

A TEEN THRILLER APPROVED FOR ALL AGES



UNDERGROUND UNDEBONND

One Underground Fort, Two Teenagers,
and Three Hours to Save Two Undercover
Agents. Can This Duo Do It?

LEE SILBER

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UNDERGROUND UNDERGROUND

A Teen Mystery



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UNDERGROUND

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This is a work of fiction. All the names, characters, and places are either invented or used fictitiously.

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*The Pacific Bluffs, the best
possible place to grow up.*

—LEE SILBER

NOTE FROM AUTHOR

This story was originally included in *Summer Stories*—way back in 2002, and I left it set in that time period. So when you're thinking, "Why don't they just use a smart phone?" The answer is, they weren't invented yet.

CHAPTER ONE

Cole was still shaking, curled up in a fetal position on the floor, his arms wrapped around his convulsing body as he sobbed and moaned. This was just too much for a fourteen-year-old to handle.

Upstairs, Cole's father, a Drug Enforcement Agent, was being "interrogated" by a drug lord and his henchmen. Cole had already lost his mother to cancer and now his father was being beaten and probably kidnapped no more than a few hundred feet from where he was hiding. He felt helpless and weak, wondering what would happen to him now. He also felt terribly guilty for not doing anything and everything to help his dad. What was wrong with him? Cole wondered if he was a coward.

When his mother was dying, he tried to be strong, but he couldn't control himself and he sat by her bed crying as she slipped away. For months, he was beyond distraught. He felt abandoned and alone. But that didn't even begin to compare to how he felt at this moment.

Cole's father was brave and refused to tell the men what they wanted to know. If he told them where he had hidden the money and the files they

were searching for, it would have led them straight to Cole's secret hiding place—a fort built ten feet underground next to their house. When they hit his father, Cole cried out “NO!”, but in his fort nobody could hear him. The intercom system only allowed one person to talk at a time and Cole's dad had managed to flip the switch inside the house so they couldn't hear the boy. Unfortunately, that meant Cole heard everything that was happening. At first they threatened his dad with pain, then they inflicted it until they got frustrated by his defiance and shot him in the leg. Nothing they did to him would have made him give up the goods. His father was a tough guy.

CHAPTER TWO

For a tough guy, Jack Ford was a big softie who spoiled his only son as best he could on a cop's salary. After Cole's mother died, the two of them became inseparable. Jack treated his son like an adult and Cole liked that. They did adult things together. After his dad got home from work they discussed different cases while they played catch out back. Then when it got dark, they worked on their secret project—Cole's underground fort.

Since they lived in a condominium complex, a tree fort was out of the question. Since they were the end unit next to an easement, they decided to dig one. They drew up the plans, got the supplies, and dug the hole without anyone being the wiser. The secret was putting a shed adjacent to the condo and off the garage that hid the hole. They could dig all they wanted and nobody suspected a thing. A tall eucalyptus tree also helped to hide the outbuilding. They spread the dirt around the easement late at night or Cole's dad would haul it off and dump it on his way to work. Sure, some of the neighbors were suspicious, but nobody really knew what the two of them were up to. Cole certainly wasn't going to tell

anyone. Not even his best friend, Jennifer, knew about the fort.

With the help of Cole's grandfather, a retired general contractor, the project took over a year to complete. It was worth the effort. When they finished, Cole had the ultimate hidden hideaway complete with electricity, carpeting, a bed, television with cable, a stereo, small refrigerator, desk, computer, and Play Station. Everything folded up or retracted into the walls to maximize the little space. An air duct that ran from the roof of the shed to the fort brought in fresh air. Then there was the two-way intercom system set up so he and his father could talk to each other. Cole's father also installed a sizable safe for their valuables and some work stuff he kept in there.

To get to the fort, they would enter the garage and go to a big metal cabinet on the far wall. The whole cabinet swung open. Inside the cabinet were all the things you'd expect to find—old paint cans and other lightweight junk—all screwed down. You had to look closely to see the handle to pull to turn the cabinet into a door. Once you swung the door open, you had descended down a ladder that led to the entrance to the 8 foot by 10 foot cinder block room. It probably wasn't for anyone with claustrophobia issues, but Cole turned it into a teenager's dream fort.

CHAPTER THREE

Only now Cole was lying on the floor wondering what to do next. He knew he should dial 9-1-1, but he was afraid the kidnappers would kill his father if they found out the authorities were involved—at least that’s what happened on television. There was only one person who would know what to do—Lauren, his father’s partner in the DEA. Cole knew that Lauren and his father were more than professional partners, they were partners when they were off-duty, too. At first they tried to keep it a secret, but eventually everyone knew what was going on. When their boss found out, he was furious and threatened to transfer one of them, but after he cooled off he conveniently forgot about it. The truth was, Jack and Lauren worked well together.

Cole appreciated the fact Lauren wasn’t trying to replace his mom. She was more like a big sister. His dad was in his early forties and Lauren was only twenty-eight. Thinking about his father and Lauren gave him the strength to get up. He wiped away his tears and gathered himself together. It was time to be a man.

Cole began thinking of what his dad would do in a situation like this. His dad would start by carefully examining the facts. Fact number one, the thugs didn't know where he was. So he could stay hidden away in his fort for as long as he needed. Down here he would be safe. But he was tired of playing it safe. He knew he had to take action. That's what his father would do.

He would carefully consider the risks, plan for the worst and hope for the best as he took calculated chances. The worst thing that Cole could think of was that the bad guys would catch him as he came out of the fort, and his only safe place in the world would be compromised.

He was sure that someone would be watching the house. He had to get in touch with Lauren. He was afraid to use the phone for fear they may be listening. Cole also wondered if they were able to monitor his e-mails, too. He decided it was a risk he couldn't afford to take.

Cole pondered his next move. He looked at his watch. 2:00 AM. If he could make it over to Jennifer's condo, a few doors down, he could wake her up and use her computer to send an e-mail to Lauren. Jennifer's mom was a single parent who worked the graveyard shift as a nurse at the nearby hospital, so he didn't have to worry about involving her in this mess. He wondered if he should get Jennifer involved. They have been best friends since third grade and he knew that if he didn't involve

her she would be furious. Yes, that was what he would do.

He packed a flashlight and his trusty Swiss Army knife in a backpack and climbed up the ladder leading to the secret passage in the garage. He stayed there for a long time and listened. Convinced nobody was in the garage, he unlocked the door and slowly pushed it open. Once inside the garage, he climbed up on a workbench to slide open a window. Opening the door would draw too much attention. This was the only way out. Very quietly and slowly Cole eased himself out. He slid the window shut, and crouched down and stayed still, listening for any signs of life. Soaking in sweat with his heart racing, he crawled on the grass, moist with morning dew, until reaching a row of bushes that he used for cover as he ran in a crouched position until getting to Jennifer's condo a few doors down.

CHAPTER FOUR

Cole made his way around to the back—like he'd done a million times before—climbing up the tree that was outside her window. To his relief, the window was open. He took out his Swiss Army knife and popped out the screen and set it aside. Then quietly slipped inside, being careful not to knock anything off the hope chest that sat below the window. So far, so good. He dropped down onto the floor and looked back out the open window to make sure nobody had seen him climbing up the tree. Closing the window and staying low, Cole crept up to Jennifer's bed.

