

# *Walks with Bears*

BOOK 3 OF THE COMANCHERÍA SERIES

B RAY MIZE

Copyright © 2014 by B Ray Mize



Mill City Press, Inc.  
322 First Avenue N, 5th floor  
Minneapolis, MN 55401  
612.455.2293  
[www.millcitypublishing.com](http://www.millcitypublishing.com)

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, without the prior written permission of the author.

ISBN-13: 978-1-62652-585-6  
LCCN: 2013922724

*Printed in the United States of America*

This book is dedicated to my great-nieces and great-nephews.  
May each one of them grow a strength of character so strong  
that it Walks with Bears.



## **EARLY MONDAY MORNING, GUADALUPE MOUNTAINS NATIONAL PARK, TEXAS**

Twelve-year-old Brandon Matthews stood next to a trail guide at the edge of the Apache Highlands Trail and pointed a finger. “What’s the name of those trees down there?” he asked.

“Honey mesquite. They grow along the streams in the arroyos. We’re about 100 feet above them here.”

Brandon and the trail guide snapped their heads around when a man wearing a turban on his head and dressed in white clothing came out of nowhere with a gun and fired a burst of shots into the air. “On the ground!” he shouted.

Some of the children behind Brandon panicked and broke into a run back down the trail. They got only a few yards before encountering a second gunman. He, too, fired a rapid burst of shots into the air above their heads.

Brandon and his classmates immediately dropped to the ground.

The trail guide stood defiantly, and yelled out that the park was a gun-free zone.

The second gunman shot him in the back of the head, and as the trail guide wilted to the ground, said loudly, “Anyone else have something stupid to say?”

The first gunman, a bearded man with a long, crooked nose resembling a claw, walked over to the children’s kneeling teacher and shot her dead.

Brandon looked on, horrified, and watched for any chance of escape. None existed at the moment. Maybe later. He glanced over at Becky, a girl he had met for the first time on the bus ride to the park. She was older and a class ahead of him, and the only African American at their school. He thought she was the prettiest girl he had ever seen: big brown eyes and matching shoulder-length hair. She had said she was new in school and didn't have many friends. Me too, Brandon had said. At the moment, Becky's eyes had a deer-in-the-headlights look, Brandon thought. His too, probably. And suddenly her eyes got even bigger at the same moment he felt something hard hit him on top of the shoulder.

Claw-Nose stood over Brandon, tapping him with the barrel of his gun.

He pointed his gun at several of the other boys: Bobby, Curt, and a kid nicknamed Spider. The boys were older than Brandon, but not any bigger. "Hurry up," he said with a broken muffler of a voice.

Brandon jumped up and grabbed the trail guide's arms. Bobby took the ankles.

After the two bodies were dragged away, the gunmen gathered up the children and herded them farther up the trail.

On the trail were sixteen children from Fredericksburg, Texas, ranging in age from twelve to fifteen. They were on a school outing, a weeklong event that began on a late September morning.

Brandon walked next to Becky. "Don't know why they had us move the bodies," he whispered to her. "They didn't sweep the trail and cover up anything. They didn't even pick up their brass."

"Brass?" Becky asked.

"Their spent casings," Brandon said. "The metal things that hold the bullets."

"OK, but, like, who are these guys? And where are they taking us?"

"I don't know. My dad will find us, though. These guys are leaving

behind a trail even a blind person could follow. And what's with the clothes they're wearing?"

"It's Arabic clothing. See that black-and-white scarf on that man's head? That's a shemagh. That little cap the other man is wearing is called a kufi. The white robes that both men are wearing are what I think are called dishdashas with pants. My mother spent a lot of time in the Middle East and has pictures. My father is Arabic, but she never talks about him.

The gunman in the lead, Claw-Nose, stopped and turned around to face everyone. "We're leaving the trail. Watch your feet. Anyone who falls will be shot and left behind. Do you understand?" he growled loudly.

Brandon took Becky by the hand. "I'll go in front of you. Try to put your feet where I've put mine."

What lay before Brandon and his classmates was a steep decline into an arroyo filled with a rabble of shrubby oaks, boulders, gravel, and deadfall. It would be easy to stumble over something unseen there, easy to twist an ankle.

Brandon put as much distance as he could between himself and the others in front, mainly the younger, smaller children: Emma Jean, Kathy, Benjamin. If he lost his balance, he didn't want to stumble into them and cause one of them to fall. He gained a little distance by zigging and zagging and making his own ad hoc switchbacks.

From behind him Becky said, "This is so, like, too much walking. We'll be doing ten miles to everyone else's one."

