

Fire Station Buddies, Inc.

THE PACT



Illustrations
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To all the kids who dream of having a friend to go on an
adventure with.

To those who know that animals do know how to talk.

To fire fighters who wish we really did have extra help up on
the mountain.

Jesse & Drew – True believers.

Nancy – The Wonder Editor – You made it all come alive.

2010

The Fire Station Buddies, Inc – The Pact

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CHAPTER ONE

Jordan chewed on his lower lip as he drew pictures of his friends on the back of the homework assignment Ms. Williams was going over with his sixth grade class.

Using his red pencil, he covered Ryan's face in little dots. He tipped his head sideways to study the effect. The dots looked more like measles than freckles, which was what he'd been trying to draw. He shrugged. Too late to do anything about it. He colored Ryan's hair red and orange and yellow to make it look like a flame. He smiled in satisfaction. He wasn't listening to a word Ms. Williams said.

Next he added in Michael. He drew Michael's glasses so big they almost covered his entire face, making Michael look even geekier than he did in real life. He put backwards numbers in Michael's glasses so it looked like he was studying hockey stats. Keeping stats was one of Michael's favorite things to do and he did it very well. He gave Michael hair that looked like Albert Einstein's.

He cocked his head and studied what he'd drawn so far. He thought it was a stroke of genius on his part to add the Einstein hair. He bet when Einstein was a kid he looked a lot like Michael, except Michael was African American and Einstein wasn't. But the color of their skin wasn't especially important anyway, Jordan thought, so that was a minor point at best.

He sketched a bag of sunflower seeds sticking out of Michael's pocket and grinned, pleased with the extra touch. He swore Michael lived on sunflower seeds. He'd picked up the habit of eating them while he was keeping stats during hockey games and now he always had some tucked in a pocket.

Next Jordan sketched Annie into his picture. He quickly drew her long, straight black hair, making her bangs reach just

above her brown eyes. He colored her shirt bright red. Her grandmother was forever making her wear something red because she said in China red brought good luck.

Annie always knew the answer to everything, so he made her head extra large so it'd have room for her gigantic brain. He almost laughed out loud when he was finished.

Moving right along, he drew his friend Will sitting on top of a totem pole watching over the rest of them. Will was Native American. He was proud of his culture and had read the class his report on totem poles last month. Ms. Williams had given Will and A+ on it.

Jordan continued to ignore his teacher as he colored Kate into his picture. He drew her wearing a huge sweater with sleeves that covered her hands. She always wore big, fluffy wool sweaters her aunt knitted for her. He swore Kate had at least one of every color and a whole bunch of striped ones, too. He drew Kate in the background, running toward the rest of his friends. She was always late because her parents used up almost all her time on boring lessons. They called these "things to enhance her education." Music lessons, dance lessons, visits to museums. You name it, they were always making her take some kind of pointless lessons or dragging her off to some boring place. He felt sorry for her. Having professors for parents meant they thought of education 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

As he considered where to put himself in his drawing, Ms. Williams walked up quietly beside him. She thrust her hand out so close to his eyes he didn't have time to blink. He was so startled he dropped his pencil. It rolled across the floor until Michael stuck his foot on it and stopped it.

Ms. Williams' hand was no more than an inch below his nose. He smelled the rose-scented perfume on her wrist. Sheepishly, he handed her the paper.

She twisted her mouth as she examined the picture he'd drawn on the back of the assignment sheet that listed all the things to include in their fire house report. "I do admire your artistic talent, Jordan. In fact, I think so highly of it, I want you to add a drawing or two to your report on Fire Station #2," she said. She tried to sound casual, but he knew he'd made her angry. Again.

How could she expect anybody to be happy about the dumb Fire Station #2 report. School ended in two weeks and they'd already written at least three thousand reports. She knew by now that they knew how to write the dumb things. She should give the report stuff a rest.

