

GHOSTS of WAR

AWOL in North Africa

Other Ghosts of War books

The Secret of Midway

Lost at Khe Sanh

AWOL in North Africa

Fallen in Fredericksburg

GHOSTS of WAR

AWOL in North Africa

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SCHOLASTIC INC.

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For Rick and Louie and my dad

CHAPTER 1

My best friend, Greg Troutman, was late for band practice, and our friend Julie Kobayashi wasn't happy about it. I wasn't, either — Greg seemed to be running late a lot lately — but at least I wasn't storming around and yelling about it like Julie. For somebody so quiet at school, she sure could get loud sometimes.

“He better have been abducted by aliens!” she fumed. “Or chased by clowns.” She hit a couple of minor chords on her electric keyboard when she said that — *Dunh, dunh DUNNNNH!*

“Why clowns?” I asked.

“Oh, please, Anderson,” she said, rolling her eyes — something else she did really well when she was exasperated with Greg or me. “As if there’s anything worse. Or scarier.”

“He probably had to do chores after school,” I suggested.

Julie glared at me. “That’s no excuse.”

It occurred to me that maybe there *was* something — or somebody — scarier than clowns, but I didn’t say that out loud.

Julie stomped around our practice room for another minute, just to make sure I totally got how annoyed she was. We were in the basement of my uncle Dex’s junk shop (the Kitchen Sink), of course, where we always practiced, and where, ever since we started our band, the Ghosts of War, we’d been stumbling into ghost mysteries involving this trunk full of old war artifacts. After our most recent ghost episode, I had shoved it deep in a corner of the practice room and piled stuff on top so I wouldn’t have to look at it, or be tempted to open it and have another mystery spill out that we’d also have to solve.

We’d already had encounters with two ghosts — one from World War II and the other from the Vietnam War. They turned out to be nice, and we were able to help them

in the end, but, man, were we ever stressed out and exhausted afterward. I wrote all about those mysteries in a couple of notebooks I kept hidden under my mattress at home that nobody will ever read except Julie and Greg. I even gave them titles. The first one I called “The Secret of Midway” and the second was “Lost at Khe Sanh.”

But all that detective work cut into our band practice time, and the best we’d been able to do in two tries in the monthly open mic night battle of the bands was come in next to last. So I kind of understood why Julie was annoyed right now.

She was still fuming and I was still trying to stay out of her way when the door to our practice room suddenly opened and there was Greg, staggering into the door frame, holding his hand against the side of his head. His red hair was all wild on one side and matted on the other, and when he pulled his hand away from the matted side there was blood. *A lot* of blood!

“Greg!” I shouted, jumping over my amplifier and guitar to get to him before he fainted, or fell, or both.

Julie came flying over to us as well. “Oh my gosh!” she said. “What happened?”

“Uh, maybe we could first stop the bleeding?” Greg said.

I looked around the room but couldn't see anything to use, so I pulled off my shirt.

"What are you doing?" Julie barked. "Put your shirt back on, Anderson."

"Well, what else can I use?" I barked back.

"Go ask your uncle," she said.

Greg shook his head, keeping his hand pressed over the bloody wound. "He must have stepped out. He wasn't at the front desk when I came in."

Then he said, "Check the trunk. I'm pretty sure I saw a medic's kit in there the last time it was open."

"A medic's kit?" I repeated, sort of asking and sort of stalling, so I could think up an excuse not to check. I did *not* want to go back into that trunk and risk starting up another ghost of war mystery.

"Just go check!" Julie ordered. "He's bleeding all over the place. Look, it's on his shirt and everything."

"Okay," I grumbled. "You know, head wounds bleed a lot because the veins or whatever are so close to the skin, but they're usually not that serious. I read that somewhere."

"Go!" Julie ordered again.

It took me a couple of minutes to drag boxes and stuff off the trunk, but once again — just like the last two times this

happened — the trunk seemed to practically open by itself. And sure enough, there, right on top, was a canvas army medic’s pouch. I hesitated, then grabbed it and opened it and rifled through scissors and vials and capped syringes and pill bottles and stuff until I found what seemed to be gauze packages, and a larger package that said “tourniquet.” I grabbed both and rushed back over to Julie and Greg, tearing open the packages as I went.

“Smells kind of musty,” Julie said as I handed her the gauze. She wrinkled her nose but pressed it against Greg’s wound. I offered her the tourniquet, too, but she just shoved it away.

“We don’t need that, Anderson. We need some tape, to tape this on.”

So I went back for the medical kit — there were rolls of surgical tape — and we finished bandaging Greg.

“Should we call 911?” I asked.

“I guess,” Julie said, though she didn’t sound convinced.