Cole stood over her and listened to her breathing. He gently put his hand over her mouth to muffle the scream he knew was coming. He shook her, but she just moaned and rolled over. He just stood there staring, taking it all in—the silky chestnut hair that came down to the small of her back. The smell of clean sheets. The sweet sound of her gentle breathing. “Get a grip,” he said to himself.

Jennifer rolled over and he once again covered her mouth, this time giving her a good shake. That did it. Her big brown eyes got even

bigger and she tried to scream.

When she calmed down Cole whispered in her ear, “Jennifer, it’s me. My dad’s in trouble and I need your help.”

She grabbed his hand and pulled it away. “Oh my God, Cole. What happened?”

He explained in detail everything that happened that night. She looked skeptical.

“I’m not making this up,” Cole pleaded. “You gotta believe me!”

Jennifer saw the fear in his eyes and she stood and hugged him. Cole felt a strange stirring as Jennifer’s warm breath was in his ear saying over and over again, “It’s gonna be okay. It’s gonna be okay. We’ll find him.”

Cole almost broke down and cried, but he wanted to be strong. He gently (and rather reluctantly) pulled away. “Jen, I have to get in touch with Lauren, but I don’t want to use the phone in my house. It could be bugged.”

“You can call from here, but if they bugged your dad’s phone, Lauren’s phone is probably bugged, too. They could trace the number back to us.”

“You’re right. We need to get to a pay phone—and fast. We have to warn her,” Cole stated.

“There’s an old pay phone inside the rec center, and another by the pool, but that one is out in the open,” Jennifer pointed out.

“First, let me send Lauren an e-mail and tell her what happened and ask her what to do.”

Jennifer turned on her laptop and Cole quickly typed out a message while Jennifer wrote a message to her mom on a sticky note.

They quietly used the front door which faced away from Cole’s house and crept along, using the bushes as cover. It helped they’d played a game called “chase” with the other kids in the complex and knew how to move about stealthily.

It was so eerily quiet it seemed that the sound of their hearts pounding would give them away. They made their way to the easement and ran along the side of the buildings until they got to the street. This was where they would be most vulnerable. They had to cross the street to get to the playground that was next to the recreation center. It was sketchy. At the edge of the easement they stopped to regroup.

“Jennifer, I’m sorry I got you into this mess, but I didn’t know who else to turn to. If you want to go back, that’s cool.”

Jennifer grabbed his hand and pulled him toward her and kissed him softly on the lips. Cole was stunned. This was their first kiss. But he didn’t have time to enjoy it, because Jennifer yanked him and ran across the street.

CHAPTER FIVE

At that moment, a van turned the corner at the bottom of the hill and headed their way. “Nooooo!” they both yelled, hurling themselves over the hedges lining the other side of the street. Landing in the wet grass, they rolled to a stop out of sight. They crawled back to the hedges to peer over. The van turned into the complex and stopped. They looked at each other in fear when the passenger door opened and a man stepped out and started walking toward the street.

Cole was getting ready to run, but Jennifer put her hand on his shoulder. “Wait,” she whispered. The man was carrying something bulky in his hand. They couldn’t make out what it was. When he walked up the street he tossed something at the first condo he came to.

“It’s the paper delivery guy,” Cole said with relief.

“Of course,” Jennifer replied as she let out a big breath of air.

It was still dark, but Cole knew that if the paper was being delivered, daylight wasn’t all that far behind. “We’ve gotta go,” he said with urgency.

They made it to the playground without any further problems and hopped the fence into the enclosed area. The sand made it hard to move, but it also made for a soft landing. They used the playground equipment to shield their movements and made it to the rec center without being seen. The door was locked, but all the kids who lived there knew how to pick the lock with a pocket knife. Cole took off his backpack and got out his knife and worked the lock while Jennifer kept an eye out for the security guard. It took about ten seconds and they were in.

The phone was at the back of the rec room and next to the pool table. It was then that Cole realized one important part of the plan he'd overlooked—he forgot to bring change. He checked his pockets, nothing. It was pitch black and he didn't want to use his flashlight to rummage around in his backpack.

Jennifer whispered in his ear. "What's wrong?"

"I forgot to bring change," Cole said as Jennifer giggled and handed him two quarters she had in her pocket, and then punched him lightly on the shoulder.

He whispered back, "Good thinking. Now take off your shirt."

"What!?" Jennifer said, no longer keeping her voice down.

"Take off your shirt. I need something to put over my head so I can use my flashlight to see the numbers on the phone."

“Nice try. Here, use this,” Jennifer said as she pulled the cover off the pool table. It made a perfect tent and kept the light from illuminating the whole room. Both of them huddled under the cover as Cole punched in the number and let the phone ring until the answering machine picked up. “Hi, this is Lauren, I’m not...” Then a groggy Lauren picked up. “Hello?”

“Lauren, it’s Cole. I’m so glad you’re there.” He then explained what was happening and Lauren didn’t interrupt once as he told her everything.

When he was through she said in a tone he hadn’t heard her use before—authoritative and resolute, “Cole, I’m going to ask you some questions. Under no circumstances are you to tell me where you are or where you are going. Okay?”

“Okay.”

“Are you safe?”

Cole looked at Jennifer and said, “Yes.”

“Are you in your secret place now?”

“No.”

Lauren paused for a second and said, “Good. Now, how many men were there?”

“Three, I think.”

“Did you hear them call each other by name?”

Cole thought about it for a minute and then said, “I think my dad called one of them Santa.”

“Santa? Could it have been Santos?”

“Yes! That’s it. Santos.” There was silence on the other end of the line, so Cole asked, “What’s wrong?”

“Santos is a DEA agent we’ve been watching for a few weeks now. Look, Cole, let’s not talk about this on the phone, okay?”

“What does this mean? Do you know where they took my dad?”

“Cole, I’ll do everything I can to find your dad. I promise. It’s good you came to me first. We don’t know who we can trust. It’s up to us to get your dad back. Okay?”

“Okay.”

“Cole, are you alone?”

“No, I, uh, have someone you know with me. She wants to help.” Cole knew Lauren would know who he was talking about.

“Okay, good. I need you both to be strong. We need to get you two somewhere safe. Can you think of anywhere you can go?”

“Yes.”

“Cole, it’s not where I think it is, is it?”

“Don’t worry. I can get there without being seen. “

“All right. That’s probably the best place to hide for now. I need to ask you something, Cole, and I want you to be completely honest with me. Did your dad hide anything there?”

“Yes. There are folders, thumb-drives, and a lot of money.”

“Your dad showed you this stuff?”

“Well, not exactly. It’s in a safe and I . . .”

“So you know how to break into it. Good. Cole, be very careful. I want you to go to that safe place and sit tight. I’ll send you instructions soon. Do you understand what I’m saying?”

“Yes.” Cole knew she would e-mail him on his computer, but she didn’t want to say that and give away more than she already had.

“Don’t worry Cole, everything is going to be fine.”

“Okay, bye.”

CHAPTER SIX

As soon as Lauren hung up the phone, she let the facade fade and began putting the pieces together. She knew that Santos was probably hooked up with some heavy hitters who wouldn't think twice about killing a DEA agent—or two. She hadn't been concerned for her safety until this moment. She was also worried about Jennifer and Cole. She was their best hope and she had to go somewhere safe. What she didn't know was, it was already too late.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Cole filled Jennifer in on what Lauren had said. As he was telling her about Agent Santos he remembered something that made his gut twist up into a knot and brought him a new level of fear. “Santos. I remember him. He was at the Fourth of July party at the rec. I think I even played basketball with him.”

