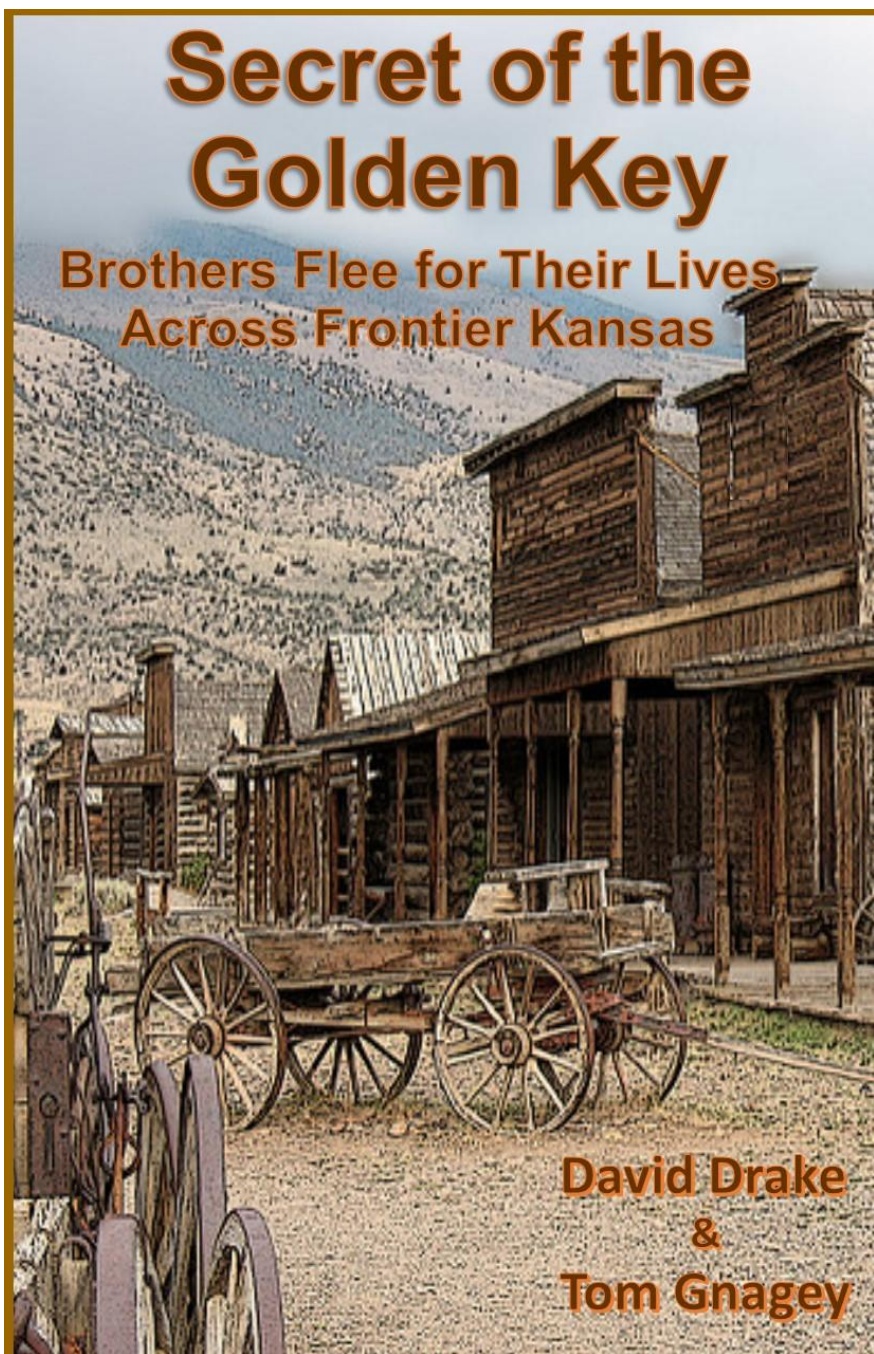


Secret of the Golden Key

Brothers Flee for Their Lives
Across Frontier Kansas

David Drake
&
Tom Gnagey



Secret of the Golden Key:

**Brothers flee for their lives
across Frontier Kansas**

For readers 9 to 15

by

**David Drake
&
Tom Gnagey**

Family of Man Press

© 2018

///

Things you will want to know: 1880 Old West Kansas.

The Year was 1880. Kansas had been a State for nineteen years, the Civil War had been over for fifteen years, the national baseball league had just been formed, Rutherford B. Hayes was president, and Thomas Edison had just invented the light bulb, which would not come into wide-spread use in rural Kansas for many years. The common use of cars was still twenty-five years in the future.

Many men continued to wear six-shooters in central and western Kansas – a place where being quick on the draw was often a matter of life or death. Jessie James and his gang still pillaged the Midwest. Horseback and buckboards were the primary means of local transportation and the railroad had only recently connected the east coast with the west coast (a 10 to 15-day journey). The stagecoach, although replaced by trains in most places in the east, was still the necessary choice for travel through many remote parts of the plains states.

It would take nearly \$25.00 in today's money to equal the purchasing power of \$1.00 in 1880 Kansas. Salaries for most workers averaged between \$60 and \$200 a year. Today, Kansas has 101 counties. Back then only 92 had been established.

Boys did grow to be ten and fourteen, back then, and that's where our story begins.

[Please note that during that era, Native Americans were referred to as Indians, so, to make the story authentic to the time, that is the term that is used in this book. No disrespect to our country's beloved first citizens is intended.]

[Also, this story is intended for readers 9 to 15 years old, a wide range of reading abilities. The writers chose to use the *best* word, rather than the *easiest* word, so, after the more difficult ones, they often inserts a synonym in parentheses () . They hope this facilitates (helps) the younger readers.]

///

CHAPTER ONE: Escape in a Blaze of Bullets

Being chased by outlaws had never been part of fourteen-year-old Rusty's life, but that night it would be. Witnessing an old man being shot had never been part of young Rusty's life, but that night it would be. Having a bad guy, possibly a killer, catch him watching the whole thing, had never been part of young Rusty's life, but that night it would be.

It began a few minutes after nine o'clock in the first-floor office of *Doctor Potter's Home for Boys* – a large, old, two-story, brown stone building. Rusty had just finished helping the younger boys – including, Willy, his ten-year-old brother – get to bed in the second-floor dorm where they all slept on cots. He had slid the banister on his way downstairs to inform Doc that the boys were in bed, the lights were out, and the windows were open to provide what relief from the sweltering, summer heat that might bring.

Once downstairs, Rusty noticed that something was not the way it should have been. The door to Doc's office was closed. It was always open when he was in there, and at nine o'clock at night, he was *always* in there.

Rusty hesitated for only a moment, then moved cautiously through the shadows across the wide entry hall toward the office door. He squatted and peeked in through the keyhole. The light was on inside. There were two men in the room with Doc, both dressed like cowboys and both unfamiliar to Rusty. The taller man had a long, jagged scar across his forehead. The door to the large, old, iron safe was open. The man with the scar was shaking old Doc by his collar and was speaking to him in a loud, angry voice. He may have spoken in an accent – through his rage, it was difficult to tell.

"The key, old man. We know you have it. The golden key!"

He slapped him. Doc groaned. His lip was bleeding.

“I have no idea what you mean.”

He removed his key chain held it up for the man to see.

“These are the only keys I have and none, as you can see, is gold. Perhaps if you could explain further.”

The man pushed Doc to the floor, out of sight, behind the desk, took a pistol from his pocket, and pointed it in his direction.

“I’ll ask you one final time. Give up the key or we will have to convince the boys to give it to us, and when I say ‘convince’, I don’t mean by employing polite conversation.”

Doc didn’t respond. He may have been rendered unconscious by the fall. The man pulled the trigger. Rusty winced and his eyes filled with tears.

The men crossed the room to the door and pulled it open, leaving Rusty kneeling there, out in the open. Startled by his presence, one of the men reached down for him. Rusty rolled away across the floor to his left, scrambled to his feet, and ran to the back of the hall where, still at full speed, he flattened out in the air and dove through the open window into the darkness. As he was complementing himself on the fantastic dive, he hit the ground – rock hard clay. The awkward landing was *not* something to be complimented. He lit on his left shoulder and skidded along for several feet. It tore his shirt and skinned his flesh.

The night sky held the slip of a moon, so it was not completely dark. He hurried to his feet and, grasping his painful left shoulder, he raced into the stand of trees that bordered the south west of the back lawn – to his left. Shots were fired from the window, but none met their mark.

Rusty’s first thoughts were about the boys, upstairs – how frightened and confused they must be. He hoped they stayed in the dorm room. The other two older boys would just have to handle it. The men had seen him face on – his long blond hair, well-tanned skin, and blue eyes. If they would shoot an old man over a key, which he may or may not have had, Rusty couldn’t imagine that they wouldn’t do the same to a witness who could identify them and testify against them – possibly for murder. He couldn’t be sure of that.

Rusty had lived the home since he was four. It sat a dozen blocks from the eastern bank of the river that separated the areas of Kansas City, Missouri from Kansas City, Kansas. (In 1880, they had not yet officially received those names.) He often went to the docks and watched the boats as they took on cargo and people, ready to sail them off to unknown places. He had dreamed of being a part of

that, of boarding a boat and beginning some grand adventure.

He was tall and strong for his age and had just finished 8th grade with good marks in all the subjects. The big decision that had been on his mind that summer was whether to take up a trade or enter high school to get four more years of education. Suddenly, he had two very different sorts of things on his mind – how to get his brother out of the building safely, and then, how to keep the two of them away from the bad guys and stay alive.

Breathing heavily, he peered back at the big building from just inside the edge of the woods where he had stopped. By then, the back door was standing open and the two men who had been shooting, stood talking in the center of the large back yard. He could not hear what they were saying but watched as they pointed one way and then another, confirming they had no idea in which direction Rusty had run. That was a relief. Presently they turned and walked around the side to the front. He waited to hear horses or a buggy signaling they were leaving. Those tell-tale sounds did not appear. The men were still there, perhaps still searching for him, perhaps going upstairs to question the boys.

Rusty ran back to the rear of the building holding his injured arm against his body with the other one to keep it from flopping. It really hurt – clearly more damage had been done than merely getting skinned. There were several strong trellises clinging to the old building. They rose from the ground up to the roof. They supported sturdy, decades-old, evergreen, ivy. The older boys often climbed down one of them at night after lights out, to go have adventures along the docks or meet girls if things worked out right.

He began climbing the trellis in the center of the rear wall – it led to the best ‘escape’ window on the upper floor. With only one hand at his disposal (to use), it was both difficult and dangerous. He would let go with his good hand for a moment while he quickly reached to grab the cross-bar just higher. He moved his feet up and repeated the sequence all the way to a second-floor window. He gave the signal whistle – three sets of two. One of the older boys appeared in the open window. Rusty whispered.

“Hurt my arm. Need some help up over the sill. Bad stuff happened down stairs. Two men shot Doctor Potter. I don’t know how bad it is.”

Once inside, the boys surrounded him. He related the short version of what had taken place and began giving orders. Being the oldest, he was the acknowledged leader of the youngsters.

“Billy, down the trellis and get Doc Weatherby. Bring him back with a policeman – or ten. Don’t know for sure if the gunmen

are still here or not so leave quietly in the shadows. Winston, lock and barricade the door to the hallway. Use the chests and dressers. Willy, you and I have to get out of here. Gather our things into two pillowcases and tie them with shoe strings. Get dressed – dark clothes. I'll trade this white shirt for my brown one. The rest of you must stay strong. Get back in bed and stay there. If they somehow make their way in here, pretend you're asleep. The bad guys have no reason to harm you. If they ask where I might have gone say to the cattle yard north of town – that is if you are willing to lie. Make it seem like that's my favorite place. Don't mention Willy – I have no idea if they have any way of knowing he's my brother. Better unmake one cot and stand it against the wall so it won't seem like somebody besides me is missing.

"I have no idea if we'll be back. You guys be good and take great care of each other. I guess this makes Ward your leader now. Do like he says – he's smart and good hearted. Love you all."

One of the boys helped Willy tie the pillowcases to the end of a half-inch rope while another helped Rusty out of the old shirt and into the new one.

"While we climb down, you guys lower our stuff to us. Keep it away from the windows so nobody will see it."

With that, Rusty motioned Willy out the window ahead of him. He followed immediately. With his one useless arm, *descending* the trellis was no easier than climbing it had been. Willy was on the ground a full minute before his brother. He untied the pillow cases from the rope.

Each of them slung a case over their shoulder and they ran toward the trees. Inside the woods, they continued to run at an unsteady pace – Rusty in the lead. He had never considered what a large part his shoulders played in running a straight and true course. He grasped his belt with his left hand to keep that arm from flopping around and becoming even more damaged. The pain grew worse in his shoulder, but his concern for Willy and his fear for their lives, pushed it to the back of his thoughts.

It was a fifteen-minute run to the main dock – *wharf* as it was called locally. Rusty's seat of choice there was usually atop bales of cotton fresh up the river from the south. That night he drew Willy close and they huddled back into a shadow-darkened opening between two large bales. He had thinking to do – the most important thinking of his life up to that point.

If Doc Potter had been killed, there was nothing his testimony could do to bring him back to life. If he had not been killed, then he would be fine, testimony or no testimony. Rusty had

been with Doc every day of his life since his fourth birthday and he knew one thing for sure; the old gentleman would never want Rusty to put his life in danger for him. He would have, of course, if there had been any way of defeating the bad guys, but that night, there hadn't been.

That was it, then. They would move on and avoid the danger he had brought on himself and his brother when he peeked through the keyhole.

"Move on to where?" he asked out loud.

Willy understood. He had often witnessed Rusty talking himself through a problem. He remained silent.

"Some place safe – far away from here," he answered.

He scooted a bit forward to allow a better, broader, view of the riverfront.

"By boat or land?"

He thought for a few moments.

"We could start out by boat and see how it went. It would get us further away, faster, than walking would."

He thought for a little longer.

"We have no money, but maybe we could work our way on a boat."

Again, he let himself think on it. During his fourteen years, Rusty had become a careful sort – a very good planner who examined lots of possible outcomes before making any major move. (Except, diving out of windows head first, while a bad guy was shooting at him, perhaps!)

"A big steamer or a smaller boat?"

He continued talking, addressing his brother that time.

"Big steamers are classy – we're not dressed for that. What kind of a smaller boat then?"

Having their first goal in mind, they looked over the docks with great care, wishing there was more light.

"We won't find our ride sitting up here, Willy. Moving out onto the wharf means risking being spotted. I suppose there is no way around that at this point. We're here and the boats are there. We'll stick to the shadows as much as we can and move 'furtively'. I love that word. It's from my new book, Willy. It means, secretively."

Willy, a bright boy himself, knew the word but didn't mention it.

Rusty stood and pulled his brother up with him, staying in close to the bales. He had almost forgotten about his injured shoulder. Suddenly, it really hurt. He decided he would just have to live with it a while, hoping the pain would lessen.

They moved south on the wooden wharf (large, main, pier to which smaller docks were attached). The smaller boats docked further south, so the boys kept to the shadows and continued in that direction. Not only would it get them to the boats they needed, it would move them further away from Riverview, the name given to the area in which the Home sat. It would be the first time Willy had not slept the night at the home since he was an infant – ten years before. Rusty fought back the tears that tried to burst onto his cheeks. He needed to remain strong for Willy who still really didn't understand what was going on. He searched his pockets for a hanky.

