



my brother's hero

ADRIAN FOGELIN

Author of *CROSSING JORDAN*

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*Visit the author's website at
www.adrianfogelin.com*

*For my husband, Ray Faass, best friend, sweetheart,
and occasional catcher of tarpon using odd lures.*

*To my agent Jack Ryan, publisher Margaret Quinlin,
editor Vicky Holifield, and the whole Peachtree family, thanks for helping
my stories grow up to be books.*

*Thanks, as always, to my friends and critics,
the Wednesday Night Writers.
You guys don't let me get away with anything!*

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chapter one

PECANS FOR CASH

Now listen up. I found us a few new places.” Nana Grace flattened the little map she’d torn out of the phone book against the hood of the truck. “There’s a mess of pecan trees on St. Augustine.” She gripped the pencil and drew an X. “That’s where we’ll start. Okay, Ben?”

I stifled a yawn. “Sounds good,” I said. I had done my job by getting out of bed at six-thirty on a Saturday morning. Like all the kids standing around the truck, I was just waiting.

Leroy slow-bounced a basketball.

My little brother Cody stood on one foot, trying to set a new world’s record. “How long was that, Ben?” he asked when he put his foot down.

“Oh, ’bout twenty-two seconds,” I told him.

Cass was hugging herself, trying to stay warm inside her thin windbreaker.

Jemie leaned over to scratch an ankle. Of the eight kids waiting to pile into the truck, Jemie Lewis was Nana Grace’s only real grandkid. The rest of us were honorary.

“My, my,” Nana Grace likes to say when we’re all hanging out on her big front porch, “don’t I have me a *fine* lookin’ mess of grandbabies?”

We’re a mess all right. Black, white, short, tall, fat, thin, different ages. We all have real grandmothers we see on holidays. Nana Grace is for the rest of the time. Until a cop makes her turn in her license

for driving bad or for being too short to see over the wheel—or until one of us gets wheels of our own—we'll ride around in the back of her pickup.

"An' then we'll swing by those big old trees near Railroad Square." Nana gouged another X into the paper. "All that'll take about an hour."

Justin groaned.

Nana Grace looked at him sharp. Slumped against the truck, his shirt hung out. He was staring at his untied sneakers. "You got a problem, Justin?"

"He stayed up 'til three playing video games," Clay reported.

"Three-thirty," Justin croaked. "Go easy on me."

"Easy my foot. We got pecans to get." Nana Grace liked us—but she didn't treat us soft. She drew another X. "After that, we'll check out Meyer's Park." She looked up and caught me in the middle of a really big yawn. "How 'bout you, Ben? You get your beauty rest last night?"

"Yes, ma'am. But what would it hurt to start a little later?"

"Wouldn't be a nut left on the ground if we slept in. Those old men with paper sacks'd pick up every last one. No, Ben. You gotta be the early bird." She dropped the pencil in a sagging sweater pocket and snatched the straw hat off the top of the cab. "Everybody in back. Hustle, now!" And she jammed the hat down to her eyebrows.

Cass and Jemmie stepped onto the tailgate and Clay scrambled up behind them. He turned to Justin, who was puffing, one knee on the gate. "Hey, lard-butt, need a hand?"

I climbed up, then grabbed my brother by the seat of the pants and lifted. Last year Cody was too little to go after pecans. He was still too little to be any real help, but he begged. Dad made me promise to keep an eye on him. "You sit over here," I said, putting him on the girls' side with Cass and Jemmie.

"You two waiting for a personal invitation?" Jemmie called to Leroy and Jahmal. The brothers stood in the driveway, bounce-

passing the ball. Leroy was the holdout. Jahmal was only following the lead of his big bad brother.

Leroy spun the ball on one finger. “Mr. Cool?” Nana barked from the driver’s seat. “Less you wanna get left behind, you’d best move your feet.” With a belch of smoke we began to roll.

The ball sailed into the truck, followed by the brothers. I jerked the tailgate up. Leroy plopped down next to Jemmie and slid his foot over until his sneaker touched hers.

She glared and pulled her foot away, then whispered something in Cass’s ear. The girls giggled.

“Hey!” Leroy held up his hands. “It was an accident, okay?”

Cass whispered something to Jemmie. They giggled again. The two girls were like yin and yang. Cass was white, Jemmie black. Cass quiet, Jemmie in-your-face. But together they made some kind of weird whole.

