

 Chapter 1 

El Monte

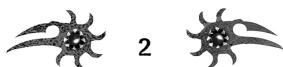
It was a steamy hot day in the middle of nowhere in Venezuela. The sky was light blue, without a single cloud. I stood in front of the rusty barbed wire fence that circled Campo Mata, the place I called home. There was a gap in the fence where I had propped a board in between the lowest wires. It was my gateway into El Monte, the green, dark jungle that surrounded our camp. I hunched down and carefully stepped through the opening. Billy had ripped his shirt going through the gap last year and cut a gash in his back. His parents had made him get a tetanus shot. They said he'd end up getting lockjaw and have to eat

through a straw for the rest of his life if he didn't. I sure as heck wasn't going to get a shot, or lock-jaw. When I got through the gap I stood up to my full height of four feet, eleven and a half inches. I knew my exact height because I marked it on the wall next to the doorway in my bedroom. I had grown almost three inches in the last six months. I was sure I was almost a man now.

'Come on, Mati!' I called out. 'You can do it.'

Mati was my dog. My parents had named him Matisse after a famous artist from France. My mother was an artist, so I guess she was the one who came up with it. I don't remember because Mati was born about the same time I was. That was over twelve years ago, so I guess that made him almost ninety in dog years. He sure didn't act like a ninety-year-old. Mati jumped through the gap without losing any fur on the sharp barbs on the wires. He was an Australian Shepherd with one light blue eye and one black eye. He had a black coat with splotches of white on his hind end. It seemed to me that his tongue was always sticking out and he always had a happy smile.

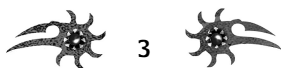
We stood there on the other side of the fence looking at the tall wall of green trees in front of



us. We were both excited. We had never gone into El Monte without having some sort of adventure.

We started down the short path through the tall dry grass that led into the tropical forest. It was going to take us about ten minutes to get to our hideout. Billy said he would be there waiting, and Todd said he'd try to make it too, but he was in trouble for fighting Alex, so I wasn't sure he'd be there. Mati and I stopped just before we reached the dark shadows of the trees. The huge trunks of the closest ones had long, hard spikes sticking out of them like big rose bush thorns. Getting pricked by one of those thorns really hurt. I couldn't tell you how many times it had happened to me. It would sting like a bee and it would keep stinging until my mom put some medicine and a Band-Aid on it. Mati somehow knew that too, because he never got poked by one of those spikes. I took a deep breath, big enough for the both of us, and then took that first heart-beating-hard step into El Monte.

The heat went away with the sunlight, but it seemed like the humidity went up a notch or two. I always sweated more in El Monte. Everything was wetter under the jungle canopy, even though



it hadn't rained for a few days. I guess the trees and plants had to sweat too. You could tell that Mati and I weren't the only ones to use the trail since it was bare dirt and it was packed down from all the animals that used it. The rest of the ground around the path was just tons of rotting leaves and moss and mushrooms and ferns everywhere. Everything was damp and you could see dewdrops on the mushroom caps, holding on for dear life. It smelled wet. I tried not to think of the different animals that used the path because I knew that most of them would love to catch me on it; at least they'd like it if Mati wasn't with me. He'd protect me for sure; always had before.

We were about halfway to the hideout when I heard the screeching of that stupid monkey. He'd seen me from way up in his tree and now he was raising a big fuss about me invading his territory. I didn't understand a thing he was saying, but I was pretty sure he was using all the curses and bad words he could think of. Couldn't be anything else from the nasty way he was yelling at me.

Mati started barking at the stupid monkey and they were raising quite a racket together. Monkey and I had crossed paths lots of times, so I knew

what was next. Sure enough, that skinny bag of bugs reached around to his behind and started throwing his poop down at us. I was ready for it and I had already ducked behind one of the spiky-trunked trees, but Mati wasn't so lucky. He caught one of those monkey poops right on his nose. He was trying to scrape that smelly stuff off with his front paws and, while he wasn't looking, he caught a few more chunks on his back before he gave up and started to run down the path to the hideout. I was right behind him.

Billy was already at the hideout when we came running down the path.

'Looks like you guys got caught in another poop storm,' laughed Billy.

