

# DOC WILDE



AND

## THE FROGS OF DOOM

TIM BYRD



## TIM BYRD

lives with his adventurous son and a treacherous cat near Atlanta, Georgia. He is often barefoot, prone to irony, and interested in everything. He knows how to tie a tie, but doesn't care to. He has been a dishwasher, shoe salesman, waiter, soldier, game designer, independent filmmaker, and outdoor guide. He wants to be a kid when he grows up.

Tim is the author of *Doc Wilde and The Frogs of Doom*, the first in a series of pulp adventure novels from G.P. Putnam's Sons.



For more information, please visit [www.DocWilde.com](http://www.DocWilde.com)

and Tim's blog at [www.tim-byrd.com](http://www.tim-byrd.com).



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AND  
**THE FROGS OF DOOM**



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**G. P. Putnam's Sons**

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To Nathaniel,  
The *real* wild kid



**Writing this book** has been the literary equivalent of cooking a batch of Stone Soup; I brought some rocks, but the meat and veggies and spice came from many sources.

For inspiration, I affectionately acknowledge the spinners of countless adventure stories I've enjoyed since I was a kid, folks like Robert E. Howard, Fritz Leiber, Alexandre Dumas, Paul Dini, Karl Edward Wagner, Rafael Sabatini, Walter Gibson, Ray Harryhausen, Neil Gaiman, Joss Whedon, Norvell Page, Michael Chabon, and Robert B. Parker.

I owe a special debt to two writers from the pulp magazines of old. Lester Dent, who, under the nom de plume "Kenneth Robeson," brought the world the extravagant adventures of Doc Savage, the original superhero; and H. P. Lovecraft, whose spooky stories warned of eldritch horrors lurking just outside our world, waiting to devour it. Lovecraft's work is always readily available, and as I write this, all the Doc Savage stories are finally being reprinted in beautiful editions by Anthony Tollin's Nostalgia Ventures ([www.nostalgiatown.com](http://www.nostalgiatown.com)).

For encouragement over the years, I'd like to thank the enchanting Carmen Agra Deedy, the sensational Shane Black, and especially my noble friend Ed Hall, who never falters.

Thanks to my wonderful agent, Laura Rennert, who daily dares the frightening jungles of publishing with greater fortitude than I'll ever know. A very big thank-you to my editor Timothy Travaglini (and his right hand, Shauna Fay) for teaching me to use the scalpel and ignore the pain. Thank you for your patience; I'm a blockhead sometimes, and it can take me a while to realize when I'm wrong. This book is a much shinier diamond than it would have been without your help.

A very special thanks to comic book virtuoso Gary Chaloner, the first true friend of the Wildes. Gaz, you'll always be welcome on our adventures as far as I'm concerned.

And the biggest thank-you of all goes to my son, Nathaniel Byrd, who made me want to tell this tale in the first place.

—Tim Byrd



# ONE

**The Lyceum** of the Wilde family's manor was a huge, odd room that seemed a combination of world-class library and Olympic gymnasium. There, Brian Wilde sat at a big oaken desk, staring at an ancient scroll till his eyes nearly crossed. An unknown work by the classical philosopher Plato, the roll of papyrus was roughly 2,500 years old. Enormously valuable, it was held with gentle precision in an airless vacuum inside a small ornate brass device. This was called, simply, a "scroll reader" and had been invented by Brian's father.

His father had also unearthed the scroll itself in a bizarre subterranean maze a mile beneath Desoto, Missouri, where it was guarded by an earth monster formed of crystalline needles as long as a man's arm. The thousand-pointed elemental creature was incredibly dangerous, but, it turned out, extremely vulnerable to high-pitched sonics, and Brian's dad had left it shattered across the stone.

As part of his daily study, Brian was translating Plato's words into English. From ancient Greek. And his Ancient Greek, though exceptional for a twelve-year-old, was pretty darned rusty.

"I could do it faster," his upside-down sister told him. Wren Wilde was hanging by her knees above him from a trapeze that swung over the desk. With each swing, her long ponytail lightly brushed the top of his head.

She was watching him. Supposedly learning from him, but actually annoying him terribly.

"No, you couldn't," he said.

"I could too."

