

Jeff Gottesfeld

# Robinson's Hood's

# Chapter One

Robinson “Robin” Paige leaned his skinny self against the wall near the Barbara Jordan Community Center restrooms and rubbed his tired eyes. He was worn out, and not just from “Welcome Day” at Ironwood Central High School where he’d start ninth grade for real on Monday.

He was more than ready for school. He’d already done his summer reading, an amazing novel called *Bud, Not Buddy* about an orphan boy searching for family, and written a great five-paragraph essay too. Robin was whipped because he’d barely slept. There’d

been a fist fight under his window at midnight that woke him the first time. An hour and a half later, there'd been another fight. This time it wasn't just gang dudes throwing punches.

This time, there'd been gunfire.

*Three gunshots at one thirty in the morning can mess up your shut-eye,* Robin thought.

Robin was no stranger to gunfire. He and his grandmother lived on the toughest street in the toughest hood in the tough city of Ironwood. Miz Paige—that's what everyone, except for Robin, called his grandmother—would have gotten them out of the Second Ward ages ago if she could afford it. She couldn't. She ran a joint on Ninth Street called the Shrimp Shack that was barely making it. Unless they hit the Powerball, they were stuck with the Ninth Street Rangers gang, the blast of

deuce-deuces at one thirty in the morning, the sirens. ...

The men's room door opened. Old Mr. Smith teetered out. The Center had two kinds of members. You had to be younger than sixteen or older than sixty-five to hang out there. Robin was fourteen, though some folks still took him for twelve. Barely five feet tall, he had coal-colored skin and a buzz cut.

Mr. Smith was way older than sixty-five. He'd lost part of one foot in the Vietnam War, wore a special shoe on that foot, and sometimes used a cane. He had thick round glasses and smelled of Old Spice. Robin loved him. He used to be a locksmith and could open any lock with just a hairpin. He was great at games. He had taught Robin and his friends pinochle, hearts, spades, rummy. ... Robin had never beaten Mr. Smith at cards. Not once. And checkers? Maybe twice.

“Robin Paige, you waitin’ to walk me back to the rec room?”

Mr. Smith had on a baggy dress shirt tucked into pants, with his belt way too high. As for Robin, he wore the ICHS school uniform: dark blue pants and a matching short sleeve shirt. His new school had a strict dress code, mostly because so many kids got bussed there from different parts of the city. When the school first started, kids from the same hoods started dressing alike, and there were a lot of fights. That’s when the school board said all Ironwood kids had to wear blue and blue, even the girls. Even the teachers.

*Not that it stopped the fighting, Robin thought. Kids know who’s from their hood. You don’t need a shirt to represent.*

“You got it, Mr. Smith.” Then Robin noticed something. He winced. “Um ... XYZ, Mr. Smith.”

“XY. ’Scuse me, what?”

“XYZ, Mr. Smith. X-Y-Z.”

Mr. Smith stared blankly. “Huh? Whatchu talkin’ ’bout, Robin?”

Robin grinned and pointed. “X-Y-Z means examine your zipper.”

Mr. Smith laughed. “Oh! Sorry. Don’t want to be showin’ the colors in the rec hall. Too many old ladies askin’ me to marry them already.” He zipped his fly. “Easy to fo’git when you my age.”

*Easy to forget*, Robin corrected mentally. His gramma was always on his case about speaking properly, even if she used a lot of street slang herself. Robin could go both ways. It was useful.

“Okay,” Mr. Smith said. “Sly’s show starts in five minutes. It’ll take me that long to git to the rec hall!”

Sly was Sylvester “Sly” Thomas. He was one of Robin’s two homies, along with

Karen Knight, who everyone just called Kaykay. Sly's daddy was Reverend James "Tex" Thomas of the Ironwood Community Baptist Church that Robin and Miz Paige attended. Sly and Kaykay hung at the Center a lot. Most every Friday afternoon Sly put on a magic show. The old folks loved him. His goal was to have his own stage show in Las Vegas, and Robin thought he just might do it. He was a cold magician and a dope mime.

Robin and Mr. Smith finally reached the rec room, where a crowd of maybe fifty people waited near the low wooden stage for Sly to appear. Kaykay saw them enter. She rushed over with a full plate in her hands.

*That's so Kaykay,* Robin thought. *She never walks if she can run.*

Robin gulped. Kaykay was just so ... fine, even in her blue school uniform. An inch taller than him, she had tawny skin, straight hair to her shoulders, and eyes that

appeared to change color depending on her mood. Every boy who met her wanted to be with her. Robin did too.

*Not that I'd ever tell her. She'd laugh her ass off.*

“Robin! Mr. Smith! Check out what I made with Mrs. Swett in the kitchen!” Kaykay talked as fast as she moved. “Organic peanut butter cookies. Taste!”

