

Little Mountain, Big
Trouble first three
chapters

Chris Norbury

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DEDICATION

To my Little Brothers, Zach and Ethan. If I helped you become better people even half as much as you helped me become a better person, then my life has been worthwhile.

To all past and present Big Brothers, Big Sisters, Big Couples, and school-site matches. You are heroes and heroines for walking the walk by dedicating your time and effort to being a friend of a child who needs a friend more than most children do.

To Big Brothers Big Sisters of Southern Minnesota. Working with all the staff who've come and gone in my twenty-plus years of being a Big Brother has been the single best volunteer experience I've ever had.

To Sandra, for making this all possible.

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Daniel “DJ” Schuette of CriticalEyeEditing.com did another outstanding job of copyediting and made many helpful suggestions for improving the story. Carl Graves of ExtendedImagery.com designed another excellent cover.

Littles and Bigs are as diverse as the American population. I cannot possibly represent everyone who has ever been a Big or a Little with two fictional characters based on my own experiences as a Big. However, I tried to paint a realistic portrait of the Big-Little relationship and the challenges faced by many of the Littles. And yes, that’s what we call the participants—Bigs and Littles.

ALSO BY CHRIS NORBURY

Thrillers for Older Readers

Straight River (Matt Lanier #1)

Castle Danger (Matt Lanier #2)

Dangerous Straits (Matt Lanier #3)

Chapter 1

CHAPTER 1

Earning fifty bucks to stand guard outside a warehouse for twenty minutes sounded like a sweet deal for a kid like me until I was actually there with Dad at midnight. Now, my tingling nerves and racing heartbeat filled me with doubt.

Before leaving me in position behind a tree across the street, Dad gripped my shoulders and looked me in the eye. “Remember, if you see a white Cadillac, call me on the walkie-talkie. Got it?”

“Got it,” I said, faking confidence even as I winced from his tight grip.

“When we get inside, I’ll call you to make sure we’re still in range.” Dad returned to Jimmy’s pickup truck, and Jimmy drove to the warehouse gate. Working together, they unlocked the gate, drove in, closed the gate, and drove behind the warehouse in less than a minute.

I began a full-circle search, alert to every sight, sound, and smell, even though there wasn’t much activity in an industrial area at midnight on a Saturday. My mouth was dry. My legs twitched, eager to run.

After several painfully long minutes, Dad's voice crackled through my walkie-talkie. "EJ, you see a white Caddy yet?"

I pressed the *talk* button. "No, sir."

"Okay. We're almost done. Keep a sharp lookout."

"Roger." I resumed my lookout duties until I saw headlights approaching and focused on them. When the vehicle passed under a streetlight, I got a major surprise. *Holy guacamole!* It was a police car. With each passing second, this felt less like the practical joke Jimmy and Dad had said they were playing on Jimmy's boss and more like trouble.

I steadied myself behind the tree as the patrol car crept along, its searchlight illuminating the warehouse side of the street. The light beam bounced over the chain-link fence as the cruiser got closer. When it settled on the gate, the cop stopped his car, got out, and inspected the gate area. Seconds later, he clicked on his shoulder radio and spoke. As he did, I focused on the gate and instantly realized why the cop had called the police dispatcher: Dad and Jimmy hadn't relocked the gate.

Oh, man, I was confused. Earlier tonight, Dad had assured me the cops wouldn't come, yet here they were. He'd told me to call only if the white Cadillac appeared, because that's what Jimmy's boss drove. I bounced up and down as dread filled my body from my feet to my hair. I wanted to warn Dad. I wanted to run. I also didn't want to disappoint him *again* in my brief life by doing the wrong thing. The walkie-talkie slipped as I gripped it with my

damp palm. Finally, I raised it to my mouth and pressed *talk*.

“Dad, there’s a police car at the gate.”

“*What?*” He yelled so loud I thought the cop would hear him for sure. Then he said in a more muffled voice, “Jimmy, the po-po comin’. Someone ratted us out.”

When the cop swung the gate open, I pressed *talk*. “He just opened it.”

I fought down a sick feeling in my gut. The faint odors of oil, chemicals, and decaying trash didn’t help. Despite the night being warm for September, I shivered. Flashing red-and-blue lights in the distance shot a bolt of panic through me. I pressed *talk* again. “Another one’s coming. I see the flashing lights.”