"*Vous ne pouvez pas,*" he said in French: *You could not.*

"*Si podria,*" she said in Spanish: *I could.*

"不能," he insisted in Mandarin: *Couldn't.*

"*Ninaweza,*" she pressed in Kiswahili: *Could.*

"Okay, smarty-pants . . . what's this word mean?"

"*Ophrys?* That's 'eyebrow.'"

"It is not."

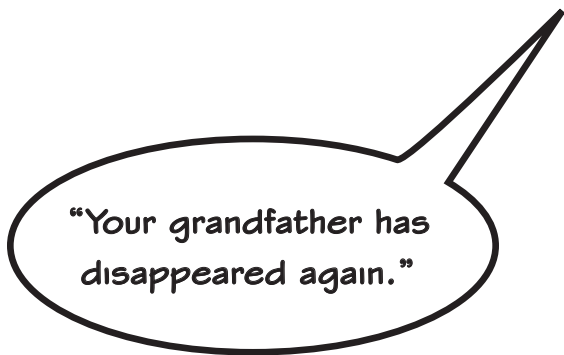
"Is." She grinned. "Look it up."

"Hmmp." Brian reached for the translation dictionary. Surely Wren couldn't be right. Why would Plato be

writing about somebody's *eyebrow*? If she was right, though, she'd never let him forget it.

He was saved from this dread possibility when the door opened, revealing Dr. Spartacus Wilde. Their dad.

“Grab your backpacks,” Doc Wilde commanded.





## **Grandpa was missing again.** Cool!

As Brian powered down the scroll reader, Wren flipped from the trapeze and shot out the door. He darted after her, out of the Lyceum and up the stairs. Wren was already out of sight. She was tiny, even for a ten-year-old, but she was fast.

Reaching his bedroom, Brian dove over the half door blocking the doorway, somersaulting to his feet on the other side. This was one of the many ways the kids honed their skills: they had to do a dive roll to get in or out of their bedrooms.

Similarly, Brian's bed was thirty feet above the floor and reachable only by a difficult clamber up a climbing wall.

Brian's backpack was on his desk, ready for the field. All he needed to add was a book to read and he'd be all set.

He scanned the tightly packed shelves. *What to read, what to read . . . ?*

Into his pack went a book of Ray Bradbury dinosaur

stories. He'd already read it three times, but some books never get old.

He sprang to a small square tunnel in the wall opposite the door. Backpack hugged to his chest, he slid through the opening feetfirst.

**SWOOSHI!**

On his back, down a slippery slide, he whirled and spiraled through spaces behind the walls, under the floors, beneath the Wilde mansion.

The slide ended abruptly and Brian flew out of a hole in the wall at the bottom into a large mat stuffed with goose down, landing like a mouse on a soft pillow.

He was in a huge chamber, bigger than a football field, carved out of solid granite 150 feet underground. Scientific equipment of all types known (and many unknown outside of the family) filled this hidden space; it was the subject of countless odd rumors, weird tales, and international legends. It was also the finest laboratory on earth: Doc Wilde's workshop.

A short distance away, Brian's dad stood before a large screen, arms across his broad chest, holding his chin in thought.

Wren had, annoyingly, gotten here before Brian and stood by their dad, mirroring his pose down to the way his fingers held his chin.

With them was Phineas Bartlett, a very thin, very stylish Englishman with a pencil-thin mustache. He was the Wildes' majordomo. A brilliant attorney and great friend, Bartlett managed the Wildes' legal matters, general itineraries, and the Wilde manor, Lyonesse, itself.

Brian slung his backpack over his shoulder and joined them.

In excited thought, the Wildes presented quite a picture. They were all long-limbed and golden: golden brown hair, golden tans, and large eyes with glittering irises that seemed composed of layered gold leaf. Brian and Wren were both a bit smaller than most kids their age, but they had reason to believe they might one day shoot to greater height, for their father stood well over six feet tall. Thousands of hours of physical training had made him muscular and agile. From the look of him, Doc Wilde might have been some ancient hero, perhaps the half-human child of a solar god, glowing with warmth and golden light.

Like the others, Brian stared at the screen.

"Is that some kind of monstro frog?" he asked.

“Yes,” his father replied. His voice was deep, resonating like distant thunder.