That was so Kaykay too. She was all about keeping it organic and green. She was the kind of girl who'd yell at a stranger for dropping a McDonald's cup on the sidewalk.

Robin and Mr. Smith were about to try Kaykay's cookies when the room hushed. Robin thought Sly's show was starting, but it wasn't. Instead, a man of about forty-five took the stage. He wore black pants and a white shirt and stood ramrod straight. This was Sergeant Bruce Jones, who'd been a real Marine drill sergeant before he ran

the Center. Everyone just called him Sarge. When Robin first met Sarge, he'd been afraid of him. Then he figured out that under it all, the ex-Marine was a softie.

“I’m gonna keep this short,” Sarge declared, “’cause it sure ain’t sweet. You know I care ’bout each of you. You also know the shape this place is in. We jus’ got a visit from the city inspectors, and they say we can’t put off the new roof no longer. But it’s gonna cost twenty-five thousand dollars we ain’t got. If we can’t get the money soon, we gots to close.”

A murmur went through the crowd. Robin felt sick to his stomach. The Center had to close? He loved this place. It had this rec hall, a kitchen, arts and crafts, meeting rooms, even a small library. The place was pretty jacked up, though. The heat was bad, the A/C worse. The walls and floors were

a mess, and it did need a new roof in the worst way.

“When we gots to close?” Mr. Smith called out.

“Next Wednesday. Wednesday be the last day, ’less someone comes up with some big money. That’s all I gotta say.” Sarge stepped off the stage as everyone talked at once.

*What will these old people do with themselves?* Robin thought as a dozen conversations erupted around him. *What am I gonna do?*

Mr. Smith went to talk with some of his friends. Sly came over to join Robin and Kaykay. Sly wasn’t tall, but he was wide. A clown by nature, he wasn’t clowning now.

“Can you believe this bull?” Sly asked. “We can’t let this place close! No way, no how!”

Kaykay put her hands on her hips. Robin thought that maybe she was about to cry. “Whatchu plannin’ to do then, Sly? Pull a big-ass wad of dead presidents out your magic hat? If we was in the rich burbs, we’d get fixed right up. But who gonna help us out?”

“I wish I could,” Sly admitted.

“We can’t just give up,” Robin told his friends. What they could do, he didn’t know, but they just couldn’t let the Center die.

Like Sly said: “No way, no how.”

# Robinson's Hood

If Robin hadn't just paid off the Ninth Street Rangers, or if Tyrone and Dodo hadn't hit on him to do their school-work, he never would have done what he was about to do.

Stealing from the rich and giving to the poor takes on a whole new meaning ...