I stopped running when I got to where Billy was standing on the outside of the ditch that we had dug around our hideout. I was breathing hard and now I was sweating like my dad did whenever he played a round of golf back at the camp.

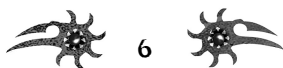
'I hate that stupid monkey,' I said, gasping for air.

'Yeah, well, at least you don't have to go by Pablo Malo's farm to get here,' said Billy. 'Those gnarly dogs of his always come running after me

when I walk down that dang road by his banana trees.’ He reached behind his back and pulled out his slingshot. ‘Good thing I keep this in my pocket. Pegged that really mean one, Loca, smack-dab on her snout and she turned and ran.’

Billy Hale was my best friend in the world. Well, maybe Mati was my real best friend, but Billy was my best human friend, for sure. We’d both grown up in Campo Mata. Both of our fathers worked for oil companies. My dad was an engineer for one of the big oil companies, and Billy’s dad worked for one of the oil service companies that drilled the oil wells for my dad’s company. So my dad was kind of his boss, and I was kind of Billy’s boss. This was mostly because he could never seem to beat me at anything unless I let him, like I had the other day when he challenged me to a wrestling match. I hoped he wouldn’t try me right then because I was really tired from the escape from the stupid monkey. He didn’t look like he would though.

Billy was shorter and thinner than me, which was saying something because I was pretty skinny. He was born in West Texas, like his parents, and



he had a really strong southern accent, like most of the kids in the oil camps. Almost all of them were born in Oklahoma or Louisiana or somewhere where there was lots of oil under the ground. I was born in California and moved to Campo Mata when I was six weeks old. Billy had bright red hair which his mom kept cut short. My hair was really blond and cut in a buzz cut too. Almost all of the boys in the camp had buzz cuts. Only one that didn't was Björn Sorensen, but he was from Europe and they seemed to do things differently over there. Billy always wore green jeans from Sears and red and white checked shirts with pearly buttons. I mostly wore Levi's blue jeans and a white T-shirt, which was never white for long. He wore cowboy boots and I wore black canvas sneakers. We both had cowboy hats but we almost never wore them. We'd stopped wearing our holsters with the six-shooters about a year ago. We were too old for that now. I had greenish eyes, and the moms in the camp always said things like 'Oh, isn't he sweet and so good-looking, like his dad' or 'I could just hug you all day'. Billy had eyes as blue as a gunfighter's, ears that stuck out from the side of his head like

an elephant and an Adam's apple that made him look like he'd gotten a bone stuck in his throat. I never heard the moms gush over him much, except for his own mom, of course. So, other than the fact that we were both skinny as rails, we were pretty much opposites in most ways.

Billy and I looked at each other and then turned our eyes to the huge trunk of the mango tree about twenty metres away. We both started running for it at the same time.

'Last one's a rotten egg,' I yelled.

'You already stink,' yelled Billy.

I beat him by a step, but I still had to push him away from the wooden plank steps that we had nailed to the trunk to get to our hideout high in the thick branches of the mango tree. He fell down on his rump and I started to climb.

'You're such a jerk, Avery,' he grumbled as he got to his feet, swatting the muddy leaves from his rump. 'Who made you the boss?'

I was already halfway up the trunk when I stopped to look down at him. He always tried to make me feel guilty when I beat him at something, and I almost always did feel guilty. I guess it's how good friends feel when that happens.

‘Aw, come on, Billy,’ I replied. ‘Don’t be a sore loser. You should be used to it by now.’

I felt bad as soon as I said it. It just wasn’t a nice thing to say, especially to my best friend. I tried to think of something that would make him feel better and keep him from being grumpy the rest of the day.

‘It wasn’t fair,’ I said. ‘I was already warmed up running from that stupid monkey and you weren’t ready. I think we tied anyway. I mean, I had to push you out of the way, didn’t I?’

Billy was no fool. He knew that I’d out-raced him, but all he needed was something to hang his hat on, and that was good enough for him.

‘Yeah, I guess so,’ he said. ‘Besides, I think you got the jump on me.’

