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AllieCat

A novel

By

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“Like dogs, bicycles are social catalysts that attract a superior category of people.”

–Chip Brown, “A Bike and a Prayer”

Chapter One

Finding Father

July 1

AllieCat disappeared the day we found Father Malcolm.

Allie and Joe and I charged our mountain bikes through the junk woods like we always did, bouncing over ruts and tree limbs and sand hills.

The night before, a thunderstorm blasted through Blue Earth County. Tree branches were down all over the place, and wet leaves plastered the ground. We rode around the trailer park cemetery—where Mr. Turtle buries dead trailers, not people—and we slid up and down hills, slick as ice with the wet green leaves. Allie headed down the big steep slope to the Blue Earth River, but behind her, Joe froze at the top of the hill.

Joe does that on hills. Now I know he had good reasons to freak out at the top of big hills, but back then I just thought he was a wuss-out pansy who couldn't ride hills for diddly-squat. Anyway, he froze. At the top of the hill, he hit his brakes, which is what you *don't* do when you're riding a bike on a slippery surface, whether it's snow or loose gravel, or loose sand, or wet leaves. You follow the flow of your front tire, but you don't slam on your brakes.

Joe slammed.

“Stay off the brakes!” I yelled. “Go. Just ride through it. Let go and follow your front wheel.”

Joe let go of his brakes and started down the incline.

“Steer into the slide,” Allie hollered from down the hill, ahead of us. “Stay off the brakes. Feather ‘em if you have to.”

But Joe couldn’t stay off the brakes.

He made it about fifteen feet down the hill, fishtailing all over the place, and then went down. His shoulder smacked into the ground and he zipped downward in the wet leaves like he and his bike were sideways on a waterslide.

His handlebar hooked a cedar sapling beside the trail, and his bike swung around it like a yo-yo. Joe catapulted over the edge of the ravine and shot out into space, skimming scraggly treetops, and yelling to beat the band, and then disappearing, trailing his “Aaaaahhhh...” through the air behind him.

“Pussy!” Allie screamed over her shoulder from the bottom of the hill. But she braked and looked back just in time to see Joe fly out of sight. That shut her up.

I guided my front wheel down the hill about ten feet behind Joe. I tapped my brakes lightly to slow down some more, but my back tire slid out from under me anyway, and wet green rushed at me. I smacked down on my side and I felt my shoulder and my helmet bounce. I kicked like crazy and twisted my feet so my shoes unclipped from my pedals as I slid. I grabbed for dirt, mud, leaves, anything to stop sliding. My foot found a root and I stopped just before the edge of the ravine.

Allie, stopped at the bottom of the hill, struggled to unclip from her pedals and yelled, “Sadie! Joe! You guys okay?”

“Fine,” I yelled, scrambled to my feet, brushed off wet leaves.

“Holy crap!” Joe hollered from somewhere below us. “Holy crap! Get down here *quick!*”

“What!?” I yelled, moving toward his voice. “You okay?”

“Why don’t you just swear and get it over with,” Allie yelled. “I’m so sick of hearing you say *holy crap.*”

“Just get down here, then!” Joe’s voice cracked. “Oh, crap! Hurry up!”

“Are you hurt?” I moved over the edge of the ravine, working to keep my footing, and then approached Joe in leaps. He had landed against the only decent-sized tree trunk on the steep slope. He sat, leaning on the scraggly fir tree, which kept him from falling the last twenty feet, and stared toward the bottom of the ravine.

“Look,” he said.

I looked.

The first thing I saw was a ripped blue plastic tarp, spread over the ground. Joe pointed. Two brown shoes, toes down, souls up, lay in the mud, sticking out from under the plastic sheet. There were feet in the shoes, attached to legs that disappeared under the tarp.

“Holy crap,” Joe said again.

“I am so sick,” said Allie, scrambling down to us, “of your ‘*holy crap.*’ I wish—” She saw the feet. “Oh, Christ!” We looked at each other and back at the feet. Then she almost managed a crooked grin. “Lost soles.”

I tried to smile at her perverse joke, but my mouth wouldn't bend that way. It was hard enough just to breathe, much less smile. It was harder to get air in my lungs just then than it was riding up Embolism Hill following Allie's wheel.