Jennifer looked at him long and hard and said, “That means he knows what you look like.”

“You’re right. We have to be extra careful getting back to the fort.”

“Fort? What fort?” Jennifer asked, clearly in the dark.

It was starting to get light as Cole said, “Let’s go, I’ll tell you about it on the way.”

After Cole told Jennifer all about his secret hiding place, she seemed hurt. “Why didn’t you tell me about the fort before?”

“My dad wouldn’t let me tell anyone about it. That was one of the rules.”

“Humph. What are the other rules?”

“I have to keep it kinda quiet down there so nobody can hear anything and figure out what we did. I also have to make sure that nobody sees me coming or going. But most of all, I have to keep the fort a secret.”

Jennifer pouted as they sneaked back the way they had come. When it was time to cross the street, they made sure no cars were coming and made a mad dash, this time going undetected. When they were safely across, Jennifer asked Cole, “What other secrets have you been keeping from me?”

“I don’t know. Why?”

“Because, I thought we were friends. I can keep a secret. You could have told me,” Jennifer said, pleading her case.

“No, I couldn’t. My dad would have killed me. I’m telling you now because . . .” Cole was silent for a minute, lost in thoughts about his dad.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Jennifer reached out and grabbed his hand. He squeezed it back and held on. It felt good. They walked hand in hand along the easement adjacent to the development.

The mood turned serious as they approached Cole's condo. Cole whispered to Jennifer that he was going to check the front and Jennifer was to see if anyone was watching the back, where the garage was located. They synchronized their watches and agreed to meet back in the same spot in exactly ten minutes. Jennifer whispered in his ear, "I love you." Before Cole could reply, she was gone.

Cole made his way slowly and silently toward the front of the condo. He was sweating profusely. He was careful not to make a sound, and he didn't. He kept his back to the wall and inched along until he got to the corner and then poked his head around for a look. Sure enough, there was a black BMW sedan parked at the end of the walkway. At first he saw an orange light blinking on and off every few seconds but quickly

realized it was a man smoking a cigarette. He was gripped with fear. Cole leaned back against the wall and slid down into a sitting position pondering what he saw. He got up and made his way back to Jennifer. She was waiting behind the shed next to his condo.

Cupping his hand over her ear he whispered, “There’s a guy in a BMW parked out front.”

She whispered back, “I didn’t see anything in back. Cole, it’s really starting to get light. Shouldn’t we get into your fort?”

“Give me five minutes. I’ll be right back.” Cole was faking a bravado he didn’t feel—and a little woozy from having Jennifer whispering in his ear.

He got to the end of the building and checked to make sure the car was still there. It was. He got down low and, using the bushes as cover, made his way to the next building. He ran up the alley until he reached the end. He was now behind the BMW, but hidden by the building. He pulled out a pen and a small pad of paper and jotted down the license plate number. Then he put the pad away and got out his trusty Swiss Army Knife. He set his backpack down, opened the knife and crawled on his stomach to the rear of the BMW. Without a sound he began making a tiny incision on the inside of the sidewall of the rear tire. Careful not to make the hole too big, he made a perfect hole that hissed ever so quietly.

He then did the same to the other rear tire. As he was about to make his way back to the safety of the building, the door opened.

Oh no! Cole's heart stopped. A cigarette hit the ground and a foot wearing a loafer ground it out. The door closed and he heard the man light another one. Figuring the man was preoccupied with his smoke and that the dome light had killed his night vision, Cole quickly took advantage of the opportunity and bolted for the building. He picked up his backpack on the way and peered around the corner to make sure he wasn't seen. The man in the car was looking at the front door of his house, so he felt reasonably safe that he hadn't been spotted. He ran back to Jennifer, stopping only to secure the items in his backpack so they didn't rattle when he ran.

CHAPTER NINE

Jennifer was anxiously waiting and pulled Cole down as he approached. “Where were you?” She whispered in his ear.

“I wanted to get a closer look at the guy in the car. Come on, let me show you my fort.” Cole stood up and opened the window that was just over their heads, standing on his toes and looking inside to be sure nobody was waiting on the other side. He opened the window and slowly pulled himself up and in. Jennifer handed him his backpack and Cole silently set it down before pulling her up and into the garage, making sure not to knock anything off the workbench under the window. He then slid down to the garage floor. Jennifer, however, wasn’t as careful and she accidentally dragged a wrench with her when she lowered herself to the ground. It clanked on the garage floor and sounded like a cymbal crashing.

“Quick, follow me,” Cole whispered. “Hurry!” He led her across the garage and swung the large metal cabinet open, pushed her in and then crowded in next to her. Cole used the handle on the back of the door to

pull it shut, ever so quietly. Suddenly the door from the kitchen to the garage burst open. They could hear someone moving about in the dark, bumping into things as he went searching for the light switch. Cole's cat hissed and he heard three quick muffled sounds in succession. They sounded like an air gun. Pffft. Pffft. Pffft. Then it was quiet again. They waited and saw light filter in under the door. They heard a man talking on a phone.

"Aw, Hell!" The stranger yelled, "I just killed a cat. I thought maybe the kid came back because I heard something fall in the garage, but it was just a freaking cat." Cole felt Jennifer shudder next to him, but she remained silent. Cole was pissed. He clenched and unclenched his fist. The man on the phone asked, "See anything out there?" There was a long pause and the man said, "What? You have *two* flat tires? Damn it. I'll be right there." The door from the garage to the kitchen opened and closed and then there was silence.

Cole waited a full minute, and pulled off his shirt and rolled it up before shoving it under the door. He figured if he could see light coming in, someone could see light coming out, too. He and his dad would have to fix that. Cole pulled a chain overhead and a light came on. He lifted a hatch to reveal a manhole-sized opening and a ladder leading down. "Follow me," he said and added, "Turn the light off and pull the hatch

shut on your way down.”

Cole dropped down into his underground fort and hit the lights. Jennifer entered the room next and was clearly in awe. She started to speak but wondered if anyone could hear above. As if reading her thoughts, Cole said, “It’s okay. It’s not soundproof down here, but they won’t hear you.”

“Oh my God,” she exclaimed. “Cole, this is amazing.” She looked around, taking it all in.

Cole discreetly grabbed the *Sports Illustrated* swimsuit edition and put it under the mattress while Jennifer was looking the other way. He cleared some things off the bunk and motioned for her to sit down. Cole went to his desk and turned on his laptop computer to check his e-mail. He tapped his fingers while he waited with Jennifer looking over his shoulder, her long silky hair resting on his exposed shoulder. He had three messages. He clicked on each one. They were all junk mail. “Dang!” Cole turned up the volume on the computer so he’d hear the audible alarm when new mail arrived and crawled under the desk.

“Cole, what are you doing?” Jennifer asked.

“There’s a safe built into the floor under this desk,” Cole said, as he handed her a pile of clothes so he could get to the safe. He quickly worked the combination lock and opened it. He began handing her papers, fold-

ers, photos, and a large duffle bag. She set them on the bed and they both began sorting through them.

“Jen, hand me that thumb-drive,” Cole said, pointing to what looked like a toy container ship mixed in with the other items from the safe. “I’ll check this out while you look through this stuff and see if you can find anything that refers to someone named Santos. Okay?” Cole pulled the boat apart to reveal the USB adapter hidden inside..