Billy started up the ladder about the time I made it into the hideout. It was the most special place in the world. No girls had ever been there or would ever be there. They wouldn’t dare. It was a tree house made out of pine boards from the pipe yard in the camp. My dad built most of it the summer before. He and I had carried the long wooden boards down the path past the stupid monkey until we had a big pile of them

underneath the mango tree. He brought a handsaw, a hammer and lots of nails. On the first day he finished the steps and the floor. The next day, all by himself, my dad dragged lots of sheets of rusted and used tin roofing through the jungle and made a roof for our tree house. Billy and I, with a little help from Todd (when he wasn't grounded), built up the walls of our hideout. It took a long time and it seemed like years, but it was probably only a week or two. So the floor was really nice and flat, and didn't have any cracks in it. And the roof never leaked when the rains came. The walls that Billy and I built by ourselves weren't so good, but that didn't matter to us. We painted the whole tree house in army green so that our enemies, especially the girls, couldn't see it from below. It had worked so far.

Billy's head poked up through the opening in the floor of our hideout and he carefully looked around before climbing all the way in. He did that every time we climbed up to the tree house, ever since last year when we had been close to finishing the walls and he had come face-to-face with the iguana. Billy had beaten me to the steps that day, and he was still laughing and calling me a

‘rotten egg’ when he poked his head through the opening in the floor and came nose-to-nose with the iguana. From that distance it must have looked more like Godzilla. All I remember was a girly high-pitched scream and a hard thud as Billy landed on the ground next to me. He ended up breaking his arm and got to wear a cast. He still has that cast and it has all of the names of our classmates on it. I drew a picture of Godzilla on it.

Our hideout was roomy. We could stand up straight inside without banging our heads on the tin roof and it was about five or six paces across. We kept all kinds of stuff in there. Our old holsters with the cap-gun pistols were hanging from nails on the far wall. Even though we didn’t wear them any more we kept them there in case some girls showed up and we had to shoot them. All along the walls were our most prized possessions. Our comic book collections were stacked up high on the left wall. Billy was a fan of the *Iron Man* comics, while I liked *Thor*. We both knew that Thor could use his hammer to pound Iron Man’s metal suit to a pulp, but I never made a big deal of it. I had about ten of my favourite Louis L’Amour western paperback novels next to my

pile of comics, and Billy had his seven or eight Max Brand westerns next to his. We were big fans of westerns. I was pretty sure that Billy would have been a gunfighter like one of his Max Brand heroes, if he'd been born about a hundred years ago.

Jam jars and Mason jars full of all kinds of weird things that we had found in El Monte were stacked up along the right wall, just underneath the only window in our hideout. The most special of those weird things was the worm snake.

A few months ago, when we were digging the moat around the trunk of our mango tree, Billy let out one of his scaredy, girly screams, dropped his shovel and ran away really fast. Not knowing why he skittered away so suddenly I ran after him, and away from whatever it was.

'What the heck's going on?' I yelled when I caught up to him.

'I dug up a snake!' he screamed back. He was still running and looking back at the half dug ditch. His eyes were wide with terror. They were pretty much the same eyes he'd had when he met up with Godzilla.

'A snake buried in the dirt?' I replied. We had



stopped running. ‘Snakes don’t dig holes in the ground. Come on, let’s see what it is.’

We worked our way back to the ditch, hiding behind tree trunks like soldiers sneaking up on an enemy camp. When we reached the big mound of dirt that we had piled up on the outside of the moat, we stopped and looked over it. There it was, halfway out of a hole in the side of the ditch, right next to the shovel that Billy had dropped. The part that stuck out was about half a metre long and thick as a garden hose. It was a sickly whitish colour and it was wriggling around slowly.

‘That’s not a snake,’ I said. ‘That’s a worm.’

‘Is not,’ replied Billy. ‘No such thing as a worm a metre long.’

I walked around the pile of dirt and into the freshly dug out ditch. I picked up Billy’s shovel and prodded the wriggling worm snake thing. When I did that it started to move into its tunnel, so I dropped the shovel and grabbed it by its tail or head or whatever that end of it was. Billy almost had a heart attack.

‘Let go of it,’ he cried. ‘It’s gonna come out and bite you, and you’ll have to go to the clinic to get all those anti-venom shots like Eric.’



