving with his free hand, voice thick with affection. “Got some things for y’all.”

Dyson bolted out, bare feet kicking dust, grinning ear to ear. “You brought *more*? Aw, man—you guys are the best!”

“Of course we did,” Lane beamed, thrusting forward a crinkling paper bag heavy with canned goods—beans, tuna, corn—while Ben unloaded milk, fresh bread, and a precious small jar of peanut butter. “Mom packed it herself. Said, ‘Share what we have, boys. God multiplies the loaves and fishes.’”

Mary-Kate emerged, apron dusted with flour, her calloused hands trembling slightly as she took the bags. Tears welled in her eyes, spilling over as she clutched the bread to her chest like manna from heaven. “Oh, boys... y’all are angels yourselves. Come here.” She pulled them into fierce hugs, one by one, the embrace warm and floury. “The Lord’s been so good—through that storm, these provisions. We were prayin’ this very minute, askin for strength and perseverance. And here you are. *Thank You, Jesus!* God bless you. Bless your mama too.”

Dyson’s face transformed—eyes widening, mouth agape at the bounty. He ran reverent fingers over the peanut butter jar, then whooped, hugging it close. “Peanut butter sandwiches! And milk! Mom, we can have *real* supper tonight!”

The four of them gathered there on the barn porch, bags unpacked amid laughter and sniffles. Mary-Kate bowed her head right then. “Let’s pray, quick-like. Heavenly Father, thank You for these boys, for Your endless provision. Like the widow’s oil that never ran dry, You fill our cups. Help us trust, help us give back. In Jesus’ name, Amen.”

Amens echoed, voices thick with emotion—hearts overflowing not with abundance, but with gratitude. In that moment, amid hardship’s shadow, it wasn’t about wealth or want. It was kindness blooming from faith, thankfulness turning strangers into family, God’s love lighting the lantern’s glow brighter than any chandelier.

# Epilogue

## Answered Prayers and New Horizons

The following Sunday dawned bright and hopeful, the little church steeple piercing a sky unmarred by storm clouds—a canvas of endless blue, echoing the peace that had cradled them through trials. Ben, Lane, Dyson, and their families filed into the wooden pews of First Baptist, the air humming with organ hymns and the murmur of fellowship. Sunbeams slanted through stained-glass windows, painting rainbows on hymnals, as if heaven itself celebrated their survival.

Pastor Scott’s sermon hit like a thunderclap of grace: “*God’s provision isn’t always flashy—sometimes it’s a stranger’s push, a shared loaf, or a job whispered in faith. ‘Ask, and it shall be given.’ Brothers and sisters, let’s be vessels today!*” Hearts stirred—Karen, Ben, and Lane with their parents, Dyson and Mary-Kate beaming beside them—felt the call deep in their bones.

After the final *Amen*, as coffee percolated in the fellowship hall and donuts vanished, Dad stood tall. “Folks, we’ve been blessed through floods and angels. But our friends here—Mary-Kate and Dyson—need steady work, a real home. Anybody got businesses needin’ hands? Good, diligent workers?”

Murmurs rippled. Then, Mr. Hargrove—a kindly businessman in crisp overalls, owner of the town’s newest apartment complex—raised a weathered hand. “Mary-Kate, I’ve been prayin’ for an onsite manager. Place needs someone trustworthy and dependable—maintenance, leasing to folks so they feel right at home. You’ll get a free apartment, top floor with river views, and a comfortable salary to boot. That storm shook us all; so, let’s rebuild together.”

Mary-Kate’s hand flew to her mouth, tears cascading like joyful rivers. “Mr. Hargrove... I-I’d be honored. God’s hand, plain as day!” Hugs erupted—congregation erupting in cheers, prayers flying like confetti. Dyson whooped, fist-pumping Ben and Lane. “We got a *place!* No more barn!”

Word spread like wildfire: Dyson’s grandmother across town, with a heart for teaching and a cozy home stacked with books, stepped up. “Bring that boy over, Mary-Kate. I’ll homeschool him—Bible, math, adventures in history. God’s got plans!”

It worked out *beautifully*. The apartment gleamed—spacious kitchen for Mary-Kate’s cooking, balcony for Dyson’s stargazing, rooms echoing with laughter. Grandma’s lessons bloomed; Dyson thrived, devouring knowledge between escapades with his brothers-in-arms.

Ben and Lane? Their adventures multiplied—football fields conquered, rivers rafted, mysteries unraveled under watchful angels. Faith anchored them, family fortified them, community cheered them on. And so, dear reader, their stories continue—ripples of grace in a storm-tossed world. This author will keep trying to put together *The Adventures of Ben and Lane* because some tales, like God’s love, never truly end. **The End**

# *“The Adventures of Ben and Lane”*

## **Acknowledgments**

This book was shaped by the people whose love, faith, and steady presence filled my childhood with meaning. I am grateful first to Jesus Christ, whose guidance, protection, and mercy appear in every chapter of my life and every page of this story. His hand has carried me through storms—both the ones outside and the ones within.

To my family, thank you for the memories that inspired Ben and Lane’s Adventures. The laughter in the backyard, the long bike rides across dusty fields, the block parties on Poplar Avenue, and the lessons learned in church pews all live in these pages. You taught me what it means to help others, to stand firm in faith, and to trust that God’s timing is always perfect.

To the friends and neighbors who shaped the world I grew up in, your kindness and generosity left a mark that still guides me today. The spirit of small-town Texas—the sense that everyone looks out for one another—remains one of the greatest gifts of my life.

To the readers who pick up this book, thank you for stepping into this story with an open heart. My hope is that you feel the same warmth, courage, and faith that carried Ben, Lane, Karen, Dyson, Mary-Kate, Mom, and Dad through their journey.

And finally, to the angels—seen and unseen—who have shown up in my life at just the right moments. Their presence is woven into this story, just as it has been woven into my own path.

Thank you all for being part of this adventure.

***“The Adventures of Ben and Lane.”***

**This is a Book of Fiction!**

**Any similarities of the characters are purely coincidental.**

***Thank You For Reading!***

**Coming Soon Book 2**