The sinister shape on the screen was, indeed, a frog. A frog as big as a dump truck, with long, spidery claws and sharklike rows of dagger teeth.

Grandpa Wilde was in its mouth.

“Do we know where this was taken?” Wren asked.

“Or who took it?” Brian added.

Doc shook his head. “Unfortunately not.”

In the photograph, Grandpa Wilde stood in the monstrous frog’s gaping maw, grinning and waving at the camera. His longish white hair stuck out, looking wind-blown as usual. He wore rugged safari-style clothing just like Doc and the kids usually wore in their travels. In fact, he looked just like an older version of Doc himself.

The frog was actually the sculpted mouth of a cave, its stone skin mottled green with fungus and moss. All around it were brawny roots and snaking jungle vines.

Grandpa was clearly in no immediate danger when the photograph was taken. But what had happened since?



# THREE

**Lyonesse.** Doc Wilde's manor, was immense and imposing.

Its structure was an odd mix of Gothic castle, log cabin, and Art Deco glass and steel, with an enormous white ash tree rising through its architectural core like Yggdrasil, the sacred World Tree of Norse myth. It sat on a high wooded hill eighteen miles outside the city limits of New York, a mighty guardian watching over the land.

Dr. Spartacus Wilde had designed Lyonesse and oversaw its construction. He took its name from Arthurian legend: Lyonesse was the mystic island of Sir Tristan's birth, a sunken land lost beneath the waves somewhere off the coast of Cornwall. Now this modern Lyonesse was internationally renowned as the fantastic home and headquarters of the world's greatest adventurer.

Half a mile from the hill on which the manor stood, a faint dirt track branched off the road into deep woods,

ending at a well-camouflaged cave that penetrated deep into the bedrock beneath the rugged hillscape. This passage led to a spectacular underground bunker in which Doc Wilde stored his amazing assortment of vehicles.

As early evening twilight painted the hills above, an elegant jet-black automobile with three headlights zoomed from the bunker, eerily silent but for the crunch of tires on the gravelly cave floor. This muscular rocket of a car was a 1948 Tucker Torpedo. Only fifty-one of them had ever been made, and only forty-eight remained in existence. Some were in museums. Some were with wealthy collectors. They were virtually impossible to acquire.

Doc Wilde had three.

The Tucker accelerated swiftly. A titanium wall loomed in its path, but the vehicle did not slow. Seconds before impact, the wall snapped open, locking shut again after the car was through. Every hundred yards another such gate barred the way but allowed the Tucker to pass. These indestructible gates were just one of the many security measures protecting Lyonesse.

The unusual automobile shot from the cave onto the dirt track through the forest.

Doc Wilde had made some modifications to the three Tucker Torpedoes so they would be truly adventure-worthy. Their steel bodies were reinforced with a spray-on

armor coating, the windows were unbreakable glass, and the tires were made of rupture-proof polymer gels. The old gasoline engines were replaced with solar/hydrogen engines of Doc's own invention, eliminating all polluting emissions. And running boards had been added along the sides.

When the weather was nice (and sometimes when it wasn't), Doc liked to ride outside the car on the running board. In times of emergency, this served the additional purpose of making Doc visible to law enforcement officials, who knew that if Doc Wilde was breaking traffic laws, it had to be for a very good reason, so they would try to clear the way and offer any assistance he might require.

The weather was nice now, and Doc was out on the driver's-side running board, the wind blasting through his hair, his mighty arms holding tight. He wore a white safari shirt with epaulets on the shoulders, khaki cargo pants, and leather boots. Over his shirt he wore his field vest, brown and full of pockets holding numerous useful tools and gizmos he always took with him on his travels.

Brian and Wren rode in the Tucker's backseat, wearing clothes identical to their dad's. The Wildes called these outfits their "danger clothes."

Behind the wheel was Doc's driver and pilot, an Irishman named Declan mac Coul. Declan's hair and beard

were shaggy red, and while he was just a few inches taller than five feet, he weighed as much as Doc. He was like a short bear and all muscle. There were many mysteries about Declan mac Coul, but one thing they knew for sure was that he could always be counted on completely.

Next to Declan sat Phineas Bartlett in a dapper suit and derby hat, holding a cane with an ornate eagle's head handle of purest silver.

