

## CHAPTER ONE



# THE UNWRITTEN CODE

John drifted in and out of his groggy state. *Am I asleep or awake?* Consciousness toyed with the edges of his mind.

He didn't want to wake up but he knew that soon the bugle would blow, calling the members of his Scout troop to assembly before breakfast. Still, he fought against opening his eyes. But then another force made its presence known, a pressure deep within him that he knew he would soon have to give in and answer. He sighed, threw back the edge of his bedroll, and sat up.

The world gave a crazy rock and roll.

John's eyes popped open, and his not-fully-awake mind scrambled to make sense of what was happening. Before he could focus, he felt himself falling . . . falling . . .

*This can't be!*

He plunged into darkness, his mind further rebelling. He couldn't breathe. A spark of reason on the edge of his

brain told him he was in water, and he fought to get to the surface.

Emerging from the cold, murky world, he sputtered and coughed as he began to tread water. Then he heard . . . heard what? Laughing?

Confusion was slowly replaced by anger as John came fully awake. He was in the lake! Several boys in canoes surrounded him. Someone had placed him—cot and all—adrift in the lake, and now they were watching him.

“You’ve got to be kidding me!” John’s yell could probably be heard all the way to the front gate. “You guys are gonna get it. Just wait and see.”

One of the favorite, although unauthorized, activities at Boy Scout camp was playing pranks on one another. This year, John had clearly been winning that particular contest—until this morning. But he could take it as well as give it, and his anger faded as he joined in the laughter.

One of the nearby canoes held three cackling boys—Ben, Philip, and Preston. John knew them to be the primary instigators and most likely the architects of his disaster. He swam over to their boat.

“Good one, guys.” He forced a cheerfulness he didn’t entirely feel. “Must’ve been hard to carry my cot down, get me loaded in the canoe, and push me off—without waking me up.”

“Not so hard.” John watched Philip try to hold back his mirth, but he failed and a laugh burst forth. “You sleep like a rock.”

That confirmed it. They had thought it out carefully, but not carefully enough.

Across from him, his friends Samuel and Jacob had captured his canoe and were retrieving his cot and his gear. *Good.* That only left John with one task.

Scouts are taught how to get out of the water and into a boat that can turn over easier than any other watercraft. The boys in the canoe must offset a Scout's weight as he quickly stretches himself up and across the edge to grab the other side. Then, ever so slowly, he has to pull himself into the boat as the others continue to counterbalance his weight. *Slow* is the operational word. *Sudden* is not a word that goes well with canoes.

They had practiced this drill over and over.

Holding onto the side of the boat, John reached up to shake Philip's hand. "Beautifully executed prank, man."

Philip grinned and reached for his hand. "Well, I'm surprised you—"

John didn't shake the hand. Instead he pushed off the side of the canoe with his legs, drawing Philip into the water after him and overturning the canoe. All three boys splashed into the drink.