Dad swore about ten words he always tells me not to say as the first cruiser slowly drove into the warehouse yard and worked the searchlight along the warehouse walls. Now what? Would the police find them? The warehouse and surrounding yard were huge. Could they sneak out through another gate? With two cops looking for someone inside, the odds were crappy. Would the cops believe Dad and Jimmy were playing a practical joke on Jimmy’s boss? And what if they weren’t?

Seconds later, as the first police car drove around the nearest corner of the warehouse, Jimmy’s truck appeared from behind the far side, its lights off, heading toward the open gate. I thought Dad and Jimmy might escape without the first cop seeing them and before the second

squad car arrived. But the second car must've been going eighty all the way. It pulled up to the gate entrance just as Jimmy's truck arrived. *Busted!*

Through the walkie-talkie, Dad said, "Go home, EJ. Don't say a word about tonight to *anyone*. If you do, I will beat the tar out of you. Understand?"

"R-r-roger." The anger in his tone scared me as much as the two police cars. I shoved the walkie-talkie into my pocket and took off running down the street, away from the warehouse. I wanted to get to Dad's house as fast as possible in case the cops came to check on me. If I was home, they'd assume I hadn't gone with Dad. My biggest worry was that I couldn't hide the lie because I'm a horrible liar.

Once I was out of sight of the warehouse, I slowed to half running, half walking. As I passed an alley two blocks from Dad's place, I spotted a dumpster in the shadows. Joke or crime, I didn't want the walkie-talkie to get me or Dad in trouble. Especially after Dad's bone-chilling warning about keeping quiet. I tossed the device into the dumpster and sprinted home. By the time I reached Dad's house, my lungs ached, and my legs were wobbly. If I had to run even one more block, I'd have puked.

I pounded on the front door, then the back door, then collected some pebbles from the gravel driveway and threw them at the window of the bedroom I share with my younger brother, Louie. After what seemed like forever, Louie's face appeared in the window. I waved and pointed

to the front door. He nodded and disappeared.

A few moments later, a groggy-looking Louie opened the door and said, “Why you outside?”

“Can’t tell you,” I said as I shoved past him into the house, still gasping for air.

“Why didn’t Dad answer the door?”

“Can’t tell you.”

“Why you crying?”

“Shut up, Louie. Just shut up.”

I led him upstairs, and we went to bed. Louie quickly fell back to sleep. I lay on my bed, trying to figure out what to tell Mom in case Dad didn’t come home.

Chapter 2

CHAPTER 2

My parents divorced six years ago, and Louie and I mostly live with Mom. Dad has custody of us every other weekend. Some dads have their kids more often, but this was the best deal Mom could make without Dad threatening to leave town. Although I should be disappointed that he barely wants to see us, four days a month is enough.

Staying with him usually makes me uncomfortable because he's not like the other fathers I've met. We rarely do fun things together, and he mostly ignores Louie and me. He acts like we can never be good enough for him, like he wishes he had better sons. Dad swears a lot too, and his house smells funny sometimes. I think he smokes marijuana. Never in front of me, but his place has this pungent odor some older kids described in the school bathroom one day.

I'm not crazy about Dad's friends either. They're constantly dodging trouble. Once, when Mom was dropping me off for the weekend, we saw Dad and a friend of his talking to a policeman in his driveway. The police car's lights were flashing, so Mom immediately turned around

and drove us home. I guess nothing bad happened to Dad *that* time. Still, this weekend had been going much better than usual... until the situation at the warehouse went *kablooey!*

For starters, when Louie and I arrived on Friday after school, Dad said, “Got a surprise for you, EJ.”

“What?” I asked. A surprise from him was as rare as my getting an A on a test.

“I’ll tell you later.”

Dinner that night was fast-food burgers and fries. Mountain Dew for Louie and me. Beer for Dad. We laughed at Dad’s jokes; he pretended to laugh at ours. After dinner, Louie asked if we could watch a movie.

Dad flashed one of his fake smiles. “Sure, slugger. Haven’t seen you much lately, so I’ll let you pick.”