Brandon, who'd been spotting the ground ten feet in front of him, saw the hole. Benjamin did not. He stumbled.

Brandon lunged forward and caught him by the arm, righting him and preventing him from falling.

From the back, Spider yelled out, "Let the retard fall."

Spider's girlfriend, Chigger, laughed and repeated what Spider had said.

“Shut up,” the gunman in the rear yelled out. “No talking.”

At the bottom of the decline into the arroyo, and then beyond a shallow creek, the land became a grassy meadow. Claw-Nose led the children over to a stand of gray oak trees. “Take off your backpacks and whatever’s in your pockets and throw them in the bushes below the trees,” he commanded. “We’ll be watching and checking.”

Brandon and his classmates ran up at once and did as they were told.

Amid the confusion, Brandon palmed a small, rectangular box from his backpack and shoved it under his shirt. Claw-Nose later checked Brandon’s pockets, but didn’t bother to check inside his shirt.

“Follow me,” Claw-Nose said. He turned north. The land rose moderately. The grass and wildflowers became sparser, and gave way to an assortment of rocks and boulders of various sizes.

Brandon occasionally feigned a stumble, digging the toes of his boots as deep into the ground as he could and grabbing and twisting tufts of grass. When no grass was available, he dislodged a rock or two.

Becky poked him in the back. “You are just so, like, the clumsiest boy I’ve ever known.” She poked him again.

Brandon grabbed at some wildflowers and snapped their stems. He handed the flowers to Becky. “Don’t know what they are, but they’re for you.”

“Thanks.” She put the flowers to her nose. “You’re still clumsy, though.”

Brandon held himself back so he and Becky could walk side by side. “I’m leaving behind signs for my dad. He won’t really need them, but I’m doing it anyway.”

Becky put the flowers to her nose again. “Not a clue what you’re talking about. What signs?”

“Never mind,” Brandon said. “But when they find us missing, my dad will come here and find out where they took us.”

“Where are they taking us?” Becky asked.

They walked over a rise and saw a helicopter. Their jaws dropped.

“No way,” Becky exclaimed. Once again, her eyes took on that deer-in-the-headlights look.

Brandon’s face became drawn and tense. “We can’t all fit into that. My dad’s pickup truck is bigger.”

“Stop talking!” Claw-Nose screamed out.

When they later arrived at the helicopter, Claw-Nose climbed into the pilot’s seat and started up the engine.

The gunman in back came forward and made everyone line up. “Big ones up front.” He pointed at Brandon and several of the other boys, most of whom were older than Brandon by three years. “You’re going to lie down inside so everyone else can pile in on top of you.”

Brandon saw in his peripheral vision that Emma Jean and another classmate had made a run for the forest, which wasn’t too far away. The gunman lining everyone up was distracted, but he wouldn’t be for long.

Brandon rushed forward and tripped over his own feet, crashing into the gunman and knocking him off-balance. Brandon shoved his boot down hard on the man’s sandaled foot.

The gunman yelped and staggered, but quickly regained his balance and backhanded Brandon on the side of the head.

Brandon fell to the ground, not nearly as hurt as he pretended to be.

Claw-Nose jumped from the helicopter’s pilot seat and pointed his gun at Brandon.

The gunman Brandon had collided with noticed the two escaping children and gave chase, but was limping so badly that he soon gave up. He fired his gun in anger, but Emma Jean and her fellow escapee were already deep into the trees.

The gunman standing over Brandon called him a turd, a big fat camel’s turd.

Spider and Chigger rocked up and down on their feet, saying, "Shoot him. Shoot him."

"Shut up, you little turds," Claw-Nose shouted out. "You are all worthless." He then grabbed Brandon by the back of his shirt collar and threw him into the body of the helicopter. He swung around to face the other children. "Pile in on top, and hurry up. Anyone who can't get inside will be shot!"

Brandon moved to the side and folded his body up in such a way as to protect himself from the onslaught as best he could. He saw Claw-Nose take Becky aside. "You're not like the others," he said. "You'll ride up front with me."

Becky protested, but relented when Claw-Nose grabbed her arm and forced her up front.

Brandon prayed that everyone could get in, even if it meant his body had to absorb the crushing weight of his classmates. He was already having trouble breathing. He knew without a doubt that these men were evil and would kill as they said. He had been witness to evil men before, and knew them from their eyes. But the man who would later adopt him as his son had shown up at the last minute and had saved him and his mom. It had started when his mom moved to New Orleans. She had unknowingly gone to work for a very bad man, and, when he thought his mom was beginning to find out too much about his drug business, he tried to have her killed. A few days later, this gangster and his hired killers were all dead. Brandon knew his dad would come again and save him from these men, as well; his dad would tear the world apart if necessary.