Spraying dust, the Tucker veered from the dirt track onto the main road into town. Bartlett scowled at Declan. "Slow down now, you misbegotten ape."

"Funny you callin' me an ape, all natty in that monkey suit," Declan replied. But he did slow to the speed limit, as they were no longer on Doc's private land.

When Declan and Bartlett addressed each other, the two men's voices oozed disgust and dislike. But actually, they were the greatest of friends.

Wren interrupted their sparring. "Declan? Bartlett? Do either of you know what *ophrys* means?"

Brian shot her a look. The little trickster hadn't forgotten their squabble.

Bartlett chuckled. "You'll need to wait till Declan learns *English* before you start tormenting him with Ancient Greek. But *ophrys* means 'eyebrow,' if I recall correctly," which he did. Phineas Bartlett recalled *every-*

*thing* correctly; he had an eidetic memory (often called a “photographic memory”) and had total recall of everything he’d ever read.

Wren grinned at her big brother. “Gotcha.”

Declan snorted. “You *would* know that.”

Bartlett smiled. “The benefits of a *highbrow* education.”

Wren grinned at Brian even more. He scowled and tried to ignore her.

Bartlett gazed benignly at Declan. “Aristotle tells us, ‘Educated men are as much superior to uneducated men as the living are to the dead.’”

Bartlett was familiar with lots of quotations.

“Well,” Declan said, “I reckon that means I’m superior to Aristotle, me bein’ alive and him bein’ dead. So why should I listen to him?”



Wren suddenly cried. Startled, everyone glanced out the windows.

***Doc Wilde was no longer on the running board.***



# FOUR

**Declan slammed on the brakes,** the Tucker's tires skidding asphalt in a long screech. "*DOC?*" he shouted out the open window.

There was no reply.

He and Bartlett unsnapped their seat belts and sprang from the car, scanning the empty gloom behind them. Wren and Brian scrambled out the rear doors.

"I don't see him," Brian said. His heart pounding, he clawed at a pocket on his vest and pulled out his communicator.

"*Dad?!?*" he shouted into it. "Dad, are you there?  
*Dad?!?*"

His father did not reply. ***Where was he?***

"Get in the car," Declan mac Coul ordered. "We'll go back and find him."

Everyone jumped back into their seats, slamming doors.

"*Kids?*" Doc Wilde's voice boomed from Brian's communicator. Relief washed through them.

Bartlett and Declan whirled to face Brian as he responded.

“Dad! Where are you?”

His father’s voice replied: “I’m about a mile back along the road.”

Wren had her communicator out too. “Are you okay?” she asked.

“Yes,” Doc Wilde answered. “Sorry I couldn’t answer earlier. Come back, swiftly. I’ll tell you what happened when we’re together again. But be alert, there’s danger afoot.”

Declan spun the Tucker Torpedo and rocketed back the way they had come. Soon, the beams of the car’s three headlamps washed over Dr. Spartacus Wilde, who stood on the right side of the road. He raised his hand in a wave, his golden eyes glittering as they caught the light.

He was unharmed, though the right sleeve of his shirt had been ripped. It hung raggedly between his shoulder and the cuff still around his wrist, revealing the sleek muscles of his arm.

Everyone scrambled from the car and gathered before him.

“What happened, Dad?” Brian asked.



# FIVE

**A few minutes ago:** Doc Wilde grinned, the brisk wash of wind around the Tucker smoothing his hair back so that it looked like a golden skullcap. His clothes rippled in the wind, his muscles bulging as he held on.

Through Declan's open window, Doc could hear the muted sounds of conversation, though the words were unclear. From the sharpness in Declan and Bartlett's voices, he judged they were arguing. But then, if those two were within speaking distance, they were usually bedeviling each other.

The twilight was fading from navy blue to black as night fell. Trees along the roadside swayed gently in a breeze. The car was so quiet and his hearing so keen that even with the wind from the Tucker's speed roaring around him, he could hear crickets and frogs singing their evening songs.

Ahead, to the right, something moved in the shadows among the trees. Doc tried to make it out, but the

Tucker reached the spot quickly. As he stared across the car's roof into the shadows, one shadow detached itself and leaped over the car, so fast it took him off guard, which was not an easy thing to do.

