



CHAPTER ONE

Welcome to Destiny

The crazy lady in seat 2B hasn't stopped singing "You Are My Sunshine" since the glare hit the windshield three hours ago. Okay, maybe I nodded off for a minute or two. And maybe that's a line of drool on my chin. But when my uncle punches me in the arm, hard, I jump wide awake.

"Get off the bus, Theo," Uncle Raymond says, pushing ahead of a girl moving too slow for him. "We're in Destiny."

I grab my bags and baseball glove and follow him.

The minute the door opens, heat hits me like a slap in the face. When a whoosh of diesel fumes almost knocks me over, I hold my breath and step onto the blazing sidewalk.

Everywhere, old men wearing shorts, flip-flops, and big smiles grab suitcases. They hug relatives and hustle them off in station wagons. But nobody's expecting us at this Marathon Gas Station.

Wait a minute. What's all that slithery gray stuff hanging from the trees? I kick at two brown coconuts littering the ground, squint up at the sinking sun, and shake my head at the banner swinging from one streetlight across to another: *Welcome to Destiny, Florida, the Town Time Forgot.*

Leaning down to pick up my knapsack, I jerk it away when a tiny lizard skitters under a plant so sharp it could cut off my fingers. I push up the long, hot sleeves of the shirt that was just fine when we left Kentucky early yesterday, and all I can think is *Ob man. What am I doing here?*

One good thing — I'm tossing the jacket I've been sleeping on. It stinks worse than my granddaddy's hog pen. Not to mention my arms don't hardly fit in the sleeves anymore.

I dangle the coat over a trash can on the sidewalk. "Too hot for this," I say.

Uncle Raymond swats at my jacket. "Keep it," he growls. "Just in case."

I jam the coat in my bag. Wondering what *just in case* could ever need a puke-green jacket like mine.

My uncle puts his big tool chest down, unfolds a piece of paper, and nods toward a flowery row of bushes. "Turn down there. Miss Grandersole says her Rest Easy Rooming House is off Main Street."

He shoves the note in my hand and leaves me on the corner. While he stops to stare at a statue of some old army guy on the town square, I spot the Chat 'n' Chew Cafe. Next door's an ice-cream stand! Actual kids eating Popsicles and looking normal. My stomach rumbles at the smell of greasy hot dogs frying and the thought of an orange sno-cone.

I hurry to catch up with my uncle. "Wanna get something to eat?" I ask.

"Supper's included with our room," he barks out, then keeps walking.

I wipe the sweat off my eyebrows and look up at a tree thick with leaves. A zillion green birds blink down from a high branch. Whoa! A green bird? Not in a cage? I jump backward. No way am I standing under a flock of pooping birds.

I try to raise my voice above their squawking. "Wait up, Uncle Raymond! You said this was a beach town. Where's the ocean?"

"Don't you know nothing? It ain't no ocean. It's the Gulf of Mexico. I got no time for dawdling. Gotta get ready for my new job tomorrow." Uncle Raymond shoots a big rock off the sidewalk with his heavy work boots. "Keep up," he hollers.

I uncrumple the note he shoved in my hand.

1. *Turn left at the stoplight.*
2. *Go two blocks down Breezy Way Street.*
3. *Rest Easy Rooming House is on your right, just after the live oak tree.*

Sure that I'm being chased by green birds, I scoop up my suitcase just as a loud rumble of thunder shakes the sidewalk under me.

Really, things can't get much worse in Destiny.