“Bet you’re talking about us,” Clay called over to them.

Jemmie rolled her eyes. “In your dreams.”

All the guys were dying to know what those two whispered about us—and scared they didn’t talk about us at all.

Nana Grace popped a wheelie turning onto Roberts Avenue. We all slid. Just as quick, she whipped the wheel the other way and stomped the gas.

“I steered better’n that when I was ten,” I shouted in Clay’s ear.

“Ten?” As the wind picked up, Clay’s red hair began to whip around like his brain was on fire. “Come on. You’re lyin’.”

“I swear. Dad took me parking-lot driving on my tenth birthday.”

In just eighteen months I’d have my learner’s permit. Then maybe Nana Grace would slide over and let me take the wheel. I was tired of being a rider.

I hung my elbows over the side of the truck. In a second, Clay slid closer to me and did the same. “Hey,” I shouted. “You mind getting out of my lap?” And he backed off a little.

Justin sat off by himself, facing the tailgate. Lately, he’d been saying

things like, “Ben, did you ever wonder what it’s like to be dead?” Sometimes he scared me.

“You’re just gettin’ your weight first an’ your height second,” Nana Grace had told him. But that didn’t help when short, fat, and zitty was what he was right now.

Leroy stretched his long legs out, then glanced over to see if Jemmie was impressed. I kept my own legs bent. Until last summer I was the tallest guy in the neighborhood. But these days, when it came to tall, Leroy was the man. “Three and a half inches since summer,” he brags to anyone who’ll listen.

Seeing him over there relaxing, eyes half-closed like a lizard, it was easy to tell he felt good about himself—good enough to deny Jemmie Lewis’s existence.

I checked Jemmie to see if he was getting to her but ended up looking at Cass. Her short, brown ponytail was blowing to one side. Her freckles looked like somebody’d spilled cinnamon all over her. I wondered if they went up under her hair, the way some dogs’ skin is spotted under the fur.

She and Jemmie hugged their knees to stay warm. I bet Leroy was thinking about putting his arm around Jemmie. Thinking, not doing. I looked over at Cass, but we weren’t like that. We were buddies. In fact, if you asked me who my friends were, I would’ve named the guys in the truck: Justin, Clay, and Leroy. We hung out together, we messed around, we killed time. But my real best friend out of every one in the truck was Cass—even though you would’ve had to cut my tongue out before I’d say it.

Me and Cass have known each other since we were both babies. Her mother has pictures of us taking naps in the same playpen—another thing I’d never talk about.

Cass wiggled the fingers of one hand, sending me a secret wave. She smiled and the corners of her eyes crinkled up. I smiled back. Then we both looked away. Too bad Cass is a girl. People get the wrong idea.

When I glanced at Cass again, Jemmie caught me looking. She scooted closer to Cass, squeezing out the last air molecule between them. After that, I did the lizard thing with my eyelids. When did everything get all boy-girl weird?

I felt tired, and it wasn't just getting up early. I was tired of doing the same old things. Like the pecans. We went after pecans every year. If Cody hadn't threatened to stink me out with a giant fart, I would've stayed in bed this time.

I wanted to *do* something. But being thirteen and a half isn't about doing, it's about waiting. Waiting to get a license. Waiting to get a car. Waiting around.

I looked at Cass between half-closed lids. When I finally got that license and car, when I finally went someplace, maybe she could ride along.

Thwomp. Nana Grace rolled two tires up on the curb and set the hand brake. "I know what you're gonna say, Ben," she yelled back at me. "But I don't trust the crazy drivers in this town."

"Nobody's up but us, Nana Grace," I shouted back. "No one in the whole city of Tallahassee. We beat the old guys by hours."

Her door opened with a loud creak. "It don't pay to waste daylight." She climbed out and stood in the street. Her stockings were rolled down below her knees, her hat crooked. "Let's move, folks!" And we all bailed out of the truck.

She passed out paper bags. We carried them up and down the street, collecting pecans from the sidewalks and gutters and the edges of lawns. Just last year this had seemed like fun. Now I kept wondering about the people inside the houses. What did they think about having a swarm of kids running around snatching nuts off their driveways?

