

BRODY BOONDOGGLE

The **LAST**
AKAWAY

A Spirit
Animal Adventure

GARY KARTON

Illustrated by Samuel Valentino



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Dedication

To Jake and Brody. And to Halea, too.

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What's an Akaway?

A decorative arrangement of seven light gray paw prints is scattered around the title. One is at the top center, and the others are arranged in a loose circle below it.

“Freeze,” said Grammy, in the spirited tone that she saved for particularly important discoveries. She took an eagle’s feather out of her backpack and pointed to an imprint in the snow. It was the first snow of the season, which everyone knows is the best time to search for fresh tracks.

“Oh my sweet cousin from Kalamazoo with double chocolate mud brownies and pulled pork sandwiches,” Grammy said. “Do you know what this is?”

“An animal track,” said Brody Boondoggle.

“Nope, it’s an animal track,” answered Grammy.

Brody had learned recently not to say things like, "That's what I said," when Grammy didn't hear him properly, because she wouldn't hear that either.

For some reason, Grammy's senses hadn't been as sharp lately. Two months ago, she lost feeling in her right hand. Brody noticed when she kept poking herself with a pin while sewing patches on his favorite pair of jeans. Just last month, she lost the ability to see colors. Brody noticed when she unknowingly kept eating the blue M&Ms, the ones she swore to boycott because she believed eating them made her feel blue. And now, Grammy was losing her hearing. It was almost completely gone in her left ear and it was starting to fade in the right.

"And do you know what kind of animal track?" Grammy asked. This time, she didn't even wait for an answer. "It's an Akaway," she said. "An Akaway."

"What's an Akaway?" asked Brody.

"Oh, about 50 pounds," said Grammy. "Maybe a little more after a big meal. But that's not important now."

Brody paused for a second, looked up to the sky, shook his head slightly back and forth, then slowly maneuvered over to Grammy's right side. He spoke slowly and clearly.

"I said, 'what is an Akaway?'"

"Oh," chuckled Grammy. "Yes. An Akaway is one of the rarest creatures in the universe." She moved closer and whispered, "And one of the most important. Nobody's ever seen one before."

Then how does she know what its footprints look like? Brody thought to himself. But before he could ask Grammy directly, she turned to him and shouted, "Let's go!"

In a flash, Grammy was off. Now Grammy might be a grandmother, and she might be losing her vision, her hearing, and her sense of touch, but she knew her way around these woods and she could run like a deer. Well, maybe a slightly older deer, with a little arthritis in her knees, who had just quit smoking a few years ago, and loved a decadent treat called Danish pastry. But the point was, she could cruise when she wanted to, and right now she was jumping over logs, ducking under branches, and busting through snow banks. Brody's long legs and arms were pumping furiously, and he was still falling behind.

Finally she stopped abruptly, allowing Brody to catch up.

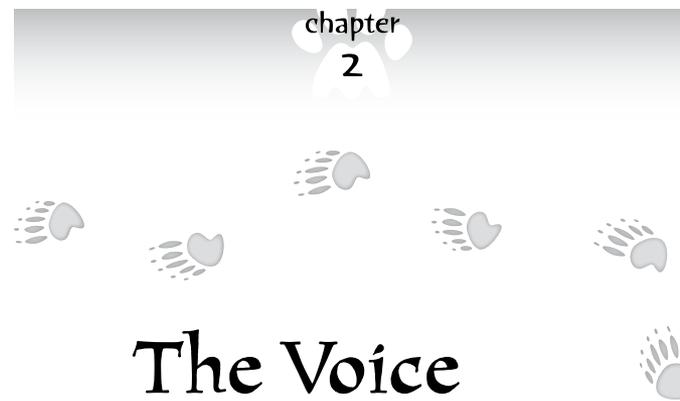
As he leaned over with his hands on his knees, trying

to catch his breath, everything Brody ever knew about animals suddenly flashed through his mind. And there was plenty to flash, because if there was one thing Brody knew, it was animals. Reptiles and mammals, birds and insects, amphibians, and fish. Even those tiny little bacteria on the underside of rocks at the bottom of the ocean, which are really only half animal, half plant, but that was close enough for Brody, so he knew about plankton as well.

But he never even dreamed of an Akaway.

“Do you see it?” asked Grammy. She pointed through the woods to a huge rock next to the snow-covered lake. “Please tell me you see it.”

And at that point Brody understood how Grammy identified the footprints. Because even though he had no idea what an Akaway was, he knew for certain he was staring at one right now.



The Voice

It's difficult to describe a creature that nobody had ever seen before, but I'll give it a try. It looked kind of like a bear cub, but not really. Sort of like an otter, but not so much. Almost like a raccoon, but kind of not. It certainly didn't appear magical like a unicorn, but you could tell that it was. It didn't seem inspiring like an eagle, but it had to be. Basically, it seemed exactly like every animal, but nothing like them at all.

“That's an Akaway,” said Grammy. “And, oh my monkey's uncle on Saturn with a green onion Philly cheese steak and sweet potato fries, this one is an albino. It's the only one of its kind.”

“How can you tell?” asked Brody.

“Oh, sweetie, they smell with their noses, just like you and me,” said Grammy. “But I really don’t see how that’s important right now.”

Again, Brody repositioned himself and repeated his question.

“I said, ‘How can you tell?’ not ‘How do they smell?’” he said slowly.

“Oh,” chuckled Grammy. “That would make more sense. The only difference is their eyes. Their eyes are pink. Take a close look.”

At the same moment Brody cleared his long, black hair off his face to look the Akaway right in the eyes, the Akaway picked up its head and did the same thing to Brody. As the two animals stared at each other for what seemed like minutes, Brody felt something strange inside. A voice, calling him closer.

“Can I pet her?” Brody asked, raising his voice so Grammy could hear. And of course, Grammy said, “Yes.”

Brody confidently walked up to the Akaway as if it were a pet he had raised since birth. It seemed more like floating, but 11-year-olds can’t float, so we’ll say he was

walking. The Akaway didn’t move; instead, its ears went forward, its tail curled up, and it tilted its head just enough to make Brody sure he was welcome to come closer.

And then. . . . “Ow!” yelled Brody, as he fell to the ground, holding his face in his hand. “That thing bit me.”

In a flash, the Akaway was gone.