The dark shape crashed into him, clutching at his shoulders, its weight knocking him from the running board. Doc's body was still traveling at sixty-five miles per hour as he fell toward the hard asphalt.

In midfall, Doc Wilde grabbed the shape with one hand, wrenching its mass off him. He felt its hand (or claw?) grasp and rip his sleeve as it fell away in a different direction.

Doc tucked his chin and pulled himself into a tight ball, shifting his weight a fraction of a second before impact so that he'd strike the ground at a better angle. He hit the road in a ball, spinning madly, and rolled as smoothly as it is possible for a human to roll under such conditions.

As the Tucker sped away, Doc's roll ended in the grass by the roadside. As he stood, his head reeled with brain-racking dizziness. Using a mind technique learned from a ninja monk in northern Japan who would somersault for miles down forested mountainsides, Doc cleared his senses. He dropped into a defensive stance and looked for his attacker.

About forty feet back was a shadowy lump in the grass. Staggering, it heaved itself to its feet. Doc's eyes couldn't make out its exact shape, and he realized it was wearing a cloak or loose robe.

He charged it just as he heard Brian's voice come over his communicator.

The shape turned toward him, then leaped into the woods. The leap carried it at least thirty feet. Doc tried to catch up, but the shape leaped again into the darkness, then again, and it was gone.

All Doc had seen was the dark shapelessness of its cloaked form and, when it looked at him, *huge bulging round yellow eyes . . .*



# SIX

**"How big** *were* its eyes, Dad?" Wren asked.

"Roughly the size of baseballs. The thing wasn't human, at least not of the everyday variety."

"Do you think this has anything to do with Grandpa?" Brian asked. He stared out into the woods, watching for motion. Was the thing still lurking out there, watching, perhaps waiting to try again? Perhaps not alone?

"We can't be certain," Doc Wilde said. "But it seems likely."

Brian had a thought. "Were its eyes *froglike*, Dad?"

Doc Wilde smiled and nodded. "Yes, they were."

Brian grinned back.

"Froglike?" Declan said. "Ah, like the frog cave in the picture!"

The group returned to the Tucker Torpedo. Doc popped the trunk and grabbed an unshredded shirt. He always kept spares handy; no matter how well made they might be, his shirts inevitably wound up ripped. As the

others got into the car, Doc hopped back on the running board, seemingly unconcerned about the possibility of another attack. Maybe even excited at the prospect.

Declan turned the car back toward town, and off they went. They had a very important appointment to keep.

They hoped they'd make it in time.



# SEVEN

**“You’re five minutes late.”** Grandma Pat said when they arrived. “But I love you anyway.”

She smiled warmly and motioned them to enter. As they filed past, she greeted her son and grandkids with kisses and let Declan mac Coul and Phineas Bartlett kiss her hand.

Patricia Wilde was a beautiful woman with the wit and vim of a 1940s movie star, which, in fact, she had been. She was shapely and nearly six feet tall, ever exquisitely dressed, with shining golden brown eyes and long bronze hair streaked slightly with white. The kids had always been very close to both their grandparents but had grown even closer to their grandmother in the years since their mother had died.

The vast condominium in which Grandma and Grandpa Wilde lived filled the entire eighty-sixth floor of the tallest, most elegant building in New York City, the Empire State Building. Grandpa Wilde had lived

there since the 1930s, before he and Grandma had even been a couple.

They followed her past invaluable artifacts, exquisite paintings, pristine tapestries, pagan statues, fossilized bones, and master weaponry. The furniture was antique and wooden and looked like it belonged in a nineteenth-century gentlemen's club. And there were books everywhere. Shelves and shelves of books, books in towering stacks, books on tables. Like Doc and the kids, the grandparents Wilde liked only one thing more than adventuring: reading.

Grandma Pat led them to the dining room, where they all took their places around a large oaken table of Camelot-esque roundness.

"We don't have you over for dinner often, so I whipped up your favorite," she told Doc.

He smiled. "Thanks, Mom."

Brian and Wren spoke together: "Yes, thank you, Grandma!"

In the middle of the table was a large basket full of crispy fried chicken, with sides of corn on the cob and garlic rice with Tasmanian truffles. Everyone dug in hungrily.