“Thanks,” Louie said, his smile wide and toothy other than his two missing front teeth. He scampered to the entertainment center and studied the DVD collection—a measly ten disks. Four were animated movies. Three others were the first three *Star Wars* movies. Louie chose *The Empire Strikes Back* and predictably fell asleep an hour through the movie. Even though he thinks staying up late is cool, he rarely makes it past eight o’clock.

When the movie ended, Dad carried Louie upstairs and told me to follow. He put Louie on the bed and said, “Get him into his jammers and have him brush his teeth. Then hit the sack. If I see light under your door at 9:30, you’re in a heap of trouble. Got that?”

Translation: *I've got friends coming over, and we don't want to be bothered by little kids.*

"Yes, sir." I woke Louie, and we got ready for bed. I lay awake staring at the ceiling, wondering if Dad's surprise would be good or bad, fun or not so fun. With him, you never know.

Saturday morning, Louie and I ate Froot Loops and Cheerios, respectively. Dad made hot chocolate for us—a rare treat. That made me think the surprise would be good, since he was being nice in his own way. Even though I asked him about it twice, he only said, "You'll see."

Louie and I played outside the rest of the morning. He only used his inhaler once after we raced each other around the house at full speed. When Dad came outside for a while, we kicked a soccer ball around the backyard. Louie's a good kicker. I'm not. I miss the target a lot. Dad claims he was a star high school athlete in soccer and basketball. He certainly knows how to kick a soccer ball. He kicked it straight at me super hard several times, and I couldn't get out of the way. Those balls sting like crazy when they hit you.

After tiring of soccer, we switched to basketball in the driveway with the rusty hoop nailed above the garage door. Dad's tall, and he can dribble and shoot well, so he mostly shows off with a few long shots and tries to teach us how to hold the ball when we shoot. He says it's all in the wrists, whatever that means. Based on *my* athletic ability, I wouldn't know. I always got picked near last for play-

ground teams in elementary school. I'm still not interested in sports other than watching soccer on TV.

Around noon, Dad got a phone call and walked into the house. He returned ten minutes later. "Your surprise happens tonight, EJ. Let's eat lunch."

He made canned tomato soup and grilled cheese sandwiches—another treat. When we finished eating, Louie and I chilled outside for a while. Then we played video games on the living room TV before switching to chess in our room.

After we'd set up the board, Louie said, "Do you like Dad?"

I wasn't ready for that question, especially from him. I'd never thought about it. Dad was Dad, and I couldn't change him or choose another dad. I finally said, "I dunno. I love him, I suppose, cuz he's our dad, and we're supposed to love our parents, right?"

Louie nodded. "Do you like Mom?"

"Heck yeah, she's great."

"I like Mom more than Dad."

"Dad does the best he can. He always tells us how he works so hard just to pay rent and buy food. Grownups have it tough, you know. I'll bet his jobs are physically harder than Mom's, so he gets too tired to do fun things with us."

Louie looked me in the eye. "I don't like him at all. But I pretend to, so he won't get mad at me. I'm glad when I'm sick and can't come here with you. Is that wrong?"

“Nah, that’s cool. I miss you when you’re not here, but I get the bedroom all to myself. That’s fun.”

His face brightened. “And I get our room to myself at Mom’s too. We both win.”

We started another chess game. I tried my best and barely managed to beat my smart little brother.

Chapter 3

CHAPTER 3

When Dad called us downstairs to dinner, I was surprised to see his housemate, Jimmy Jackson, sitting at the table. I don't see Jimmy much because he works weekends and spends most of his downtime either in his room or at his girlfriend's place. That's good because Jimmy is one mean, scary-looking dude.

He's tall and heavy, with big muscles, a scar on his face, and several tattoos on his arms and neck. One is a long, ugly snake. Another is a dagger with blood dripping off the point. Jimmy also shaves his head. I think he polishes it so people will notice and be more afraid of him. When he's hot, embarrassed, or mad, it reminds me of the tip of a gigantic pink bullet.

"How ya doin', EJ?" Jimmy asked in his deep voice. He doesn't talk much, and when he does, the sentences are short. He always seems to be in a bad mood or looking for a fight.

"Okay, I guess." I struggled to sound calm and casual to cover my uneasiness.

"Hi, Jimmy!" Louie said and ran up to give him a high

five.

“How ya doin’, little man?” Jimmy said as he returned Louie’s high five.

