

"How should we say they will be punished?" one of the counselors asked.

"Let them use their imaginations," said the Warden.

Stanley watched the counselors return to the tents, leaving only the Warden and Mr. Sir behind. He knew the Warden didn't care whether the campers dug any more holes or not. She'd found what she was looking for.

He glanced at Zero. A lizard was perched on his shoulder.

Zero remained perfectly still except for his right hand, which slowly formed into a fist. Then he raised his thumb, giving Stanley the thumbs-up sign.

Stanley thought back to what Mr. Sir had said to him earlier, and the bits of conversation he'd overheard. He tried to make sense out of it. Mr. Sir had said something about a lawyer, but Stanley knew his parents couldn't afford a lawyer.

His legs were sore from remaining rigid for so long. Standing still was more strenuous than walking. He slowly allowed himself to lean against the side of the hole.

The lizards didn't seem to mind.

# 47

The sun was up, and Stanley's heart was still beating. There were eight lizards in the hole with him. Each one had exactly eleven yellow spots.

The Warden had dark circles under her eyes from lack of sleep, and lines across her forehead and face which seemed exaggerated in the stark morning light. Her skin looked blotchy.

"Satan," said Zero.

Stanley looked at him, unsure if Zero had even spoken or if he'd just imagined it.

"Why don't you go see if you can take the suitcase from Zero," the Warden suggested.

"Yeah, right," said Mr. Sir.

"The lizards obviously aren't hungry," said the Warden.

"Then you go get the suitcase," said Mr. Sir.

They waited.

"Sa-tan lee," said Zero.

Sometime later Stanley saw a tarantula crawl across the dirt, not too far from his hole. He had never seen a tarantula before, but there was no doubt what it was. He was momentarily fascinated by it, as its big hairy body moved slowly and steadily along.

"Look, a tarantula," said Mr. Sir, also fascinated.

"I've never seen one," said the Warden. "Except in—"

Stanley suddenly felt a sharp sting on the side of his neck.

The lizard hadn't bitten him, however. It was merely pushing off.

It leapt off Stanley's neck and pounced on the tarantula. The last Stanley saw of it was one hairy leg sticking out of the lizard's mouth.

"Not hungry, huh?" said Mr. Sir.

Stanley tried to return to the snow, but it was harder to get there when the sun was up.

As the sun rose, the lizards moved lower in the hole, keeping mainly in the shade. They were no longer on his head and shoulders but had moved down to his stomach, legs, and feet.

He couldn't see any lizards on Zero, but believed there were two, between Zero's knees, shaded from the sun by the suitcase.

"How are you doing?" Stanley asked quietly. He didn't whisper, but his voice was dry and raspy.

"My legs are numb," said Zero.

"I'm going to try to climb out of the hole," Stanley said.

As he tried to pull himself up, using just his arms, he felt a claw dig into his ankle. He gently eased himself back down.

"Is your last name your first name backward?" Zero asked.

Stanley stared at him in amazement. Had he been working on that all night?

He heard the sound of approaching cars.

Mr. Sir and the Warden heard it as well.

"You think it's them?" asked the Warden.

"It ain't Girl Scouts selling cookies," said Mr. Sir.

He heard the cars come to a stop, and the doors open and shut. A little while later he saw Mr. Pendanski and two strangers, coming across the lake. One was a tall man in a business suit and cowboy hat. The other was a short woman holding a briefcase. The woman had to take three steps for every two taken by the man. "Stanley Yelnats?" she called, moving out ahead of the others.

"I suggest you don't come any closer," said Mr. Sir.

"You can't stop me," she snapped, then took a second glance at him, wearing pajama pants and nothing else. "We'll get you out of there, Stanley," she said. "Don't you worry." She appeared to be Hispanic, with straight black hair and dark eyes. She spoke with a little bit of a Mexican accent, trilling her r's.

"What in tarnation?" the tall man exclaimed, as he came up behind her.

She turned on him. "I'm telling you right now, if any harm comes to him, we will be filing charges not only against Ms.

Walker and Camp Green Lake but the entire state of Texas as well. Child abuse. False imprisonment. Torture."

The man was more than a head taller than she, and was able to look directly over her as he spoke to the Warden.

"How long have they been in there?"

"All night, as you can see by the way we're dressed. They snuck into my cabin while I was asleep, and stole my suitcase. I chased after them, and they ran out here and fell into the lizards' nest. I don't know what they were thinking."

"That's not true!" Stanley said.

"Stanley, as your attorney, I advise you not to say anything," said the woman, "until you and I have had a chance to talk in private."

Stanley wondered why the Warden lied about the suitcase. He wondered who it legally belonged to. That was one thing he wanted to ask his lawyer, if she really was his lawyer.

"It's a miracle they're still alive," said the tall man.

