



**Bravo Zulu,
Samantha!**

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Summary: Decidedly unenthusiastic about spending part of her summer vacation with her grandparents, twelve-year-old Samantha is particularly upset by her prickly grandfather's secretive behavior and decides to find out what he is hiding.

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For my niece, Hailee Romain:

May your insatiable thirst for knowledge continue unabated throughout your life. May your nose be forever buried in a book, as was mine. May we call each other over the years to talk about our latest “best book” discovery and to chat about our lives.

And may you remember I love you, now and for always.

—K. B. D.

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To Chris, what can I say? You gave me the freedom to find my wings and the support to help me fly. I am eternally grateful for your unflagging belief in me.

And finally, thanks to Vicky Holifield, who helped me empower Sam to stand on her own two feet, to tell her story, and to tell it in her own unique way.

CHAPTER ONE

I'm not going," Samantha declared emphatically as she unwrapped a piece of Bazooka bubble gum and popped it in her mouth.

"Sam, don't make this difficult," her mother warned without turning around from the sink. "I've gone over this a dozen times. Your aunt's divorce is final, and she wants to move back here to be close to the family. She needs your father and me to help her sell the house, pack up her things, and make the drive from Kansas. There'll barely be enough room for three adults and all those boxes in our two cars." She dropped a spoon into the dishwasher with a clang. "And I am not leaving a twelve-year-old here on her own."

Sam chewed furiously, stretching the gum over her tongue, and started to blow a bubble. Momentarily distracted from the argument with her mother, she watched the reflection of the bubble grow in the smooth surface of the refrigerator until only her dark brown eyes were visible.

She tried to remember the world record for bubble-gum blowing from the mouth. She knew that the largest bubble-gum bubble ever blown through the nose was 11 inches wide and was blown by Joyce Samuels of the USA on November 10, 2000. *How did one blow a bubble-gum bubble from one's nose anyway?* Sam wondered.

Kathleen Benner Doble

"Staying with your grandparents is not the end of the world," Sam's mother continued, "and it's only four weeks, not the *entire summer* as you seem so fond of saying."

With a loud pop, Sam's bubble burst, flinging bits of gum into the mass of brown curls that framed her face. At the sudden noise, Sam's mother turned. When she saw what had happened, she began to laugh. Angrily, Sam yanked the wad of gum from her mouth and tried to use it to pull the sticky pink strands from her hair.

"It's still four whole weeks," she argued as she swiped at the bits of gum clinging to her hair.

Soon the entire wad was hopelessly tangled in her bangs, and Sam's head ached from all the tugging and pulling. "I think I'll just kill myself now," she shouted out in frustration.

Her mother sighed as she grabbed some ice cubes from the freezer. "Well, do it painlessly then. I wouldn't want you to suffer too long."

"If you don't want me to suffer, you shouldn't be sending me *there!*" Sam insisted.

Sam's mother sat her down in a kitchen chair and ran an ice cube along her gum-encrusted bangs. "You love being with your grandmother," her mother reminded her.

Sam kicked the table leg. "Grandma's not the problem," she said. "It's the Colonel."

Slowly, Sam's mother removed the hardened gum from Sam's curls. "I know your grandfather has always been a little difficult, more so since he retired, but Sam, he does love you. I promise."

"All he ever talks about now is flying," Sam muttered as she watched her mother drop bits of gum onto the kitchen table. "He used to be fun, taking me fishing and all. But now he hardly talks to anyone except to complain about something."

BRAVO ZULU, SAMANTHA!

And he quizzes me all the time with those stupid flying facts he got from his time in the military. It's so annoying!"

"Funny thing for *you* to be saying," her mother said, nodding toward the dog-eared copy of *The Guinness Book of World Records* lying on the kitchen table. Sam never went anywhere without that book. She'd read it several times and memorized half of it.

"I like *fun* facts," Sam protested, "not those boring aviation facts he rattles off all the time." She winced as her mother jerked on a particularly stubborn piece of gum. "Why does Grandma have to go to work while I'm there?" Sam whined. "And why do they live so far out of town? It's my summer vacation, and I won't even be able to go swimming at the town pool with my friends!"

The sympathy that had been in her mother's eyes disappeared. She stood up and threw the gum in the trash. "We've been through this already. I know it's a bit isolated, but it's not *that* far from town. Your grandfather might be willing to drive you in on a few days. And if not, you love swimming in their lake and wandering around their woods. You have a ton of new books to read. As for Grandma, she didn't have a choice. Her assistant at the Battered Women's Shelter quit, and until they find a replacement, she can't take a day off. Somehow I think helping battered women is slightly more important than your missing four weeks of swimming with your friends! You'll have the rest of the summer to be with them when we get back."

"Grandma's too old to work anyway," Sam grumbled.

Sam's mother pressed her lips together. "She'll be retiring in a few years," she said. "Now, I am not going to discuss this further. Run on upstairs and bring down your bag."

Sam glared at her mother. She opened her mouth and

Kathleen Benner Doble

sucked in a deep, deep breath. The longest time any human had ever voluntarily held his breath was 13 minutes, 42.5 seconds. Sam had tried hundreds of times to break this record but had never even come close. Today she was determined to hold hers until she convinced her mom to change her mind or she died right there in front of her. It would serve her parents right. They would have to stay home just to attend her funeral!

"You can try that again, Sam," her mother said, "but this time I will not lift a finger if you turn blue." She began to load the rest of the dishes into the dishwasher, occasionally glancing over at her daughter.

Sam crossed her arms over her chest, fighting the urge to take a breath.

