

One

Muddy Walk

My brother, Joaquin, and I are hiding out. Nobody knows where we live and that's how we want it. If anybody finds out that Joaquin and I have moved back into the summer cottage with Aunt Mandy like she is, we might have to go live with strangers. We need to stay with her no matter what. No way am I going to let strangers take her. Besides, two brothers might get split up between two families. Joaquin needs me and so does Aunt Mandy, so I'm going to make sure nobody ever knows we live here.

I'll bet the school reported us missing while we were in the hospital keeping watch on Aunt Mandy. If the police had come here to do a house-check, they'd have found that this little house belonging to Aunt Mandy and her brothers stayed empty for over a month. That ought to discourage anybody from nosing around, even Dead Uncle Dick.

Joaquin and I watch the houses around the lake like two sight dogs. Right now it's starting to be spring, but it's still cold and wet outside and the people haven't begun opening up their vacation homes yet. That's good and bad. Good because we don't have to worry about nosy questions. Bad because we've almost eaten up all the food in the summer cottage as well as the food-hoard we keep in our back packs in the bottom of our closet.

It's also bad because both Aunt Mandy's and our money is almost gone. We need to pick up some odd-jobs that pay, but we can't wait for when people start to move back into the houses for the summer. We need food right now. You might say we're in a tight spot.

Aunt Mandy is the grown-up we live with and she needs us. She used to be smart and pretty and funny, but when she finally woke up in the hospital, she had changed. She has her head bandages off, but she doesn't laugh anymore and she keeps saying really weird stuff.

This summer cottage by the lake has two big rooms. One is a living room and kitchen with a great big fireplace. The other is a bedroom with a big bed where we put Aunt Mandy and a set of bunk beds where Joaquin and I sleep. We both prefer the top bunk because it's by a high window where we can look outside. We take turns.

It's my turn, so I'm sitting on the top bunk looking out the window when I hear Joaquin calling me. "Cheyenne! Come here! Aunt Mandy is trying to get out!"

"Hold the door shut!"

"I am!"

I scramble off the bed and down the post. Joaquin is holding onto the door knob with both hands and Aunt Mandy is pulling hard on his arms. I know she is much stronger than both of us together, so I pull a kitchen chair very close to them and stand on it. I might get knocked over, but she might take notice of me. She stops struggling with Joaquin and looks at me, one eye up and out from where it should be focusing. The other one's OK.

"Aunt Mandy, what do you want?" I ask her. I already know she wants outside, but after the operation we heard the hospital doctors say she needed practice with speaking. She's forgotten a lot of the words she used to know. I didn't know that was possible. You wake up after being unconscious in the hospital for two weeks and you can't remember words anymore? That's got to be one of the scariest things I've ever heard of. About as scary as Dead Uncle Dick.

Not having all her words makes Aunt Mandy very frustrated. I'm trying to get her to express what she's thinking. I was in fifth grade before we quit school and that was part of our writing assignments: expressive communication, the teacher said. Joaquin is supposed to be in first grade. I have him read to me a lot, so he shouldn't be too behind if we ever start going to school again. Which I don't think we will.

"Aunty Mandy, tell me what you want!" I shout at her to get her attention.

She looks a little offended because I shouted at her. She drops Joaquin's arm and thinks for a minute. "Go outside," she says. "Now."

Joaquin shakes his head at her and looks fierce.

I tell him, "I think we should take her for a walk, Joaquin. The doctor said she needed to get lots of rest and exercise. This house is too small for her to get any exercise. I'll keep her here while you get all our coats."

I coax Aunt Mandy to put on her coat. Then I push her gently onto the chair I was standing on so that I can pull her boots up and tie them. It's really muddy outside.

Joaquin opens the door and we each try to take one of her hands. She won't let us, though. At first Aunt Mandy grabs the sides of her big skirt and swishes it from side to

side with each step, but she tires very quickly and settles down. After we've gone past the big yards of about six houses she starts to slow way down, so I try to turn her around to go home, but she won't turn.

She shouts, "More! More!" and busts out walking with more energy. Joaquin and I trot to keep up.

We've gone past about twelve houses when she completely stops. "I'm tired," she says. "Too tired. Can't go on." She starts to sit down on the ground in the mud.

I yell for Joaquin to push up on her bum from behind so she can't sit down. If she sits down we might never get her up again. She was sort of like dead in the hospital for two weeks before she woke up. I'm really scared that if she gets wet and cold in the mud that she could get sick enough to die. We've got to get her home and dried off.

She's a lot taller than us and it's hard to get her moving. Joaquin is pushing on her bum for all he's worth and I'm pulling on her arms as hard as I can. We get her past about five more houses that way. Only two more houses to go.

And then Joaquin slips. Falls flat on his face in the mud. He's soaking wet and wants to cry. But when you're in this much trouble, the fact is even little guys know the point where you can't cry. He picks himself up.

Aunty Mandy is very interested in looking at him. "Joaquin is dirty," she says.

"Very dirty and wet and cold," Joaquin says, his cheeks trembling.

She takes her clean fingers and carefully tries to wipe off his muddy face, just like she used to do mine when I was little. She wipes her muddy fingers clean on her skirt.

I remember the good times when we were safe with Aunt Mandy and I want to sit down in the mud and cry. Everybody is feeling the same way. Aunty Mandy is wailing, "I'm too tired. I can't go on."

Joaquin starts to push again and I start to pull, but Aunt Mandy keeps on wailing in a voice she never used to use before. "I'm too tired. I don't care. Let me sit here. Go to sleep. I want to sleep and die right here. It's too far. I'm too tired."

If she'd just take normal steps we'd be fine. Joaquin and I don't let go. We've got to get her home.

We're almost at the doorway when she seems to recognize it. She stops pulling against us and walks by herself into the house, all slow and draggy. I get her to sit down

on the chair so I can pull off her muddy skirt. Joaquin knows how to take care of himself.

I guess you could say Joaquin and I are in a pile of trouble. I sure wish I could tell you how we are going to get ourselves out of this, but I don't see a way, yet. All I can tell you is how we got here. I'll start kind of close to the beginning.