"Do you think," Joe croaked, "he's dead?"

"Only one way to find out," Allie said, picking her way down to the tarp.

"Think we should just leave him be and go call the cops?" Joe said, struggling to his feet.

"Good idea." I nodded and backed farther away from the tarp and the feet. I could feel my breakfast rising inside me.

"Either way," Joe said, "dead or alive, we've got to call the cops." He glared at Allie's back. "Now don'tcha wish you hadn't told me *real* riders don't carry cell phones?"

Allie shrugged. "So we have to *go* call. I'll go."

"If he's alive," I croaked, my mouth sandpapery, and realizing that my voice had to filter through my fingers because I couldn't seem to peel my hand away from my mouth, "if he's still alive, a few minutes can make a lot of difference. You know, CPR and all that...He could die while we're getting help."

"I don't know about you," Allie said, "but I'm not doin' CPR on *that*..."

"Too bad," Joe said again, "it's such a *crime* to carry a cell phone."

Allie threw him a black look—it was easy to picture the day Joe had answered his phone while we were on a ride, and Allie left him in the dust and said she wouldn't ride with him if he brought it along anymore—and she stepped toward the tarp. "We gotta see if he's dead."

Joe and I crept behind her, as if the guy would jump up at us. Maybe it was a ploy; he had hidden under the tarp, and he'd come roaring to life, brandishing a tree branch. We must all have been thinking the same thing because Joe jerked a stick, bigger than a baseball bat, out of the wet leaves. "Here." He handed it to me. "Hold this, just in case."

I nodded, grabbed the end of the stick and moved into position, as if I were stepping into the batter's box, a space within hitting distance of the body.

Allie nudged one leg with her foot. The leg didn't budge. Joe lifted a corner of the tarp. No response. He lifted higher so we could see all the way to the body's waist. The legs were inside mud-smear'd navy Dockers.

A look of steel determination came over Allie's face, like when she pumps up a hill on her bike. She took the opposite corner and flung it off the guy. His head, mostly nose-down in the mud, was turned toward Allie.

She stepped closer and bent to look at the face. Allie sucked air so hard, it sounded like somebody punched her. She stumbled backwards and grabbed her stomach. "Oh my god! It's Father Malcolm."

"Who?" I said, lowering my club.

"Is...he...dead?" she whispered.

He—the Father Whoever guy—wore a black priest's shirt, still tucked into the navy Dockers in a few places. Otherwise, the shirt hung out. His arms lay skewed at awkward angles, one up and one down, bent in places where there were no joints. Mud caked his gray hair. There was blood everywhere, on his shoulders, dried on both sides of his head, crusted on the clerical shirt collar.

“Who?” I asked again.

“Father Malcolm.”

“How do you know this guy?” Joe asked.

“He's a priest.” Allie stood, hugging her ribcage.

“That much I figured,” Joe said.

“Is he dead?” Allie asked again.

Joe squatted down beside him, braver now that he knew the guy wasn't a mugger.

“He stinks.”

“Yeah,” I said, tossing the stick into the weeds. I squatted beside Joe and clapped my hand back over my mouth and nose. “But he stinks like blood and piss. Not like a dead animal. Does he have a pulse?”

Joe peeled the biking glove off his right hand and stuffed it in his jersey pocket.

“Hurry up!” Allie said, squatting on the other side of him.

Through my hand again, I said, “He could have died while we're staring at him.”

“*You* wanna check his pulse?” Joe hissed at me. “Be my guest.”

“I'll shut up,” I said.

Joe took a deep breath and extended his hand like he would to a poisonous snake. He picked up the wrist and the hand hung limp. The fingers and fingernails were full of mud. But no blood there. “He's still warm.” Joe held the arm, his fingers on the inside of the wrist. He shifted his grip, and shifted it again. His eyes were on the treetop, eyebrows scrunched in concentration, while he searched for a pumping artery. “There! Yeah. He's *alive!*” Joe grinned, triumphant as if he'd saved him. “You wanna feel it?”

“You outa your mind?” I shrank backward, slipped in the mud, and fell onto my butt.

Allie leaned over. “Father Malcolm? Can you hear us?” She grabbed his shoulder and wiggled it. “Father Malcolm!” She straightened up, her face pale. Until that moment, I thought she was fearless. Guess I was wrong. “We gotta get an ambulance,” she said.