That made him smile. There he was running for his life and worrying about having a handkerchief. The area of the wharf toward which he was heading was four blocks away. The boys picked their way carefully, from crate to crate, from shadow to shadow, thinking about how good that baked chicken had been for supper and wondering when they would eat next.

Presently, they came upon a thirty-five-foot, single stack, steam powered cargo boat. It was wider than common, suggesting it was made to maximize load rather than speed. It was old. Much of the paint had peeled away. Willy pointed to the name painted on the near side up close to the front – '*Lazy Boy*'. That sounded comfortable. Most boats wore feminine names. At that point in his life, Rusty was quite confused about females, so felt some relief seeing the name.

The *Lazy Boy* sat in a slip (U-shaped dock) in the shadow of a much larger steamer. Rusty pointed, and the two of them darted across the open expanse and into that shadow, crouching low while they got their bearings. Presently, they stood and walked along the slip to get some idea about the boat and its cargo. It rode low in the water suggesting two things to Rusty: it had a well loaded storage area below deck, and, it was ready to sail. Boats always unloaded as soon as they docked. There were bins on the deck which held sacks of grain piled eight high. That suggested a trip to the south was most likely. Cotton *from* the south; grain *to* the south. He had often accompanied Doc to the store for supplies, some of which had been sacks of flour and sugar and salt and heavy crates of meat and vegetables. He figured he could handle the grain sacks. He motioned Willy to follow him as he approached the plank that led from the dock to the deck. He called out.

"Anybody on board? Captain? Ahoy?"

That exhausted his knowledge about calling to a boat.

There was movement at the wheel house. An older man

smoking a long pipe came out onto the deck.

“Good evening, Sir. My name is Rusty. I’m looking for passage – to work for passage that is. I’m strong and dependable and tend to be well-organized. This is my brother, Willy. We come as a team – two for the price of one.”

The man took several more steps out into the moonlight. He wore his graying hair long, stringy in appearance as it hung below his white hat. From there, his appearance went downhill – oily skin, a holey T-shirt, black trousers (pants) that hung well above his ankles, no stockings, and black, well-scuffed, leather boots. He more resembled a pirate from one of the books Rusty had read than a riverboat captain.

The man continued to look him over in silence. Eventually he spoke.

“Age?”

“Just fourteen going on 20 is how Doc used to describe me.”

“You’re holding your shoulder.”

“Yes, sir. I . . . took a nasty fall earlier this evening. I’m sure it will be better by morning.”

The as yet unnamed captain motioned them on board and guided Rusty to take a seat on a wooden keg.

“Sit and let me have a look at it. Let’s get you outta your shirt.”

Rusty was surprised at the attention, but went along. It was a struggle to remove the shirt – the captain helped, very gently Rusty thought for such a rugged looking man. Willy stood by, feeling all quite helpless. The captain swiveled Rusty, so his shoulder was in the light. Seeing that was not sufficient, he lit a lantern and hung it above him. He looked, he poked, his felt deep into the muscles. It hurt terribly, but Rusty sat there, not so much as blinking.

“Not broke. Sprained I’d call it if was a ankle. It’ll be a week before you can use it for any serious lifting.”

“Doc always said I healed rapidly.”

“This Doc of yours . . . ?”

He let it just hang there as if wondering where the boy would go with it.

“Doc runs a boy’s home – a place for kids with no other place to live. A smart and very kind man. My brother and I live – er, lived, there”

The captain offered a hand for a shake – first to Rusty and then Willy. Neither was used to being asked to shake but managed well enough.

“I’m Jake. Me and the *Lazy Boy* here been sailing the old

Mizzu (Missouri River) fer thirty years.”

Privately, Willy wondered if at any point during that time he had taken a bath.

Jake went to the wheel house and returned with a small wooden box. He removed a roll of three-inch strips of cloth and began wrapping the shoulder. Rusty allowed it and continued the conversation.

“I saw your deck is loaded with grain – I assume it’s going south and not coming to this part of the country.”

Jake nodded.

“New Orleans. Leave out just before dawn.”

“Just before?”

“The big boys, like this one next to us here, all leave at dawn. I skedooodle out a here ahead of them.”

“I have to ask, then, Sir, why do you have a head of steam building now if you’re here for another eight hours?”

Jake smiled and nodded again. Rusty hoped all the nodding meant he was feeling good about the two of them.

“Had a leak in the system on the way north. I fixed it. Now, just testing to make sure it holds a full head a steam.”

“A careful man. That’s good.”

“You interest me, boy.”

“You interest me, as well, *man*.”

Jake smiled at the exchange.

“Where you headed?”

“Doc taught us to be truthful so, I must say that we have no place in mind. Just away.”

“Everything about you two smells like runaways.”

“Only in a manner of speaking. We are not running away from Doc or the home. There was bad trouble there and I witnessed it. The bad guys know I saw them and I believe they are after me. If that puts you in more danger than seems reasonable, we will leave at once. It is not my intention to bring harm on anybody.”

“You are clearly a bright lad and you talk like a teacher.”

“Doc was a stickler for proper grammar and vocabulary. I did very well in my studies. Willy did even better.”

Jack finished strapping up Rusty’s shoulder. He worked his arm in an easy fashion.

“Feels much better, Sir. I don’t know how to thank you. I have no money to pay for the supplies you used.”

Jake pushed air in his direction indicating that was no problem, then returned the box to the wheel house.

There was a commotion up on the wharf. Rusty swallowed

hard. Jake doused (turned off) the lantern.

“Those are most likely the men who are after us – well, mainly after me.”

“You two sit on the floor in the wheel house and stay out of sight. Lazy Boy loves ta play games in the dark.”

Rusty did not understand, but he did as the man asked, motioning Willy in ahead of him. They were the kids. They’d do as they were told.

Unable to watch from where they sat, the boys had to figure what was going on from what they could hear and feel. Steps toward the front of the boat. Dragging a rope on board across the side. The plank pulled onboard. Steps to the rear. Dragging another rope on board. The door to the wheel house opened and closed – Jake had entered. The boys scooted a bit to allow the man leg room.

Jake released a lever and pulled it backward. It was a slender, four-foot-tall piece of cast iron that grew out of a long narrow slit in the floor. Jake whirled the wheel. They felt the boat backing out of the slip. It was turning in a wide arc to miss the rear of the larger boat moored next to them to the north (left).

What they experienced next was nothing either the boys or Jake had bargained for – shouts and shots coming their way from the wharf. One bullet broke a side window in the wheelhouse.

///

CHAPTER TWO: Making Plans

Considering the clear danger of the situation, Rusty's first inclination was to stand and give himself up to protect his brother and Jake. As he began to get up, Jake laid his big hand on top of the boy's head and slowly pressed him back down out of sight.

"Don't be a fool, kid. They know that me and Willy's seen 'em just now, so they ain't about to let the two of us go regardless of what you do. Be still and let me and *Lazy Boy* handle this."

Rusty slumped back down onto the floor. Willy reached out and put his trembling arm around his brother – the most important person in his life. They held each other tightly as if never to let go.

A second bullet smashed the window just above them. Glass flew across the small enclosure. Rusty pressed Willy's head down into his lap and bent over covering him with his own body. He hoped they were far enough from the dock, so the men couldn't jump onboard. That would pretty well be the end for all three of them.

"Now they went and done it," Jake said clearly angry about the windows.

He shook his fist in their direction. Lost in the darkness, it meant nothing to anybody but him.

"They done harmed my *Lazy Boy*. I have a mind to turn around and run 'em down, dock and all."

Instead – allowing his better judgment to prevail – Jake pushed the long lever forward. The boat shook as the gears abruptly switched from reverse to forward. They were headed down river. The wheel house sat nearer the front than the back. Behind it were the bins stacked six feet high with sacks of grain. Those sacks would stop any bullets coming from the rear. Rusty let himself begin believing the old man just might have pulled it off. Willy pulled on his brother's shirt and whispered.

“We okay, you think, Rusty?”

Rusty reached up and pulled on Jake’s shirt.

“We okay, you think, Jake?”

“Providin’ they don’t have horses or a boat, we should be in the clear.”

“I don’t know about horses. I assumed they’d have some. I can’t see why they’d have a boat.”

“We’ll soon be clear across the ol’ Missouri huggin’ its west bank. Still got deep shadows over there this time a the mornin’. Them pea shooters they’re usin’ won’t come within fifty yards a us. Stay down fer a while more, though.”

Jake was a brave man and Rusty respected him for that. The question about why he was being so helpful – putting his own life in danger – was still an unanswered question. They figured there was no way they could ever repay him.

Jake had been right. The river was nearly 600 feet wide at that spot and the bullets dropped harmlessly into the water.

“You can get up now, boys. Maybe just knowin’ you have left the area will make them feel safe from your testimony, Rusty.”

“I’d sure like to believe that, but something one of them said while I was running toward the window makes me wonder. He said, ‘That has to be the kid that holds the secret – blond, blue eyes and that key on a chain around his neck.’”

“Secret?” Jake said.

It had the tone of a question.

“I have no idea what he meant, Jake. Honestly, I don’t know any special secret. The only secret I know is that if a boy taps on Mary Lou Kottle’s bedroom window at night, she’ll open it and talk to him.”

Jake snickered to himself. Rusty let it go.

“Well, from what you think you heard, that man seems to think you know something that’s worth shooting at you over.”

“I see. Do you think that means they need me alive, because if that’s true, I have to assume the shots were meant to frighten me and not harm me?”

“Interesting,” Jake said. “You *are* a bright lad.”

“He’s the brightest boy I know, Sir,” Willy added as if to support the old man’s take.

He beamed up into his brother’s face. Rusty returned it with a question.

“Do you have any idea about some secret, Willy?”

“Hmm.”

Willy tended to be a thoughtful person not given to snap

decisions or responses. Presently, he offered an idea.

“Unless it has something to do with the pouch that was in the basket I was in when Doc found us at his door that night ten years ago.”

“A good thought, little brother. I hope you packed it with our other stuff.”

“I did. You always told me to never get separated from it. Do you know what’s in it?”

“Not specifically. On my seventh birthday Doc and I went through it. All I remember are some papers, a map, and a thick, pasteboard envelope with writing on one side. He kept it in his safe until I turned thirteen when he said it was time I began taking care of it. I kept it in the footlocker at the foot of my cot. He made me promise not to go through it until I turned sixteen unless something fully unexpected happened. I’m thinking this is something fully unexpected. Do you agree with me?”

Again, Willy took time to think – not as long as before. He began nodding.

“I imagine this qualifies alright. Suddenly, it seems we understand a whole lot less than we did before, and before, we really didn’t understand *anything* about us – our past, our parents, or things like that.”

Rusty broke a big smile and spoke.

“So, you’re saying that suddenly we know less than nothing about ourselves.”

“You know what I mean – well, probably not since I don’t have any idea what I mean.

“My,” Jake began. “It seems I have encountered a pair of mystery men. How can I help you?”

“You’ve already probably saved our lives,” Rusty said. “I imagine that should be enough.”

“Aw, that was mostly *Lazy Boy’s* doin’. I’m just along fer the ride.”

“If you’re serious, Jake, it will help if we can stay on board until we go through what’s in our pouch and put a plan together.”

“Of course. Take whatever time you need. In just a little while, we’ll be set for St. Louis with a few stops here and there. The Missouri River runs generally south east through Missouri to the Mississippi at St. Louis. That’s a three or so day cruise.”

“As I recall, the map in our things was of Kansas. If we decide we need to go there, we may not be burdening you for long,” Rusty said. “Unless you need our help right now, I think my brother and I need to examine the contents of our pouch.”

“We’ve made the journey hundreds of times – just the two of us – me and *Lazy Boy*. We’ll be fine unless we get boarded by pirates.”

Willy’s eyes grew big.

“Pirates? On the river? Really?”

“Naw. Just kiddin’. Didn’t mean to upset you. I ain’t had much experience talkin’ with boys your age. I may say things that are out of place.”

“A boy needs something to get his heart racing every once in a while, Jake,” Rusty said attempting to make things right.

Willy managed a smile and nod in the old man’s direction. Jake pointed to the area between the back of the wheel house and the bins – six feet or so fitted out with a table and three wooded stools, all nailed in place on the wooden deck.

“Have you two ate recently?” Jake asked.

“Had a fine evening meal about five, Sir.”

“If your tummies start ta growlin’, we can put together some vittles (food).”

The boys thanked him as they moved back toward the table, collecting the two pillowcases they had dropped earlier. Those two little sacks held all the possessions the two of them had in the world. They were soon seated next to each other. The sun was just peeking over the city skyline in the east, bathing the water in remarkable, yellow hues that rolled with the gentle waves, causing the tumbling edges to sparkle, as if showing off atop a sea of liquid gold. Both boys paused a moment to take note. Willy lingered over it longer than his brother. Rusty was a person of action and superior physical skills. Willy was more the thinker, talker, writer and artist.

“I put the pouch in my sack,” Willey said.

Rusty smiled.

“And just how are we supposed to know which pillowcase is yours?”

It was worth a nervous chuckle between them. By chance, each had grabbed the one that contained his own belongings.

“I wondered why yours was so heavy,” Rusty said. “It’s loaded with books.”

“You know I’d feel naked without my books.”

Rusty just nodded and smiled. It did make him remember something – something that for the first time in his life seemed like it might be important.

“You know that word that’s tattooed on the inside of each of our upper legs?”

“Yeah? Yours says SVENSTON 2. And mine says SVENSTON 1.”

Rusty nodded.

“Like you came first, maybe?” Willy asked.

Rusty nodded, again. Willy continued.

“I looked it up in both a dictionary and an encyclopedia once and I couldn’t find it – so I assume it isn’t a word – something else I guess.”

“It sounds a lot like Swenson – Ward’s last name back at the home,” Rusty said. “He says it’s Swedish – from Sweden.”

Willy rolled his eyes.

“No kidding? Swedish is from Sweden?”

“Ignoring my LITTLE brother’s putdown, I will continue and go on to say that maybe it would be found in a Swedish dictionary.”

“Interesting. Sorry, then, about the eyes. What about the 1 and 2?”

“It sure could be like you said – me 1 because I was born first and you 2 because you came 24th?”

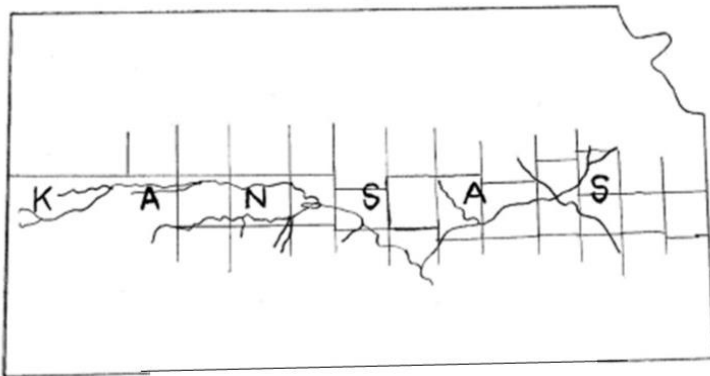
Willy frowned, not understanding. Rusty explained through his wonderful smile.

“If I had said *second*, you’d have rolled your eyes again and made some comment about how surprising it was that 2 might mean second, right?”

“Right. I deserved that. Actually, that 24th thing was pretty funny come to think about it.”

Willy handed over the soft leather pouch to his brother, explaining.

“The rawhide tie has a knot in it. I can’t untie it.”



Rusty took out his pocket knife and cut it.

"I could have done *that*. I thought you'd untie it. You're better at knots than I am."