"I got your e-mail with the photo of Dad in the frog

cave,” Doc told his mother. “Do you know where the cave is?”

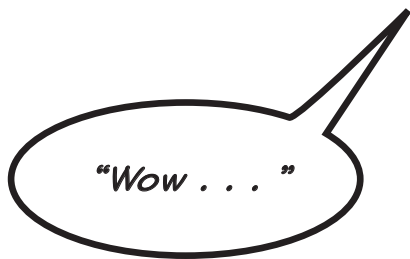
She shook her head. “You know how he is. He goes off somewhere to do research or see a friend, and the next thing you know, he’s battling evil in some odd corner of the world. This time he went to Boston to give a speech at Harvard. That was about a month ago. I’ve been abroad myself, and hadn’t heard a thing from him until I returned this morning to find that his plane had come home empty on autoreturn. There was a packet inside.”

“Was it the photograph?” Brian asked.

“Yes. But that wasn’t all.” She left the room, quickly returning and placing an item on the table by Doc’s plate.

“This was in the packet too.”

They all stared, but it was Wren who spoke first.





# EIGHT

**It was a frog**, carved from solid emerald, with tiny bloodred rubies for eyes.

Brian hefted it in his palm. It was heavy, with the same gaping mouth, shark teeth, and spidery claws as the sculptured cave mouth in the picture.

He passed it to Wren. “Cool frog,” she said. “It must be worth a million dollars.”

“Likely more,” Grandma Pat said.

Declan whistled in appreciation. “Aye, it’s a beauty . . . or at least as much a beauty as a hideous monster frog can be. Doc, is this thing familiar to you at all? Know any demon frogs of legend or anything?”

“Nothing like this.”


“Perhaps it’s a *real* creature,” Wren said.

Doc smiled. “Intriguing thought.” He turned to his

mother. “We’ll stay the night and head for Boston in the morning to pick up Dad’s trail.”

“Uh, Dad . . . ?” Wren started.

Everyone looked at her.

A speech bubble with a tail pointing towards the top left. The text inside is centered and reads: "What are those creepy things crawling on the window?"

“What are those  
creepy things crawling  
on the window?”



# NINE

**The Wildes moved to the large window.** The view from the eighty-sixth floor was spectacular, looking out over the city lights for miles. On a clear day, you could see into four other states. A block away and a few floors down, a police blimp drifted like a bubble in the ocean of night. Far below, over a quarter of a mile down, streams of light from thousands of headlights marked street level.

The view now was unusual, however, because it was obscured by fist-sized lumps oozing around on the outside surface of the glass. Lumps with bulbous round eyes.

## Frogs.

There were at least a dozen of them, and they were the ugliest frogs any of them had ever seen. Their skins were yellowish, with scabby-looking patches of black warts. Where they had no warts, their flesh quivered roughly in the wind.

Brian looked at the feet for claws, wondering if these

were the monster frogs that inspired the cave in the photo, but they didn't appear to be. Their stubby toes had suction cups, and their feet were like yellowish wads of chewed gum that squished securely to the glass and left wet smears when pulled away.

They didn't look dangerous, but they did look gross.

As the humans stood near the glass, the frogs pulled their bloated forms toward them, their bulging eyes shifting, focusing . . . trying to get a better look at the people inside!

"I'm thinkin' these fellas are connected to this other business," Declan said with a chuckle.

"I was thinking they were relatives of yours," Bartlett said, "then I realized they're many rungs ahead of you on the evolutionary ladder."

"Well, it *would* look that way to *you*," Declan replied, "way down there at the foot of the ladder."

"We need one to examine," Doc said. "Let's go."

The others looked at Doc, then back out the window at the frogs and the eighty-six-floor drop to the streets below.

Brian's eyes were wide.



"We're going out *there*?"



## **The Wilde condominium perched 1,050 feet**

above the street. From the eighty-sixth floor, it already provided an eagle's view of the city, but above it the building climbed another sixteen stories, reaching 1,224 feet.

A long way to fall.

At the top of the building, a 230-foot-high dirigible mast pierced the sky, a towering pole used as a tethering point for the great airships. At the base of the mast was a passenger platform that also served as an observation deck for tourists.

The rooftop elevator opened and Dr. Spartacus Wilde strode out, followed by his kids, his aides, and Grandma Pat.