"Yes, it is," the Warden agreed, with just a trace of disappointment in her voice.

"And they better come out of this alive," Stanley's lawyer warned. "This wouldn't have happened if you'd released him to me yesterday."

"It wouldn't have happened if he wasn't a thief," said the Warden. "I told him he would be set free today, and I guess he decided he'd try to take some of my valuables with him. He's been delirious for the last week."

"Why didn't you release him when she came to you yesterday?" the tall man asked.

"She didn't have proper authorization," said the Warden.

"I had a court order!"

"It was not authenticated," the Warden said.

"Authenticated? It was signed by the judge who sentenced him."

"I needed authentication from the Attorney General," said the Warden. "How do I know it's legitimate? The boys in my custody have proven themselves dangerous to society. Am I supposed to just turn them loose any time someone hands me a piece of paper?"

"Yes," said the woman. "If it's a court order."

"Stanley has been hospitalized for the last few days," the Warden explained. "He's been suffering from hallucinations and delirium. Ranting and raving. He was in no condition to leave. The fact that he was trying to steal from me on the day before his release proves . . ."

Stanley tried to climb out of his hole, using mostly his arms so as not to disturb the lizards too much. As he pulled himself upward, the lizards moved downward, keeping out of the sun's direct rays. He swung his legs up and over, and the last of the lizards hopped off.

"Thank God!" exclaimed the Warden. She started toward him, then stopped.

A lizard crawled out of his pocket and down his leg.

Stanley was overcome by a rush of dizziness and almost fell over. He steadied himself, then reached down, took hold of Zero's arm, and helped him slowly to his feet. Zero still held the suitcase.

The lizards, which had been hiding under it, scurried quickly into the hole.

Stanley and Zero staggered away.

The Warden rushed to them. She hugged Zero. "Thank God, you're alive," she said, as she tried to take the suitcase from him.

He jerked it free. "It belongs to Stanley," he said.

"Don't cause any more trouble," the Warden warned. "You stole it from my cabin, and you've been caught red-handed. If I press charges, Stanley might have to return to prison. Now I'm willing, in view of all the circumstances, to—"

"It's got his name on it," said Zero.

Stanley's lawyer pushed past the tall man to have a look.

"See," Zero showed her. "Stanley Yelnats."

Stanley looked, too. There, in big black letters, was STANLEY YELNATS.

The tall man looked over the heads of the others at the name on the suitcase. "You say he stole it from your cabin?"

The Warden stared at it in disbelief. "That's im . . . imposs . . . It's imposs . . ." She couldn't even say it.

# 48

They slowly walked back to camp. The tall man was the Texas Attorney General, the chief law enforcement officer for the state. Stanley's lawyer was named Ms. Morengo.

Stanley held the suitcase. He was so tired he couldn't think straight. He felt as if he was walking in a dream, not quite able to comprehend what was going on around him.

They stopped in front of the camp office. Mr. Sir went inside to get Stanley's belongings. The Attorney General told Mr. Pendanski to get the boys something to drink and eat.

The Warden seemed as dazed as Stanley. "You can't even read," she said to Zero.

Zero said nothing.

Ms. Morengo put a hand on Stanley's shoulder and told him to hang in there. He would be seeing his parents soon.

She was shorter than Stanley, but somehow gave the appearance of being tall.

Mr. Pendanski returned with two cartons of orange juice and two bagels. Stanley drank the juice but didn't feel like eating anything.

"Wait!" the Warden exclaimed. "I didn't say they stole the suitcase. It's *his* suitcase, obviously, but he put my things from my cabin inside it."

"That isn't what you said earlier," said Ms. Morengo.

"What's in the suitcase?" the Warden asked Stanley. "Tell us what's in it, then we'll open it and see!"

Stanley didn't know what to do.

"Stanley, as your lawyer, I advise you not to open your suitcase," said Ms. Morengo.

"He has to open it!" said the Warden. "I have the right to check the personal property of any of the detainees. How do I know there aren't drugs or weapons in there? He stole a car, too! I've got witnesses!" She was nearly hysterical.

"He is no longer under your jurisdiction," said Stanley's lawyer.

"He has not been officially released," said the Warden. "Open the suitcase, Stanley!"

"Do not open it," said Stanley's lawyer.

Stanley did nothing.

Mr. Sir returned from the office with Stanley's backpack and clothes.

The Attorney General handed Ms. Morengo a sheet of paper. "You're free to go," he said to Stanley. "I know you're anxious to get out of here, so you can just keep the orange suit as a souvenir. Or burn it, whatever you want. Good luck, Stanley."

He reached out his hand to shake, but Ms. Morengo hurried Stanley away. "C'mon, Stanley," she said. "We have a lot to talk about."

Stanley stopped and turned to look at Zero. He couldn't just leave him here.