Rusty ignored the words and pulled back the opening as it lay on the table. It was six inches across and ten from top to bottom. He removed the contents, part of which was a map of Kansas with a series of lines and squiggly marks on it. The word KANSAS was printed across it from west to east. It was hand drawn in ink.

"I wonder what the squares are?" Willy said. "The letters don't seem intended to fit inside them."

"I'm thinking they may be ranches or counties."

"If that's the case, lots of them on the North, West and South are missing."

"That may tell us only the ones that are shown, count," Rusty said.

"But *count* for what. I'm confused."

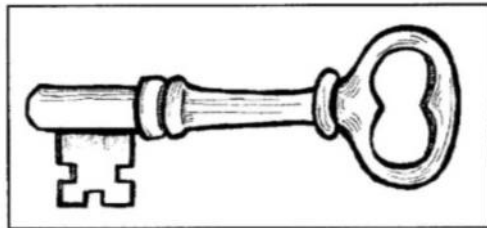
"Me, too. There's more stuff in here. It may explain everything. Let me open the heavy envelope."

There were two sheets of paper inside. Rusty removed them. One looked to be a letter; the other contained an odd assortment of words and figures.

"Wait. Something else in the envelope – heavy," Willy said, having picked it up for examination when his brother set it aside.

He turned it open end down, and out slid a large, gold key.

"It's like the little one you wear around your neck, but it must be six inches long and heavy – here, heft it (feel how heavy it is)."



Rusty took it and examined it carefully. He compared it with the small one that had been on a string around his neck the night he and Willy arrived at Doctor Potter's place. Doc had replaced the string with a sturdier, gold-colored chain.

"They are alike in every way but size," he concluded.

"This is getting weird," Willy said. "First the bad guy shoots

Doc because he won't hand over a key. We assumed that was because there wasn't any key. Now, here it is – a key. Do you suppose Doc knew about it, but wouldn't admit it – to protect it – us?"

"That seems *just* what he did. It must mean the golden key is in some way important, but why would such a thing be in the pouch that arrived at the home with us?"

"We don't know," Willy answered. "Let's see what's on the sheets of paper."

The first was a short letter.

Our Dearest Sons, Russell and William,

If you are reading this you will be sixteen and twelve, at least that was our instruction to Doctor Potter, the man to whom we entrusted your care and safety. By all reports he is a man of love and integrity (honesty). That decision had to be made quickly. Also, if you are reading this, you must conclude that, since we were unable to return for you, the worst has happened to us.

In our culture, boys of your status became men by successfully fulfilling feats of bravery, ingenuity, and mental acuity (sharpness). That culture is gone, but we want you to have the opportunity to be the last from our kingdom to meet those sacred tasks. There are instructions included. Your story and the answer to your questions about who you are will be answered as you progress through the challenges. Perhaps the greatest of the challenges will be patience – something young Rusty is yet to demonstrate.

Know how deeply we love you.

*Your Father and Mother, GD and gd / F
and W*

"Tell me, Rusty, did that clear up anything for you? It sure didn't for me."

"I don't know if 'clear up' is the right term, but I find it very encouraging. It suggests we are to be given the chance to find out who we are and where we're from. And, apparently, a chance to prove that we are a match to a set of difficult tasks that are going to

be laid out for us – something that was clearly quite important to our mother and father.”

“I guess I get that. It also sounds like we are important, somehow. It says, ‘boys of our *status*’, and something about a lost kingdom. *That*, made our already *weird* situation, just get *weirder!*”

“And, if we are so special, think how special our parents must have been, Willy. It’s simply mindboggling!”

“What do you suppose the upper-case GD and the lower-case gd mean and the F and W?”

Willy shook his head and shrugged. Rusty said what came to mind.

“The only GD abbreviation I know about, stands for the cuss words Billy Kuhns gets a whipping for using – about every other day.”

“I doubt that’s it – parents wouldn’t cuss at their kids, Rusty.”

They nodded in agreement on that.

“Before we look at the other sheet of paper can we start from the beginning, with what we already know?” Willy asked. Get everything sorted out, first.”

“Sure. I guess. Like what?”

“Do you remember things before coming to Doc’s place?”

“Not really. A few pictures in my head of several places and things, but, not really. I think I may remember a huge fireplace and long porch.”

“So, that means what we know starts there at the front door that first night. Do you remember that?”

“I sure do. I don’t remember how we got up on the porch, but we had to have help – at four years old, I couldn’t have carried you in your basket.”

“So, somebody put us there. How were we arranged?”

“Well, you were in a basket in front of me on the floor by the front door. I remember having to reach over you to knock. I remember it took a long time for anybody to come. I think I knocked several times. I remember I was scared.”

“Like it was so late that Doc was already in bed, maybe?”

“Yes, that seems likely from we know about him, now. Then, I remember the door opening just a crack and then all the way. The man – Doc – was wearing a robe and slippers. That tends to confirm your idea about it being late. He held a lamp up high, then he lowered it near my face and finally down further to light you. I remember being hungry and asking Doc for something to eat, not understanding I guess that we’d been left there on a more or less permanent basis.”





“No, that’s not how Doc told the story, Rusty. He said you looked up at him and said, ‘My baby brother is hungry. Do you have anything he can have.’ I guess you have just always been looking out for me.”

Rusty shrugged. In a heartbeat, he’d risk his life for his little brother. They were all the family they had. He was the big brother. Apparently, even at four, he had known he had family responsibilities.

“Anyway, I remember he picked you up and I dragged the basket inside. He warmed up milk and white gravy. You got the milk – a spoonful at a time. He pulled pieces of bread off a loaf and showed me how to sop up the gravy and eat it. I remember how good it tasted.”

“We’ve had lots of sop gravy, haven’t we?” Willy said. “When money ran short, I suppose. I never minded. I love the stuff. One thing I’ve learned about food from Doc, I can eat anything if I put enough salt and pepper on it.”

That memory produced big smiles.

6 stops where waters meet.
 Each within a man made box.
 The key is key times 6.
 ‘K’ = UR ●
 ‘old’, w/G; IFT w/G 2 X 2 U,




 GDd—F / W

Rusty continued.

“After we ate – well, I ate, and you sipped – Doc took us to his room. He had a big bed. He said something like, ‘I think you boys will be more comfortable here in bed with me tonight.’ I can’t really remember how I was feeling by then – still scared, probably, but I don’t have a recollection about it. We must have been tired

because the next thing I remember is waking up in the morning. After that, I guess, we just started fitting in and became part of Pop's big family."

"Okay, that helps me," Willy said. "I guess we should look at the other sheet of paper."

"Wow, what a jumble," Rusty said, flattening it out against the table with his hands. "Well, I guess we just start at the top and try to work our way down the page."

"*Six stops where waters meet.* Waters is an odd word, isn't it?" Willy asked.

"Seems to be. Hmm. It implies at least *two* waters since they have to meet. What kinds of waters could meet, Willy?"

"Jake was talking about this Missouri River meeting up with the Mississippi River. Maybe the 'waters things' are like rivers. Or, streams and creeks – they are just a whole lot smaller."

"I'm thinking that may be good thinking, little brother. Remember we have this map of Kansas which makes me think our search may be confined within that state. If that's the case it would be likely the smaller streams you mentioned might be the kind that play a part."

"I suggest we keep all that in mind and move on to the next clue or whatever these are," Willy said.

Rusty nodded and pointed to the second entry, reading it aloud.

"Each within a manmade box."

"How could you fit a stream into a box?"

"You couldn't, of course, so 'box' must have an unusual meaning."

They thought in silence for some time. They studied the map. Willy got up on his knees on the stool to get a closer look.

"A box canyon, maybe?" Willy suggested, offering a fully random thought.

They both shrugged their shoulders not giving it much credence (believability). Rusty pointed to the map.

"There are a bunch of squares drawn across the map, remember. Squares might be called boxes, right?"

"Right. But why would there be boxes strewn across Kansas like that?"

Rusty raised his voice to get Jake's attention.

"Jake! Would you by any chance have a map of Kansas?"

"I would. I sometimes take the Arkansas north west into Kansas. They are here in the wheelhouse. Let me show you how to open the metal cabinet."

They went to him and soon found they had a choice of several atlases or carefully folded paper maps. They decided on a paper map. It looked expensive because it was printed in colors. They figured that meant up-to-date and accurate. Not necessarily so.

“Thanks, Jake. We’ll return it in a few minutes.”

“Keep it. As you can see, I have several.”

“Double thanks, then, I guess,” Willy managed. “Anything we should be doing to help you?”

“Not a thing. There’s no sign of your bad guys. River traffic’s light this morning so if they got a boat to follow us, I’ll be able to pick ‘em out and duck into some cove – lots of hidden coves along the west bank that are big enough for *Lazy Boy* to cozy into. You thinking you’ll be off to Kansas?”

“Maybe. Hard to tell,” Rusty said.

“So far that’s where the clues seem to be pointing us,” Willy added.

They returned to the table and spread out the new map.

“I see it right away,” Rusty said.

“If you mean all those county boundaries shaped like boxes, I do too. Almost all of them are square or nearly square. But which ones.”

“First,” Rusty began, “only those across the center have been drawn onto our map, so we have to assume one or more of them will be important to us.”

“Makes sense, but which ones? Kansas looks to be a really wide state.”

“If we assume the curvy lines represent the streams and rivers that we think play a part in it all, let’s determine which counties have streams that converge – flow together.”

“I suppose that’s a good starting place, but the first clues suggest just six places like that and I count ten boxes.”

“I see what you see. How can we reduce that number to just six?”

They remained silent for some time, then Willy spoke.

“There are some letters – a word, maybe – on the back of *our* map, remember? Maybe that will help. I figure if it’s there it must be a clue.”

Rusty turned the map over and they examined the letters.

“SASNAK,” Willy said. “I don’t know such a word, do you?”

“No. Maybe, though, does it sound like an Indian word?”

“Could be I guess. Let’s ask Jake if he knows it.”

They moved together to the wheelhouse. Rusty offered the

word where it was printed on the sheet.

“You know of such a word – we are wondering if it could be Indian?”

Jake took the sheet and studied it. He tried pronouncing it in several ways. If he knew it, it would be something he had heard, not read, since the Indians were not writers using the English alphabet.

“Sorry. Nothing comes to mind. I agree it sounds Indian. If you two are thinking of staying in Kansas, you need to be getting off soon. Another five miles and this Missouri River heads east – south, south east, away from Kansas through Missouri.”

The boys looked at each other, knowing what they needed to do, but frankly frightened just thinking about leaving Jake and the safety of the *Lazy Boy*. Rusty spoke.

“I guess we need to leave then, but we haven’t done a single thing to work off what we owe you for your help.”

“When I was a boy about your age, I ran away from home – Springfield Illinois to the Mississippi. By the time I arrived, I was out of money, hungry, and scared out of my wits. The owner of a livery stable took me under his wing for several weeks. I said to him what you just said to me. His reply went like this: ‘Here’s the deal, son. Sometime in your future, when you are on your feet and have some resources of your own, you find a lad in need of help and encouragement and do the same for him. That will even the score and keep it going on for generations.’”

“That is a wonderful thing,” Willy said. “Thank you and we will most certainly do that – as often as we can.”

“I guess that’s it, then,” Rusty said. “Wherever you can, put us ashore.”

“Not quite *‘it’*,” Jake said. “My man set *me* off with provisions to last a week or so, so if I am to do like I promised him, we’ll need to take care of that before you leave me. You wouldn’t want me to go back on my promise to that old man, now, would you?”

Rusty saw through the old man’s kindness but would not object. He could see how much it meant to him.

During the next fifteen minutes, Jake filled a gunny sack with food and a few tools. He guided the *Lazy Boy* into a shallow cove and eased it up close to shore. With no more than damp boots the boys and their possessions were soon on dry land, waving, and watching the very kind old man steer his way back out into the main channel.

Later, the boys would discuss the man’s great kindness. Their first objective, however, was to make tracks inland and get as

far away from the bad guys as possible.

///

CHAPTER THREE

“Last one in is a Monkey’s Uncle!”

They both felt the need to put distance between them and the bad guys, so pressed on without rest until the sun was straight overhead. They had spoken very little, each lost in his wonders about what life would be offering them – right then as well as way on down life’s road. Neither one would have tried convincing the other that he was not frightened. During that thinking time, they had each decided there were three things going for them: the map and clues from their parents; the week’s provisions in their sack; and, each other. With those things on their side, life should be good.

Willy spoke as they approached a small, slow moving, creek, just down from a gentle, wooded, slope.

“If you’re hungry, I’m willing to stop and see what Jake gave us.”

They exchanged smiles. Rusty pointed to a spot in the shade under a stand of young trees. They put the sack between them and sat in the tall grass. Willy untied the heavy cord that bound it closed and rolled it down to reveal the contents.

Inside, was a lightweight, cloth bag, which also needed untying. It revealed two loaves of bread, a liberal slab of salt pork, a dozen eggs, a variety of fruit, several tins of beans, four large potatoes, a small can of crackers, and a few other things. It looked like pretty good eating compared with what they had at the home when the end of the month rolled around. They went with bread and beans, each one slipping a piece of fruit into his pocket for later.

“Can we take time for a nap?” Willy asked. “I’m beat.”

“Yeah. Me, too. An hour, okay?”

“Sounds good. Should we move back in among the trees, like to hide in case anybody comes by with questions?”

“Questions or *bullets*,” Rusty said.

Willy became obviously uneasy at his brother’s words.

“You know I wouldn’t say such a thing just to scare you, Willy, but we have to realize that for a while, at least, being scared is going to just be a part of our lives.”

“I understand. I don’t like it, but I understand it.”

They found comfortable spots on the mat of pine needles under a large old tree near the center of the small wooded area. Within minutes they were both asleep.

Having set their heads for a short nap, they both awoke at about the same time – Rusty a few minutes before his brother.

“Don’t chew so loud big brother. You woke me up.”

“Haven’t been up for long, but had a hankering for an apple.”

“Sounds good.”

Willy sat up, and scooted back against a long-fallen log.

“How’s your shoulder doing?” he asked.

Rusty worked it, very easily, before answering.

“Still hurts, but I’m thinking it’s too soon to hope for any improvement. The way Jake bound it up has really helped.”

Willy nodded and began on his own apple. He always held the stem and turned the apple until it snapped off. That time, 11 turns. He looked around.

“This looks like a pretty good spot, Rusty. We could stay here and keep working on the clues – or do we need to keep moving on?”

“I like your idea. We kept to a pretty fast pace this morning, so we’ve probably put 25 miles between us and the river. We haven’t followed any system that anybody could figure out. Our bodies’ have to be really tired – no sleep last night and the long walk this morning.”

“Good. First, we need to drink from the stream. Wish we had a canteen,” Willy said.

“There may be one in the gunny sack from Jake – we stopped searching once we found the food. First a drink, then back into the sack.”

There was, as Rusty figured, a canteen. Also, a small axe, a hunting knife in a sheath that fit on his belt, a piece of flint to help start fires, a length of rope, and a chisel. At the very bottom was a small pouch with a draw string. Willy opened it and dumped the contents into his palm.

“Five, silver dollars! I’ve never, ever seen that much money in one place before, Rusty. He shouldn’t have done that. It must be a week’s earnings for Jake.”

“We must remember he really wanted for us to have all this stuff. I’m sure it made him feel good to provide it.”

Rusty removed the envelope from the pillow case that held his things.

“Ready to get back at it?” he asked, not really pausing for a response. “Let’s skip the lines about the boxes and move on down the sheet to see what all we have to work with – then we can start back through it all.”

Willy nodded and moved to his brother’s side.

“The third line says, ‘*The key is key times 6*’. Hmm?”