Nana Grace walked like she had screws in her knees, cranked half a turn too tight. Cody nearly bumped into her as he hopped by on one foot. "Whatever are you doing, child?" she asked, dropping the pecan she had just picked up.

“Not stepping on cracks!”

“Not pickin’ up nuts either.” But I noticed she was smiling. “People,” she called to the rest of us. “Y’all go for the big ones this time. Ashmore’s don’t hardly pay squat for the little ones.”

I looked up into the trees. The last rain had brought most of the pecans down. We were about out of Saturdays to gather pecans for cash. Just five more school days, and we’d be on Christmas break. Not that it would be much—two weeks of pick-up basketball on the middle school playground. The hoops there were so low I could slam-dunk without even jumping. We’d ride bikes, hang out, try to talk some adult into driving us to the dollar movies or the mall.

Christmas morning, everyone would show off their loot—everything but the socks and underwear. Then we’d go back to shooting hoops or riding bikes—the same old stuff.

I was picking up a little pile of nuts that had washed together by the curb when Nana Grace swung her stick over her head. “Back in the truck, people! We’ve about picked this place clean.” Everyone scrambled. And we headed for the next X on the map.

The old men showed up around ten. Old women too, plus a few kids, everyone gathering pecans. Nana gave me a look. “See what I’m talkin’ about, Ben? You got to be the early bird if you’re pickin’ up pecans for cash.”

It was almost noon when Nana Grace yelled, “Payday!” The old pickup’s tires squealed against the curb in front of Ashmore’s.

She kept one bag of nuts for pies. “My share of the haul,” she said. She had Mr. Ashmore put them through the machine. While the machine ka-chunked, the kids fanned out, poking through piles of junk and antiques. Ashmore’s has been in the same spot fifty-three years. Some of the stuff looks like it has too.

Nana Grace held a flowered teacup in one hand, an old postcard in the other. “Got a little bit of everything here, don’t ya?” she yelled as the pecans rattled down the chute.

“Yup,” Mr. Ashmore shouted back. “Better’n any ol’ WalMart.”

Clay carried the sack of cracked pecans to the truck. The machine

didn't take the shells off, just cracked them. We'd be up on the Lewis's porch all afternoon picking shells.

We sold the rest of the nuts. The shrimps we should've left on the ground in the first place went for twenty-five cents a pound. "For that kinda money it ain't hardly worth bendin' over to pick 'em up," Nana Grace mumbled. Jumbos sold for seventy-five.

While Nana Grace divvied the money up on the truck hood, a couple of old men shuffled past, hugging sacks of pecans. Mr. Ashmore held the door. "Gentlemen," he said.

Nana Grace slid two dollars and seventy-two cents at each of us. "Y'all done good," she said.

Justin stared. "I fell out of bed for *this*?"

"You got a pecan pie coming too, if you bring yourself back by the house after lunch and help pick the shells off." When he still didn't take the money she said, "More for the rest of us," and reached for his share.

Justin scooped it up and stuffed it in his pocket. "But don't count on me for after lunch," he said.

"Suit yourself," Nana Grace told him.

But he'd be there. We'd all be there. It wasn't like we had anything better to do.

chapter two

ASTEROIDS AND ALIENS

Cody jangled the money in his pocket as we walked toward home. “Hey, Ben, I got an idea. Let’s eat quick, then go to Mr. G’s. Bet I have enough for a jumbo bag of chips.”

I scuffed his short hair. “You know chips aren’t on the Mom-approved list.”

He skipped ahead of me, backwards. “But I earned the money myself.”

“You got your Christmas shopping done?”

“Well, no.” He kicked a ball lying in our front yard, sending it rolling toward me across the grass. “Whaddya think we’ll have for lunch?”

“Peanut butter sandwiches with sprouts, same as always.” I stopped the ball with the side of my foot and soccer-kicked it back to him. I wished an asteroid would drop out of the sky. I wished we’d be abducted by aliens—anything for a change.

“You forgot carrot juice.” He chased the ball. “We always have carrot juice.” He took a wild kick. The ball bounced off the storm door, making the glass shiver. “Oops.”

“Man, you are so lucky you didn’t bust it!” I jumped up and slapped the edge of the roof.

Cody raised an arm. He was too short to slap the roof by himself. “Lift me up, Ben!” I squeezed the back of his neck and shoved him through the door.

I slammed right into him when he stopped in his tracks just inside the door.