‘Nah . . . it’s a worm all right,’ I replied, pulling on it. ‘I need some help.’

Billy wasn’t having any of it and he stayed put behind the protection of the dirt pile as if he thought the critter might blow up like a grenade or something.

I was starting to win the tug of war with the worm. Little by little it started to come out of the worm hole. I was careful to not pull too hard. I didn’t want to snap it in two and have worm guts and juice flying all over the place. I was just starting to wonder how long the thing was when the rest of it finally popped out and I almost fell over on my butt. I dropped it on the ground and it thrashed around in the way that normal earthworms do when you dig them up to put on a fish hook; only this one would need a hook the size of an anchor to use as bait.

‘See?’ I said triumphantly. ‘No eyes, no mouth, no fangs – not even any rattles or scales. It’s a worm, that’s all.’

We put that worm in the biggest glass jar we had, filled it up with dirt and then poked some holes in the cap so it could breathe. That was the coolest thing in our jar collection of bugs and fish.



We also had jars with piranhas that we'd caught in the river (with smaller worms) and monster rhinoceros beetles. We even had one full of machacas, which is what we called the huge ants with big pincers that lived everywhere around Campo Mata. Those machacas could cut the leaves off a whole tree in one day and march away along the ant highways that they'd made on the ground to their volcano mounds. The ant highways were all over the place and they always led to one of the huge mounds of dirt that they'd built up. We didn't mess with those customers too much. Rumour had it that they could clean the meat off the bones of a sleeping person faster than a pack of piranhas.

We also had shoeboxes full of other bugs; neat ones like centipedes, millipedes, machaca queen ants (with their wings still on them) and tons of butterflies and moths. All of them were much bigger and brighter than the kinds you find back in the States. What we didn't have were snakes. We'd collected some snakeskins, but Billy and I didn't get near live snakes. They scared the heck out of both of us.

We were standing at the window of our tree



house when Todd came crashing through the bamboo thicket behind our hideout, down the same path that Billy always took. We had heard him coming for quite a while, mostly because he had been yelling our names the whole time.

‘Avery . . . Billy,’ he yelled between big gulps of air. ‘Guys, there’s a dead body on the slab behind the clinic! We gotta go and see it.’

Todd Shanker was a lot bigger than Billy and me. Not just taller, but he weighed more and he was really strong. But he was also dumber than a doornail or, as my dad once said, ‘Todd’s not the sharpest tool in the shed, that’s for sure’. I always wondered how he could have such a big head and such a tiny brain. It must have rattled around in there. He had blond hair like me, and it was buzz cut too. He had brown eyes and they were really close together, like a weasel’s. He had a tiny nose that didn’t do a good job of hiding the holes of his nostrils, which made it too easy to see the crusty chunks of snot he always had up there. A couple of years ago I caught him picking at them and eating them. He got really mad at me when he realised I had seen him. If he didn’t know how to handle an awkward situation he would just beat



you up. It made him feel better somehow, I don't know why. He was wearing a pair of cut-off jeans, dirty sneakers and a black cotton shirt with a little green alligator sewn on to it just above where your heart should be. He didn't eat snot any more, but he also never wiped away the two trails that seemed to always leak down from his nose to his upper lip. Todd was my second best friend; third if you counted Mati.

Billy and I got on our hands and knees and looked down through the opening of our hideout at Todd. He looked up and waved at us to come down.

'I heard it from my brother,' he said, still trying to catch his breath. 'There's some local guy lying dead on the concrete slab at the back of the clinic. He said that there's blood and guts and that it's really gross. We gotta go and see it.'

I had seen one other dead body on that concrete slab before. He had been driving one of the big eighteen-wheelers hauling drill pipe to one of the rigs in the oil field when he lost control and crashed. The pipe had come smashing through the cab of the truck and went right through him too. That one was definitely gross. I doubted that



this one would be as gross, but I knew that we just had to go and find out.

‘You sure?’ I asked. ‘I don’t want to go all the way home to get my bike and pedal all the way across the camp and find out that your big brother was just pulling your leg all along.’

‘No, it’s real all right,’ replied Todd excitedly. ‘Come on, let’s go.’