“I wonder why our parents made this so difficult,” Willy asked.

“We have to believe it was for a good reason. Part of the letter said we had to prove our wits, remember. Also, it seems to be private, just between them and us, which is another reason for the codes, I’m thinking.”

Willy nodded. It made sense.

“So, we know what the key is. Here.”

Rusty held it up.

“There is only one key so the ‘times six’ has to mean something other than the number of physical items – keys.”

“Maybe each of the words, ‘key’, means something different,” Willy said.

“More, please!”

“Well, key can also mean an important clue – like the key to the solution – as well as an object – a key.”

“Very good! So, if the first, ‘key’ means important clue it could mean that the one key provides 6 solutions or has 6 purposes?”

Rusty offered that as a question, still thinking about it as he spoke. Willy nodded, again.

“And what are key’s for?”

“To open a locked something?”

“That’s what I’m thinking. Does it make sense that it is saying the key is to be used to open six separate – *some things*, like you put it?”

“It sure could. Let’s assume *that* for the time being and move on.”

“I’ve been looking at the next line and it sure doesn’t make any sense to me, Rusty.”

“As I recall, neither did any of the first three until we set our brains to work on them.”

“I get your point. Okay, it says, ‘*K*’ = *UR and then there’s a black block*. The K is enclosed in – what are they called – apostrophes or single quotation marks?”

“Right. It is a way of emphasizing it means the letter ‘K’ – not an abbreviation or something like that. So, where is there a ‘K’ in any of our clues?”

“I see three: one is the first letter of ‘key’; one is the ‘K’ on the map – the first letter of Kansas; one is the ‘K’ – the last letter in the Indian word on the back of the map.”

“But with those marks around it, it isn’t an abbreviation so doesn’t that get rid of ‘key’ as a possibility,” Rusty asked.

“Hmm?” Willy said.

His face lit up.

“Could both of the other K’s mean the same thing?”

“How?”

“I have absolutely no idea, plus we call it an Indian word but have no proof of that. The one ‘K’ *word* we have for sure is KANSAS on the map. Let’s go with that while we look at the rest of it. The equal sign seems clear enough – the ‘K’ equals the right side of the clue – *the UR and the black blob*.”

“The blob could be an oval: dark oval, black oval, filled oval, solid oval. None of those seem to help, do they?”

“You’re right, I guess.”

“What did you say?”

“I said, you’re right, I guess.”

“Genius, little brother.”

“What?”

“Get it – UR. Pronounce them like a word.”

“U R. Oh, I get it, ‘your’ or ‘you’re’ or ‘you are’. That would mean *our*, I suppose – yours and mine since our parents said it to us.”

“Okay, then. Let’s say the K in Kansas equals ‘your’ – meaning *our* – something, and *our something* is represented by that black blob. Hmm?”

“Well, big brother, I for one have always wanted a black blob. How about you?”

They exchanged smiles and puzzled looks, understanding that knowing only part of a clue was no better than having no clue at all.

“If we don’t refer to it as an oval or a blob, what else could it be?” Rusty asked as much to himself as to Willy.

“A blot? A splotch? A blotch? A blemish?” Willy continued trying to think the way Rusty had suggested.”

“You wouldn’t think a little black spot could be so difficult to name, would you, Willy?”

“Can I call *you* a genius, now?”

“Of course, it’s clearly the truth, but why at this moment?”

He offered it with a grin.

“I think you may have just said it – *spot*. The ‘K’ in Kansas equals *your spot*.”

“My, my! Do you suppose? It at least makes sense when none of the other ideas did. If that’s right, then, what does ‘spot’ refer to?”

“Well, for sure, of all the spots everywhere in the universe, *this* one is just ours,” Willy said.

“Do you suppose ‘spot’ means ‘goal’ – the place we’re looking for. I mean the way it’s all set up, we seem to be being directed to some *place*.”

“I’m betting you’re right, Rusty. Now, what is the goal’s relation to the ‘K’?”

“Where the ‘K’ is on the map, I’d think. Clear across the state. Look here. It seems there are two places close to the ‘K’ where two streams come together – if those lines really represent streams of water.”

“But if that’s right, why does it make us use the key six times on the way to there? Why not just send us there?”

“No idea, Willy, but I believe we must trust in our parent’s wisdom.”

“Okay. I can go with that. Let’s go on to the next line. Maybe something further on will help clear up our questions.”

Rusty moved on.

“*Old, w / g.*”

“W slash g? I don’t get it,” Willy said.

“The w-slash thing often is an abbreviation for the word ‘with’ – like pie / milk. In that case it reads, ‘old, with g’.”

“You mean like g – old – gold?”

“Wow. Good, maybe, perhaps, I’ll bet.”

Willy chuckled.

“Good, maybe, perhaps, I’ll bet?”

“My mental path from giving your idea some consideration to seeing it just may be right. Let’s see if that gets us anywhere. The next part of the line is, *IFT w/g*, if it follows that same pattern it would be . . .”

Rusty paused so his little brother could make the discovery.

“G with IFT. Gift? *Gold Gift*. Like the keys – the old one on your neck and this new one in the pasteboard envelope?”

“I doubt it. Why would they tell us in code about a gift we already know about?”

“I see. So, what then? I know what you’re going to say.

Let's move on and see what else there is?"

"Now you got the idea, Willy. Next comes, $2 \times 2 U$ followed by a comma."

"That's simple: 2 times 2 is 4 so it's 4 U or *for you*."

"Good, but it is *for you, comma*, connecting it to the next line I'm thinking."

"I see a clock and two fancy circles," Willy said.

"We just need to find the intended names or words for those two symbols – the clock and the circle-things."

"Well, a clock could mean time, maybe."

"Or it could mean face – the face of a clock, or even hands."

"Those don't seem to get us anywhere, Rusty. What about the two circular figures. Like I said, they are sort of fancy, like lace, maybe, with lines going out away from them."

"Snowflakes?" Rusty guessed.

"Time snowflakes, face snowflakes, hands snowflakes – that went nowhere, fast."

"The clock might stand for second or minute or hour," Rusty said trying his best.

"Or even day. Remember, there is a comma before the clock, like maybe it begins some sort of phrase, like in, 'I love you, my friend.'

"Ah. Guess I haven't studied phrases like that yet, but here's an idea. They aren't the way I'd have made them, but could they be suns – really fancy or special kinds of suns? But we only have one sun, so why put two?"

"Interesting. Our parents' world had only one sun in the sky, *but* they had two . . ."

Again, Rusty paused for his brother.

"Ah. You'd make a great teacher, Russell."

"Russell?"

"Well, if I am addressing a teacher I wouldn't use his nick name, Rusty."

"Your head occupies a world all of its own, doesn't it?"

"Doc always said he figured I kept my brain well-oiled because it kept slipping off into some other world. I suppose you both mean the same thing. Anyway, the answer you so skillfully set up for me is *son* – meaning male child. And since there are two figures it doesn't refer to son but to . . .," he went on imitating his brother's teaching technique.

"Yes, plural, *sons*. Very good. If that's true, then what we have here is, 'the meaning of that clock' modifying *sons* – telling something about sons. Hmm?"

"I didn't know clock also meant handsome and brilliant," Willy said offering a broad smile.

"You think you're joking, but not long-ago Doc referred to both of us with just those words. We had been talking about what we had going for us in life."

"Really. I don't know how a guy can tell if he's handsome or not."

"That's what I said to Doc. He said then I should just take his word for it. I guess he realized we both knew we were pretty smart."

"Just not smart enough to figure out what this clock means. It does show what hour it is – like eleven after twelve."

"You can see *eleven* on that infinitesimal clock face?"

"Infinitesimal?"

"Tiny."

"Thanks. Well, yes, then. Can't you see the minute hand and the hour hand."

"Wait a minute. You mean it is not the '*your*' hand but the '*hour*' hand."

"You lost me, brother."

"Just listen to the difference; your / hour."

"Give that man a three-legged horse! You mean hour/*our*. The word we need is *our* as in *our sons*. Brilliant like the sunny sons."

"You are working too hard for jokes, little guy."

"At least I am trying."

"Yes, sometimes I find you *very* trying (a pest)."

"Ha, ha. Actually, that *was* pretty funny."

"So, those last two lines of clues read: 'gold gift for you, our sons'."

"That's like the only time we've heard our parents say that – 'our sons'. That seems pretty special to me."

"Me, too, now that you point it out."

They sat in silence for a long moment.

"Two lines to go, brother. Ready?"

"Sure. Let's see. A drawing of a key – just like the new one in the envelope – and four arrows. It must be about the arrows."

"I agree. We need to describe them, I think, in order to make proper sense of them."

"Describe them how?"

"Well, they all point somewhere."

"Imagine that. Arrows that point somewhere."

"Under different circumstances I'd drag you to the creek and

give you a good dunking for that.”

“I guess I’m glad these are ‘different circumstances’ then.”

Rusty lay the sheet of paper aside and just looked into Willy’s face.

“You know I love you more than anything in the world, don’t you?”

“I was hoping for ‘in the *Universe*’, but, of course I know that. You’ve showed me that every day since I can remember. I probably don’t *show* it as often to you, but I *think* it many times every day. We are our family.”

They continued to share their gaze for several long moments before Rusty picked up the sheet, indicating it was time to get back to work.

“Here’s what I meant. The first arrow curves up to the right. The second one curves down, but, also, to the right. Then again up to the right, and then back in the opposite direction again.”

“And, that last one is like only half the length of the first three,” Willy pointed out, tracing it with his finger. “See the line that like stops it.”

“Maybe to indicate only part of whatever the first three mean.”

“Like half, maybe,” Willy added.

Rusty nodded, although none of that seemed to make sense to him.

“All the stuff on each of the other lines hung together to make the meaning,” Willy said. “So, I’m thinking the arrows refer to the key, right?”

“Okay. And curved arrows might refer to turning – how to turn the key.”

“Don’t you just usually insert a key and turn the bottom to the left – top to the right?”

“That’s right, er, correct. Maybe a part of the secret for using this new key is to use it differently – see – maybe begin by turning it so the bottom moves up to the right. Then, turn it from the top down to the right. Then back up to the right and finally down to the right – half way.”

“Like a dial on a safe,” Rusty said. “So many clicks in one direction and then so many in the opposite and so on. I watched Doc do it several times on his safe.”

“I’ve never heard of a key working that way.”

“Have you ever heard of a scavenger hunt that takes two orphan kids all the way across the state of Kansas to claim their kingdom?”

"Your point is well taken, my fair-haired, younger sibling."

"Finally, some respect! You know I was just kidding about that, right?"

"Of course."

"Is that it for the key turning?" Willy asked.

"Until we find a key hole to slip it into, I guess."

"What if we're wrong? What if once we turn it the wrong way, the lock is rigged so it will never work?"

"TITFTNT," Rusty said.

"What!"

"Then It's Time For TNT."

They chuckled about it, but Willy had raised a troubling possibility that would not be soon forgotten by either of them.

"One final line, little brother. *GDd – F / W*. Notice how it is indented like where you might sign a letter or note to somebody."

"So, it represents our parent's signature, you're saying?"

"I'm more *wondering* than *saying*, I suppose. But do you think that makes sense?"

"It makes sense. It's just like at the end of the other sheet. But, with nothing to go on, how can we possibly figure it out?"

"Maybe that will need to wait for some of the information promised as we go along. Those six stops."

"That's an important thing," Willy said.

Rusty smiled and waited for something further.

"We know about six steps or stops along our way. We figure the position of the letter 'K' on the map is our final step – our 6th and final stop, maybe. There are six letters in KANSAS – one for each stop, you think?"

Rusty pulled his brother's head close and sniffed it.

"Yes, sir. I can smell the wheels turning so hard they're smoking in there. Top rate thinking, William."

"William?"

"Well, I wouldn't call a Top rate thinker by his nick name, now, would I."

Willy managed a smile and nodded.

"You know what we've left out of all this?" Rusty asked and then went ahead to offer the answer. "That Indian word. Let's look at that again."

Rusty turned the map over and positioned it toward him so he could read the word.

"SASNAK. Hmm?"

"SASNAK, nothing, big brother! As I sit here I'm looking at the word upside down and what I see is 'KANSAS' with all the

letters turned upside down. I think our mysterious Indian word is just Kansas spelled backwards.”

“Fascinating.”

Rusty turned the sheet around to confirm what Willy had said.

“Okay. I see what you see, but I don’t understand what it means.”

“Not sure I do, either, but I’m sure we’re within a flees eyelash of finding it. Turn it back over to the map side. There is the word KANSAS, but reading it from right to left it says SASNAK. Our parents arranged things, so we would be traveling from east to west – right to left – across this map.”

“That’s it,” Rusty said. “To get to our goal – ‘K’ – we first have to travel to or through S, A, S, N, and A – backwards as we move from east to west. I’m betting it is our instructions for the order in which we investigate each letter or box.”

“That makes something else clear,” Willy offered. “Look! Each letter is mostly inside one box – six boxes – six places. The spots where the streams meet must be inside the six boxes that have letters. Those are the most important places on the maps for us – the confluence within each county that contains a letter.”

“Confluence – *joining point*. Pretty good word for a kid your age, little brother.”

“Perhaps I’m not as dumb as I appear.”

“That’ll be the day – you appearing dumb, I mean.”

Rusty continued.

“Okay, then. To reach ‘K’, we work our way progressively from ‘S’ on the east of the state, across ‘A’, ‘S’, ‘N’ and ‘A’ in that order. At every confluence – the place the streams meet – we will find something that we will be able to open with our big gold key and in it we will find more information about us and our family and our history.”

“*And*, about that Kingdom thing. That’s what’s caught my attention, I’ll tell you. Maybe we are kings.”

“Sounds like a lot of work to me – being a king,” Rusty said trying to calm his brother’s enthusiasm. “Enough work for now. How about a swim?”

“Think it’s safe – I mean safe from the bad guys?”

“We haven’t seen any sign of them. If they were really on our trail don’t you imagine they’d have already caught up?”

“I suppose.”

“My theory is that if they are going to look for us, they will scour the area asking questions about a couple of kids that answer

our descriptions. Without a boat, they had no chance of following us down the river.”

“That all makes sense. Thanks. I hadn’t thought it through like that.”

Rusty carefully stowed the sheets and such back with his things and tied it closed.

Willy waited patiently until that was finished, then stood and ran toward the stream calling back, “Last one in is a monkey’s uncle.”

///

CHAPTER FOUR

Hole in the hill

Watching Willy relax for the first time since they'd headed down the trellis, Rusty was happy to be the *monkey's uncle*. They swam for a half hour and then drip dried in the early afternoon sun. By three, sky time, they were back on their way west.

"I figure when it gets close to dark we'll need to look for a safe place to spend the night," Rusty said.

Willy thought that hadn't needed to be said, but he didn't mention it out loud. What *would* they do, try and find an *unsafe* place to stay? It brought a slight grin to his face – one his brother would not see since Willy was walking behind him.

They stuck close to the creek. The bank provided relatively smooth ground for them and, it headed west – maybe slightly south, which was also good. They needed to slip fifty or so miles south to hit the first county on the outline map of counties – it would be *Osage County* according to Jake's big map. It lay about fifty miles west of the state boarder with Missouri. That could take them several days.

"Berry bushes ahead," Rusty said pointing off to the left, away from the creek. "If we supplement the food Jake gave us with berries and fruit, we can make it last longer."

"Can we eat while we pick?" Willy asked.

For the first time, Rusty recognized a problem between them. He led the way to the stand of berries and opened the topic as they picked – and ate!"