Brandon lost track of time, but from the time the helicopter laboriously lifted and landed, it seemed like only minutes had passed.

More men with guns rushed Brandon and his classmates from the helicopter and into an airplane, shoving them inside. Becky came in last and took a seat next to Brandon.

“Glad you’re back,” Brandon said. “Why—”

“Don’t even ask,” Becky said. “I guess because I’m black. I don’t know. What I do know is, like, this plane is so much like a piece of shit. Rust everywhere. And it stinks in here. Can’t you smell?”

## **MIDDAY MONDAY, ONBOARD A PLANE ABOVE THE WEMINUCHE WILDERNESS, SOUTHWESTERN COLORADO**

Brandon’s droopy eyes popped open wide when the plane’s engines abruptly changed from a steady rhythmic hum to a cranky rattle. And his stomach jumped to his throat when the plane dropped like a rock. He grunted. Becky, who was sitting next to him, screamed along with everyone else on board.

The plane leveled off. The screams died down.

Brandon leaned over to Becky and pointed out the oval window on her right. Fire had engulfed the plane’s engine.

Becky gasped and grabbed Brandon’s arm. “Oh my God,” she stuttered. “We’re going to crash.”

Brandon gazed into her eyes. He opened his mouth to speak at the same moment that his other classmates noticed the fiery engine.

The plane dropped again and started bucking wildly. Thick smoke billowed from the front of the plane. Everyone screamed louder than before and several children cried out hysterically.

During one of the plane’s mad bucks, Brandon’s head hit the back of his seat. “Ouch, that hurt.”

Below the plane, a blue lake lay calm. On its eastern shore, its

waters huddled with ragged boulders and walls of mountains. The lake loomed large and fast to catch the plane holding the fourteen kidnapped children.

Brandon reached over and forced Becky's head to her knees before putting his own head down, as his dad had taught him.

Brandon started humming to himself, a Comanche chant he had learned from his Native American father.

The plane hit the water at a glancing angle, bounced two, three, four times, then twisted sideways and skipped uncontrollably across the water. The forward movement of the plane never slowed.

Brandon resisted the temptation to raise his head and instead looked out of the corner of his eye to see Becky looking back at him. Her ebony face had turned a lighter color. He opened his mouth to tell her so, but was violently jerked upward and backward, his head smacking once again against the back of the seat. His seatbelt cut into his lap, and he yelped out.

Becky grunted and screamed.

A massive explosion blanked out her second scream.

The explosion's shock and concussion caused Brandon to wince in pain. He instinctively put his hands to his ears, as the ringing was unbearable. His vision blurred. He became disoriented and sick to his stomach. He shook his head. Was he being tilted backward, as on a carnival ride? He shook his head again and blinked his eyes. Was he seeing sunlight and blue sky in front of him? He blinked his eyes a few more times to be sure: yes, the forward section of the plane was gone, broken off. He was looking up from the back end of a giant tube jutting out into the open sky.

Sensations of sliding backward grew more real and more prominent.

Water began flowing in over the top of the tube, causing the tube to sink—slowly at first, and then with gushing speed.

Brandon turned to Becky. Her mouth was open and her lips were moving, but he could hear only the ringing in his ears. He opened his mouth to speak, hoping she could hear him telling her to breathe deeply. The water crashing in would soon overtake them and fill up the tube. To make sure she understood, he poked her in the shoulder and demonstrated to her what he was doing. She must have understood, because she started duplicating what he was doing.

The water crashed in around them.

The water's physical force and coldness shocked Brandon to the core. He locked his eyes down tight for a moment, then opened them and released the safety catch on his seatbelt. Becky panicked and fought with hers. Brandon reached over and released it for her.

Becky shot upward through the water and disappeared.

Brandon held on to his seatbelt to prevent himself from moving upward too quickly. His and Becky's seats were near the middle of the plane, and he wanted to see about those behind him.

A girl he knew, Emily, was struggling desperately to free a foot trapped in a tangle of debris.

Brandon grappled with her foot and freed it. Emily kicked out wildly in fright, both feet catching Brandon solidly in the chest. He fought to keep air in his lungs.

He recovered and swam upward, colliding with a boy he recognized as Troy swimming downward in the wrong direction. He forced Troy to change directions, but not before Troy put up a fight with swinging arms. Brandon took a few blows to his face before turning the small, frail boy around.

Together they crashed through the water's surface. Troy gasped for air, but sucked in a lot of roiling water as well. He choked and sank.

Brandon grabbed him by the shirt collar and pulled him back up, then swam with him in tow some 100 yards to shore. He dragged Troy, who was now unconscious, from the water and onto a grassy shoreline.