"I will not do anything if you should start to pass out either," Sam's mother warned, but her voice quivered a bit.

Just then the back door slammed, and Sam's father came into the kitchen.

"Well," he called, "everybody ready to go?"

He saw Sam sitting at the kitchen table, her cheeks puffed out and her face turning red. "Holding her breath again, huh?" he asked.

Sam looked at the clock on the stove. Three minutes had passed. Her head was beginning to spin, and her stomach felt queasy.

"She's still unhappy about staying with the Colonel," her mother said, her brow wrinkled with concern. "She's trying to finish herself off right now before we get a chance to leave."

Four minutes. Sam was going to explode.

"Stop worrying, honey. It hasn't worked in the past," Sam's father said. He turned to Sam. "We'll just go get your bags and load up the car so we can get going when you're done there."

Sam's father took his wife's hand and pulled her from the kitchen.

BRAVO ZULU, SAMANTHA!

Sam watched them go, feeling hot and sick. The last of her breath exploded out of her. Four minutes, twenty-four seconds. How did anyone hold their breath longer? Sam hadn't broken any records, and she was still alive.

"Stink," Sam muttered.

She stomped outside, making her way toward her tree house in the backyard. She climbed hand over hand up the old worn ladder and flopped down on her back on the smooth plywood floor. Staring up at the hazy light filtering through the green leaves, Sam thought about the weeks ahead with her grandparents.

She'd be stuck with just her grandfather almost every day. This wouldn't have been so bad two or three years ago. They would've gone fishing or watched ball games on TV. Sure, he'd always been a little bossy, ordering everyone around as if he were still on a military base, never admitting that he might be wrong about anything. But she got along fine with him.

Now he seemed like a different person. Since he retired from the Air Force, he'd lost interest in all the fun things they used to do together. He spent his time either in front of his computer or moping silently around the house. Everyone who knew him had commented on the change.

The last time Sam visited their house, he hadn't spoken to her at all except to quiz her on his "important" aviation facts. And it wasn't that Sam didn't like facts. She loved facts. But Sam liked weird facts, fascinating little-known facts, like how jelly gets inside a donut or what you call the little thing that hangs down in the back of your throat. She liked reading about world records, about the people who set them and the ones who broke them. She especially liked tabloid articles and gossip columns. In the past, some of those very strange facts had made the Colonel, as everyone called him, laugh. But now, he seemed to consider all of Sam's facts irrelevant or just

Kathleen Benner Doble

plain stupid. He'd taken to rolling his eyes every time she told one, as if she was just as stupid as the facts she loved.

Sam heard a soft rustling noise from below. She sat up just in time to see a yellow balloon arc over her head and hit the inside of the tree house. Water exploded all around, dousing Sam's shirt and soaking her hair.

"Hey!" she shouted, jumping up and leaning over the side of the tree house. Water ran down her forehead and dripped into her eyes. She squinted at the figure standing at the foot of the tree.

It was Billy Burnham with another water balloon in his hand.

"You check the baseball stats today, short stuff?" he yelled up. "Sandy Hill, the dream machine, hit another home run last night."

Sam gritted her teeth. Since Billy Burnham had moved here last summer, Sam had had no peace. Billy was always following her around the neighborhood, teasing and tormenting her. Some of Sam's girlfriends had suggested that Billy liked her, but she just thought he liked to *irritate* people.

"I am not short!" Sam shouted down at him. "And Sandy Hill will end his season at less than .319, or I'll eat dirt."

"I'd like to see that," Billy yelled back. "Yeah, I'd like to see you with dirt in your mouth, short stuff."

"Stop calling me 'short stuff,' you big cow," Sam shouted back. "And it's going to be you eating dirt, not me."

"Right," Billy said, laughing. "No way, short stuff. You'll be eating dirt. You'll be eating dirt with the Colonel."

The mention of her grandfather set Sam's teeth even further on edge. "Who told you that?"

"My mom ran into your mom down at the Big Bear," Billy replied. "She said you're staying almost a whole month with

BRAVO ZULU, SAMANTHA!

your grandparents while your parents are in Kansas, and that the Colonel is going to be your babysitter."

"Well, it's not true," Sam said. "I am too old to be babysat."

"Yeah?" Billy asked. "What're you gonna do? Stay here by yourself?"

"Maybe," Sam said. "Yeah, maybe I will."

"Fat chance." Billy turned to walk away. "Have fun, Sam," he called over his shoulder. "Have fun with old Mr. Grumpy."

Sam smacked the side of the tree house, wanting to scream. Why did her mom have to tell Mrs. Burnham? Now everybody would know Sam's business. Billy's dad had died just before they moved here, and his mom was always looking for someone to talk to about *everything* she had seen or heard.

Sam sat down in a huff just as another water balloon exploded right in her lap. She scrambled back to the edge of the tree house. Far below, she could hear Billy's loud, annoying laugh.

"Gotcha, short stuff!" Billy yelled up. Then he turned and ran toward the street before Sam could climb from the tree house and deck him.

"Get back here, Billy Burnham!" she yelled.

But he didn't stop.

"Okay!" Sam shouted as loud as she could. "Keep on running, you yellow-bellied, drool-making coward!"

But yelling at Billy didn't make her feel one bit better. She was still losing her dumb bet on Sandy Hill. She was still soaked with water and unable to lay a hand on Billy Burnham's ugly mug. And worst of all, she was still going to the Colonel's.

Sam flopped back down again.

"Sam," she heard her father call. "Time to go."

Stink, Sam thought. *Stink, stank, stunk!*