Besides, he already knew all about Fire Station #2. For the last five years his mother had led the efforts to raise money to build it. You'd think it was a castle or something instead of just a place to park fire trucks. He wished she'd put that kind of effort into getting money to build a real ice hockey rink. He liked playing hockey on rollerblades well enough, but he couldn't imagine anything cooler than having a real indoor rink for games.

But was his mother even interested in building an ice hockey rink? Heck no. She only cared about the fire station. She talked about it as much as his know-it-all, sixteen-year-old sister Sarah talked about zoology.

His father, Frank, was a firefighter, so of course he was always interested in hearing everything his mother had to say about the new station. But personally, Jordan was sick of the whole thing. He'd be glad when the dedication ceremony was over and he never had to hear about it again.

At least his dad liked hockey, too, so once in a while they got to work that into the conversation, but that seemed to happen less and less these days. His dad was turning as boring as his mother and sister. All he had time for was his job at the post office and being a volunteer firefighter.

“Do you want to tell the class what your report will be on?” Ms. Williams asked Jordan, pulling his back to the present. Her tone was what his mother would call “mocking.” He could tell Ms. Williams doubted he had anything in mind for his report at all. She was right. He didn’t.

He shrugged.

“I can’t hear you,” Ms. Williams said. A few students giggled, but Jordan didn’t care. Except for his gang, which he’d been drawing quite happily before Ms. Williams had interrupted him, it didn’t much matter to him what anybody else thought.

Ms. Williams put his drawing back on his desk and tapped it with her fingers. He watched her long fingernails go up and down on the drawing like they were doing a tap dance. She liked to paint her nails colors to match holidays. On Halloween she painted them black. They were green on Christmas and purple and pink on Easter. Today they were just plain red. He thought she should paint flames on them since she was so interested in the fire station, but he knew better than to say it out loud. He’d had enough detention already this year, and it was way too nice outside to stay after school again.

“The report is due in a week,” Ms. Williams reminded him. “It’s the final one this year, and it will be a big part of your grade, so I suggest you come up with an idea very soon. It’s not every day Glacier Creek, Colorado, gets a new fire station. I hope you’ll be at the dedication ceremony tomorrow night to celebrate.”

He nodded. Of course he’d be there. His mother would make him go. He couldn’t wait to be older. Eleven was a rotten age. You weren’t a cute little kid anymore so you got yelled at a lot. But you also weren’t a teenager yet. Teenagers got to do whatever they wanted. At least his sister did. He wished he was thirteen already, but he still had one year and four months to go. An eternity.

As soon as Ms. Williams was back at the front of the class, he quickly added himself into his sketch. He drew himself wearing a hockey jersey with the number 13 big and bold right in front. Thirteen. He decided he'd adopt the number 13 as his new lucky number because when he turned 13 in less than a year and a half, he would have all sorts of new privileges. He could hardly wait. He was tired of life being boring.

The bell rang at almost the exact minute he finished his picture. He stuffed it into his backpack and ran outside to meet his friends. They referred to themselves as the gang and met every day on the playground to walk home together. Well, at least as far as they could walk before they had to go their separate ways. They didn't exactly live in the same neighborhoods, but still, they started out together.

Annie, Will, Ryan, and Michael were already waiting by the swings. Jordan joined them.

"Kate's late again?" he asked, hiking his backpack over his shoulder when he reached them.

"She's meeting us at the old fire station. She had to run over and put in a chocolate order for her mother first," Annie told him.

"Why didn't she just give it to you, Ryan? You could just hand it over to your mom when you get home. I mean, sheesh, she owns the chocolate business," Jordan pointed out.

Ryan shrugged. "Who knows? Guess Kate's mother must not trust me or something."

"That's ridiculous. You never do anything wrong," Michael teased.

"Yeah, messing up is Jordan's job," Annie added.

Everybody laughed, including Jordan.