“What’s going on?” he whispered. Dad, who is kind of chunky and no great dancer, was waltzing Mom around the living room, bumping into furniture.

“I guess they finally lost it,” I whispered back.

Mom held her long skirt up with one hand. “We’re going,” she called as they whirled into the kitchen.

“It looks like you two are already gone,” I called back.

“Was that sarcasm?” Dad asked as they reappeared in the kitchen door.

“It was,” said Mom. “Let’s leave him home.” They spun into the living room, Dad’s ponytail flying—and ran right into the couch.

“Hey, time out,” I said, making a T with my hands. “Is this for real? Are we *really* going somewhere?” She smiled and nodded, but didn’t say a thing. “C’mon, Mom. Dad, where are we going?”

“I need a drum roll!” Dad said, dipping Mom so low her long hair brushed the floor. Cody drummed his hands on the coffee table. “We’re going to Bert’s Marina!” Dad pulled Mom back up and put his cheek against hers. “Your aunt and uncle won a cruise! We’re going to watch the marina for them.”

“Christmas in the Keys!” Mom added. “What do you boys think about that?”

“You mean it?” I asked. “Christmas in the Keys?” I pumped a fist. “*All right!*” This was unprecedented! Colossal! Me and my brother wouldn’t be hanging out on Magnolia Way this Christmas. We’d be at the other end of the state on an island that dangled off the tip of Florida like a lure on a fishing line.

Cody tugged my arm. “What’s it like there, Ben?”

“Well, it’s real bright.” I tried to remember more. “And there’s a lot of water.”

He hung on my arm. “And what else?”

“Give me a break. I was only four when I went. There were kids all over the place. Everybody lived on boats.” The other thing I

remembered was looking up at Uncle Bert's big belly. That was basically it—sun, water, kids, and Uncle Bert's belly.

"Ben!" Cody squeezed my arm hard. His blue eyes bugged out. "Does Santa know about the Keys?"

"Sure, bro. He comes in on water skis."

"But...but...don't the presents get wet?"



All the kids from the pecan run were on the Lewis's front porch—plus Anna. Anna is like a distant moon that sometimes circles the planet Cass/Jemmie. Today her arm was around the neck of a dog that looked like it had been blown apart and put back together again—only missing a couple of parts. "You don't understand," she was telling Clay when me and Cody walked up. "They were going to put her to sleep. We *had* to adopt her."

"Couldn't you at least find a dog with two whole ears?" Clay asked.

The arm around the one-eared dog tightened. "No!" Anna had had a hard time finding a home herself. She was about to lose her foster home placement when Miss Johnette came to the rescue. Miss J is a biology teacher who lives in the neighborhood. They make a great pair. From bugs to ugly dogs, they both love nature.

"Hey there, girl." I said to the dog as I scratched her neck. "You got a name yet?"

"Her name is Beauty!" Anna nuzzled the patch of white on the dog's neck, then looked up and smiled. "Want to smell her? She smells really good." Cody took a whiff. "Just think," Anna crooned, hanging on her new pet, "when I woke up this morning I didn't have a dog and now I do! You never know when something good'll sneak up on you."

"Yeah!" Cody blurted out. "This morning I wasn't going on a trip, but now I am!" Everyone stopped picking pecan shells. "Christmas in the Keys!" For a minute they all sat, opening and closing their mouths like Justin's pet goldfish, Xena.

Things got so quiet, I heard a *ping* when Nana Grace dropped a shelled pecan into the metal bowl between her knees. “Well, now,” she said. “Isn’t that nice.”

“You’re leaving?” Cass asked in a small voice, her eyes on me.

“Yeah.” I took a kick at the bottom step. “We have to help my aunt and uncle.” Suddenly I didn’t feel as good about going. Except for the one week a year her family visited her mom’s folks in Georgia, Cass never went anywhere.

Maybe I could invite her along. My parents think the world of Cass. But I knew it wasn’t going to happen. On the other side of the fence that divides the Bodine’s yard from the Lewis’s, her dad was on the roof, propping up reindeer. Christmas is a big deal at her house—the only big deal of the year. Besides, invite a girl on a trip? The guys would never let me live it down.

Cass was still looking at me. “Will you be gone the *whole* two weeks?” she asked.

“Yeah, pretty much.”