Zero gave him thumbs-up.

"I can't leave Hector," Stanley said.

"I suggest we go," said his lawyer with a sense of urgency in her voice.

"I'll be okay," said Zero. His eyes shifted toward Mr. Pendanski on one side of him, then to the Warden and Mr. Sir on the other.

"There's nothing I can do for your friend," said Ms. Morengo. "You are released pursuant to an order from the judge."

"They'll kill him," said Stanley.

"Your friend is not in danger," said the Attorney General. "There's going to be an investigation into everything that's happened here. For the present, I am taking charge of the camp."

"C'mon, Stanley," said his lawyer. "Your parents are waiting."

Stanley stayed where he was.

His lawyer sighed. "May I have a look at Hector's file?" she asked.

"Certainly," said the Attorney General. "Ms. Walker, go get Hector's file."

She looked at him blankly.

"Well?"

The Warden turned to Mr. Pendanski. "Bring me Hector Zeroni's file."

He stared at her.

"Get it!" she ordered.

Mr. Pendanski went into the office. He returned a few minutes later and announced the file was apparently misplaced.

The Attorney General was outraged. "What kind of camp are you running here, Ms. Walker?"

The Warden said nothing. She stared at the suitcase.

The Attorney General assured Stanley's lawyer that he would get the records. "Excuse me, while I call my office." He turned back to the Warden. "I assume the phone works." He walked into the camp office, slamming the door behind him. A little while later he reappeared and told the Warden he wanted to talk to her.

She cursed, then went inside.

Stanley gave Zero thumbs-up.

"Caveman? Is that you?"

He turned to see Armpit and Squid coming out of the Wreck Room. Squid shouted back into the Wreck Room, "Caveman and Zero are out here!"

Soon all the boys from Group D had gathered around him and Zero.

"Good to see you, man," Armpit said, shaking his hand.

"We thought you were buzzard food."

"Stanley is being released today," said Mr. Pendanski.

"Way to go," said Magnet, hitting him on the shoulder.

"And you didn't even have to step on a rattlesnake," said Squid.

Even Zigzag shook Stanley's hand. "Sorry about . . . you know."

"It's cool," said Stanley.

"We had to lift the truck clear out of the hole," Zigzag told him. "It took everybody in C, D, and E. We just picked it right up."

"It was really cool," said Twitch.

X-Ray was the only one who didn't come over. Stanley saw him hang back behind the others a moment, then return to the Wreck Room.

"Guess what?" said Magnet, glancing at Mr. Pendanski. "Mom says we don't have to dig any more holes."

"That's great," Stanley said.

"Will you do me a favor?" asked Squid.

"I guess," Stanley agreed, somewhat hesitantly.

"I want you to—" He turned to Ms. Morengo. "Hey, lady, you have a pen and paper I can borrow?"

She gave it to him, and Squid wrote down a phone number which he gave to Stanley. "Call my mom for me, okay? Tell her . . . Tell her I said I was sorry. Tell her *Alan* said he was sorry."

Stanley promised he would.

"Now you be careful out in the real world," said Armpit.

"Not everybody is as nice as us."

Stanley smiled.

The boys departed when the Warden came out of the office. The Attorney General was right behind her.

"My office is having some difficulty locating Hector Zeroni's records," the Attorney General said.

"So you have no claim of authority over him?" asked Ms. Morengo.

"I didn't say that. He's in the computer. We just can't access his records. It's like they've fallen through a hole in cyberspace."

"A hole in cyberspace," Ms. Morengo repeated. "How interesting. When is his release date?"

"I don't know."

"How long has he been here?"

"Like I said, we can't—"

"So what are you planning to do with him? Keep him confined indefinitely, without justification, while you go crawling through black holes in cyberspace?"

The Attorney General stared at her. "He was obviously incarcerated for a reason."

"Oh? And what reason was that?"

The Attorney General said nothing.

Stanley's lawyer took hold of Zero's hand. "C'mon, Hector, you're coming with us."

# 49

There never used to be yellow-spotted lizards in the town of Green Lake. They didn't come to the area until after the lake dried up. But the townsfolk had heard about the "red-eyed monsters" living in the desert hills.

One afternoon, Sam, the onion man, and his donkey, Mary Lou, were returning to his boat, which was anchored just a little off shore. It was late in November and the peach trees had lost most of their leaves.

"Sam!" someone called.

He turned around to see three men running after him, waving their hats. He waited. "Afternoon, Walter. Bo, Jesse," he greeted them, as they walked up, catching their breath.

"Glad we caught you," said Bo. "We're going rattlesnake hunting in the morning."

"We want to get some of your lizard juice," said Walter.

"I ain't a-scared of no rattlesnake," said Jesse. "But I don't want to come across one of those red-eyed monsters. I seen