The truth was, Ryan really didn't mess up much. His older brother, Jake, was always in trouble, and his little brother, David, had to go to speech therapy, so Ryan tried not to give his parents any problems. They had enough to worry

about. Besides, Ryan had explained to the gang more than once, if he didn't cause problems, his parents didn't pay too much attention to him. "Which means I have a lot of freedom to come and go as I please," he always added.

The gang began walking, but instead of turning right when they got to the end of the playground like they usually did, they turned left.

Jordan didn't notice everyone else turn until he'd gone several yards in the opposite direction. He spun around to see what was going on. "Hey," he yelled. "Where are you going?"

He suspected Michael was just pulling a trick on him. Michael might be the biggest geek he'd ever met, but he was also big on tricks.

But this time, Michael hadn't been trying to trick him. "We're going to the old fire station, remember? Research," he reminded Jordan.

"Oh, yuck," Jordan replied as he trotted to catch up with the rest of the gang. "I'm so tired of hearing about that place I could barf."

"So what's your report going to be about?" Will asked Jordan when Jordan fell into step beside him.

"I don't want to talk about boring stuff. School's over for the day," Jordan said shortly.

"I'm going to start making you give me a dollar every time you say the word *boring*," Annie said. "It's boring that you always say boring. Besides, a new fire station is going to be exciting."

"I didn't say the new fire station was boring. Reports are boring," Jordan corrected her.

Annie laughed. "You just said boring twice. Now you owe me two dollars."

Jordan poked her playfully on the shoulder. "And I'm going to charge you five dollars every time you tell me I owe you money for saying *boring*."

Ryan was used to Annie and Jordan bickering. They were good friends, but they teased each other a lot. He didn't feel like listening to it again, though, so he took over the conversation. "I'm doing my report on all the cool trucks the new station is getting. I bet they do all kinds of really neat things. Wish I was old enough to drive." His brother Jake was, but he'd been suspended from school for smoking in the boys' bathroom at school, so his parents had taken his learner's permit away.

Michael chimed in. "I hear the station will have all new communication systems. The firefighters are even getting special helmets with data communications in them. This is high tech James Bond stuff. Chief Mark promised I can check out some of the new stuff to see how it works."

"I'm writing about the new uniforms. I think they were made by NASA, but I have to do some research and check," Annie said.

The gang turned the corner and saw Kate waiting impatiently in front of the fire station. "Why'd we come here to do research, anyway?" Jordan asked. "It's not like there's anything left in there."

"Forget research. I just want to see how it looks with everything moved out," Michael said.

Jordan liked the sound of that. Going into an empty building was something different to do. They were always looking for things out of the ordinary.

Kate skipped down the block to meet them. "It's all locked up," she said. "So I guess we can't check it out after all."

Jordan was suddenly much more interested in this whole visit. Getting into a locked building sounded like fun. "I know for a fact the window in the back isn't locked. My dad said they always meant to fix it, but every time they started working on it, somebody reported a fire someplace. The

firefighters started thinking repairing the window brought bad luck.”

The gang didn't need to be talked into giving the window a try. All of their parents were involved in fighting fires one way or another, and so they had all been in the building hundreds of times. It was basically their second home.

Jordan's dad, Frank, had been a firefighter since he was eighteen.

Will's uncle, Silent Wolf, was the first to be called when somebody was lost.

Michael's dad, Warren, was an emergency medical technician, or EMT for short, and always went with a team if somebody might be hurt.

Ryan's dad, Ted, helped out wherever he was needed. Sometimes he went out to help build containment lines to keep the fire from spreading. Other times he stayed at the command center to make sure supplies got where they needed to go. Sometimes he drove the fire trucks.

Annie's dad, Joe, had a bad leg, so he took care of the paperwork side of the fire department.

Kate's dad, Peter, helped at the command center if he was in town when a fire struck. Everyone's mother pitched in, too. Sometimes they worked in the command center. Sometimes they made sure there was food and drinks for everyone involved in the getting the fire under control. They also all helped out with each other's kids or washed equipment or took care of anything else that needed to be done.

