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My Stupid Trip to Smellyville

Bandy is a mutt like me. He's black and white and small enough to hide in a gym bag, except he can't keep from barking *hi-hi-hi* with his silly tongue hanging out and his little tail sticking up. Bandy, short for Bandit, because of the black marking across his eyes and nose. Don't get me wrong, he's the best dog in the world, and what happened wasn't really his fault, even if it nearly got me killed two times. Three if you count the tippy canoe. Later on he made up for it by totally saving my life. Of course none of it would have happened if my mom didn't make me visit the golden oldies in Smellyville, which is what I called New Orleans before I knew better. Before the wind and the rain and the flood, and me having to pretend I was brave, even though inside I was scared to death.

My name is Zane Dupree. I need to warn you right now, there's some really gross stuff in this book, and I'm not talking about make-believe gross like plastic poop and vomit, but stuff so awful it made a dog hide his nose, and believe me Bandy will sniff at most anything. Other than dog food, his favorite smells

are dirty socks and toilet bowls, so that should give you an idea how bad things got.

Okay, deep breath, back to the beginning. How it started, me going to New Orleans. If you don't already know, summers are pretty great in New Hampshire, where I live. The sky is blue and clear and the days last almost forever.

This one perfect summer morning Bandy and me are out in the yard fooling around for a while. Playing this game where he tries to guess where I'm going to throw his ball, which I do with my eyes closed, and most of the time he guesses right and is waiting there before the ball hits the ground. Mom says me and Bandy have some kind of boy-dog mind-meld thing, like we can read each other's thoughts. I don't know about that, but for sure that little dog seems to know what I'm going to do before I do, which is maybe kind of weird but also really cool.

Anyhow, when we come back inside that perfect summer day my mom is sitting in the kitchen with the phone on the table and her eyes all red.

"Did somebody die?" I ask, because that's how she looks.

"No, no. Nothing like that," she says, sniffing back a tear. "The opposite. Somebody I didn't think could possibly still be alive."

Oh yeah, I forgot to mention about my father dying before I was born. Mom and him met when they were in the Air Force, and then they got married and moved to New Hampshire and started a new family — me. My dad happened to be in the

wrong place at the wrong time. Some old gumby had a stroke and ran him over.

For the record I really hate it when people feel sorry for me because my father is dead. It's too bad he died and everything, but I never knew him so I never missed him, okay? Because you can't miss somebody you never knew, can you?

Anyhow, back to my mom. She's all weepy because she finally managed to locate one of my father's long-lost relatives.

"Her name is Beatrice Jackson. They call her Miss Trissy. She's your great-grandmother and from what she told me she pretty much raised your father. In New Orleans, Louisiana."

"New Orleans? You said he was from Mississippi."

She nods. "That's what he always told me. Biloxi, Mississippi. Didn't ever have much to say about his family, or what happened in the years before we met, but Gerald was living in Biloxi when he enlisted in the Air Force, I always knew that for sure, it's right there on his induction form. So when he — when the accident happened, I called every Dupree in the book down there. My own father, bless him, he even hired a local investigator. But it was a dead end. Never could find any of your dad's relatives in the state of Mississippi. We thought they were all gone."

"You already told me that stuff like a bunch of times," I say, dropping into a kitchen chair.

Mom gives me this pleading look. "Don't be angry at me, Zaney. You'll be thirteen on your next birthday and I thought you should know something about your father. Whatever there

is to know. Something besides photographs and me with my stories. So I tried this new website for connecting families and what do you know, it worked.”

“Okay fine,” I say, making a bored face. “So now I know. There’s an old lady with a funny name that used to know my father.”

“Raised him! She raised him!” Mom says, excited and talking fast. “She’s your blood, honey. From what I can tell, she’s all that’s left, and she never even knew you existed until she picked up the phone this morning. She sounds really lovely, and very old, of course, and more than anything in the world she wants to see you before . . . you know.”

“Before she dies.”

“Don’t say that.”

“It’s what you mean, isn’t it?”

“Zaney, listen to me,” she pleads. “This is important, okay? We need to get this right.”

Fine. Whatever. At first I figure the old lady will visit us in New Hampshire and I’ll have to be nice and everything, but it turns out she’s too old to travel, and since Mom can’t get time off from work she thinks I should go down there on my own.

By myself. Without Bandy.

“Totally no way,” I say, folding my arms. “Never going to happen. Never, never, never.”

Never is a bad word to use on my mom. She also hates it when I say “totally no way.” She’s never hit me, not ever in my whole life, but that day we have a big yelling fight that ends

with her slamming her bedroom door. I can hear her sobbing, which totally ruins everything because it wrecks me when she cries. Maybe it isn't cool to say this, but she's the best mom in the world and I'd never on purpose make her cry. Are we clear on that? Good. So eventually we come to an agreement: if the old lady lets me bring Bandy I'll agree to visit her for the last week of summer.

To call that bad timing would be, as Mom later said, the understatement of the century. Because I fly down to New Orleans on a Monday in late August. The very next day something called a tropical depression forms near the Bahama islands, almost a thousand miles away. A day later they give the storm a name. They call it Katrina, and it's coming to get us, but we don't know that then.

We don't know much, me and Bandit the Wonder Dog. All we know is we don't want to be there.