"I hear you asking for my permission about things," he said. "I know that's how it's been, but I think it's time we agreed upon a more equal status between us. I want you to make suggestions, not ask permission – say what's on your mind. When one of us has reason to question something the other one suggests, then we must feel free to say so – get it out in the open – discuss it. No bad

feelings, just a suggestion that we need to think something through better than we had up to that point. You get what I'm trying to say?"

"What I hear you saying is you are promoting me from 'little brother' to just 'brother'."

"Interesting! I hadn't considered it that way, but yes, I suppose so, *brother*."

"I don't mind being called little brother, Rusty. Really, I don't. It's like a special thing between us. You are the only one in the universe who can call me that – for real, I mean."

"So?"

"So, call me what you want to, but think of me as being closer to your equal. I know I'm not, yet – your equal. You have better judgement and you know lots more stuff, and you're stronger and have more endurance, but you recognize I have a pretty good head on my shoulders and that my ideas are often as good as yours. So, instead of asking you, 'what are we going to do next,' you will hear me making suggestions about our next possible moves. You can accept them, improve upon them, or reject them. Of course, if you reject them, I will have to kill you in your sleep."

Willy's fully unexpected last line caused Rusty to double over in laughter, which, of course was contagious and they spent several minutes flat on their backs laughing it out together.

They were ten yards up the slope from the stream and, after recovering from their fits of chuckles and giggling, had sat up on the grass to finish eating the berries they had picked.

They both heard it at the same instant – several horses coming toward them at a gentle trot along the water from where they had just been swimming. Rusty pointed to the trees just up the hill, behind the bushes, and they hurried up the slope. They found a spot in which they could hide and yet watch whatever developed below.

From around the corner, appeared two men on horseback. Their heads turned from side to side suggesting they were looking for something – someone or more likely two someones.

The boys ducked further, more out of fear than necessity. They were well hidden. Rusty whispered into his brother's ear.

"The tall one. Can you see his forehead?"

"No. It's shadowed by the brim of his hat."

Rusty nodded. That had been his problem, as well.

The men stopped to let the horses drink. The taller man removed his hat and turned toward the slope as he wiped his forehead – a forehead, which in the full light of the sun, clearly bore that unmistakable, jagged scar Rusty had seen in Doc's office.

The boys remained quiet, hardly daring to breathe. The men drank from their canteens, passed a few words between them, and moved on. Rusty sat back from how he had been on his knees. Willy did the same.

“How did they make such good time?” Willy asked.

“A man can move a lot faster on horseback than boys can walking,” Rusty said.

It hadn't been a full explanation, like how they got across the river, had they made contact with Jake, how they had come upon horses, and how they knew the route the boys were following – things like that. Nonetheless, Willy accepted it. He did have a suggestion, however.

“Here's my first equal brother thing. I suggest we head due south for a while away from this stream. The men seem to be following it.”

“A great first thing, I'd say. Let's get our stuff and cross over this hill to the south right here.”

In Kansas, about the only truly hilly land is found on the eastern side of the state. The vast amount of the state is flat. A gentle rise begins at the far western side, which eventually joins with the foothills of the Rocky Mountains across the border in Colorado.

The hill was covered with low bushes and brambles, which required them to move with caution and slowed them considerably from the good pace they had been setting along the stream. Still, they believed it was the best plan – the safest plan.

By four, they had descended the opposite side, which opened onto a broad, mostly flat valley with a stream along the far side. They lowered their backpacks and sat to rest in the shade of a stand of scrub trees.

“Let's head for the stream over there,” Rusty suggested, pointing across the valley. “We can follow it west as long as the light lasts, and camp along it for the night.”

“I suggest we make sure our camp site is well hidden. It seems like Scar Head and his pal may have some idea where we are going and may drop south themselves.”

“Good point. It makes sense they know things we don't. They knew about where we were and about the key. They may know other stuff, too.”

“How far across the valley, you guess?” Willy asked.

“Less than a mile.”

“You realize that is totally useless information. Could mean anywhere from an inch to 1,760 yards.”

Rusty smiled.

“Okay then, I estimate 1,500 yards. That better?”

“Much better, thank you.”

They exchanged smiles and for the first time moved out shoulder to shoulder. It made Willy feel important – walking beside his brother like that. Rusty really hadn’t taken notice.

Rusty set a diagonal course across the valley – a slant to their right – south west. The land was covered with a mix of grasses – tall, short, green, gold, white, thick blades and narrow. Some bared their roots along the soil and others sunk them deeper underground – those were generally the taller more robust plants.

Thirty minutes later, Willy pointed to the ground.

“Look at all the debris (trash) over here close to the stream – sticks, tree leaves, rocks, small logs, even a few branches. How’d they get here?”

“I can only guess, but I’d say that creek must overflow often, and it brings debris downstream and spread it out across the land, in close to the bank.”

“Makes sense. The ground is a lot moister here than what we’ve just come across.”

Rusty nodded, taking note, and adding, “Maybe a recent overflow. This dry, sandy soil absorbs water fast so it’s difficult to judge how long ago.”

Willy reached down and picked up a good-size stick.

“Still wet through and through – look. I imagine sticks don’t dry out as fast as the dirt. Could have been covered in water very recently.”

Rusty nodded again, privately impressed with his brother’s observation.

They reached the bank of the creek. It ran clear and fast, being some five or so feet deep where they came upon it. The top of the bank was well above the water and varied from steep to gentle.

“No place for a hidden campsite on this side of the stream,” Rusty said. “We need to cross and see what we can find over there against the hill.”

They continued west along the bank for some time looking for a shallow place to ford the water.

“Look there,” Willy said. “A horse – no saddle. Wild, you think?”

“Maybe. I’ve read there are thousands of wild horses out west. No. Look closer. A rope rein or harness of some sort looped around its head and neck. That’s not a feature of wild horses.”

“And, it’s not running from us. Wouldn’t a wild horse run?”

"I'd think so," Rusty agreed. "Let's approach it slow and easy and see what's up."

'There he goes again,' Willy thought to himself. '*What's up?* The sun's up, the sky's up, the clouds are up, the tree tops are up. I doubt if any of those things play any part in the story about this lonely looking horse.'

"Maybe it came up lame or something," Willy offered, thinking that '*came up*' was at least a more reasonable possibility than '*what's up?*'

As they drew close, they saw it was somewhat smaller than the horses they were used to back in the city. It was brown with large white splotches. The hair on its back was matted down suggesting it had been ridden on a regular basis.

"I think it's called a Pinto," Rusty said.

"Aren't Pintos Indian horses?" Willy asked.

"Yeah. Maybe we need to be careful. I've heard you can never tell if an Indian is friendly or not."

Willy, apparently, let the fear factor go. He spoke.

"Sure is beautiful, isn't it?"

"Yeah," Rusty agreed looking around. "Let's put our stuff down before we go any further."

Willy moved ahead, approaching the animal, arm out, in an easy manner.

"It seems used to people, for sure," he said.

At that moment the horse moved its head up and down and snorted. It trotted off along the low creek bank and stopped ten yards ahead, looking back at them. The boys looked at each other.

"If it was a dog, I'd say he wanted us to follow him," Willy said.

"Let's do it."

As they moved forward, the horse picked its way down the high bank to the edge of the water. The boys hurried after him.

"Look, there!" Willy said. "A body on the edge of the water – half way into the creek."

"Not just a body; a boy's body," Rusty continued.

Willy reached it first.

"An *Indian* boy's body."

He leaned down and turned him over.

"Indian for sure," Rusty said. "Is he breathing?"

Willy put his palm close to the boy's nose and mouth.

"I don't think so. Hard to tell. What should we do?"

"Is his skin warm?"

Willy felt several places.

“His shoulders are hot – they’re dry. His legs are cold, but they’ve been in the water.”

Rusty motioned for his brother to pick up the legs. He grabbed hold under the boy’s arms and they struggled to carry him up the bank and onto the grass. The pinto was immediately at their sides, snorting and sniffing the boy. Rusty removed the quiver of arrows attached at his waist while Willy did the same with the bow he had slung over his shoulder.

“Turn him onto his stomach,” Rusty said. “I’ve seen pictures. I’ll lift his legs up high and you press on his back just below his shoulder blades – down and up like at a breathing rate.”

“How hard?”

“Hard. The idea is to force any water out of his lungs.”

They kept it up for several minutes. Finally . . .

“Water’s draining out of his mouth, Rusty.”

The boy began coughing and turned himself onto his side. That was when they first noticed the large bruise and deep gash on his forehead. It had been covered by his long, black hair.

“Looks like he was thrown and hit his head on rocks,” Willy said.

Rusty lowered his legs and the boy was soon sitting up, still coughing. Pinto nuzzled him from one end to the other. The boy reached out and draped his arms around the horse’s neck, drawing his head close. Clearly, they belonged together. He reached up and felt his own forehead.

“A bruise and deep cut,” Willy said kneeling beside him.

The boy frowned and said something they could not understand.

“He can’t understand us, and we can’t understand him, Willy. How’s your sign language?”

Willy gave it a try. He drew a circle on his own forehead and then slashed across it with his finger. The boy offered something of a smile and nod. Rusty removed his handkerchief and wet it down in the stream. Returning, he handed it to Willy. Willy was by far the gentler of the two of them.

He dabbed at the gash with the wet rag and showed it to the boy – the blood, just to demonstrate the nature of the situation. The boy nodded and for the first time looked them over. He winced as Willy began cleaning mud and bits of stone out of the gash. Willy paused. The boy shook his head and directed Willy’s hand back to his forehead. He wanted him to continue regardless of the pain involved. The boys had heard such things about Indians.

Soon, Willy was finished. He handed the handkerchief back

to Rusty and pointed to the stream. He wanted it rinsed out.

"I understand your voice language, brother," Rusty said. "You don't need to use sign language with me."

Willy offered a big smile up into his brother's face as he sat back on his legs. The Indian boy broke a smile in response – its meaning was no clear. Rusty handed the rag to the boy who accepted it with a nod. He folded it twice and held it to his forehead. He placed his other hand over his heart and then pointed to the boys.

They nodded and smiled.

"Now what?" Willy asked.

"I don't know." Rusty said. "See if he'll take an apple or chunk of bread."

Willy followed the suggestion, holding out one of each. The boy looked back and forth, selecting the apple. He nodded his appreciation and then did the unexpected. He placed it to the Pinto's mouth and it was soon gone.

Willy again offered the bread. The boy hesitated, but then took it, again nodding and putting his hand to his heart. He had stopped attempting to communicate with words, switching to Indian sign language. That was no more meaningful to the boys than the words had been.

"He must think we are pretty stupid," Rusty said.

Willy offered a shrug and palms-up hands – the universal signal for, 'I don't understand.' The boy smiled and mimicked the gesture, then pointed back and forth between him and Willy, repeating the shrug.

"I think he understands what I meant," Willy said looking up at his brother who was still standing."

"You mean he understands that we don't understand?"

"Something like that. I suppose it's a beginning."

He made short work of the piece of bread and then struggled to his feet, motioning away the help Rusty offered. Willy picked up the quiver and bow and offered them in his direction. He smiled and nodded as he accepted them.

He pointed to the boys and then to the ground. He pointed to himself and then west across the valley. Finally, he pointed to himself and then the ground where they were standing.

"I think he means we are to stay here" Rusty said. "And that he is going to leave and then come back. That what you got from it?"

Willy nodded and smiled at the boy, then offered some signs of his own. He put his palms together beside his cheek and closed

his eyes, suggesting sleep. Then, he pointed across the stream at the base of the hill. The boy repeated the signs and seemed to amend his former suggestion to say he would meet them over there, later. He put his hands to his mouth and made a chirping sound – a bird they figured. *Why*, was a different matter. He mounted the Pinto in one well-rehearsed leap – leg up and over, then leaned forward and grasped the rope. He rode an easy gallop in the direction he had been pointing.”

“He probably shouldn’t be riding,” Willy said. “His brains may be scrambled.”

“Doctors call that a concussion and I agree with you.”

“On the other hand, we probably shouldn’t be trying to keep him from riding – you see that knife slid in behind his belt?”

“You figure he really intends to return, and if so, why?” Willy asked.

“I guess we’ll see. Not sure it would be comfortable if he brought a bunch of the men from his tribe back with him.”

“Like, to kidnap us, you mean?”

“Maybe, but I meant to take us with them, so they could take care of us. I imagine adult Indians are a lot like adult white folks when it comes to letting a couple of kids wander through life on their own.”

“I see what you’re saying.”

Rusty changed the topic.

“We need to get settled in for the night. Let’s find a place to cross the creek.”

As they moved on along the bank, they continued to think about the Indian boy.

“How old you figure he is?” Willy asked.

“About my age, don’t you suppose?”

“That’s what I was thinking – maybe even a year or so older. His shoulders are wider than yours and his chest and arms are more developed.”

“You’re probably right. Think we’ll really ever see him again?”

“I’ve read Indians are 100% honest, at least among themselves. Nothing is more important to them than their good word. It’s where the saying, ‘honest injun’ supposedly came from. Like when a person says something and then adds, ‘*honest injun*’, meaning I promise it’s so.”

“You really have read a lot, haven’t you?”

Willy shrugged, taking it as a compliment. It had been well known at Dr. Potter’s that Rusty had good common sense and

learned well from experience, while Willy had more book learning than anyone the others had ever known – well, except for Dr. Potter. Willy would be the one they chose to sit beside during a test, but they'd go with Rusty on a camping trip or during an emergency.

"Look there," Rusty said pointing ahead of them. "A log spanning the water. Looks like we found our bridge."

It was eighteen inches thick and had clearly been there for some time. It was long bare of bark and was well weathered.

"I wonder who put it here?" Willy asked. "They had to bring it a long way. There don't seem to be trees that size close by."

"I guess their work is our gain," Rusty said. "I suppose they needed – or need – a dependable crossing point, probably to use on a regular basis."

"Maybe this is like a trail between two important points. I'm thinking it is for Indians on foot. Riders on horseback would just ride across. Buggies and wagons would need to find a much shallower place to ford (cross). Anyway, we haven't met a white person all day – well, you know what I mean."

Rusty nodded and looked around, scanning the hill they had come from and then the one across the water. He suddenly seemed uneasy. He didn't say as much, but Willy could tell. It prompted him to look around also. The Indian boy seemed very friendly. Willy figured friendly kids came from friendly families, so let go of his uneasiness at that. He spoke.

"Wouldn't it be funny if the log was put there by two black bears who decided the boys on the other side of the creek tasted better than the boys on this side of the creek."

"Absurd maybe but *not* funny," Rusty said.

"I didn't know you even knew the word *absurd* – meaning ridiculous or silly, right."

"When a guy's lived with you for as long as I have, he needs to learn a word like that."

They managed a chuckle. The smiles continued for some time.

They crossed the creek and before long had selected a superior spot for camp – under a rock ledge that formed a shallow cave about four feet high. It was, perhaps, three yards deep into the hillside and two across the front with a hard-packed, dirt floor. It offered protection from wind and rain, and the tiniest of fires would keep it warm all night. Willy mentioned he had read the Kansas plains became quite chilly at night, even during the warm season.

"We really aren't very well prepared for this trip, you know, Willy? Wish we at least had blankets."

“And pillows would be nice.”

“Guys don’t take pillows on camping trips, doofus.”

Sometimes – the way younger brothers will do – Willy just tried to push his brother’s buttons to get a reaction! It almost always worked!

By nightfall they had a small fire going and were heating a can of beans for supper. There was still a full loaf of bread, salt pork, and fresh fruit left from what Jake had given them. They were soon relaxed and felt safe there in their ‘hole in the hill’ as Willy called it. The world was dark in all directions. They lay back preparing to get some sleep.