Jennifer nodded and started looking through the stack of folders, but her curiosity about the duffle bag got the best of her and she unzipped it. “Cole! Look what I found!”

CHAPTER TEN

Cole was busy trying to open the drive, but with no luck. He needed the password. He looked back and Jennifer was removing stacks upon stacks of hundred dollar bills. "I know. It's a lot of loot, isn't it," he said. Jennifer was fascinated by the money and began stacking the bundles, counting as she went. Cole continued to try and figure out what password his dad would have used to secure the disk. His birthday? No, too obvious. His own birthday? He tried it. No luck. His mom's birthday? He tried that and he was in. Wow, that was easy, he thought. Too easy. He began opening up the computer files. They contained his dad's notes from an internal investigation of agents Luis Santos and Mike Walsh. He read enough to know that this was probably what the hoodlums who kidnapped his dad were after.

Jennifer was quiet for quite a while so Cole turned and looked at her. She had made neat stacks of the bundles of money and was counting them. She then declared, "There is sixty-seven thousand dollars here." Cole already knew the amount. He had counted it several times before.

He tried to get her out of her trance.

“Jennifer, look at this,” he said as he showed her some of the contents of the computer disk.

“Wow!” She exclaimed. “Your dad was about to bust these guys.”

Cole was proud and sad at the same time. “Yeah. And look what it got him.”

Jennifer wrapped her arms around his neck and sat on his lap. “Cole, your dad is a hero. He’s tough and he’s smart. He’ll find a way to escape or he’ll send a message and get help. I know it. Your dad’s going to be okay.”

She then leaned in to kiss him and pressed herself up against him. Cole felt dizzy. His head was spinning. He was afraid to break away for fear the kiss would end, but he also couldn’t breathe. Fortunately, Jennifer pulled away and pulled him down to the bed by his hand. Cole wasn’t sure what was going to happen next, so when Jennifer put her head on his shoulder, he put his arm around her and after a short while they fell asleep in each other’s arms.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

They were startled by the audible alarm on Cole's computer alerting them to an incoming e-mail. They bolted for the computer only to see junk mail. He looked at Jennifer and smiled. She smiled back and said, "Cole, can I wear one of your shirts?" Cole began reaching for one on the floor and Jennifer quickly said, "A clean one, please." Cole handed her one and they sat on the bed. There was no awkwardness, thankfully. She looked up and asked, "Cole, what do we do now?"

"How long has it been since we talked to Lauren?" Cole asked.

"I don't know," Jennifer said as she looked at the clock on the wall, "About six hours. Do you think Lauren found your dad?"

"If she had she would have contacted us, don't you think?"

Jennifer looked at him for a long time and said, "Cole, are you okay?"

"Yeah, I'm okay. I'm worried, but I know my dad and Lauren are okay. We just have to go find them."

"You think the guys who took your dad got Lauren, too?"

Cole nodded and said, "That's exactly what I think. That's why Lauren hasn't contacted us."

"Cole, maybe it's time we called the cops," Jennifer suggested.

"Not yet. But we will." Cole started gathering up the files, disks, and money and shoving them into his backpack.

"Cole, what are you doing, cleaning up?"

"Hardly. I have an idea, but we have to get out of here. It's time to take matters into our own hands. It's up to us to save my dad."

CHAPTER TWELVE

“What if Lauren tries to contact you?”

“We’ll take the laptop with us. There’s also a phone in my dad’s car.”

“We’re taking your dad’s car?” Jennifer asked.

Cole nodded. “You know how to drive, right?”

“Uh, not exactly, but my mom let’s me drive in the parking lot by Target sometimes.”

“Okay, then it’s settled. You drive.” Jennifer just stared at him and frowned.

“Don’t worry. I mean, what’s the worst that can happen?” Cole asked, and regretted those words the minute he spoke them.

“Well, let’s see, we could die!” Jennifer exclaimed.

“You’ll do fine. Come on, let’s go. We have to be quiet when we get to the top of the ladder. I’ll go first and you follow me. My dad has a key stashed under the bumper. Once we get the car started I’ll open the garage door and we’ll have to hurry to get out. Okay?”

Jennifer nodded firmly.

“Good.”

Jennifer then asked, “What about the guy in the BMW watching the front of the house?”

“Don’t worry, unless he has AAA, I doubt he’ll be following us,” Cole said with a smile and a wink.

They crept out from behind the secret door and into the garage. The garage was never all that neat, but it was clear that someone went through it looking for something and had made a mess. They tiptoed around the debris and Cole reached under the car, found the hidden key and opened the door. He threw his backpack in the back seat and the two of them slipped into the car, quietly closing the doors of the Jeep Cherokee.

Cole helped Jennifer adjust the seat so she could see. Since Jennifer was taller than Cole, it was a good call she was the one driving. They whispered back and forth about how to start and stop the car. Between the two of them, they had it all figured out—or so they thought. Once the car was started Cole used the remote to open the garage door.

Cole shouted “Go!” and Jennifer backed up a little too fast, sending the car backward into a bush. She slammed on the brakes and Cole’s head snapped forward. He braced himself against the dash. Jennifer gave

him a crooked smile and shrugged. Cole raised his eyebrows and made a show of putting his seat belt on.

Jennifer concentrated on what she was doing and put the car into drive. She peeled out perfectly and they sped off. Once Jennifer gained some confidence, Cole wasn't so sure he should have let her drive after all—she was a maniac behind the wheel.

Fortunately, nobody was following them. Cole had learned how to spot a tail from his dad and his “six o'clock” was clear. They took back roads to drive the two miles they needed to go. The last thing they wanted was to get pulled over by the police.

Cole called Lauren's house from the car, but only got the answering machine. He left the car's phone number, knowing that Lauren would figure out they were on the move and safe. They drove through quiet suburban streets. Kids were playing in their front yards, gardeners were mowing lawns, and everything seemed so serene. Most of the streets were lined with old single story tract houses built in the 1950s, but were well kept and charming. The neighborhoods seemed warm and friendly. Comforting somehow.

Jennifer strained to see over the hood of the Cherokee as they looked for Lauren's house. Cole knew how to get there, but because they were taking back roads it was hard to tell where they were. They steered

clear of the main road and after a couple of missed turns and adventure-some U-turns, they made it to Lauren's. It was a little cottage near the edge of a canyon across from the Little League fields where Cole had played second base for the Puppy World Pirates.

As the they approached the house Cole said, "There. Right there," but Jennifer kept driving. "Hey, Lauren lives right there," turning his head and craning his neck to look back.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

“Cole, don’t you think we should make sure nobody is watching the house?”

Cole smacked his head and said, “Duh.”

“Duh is right. Let’s go around the block again and if the coast is clear, we can park around back.”

On the second pass everything looked normal, so they pulled around to the street behind the house and Jennifer parked the Jeep. They got out and laughed because the Jeep rested half on the curb and half on the street. Cole, trying to be supportive said, “Hey, not bad for your first try.” Jennifer just stood there staring at the Jeep until Cole broke the trance by grabbing her hand and pulling her toward the back of Lauren’s house.