There were some tourists milling about, oohing and aahing over the wondrous metropolis, talking about how the people below looked like ants (even though it was night and they couldn't actually see any people). They

were captivated to be on the top of the world. Or as near to it as they'd ever get, anyway.

(Doc and his kids had been to the actual top of the world, a spot unknown to all but a handful of people, higher than Everest and more dangerous than a bathtub full of black widows. But that's a tale for a different time . . . )

At the sight of the world-famous Wildes, most of the visitors instantly decided this vacation was their best ever and started mentally rehearsing the anecdote for folks back home. Little did they realize their anecdote would get even better.

Without a word, the intrepid crew moved to the edge of the platform. To the tourists' amazement, Doc Wilde lifted his twelve-year-old son and threw him over the high railing. Brian plummeted from sight.

A gasp burst from every observer. Phineas Bartlett raised one eyebrow and cocked a look at Declan mac Coul. The two men separated to walk among the shocked tourists, calming their fears.

Already out of sight of anyone inside the railing, Brian had everything under control. In fact, he and his sister had argued over who'd get to perform this task, and it was his turn.

His fall slowed with a slight springiness about thirty feet below the platform, and he swung at the end of a

hair-thin titanium-alloy jumpline that was hooked into his belt buckle.

The wire was strong enough to support an elephant but elastic enough to stretch and gently slow his fall without snapping him back up as a bungee cord would. Above, it looped around one of the platform rails, with its far end locked into his father's belt.

All the same, Brian's stomach dropped as he looked down, down, down at nothing for over a thousand feet. If he fell, he'd fall for nearly a minute before splatting like a water balloon on the avenue below.

He loved being a Wilde. He really did. And he *had* nearly wrestled his little sister to get to do this. But sometimes, like at that *very* second, he briefly questioned the craziness of his life. Sometimes, he thought insanity ran in his family's genes.

He had voiced that thought to Phineas Bartlett once and been rewarded with one of the Englishman's quotations: "Brian, just remember what Virgil wrote: *'Audentes fortuna iuvat.'*"

*Fortune favors the brave.* That could have been the Wilde family motto, and they each proved it personally at least five or ten times a week.

"You okay, Brian?" his dad's voice asked from the plug in his ear.

“Couldn’t be better,” Brian said into the communicator in the collar of his vest.

“Good. I’ll start lowering you. Let me know when you near the frogs.”

“Okay.”

Frogs. He was hanging from the tallest skyscraper in the city on a wire he could barely see so he could grab a couple of giant, butt-ugly, gooshy frogs off a window. And for all he knew, these things might have teeth like the monster frog statuette. He had a sudden image of the bunch of them jumping onto him with their gummy bellies and sucking toes, toothy mouths ripping . . .

The jumpline reeled out, and Brian dropped fast. He put the image out of his head. He had on thick gloves and goggles anyway, just in case.

Down he went . . .

The wind was strong, spinning him and swinging him into the building.

He was enjoying himself. This reminded him of some of the exercises he practiced in the Lyceum at home, and that put the whole activity in its proper light. This was *adventure*. It was what he did.

He kicked the wall and flipped over so that he was dropping headfirst, staring down the endless wall, zip-ping groundward in a bullet dive. He started to laugh.

Yes, he loved being a Wilde.

He could see the lumps slimed to the big window of his grandparents' condo.

"I'm close," he said into his communicator.

The unreeling of the wire slowed, checking his fall. By the eighty-seventh floor, he was descending at a far gentler pace.

"I'm here," he announced as he reached the eighty-sixth floor.

The jumpline stopped. Brian flipped right-side up. He could see into the condo's dining room, where their food was waiting patiently.

The frogs were just as wretched out here as they'd seemed from inside, like tree frogs living near a nuclear reactor. They slowly shifted their sticky bulks, rolling their bulging eyes till they were staring right at him. *Aware* of him. *Interested* in him.

And, suddenly, **SWARMING** toward him.



# ELEVEN

## **The frogs closed in.**

They couldn't reach Brian where he hung on the jumpline unless they hopped (assuming they *could* hop or hop enough to reach him and not just plummet straight to the street). But they oozed into the area of the window directly in front of him.