“And guess what?” Cody whooped. “Santa’s gonna come in on water skis!”

“Will you stay in Key West?” Anna asked.

“No.” I scratched Beauty’s neck, working my fingers down into the fur. “My uncle built his marina close to the mainland so they could get off fast if there was a hurricane.”

“Key Largo?” Anna guessed. “Islamorada?” Anna’s other hobby is maps.

“That’s right, Islamorada.” I liked saying it. Islamorada. Isla, like island. Morada, like...well, like something mysterious.

“Islamorada,” Cass echoed. “It sounds so far away.”

“It’s still in Florida,” I told her. But it was a whole different Florida. It was the Florida of hurricanes and pirates, of shipwrecks and sharks. The Florida where things happen.

“Well, ’til you get there, you mind doin’ these, hammer-man?” Nana Grace pushed a bowl of pecans my way with the toe of her sneaker. Sometimes the cracker doesn’t crack a nut enough. When

that happens, I whomp it—Nana Grace gives me any job that calls for a tool. “Hammer’s up on the windowsill,” she said.

“Yeah, I know.” I’d put it there myself the week before.

I hammered nuts on the top step and daydreamed about the trip. Every now and then Beauty would lick my neck with her pink-and-black tongue and bring me back to earth. Then I’d look at Cass. Seeing her picking bits of shell off nuts, I felt lousy for being so happy.

But it wasn’t my fault. Like Anna said: sometimes good things sneak up on you.



“I’m going to New Leaf.” Mom had the car keys in her hand. “Do either of you boys want to come?”

“Sure,” I said. “I’ll go.” New Leaf is the natural food store where Mom buys tofu and mung beans and soy burger mix—things that would disgust the average kid who hadn’t been raised on them. But I wasn’t riding along to scoop things out of bins.

“I’m going to Crystal Connection,” I said as Mom parked. “Christmas mission.”

Her eyes sparkled. “Something for a girl?”

I handed her the canvas shopping sack she uses to save trees. “Yeah, Mom. You.”

I pushed the shop door open. Chimes rang. I plinked my finger against one of the hanging prisms in the front window. The rainbows that dotted the walls went flying. “Can I help you?” asked a girl with eyebrow rings and a patch of purple in her hair.

“Just looking.” I shoved my hands in my pockets and peered into a jewelry case. I don’t normally look in jewelry cases. If something’s in a case, I can’t afford it. But it was Christmas, and I wanted something good for Mom.

Dragons, wizard rings, and crystals of power were arranged in rows. Most of the tags were flipped over. I squatted and tried to read them through the underside of the glass shelf, but it was hard. The

ones I could read were pretty steep. I was about to check out incense burners when something at the very back of the case caught my eye.

Hanging between wizard and angel pendants was a fairy with dragonfly wings. In her hands she held a pearl, hopefully fake, if she was going to be anywhere near my price range. For some reason she reminded me of Cass. I hadn't come looking for a present for Cass, but I always give her something. Back when I was immature, it was gag gifts—things that blew up or burst out of the box. Last year I gave her a key chain with a rubber sneaker on it. The fairy necklace had to be more expensive, but Cass needed cheering up. "How much is that one?" I asked.

"Which one?" The girl leaned over the glass case, her spiky purple hair darting at me like snake tongues.

"That one at the back. The fairy."

"Sweet!" She slid the door of the case open and flipped the tag. "It's eighteen."

"Eighteen dollars?" That was most of what I had for all my shopping.

"Eighteen plus tax."

If I bought it, what would I give my parents?

The girl behind the counter lifted the necklace so I could take a better look. "Want me to wrap it?" The fairy swung on her chain. "Gift wrapping's free."

I swallowed hard. "Yeah, okay." I could give Mom a coupon good for dish-washing for a month and Dad one for weeding the garden. They always say Christmas is about family, not stuff. Luckily, I already had a supersonic yo-yo for Cody. He still liked stuff.

"This must be for someone special," the girl teased.

"It's for a friend." I tried to sound offhand like Leroy, but my voice cracked.

She raised her holey eyebrows and put the fairy in a tiny white box—a jewelry box. Right then I knew I'd made a mistake. The present looked like a boy-girl gift, which it would have been if it was Leroy giving it to Jemmie. But Cass and I were friends, period.

Unless this stupid present messed the whole thing up.