They cut through the side yard of another house and tried to open the gate to Lauren’s backyard. It was locked. So they climbed over the small wood fence and walked to the sliding glass door. They didn’t need to go inside to tell that something was wrong. Lauren’s house had been

trashed. Things were thrown all over the floor and papers were strewn everywhere. They stayed there with their hands cupped around their eyes to shield the glare with their faces pressed to the glass.

Cole spoke first. "Let's see if her car is in the garage." They walked over to the detached garage and looked in the side window. Her Ford Explorer was still there.

Cole walked back toward the house and picked up several rocks until he found the one he was looking for. Jennifer tried to grab his arm to stop him from breaking the glass. "Wait! That'll make too much noise."

Cole pulled her hand away and turned the rock over and removed a key. "It's hollow," he said as he showed it to her. He unlocked the door to the garage and said, "Jennifer, check Lauren's cell phone in the car and press redial to see who she last called. I'll do the same with her home phone."

Jennifer nodded and pointed to her head. "Smart thinking, Cole."

Cole bowed for her and then unlocked the sliding glass door and made his way through the mess to Lauren's kitchen to find the phone.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

The house was a one-story one-bedroom place. When you came in the back door you were in the dining room. To the right was the kitchen. A counter and bar stools separated the two rooms. Directly across from the back door was the living room and front door entry. Lauren had used a corner of the living room to build a small nook with a desk and computer that she used as an office. The bedroom and bathroom were through a hallway on the left. The whole house was decorated in earth tones—very soft and peaceful. Cole walked into the kitchen, picked up the phone and hit redial. He waited while the phone rang on the other end.

“Hello?” The female voice on the other end said.

It sounded familiar.

“Hello?” She repeated. “Who is this?”

Cole waited before answering. “Who is this?”

“Cole, is that you? This is Lauren’s mom.”

“Oh, hello, Mrs. Van Pelt.”

“Cole, is everything all right?”

“Oh, yeah, fine.”

“How did you get my number, Cole?”

“Uh, I’m at Lauren’s house, Mrs. Van Pelt.”

”Is your father with you?”

“No.”

“Cole, put Lauren on the phone, I’m worried about her.”

“She’s not . . . she’s not here.”

“Do you know where she is?”

“I think she’s with my dad,” Cole said. This much was true.

“Cole, are you sure everything is okay? Lauren called me very early this morning and she sounded upset.”

Cole tried to sound upbeat, “Yes, Mrs. Van Pelt, everything is fine.”

“Cole, will you have Lauren call me as soon as she gets back.”

“Sure. Of course.”

“Cole.”

“Yes.”

“Why did you call me in the first place?”

Cole had to think fast. “Oh, right. I wanted to invite you to dinner with me and my dad.”

“That sounds lovely. Let me know when.”

“Soon,” Cole said, “Very soon.”

He hung up the phone he went to find Jennifer. She was sitting in the office nook trying to hack into Lauren’s computer. Cole came up behind her and she turned around and pulled him down for a kiss. She smiled. “I’m surprised that the people who trashed this place didn’t take the computer. It was on when I sat down.”

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

“Think they downloaded everything onto a thumb-drive?”

“Probably. See here. Someone was using the computer at 6:00 this morning.”

“What time did I send the e-mail?”

“Before that, I think. Here it is,” Jennifer said as she tapped the screen. “It was read, but by who?” Cole said as he stared at the screen.

“What else is in there?”

They scrolled through Lauren’s messages until they came to one that was from Cole’s dad to Lauren. They each read it silently. Both were stunned. The letter indicated that Lauren and Cole’s dad were stealing cocaine from dealers they had busted and then selling it on the street. Cole just stared at the screen.

Jennifer spoke first. “Cole, you don’t believe this is a real e-mail from your dad, do you?”

Cole rubbed his temples, “No, of course not,” he said with conviction.

“My dad isn’t dirty. No way is he involved in this. If anything, they were working undercover trying to root out who the real crooked cops are, probably that Santos guy and whoever was waiting outside my house in the BMW.” Cole didn’t want to believe that his dad, his hero, was a crooked cop. He hit the delete key .

“Lauren’s last call on her cell phone was to Pizza Palace. What did you find out from the phone in here?” Jennifer asked, trying to change the subject.

“Her last call was to her mom this morning.”

“What did she say?”

“I’m not sure, but her mom said Lauren sounded different. She was worried. Oh, and she’s coming to dinner next week with me and my dad.”

Jennifer raised an eyebrow as Cole said, “Long story.”

“Ya know, whenever I’m scared I call my mom at the hospital before I go to bed. It makes me feel safe just to hear her voice,” Jennifer said as she pondered her current situation and hoped her mom wasn’t too worried about her.

“I’ll bet Lauren was scared about what she thought might happen to her.”

“So, what do we do now?”

Cole replied, "We have to find Santos. If we can find him, I bet we'll find my dad and Lauren, too."

"Is it time to call the police?" Jennifer asked.

"We can't bring them in yet. They'll think my dad's a corrupt agent and arrest him, or worse. We have to get to him first and let him clear this up with the evidence from the safe."

"I agree, but how are we going to find out where they took them? Cole, are you listening to me?"

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Cole was staring down at a pad of paper next to the computer. The top page was torn off. “Jennifer, find a pencil. I have an idea.” Cole pulled out his Swiss Army Knife and took the pencil from Lauren. He scraped the lead onto the blank pad of paper.

“What are you doing?”

“I’m trying to figure out what Lauren wrote on the page above this one.”

“Will this really work?”

“I don’t know. I saw it on TV once and it worked,” Cole said in all seriousness.

Sure enough, the last impression left on the page on the page read Real Deal Produce. “Do you think this means anything?” Jennifer asked.

“Maybe. Look for a phone book,” Cole said.

Jennifer found one and looked up Real Deal Produce. They weren’t listed in the yellow pages, but they were in the white pages. Jennifer read

the address out loud: "10145 Armistad Road. That's way down by the border."

"Exactly. Lauren wouldn't order groceries to be delivered by a company that far away. Besides, I bet they don't even sell to the public. I bet they don't even sell produce," Cole said as he lifted his eyebrows for effect.

Jennifer tore the page out of the phone book and added, " Plus, they're right by the border where all the drug smugglers are."

"Let's get out of here," Cole said.

"Does your dad have a map?"

"Yes, he has one of those Thomas Brothers maps."

"Good. We'll need it. I've never driven to the border before."

Cole looked at her and said, "You've never driven anywhere before today."

As they got to the Jeep they both laughed when they saw how it was parked. That's when Cole said, "Jen, do you mind if I try driving?"

Jennifer gave him a pouty look and then said, "Okay. I'll look up the address on the map while you drive. My mom says men have no sense of direction."

Cole ignored the comments and started the car.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

As they were driving down the freeway Cole was smiling to himself. “What’s so funny?” Jennifer asked when she looked at him.

“I don’t know. I’m pretty proud of us. We have a good idea where my dad is, I’m driving on the freeway, I kissed a beautiful girl, and it’s not even noon yet.”

Jennifer gave him a peck on the cheek and squeezed his knee. She wanted to push his leg down so he would drive a little faster—they were barely going the speed limit—but she didn’t want to burst his bubble. He was right, it had been a good day. If things worked out and they rescued Cole’s dad and Lauren, this was going to be a good summer. She and Cole would be a couple and could hang out in Cole’s fort.