The parents were so involved in firefighting that the kids had all been at the old station since they were old enough to walk. They didn't see a thing wrong with going inside the station uninvited.

Jordan boosted Michael up so he could open the window.

A squirrel on a big oak tree beside the building chattered away at them as if he was trying to get their attention. He seemed annoyed to see them. Michael took some sunflower seeds out of his pocket and laid them on the ground. This quieted the squirrel for a minute, but then he started chattering even louder as the gang helped each other through the window.

“S-s-s-h-h-h,” Will shushed the squirrel. “Calm down. We’re not going to hurt anything.” Oddly, the squirrel seemed to understand. He moved closer to watch.

“I swear you and animals understand each other,” Jordan said. “It’s weird.”

Normally Will might have pointed out that, like his ancestors, he believed everything on earth was connected, so of course it was possible to communicate with animals. But getting inside the building was more important than answering Jordan at the moment, so he let Jordan’s comment slide.

Michael was the last one in. He glanced back at the window just as the squirrel leaped onto the window sill. Michael laughed and dug into his pockets for more sunflower seeds. He tossed them through the window for the nosey little squirrel.

Michael joined his friends in the center of the empty station. It seemed much more spacious without the trucks in it. It still smelled strongly of rubber hoses and sweaty firefighters. Random streaks of light spilled through the station’s few windows. Instead of making it easy to see, the inconsistent light cast eerie shadows over the nearly bare room.

“Wow, it’s kind of spooky in here,” Kate whispered.

“Yeah,” Jordan agreed, then added, “It’s a lot bigger inside than I thought.” He spoke loudly, as if to chase away any creatures that might be lurking in the dark. “Without the trucks we could use this place as a hockey rink.” He squatted down to open a box.

“At least it’d be a good place to practice,” Will agreed. “Too bad they’re knocking it down.”

Jordan forgot all about the box for a minute. “That’s it! I’ll write my report on the explosives they’re going to use to level this place.”

Michael pointed to a row of lockers. “Wonder if there’s some old gear in there,” he said. “You could compare it to the new stuff for your report, Annie.”

“Great idea,” she said, and the gang crossed the floor to rummage through the lockers. They all appeared to be empty.

Annie leaned over to pick up something from the floor. “Hey, look here. I think I found a station patch.”

Kate moved in for a better look. “I don’t know. It kinda looks like one, but I’m not sure.” She pointed to the numeral 2 in the middle of the faded patch. “It has the station number right where it’s supposed to be, but what are all the weird symbols around the number? There’s even a paw print.”

“Let me see,” Will said, moving closer to the girls.

Jordan, Ryan, and Michael joined them as well, and together they studied the symbols.

“That’s a flame,” Ryan said, touching one of the symbols.

“And a horn,” said Jordan.

“That’s lightning. And that’s an eye right next to it,” Ryan said. His voice was soft, and the others could tell he was still spooked.

Will pointed to the last symbol. “That’s water,” he said.

Annie nodded and tucked the patch into her shirt pocket. “I’m going to ask my grandmother about these symbols,” she said. “She knows all about the meaning of things. Fire patches don’t look like this. I want to know where it came from.” Nobody objected.

Will returned to the lockers. Now that they’d found something unusual, he felt as if they were on a hunt. Sure enough, he found a locker that hadn’t been completely cleared

out. “Hey, check this out,” he called to his friends. “There’s all sorts of things in here. Old packs. Bandanas. Even an old book of some kind.” Will held the old book out as proof of his discovery.

Jordan reached over Will’s shoulder for the book. “Wow, this book is really old. The pages are all yellow and brittle. It smells weird, too. Kinda like wet wood.”