“Cell phone,” Joe said.

Allie whirled at him. “All right already,” she yelled into his face. “So I was wrong! So you should have brought it. *I’ll* go call 911 from the *Spur* Station down the hill.” She turned and sprinted back toward her bike before Joe or I could argue.

“How do you know this guy?” I hollered at her backside.

“I’m gone,” Allie shouted back. Out of sight, she added, “I’ll tell them where to find you.”

“You’ll probably have to lead ’em here,” Joe yelled back. “Hurry up!”

No answer.

And that was the last we saw of Allie.

All Joe and I could do was wait, sitting in the wet leaves beside this lost soul.

“Don’t we have to see if he’s breathing?” I asked. “The heart can pump even if the lungs aren’t working, right?”

“That means we have to roll him over,” Joe said. We swallowed in unison and scrambled to our feet.

“Are we supposed to disturb him? I mean, isn’t this a crime scene?”

“But he's *alive*,” Joe says. “You don't move a dead body, but what if he can't breathe, face-planted in the mud like this?”

So I peeled off my biking gloves, too. If I touched him with them on, I'd have to throw them away. My hands I could wash. I took his left hip. Joe took the left shoulder. We lifted and pushed. Dead weight, I thought. That was a bad metaphor. In English class Mrs. Rosen said that metaphors compare unlike things. Father-whoever was not unlike the Dead. Not unlike at all. I couldn't believe I was thinking about metaphors when I was touching an almost-dead body for the first time in my life. But maybe that's how the mind works—distract yourself from horror so you don't freak out entirely.

Father-whoever was heavy and stuck. Pulling him loose made a sucking sound in the mud. When he flopped onto his back, he was even bloodier in the front. Mud smeared his face. His nose was skewed at a crazy angle. A piece of broken tooth stuck in the mud and blood on his chest. But we could hear ragged breathing going in and out.

Below his chin, his white clerical collar was cloaked with mud and more blood. And a crucifix that had been wound around his neck. To choke him.

“Holy crap,” Joe said under his breath. He untwisted the crucifix chain a couple turns to make sure it wasn't still cutting off this Father-guy's air supply. Joe touched his own forehead, chest, shoulder to shoulder. The sign of the cross.

I felt my breakfast rising for real, and I stumbled into the woods before it came sailing out, spraying the weeds with orange juice-tinged oatmeal. When I was done, I wiped my mouth on my forearm. I didn't want to touch my face with the hand that had touched this half-dead man.

Finally, finally the cops came. The rescue truck and the ambulance wailed up the hill to the LeHillier junk woods and wound through the dirt roads as close as they could get to us.

While the rescue squad loaded the priest on the stretcher and put him in the ambulance, two detectives asked us ten million questions. Officer Mick was a little overweight with red hair. He fit the stereotype, like he got his share of donuts. Officer Kate had a kind smile, a no-nonsense brown ponytail, and she looked like she could bench press a Pontiac.

“Where’s Allie?” I said.

“Who’s Allie?” Officer Kate asked while Mick snapped pictures.

“Allison Baker. She called 911. From the gas station.”

Officer Kate scribbled in her notebook. “Baker, huh?” She looked at Officer Mick and frowned.

We couldn’t answer any of their other questions about Allie. “That’s all we know,” Joe said. “We ride with her every day, but we don’t even have a phone number.”

Officer Kate frowned. “You know where she lives?”

I shook my head. “I met her out riding on the trails, and we just meet at Scout’s Last Chance every day to go for a ride.”

Joe said, “Somebody has to know. She’s won a bunch of mountain bike races.”

The rescue truck and ambulance wailed their flashing lights back into Mankato, bearing the almost-dead priest.

Officer Kate wrote some more notes, helped Officer Mick put the blue tarp in a big plastic bag, taped off the whole ravine with yellow plastic crime scene ribbon like on TV, took a bunch of pictures, and they both scrounged around for other evidence.

Joe and I kept watching the rim of the hills for Allie. The only movement we saw was a mangy German Shepherd watching us from the treeline. When he saw us looking at him, he slunk off into the woods like a wolf.

Still, no trace of Allie.