That was when they heard it. *That* was when they saw it. *That* was when they wished they were back on their cots at Dr. Potter’s place.

CHAPTER FIVE

An Unexpected Overnight Guest

The boys' uneasiness grew. Willy increased his grip on his brother's arm. It was the sound of snapping twigs. It was the snorting sounds of a horse – or, horses. The partial moon provided very little light – enough, however, to see the tall grass spreading apart, laying a trail directly toward them as if by the hands of some invisible force intent on doing them harm.

“Scar Head, you think?” Willy asked in a whisper, moving in closer to Rusty.

“Too low to the ground – unless they are crawling, trying to sneak up on us,” Rusty came back. “More likely a coyote.”

He understood that if it were an animal, they needed to build up the fire to keep it away, but, if it were humans, they needed to put it out to remain hidden. Rusty didn't know which way to go.

Fortunately, he would not have to make that decision.

The movement in the grass stopped. A bird chirped.

The boys looked at each other. Willy whispered.

“I'm thinking Indian Boy's bird sound.”

Rusty nodded. He had no idea how to sound like a bird, but he offered a prolonged, steady whistle.

Presently, the smiling face of their new friend raised up out of the grass. His pony followed and stopped a few yards away. The boys moved up onto their knees – the *hole in the hill* being too low for standing. They returned his smile. Willy motioned him toward them. The boy put up one finger as if saying, ‘just a minute’. He went to his horse and pulled off two large sacks that were tied together and had hung over the animal just forward of where he rode. They were clearly heavy since he dragged them through the grass.

They had no idea what was going on or any idea how to ask in sign language. So, Willy just spoke what was on his mind.

“Whatcha got there, Chief?”

The lad smiled and then astonished the boys.

“I managed to acquire some things I believe will make your lives more comfortable.”

The boys turned to each other and exchanged open mouthed, frowns. They offered twin shoulder shrugs in the boy’s direction.

“I had to deceive you before – about language. I am not permitted to speak to anybody outside my village without permission from my father. He is chief. Someday I will be chief. Because of that, I am terribly over protected – that’s the reason for the talking rule. My father hopes to meet you and thank you in person for saving my life and his blood line.”

“But an Indian kid who speaks better English than we do? Really?”

“My father believes the future of our tribe lies in education and I agree, so he pays a teacher to live with us – Professor Oliver P. Compton. He once taught at a university in Illinois. He brings books from a city library. He is probably my best friend even though he is five times my age.”

The boys nodded, meaning they had heard his words even if they did not fully understand them.

“So, what did you bring us. You need to know we only have five dollars to our names.”

“Oh, no cost. My father was embarrassed that this is all we could offer right now. It was a long, brutal winter just past.”

He untied the ropes that held the bags closed, and pulled them open pushing one toward Rusty and the other toward Willy.

There were two, large, colorful, thick, blankets and leather water bags decorated with colorful designs. There was, a stone hatchet and a flint knife. There were two sets of moccasins and two soft leather jackets with beadwork. Wrapped in a large, orange, cloth were baked goods – bread, crackers of some kind, and a sweet something that looked to be part cake and part pie.

“This is very kind of you and your people, but we will never be able to carry it with us as we walk across Kansas.”

The boy smiled again.

“I suppose you are right. What you need are a couple of really good horses.”

He put his hands to his mouth and made a sound – a coyote call, maybe.

Presently, two Indian men came into view at the outer limits of the circle of light provided by the boys’ fire. They each led a

pony, much like the one the boy rode.

“For us?” Willy asked, moving outside the cave toward them.

One of the men smiled and handed him the end of the rope halter. The other man motioned for Rusty to do the same. He did, still astonished by the kind gestures.

He stumbled over a response.

“I don’t know what to . . . I don’t know how to . . . I mean, I really . . .”

Willy took over.

“What my brother means is thank you for your kindness.”

The men turned and disappeared into the darkness.

“Shouldn’t you go with them – night and all?” Rusty said.

“I would like to spend the night here if you will permit it. The men will remain not far away. The only son of a chief is well protected whether he wants to be or not. Earlier in the day I slipped away to be by myself. My pony came upon a rattler and bolted, throwing me down the bank and into the water. My father is quite unhappy with me. It’s a good night to be away from him.”

“We should tell you that there are bad men after us,” Rusty said, “so it may not be safe for the son of a chief.”

“How many bad men.”

“Two.”

The boy chuckled.

“I believe my companions can handle them. Father insisted that I be accompanied by six of his most able braves – partly for my protection and partly so I couldn’t run off again.”

“Six?” Willy said surprised. “How big is your village, anyway?”

“My village has about two hundred. My father has five villages in his care.”

“In his care?”

“That he is chief over.”

The boys nodded, impressed for sure. Then Willy spoke.

There’s been something I suppose it’s time we take care of, new friend.”

“And that is . . .?”

“Introduce ourselves.”

All three chuckled. It was true. They were each fascinated that names had not been important up to that point. Willy continued.

“This is my brother, Russel, but I call him Rusty. I am William, but I prefer Willy.”

“Russel/Rusty and William/Willy, I am pleased to know your names. I am called Running Bear, and before you make jokes

about it like the boys in my village, it is spelled b-e-a-r, not b-a-r-e.”

Willy tried to muffle a chuckle.

“Sorry,” he said. “I don’t think I would have even thought of the drafty alternative if you hadn’t explained.”

“That was really funny – *drafty alternative*,” Running Bear said, and he managed a prolonged chuckle about it.”

“How old are you?” Rusty asked.

“Fifteen summers – fifteen years.”

“I’m fourteen and Willy is ten.”

“Those are the ages I related to my father. I am glad I was correct.”

“I’ve noticed you don’t use contractions when you speak – you say, ‘I am’ instead of ‘I’m’.”

“Even though my father encourages it, the old people speak and understand very little English, and contractions give them fits – I believe that is your saying – so I avoid them. I understand them so do not change your speaking for me.”

“No offense, Running Bear,” Willy said, “but you’re nothing like what the books I’ve read led me to believe an Indian boy would be like.”

“I hope it is alright that I am how I am.”

“Oh, yes. I didn’t mean that.”

“May I make a suggestion?” Running Bear asked.

“Of course.”

“The *a-nv a-su-ge-da-u-lo-s-da* that I brought is best when eaten fresh.”

“And ‘*a-nv . . . whatever*’ refers to what?” Rusty asked.

Running Bear smiled and pointed.

“*Strawberry cake* I think you would say it – I mean, *call* it. English is a very difficult language.”

“*Strawberry cake* sounds wonderful in any language. Now, I have a question. Which of all this is it? You brought so much.”

Running Bear pointed again, then picked up the loaf and broke it into three sections, handing a good-sized chunk to each of the boys, and keeping the smallest one for himself. Willy put it to his face and smelled it. His eyes grew wide.

“Smells delicious.”

While they enjoyed the treat – and it was delicious – they moved the bags of things into the cave for safe keeping.

“It is growing chilly,” Running Bear said rubbing his arms.

“I think he’s suggesting we try on our new jackets,” Willy said.

“*Jackets* – that is the word,” running Bear said, thumping

himself on his forehead. "All I could think of was coats."

"We'd have understood," Rusty said.

"But my father says I must be the best in speaking and reading English because next year he is sending me to study at a college."

"Wow! That's a big step at your age," Willy said.

"I know. It is why I must study so hard, now."

They built the fire up, considering they no longer had to fear Scar Head and his pal. They talked well into the night.

They shared things about themselves – the boys about the journey they were beginning, and Running Bear about his people, their daily life, and his hopes for the future. His biggest concern was that an uncle had broken away from the tribe recently and had a small following of young braves who were inclined to let their dislike for the white man boil over into raids and theft and even killing. His father was preparing to contain them. Running Bear referred to them as renegades.

It was well after midnight when they finally turned in.

* * *

Willy stretched himself back to life just as the sun was beginning to light the valley. Something was wrong. Their new friend was gone. His pony was gone. Willy poked Rusty to awaken him.

"He's gone."

Rusty sat up and looked around, shaking out the cobwebs.

"I see. I didn't expect that."

"I didn't either. At least I hoped to say goodbye. At most, I guess, I hoped to get to visit his village and meet his father and people."

"Well, I don't understand any better than you do, but I suggest we get on with our life. We need to eat and fill our canteen and new water bags and find our new horses."

"Looks like that last part is already handled."

He pointed at the horses. The ends of their halters were wound around large rocks and they remained close by.

"I see. They came equipped with bags like Running Bear had on his pony. Let's divide things up evenly between us – by weight, I mean."

"I sure hope the ponies aren't particular who gets to ride them," Willy said.

"I doubt if he'd have left us any he didn't think we could handle."

"I suppose you're right."

They made short work of breakfast and were soon ready to mount their new rides. They had both done a good deal of riding in their short lives. There were six horses at Doc's place. Their new ones were a bit shorter – ground up as well as front to back. The single strand of rope for reins was also different, but they figured they could learn to make it work.

"They don't have horse shoes," Rusty noted. "Suppose they get sore hoofs often?"

"I have no idea. We'll need to check them from time to time, I suppose."

With no saddles and stirrups, it took them each several tries – and much giggling – to mount their ponies, but once up there, things seemed to go well. They had not ridden bareback before.

First, they headed for the creek to get water. Running Bear had told them the creek began in a cave a day's ride to the south west. He didn't know county names, but they figured that must be in the general area of Osage County. They would follow the creek. Running Bear called it '*White Feather Waters*'. The name came from the many small rapids that produced foamy, white water.

The ponies drank their fill while the boys filled their canteen and the new water bags. Those things accomplished, they mounted up – with much less difficulty that time – and set off with the sun at their backs. They soon shed their jackets, securing them in front under the ropes that held the big sacks in place. By noon they had shed their shirts as well. Clearly, Kansas summer days were going to be hot.

At noon, they stopped in the shade of a stand of trees near the creek and unpacked things to eat. The crackers were filling but tasteless – probably designed to be dipped in jam or honey or salsa. They found a second loaf of strawberry cake and decided to save it as a treat for another day. It remained moist.

The morning journey had been long but relatively easy, having been contained to the flat area along the creek. The running water varied from quite shallow and wide to quite deep and narrow. The rock studded shallows ran white with foam just like Running Bear had described it. The deeper parts were still, the surface reflecting the sky above, or the boys' faces if they looked directly down onto it. They could see fish just below the surface.

"We'll need to cut fishing poles," Willy. "Fish will be a nice addition to our diet."

Willy nodded. His thoughts were scattered.

"Where do you suppose Scar Head is? I mean I know you can't know. I guess I'm sort of edgy about him."

“Me, too. Since we haven’t run into anybody, I imagine there is no one to tell on us – pass on information if he is asking about us. I wonder if he knows about the map – the K-A-N-S-A-S map?”

“You didn’t hear them asking about it in Doc’s office, did you?”

“No, but I got in on the conversation well after it began, I think. I just heard about the gold key.”

“I noticed you’ve been wearing the one around your neck, under your shirt – when you’re wearing one.”

“Yeah. Figure we don’t need to advertise it. I imagine it is one of the first things Scar Head will ask about – two boys, one wearing a gold key around his neck.”

“Do we really know that he knows about that one – yours?”

“I suppose not, but he knew a lot of things. I still think it’s better to ere (make a mistake) on the side of caution.”

Willy nodded and looked back along the trail they had been following.

“Think we’ll ever see Running Bear again?”

“I doubt it. He has his life and we have ours.”

“Speaking of our lives,” Willy said, “Have you been thinking about the – what do you call them – clues, that were in our pouch?”

“Yeah. Lots, in fact. The feeling I’m left with is that we are in some way important kids – people. Something about the kingdom that was mentioned.”

“If that’s so, then father and mother must have also been important there.”

“I suppose that makes sense,” Rusty said. “They seemed to know their lives were in danger – probably why they left us behind, thinking they would return when the danger was over.”

“Why do you suppose they were in danger – apparently in a lot of danger. The letter said as much.”

“I know. It said, ‘if the worst happens’ they would not be back for us. They did not come back for us, so I think the message is that it happened – the worst.”

“That they died, you mean?”

“Yeah. Murdered, I’m thinking.”

“Yeah. Me too. That is so sad. I hope it didn’t hurt.”

“We must not dwell on that, Willy. We are here, now, needing to complete a journey they seem to have carefully designed for us. The best thing we can do is to finish it successfully and learn the secrets they have left for us to discover.”

“I’m glad we had this talk, Big Brother. It helped me a lot.”

“Me, too, lit . . . er, brother.”

They exchanged grins.

“See those little clouds?” Willy said, pointing some distance behind them near the top of the hill they had crossed the day before.

“I see them. Odd. Like they are coming right out of the hilltop. Any ideas?”

“One, and it isn’t good,” Willy came back. “I’ve read about Indians sending smoke signals – a way of communicating over distances.”

“So, if we see one set of signals it means there are at least two people involved – the sender and the person he’s sending the message to.”

“Or two *groups* of people – Indians. Suppose it could be those renegade’s Running Bear told us about?”

“Could or couldn’t, I guess,” Rusty said. “There are lots of Indians in Kansas. I suppose we should treat it as if they might be from them. How does that change anything for us?”

“I guess it means now we have two sets of bad guys to be on the lookout for.”

“Said another way, two sets of bad guys to keep ourselves hidden from.”

That sent chills up both their spines.

“You should have said, *‘from which to keep ourselves hidden’*,” Willy said, “but I got your message and it’s scary, you know.”

Willy possessed the better grammar of the two and occasionally liked to remind his brother of the fact. Rusty really didn’t mind but sometimes flashed an irritated look Willy’s way just to play along. Willy would feel he had won a round. Rusty would feel proud of his little brother’s accomplishments. It was a ‘brother thing’.

With one eye on the smoke, they gathered their things, mounted up and urged their ponies off toward the west. They were eager to get into the ‘game’ as Willy had dubbed the activity, so stopped only infrequently to let the ponies drink and rest.

By late afternoon, the valley came to an end when the hills on each side flattened out onto the plane. The creek took a turn in a more southerly direction. It seemed that suddenly they could see forever out in front of them. Rusty pulled up and Willy followed his lead.

“What, Rusty?”

“Ahead. See that wisp of white smoke?”

“Yeah. I’d say not Indian signals. It’s one steady stream.

More like from a chimney, don't you think?"

"Probably. Or a campfire. Still, let's approach it with some care. If it's a farm house, there may be somebody there that can direct us to some places where creeks intersect. That's our major task from here on out."

"I agree," Willy said. "I'm just not certain how we approach the house with care, when there is nothing but grass and wheat for miles in every direction."

"Okay, then. Just be on the lookout."

That made little more sense to Willy, but he didn't mention it.

The vast expanse of land made it difficult to judge distance, and it took longer to reach the house than they expected. And, it was a house, with a barn and shed behind it and a whirling windmill beside it. As they grew nearer, they saw a small corral containing a few horses, cows and sheep. A man was standing on the porch – a man with a rifle in position to raise quickly if needed.

Willy waved his hat. Rusty followed suite and soon the man was doing the same, the gun lowered to his side.

"Well, I'll be," the man said. "Never'd a figured riders to be kids out here all by themselves. I'm, Parker – Jessie Parker."

He offered his hand as the boys dismounted. He called over his shoulder back through the open door.

"Mamma. You'll never believe what the east wind done blowed our way."

A woman appeared, plump, hair pulled back into a bun, drying her hands on her apron. She stopped beside the man – her husband they would learn – and offered a pleasant smile.