 **SADDEBACK**  
PUBLISHING  
[www.sdlback.com](http://www.sdlback.com)

ISBN: 978-1-62250-000-0

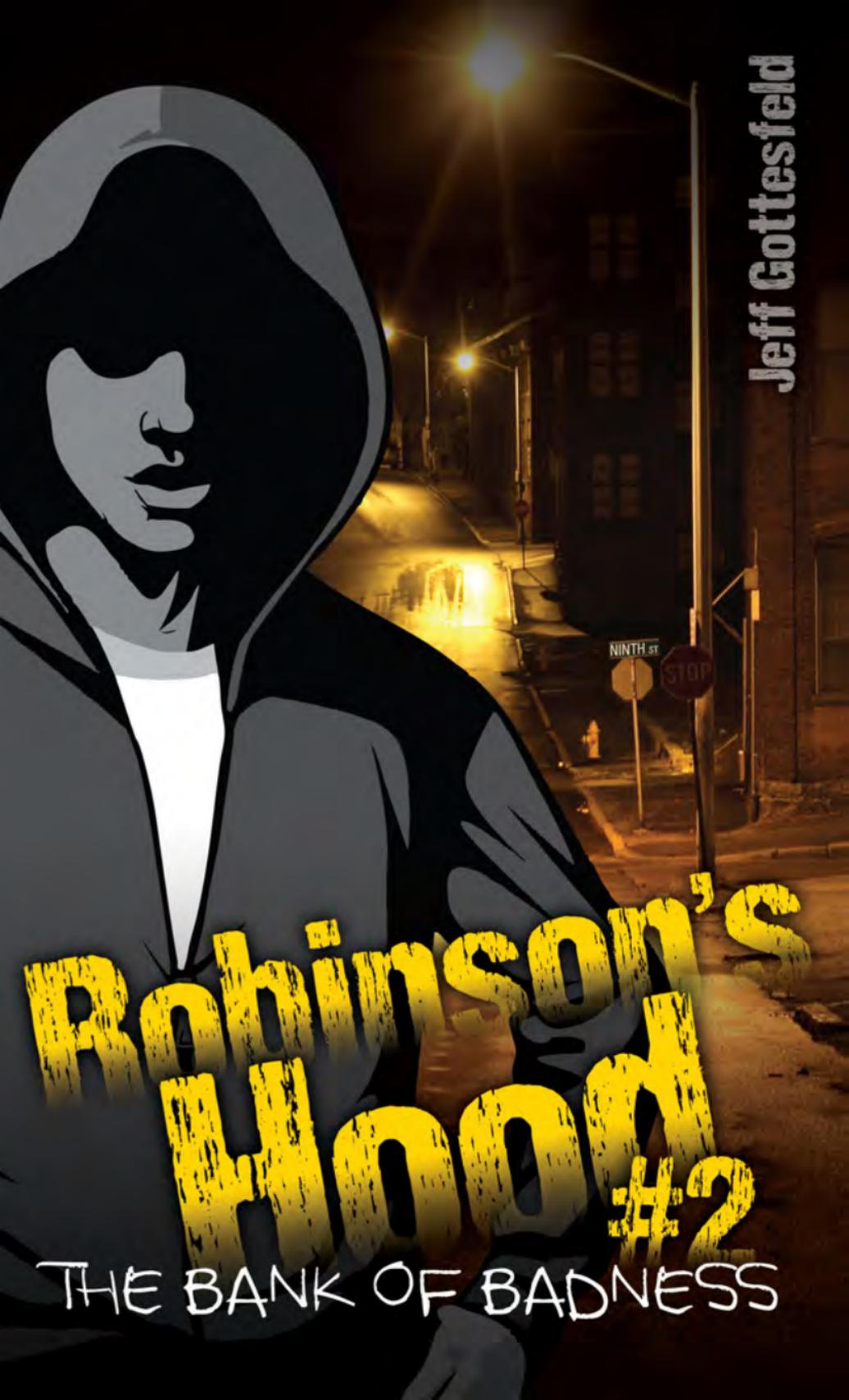


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Jeff Gottesfeld



# Robinson's Hood #2

THE BANK OF BADNESS

# Chapter One

**R**obinson Paige was only fourteen years old, but he'd already seen a lot of folks get arrested. Sometimes on the news, sometimes on cop shows or at the movies. Most often, he saw it in person since he lived on the baddest block in the baddest hood in the very bad city of Ironwood.

Robin—everyone called him that except for the enemies who'd nicknamed him “Shrimp”—shared an apartment with his grandmother. The apartment was on Ninth Street, directly over her little restaurant, the Shrimp Shack. They lived in fear of the biggest gang in the city, the Ninth Street

Rangers. The Rangers sold drugs and terrorized everyone on the block. His grandmother even paid the Rangers a hundred bucks a week so they wouldn't wreck her business.

Every so often, the cops would swoop in to arrest a Ranger or two. Robin could watch the bust from his cracked bedroom window. The arrests were for show. The charges never stuck. The gangstas always came back.

Robin was a good kid. Good in school, good to his buds, good to the neighbors, good to his grandma. He wasn't the kind of kid who got himself arrested.

At least, that's what he thought.

“Help! Help me!” Robin screamed as the cops hustled him away from the Barbara Jordan Community Center. No one had, so far. He'd seen the cops' badges when they'd grabbed him. Officer Leedham was

tall, older, and white. Officer Goodall was shorter, younger, and black. Both were in black pants, white shirts, and blue windbreakers, with IRONWOOD PD in huge yellow letters on the back. Both had guns. Both were scary.

“Shut your face!” Leedham clamped a hand over Robin’s mouth.

“Ain’t nobody gonna help your sorry ass, Robin Paige!” Officer Goodall tightened his grip on Robin’s right arm.

“Why are you taking me? What’d I do?” Robin screeched

“That’s for us to know and you to find out,” Leedham told him. “Now shut up and get in the car!”

Their cruiser was parked by the loading dock. Goodall opened the rear door. They shoved his head down roughly and pushed him inside. He slumped in the backseat, feeling even smaller than his five feet and

ninety-eight pounds. His knees were like jelly. His blue school uniform was soaked with flop sweat. Thoughts pounded in his head as the cruiser shot onto busy Marcus Garvey Boulevard.

Why had they arrested him? What had he done? Didn't he have a right to know what was happening? Did he get popped for BWB—"Breathing While Black?" Or was it something worse?

A frightening thought smacked him. *Maybe this has to do with the Rangers' money.*

The week before, Robin had learned that the Center needed twenty-five thousand dollars for repairs, or it would close its doors forever. Just that Monday Robin had figured out where the drug dealers hid their money before they brought it to Rangers' headquarters.

