

## Chapter 1

Jayrod stood at the edge of the gully, paralyzed with fear, as the thick vine swung toward him for the third time. Horace Plunk and his two hangers-on, Bobby Greenhall and Tony Farse, hadn't seemed a bit scared when they swung across, but nothing ever scared them. In the distance he heard the tinkling of the bell - her bell - the bell even Horace Plunk didn't dare ignore. Below he saw the tangle of honeysuckle and briars. *Tinkle, tinkle, tinkle.....*

"Grab it fatass!" Horace taunted as the vine came within reach.

"He's skeered," Bobby said. Jayrod closed his eyes, bit his lip, and swallowed the lump in his throat. The vine hit the fingers of his outstretched hands and he grabbed it. It felt rough in his hands, like a rope badly twisted and peppered with burrs. He opened his eyes and pushed off with his feet, toward his classmates, knowing he hadn't pushed hard enough. Over the ditch he swung, trying not to look down as he passed halfway, then three-quarters, until his feet touched the red dirt where his tormentors stood ready to push him back should he manage to find his balance. They didn't have to. A toehold proved not enough and he swung back toward the other bank, missing it by several inches. Like a pendulum he swung, back and forth, to and fro, until his hands slipped and he spiraled downward. Briars ripped the flesh of his bare legs and arms as he plummeted ten feet to the bottom of the ravine.

"Jayrod broke the vine!" Horace laughed. "Big fat Jayrod!"

At first he thought he was blind, or blurred, then he realized it was his glasses. One lens was missing and the drastic difference in vision between left and right gave him the sensation of being knocked in the head. Glasses were a big deal. A huge deal.

"Think he's dead?"

"Nah, he ain't dead, Bobby. He's just too fat to get up," Horace said.

The bullies cackled themselves giddy while Jayrod felt around for the missing lens in the tangle of briars and weeds and pine seedlings. He wallowed out quite a circle by the time he managed to get to his feet. Something cracked beneath his left sneaker and it sounded like glass.

All at once Horace and his gang fell quiet, then scampered away like mice, leaving him in the bottom of the gully to find his own way out.

*Tinkle, tinkle, tinkle.* The sound of Mrs. Snitch's bell was muffled but unmistakable. Climbing out was impossible. Both banks went straight up. He looked left, then right, but the thicket was taller than he was and blocked his view. Every way he turned he was met with briars that ripped at his arms and at the tender white flesh of his half-naked legs. There was nothing to do but pick a direction and hope it led somewhere.

The next few minutes seemed like an eternity. Off in the distance he could hear the vigorous shake of the bell. One step at a time he pushed back the briars, trying not to stick his fingers and thumbs, until the gully widened and grew shallow enough for him to climb out. As he neared the picnic area he could hear Mrs. Snitch's aggravated voice.

“Where is Jayrod? Has anyone seen Jayrod?”

“No ma’am,” Horace said. “Maybe he got lost in the woods or something.”

*Tinkle, tinkle, tinkle.....*

Mrs. Snitch told the children to finish their lunches and be sure to throw their brown paper bags and empty milk cartons into the trash can. And don’t wander off. No sense losing the entire fourth grade class. Every few minutes she snapped her bell and asked if anyone had seen Jayrod. He watched from the bushes, ashamed to show himself because of the rip in his shirt, and because of the bloody scratches on his arms and legs, and because of the broken glasses he held in his hand.

*Tinkle! Tinkle! Tinkle!*

Jayrod swallowed hard and stepped out of the bushes.

Scarlet Tanner glanced up from her half-eaten pimento cheese sandwich and saw him first. She was pretty with her pink pigtails and white sundress. “There he is, Mrs. Snitch! And he’s peed his pants!”

Jayrod looked down. It was true. True in a big way. What he had thought was sweat from his exertions was pee. Probably from the fall, or the impact of it. He wanted to turn and run back into the bushes but he knew Mrs. Snitch would drag him out again with her bell.

“Get over here this instant Jayrod Nash!”

Jayrod took a step, then another, toward his classmates. Blood trickled down both arms. His shirt was ripped and useless for anything but his mother’s rag box. Juice from the leaves he had ripped off the vine on his way down had left his palms sticky. Bits of grass and weed were matted into his thick brown curls. Numerous stickers from the briars dotted his chubby legs. His face was almost red enough to hide his freckles. He was bloody and in pain from head to toe, but no one noticed any of those things. All they saw was the big dark piss stain ringing the crotch of his shorts.

His classmates gathered quickly. What had been a loose group scattered amongst half a dozen picnic tables tightened like a fist. Twenty fourth graders at one picnic table, and all of them laughing at him. He also learned that when Mrs. Snitch says let’s have a look at you she means the class, not just her, for she took him by the earlobe and led him to within a few feet of the cackling children. She twisted him, and turned him, and looked him up and down. Hard as he tried to stop them, tears began to roll down his face. Snot tickled his nose. If he sniffed he would snuffle, and if he snuffled he would cry, so he let the snot seep out onto his lip.