If not for Cole, she would be very lonely. Her mom worked long hours at the hospital so Jennifer was often alone and didn’t like spending time at her dad’s. She despised her stepmother and stepbrothers. Last summer her mom had sent her to live with them in New Jersey, and she was bored to death. She would much rather stay at home and hang

out with Cole. As she was lost in thought Cole mumbled something.

“What? Sorry, I didn’t hear you.”

“I said, I love you.” Cole looked straight ahead as he said it, waiting for her reaction.

Jennifer scooted over next to him and whispered in his ear, “I love you, too.” She ran her hand through his hair sending electric shocks up and down his spine. Cole tried to concentrating on driving.

“Jennifer, see those numbers on the median next to the freeway.”

“Yeah,” she replied.

“Those tell you how far you are from the border.”

“Hmmm.”

“The last one said six miles. Keep an eye out for the next exit.”

“Okay.”

They somehow missed the exit because the next thing they knew they were at the border crossing. Cole pulled off the freeway and after much arguing agreed they should stop and ask for directions. They stopped at a Denny’s for lunch and asked the waitress for directions to Armistad Road. She told them it wasn’t far and asked if they were on bikes. Cole started to say they drove there, but Jennifer kicked him under the table while smiling sweetly. Quickly Cole corrected himself and said that they were in fact on bikes. The waitress said there wasn’t a whole lot

of see there and to not be out after dark. As she walked away she told them they made a cute couple. They put their heads together, smiled and said “thank you.”

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

As they approached the address of Real Deal Produce, Cole began to get anxious, the fear welling up inside him. Jennifer, on the other hand, was calm as could be. “There. Over there, see it?” Jennifer said as Cole followed her finger pointing out the building.

The place looked almost deserted except for a couple of vans and a black BMW. “That’s the BMW I flattened the tires on near my house,” Cole said as he studied the area around the New Deal Produce building trying to figure out how they would get in.

“Did you see that place? It sure doesn’t look like a produce place to me,” Jennifer said. “The fence has barbed wire on top and the whole entrance is gated.”

“We need some supplies,” Cole said as they made a U-turn and went past the building again. “Look for security cameras and dogs this time.”

“I don’t see any,” Jennifer said as she strained to see.

“Good.”

“Where are we going?”

“To the Ace Hardware we passed a couple of blocks back,” Cole replied.

“Cole, maybe we should call the police now.”

“Not yet. Soon, but not yet.”

CHAPTER NINETEEN

“There, that should do it,” Jennifer said as she handed Cole the note just the way he had instructed her to write it—his handwriting was just too sloppy. “Think they’ll buy it?”

“Oh yeah, this is going to be a big sale.”

Cole pulled five hundred dollars from the duffle bag and climbed out of the Jeep. He looked in before shutting the door. Jennifer looked concerned. “What if they arrest you?”

“They won’t, trust me. Just because I’m obviously buying tools for a break-in doesn’t make me a criminal. Besides, your note from my dad is pretty convincing.”

“I don’t know, I’m worried,” Jennifer said as she slid over to the driver’s seat.

“If I’m not back in thirty minutes, go to the police and tell them everything. I’ll do the same. But this will work. This note looks real. It looks like my dad sent me to the store to get some supplies.”

“Okay. Be careful, Cole, and hurry.”

“Don’t worry. It’s gonna be fine,” he said as he headed toward the hardware store. Cole had no trouble buying everything he needed. In fact, the sales clerk was very friendly and helpful. It’s true, Cole thought to himself. Ace really is the place for the helpful hardware man.

He left the store with bolt cutters, wire cutters, pliers, a cordless drill, gloves, flashlight, rope, ladder, black grease, and a black duffle bag. He didn’t know what he would need to break in, so he bought everything he could think of.

When he got to the car door to get in, Jennifer reached over and unlocked the door and pulled him in. “Get down!” She cried.

“Why?” Cole asked as he ducked down in the seat.

“That BMW is parked one row over.”

“Jeez, that was close. Let’s get out of here.”

Jennifer started the car and drove away while Cole stayed low. She drove for a few blocks and found a park with a big parking lot and pulled in. Cole began unwrapping and loading the tools into the duffle bag he bought while Jennifer called her mom from a pay phone to tell her she was okay and that she was going to have dinner with Cole and his dad, which wasn’t a complete lie, hopefully.

CHAPTER TWENTY

When she got back to the car they began to formulate their plan. They went over it again and again to look for flaws. There were too many to count, but it could work if everything went their way. That was one very big if. They tried not to think about being two teenagers taking on a crooked DEA agent and a bunch of drug dealers. Instead, they focused on the fact that Cole's father and Lauren needed them to be strong and smart, and that's what they were going to do.

By the time they had it all worked out it was getting dark. Cole painted his face with the black grease while Jennifer made sure he had the thumb-drive, money and files in his backpack so he could exchange them for his dad and Lauren, if he had to. They synchronized their watches and went over the plan one last time.

"Okay, let's roll. I'm ready," Cole said as he tried to sound brave, but his insides were turning to liquid. He was scared out of his mind. Jennifer nodded and tried to hide her fear.

"Okay, you've got thirty minutes. If you aren't back at the rendez-

vous point by then, I'll call in and report a fire at New Deal Produce," Jennifer said, her voice breaking from the fear she was feeling.

"We can trust the fire department," Cole said. He turned the dome light off as Jennifer slowly drove by New Deal Produce.

CHAPTER TWENTY ONE

When they were past the building, Cole opened the passenger door, threw out the duffle bag and backpack and let himself roll out onto dirt on the shoulder of the road. Even at three miles an hour, he tumbled pretty hard. He lay there and watched the Cherokee fade into the distance. He gathered the gear and quickly ran toward the building—staying low, he made his way around the tall fence to the back of the New Deal building, using the bushes and darkness as cover. He crawled out from under the shrubs and shimmied his way up to the fence. He felt around for a rock and gently tossed it at the fence to make sure it wasn't electric. Maybe he watched too much TV, because nothing happened.

Cole lay there and listened for what seemed like an hour, which in reality was only a couple of minutes. Everything was quiet except for a passing car or two. He found a spot where a bush grew up against the fence and pulled out the bolt cutter. He began cutting a hole in the fence. He figured this way, anyone walking around wouldn't see the hole. When he was through cutting, he buried the bolt cutter in the dirt and crawled

through the hole and into the lot. Cole lay very still, looking around until he found the cameras he knew had to be there. They were directed at the loading dock in back and the front entrance. In addition, both places were lit up with floodlights. That was better than motion sensor lights, Cole thought.

The BMW and two vans were parked near the loading dock. Cole noticed a door away from the main road. The building had no windows, so sound couldn't carry inside. "Lucky for me," Cole thought. The cars were parked right under a floodlight and in front of a camera. Cole pulled out his wrist rocket and felt around in his backpack for some bb's. He was able to take out the light with his second shot. "Not bad."

Cole lay still to see if someone would notice the light go out and come to check on it. No one did. While he lay quietly, he checked his watch. Fifteen minutes had gone by so far. He was sweating profusely. This was taking a lot longer than he had planned. He should be inside by now. He decided it was now or never and began crawling in the dark toward the parking lot. Once he got to the BMW he pulled out his knife and flatted the tires again. He did the same to both vans, making small holes that leaked air without making a lot of noise.

Just as he put the last hole in the rear tire of the second van, the back door to the building swung open and he heard two men arguing.

Cole's heart almost stopped beating and he froze.