Rusty felt he needed to offer an explanation since their presence seemed to be troubling to the man.

"I'm Russel and this is my brother, William – we go by Rusty and Willy. We're on our way to Osage County . . . to visit relatives."

"This is my wife, Bessie. Pleased to make your acquaintance, boys. Nice horses – Indian ponies, by the looks of it."

"Yes, sir. Gifts from a tribe back in the hills."

"Need to be careful with Indians, these days, boys. There's a gang a renegades on the loose in this area."

"We are aware of that. Don't plan on sticking around for long."

"Well, you will stay the night with us and I don't want any arguments," Bessie said.

It appeared that what Bessie said was how things were.

"Very kind," Rusty said. "We have blankets and can stay in the loft of the barn. We have our own food."

“Nonsense. No passersby here are allowed not to sit at our table. You haven’t eaten until you’ve chowed down on Bessie’s cookin’. I’ll help you put up the ponies and get you set up in the loft.”

“The ponies aren’t used to being inside, sir. Perhaps we can just tether them to the corral posts.”

“As you say.”

By the time those things were attended to, supper was ready. The food was probably the best the boys had ever eaten. Willy went for seconds and Rusty, thirds. That was before the apple pie with sweetened, whipped cream.

“Ma’am, that was without any doubt the best meal we have ever had,” Willy said.

“It’s true,” Rusty added. “We don’t know how to thank you. Maybe some chores we could do in the morning before we leave.”

“Now, you just hush your prattle. It’s our pleasure to see boys put away the vittles. We had three boys – all grown and married now. Been a while since we’ve all been around this table.”

“Then, we at least insist on doing the dishes.”

“Good idea,” Jessie said. “We’ll make it a fella’s night in the dishpan. You go tend to your knittin’ now, Bessie.”

Bessie put up a fuss, but it was more mandatory (required) than believable.

They passed, on the offer of a second piece of pie – well, almost.

“I suppose we’d take a rain check on that ‘til breakfast if that’s allowed,” Willy said.

Bessie winked as the boys left the house for the barn.

“They sure are nice people,” Willie said.

“They sure are. I’m beginning to think we led very protected lives back at Dr. Potters. We really know very few people when you think about it, and virtually no females at all.”

They closed the barn doors behind them and climbed the ladder to the loft. It was dark, but they found their way. Jess had left a lantern downstairs, but the boys were afraid to use it for fear the hay might catch fire.

As they were removing their boots for the night they heard it at the same moment – bird calls coming from the distance.

“Birds sleep at night, don’t they, Rusty?”

“They do. I’m thinking those are man-made.”

“What you really mean is that they are probably being made by flesh and blood, *renegade Indians*.”

CHAPTER SIX

Introducing Mark and Sam

After only a few distant ‘bird calls’, they stopped, and at some point, the boys drifted off to sleep.

At the crack of dawn, they awoke with a start when the rooster crowed – the sounds of a *real bird*, with feathers, not a *renegade* with feathers.

After a hearty breakfast – eggs, bacon, grits, biscuits and gravy *and* pie – they were on their way. Rusty tried to leave a dollar on the table for the meals, oats for the horses, and kindness, but Jessie would have none of it.

As they rode on southwest across the plain, their conversation quickly took on a serious tone.

“I suppose you heard the names of those streams Jess mentioned when you asked him about rivers and such we’d be running into a bit further on,” Willy said enthusiastically.

“I did – Rust Creek and Williams Run. I’m thinking we’re on our way.”

“Yeah. I figured finding the first one without having any clues just might sink our whole journey.”

“I was pretty sure our parents had an ace up their sleeves – something that would be obvious to us when the time came,” Rusty said.

“And *only* us, I’m thinking. *Rust Creek* after you, and *Williams Run* after me. They must have searched a long time to find the spot where they come together.”

“Or, they ran across it and developed the rest of the clues and hiding places because of it.”

“I guess it doesn’t matter, but your explanation makes the most sense. Streams and such aren’t labeled with names on signs out here. We’ll have to ask folks when we get closer.”

“And we’ll be getting closer by noon, I’m thinking.”

"Maybe we should have asked Jessie for locations," Willy said.

"I thought about it, but I didn't want to make it seem like they were important to us – in case Scar Head happens across their farm. This way they'll have nothing to share with him."

"So, that's why you invented that story at supper last night about the man with the scar trying to claim that our horses belonged to him – to establish a reason he might drop by and seem interested in two boys. That was brilliant. Jessie and Bessie will protect us. Brilliant, I say. But what about the people we'll need to ask about the streams down here?"

"Try this idea out, brother."

Willy beamed every time Rusty referred to him as just plain, 'brother'. Rusty continued.

"There are two parts to my idea. First, only one of us will approach people with the question – that will make it seem he is traveling alone and on horseback. Scar Head has no way of knowing we have acquired horses and will expect us to be together. I'm hoping that throws them off our trail."

"And second?"

"Second, we only ask about one of the streams from any one person."

"Ah, so nobody will know we are interested in both – the confluence."

"Right. What do you think?"

"Again, it's brilliant. May I ask you something?"

"Sure, you know you can ask me anything."

"Where have you been hiding your brilliance all these years?"

With that, Rusty flung himself off his horse in the direction of Willy who was riding alongside him. They both fell to the ground and a brotherly tussle began that lasted a good ten minutes. It was punctuated with giggling and laughter and smiles that wouldn't top. Rusty was much stronger, but Willy was fast and tricky. He never won such matches, but every year he held his own for longer and longer.

In the end, Willy lay on his back, spread eagle with Rusty on top, his hands pinning Willy's wrists to the ground. He rolled off and they continued to chuckle on for some time.

"We haven't done that for a long time, Rusty."

"We haven't. You okay?"

"Of course. I only let you pin me because I thought we'd wasted enough time, you know."

Rusty turned his head toward his brother and offered a smile and nod.

“You’ve become a lot stronger this past year, Willy.”

Willy shrugged since it had just happened – nothing he felt he could take credit for.

“I suppose the ponies have run all the way to Texas by now,” Willy said sitting up, his arms supporting him to the rear as he looked around.

“Or, maybe they stuck around to enjoy the bruhaha (brawl),” Rusty said as the horses approached and nuzzled them.

The boys stood up and brushed the considerable amount of dust and dirt from their clothing. Willy spoke.

“Glad we weren’t wearing our new jackets. Skin is easier to clean up than they’d be.”

“It’s already hot,” Rusty said. “We need to find water for the ponies.”

“I’ve read that if you just give a horse its head – don’t direct him where to go – it’ll find water when it gets thirsty.”

“So, we just loosen our grip on the rope, that what you’re saying?”

“I guess. Just lay it across their necks. We can give it a try.”

With that plan in place, the ponies veered more south than west and by one o’clock had arrived at the headwater of a small stream.

“Looks like a spring at the base of that little hill,” Rusty said as they dismounted.

The ponies understood why they were there and had soon drunk their fill. The boys had noticed that Running Bear never tied up his pony and that it never wandered away. Apparently Indian ponies were trained to stay with their rider.

“Let’s wash up and then eat,” Rusty suggested.

By two, they were ready to be on their way, again. They had shaken the dust out of their pants and shirts and believed they were presentable.

“Shall we follow the stream?” Rusty asked.

“It’s going in the right direction – SSW,” Willy came back. “Wish we’d run across another human being so we could get our bearings.”

They set a relaxed pace. The ponies clearly wanted to move faster and soon they had eased up to an easy gallop.

“We didn’t ask Running Bear if the horses had names,” Willy said. “Suppose we should name them?”

“I suppose. Any ideas?”

They rode on in silence for some time before Willy answered.

“We could name them after our favorite authors,” Willy suggested.”

“Interesting! A problem, though,” Rusty said.

“What?”

“I think we have the same favorite author – Mark Twain.”

“Hmm. You’re right. Mark Twain is his pen name, though,” Willy said.

“That’s right. His real name is Samuel Clemens.”

“So, that’s our solution – Sam and Mark.”

“More brilliance, Willy. So, who gets which name?”

“Well, since I gave you such a trouncing back there on the ground, it only seems fair you get first choice,” Willy said.

They exchanged smiles.

“Okay, then, I choose Sam.”

“And I choose Mark, so that works out fine.”

Willy leaned down close to his pony’s ear and said, “Hear that. You got a name – Mark. Maybe tonight I’ll read to you out of one of his books – I brought two of them along.”

Comically, ‘Mark’, nodded his head up and down. It was worth chuckles. Rusty felt no need to converse with Sam about it. He figured he would catch on, eventually.

They came upon a rise to their left and the stream turned with it. Sharp turns in streams usually meant deeply cut beds, and deeply cut beds often meant good fishing holes.

Rusty pulled to a halt.

“Hear that?”

“Yeah. Sounds like a school playground. Kids having fun.”

“Coming from around the bend down there.”

They urged Mark and Sam ahead at a walk.

“Well, not a school yard but a half-dozen boys in and out of the water – some swimming and some fishing.”

The boys saw Rusty and Willy and waved excitedly.

They rode to the spot but stayed mounted until they understood the situation.

“You’re new here,” one of them said.

Rusty nodded and explained, “Just passing through.”

“We got lots of extra fish. Will you take some?”

They looked at each other, nodded, and Rusty continued.

“Sure. Thanks. Been mostly eating hard tack and jerky. Fish will be a real treat. Just ate, however.”

They dismounted. Boys weren’t given to hand shaking, but

the one who had been talking introduced the others. Willy hoped there wouldn't be a test because he was sure he wouldn't remember eight new names.

"We'll filet 'em and wrap 'em and you can take 'em along, then. Water's great if you want to swim."

"Just had a dip a few hours north, but thanks," Willy said. "This stream have a name?"

"Round here we call it, '*Willy's Way*'. Officially it's *William's Run*."

Rusty and Willy tried to hide their sudden excitement. Willy continued.

"We saw the pool where it seems to start, back east of here. A spring the way it looks."

"A great spring. The old timers say it's never run dry – artesian, they call it."

"Where does it go," Rusty asked wondering if he was breaking one of the rules he had set about such questions."

"Willy's Way's just short. About ten miles on downstream it hooks up with some bigger creek. Water gets really murky after that. The water in the other stream is reddish. No good for fish or swimmin' unless ya want red hair."

They boys believed they had their answer – a stream with reddish water could certainly be Rust Creek. They accepted the fish, thanked them and continued following the creek on south.

"Talk about luck," Willy said.

"Luck?"

"Yeah. Just running onto one of streams we need – maybe both."

"No luck to it. It was all part of my master plan – ride southwest and find what we need."

"Hope the plan gets better than that, from here on."

Rusty offered a smile.

"It should. Our next challenge will be finding the hiding place of whatever it is our key is supposed to fit into. I figure after we find the first one we will have learned stuff that will make other ones easier to locate."

"I assume that at each location we'll be given the names of the next streams."

"Maybe," Rusty said. "Or, maybe they will be in code of some kind so if anybody else ran across them they wouldn't know what it meant."

Willy nodded, and they rode on in silence for some time.

"Something you said bothers me," Willy said.

“What?”

“The thing about somebody else finding our clues. If even one of them has already been found and removed, we’re up the river without a paddle – the journey’s over. The chain of clues will be broken.”

“We mustn’t think like that. Our parents were clearly very smart. I am betting they managed to work things out just right. I’m more worried about Scar Head coming upon those kids in the stream and having them give us up. They were really friendly and have no reason to think we need to be protected.”

“You could have just kept that to yourself, you know. Having new things to worry about is not one of my best things right now.”

“Sorry, but we’re in this as equals, remember. I no longer get to do all the worrying for us.”

Willy nodded and sighed. He had never thought of it that way.

“Sometimes being your ‘little’ brother made life easier, you know?”

Rusty really *didn’t* know, because he had never been the little brother. He had always been in charge, the protector, the planner, the fixer of everything that went wrong for Willy. He’d never complain about it, because that’s just the way life had cut for them. He would do anything for his younger brother.

“Hear that?” Rusty said at last.

“Rushing water – rapids, maybe,” Willy said urging Mark to an easy gallop.

What Mark did, so did Sam, and they were soon moving along through the tall grass a good clip.

They pulled up on a rise overlooking the confluence. Rust Creek was just as described – murky, red, fully unappetizing looking water.

“Iron in the water,” Willy said. “It must run through iron deposits and it makes rust just like water on an axe. I’m thinking those sizeable boulders are the cause. That’s a really angry stream with the rocks jutting up and the water swirling around them.”

“You know the strangest things, Willy. I’m not complaining, but you really do know strange stuff.”

“I suppose we camp here?” Willy asked.

“I suppose. Let’s scout around for a good spot – one that’s not out in the open like it is right here.”

They dismounted, and the ponies immediately went to drink. They chose the crystal-clear water from Williams Run rather than the rusty water just beyond where the two streams met. There was

an ideal camping spot at the base of the low cliff where they had stopped. It resembled their first spot – the hole in the hill – although it was not as well closed in on the sides and not as deep.

They removed the bags from the ponies and they went off to graze in the grass at the top of the cliff (the ponies, not the boys). Willy soon had a small fire going.

“I noticed you were really picky about which sticks you collected for the fire, Willy. I don’t understand. Wood is wood.”

“Not really. Soft wood like pine burns fast, gives off little heat and makes lots of smoke. Hard wood, like what I picked up, burns slowly, gives off lots of heat and makes very little smoke. I figured we needed heat, long life and as little smoke as possible since we don’t want to give away our position.”

“Reading?”

“Yup. You should try it sometime.”

That would usually have been enough to start a tussle between them, but since they had already had one that day, Rusty merely offered a smile and nod. He would remember, however.

“Let me go get more *hard* wood then, to keep the fire stoked for the night.”

Suddenly, Willy was feeling equal to his brother. He hoped it was a good feeling – it was certainly different. He skewered (speared) the pieces of fish with green sticks and arranged them over the fire. Rusty returned with an armload of wood. Most of it was good. Willy wouldn’t make a big deal about the few sticks of soft wood in among the rest.

“I’m eager to begin looking for the . . . whatever it will be,” Rusty said as he took a seat on the ground next to his brother.

“Me, too. Have any idea what we’re looking for?”

“No more than you do. We just have to be very observant. Look for things that may seem out of place, maybe. Use our creativity, I guess. Something that contains a hole for our key.”

“Of course, that will probably be hidden in or under something else. Doubt if a rock or tree trunk will have a key hole in it.”

Rusty nodded again, understanding his brother had just made their search far more complicated, if more realistic.

“Wish we had lemon and pepper to put on the fish, Rusty. This is a far cry from what we had back at Doc’s place.”

“I wonder how he is?”

“I thought you said he was dead?”

“I only assumed that. Scar Head shot him at point blank range. If he wanted to kill him I’m sure he did. We don’t know that’s

what he wanted. A dead Doc couldn't be of any help to him in finding the key."

"What we do know is that Scar Head escaped before the police got there so they didn't really have much time to coax Doc into spilling the beans – if he was alive. That's probably good – they didn't have time to torcher him or anything."

Even without lemon and pepper the fish tasted pretty good.

"We have probably two hours until sunset," Rusty said. "Let's scout around and see if we can find our clue or whatever it is."

"I'm ready – more than ready – but I have absolutely no idea how to begin, Rusty. Do you?"

"Search the area better than any area has ever been searched before. Keep our minds open and free to see things nobody else could see. Not overlook the smallest detail."

"Oh, is that all? Give me ten minutes, then. You take a nap. I'll have this wrapped up in no time."

"You trying to be funny or are you being sarcastic?"

"Sarcastic, I suppose, but if it was funny I'll take credit for that, too."