“What?” I asked. “You don’t think we should?”

“Well, we should see how serious it is first,” she said. “And you know what happened the last time we called 911.”

Of course I did — we all did. It was when I found a hand grenade in the trunk a month earlier, which I wrote

all about in “Lost at Khe Sanh.” The bomb squad had to detonate it. Uncle Dex said we couldn’t keep practicing at the Kitchen Sink if we ever did anything like that again.

Greg spoke up. “Don’t call 911. I’m okay. I think.”

He sat up straighter.

“Are you sure?” I asked, feeling guilty that we were even debating this. Of *course* we should call 911.

“Yes,” he said. “I’m sure.”

“Maybe we should call your dad, then?” I suggested.

“No, it’s okay,” Greg replied. “I just got a little freaked out.”

“Well, who wouldn’t?” Julie said, sounding so sympathetic it was almost hard to remember how annoyed she had been earlier at the missing Greg.

“All that blood,” I added.

“So what happened anyway?” Julie asked. “Did you wreck your bike?”

“Yeah, was it a bike wreck?” I echoed Julie. “Or did you have a run-in with a clown?”

Julie gave me a very dirty look.

“Neither one,” Greg said, taking it all in stride, as if a guy with a bloody head got asked every day if he’d gotten in a clown fight.

“Well, what, then?” Julie asked — or demanded.

Greg got a goofy expression on his face, and I could tell he was embarrassed.

“It was a chicken,” he admitted.

“A chicken?” I repeated. “What about a chicken?”

“It flew into my head.”

“A chicken?” I said again. “Flew into your head?”

Greg nodded. Julie frowned. “Chickens don’t fly,” she said.

I was happy to correct her. “Actually, they do, Julie. Short distances. That’s just a myth that they can’t fly at all.”

She gave me the stink eye and I stopped smiling.

“Well, it didn’t exactly fly on its own,” Greg said. “And it wasn’t exactly the kind of chicken you guys are thinking it was.”

“What kind was it, then?” Julie demanded.

Greg grinned, but then he winced. I guess grinning hurt his head. He held something up I hadn’t realized he had been holding all this time in his non-bloody hand. It was a rubber chicken.

“Are you serious?” Julie asked.

“Pretty crazy, huh?” Greg said. “I was just minding my own business, riding my bike over here past that old Masonic

cemetery, when I saw something out of the corner of my eye, flying right at me, but before I could duck, it hit me and I crashed my bike.”

“So somebody threw it at you?” I said. “Somebody in the cemetery.”

“A ghost,” Julie said.

Greg and I looked at her to see if she was kidding. It wasn't like we needed any convincing that ghosts were real. But why would someone throw a rubber chicken at Greg — or at anybody?

Julie laughed. “Oh my gosh, you two are so gullible! I was just kidding.”

“Not funny,” I said. “Under the circumstances.”

Greg shrugged. “I thought it was kind of funny,” he said. “In an understated sort of way.” That was an expression he'd picked up from Julie, who used a lot of adult expressions that most kids didn't quite understand, especially kids in middle school like us.

“Do you remember anything else?” I asked.

“Not really,” Greg said. “Just, you know, picking up the rubber chicken, and my bike, and then coming over here. A couple of people saw me and must have seen all the

blood because they got these funny looks on their faces. One guy asked if I needed any help. I just waved the chicken and said I was okay. Guess I was a little woozier than I realized.”

He paused, before adding, “Oh wait. There was this loud pop sound just before the chicken hit me. That was over in the cemetery, too.”

“What do you think it was?” Julie asked.

Greg didn’t get a chance to answer, though, because a voice behind us, from the direction of the trunk in the corner of the practice room, interrupted.

“There’s sulfa powder in my kit,” it said. “You should pour some over the boy’s wound, make sure it doesn’t get infected until we can get him off the battlefield. And keep pressure on the wound.”

We all turned and stared. It was obviously another ghost — and obviously a soldier — but no matter how many times these ghosts showed up, it was impossible not to be shocked.

The new ghost was wearing tattered green army fatigues, his face mostly blackened from what looked like dirt and smoke. He had a Red Cross armband on — red cross with a

white square — and he was looking around the room as if expecting to see, well, I didn't know what. Just something else. Or somewhere else.

“No stretcher?” the man asked.

I shook my head and said, “No, sir.”

“All right, then,” the man said. “I guess we'll just have to stitch him up right here.”

He had somehow crossed the room without my realizing it, and was reaching for the medical kit. Only his hand stopped short when he tried to pick it up, as if it was too heavy, or as if he couldn't quite get a grip on it, or as if it was solid and he wasn't.

“This is strange,” he said, shaking his head.

And then he vanished.