“Fine mess you’ve made of yourself,” she said. “What will your mother think of me?”

“Jayrod pissed his pants,” Horace Plunk said.

“You watch your language, Horace Plunk, or I’ll wash your mouth out with soap again.”

After what seemed an eternity, she ordered the children back to the bus. Jayrod watched them as they stuffed their wax paper wrappers and empty juice containers into their brown paper bags and tossed them into the steel trash can chained to a pipe that was cemented into the ground. His stomach growled. There was one bag left in the box atop Mrs. Snitch’s table and it was rightfully his.

“Can I ha..have my lun..lunch?”

“Lunch? Why I’d think the last thing you would want right now is more juice.” She dumped the box, bag and all, upside down into the trash can and gave him a shove toward the bus.

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On the bus ride home Jayrod saw his father. Actually, Horace Plunk saw him first.

“Hey, Jayrod, ain’t that your old man picking up trash on the side of the road? Yeah, hey everybody, there’s Jayrod’s daddy picking up trash!”

Jayrod’s father had left rather suddenly one night a few months back. His mother had said he was away in the army fighting for their country and was somebody to be proud of, but there he stood, wearing an orange jumpsuit dragging an orange garbage bag with a half dozen other men wearing the same clothes dragging the same bags. Jonce Nash was a jailbird. Bobby Greenhall chanted it over and over until the bus dropped Jayrod off amid a cloud of brown Mississippi dust at his mailbox.

“Jayrod’s daddy’s a jailbird!” he yelled again, as Jayrod walked with his head down toward the white wood-framed house with its rusted tin roof and a front porch that sagged in the middle like a swaybacked horse. “No wonder he lives in a pig sty.”

“*Oink! Oink!*,” Horace yelled. “Maybe you’d better wear a diaper to school tomorrow in case you pee your pants again.”

The roar of laughter died away as the bus clattered on to its next stop down the road and around the curve. Ellie Nash was in bed when Jayrod poked his head through the half-open door and whispered *momma*. He was glad she was asleep because that meant she hadn’t heard the part about Jonce being a jailbird. Finding out he was in jail might make her condition worse. When she didn’t answer he turned away from her room and went to his own, changed into clothes that didn’t smell like urine, and wondered if she might get up in time to fix supper. She often forgot to cook now that his father was away.

He watched television for an hour then went to the kitchen and made himself a peanut butter sandwich as quietly as possible. She didn’t like him wasting food but his stomach was starting to hurt. Maybe if he washed and put away the butter knife and went outside, so as not to drop any crumbs on the floor, she wouldn’t notice and, if she did notice, maybe she would give him one more chance since he didn’t get lunch at school. Sometimes she would give him one more chance if he cried a little. Most of the time he could even get away with swiping one of her snack cakes from under the kitchen counter because a bad memory was one of the symptoms of her condition.

Jayrod sat on the back porch with his feet dangling over the edge and ate his sandwich. He dreaded telling her about the glasses more than the shirt because he supposed they cost a lot of money. Thousands of dollars, probably. Maybe millions.

Ellie Nash didn’t have a little silver bell like Mrs. Snitch but Jayrod heard his mother moving about and slipped back through the back door before she caught him outside. She didn’t

like him playing outside when she was bedridden because sometimes she needed something fetched and he wouldn't hear her call.

"Momma," he said softly as she opened the refrigerator door and began to rummage. "I had a little accident today."

"What now? It's always something with you these days."

"I fell in a ditch and broke my glasses and ripped my shirt."

"At school?"

"We took a field trip to the park, remember? You signed the permission slip last week."

"Did you drink all the milk? I know there was milk in here last night."

"Yes ma'am, I fixed me some cereal for breakfast and there wasn't but a little bit. I tried not to use it all."

"Now I can't have my milk and bread. You know milk and bread helps me sleep. Lord knows I get precious little of that."

"I'm sorry, momma."

"Sorry don't put milk back in the jug," she said, pulling a lump of something wrapped in foil from the bottom shelf. She unwrapped her find, sniffed it and took a bite of what looked to him to be a Spam sandwich.

"Do you think we can get my glasses fixed? I'll be real careful with them from now on."

She took a second bite and mumbled something about welfare and his father being away and about kids being such a burden. When the last hunk of sandwich crossed her lips she took a swig of water and withdrew again to her bedroom with a warning to keep the racket down or he'd be sorry.

Jayrod slipped back outside and played in the back yard until dark, then went inside and took a bath before going to bed. Sleep came late, after hours of replaying the scene at the park over and over in his head. More than anything he wished he could play hooky for the rest of his life. At least until Horace Plunk had grown up and moved away.