Robin had snuck out of his apartment at night and stolen that money. Then, with

the help of his two buddies, Sylvester “Sly” Thomas and Karen “Kaykay” Knight, he’d secretly donated it so the Center could stay open. The only other person who knew about this was the kids’ best friend at the Center, old Mr. Smith. Mr. Smith said that Robin was like Robin Hood, stealing from bad guys and giving to the good.

*Is this some kinda revenge for me taking the money? Are these cops working with the Rangers? If they are? I’m dead.*

The cruiser headed north on Garvey. Robin peered out at the familiar storefronts. His mind was reeling—too many things didn’t make sense.

*Why didn’t they put cuffs on me? There’s no siren. And there’s no backup!*

*They always send two cars when they make a bust!*

A metal grate separated Robin from the cops. He took a chance and called out.

“Please? Can you tell me where we’re really going?”

Goodall swung around to face him. He held up a bag of chips.

“Relax, Robin.” Goodall’s voice was actually reassuring. “What happened back there was just an act, in case anyone was watching. You want some Doritos? Or some water?”

*Just an act? What does that mean?*

*They have to be messing with my mind!*

“Not funny,” Robin muttered.

Goodall pushed a water bottle through a hole in the grating. It fell at Robin’s feet. “No one’s joking, Robin. No one’s arresting you. Drink up.”

Robin was baffled. “What do you mean, no one’s arresting me?”

“Because you’re not under arrest. It was an act,” Leedham repeated. “Be cool. We’ll be there soon.”

“Be where?” Robin demanded.

“Just be cool,” Goodall advised.

Even with the cops’ reassuring words, Robin’s throat was still parched from fear. The water bottle was tempting. “That water isn’t drugged, is it?”

Both cops laughed.

“We got a flippin’ comedian on our hands,” Leedham commented.

“A regular Chris Rock,” Goodall agreed.

“You think he likes frozen yogurt?” Leedham wondered aloud.

“I guess we’re gonna find out!” Goodall declared. “You doin’ okay back there, Robin?”

Robin stayed silent. He was sure the cops were playing with his head. It had to be some kind of setup. They were now out of the hood, heading into an unfamiliar white neighborhood.

He thought maybe the best thing to do was try to escape.

He tried the door handle. It was locked. He was trapped.

The ride continued. The neighborhood got nicer; full of upscale shops and restaurants that Robin and his grandmother could never afford.

His grandmother. Robin was desperate to call her. Wasn't he entitled to a phone call? But what could he say?

“Hi, Gramma, it's Robin. I'm in a cop car, and I don't know why!”

All of a sudden, Leedham swerved the cruiser into an open parking space outside a frozen yogurt shop called Fro-Yo.

*Holy moly.* They hadn't been kidding about the frozen yogurt.

*What the hell is going on here?*

The cops were gentle as they helped Robin out of the car. “We're really sorry, Robin. We never would have brought you

here like this if your grandmother hadn't said okay," Leedham told him.

Robin's eyes got wide. "My grandmother knows about this?"

Goodall grinned. "Here she is. Why don't you ask her?"

Goodall pointed to the door of the frozen yogurt shop. Robin's mouth fell open as he saw his grandmother step outside. Known to the whole hood as Miz Paige, she was as tall as many men, big, and brassy. She smelled of shrimp and perfume when she embraced him.

"Oh, Robin, Robin," she said softly. "I'm sorry if you got scared. The police wanted to talk to us both. They thought this was the safest way."

Robin looked up at her. She was smiling, but he saw worry in her eyes. That wasn't good.

“Talk about what?” Robin’s voice was guarded. He still wondered if this had something to do with the Rangers.

Goodall put a hand on Robin’s shoulder. “Come on inside and eat some frozen yogurt. We’ll fill you in.”

They found seats inside the shop. Robin, his grandmother, and Goodall were the only black faces. Mostly it was white moms with their kids or Latina nannies with white kids. Goodall brought him a frozen yogurt piled high with nuts and sprinkles, but he was still too shook up to eat.

Leedham, the older cop, talked first.

“Before we get going, Robin, people are gonna ask about what just happened. You’ll say you got arrested by mistake. Got it? Don’t tell anyone we wanted to talk to you and Miz Paige together. Got it?”

Now that he was safe, Robin felt more angry than scared. “No! I don’t got it. If you

# Robinson's Hood

## THE BANK OF BADNESS

A tricked-out black Mustang with oversized rear tires pulled to a stop near Robin. He moved to the back door, unbidden. There was fear in his gut, but also fury. He hated the Rangers so much.

Stealing from the rich and giving to the poor takes on a whole new meaning ...

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PUBLISHING  
[www.sdlback.com](http://www.sdlback.com)

ISBN: 978-1-62250-001-7



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