

CANDACE LEE & ERIC NEWMAN
NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHORS



"Adventure awaits, my friends.
So be prepared."
— from the foreword by Bear Grylls

GEORGE GOODWIN DRAGON SLAYER

A SCOUTING LEGEND

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FOREWORD BY BEAR GRYLLS



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This one's for the boys. For my sons, Elliott and Fisher, who are the adventure I needed in order to finish writing this one. For my husband, Andrew, whose steadfastness is a superpower. And for my dad, Dr. Gary Robert Lee—a dragon slayer if there ever was one. He read every draft, fought the good fight, and now cheers me on from beyond the veil.

—*Candace*



For Zander and Zelda. One day, people will tell great stories about you.

—*Eric*

F O R E W O R D

BY BEAR GRYLLS

Warning: The adventure in your hands is full of danger. It's got dragons and death, coal mines and cold-blooded killers, treasure and true love—the stuff legends are made of. But even more dangerous are the kids in this tale. They're tough. They're brave. And they're exactly the kind of heroes our world needs. As Chief Ambassador of World Scouting, I always knew Scouts could save the day, but this story takes it to a whole new level!

In the summer of '23, I met Candace and Eric on my own adventure in Israel. We trudged through the desert, ate locusts, and made a TV show about one of the greatest stories ever told. That's when I first heard about their vision for this story you're about to read. Little did they know, I had read their book before I ever met them. A mutual friend had given me an advance copy at the World Scout Jamboree, never knowing that a few weeks later I'd be sailing on the Sea of Galilee with the authors. It was a wild coincidence! But even wilder was our shared belief that a simple story can awaken the hero inside each of us.

We live in a world full of dragons, and now more than

ever, we need young men and women prepared to slay them. I hope this story emboldens you to take on fire-breathing adversity and forge your own epic quest! As I've often said, in the wild there are no guarantees. But for those who dare to dream, to explore, and to confront the impossible, the rewards are boundless.

Adventure awaits, my friends. So be prepared. Be daring. Be dragon slayers.

A stylized, handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Jung'. The letters are fluid and interconnected, with a prominent loop at the end of the final letter.

C O N T E N T S

PROLOGUE	1
CHAPTER 1: INTO THE HELLMOUTH	5
CHAPTER 2: SECRETS AND SCARS	12
CHAPTER 3: AN UNEXPECTED GIFT	23
CHAPTER 4: THE BACON BANDITS	31
CHAPTER 5: BACK TO THE HELLMOUTH	46
CHAPTER 6: FEEDING THE BEAST	64
CHAPTER 7: DYNAMITE AND SMITHEREENS	74
CHAPTER 8: THE MONSTER IN THE MOUNTAIN	83
CHAPTER 9: NIGHT TERROR	92
CHAPTER 10: THE TREASURE MAP	95
CHAPTER 11: DOWN THE HATCH	108
CHAPTER 12: UKTENA	120
CHAPTER 13: 3:42 A.M.	130
CHAPTER 14: HOW JOE GOODWIN DIED	141
CHAPTER 15: ROWLAND UNDER FIRE	153
CHAPTER 16: TRAPPED IN A STEEL CAGE	162
CHAPTER 17: INSIDE THE DRAGON'S EYE	172
CHAPTER 18: BIG TROUBLE IN BIG MOUNTAIN	184
CHAPTER 19: SEARCH AND RESCUE 101	188
CHAPTER 20: STRANGE BIRDS	197
CHAPTER 21: THE DRAGON CLOSES IN	213

CHAPTER 22: THE DRAGON WAGON	221
CHAPTER 23: THE GHOST TOWN	233
CHAPTER 24: THE ORDER OF THE DRAGON SLAYER	242
CHAPTER 25: SHADY GRADY RETURNS	253
CHAPTER 26: GEORGE VERSUS THE DRAGON	262
CHAPTER 27: THE LAST WILL AND TESTAMENT	270
CHAPTER 28: KABOOM!	279
CHAPTER 29: LEAP OF FAITH	291
CHAPTER 30: THE BOY SCOUT DRAGON SLAYER	305
EPILOGUE	309
A NOTE FROM THE AUTHORS	317
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	319



PROLOGUE

The people of Big Mountain, West Virginia, believed they had seen the worst. Forests ablaze, bodies buried. Terrible, terrible things. It all began on a rather unremarkable Tuesday in the middle of September in the tiny town named after the giant mountain that loomed behind it. While parents set off to work and children to school, a band of coal miners were descending into the pitch-black tunnels of their underground workplace, just as they had every day for years untold.