Kate was quick to respond. “Be careful with that. Old books can fall apart in your hands if you’re not careful.” Kate’s parents owned the big old building in the center of town that housed the library. She spent a lot of time there helping her parents.

It annoyed Jordan that Kate always acted like that made her an authority on books. “Thanks, Sherlock,” he said. “Like I couldn’t figure that out by myself.”

Kate tried to take the book from Jordan, but he sidestepped her. He sat down on an overturned locker so he could examine it better. He wiped the dust off to read what was stamped on the cover. “Station 2 Logbook,” he said.

Carefully, he opened the logbook and read the first page. “Property of Station 2. Glacier Creek, Colorado. April to August 1975.”

“1975. That was like 50 years ago,” Michael commented.

“Actually,” Kate corrected, “It was 35 years ago to be exact.”

“Give Kate a gold star for her higher math skills,” Jordan teased. “Watch out, Michael, or she’ll take over your status as the Glacier Creek math genius.”

“Why didn’t the firefighters take the gear and this logbook to the new station with them?” Kate wondered aloud, ignoring Jordan.

Jordan turned the first page and read to the group. “Recorded in this logbook are the fire calls and training exercises that were done during the months of April to August

1975. Only firefighters from Station 2 are allowed to access this information. It cannot be discussed with anyone outside the fire community. The enclosed is top secret and must be protected.”

Pausing dramatically, Jordan continued, “It’s signed Chief Jesse Robinson.”

“What top secret? Firefighters don’t do top secret. The FBI, CIA, maybe even policemen have top secret information, but not firefighters. There must be some kind of mistake,” Michael objected. He grabbed for the logbook. “Or are you making all this up, Jordan?”

Jordan turned another page and read, “April 1, 1975. Fire on Hawk Ridge. Station 2 was dispatched on a fire call at 5:12 a.m. Engine 2 was the first to arrive on scene. We saw smoke billowing up from the fire, but what caught our attention was the group of animals standing on the side of the road. They seemed to be waiting for us. They watched us get out of the truck, and one of the biggest bobcats I’ve ever seen trotted toward us as we pulled out our gear.”

Jordan paused and then quickly flipped through some pages. “Oh, brother, this is ridiculous!” he said. “You all have to read this for yourselves.”

The gang crowded around close enough to read over Jordan’s shoulders. They read:

Naturally, I started backing up because that big old cat was getting way too close for comfort. It seemed to sense I was nervous and stopped a few yards from me. Then plain as day, the big cat said, “Fire Chief Jesse, my name is Flame. I’m in charge of the Fire Station Buddies.” I’ve never had an hallucination in my life and this was hardly the time for one. I know as well as the next person that animals can’t talk, but this one had spoken as clear as any person I’ve ever heard. Moreover, I knew that even if by some wild stretch of the imagination an animal could have figured out how to speak, why would it speak English, and why in the world would a

bobcat know me by name? I closed my eyes to clear my head, and when I opened them again, I saw my whole crew standing there with their mouths hanging open. One look at their wide eyes and I knew they'd heard the same thing I did."

Kate held her hand over Jordan's fingers before he could turn the page. "The Fire Station Buddies. Aren't they some kind of legend?" she asked, stunned.

Annie and Will's eyes met. They had both grown up hearing legends. The others teased them whenever anybody brought up a legend, but now Kate was talking about one.

Jordan shook Kate's hand off the logbook. "Obviously someone thought it'd be funny to leave a pretend logbook here," he said. "Let's see what other crazy stories he has." He turned the page so they could continue reading.

Flame the bobcat kept talking. "A special group of animals started working with Chief John, the first fire chief in Glacier Creek, and that group of animals trained another group when the first group was too old to help. That group in turn taught another group and so on. Now we're here to revive the pact. Have you forgotten your pledge?"

I replied as if it I talked to animals every day. "How could I forget about something I didn't know anything about to begin with? When I became fire chief, no one told me anything about some secret pact with wild animals."