Becky, who was waiting there for Brandon, immediately took charge of Troy using the skills she had learned as a lifeguard.

Troy finally coughed and spat for a while before sitting up. He sat there quietly with his chin on his knees.

Brandon and Becky sat down next to him, both catching their breath and looking out to the spot on the lake where the plane had gone down. Two yellow butterflies flittered by in front of them and landed on a wildflower.

“Good job on Troy,” Brandon said to Becky.

“Thanks,” she replied. “But it took so long. I thought maybe it wouldn’t work.” She put her hand on Brandon’s arm and looked at him with embarrassed eyes. “Sorry I panicked back there. I don’t know, it. . .”

“Forget it. My dad and I spend a lot of time doing things under water at our lake back home.” Brandon filled his lungs with air and stuck out his chest with feigned arrogance. “Do you know I can hold my breath for more than two minutes? Dad for three.” Brandon smiled widely.

“Awesome. But the world’s record is almost twenty minutes.”

“Really?”

“Really. My mom’s the swimming coach at school. We spend a lot of time above the water, not so much below. And she knows a lot of stuff.” Her face suddenly tightened. “Did you see any of the men who kidnapped us?”

“No,” Brandon said adamantly. “All of them were standing or sitting in the front of the plane when we hit the water. I think they all drowned.”

Troy raised his face from his knees. “Hope so! Very bad men. Most nasty indeed,” he said effeminately.

They all sat silently, each looking out at something in the distance. The blue sky above them, dappled with puffy white clouds,

stretched downward only a short distance before being stopped cold at irregular intervals by mountaintops, some tall and ragged, some stubby and bald, all mottled with shades of red, orange, yellow. The lake in front of them, having absorbed the downed airplane without complaint, seemed now tranquil and uncaring. And why not? It had absorbed all kinds of rockslides in its past. Because in it and around it, granite boulders much larger than an airplane stood upright at various water depths. A line of boulders crossed the south end of the lake, looking like a caravan of partially submerged elephants—both infant and adult.

Troy broke the silence first. “Where are we?”

“Somewhere in the mountains,” Becky said. “So beautiful.”

Brandon nodded his head in agreement. He looked back over his shoulder when he heard Emily suddenly begin sobbing more heavily. He touched Becky on the arm with his elbow. “Emily’s friend is missing.”

“Kathy?” Becky stood up and turned. She held out a finger and counted. “You’re right. Oh my God.”

“She wasn’t in the plane. I was the last one out.”

“There’s someone else missing,” Becky exclaimed. “Benjamin. The smallest boy here.” Her eyes began to well up.

“I should go back and check,” Brandon said.

Becky wiped her eyes with the back of her hand. “No,” she said, “the water’s too cold.”

Brandon knew Becky was right. There was nothing he could do now. Kathy and Benjamin were both swept away somehow and drowned. Anger began poking Brandon hard in the chest. “There are four teenagers with us, all about fifteen, I think. They should have been watching out for the younger kids.”

Troy staggered to his feet, face pale. “All four of them are simply awful,” he said. “I—I should never have endeavored to come on this

trip when I discovered they would be on it.”

Becky said, “I can’t believe this is happening to us. I’m so scared we’re going to die.” She suddenly shivered. “I’m freezing.”

Brandon, too, suddenly felt cold. “Let’s go get a fire going and dry off these wet clothes.”

“How?” Becky asked with a furrowed brow.

“With a match,” Brandon said with a forced grin. “Let’s pick up some firewood and we’ll make us a bonfire. A big bonfire. Big enough to be seen for 100 miles.”

A grassy meadow surrounded by thick forests abutted the shoreline on their side of the lake. Brandon gathered up the things he would need to start a fire: a handful of dry grass, some kindling, and some large twigs. Becky, Troy, and a few others volunteered to help gather up arm-sized tree branches. The four teenagers declined to do anything, declaring it all a big joke and that Brandon and his helpers were all “total retards.”

When Brandon thought they had enough fuel, he began to build a pyramid of wood, starting with the tinder and moving upward with twigs and large branches.

Spider, with his small, cruel eyes, laughed and said sarcastically, “Hey, look, the fucking retard is building a fucking stick pyramid.”

Brandon ignored the insult. He unbuttoned the flap to the large side pocket of his trousers and pulled out the box he had slipped out of his backpack earlier. Geometric designs carved into the box proclaimed it as belonging to Two Feathers, his dad’s Comanche name. Brandon slid the top of the box open and removed a waterproof tube just big enough to hold three matchsticks. He removed one, then closed the box and returned it to his pocket.