But this Tuesday was different.

People felt it, even miles away.

A tremor rippled through town, rattling classrooms and cafés. Then a puff of black smoke rose into the sky and hovered over the horizon like an angel of death. Twelve miners had entered the coal mine that day, but only one made it out alive. It would go down as the greatest calamity in Big Mountain's history.

If only they knew the worst was yet to come.

For a secret lurked in the depths of the mountain. A secret more dangerous than anyone could imagine. Though to be fair, people rarely believe in anything beyond what their eyes can see. So it was for the kindly folks of these coal-packed hills. What their eyes had never seen, their minds could not conceive.

Therein lies the danger of a poor imagination: What you cannot see can kill you.

But the opposite can also be true: What you cannot see can *save* you. And that's exactly what the people of Big Mountain needed—saving—even if they didn't know it yet.

It's doubtful anyone in town would have believed that the fate of their world, their homes, and their very heartbeats rested on the slim shoulders of a twelve-year-old boy. Someone they saw so often they hardly saw him at all.

They didn't see him when he passed along Main Street many months after that fateful Tuesday, his slight frame bent under a heavy pack. They didn't see him leaving town

and hiding in the shadows of an abandoned train stop. They didn't see him hitching a ride on the old coal train, speeding toward a ghost town miles away.

And because they didn't truly see him—the person he was and soon would be—they could never, not even by the greatest stretch of imagination, foresee what would happen next.



CHAPTER 1

INTO THE HELLMOUTH

George gripped the rusty ladder on the back of the coal train. His fingers ached, and his palms were sweaty, but he couldn't let go. Not yet.

Gritting his teeth, he scaled the metal rungs, then anchored himself with the crook of his arm. A hot, sticky breeze tousled his hair as the train moved along the winding path of the New River, which slithered below the mountain range like a giant snake.

The steel wheels screeched as the train slowed to a near stop at the center of an abandoned coal town. Rotting wooden rail ties passed beneath George's dingy hik-

ing boots. *Clickety-clack! Clickety-clack!* This was his chance.

He filled his lungs with air, hoping he'd live long enough to never tell this tale to his mother—and jumped!

As his feet reunited with the still, solid ground, he took a tumble, rolling into a tangle of thick shrubs. He'd made it! But what about his sidekick? He unzipped his backpack to reveal a lemon-colored bird fluttering her wings inside the tiny makeshift cage he'd built after watching a tutorial online. The chicken wire and zip ties had survived the fall, and luckily, his little sister's pet canary had too.

"Attagirl, Moonshine!" George said. Annabelle would never forgive him if he killed her bird.

Instead of zipping Moonshine back into the stuffy darkness of his bag, George pulled the wonky cage out and cradled it close to his chest as he began to hike through the Appalachian forest with its towering trees. After all he'd put her through, the little bird deserved a few breaths of fresh air. It was the least he could do—plus it gave his conscience a bit of relief.

"Whatcha doing in there, George?" his mom had shouted through the thin walls of their trailer home earlier that afternoon.

"Umm . . . some Scouting stuff," George lied as he packed his supplies.

“That’s great!” she answered, her voice bright and hopeful. “I know your friends will be happy to see you again.”

Lying was the one thing that used to make George’s daddy madder than a hornet. His father had loved that George was such a terrible liar. His face would always scrunch up in this funny, painful way as if the words passing through his lips were as sour as a spoonful of vinegar. But only hours ago, the false words had come out quick and easy.

George Goodwin wasn’t known to be a rule breaker, yet here he was, lying, trespassing, train hopping, and bird-napping. He hardly recognized himself!

George had dark brown eyes, a head of thick, wavy hair, and an appetite for adventure. Just like his daddy. His skinny rib cage held a heart that ached for justice. Just like his momma. It was a mix of these inner qualities, plus the recent terrible events, that had lured him into this top-secret mission in the early days of summer. For months, he’d been planning to do the one thing all West Virginia kids knew they shouldn’t do: break into a coal mine.

Against the law? Check.

Deadly? Check.