Flame was a patient bobcat, and he took the time to tell me more. I suppose he learned patience stalking his prey.

"You are right. We are a secret and so is our pact with you. No one can know it exists. Let me introduce you to the team, and then we can fill you in on the details of the fire."

Flame, as the bobcat called himself, flipped his tail, which seemed to mean the other animals were supposed to join us. At least that's what they did.

The bobcat nodded to the wolf. "Sage, the wolf, is my second in command. Stanley, the black bear over there, is in

charge of ice and swift water rescue. Majesty, the mountain sheep, is in command of wildfires. Max, the squirrel, is in charge of communications. Omega, the hawk, is our lookout. Majesty will show you the way to the fire when your team's ready. The fire is on the ridge. Omega reported that lightning started it. So far, there are only a few trees on fire, and it isn't spreading. We'll guide you there. All the other forest animals have left and are safe on the next ridge."

Like it was the most natural thing in the world to do, we all got our gear and followed Majesty up the side of the mountain. We found four trees in flames and quickly built a containment line around the trees. Our new friends started to help. Stanley, Sage, and Flame helped dig the line with their paws. Majesty used her horns to move all the rocks out of our path, and Omega circled overhead to keep an eye on the fire. Max was in a nearby tree overseeing the area to make sure everyone stayed safe.

Us firefighters and the Fire Station Buddies, as we soon learned they called themselves, worked as team and got the fire out at 14:22. I thanked the talking animals for their help. As I was leaving, Flame asked if I knew where their gear was.

This topped the whole thing off. Animals with gear. No doubt about it, I was dreaming for sure. It was the most lifelike dream I'd ever had by far, but enough was enough. I was ready to wake up.

"What kind of gear?" I asked before I could pull myself out of my deep sleep.

"Packs and our bandanas."

"We don't have any of your gear on our trucks," I told the animals, "but we'll look for it when we get back to the station." I sounded so sincere I almost believed it myself. Almost believed the whole thing could be real.

"Promise?" Flame asked.

“Sure,” I said. I knew I’d wake up any minute, so the promise meant less than a drop of water when a mountain’s burning.

Engine 2 returned to the Fire Station at 15:30.

Sometimes there’s not much to do in a dream, so we all looked for the gear Flame had told us about. We were shocked to find an old locker up in the attic that revealed packs of different sizes and red bandanas with markings on them. At the very bottom, we discovered a station patch.

The patch wasn’t the one we actually use at Station 2, of course, since this was a dream, but there was a “2” for the station. Around the number, there were six different symbols—a flame, a pair of horns, water, a lightning bolt, an eye, and a paw print.

Firefighter Sam noticed the bandanas had the same symbols as the patch. “I’ll bet each symbol stands for one of those talking animals that helped us put out the blaze,” he said. He actually sounded like he believed we’d really had such an experience. But then of course he’d sound like that. I still hadn’t woken up from my dream, so he’d believe anything I came up with while I was imagining things in my sleep.

Since sleep didn’t seem like it wanted to let go of me, I took a close look at the symbols. The flame must be for Flame the bobcat, I figured. The horns look just like the ones on top of Majesty’s head. The water was probably Stanley’s symbol since he commands water rescues, and the lightning bolt would be for Max and his communications. The eye would clearly be Omega’s since he was looking out for us, and the paw print was a wolf’s print, so that would belong to Sage.

As long as I couldn’t wake up from my dream, I thought I’d play along. “They must have worn the bandanas so we would know that they were part of the Fire Station Buddies team,” I told the crew. “We’ll have to order new packs, but the bandanas and patches still look just fine to me. Don’t want to waste money now,” I said with a laugh.

At 18:10, Flame arrived at the fire station. He was very serious and wanted to discuss what had happened earlier that day. He also wanted to plan how we'd work together in future fires.

Flame explained that since the firefighters don't know all the ways the animals can help, the firefighters needed to start training with the Fire Station Buddies so we can all work as a team.