Becky asked Brandon how he had managed to hide his box from the bad guys. Brandon said the man watching him hadn’t watched very closely.

With match in hand, Brandon got down on his knees and put the match head up close to the dry grass and tinder. Then, using his thumbnail, he flicked the match. It instantly popped and burst into flames.

Applause broke out, and everyone gathered around the fire except for Spider and Chigger and two tall-for-their-age teenage boys. Spider still had an angry glare in his eyes.

Becky draped an arm over Brandon's shoulders and gave him a quick hug. "Totally awesome." She removed her arm from his shoulder and stretched her hands out to the fire.

Brandon's cheeks burned.

"What's with that little box of yours, anyway?" Becky asked.

"A survival kit. My dad made it up for me. It has stuff inside, like a small knife, fishing line and hook, and herbs."

Becky turned her back to the fire. "It looks old with those carvings on it."

"It's made from cypress wood. My dad's great-grandmother, a Comanche, made three of them. My dad gave me his."

"Cool," Becky said as she turned to face the fire. "Nearly dried out now." She looked at Brandon and smiled. "Without you, we would all still be wet and cold."

Brandon added more wood to the fire. "Talking about being cold, we're going to have to find shelter before nightfall. Our thin windbreakers won't be enough. And not everybody has one."

"Maybe we could, like, build a lean-to, you know? Like the ones I've seen on TV."

"We don't have time. There's only five or six more hours before the sun goes down."

"We could make a bigger fire."

"We have another problem." Brandon pointed to the north. "See that straight line of dark clouds coming in just at the horizon? Not good. Rain, I think."

Becky dropped her head. "If it rains, it'll put out our fire."

"And we'll be wet and very, very cold."

Brandon was looking across the campfire when Spider yelled and pushed several of the smaller kids away from the fire to make room for himself and his friends.

Troy fell face-first to the ground after being pushed and tripped. Spider laughed and called him a fag-boy, daring him to do something about it. Chigger encouraged Spider to toss Troy into the fire.

Brandon walked over briskly and picked Troy up by the arm. "Come over by me and Becky."

Spider stepped up to Brandon threateningly. "Hey, dude, where do you think you're going?"

Brandon looked him squarely in the eyes and said, "Anywhere away from you would be good."

Spider, who'd taken off his shirt to dry it in the fire, tossed it over to Chigger. He then took up a fighting position. "Let's see what Troy's new boyfriend's got."

Brandon continued staring at Spider, unflinching, unwavering. Brandon had never seen another kid with so many tattoos. He knew his mother would never allow him to have even one, much less five or six. His dad had a small tattoo on his shoulder and forearm, but said that only those who served in the United States armed forces should be allowed to have one.

Brandon, having given his full attention to Spider, hadn't noticed the two older boys sneaking up behind him.

Becky yelled, but too late.

They instantly put Brandon down on the ground.

While they held him down, Spider took the survival kit. "You won't need this anymore," Spider said. He examined it, turning it over and over. "How the fuck did he open it?"

The two boys holding Brandon down let him up. One of the

boys took the box from Spider and slid the top open.

Spider grabbed the box to examine its contents. He removed a tiny cloth bag and waved it in the air. "Look at this! We've got us something to smoke here."

Brandon rose to his feet and brushed the grass and debris from his clothes. "That's herbal medicine. You don't smoke it. You make a tea with it, *dude*." Anger and defiance laced the tenor of Brandon's voice. "Most of what's in that box you wouldn't know how to use or even what it's for. It's useless to you. Give it back."

"Or what?" Spider said, flipping his middle finger at Brandon. He pulled a small fishhook and some line from the box. "We all know what this is," he said, holding it up for everyone to see. "I'm hungry. Someone go catch me a fish."

Brandon raised his voice and spoke out to everyone. "We don't have time for fishing or anything else. We need to look for shelter. There's a storm coming in, and it's going to get very cold tonight, and we'll all freeze unless—"

One of the boys who had held Brandon down interrupted and raised his voice so all could hear. "Me and Bobby are going for help. We're walking south, following the river. There's probably somebody who lives close by. Or maybe we can find a road or something."

Brandon looked at the two boys and shook his head in disbelief.

Brandon gathered Becky and Troy around him. "I'm leaving here to find shelter for the night." He pointed to the east side of the lake. "You see where the mountains are all broken up and parts have fallen down into the lake? There're crevices and giant boulders over there. We can find a cave or an overhang or something. We don't have time to build shelter. We'll have to find some."

"But we'll have to swim across the lake," Becky said.

Brandon pointed north. "We'll work our way up past that waterfall over there and find a narrow part of the river to cross over."