When morning came his mother gently shook him awake. He rubbed his eyes, wiped away the sleep, then popped them open and sat up with a shock.

"I'm sorry, momma, I didn't hear my clock go off."

"That's because I turned it off. Now get dressed and eat your breakfast before the bus comes."

Breakfast? Something strange was afoot and it had him a little worried. Maybe somebody had died, but he didn't know of anyone being sick. If somebody had to die he thought it might as well be Horace Plunk, but his mother didn't know him and wouldn't be fixing breakfast because of it. Then he felt guilty for thinking such a thing. Then he heard his mother humming as her back disappeared through the door.

By the time Jayrod dressed and combed his hair and made his way to the kitchen his mother had his plate on the table with a piece of dry toast and a tiny clump of scrambled egg. Instead of milk, since they had none, she mixed sugar with Hershey's cocoa and hot water. She called it

kid's coffee. It stung his lips when he took the first sip but he couldn't make himself wait until it cooled.

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When Jayrod boarded the school bus he was glad to see his best friend Arnold sitting in their assigned seat halfway back. He and Arnold had been best friends forever. Jayrod slid in beside him and told him about breakfast.

"Guess you won't be wanting this then," Arnold said, pulling two chocolate bars from his pocket and offering one to his friend.

Jayrod grinned and took the chocolate. "Ever thought how funny it is that your momma's name's Candy and you're always giving me candy?"

Arnold laughed. "Maybe that's why she always keeps it around the house."

"I think I'll save it for later," Jayrod said.

"That's a first."

"She might be sick or something," Jayrod said after tucking the candy bar away in his backpack.

"Momma?"

"Not your momma. My momma."

"But you said she was smiling. Don't sound like being sick to me. Maybe she's got a boyfriend. New boyfriends always make my momma smile."

"Married women can't have boyfriends."

Jayrod was glad Arnold had been absent yesterday and hadn't witnessed his ordeal at the park. No doubt he would hear about it as soon as Horace Plunk boarded and took his seat behind them. Of all the people who had to sit behind them the bus driver picked Horace.

"I might as well tell you what happened yesterday," Jayrod said, "before Horace beats me to it."

He left nothing out. By the time he was through Arnold looked as though he might cry himself. A few minutes later Horace bounded up the steps all full of life and told it again.

"You should've seen the way he pissed his pants!"

The morning bell rang and Mrs. Snitch ordered the kids to their seats. Jayrod and Arnold shared a table with Digger Jones and Tony Farse. Tony ran with Horace Plunk and was not to be trusted. Digger, like Jayrod and Arnold, was an outcast because he picked his nose a lot and had been known to eat the find. Jayrod and Arnold tried to avoid them both as much as possible.

Mrs. Snitch paused when she came to Arnold's name on the roll and demanded a note from home to explain his absence the previous day - a note he readily delivered to her desk. On his way back to his seat Horace stuck his foot out and sent him sprawling to the floor.

“Quiet!” Mrs. Snitch snapped. “Horace, you go stand in the hall.” Arnold’s face glowed crimson as he gathered himself up and made his way quickly back to his seat.

“You walk like a girl,” Tony Farse whispered when Arnold sat down.

Without his glasses Jayrod could barely make out Mrs. Snitch’s handwriting on the blackboard and relied on Arnold to read it to him at a whisper. Tony Farse repeatedly tattled to the teacher that his two tablemates were talking, until finally Arnold had to stop and leave Jayrod to squint his eyes and make it out as best he could. Jayrod had no trouble reading up close so he was able to complete his bookwork without help.

At recess Arnold approached Miss Snitch with caution as she sat in her folding chair reading a paperback romance novel. “Ma’am,” he said softly after she had failed to notice him standing in front of her. She looked up from her book and pierced his courage with her sharp glare.

“Uh..”

“Spit it out, Arnold, I’m trying to read my book.”

“Uh, ma’am, it’s just that, uh, well, Jayrod broke his glasses yesterday and, uh, well he can’t see the board from back where our table is.”

“Then his parents had better replace his glasses.”

“But...”

“No buts, young man. It wouldn’t be fair to the other students to make special arrangements for Jayrod.”

“Yes, ma’am,” he said, and walked back to the swings where Jayrod was sitting and watching.

“What was that all about?”

“Oh, nothing,” Arnold said. “I was just asking her if I could go to the bathroom and she told me to wait until recess is over.”

“Figures.”

Ellie Nash was humming to herself when her son strode through the front door and it didn’t take Jayrod long to figure out why. There he sat, big as life on the green vinyl couch, with a cigarette dangling from his lips and a beer in his hand. Jonce Nash was home.