

# HOOT

## CHAPTER 1 THE RUNNING BOY



It all started on a Monday. Roy was on the school bus. He was sitting at the front as usual. Suddenly, Dana Matherson was behind him. He smelled of cigarettes. Dana put his big, dirty hands around Roy's head and pushed his face against the window.

That was when Roy first saw the running boy. He was running very fast along the street. The boy was very thin. His hair was blond and he was very brown from the sun. He was wearing shorts and an old basketball shirt, but he wasn't wearing any shoes. His feet were black. He had no shoes, no bag and no books – on a school day! And when the bus stopped, he didn't get on. He just ran and ran.

Dana Matherson pushed Roy harder against the glass.

'Had enough, cowgirl\*?' he said.  
'Yeah,' said Roy. 'I've had enough.'

Dana took his hands away. Roy opened the window and put his head out. The strange boy was nowhere.



Mother Paula's All-American Pancake\*\* Houses were very famous. They were everywhere in the United States. And they wanted to build a new one in Coconut Cove. That day Police Officer David Delinko was at the restaurant building site.

'What's the problem?' he asked Curly, the site boss. Curly's real name was Leroy Branitt. He was very angry.

'Come and see!' he said.

Officer Delinko followed him. Curly pointed to lots of long sticks all over the ground.

'Those sticks tell us where to dig,' said Curly. 'Someone pulled them out and filled in all the holes. Now we have to start again.'

'Probably just kids. Is it a big problem?' asked Officer Delinko.

'Of course it is,' said Curly angrily. 'We'll lose a lot of days, and that will cost a lot of money.'

As they walked back to the police car, Officer Delinko suddenly fell down.

'Stupid owls,' said Curly. He helped Delinko to his feet.

'Owls?' said Officer Delinko, surprised. 'Did you say owls?'

Curly pointed to a large hole in the ground. It was as big as one of Mother Paula's pancakes. 'That's why you fell down,' he said. 'It's an owl hole.'

\* A cowgirl is a woman cowboy. Roy has moved from Montana where there are lots of cowboys and cowgirls.

\*\* A pancake is a hot, round cake which is cooked in butter.

'Owls live down there?' The policeman looked carefully at the hole. 'How big are they?'

'They're small,' said Curly. 'About as big as your hand.'

They walked back to the police car. Officer Delinko got in and put on his sunglasses.

'What's going to happen when the digging starts, Mr Branitt?' he asked. 'What's going to happen to the owls?'

'Owls?' Curly laughed. 'What owls?'



Roy was new to Coconut Cove in Florida, and he didn't like it. It was too hot and it was horrible. His family travelled a lot and Roy lived in a lot of different places. The last place, and the best, was Montana. He loved the mountains, the green rivers and the blue, blue skies there. On his first day at Trace Middle School, a teacher asked him where he was from. Roy said 'Montana'. Ever since that day, everyone called him 'cowgirl'.



All day Roy couldn't stop thinking about the strange running boy. Where was he running and why? Roy looked for him at school, but he wasn't there. The next morning, he looked for him out of the window of the school bus. No one. No one on Wednesday or Thursday morning either.

Then on Friday, there he was! He was running again, with the same shorts, the same old basketball shirt and the same black feet.

The bus stopped at a bus stop. Roy took his bag and jumped up quickly. But Dana Matherson jumped up with him and pulled his head back.

'Where are you going, cowgirl?' he said.

'Let go, Dana,' Roy cried. 'Please!'

But Dana didn't want to let go. Roy lifted his hand and brought it up over his head as hard as he could. He hit Dana hard on the nose.

'Aargh!' shouted Dana. He let go. Roy ran to the door. A tall girl with red glasses was getting on. He pushed past her.



'Hey, wait!' she shouted.

But Roy was running now. He followed the strange boy

through the streets. They ran and ran.

The boy turned off the road into a golf course. Roy was becoming very tired.

'This boy is amazing!' he thought.

Suddenly, the boy disappeared into some trees on the edge of the course. Now Roy could see a group of four golfers in front of him. They were shouting and waving.

Roy didn't see the golf ball until it was too late. It hit him hard above his left ear. He felt himself falling – then everything went black.



Now Roy was in the Principal's\* room. Miss Hennepin was not happy.

'Why did you hit Mr Matherson?' she asked.

'Because he was hurting me,' said Roy.

'He says you started it,' said Miss Hennepin. 'And did you know that you broke his nose? Your parents will have to pay his hospital bill!'

'Matherson always hits the smaller kids,' said Roy.

'Nobody else has said anything,' said Miss Hennepin.

'That's because everybody is frightened of him,' said Roy.

'Well, I don't know who to believe,' said Miss Hennepin. 'But you must write to Mr Matherson and say you're sorry. And you can't travel on the school bus for two weeks.'

'Really?' Roy said. He was trying not to laugh. 'No school bus – no Dana,' he thought. 'That's fantastic!'



\* The Principal is the head of a school.



Roy was having lunch. A tall girl with red glasses sat down opposite him. She looked strong ... and a little scary.

'I'm Beatrice Leep,' she said. 'You pushed me on the bus this morning.'

'Sorry,' said Roy. 'I needed to get off fast.'

'Why? Were you running after someone?' asked the girl.

'Did you see that boy, too?' Roy said. 'The boy with no shoes?'

'No, I didn't see anyone,' said the girl. 'And you didn't see anyone either. Do you understand? You just mind your own business.'