Brian smiled at their attempted aggression. He hadn't a clue how they'd gotten up here or what kind of threat, if any, they could possibly pose, but they were as funny as they were disgusting.

He'd still need to be careful, though. There was still that possibility of sharp teeth or poison in their skin or mouths or even sprayed from weird glands.

"Dad," Brian said into his communicator, "the frogs are trying to get me. They can't, but it's clear they want to."

"Stay alert," Doc's voice responded. "If my suspicions about these things are correct, they probably don't

pose much actual threat, but I'm hypothesizing on very limited information."

"Right." He wanted to ask what those suspicions were but knew his father wouldn't go into it now. He would want Brian's mind focused entirely on what he was doing.

**crrroak.**

As it neared him, one of the frogs belched out the loudest croak he'd ever heard. The others immediately joined in: **crrroak! CROAK! CRRRROAKKK!**

It was obnoxious and unnerving, but it did have one benefit: he could see into their mouths, and he saw no sharp teeth.

He was supposed to bring back two: one for observation, and an extra for dissection if it seemed necessary. He braced both feet against the glass. The frogs charged him in extreme slow motion. One hand steady on the wire, Brian reached the other toward a frog.

As he neared, the thing's eyes nearly crossed trying to keep his hand in sight. Brian's fingers closed over the creature. Even through his glove, he felt his fingertips slip in the mucus of its skin. He gingerly closed his grip, feeling its body squeeze like a blob of very soft rubber.

**CROAK!** The thing yelled at him.

“Yeah, yeah, yeah,” he muttered. He pulled at it, trying to unstick it from the glass, but it was like pulling at a huge wad of taffy.

He let go of the jumpline with his other hand and leaned in to dig his fingers under the frog’s gummy belly, trying to pry it while pulling with the first hand.

Yuck.

**CROAK-CRRROAK-CRRRRRRROOOOAK!**

The frog wasn’t enjoying this any more than Brian was. And it wasn’t budging from the window.

Brian grinned at a sudden thought. Digging in his vest, he pulled out his emergency repair kit, taking from it a titanium sewing needle. Holding the creature with one hand, he jabbed its slimy little frog bottom with the needle.

**CAAAARRRRROOOOAKKK!**

The frog’s eyes bulged bigger, its body heaving in Brian’s grip. It tried to jump, which separated its belly from the

glass, just enough so that Brian could pull it off the window.

With the frog squirming in his hand, Brian spun, trying to regain his equilibrium. The chorus of croaks swelled louder, the frogs agitated by his floundering. His heart pounding, Brian hung loosely to let the line stabilize.

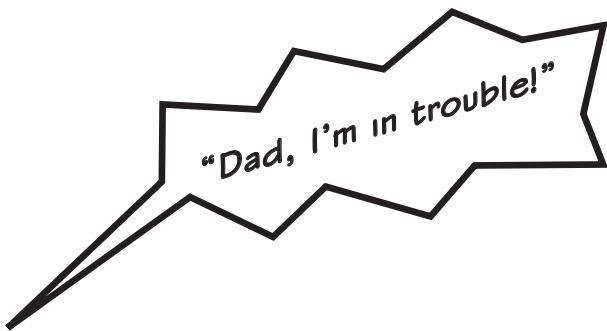
The frog was stuck to his fingers, its gummy belly adhered to the leather of his glove. Brian raised the hand toward his face, nearly eye to eye with the frog.

**Crrroak**, the frog said.

“Croak,” he said back, and stuffed the frog into a large pouch slung at his hip. He shook his hand roughly, trying to dislodge the sticky creature, but it stayed stuck till another poke from the needle convinced it to let go.

Using the needle, Brian got the second specimen easily. He was about to poke it again to get it in the bag with its buddy when he felt a quiver in the line from which he hung. He looked up.

“*Oh no*,” Brian muttered. A man-size shape hunched directly above him, about twenty feet up. It crouched on the wall, facing down, staring at him with bulging, baseball-size yellow eyes.



Brian shouted into his communicator, even as he realized the thing was doing something to the jumpline.

The wire broke.

With a frightened cry, Brian fell.

What happens next?

Read DOC WILDE AND THE FROGS OF DOOM to find out!

<http://www.DocWilde.com>