This was especially true for the Hellerman Brothers’ Mine. The whole town—probably even the whole state—knew that place was cursed. Going inside wasn’t just ask-

ing for trouble; it was wishing for death. And George knew that better than most.

But as they say, desperate times call for desperate measures.

As he wove through the crooked gravestones of an old cemetery along the edge of the deserted town, Moonshine's happy chirps pierced the silent, somber scene. Rotting homes and shops sagged into ancient green hills, while the white steeple of a long-forgotten church pointed to the sky like a bony finger.

"Spooky, ain't it?" George whispered.

Small towns used to thrive in these mountains, but more and more they'd emptied, as if some big, angry monster had chased everyone away. It started with the coal mines shutting down. Jobs got scarce, and folks began seeking their fortune in bigger cities with bigger opportunities. And with the people gone, the hungry green wilderness had devoured the churches, main streets, and neighborhoods, leaving only the bones of homes mummified in a blanket of kudzu vines and dark forest.

Could his town be next?

Most folks thought so. But not George's father. Joe Goodwin had believed in a bright future for Big Mountain, brighter than anyone could imagine.

And that was precisely what had led to his death in the Hellerman Brothers' Mine.

When he'd spoken about the treasure he'd found there, a treasure so big it could save their town, nobody had believed him. They all said he was chasing fool's gold. Not George, though. He believed his daddy all the way to the bitter end, and now he was determined to silence the naysayers for good, even if that meant going back to the place where it all went wrong.

Out of nowhere, the forest stopped. This was it. George had arrived at Big Mountain's ground zero. His footsteps crunched over singed tree branches. Even months later, the air still smelled like ash. A scrap of metal in the debris caught his eye. He crouched and flipped it over.

STAY OUT! STAY ALIVE!

His stomach turned as Moonshine let out another cheery chirp.

"You're lucky you can't read," he said, kicking aside the metal marker. He didn't need another sign to warn him about the danger of coal mines. He was surrounded by signs. Every holiday, every Scout meeting, every family dinner. George was reminded every moment of every day. People go into mines, and sometimes they never come out.

"But we'll be all right, Moonshine," he whispered—more to himself than the bird—before climbing atop a boulder for a better view of the valley below.

It had taken months for him to work up the courage, but he was finally staring down the entrance of the mine where his father died. From that opening, a river of destruction had flowed out, as if the mountain itself had spewed fire and brimstone from the depths of the earth. Even the padlocked metal gate barring the entrance looked like a mouth full of crooked teeth.

No wonder folks in town called it the Hellmouth!

The explosion had transformed this vibrant holler into a valley of black death. Ash and brush clumped together in massive mounds, creating unnatural shapes on the forest floor. Toppled chestnuts, their ancient trunks eaten away by relentless flames, scattered the scene like fallen soldiers. There was something heavy in the air, quiet but not peaceful. No singing birds. No scampering squirrels. Not even chirping crickets. There was nothing alive. Nothing but George and Moonshine.

The destruction was so great that a handful of miners had been hired to seal the mines, and in a few short weeks, this century-old mining operation would be shut down for good.

George stood at the edge of the old coal mine, his fists clenched so tight his nails dug into his palms. The entrance gaped like a mouth ready to swallow him whole. This was where it had all ended. His father's life. His fam-

ily's future. All buried beneath layers of rock, soot, and secrets that no one seemed willing to uncover.

"I'm not afraid of you," he declared, though his voice cracked under the weight of the lie.

The Hellmouth remained silent. But the memories roared in his ears—his father's laughter, his mother's tears, the whispers from townsfolk who thought George couldn't hear.

"Poor boy lost his dad to greed. Digging for diamonds where there weren't any."

They were wrong. George knew they were wrong.

"I'll prove it," he said to the mine, to the townsfolk who couldn't hear him. "I'll finish what he started."

With a deep breath, he steadied his wobbly legs, pulled a bandana over his mouth, and squeezed through the rusty gate.

He had entered the Hellmouth.

A suffocating darkness closed in from all sides. George couldn't see his own limbs, and it felt like the stony ceiling and jagged walls were inching closer with every step. But for the first time, he felt the spark of something new—a fire deep in his chest, burning too fiercely to ignore.

The past couldn't hide forever. Not from George Goodwin. He had to know the truth. And the truth was buried in the belly of Big Mountain.



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