The two men stood outside talking and then they stopped. Cole's mind wanted to make a run for it, but his body was paralyzed with fear. "God, what am I doing?" He carefully scrunched down behind the rear of the van. He got a whiff of cigarette smoke and felt a wave of relief come over him.

CHAPTER TWENTY TWO

The two were only outside to smoke. “Whew.” Cole relaxed a little and tried to listen to what they were saying.

“Santos is taking this thing too far. Making two DEA agents disappear won’t be easy. People will ask a lot questions, man. Plus, we never got Ford’s notes, the thumb-drive, or the money. If he was gonna give ‘em up, he would have by now. I mean, the beating we gave him, you would think . . .”

The other guy just said, “Yup.”

“I mean, it’s Santos’ stupidity that got us into this mess in the first place.”

“Uh-huh.”

“I think it’s time we start to turn up the heat on his partner. I mean, how would you like to watch your girlfriend get beaten right before your eyes? Ford will talk. You watch.”

The other man said, “I don’t think she knows where the stuff is. I mean, I already broke all the fingers on her left hand. If she knew, she

would have said. Trust me.”

Cole wanted to pull out his gun and shoot the two of them right there and then, but he knew better. So he continued to listen.

“Maybe the best thing is to drag Ford and Agent Van Pelt through the tunnel and into Mexico and make sure Santos goes, too. Then we can make ‘em all disappear at once. I mean, we already set it up so Ford and Van Pelt look corrupt. Let’s just say they were working with Agent Santos, too. They were all in this together. We can make it look like a drug deal gone bad and kill ‘em all and dump them in the desert. It’ll be days or weeks before they’re found. What do you think?”

“Sure, whatever.”

“Hey, do you hear that?”

“What?”

“It sounds like sirens.” They were both silent, listening.

“Shoot! It’s the cops and they’re heading this way. I can hear ‘em getting closer.”

“Calm down. That’s a fire engine. Listen.”

“Sounds like a cop car to me.”

“There’s probably a brush fire somewhere.”

“You think?”

Just then the fire trucks came into view. “Crap! They’re heading

this way!" They both threw their cigarettes down and made a dash for the door.

Santos peeked his head out. "What's going on?"

CHAPTER TWENTY THREE

The fire trucks pulled over next to the front gate and the firefighters got out looking for the fire they were told was burning at this location.

Santos and the two smokers went inside and locked the door behind them.

Cole grabbed his backpack with the evidence, got up and made a run for the fire trucks. He waved his hands as he approached and yelled for help. The lights of the trucks were flashing and firemen were standing around in their gear. Jennifer was running up from across the road. Cole made it to one of the fireman who happened to be the chief.

“Got...to...help...my...dad,” Cole said between gasps for air.

“Son, slow down. Are you the one who called this fire in?”

Cole had his hands on his knees trying to catch his breath. “Yes, but it’s not about a fire, sir.”

“If this is a false alarm boy, you are in a whole heap of trouble,” the fire chief yelled. The other firefighters gathered around to see what was going on.

Cole finally lost it and began to cry. He was so close to saving his dad and seeing this thing come to an end that his pent-up emotions began to overtake him. Jennifer spoke for him.

“Sir, what Cole is trying to tell you is that his dad is in that building and he is in grave danger.”

The chief could see that these two weren't typical teenagers out to have a little fun. This seemed serious. “Is that true, kid?”

Cole got a hold on himself. “Yes, my dad is DEA agent Jack Ford, and he and his partner Lauren Van Pelt were kidnapped and brought here.”

“Even if that's true, I can't just break into this building,” the chief said.

“You have to,” Cole pleaded. “You're my only hope. Please. You have to believe me. They're in there. I swear. Please.”

The chief took a long look at Cole and yelled out, “Fasselli, Shoemaker, go get the bolt cutters, we're going in.” The chief pointed to the EMT and said, “You, too. Come on, let's go.”

After they got the gates open, the chief told Cole and Jennifer to wait.

“No way. You gotta let me go. My dad's in there.”

“Son, I don't even think I should be going in there, let alone a

couple of kids.”

“Sir,” Fasselli chimed in, “We did get a call there was a fire there, so we’re just investigating, right?”

The chief stared at Fasselli, knowing he was right, but tried to maintain his authority and chain of command.

“Call the police and have them send a patrol car,” the chief said to another firefighter, and then he looked at Cole and Jennifer and said, “One way or another, someone is going to get arrested tonight. I hope for your sake it isn’t one of you two . . . or both.”

CHAPTER TWENTY FOUR

When they reached the door to the building they found it locked, so Fasselli and Shoemaker used crowbars to force the door open. Cole ran inside past the empty office and out into the warehouse with Jennifer and the chief on his heels.

Out of the shadows Agent Santos appeared flashing his badge to the chief and said, "What's going on here?"

"Is this your dad?" The chief asked.

"No. This is the guy who kidnapped my dad. My dad was investigating him and his guys. That's why he took my dad and his partner hostage."

"Kid, you have an overactive imagination. Do you see your dad here? Because if he was, I would have to arrest him. He's the one under investigation for corruption, not me," Santos said.

The chief had heard enough. "Cole, it looks like we got us a real conundrum. What did you say your father's name was?"

"Agent Jack Ford, and he's not dirty. I'll prove it," Cole said as he

opened his backpack and handed the thumb-drive to the chief along with the files he had pulled from the safe.

When Santos saw them he pulled a gun from behind his back and pointed it at the chief. "I'll take those."

CHAPTER TWENTY FIVE

“Not so fast, Santos,” the chief said.

“Look, don’t be a hero, chief. Just hand over the thumb-drive and the files and I’ll be on my way.” Santos waved his gun at Cole and asked, “Where’s the money?”

Cole picked up the backpack and showed Santos the stacks of cash.

“Bring it here. Now!” Santos told Cole.

Cole started walking over to Santos to hand it to him but stopped and stood next to the firefighter named Fasselli.

“Don’t be stupid, kid. Give me the money,” Santos demanded.

“Not until you tell me where my dad and Lauren are.”

“That’s not the way it works,” Santos said as he pointed the gun at Cole’s head. “You give me the money and I’ll take you to your dad.”

The chief spoke up. “Cole, do as he says. Give him the money.” Cole looked at the chief, nodded and tossed the backpack to Santos. When Santos reached out to catch the bag, Cole grabbed Fasselli’s ax and swung

it at Santos, who was off-balance after catching the backpack. Cole swung the ax with all of his might and caught Santos square in the shoulder. The sound was the same as when a batter connects with a fastball. Santos went down in a bloody heap. The other firefighters subdued him while the EMT rushed over to examine the gash in Santos' shoulder.

Just then the other firefighters burst into the building. "You guys okay?" One asked. "We heard the whole thing over the radio. Who had their mike cued so we could hear?"

Shoemaker raised his hand.

The chief patted Cole on the shoulder as he took the ax away and said, "Good work, son. You did good. Now, let's go find your father." Then he tipped his hat to Jennifer and said, "You too, little lady. Good work. But next time, leave the detective work to the professionals." He then began barking out orders for the men to spread out and search the building. At that moment, the police arrived.

Santos clutched his arm and moaned while several police officers kept an eye on him. Cole walked over to him and yelled, "You're gonna tell me where my dad is" Cole screamed as he tried to strangle Santos.

"Not gonna happen," Santos replied. Not intimidated by a mere boy.