“Hardly sick at all lately.”

“Glad to hear it, bro. You keep exercisin’ and eatin’ your vegetables, you be fine. Just like me.” Jimmy flexed his bulging biceps and roared like the Incredible Hulk does when he’s mad. Louie giggled and imitated Jimmy’s pose with his scrawny biceps and gap-toothed snarl. He actually *likes* the dude and isn’t nervous around him. And yet, Louie *doesn’t* like Dad. Go figure.

Dinner was fancier than usual—KFC instead of Mickey D’s. Cookies for dessert, too, which rarely happens. Jimmy wouldn’t waste money on us, so I wondered why Dad splurged. After dinner, Dad told us to go up to our room. He wanted to talk to Jimmy alone.

“Let’s play chess again,” Louie said once we were in our room.

“Not tonight,” I said. “I’m gonna read.”

“Okay.” He shrugged, pulled out his sketch pad and a pencil, and began drawing something. Probably dragons.

I pretended to read a new book on mountain climbing, but mostly stared at the pictures and wondered about my surprise. I must’ve dozed off because the next thing I knew, Dad nudged me awake. It was full-on dark outside. Louie was asleep in his clothes, his sketch pad on his chest. I rubbed my eyes, sat up, and said, “Whatsa matter?”

“Time for your surprise. Come downstairs.”

I'm not too sharp right after I wake up, so I blinked, yawned, and stretched, trying to get alert enough not to trip and fall as I staggered downstairs.

Dad led me out the front door onto the porch. Jimmy was perched on the rail, backlit by the pale moonlight. Dad said, "I got a job for you to do tonight that'll earn you that money you always ask about earning from me."

That news woke me up fast. "Great," I said. "Why do I have to work at night?"

Dad said nothing.

Jimmy said to Dad, "You sure he's the right man for the job, bro?"

"Yeah, he'll be fine. I mean, how hard can it be, even for him, right?"

Thanks for the vote of confidence, Dad. I started to ask about the job, but Jimmy cut me off with a scowl and a slash of his hand through the air. He stood and said, "Let's go."

He led us to his truck, a black Chevy—one of those extra big pickups with two rows of seats and a huge cargo bed. We climbed in, me in the back seat, and Jimmy drove away. He turned up the radio so loud I couldn't hear them talk in the front seat. All I got were bits and pieces: "... sure thing... don't worry... relax... won't get in trouble." My stomach churned. I began kicking my seat with my heels.

Ten minutes later, Jimmy pulled to the curb under a gigantic tree across the street from a large warehouse in the industrial park. Dad got out, told me to get out, and

removed two rectangular objects from his jacket pocket. After handing one to me, he said, "You know how to use a walkie-talkie?"

I studied the device in the dim glow of a street-light. "Sorta," I said. "A kid at school brought two for show-and-tell in third grade. We all tried it during recess."

The walkie-talkie was heavier than I'd expected. The antenna jutted from the top end like a skinny plastic finger sticking up from a hand. The surface was ridged except for a small screen that glowed a creepy green color. Next to the antenna were two round knobs. Four buttons were lined up under the screen.

Dad turned both devices on and gave one to me. "This is all you need to know." He pointed to a button on the left side. "Press that button to talk. Let go to listen. If you don't let go, you can't hear me. Got it?"

I nodded. "What should I say?"

He kneeled and looked me in the eye for the first time in forever. "If Jimmy's boss comes, you call us on the walkie-talkie. We're playing a practical joke on him and don't want him to find out. You're the lookout, okay?"

As usual, Dad had beer breath. This time, it was tinged with marijuana smoke. Although the job sounded easy enough, the look in Dad's eyes scared me.

I swallowed hard. "How will I know who Jimmy's boss is?"

"He drives a big white Cadillac and owns the warehouse. If he comes tonight, he'll drive in through that gate." Dad

pointed to a steel gate in the tall chain-link fence around the entire property.

“What if someone else drives up?”

“No one will.”

“Don’t police cars drive around all night on patrol?”

“The po-po ain’t driving around here tonight. Trust me.”

His overconfidence bothered me. “How long will this take?”

“Twenty minutes.”

“Then what?”

“We all go home, and you get paid.”

But Dad and Jimmy didn’t go home, and I didn’t get paid.

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