The big old bobcat also let me know that Max the squirrel lives in the tree outside the station. "You can contact him to relay messages to the rest of the Fire Station Buddies any time you need to," he said in that deep voice of his.

This can't be true and I swear I will not eat my wife's fire-hot chili again if it's going to make my dreams this vivid. Come on now, talking animals helping us with fires? They want to train with us? Holy blazes, what a night.

The thing of it is, I seem to be perfectly awake. And our gear smells exactly like it does after we've been out fighting a fire. And right outside the station window, a squirrel is watching me from a branch as I write this all down. He's nodding his head and looking straight into my eyes.

Every word I'm writing and everything that may or may not have happened will stay a secret. Not a word will ever go beyond this station.

Chief Jesse Robinson

Will was the first to speak. "Wow, I can't believe it. The firefighters are keeping a secret."

"It sounds like the old firefighters kept a secret, all right," Michael said. "The new ones, well, I can't see them every doing anything so interesting." Michael loved secrets. Without secrets, there couldn't be tricks.

"What do you think happened to the Fire Station Buddies the chief met?" Will asked. "Did they pass their

secret on to the next generation? They said that's their tradition."

Will knew a lot about traditions. He had moved from Denver where his parents lived so he could learn the traditions of his tribe from his uncle, Silent Wolf, who lived in a small cabin in the woods just outside of Glacier Creek. He had been chosen to learn the stories of his tribe. It was a special honor, and he took it very seriously.

Jordan burst into laughter. "You are all ridiculous. You're acting like this nonsense is real!" He flipped the book back to the first page. "Look at the date! April 1. April Fool's Day. He made the whole thing up."

Kate took the book from him. "Jordan's right," she said.

Jordan laughed even harder. "You actually thought this was for real? That some talking animals ran around helping firefighters? Boy, are you dumb."

Annie put her hand over the pocket that held the patch. "If it is all a joke, where did the patch come from?" she asked softly.

The laughter died down. Scowling, Annie flipped through the logbook. "There are a lot more entries in here. There might be something I can use in my report. Does anyone mind if I take this home for a while?"

"Go ahead. Maybe the chief's got some more good tall tales in there," Jordan said as he stood up and brushed off his jeans.

Will cleared his throat. "This is our secret. Tell no one," he said. They'd never heard him sound so serious.

"Right, like we'd tell anybody we snuck into the fire station," Ryan said. "I'd be grounded for a month."

"A month? I'd be grounded the whole summer," Michael said.

“Okay, then, our secret,” Will said. They put their hands together and swore not to say a word to anyone outside the gang.

They climbed back out the window and hurried home. Michael, the last one out of the building, shut the window behind him. He noticed the squirrel watching them silently. He flipped a few more sunflower seeds on the ground for him. Before they rounded the corner of the building to the sidewalk, Michael glanced back to see if the squirrel had found the sunflower seeds. He could swear the squirrel was glad to see them leave.

Ridiculous, he told himself, the squirrel was just a curious creature who didn't like intruders. He was territorial, like all animals. At least he could be a little grateful that I shared my sunflower seeds, Michael thought, as he popped a few seeds into his mouth, sucking the salt from the shells before splitting them with his teeth to get the seeds from the shells.

They hurried home so they wouldn't be late for dinner. They were unusually quiet, each thinking the same thing.

What if the entry in the logbook hadn't been just a tall tale? What if Chief Jesse hadn't been dreaming because he ate too much of his wife's fire-hot chili?

The gang had found that mysterious patch, hadn't they?

And what about that squirrel? He'd been on the window sill when they'd gone to climb back outside. Even Jordan had noticed he'd been watching them with keen interest.

Annie and Kate walked side by side. When they parted, they nodded slightly at each other. Both of them understood that the other did not think what they had found in the fire station was any kind of joke. They had some research to do.