Cole kicked him in his bad arm and Santos wailed.

Cole remembered that the two guys had said something earlier about a tunnel. "Wait! Look for a door or passageway," Cole yelled. "It leads to a tunnel."

Santos squirmed, but said nothing.

The chief said to everyone, "You heard the boy. Let's go find it."

Everyone spread out. After a few minutes Jennifer called out, "I found it!"

They all rushed to the corner of the building. Much like Cole's secret passage in his garage, this one was disguised as a water heater.

"Look at those skid marks on the floor," Jennifer said. "This whole unit must swing open."

The chief looked carefully and said, "Boys, let's not waste any time, let's open this up."

Cole was studying the water heater when he said, "Wait. Look here," as he turned the switch to "on" and then pulled on the empty water heater.

Sure enough, it swung open and revealed a set of stairs that led to a small hallway a few feet below the ground. At the end of the hallway there was a metal grate in the floor. They all scrambled down the stairs and lifted up the grate. This led to a ladder. Cole didn't wait to be told he couldn't go. He simply climbed down into the darkness followed by

the chief with a flashlight and several police officers. At the bottom of the ladder were Cole's dad and Lauren. Both were tied and gagged—but alive.

CHAPTER TWENTY SIX

One week later Cole's father was released from the hospital after having been treated for a superficial gun shot wound in the leg, multiple fractures, and a concussion. Lauren had five broken fingers and some bumps and bruises, but was otherwise fine.

The next day the story was all over the news. It turned out the tunnel was being used to smuggle drugs and people into the United States and money back into Mexico.

Agent Santos stumbled across it while conducting an investigation. Instead of turning the smugglers in, he asked for a piece of the action.

When Jack and Lauren uncovered what was going on, they began to build a case. The more they investigated, the more they realized just how many people were involved and how deep the corruption in the department went. Someone got wind of their findings and told Santos.

To protect the integrity of the case, Agent Ford kept a second set of files and disks from the investigation in his home safe along with bribe

money confiscated during a sting operation involving Santos. When Santos found this out, he tried to recover the money and the evidence, but both Jack and Lauren refused to cooperate despite the beatings.

EPILOGUE

A publisher thought the whole incident would make for a compelling book and offered Jack and Lauren a sizable sum to write about it. They took the deal and promptly retired from the DEA, but not before completing their investigation which led to the arrest of several crooked cops and some key drug dealers.

When the full story surfaced about how Cole and Jennifer saved the day, they became media darlings and won several citations. Although the appearances and interviews cut into their summer vacation, they didn't mind. They were too busy being in love.

DISCUSSION WITH THE AUTHOR

Did you ever build an underground fort?

Man, I wish. I thought about it, dreamed about it, and even attempted it, but never built anything like the underground fort described in this book. That said, my friends and I did build forts of all kinds when we were teenagers. One was built out of wood, and tucked inside a hollowed out bush so no adults knew it was there. By the time it was discovered and destroyed, we had turned it into a pseudo dorm room and like college, a lot of learning happened in that fort.

Is this book based on your teenage years?

Uh, we don't speak of those trying times. I'm kidding. I led a charmed life—unlike the character in this book. I did have a girlfriend when I was Cole's age, but the character of Jennifer is more like my friend and neighbor, Nancy Burg. We did not date, but we hung out during the summer and I spent a lot of time at her house. Interestingly, it was her mom who turned me on to Jimmy Buffett. It's a long story—for another book.

Weren't tunnels like the ones you describe found going from Mexico to San Diego?

Yes, years later. At the time I wrote this story, I was vaguely aware that this was happening—or a possibility—but I didn't get the idea from the news . . . or first-hand experience.

Why have most of your novels been for young readers?

That is a good question. The simple answer is, except in certain circumstances—like my novels *The Pelican*, and *Runaway Best Seller*—there's no need for bad language, gratuitous violence, or uncomfortable scenes. The more complicated answer is, I'm worried about the future of books. Adults hardly read any longer, and kids, forget about it. My hope is that by writing short novels kids can relate to will inspire them to read more (or at least a little more than they do now).

Do your own kids read your books?

My son Evan was an avid reader when he was younger. My other son, not so much. I tell them all the time, it's a fact that people who read are proven to be more successful. Their reply is, "You read and look at you." Ouch. So we now read my books aloud as a family, a chapter or two each night. The boys are becoming believers in books—and their dad.

If this book were made into a movie, who would you want to play Cole and Jennifer?

Hmmmm. For Cole, I would choose Noah Schnap from *Stranger Things*. To play the role of Jennifer, I'd go with Mackenzie Foy from the movie *Interstellar*.

What lessons can be learned from this book?

First of all, don't underestimate yourself. Teenagers today are extraordinary, and can do more than they think they can. Step away from the Playstation, put your phone down, and build something. (I'm not saying you need to make an underground fort, but do something constructive and creative with your hands.) Lastly, make the most of summer. It's good to be busy, but a lazy summer day with a friend is not a waste of time.

What about young love?

What about it? I'm kidding. Adults may discount your feelings due to your age, but to a teen, your first love[s] is important and powerful to you. My first love, Rhonda Gordon, was a big part of my life when I was fourteen—until she moved away.

You dedicated this book to The Pacific Bluffs. Is this book based on a specific place?

Yes, I used The Pacific Bluffs, a real place, as the backdrop for the story. It's where I grew up. . . . a long time ago. It was (and still is) a magical place. If I may, I'd like to take a trip back to the 1970s, and what it was like to live in the Pacific Bluffs as a kid. Come on, indulge me. You'll like it. The Bluffs (what we called it) was a sprawling development that was home to many families and a ton of kids—all around the same age. Like in the movie *Sandlot*, we played Wiffleball from dawn to dusk in an area we called, "The Square". We had full seasons, kept stats, and took it seriously. The only thing that got in the way was when we would all go to the Olympic-size pool at the center of the complex. There was a slide, a high dive, and a lower diving board. The massive pool was 12 feet deep in places. Along with the pool was a basketball and volleyball court, a large grass area, and recreation center. The rec room had two pool tables, ping pong, a television, couches, and indoor shuffle board. It was the perfect place to hang out—and the Rec Director (Mel Salazar) was the coolest guy. After dinner, our parents let us loose and 40 to 50 kids would all play "Kick the Can" (it's a lot like hide and seek and chase, but with teams). We had a lot of freedom, but were always doing something (riding our bikes around the neighborhood, playing sports, or building forts).

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Like this book, I'll keep my acknowledgments short and to the point.

I'd like to thank the San Diego Book Awards Association. Winning an award for my first work of fiction in 2002 (after several awards for my non-fiction titles) encouraged me to continue and write five full-length novels. I'd also like to give a nod to Chet Cunningham, the founder of the San Diego Book Awards (and a very prolific writer).

I'm blessed to have the support of my wife and two sons. I couldn't do what I do without them.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Lee Silber is the author of 26 books including fiction, nonfiction, and young adult titles. Silber has won eleven awards for literary excellence, including, “Best Stories” from the San Diego Book Awards for his first work of fiction, *Summer Stories*—“Underground” was one of the stories. Lee now lives in Mission Beach, California with his wife and two sons, but he grew up in The Pacific Bluffs, the place featured in this book.

You can purchase *Summer Stories* from Amazon in Kindle format, which contains this story and four others like it.

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