Rusty reached out and ruffled his brother's hair.

"I don't let anybody but you do that, you know. I hate it from anybody else."

"Just wait a few years until you get a girlfriend. She'll do it to you all the time and you'll love it."

"My life's plan does not include a girlfriend, even though my observation of life suggests that probably will not be the way things go. And, anyway, how do *you* know about girlfriends?"

"I must admit that when the three of us older boys would sneak out at night it really wasn't to go night fishing."

"I see. You lied to me."

"I'd rather think of it as protecting you from something that, first, you have no way of understanding yet, and, second, would have only worried you."

"So, you're asking me to thank you for having lied to me."

"Yes, exactly. Glad you understand – and, by the way, you are welcome."

Willy thought for a moment and broke a smile.

"Okay. I know you are correct on both counts. Thank you, I suppose."

"You're welcome, I suppose."

"I'm luckier than you've been, Rusty."

"How's that, squirt?"

"When I get ready to sneak out and see girls, I'll have you to

advise me.”

Rusty laughed – one more responsibility for the older brother.

They walked to the point of land where the two streams merged. It sat some three feet above the water levels on each side of them and rose slightly behind them, becoming part of the hill and cliff under which they had made camp.

“Remember, we’re looking for something put here nearly ten years ago,” Willy said. “I wonder how far back from the point of this ‘V’ our parents considered fair game to be called the confluence.”

“Start right here and work our way back until we find it, I guess,” Rusty said.

The grass was short, sprouting up from very rocky soil. They picked up long, thick sticks to use in parting the grass ahead of them to lay bare the ground. They made their way slowly and carefully not saying a word. From time to time a larger stone would appear and they worked together to overturn it and dig a bit underneath it with their sticks. Finding nothing, they moved on. The area between the streams became wider, which slowed progress.

After having made their way some twenty feet from the point of the ‘V’ where the streams merged, they stopped and looked back, wondering if they had missed something. They were only a few yards from their campsite. Almost as one, they turned around and resumed the tedious (tiresome) task. Thirty minutes later, the sun was low in the western sky and the long shadows had begun making it difficult to see.

“I think we need to stop and wait for morning light,” Rusty said. “We’re likely to miss something.”

“I agree. There are still a few apples and pears in our sacks.”

The fire had burned low and while Willy added several larger pieces of wood for the night, Rusty searched the bags for the fruit. He held up a small, cotton bag and called to his brother.

“You remember this?”

“No. Don’t you?”

Rusty didn’t reply but untied the string that had kept it closed. He offered a broad smile.

“Jessie must have added this. It’s full of oats for the ponies. He knew they’d probably never had any before and saw how much they liked it. He is a nice man.”

Willy joined him and they each took hands full toward where the horses were standing. They smelled it, and walked – with some apparent enthusiasm – to meet them. They lapped it up like dogs

cleaning a food bowl.

The boys returned to the fire, each with a fresh, juicy, pear. They watched the fire and the shadows it cast, dance on the rock wall next to them. Willy pointed at it.

“That’s an interesting stone, see, the one that’s shaped like a flatiron.” (a thick piece of iron with a handle, heated on the cook stove and used to press out the wrinkles in clothing after a washing.)



“I see it.”

Rusty stood and moved closer to it, feeling its surface.

“Come here. Feel this and then feel the other rock around it.”

“I see. The flat iron is smooth and hard. The surrounding rock is limestone – rough and flaky.”

“Here’s a far-out idea, Rusty. The red water is caused by *iron* deposits. Here’s a stone shaped like a flatiron – *iron*. Could that be a clue – the red water telling us to look for an iron – a flat iron?”

Rusty removed his knife from the sheath on his belt and began digging around the edge of the stone. It was eighteen inches long and about a foot high. It was pointed on one end and flat on the other.

“This isn’t dirt or sand I’m picking out, Willy. It’s old, crumbling cement colored to look like the rest of the rock. It was put here by somebody.”

“Careful, Rusty! It seems to be moving from side to side as you work on it. Maybe we can slide it out with our fingers in the cracks on each side.”

“Okay, but it will be way too heavy for us to hold if we do slide it out, so be prepared to let it fall.”

They worked for several more minutes.

“Here it comes, Willy. Watch out!”

It fell with a thud that shook the ground. The boys moved back and looked into the hole left in the side of the rocky wall. What they saw was unbelievable.

CHAPTER SEVEN

But there's no Keyhole

Willy pulled a stick from the fire, lit on one end, to use for a torch. He held it close to the hole and discovered it had been chiseled out of solid rock.

"A box of some kind in there – maybe ten inches square," Rusty said.

"Coated in something," Willy said.

"Tar over wood, the way it looks."

"To make it waterproof," Willy explained. "Pirates did it to chests filled with treasure before they'd sink them to hide them."

"You saying you think there is treasure inside this one?"

"Might be nice, but that's not what I meant, Rusty."

"Shall I pull it out?" Rusty asked.

"If I'm not mistaken that's why we're here, brother."

Working more carefully than Willy could remember ever seeing him work, Rusty slid the box forward to the edge of the opening.

"Is it heavy," Willy asked.

"Hard to tell. Maybe fifteen pounds."

"That seems heavy for such a small box."

Rusty nodded and lifted it out against his chest. He dropped to his knees and bent over, setting it on the ground close to the fire.

"Feel it."

"I see. It's cold having been inside that chunk of rock all these years. I read somewhere that deep caves stay at about 45 degrees Fahrenheit year-round. It may be the same inside solid rock."

"Hold the science lecture. I don't see a key hole."

"Maybe on the underside?"

Rusty turned it over.

"There it is," Willy said, clearly excited. "We need to get out

the instructions with the arrows. They're in one of your bags."

Presently, Rusty unfolded the sheet and they examined it together.

"We can skip down to the arrows about turning the key," Willy said. "It sure looks like it says to turn the bottom of the key up to the right, then turn it down to the right, then back up to the right and finally just part way down to the right again. Remember, that's the opposite way from how keys usually turn to unlock something."

Rusty took the key. The boys' eyes met for a long moment, then he moved it to the slot and carefully, slowly, slid it inside.

"It fits. It stopped. I suppose that means it's in as far as it needs to be."

"I suppose. Now, straight up, bottom of the key turns to the right."

Rusty turned the key and stopped at the 12 o'clock position.

"Something clicked – I felt it."

"Okay, now turn it back down to where it was in the beginning – the 6 o'clock position."

Rusty completed the turn and removed his hand. It was shaking.

"Here, you do the rest Willy. Only fair we do this together."

Willy didn't mention the shakiness.

"Is it hard to move?" he asked.

"No. It's pretty easy – surprising, considering its age and everything."

Willy made the turn – up to the right.

"I felt a click, too. Now down just half way, is that what we decided?"

"That's it."

"Okay, here goes."

That time he turned it very slowly, stopping at the 3 o'clock position and removing his hand from the key to not move it further by mistake.

"I heard that last click when you stopped," Rusty said. "I guess we try to open the lid?"

It sounded like a question. Willy nodded and motioned his brother to make the move. He put one hand on each side of the lid and slid his fingernails into the depression that separated it from the bottom. Nothing happened.

"I think the tar has stuck it together," Willy said. "How about running your knife blade all around the underneath edge of the lid?"

"Good idea."

By then, his hands were steady, and he worked quickly. The

blade sunk in no more than a quarter of an inch.

“Must have a lip on the inside,” he noted as he continued. “Okay. All the way around. I’ll try again.”

“Move your hands to the front edge for better leverage,” Willy suggested.

It made sense to Rusty.

“There it comes. There it comes,” Willy said as Rusty eased it open.

Rusty pulled up the front of the lid and lay it back. Willy moved the torch in close.

“An envelope and a leather pouch a lot like the one they left with us at Doc’s,” Rusty said.

He took out the envelope and handed it to Willy.

“You open it and see what it’s about.”

“It’s sealed. Let me borrow your knife.”

Inside was a single sheet with a message on it.

“Well, what does it say?”

Willy began reading as Rusty held the torch for him. The sun was gone and the moon only a slip in the eastern sky.

Dearest sons,

Since you are reading this, it means you have successfully completed the first step, just as your father and I were certain you would. You have already proved yourselves to be clever, bright and creative. At each point in your trial of tasks, we will share with you a piece of our family history. In the end, you will know most of what you need to know to understand who you are.

Installment One:

Hundreds of years ago, Archibald Svenston I (the first), who would later become the First of the Grand Dukes of the tiny country of Svenstonia, saved the lives of a king and his family. In grateful recognition, the king elevated him to the rank of Grand Duke and set aside 1,500 square miles as the Duchy of Svenstonia in northeastern Europe – a Dukedom over which he and his descendants had full and complete authority. It sat just west of Lake Ladoga not far from present day Priozersk

(Russia).

*Your next stop on your Trial of
Tasks: Damp Shader with Bubbles, and
Azure Hat*

*With love and devotion, your Father
and Mother,*

Gd/d

“I was hoping for more specific directions – like the actual names of the streams.” Willy said. “I guess they felt the need to keep things esoteric.”

“Esoteric?”

“Less than obvious – cryptic like in a code.”

Rusty nodded, amazed again at his little brother.

“What’s in the pouch?” Willy asked.

Rusty removed it and placed it on the ground between them.

“Heavy – several pounds.”

The top was tied with a leather thong.

“I’ll never get this untied after all these years. Shall I cut it?”

“Let me try something first.”

Willy held the torch close to the thong and turned the pouch, so the strap heated. He continued for several minutes – it seemed like an eternity to Rusty. Presently, he handed the torch to his brother and blew on the thong to cool it to his touch. With apparently no problem at all, he soon had it untied.

“A hot, dry, thong becomes narrower. Mark Twain, I think.”

He opened the top and looked in.

“You’ll never believe this, brother. More coins than you have ever seen at one time.”

Rusty looked inside.

“More coins than I’ve seen altogether in my whole life, you mean.”

Without asking for his brother’s consent, he dumped them out onto the ground between them offering a running commentary about what they saw.

“Silver and gold coins in several denominations. Look, twenty-five cent pieces, more one-dollar pieces, some three-dollar pieces, and look here twenty and fifty-dollar pieces. We’re rich.”

“I estimate there’s over five-hundred dollars there,” Willy said. “That’s more than lots of men earn in two or three years.”

“Where shall we keep them, so they are safe?” Rusty asked.

“Well, I suggest for one thing we don’t keep them all in one place in case somebody tries to rob us or something.”

“Good idea – great idea, actually. Some can stay in this pouch and you keep it. The rest can go in my pouch with the silver dollars. Maybe each of us should keep one silver dollar in our pocket in case of some sort of emergency.”

Willy agreed, and they divided the coins – more by weight than value.

“Now, we need to put that rock back in place. Think the two of us together can lift it?” Willy asked.

“No way. I’m sure it weighs way over 100 pounds. Hmm. But I see you’re point. Leave no clues behind.

“Here’s an idea, Rusty. We pack the hole with soil and on the outside transplant some of the grass, so it looks like it was always that way. There are outcrops of grass all up and down the rock face. Then we can roll the flatiron down into Rust Creek with all the other stones.”

“I like it.

“I suggest we leave that for morning, so we can do it in the light,” Willy said.

Rusty agreed.

“Listen, Rusty! Those Indian bird calls again, like we heard last night. You think those renegades are following us?”

“They have no reason to follow us – do they?”

Neither one had an answer, but Rusty had some thoughts.

“Our fire is small and out of sight here beneath the cliff. It makes hardly any smoke and, anyway, on a dark night like this the smoke will not be seen. I feel pretty safe.”

Willy nodded, understanding there really wasn’t much they could do, anyway. Still, he expressed his apprehension.

“You know, Rusty, between my excitement over the treasure we found and my uneasiness about those Indians, I’m never going to be able to sleep tonight.”

“Me either, but I think we should try.”

They put on another good-sized log for heat, spread their blankets, and . . . in two minutes were both sound asleep.

* * *

By morning it was chilly. The fire had burned low. In their excitement, the boys had forgotten to slip back into their shirts. Humorously, they thought, when the ponies saw them stirring, they began nuzzling the big bag that contained the smaller bag of oats.

“Now that we have some money, we’ll need to keep a bag of oats for them,” Rusty said.

They talked while they offered them each a handful.

“Do you suppose they’ve never had oats before, Rusty?”

"I doubt if they have, but you're the authority on Indian stuff."

"I don't recall anything about what they feed their ponies."

"I'm sure we can find somebody to ask," Rusty said.

Willy smiled and added, "And maybe even somebody who knows the answer."

The time didn't seem right for a tussle. Bessie had slipped a few thick slices of ham into the 'goodie bag' she had prepared for them. They fried one of them on sticks over the fire. It took longer to fill the hole with soil and transplant grass onto it than they had anticipated. Willy found a wild violet plant and included it. They decided to bury the special box at the back of the hole, not wanting to leave any clues behind for Scar Head and his buddy.

"That looks pretty authentic, Rusty – like it's been there for a long time. It was a good idea who ever thought of it."

Rusty nodded – meaning he agreed it looked like it belonged there – and shrugged – meaning he could care less who's idea it had been. They rolled the big stone down the gentle slope into the red stream.

"It looks happy there, I think," Willy said.

Rusty rolled his eyes, thinking it was odd to believe a rock had feelings, but Willy had lots of strange thoughts.

That done, and things packed for travel, they sat next to each other on the grass and studied the KANSAS map searching for a likely, next, set of streams. They also considered the clue their parents had left in the envelope. Willy read it out loud.

"Damp Plant with Bubbles, and Azure Hat."

"Following the pattern of the first clue – Rusty for Rust Creek and William for William's Run – we can assume it refers to the next two creeks we are supposed to find. I doubt if we'll be able to figure it out ahead of time, so we'll just have to be alert and find some names that fit the clues."

"I was just thinking the same thing. But it couldn't hurt to keep in mind that damp could include words like wet, dew, moist, soggy."

"Wet Creek. Now *that* makes sense!"

"You making fun of me?"

"Probably. Sorry. I really do know you always have great ideas, kid."

Willy let it pass and offered some additional suggestions.

"Azure means blue or blue-green and Hat could be cap or fedora – I know the hat things aren't likely, but they're starting points."

"I suggest we keep to a westerly path," Rusty said, "and

hope we find folks near streams to ask about names. I thought we were pretty sneaky the way we did it last time. Those kids had no idea we were actually looking for something.”

“I agree. The Sneaky Brothers, Rusty and Willy.”

“It makes me wonder,” Rusty said. “Do you think using our real names puts us in danger?”

“Hmm? A good wonder. I doubt if our first names do, but our last name, that was confirmed for us for the first time in our parent’s note, surely will. Let’s think about coming up with a new one. One not so clearly Scandinavian. Our blond hair is a big enough giveaway, I’m thinking.”

“Actually, Rusty, Kansas is full of Scandinavians. I’ve read it. For example, Swenson – without the T – is one of the most popular last names in the state.”

“Interesting. Still, I vote we stay away from them.”

Wily nodded. He had merely offered something he thought might be interesting.

They mounted up and headed west, which meant they first had to ford the stream. The ponies seemed to enjoy being shoulder deep in the cool water. The boy’s wet trousers would help keep them cool for some hours.

“I need to talk about our parent’s note, Rusty.”

“Me too. Not sure why we avoided doing that last evening.”

“So much to take in, I suppose. We need to decide what it means for us – about us, don’t you think?”

“Yeah. In all your reading have you ever run across a reference to that country or kingdom or whatever – Svenstonia?”

“I haven’t. It appears to have been in the lakes region of southeastern Finland along the border with Russia. I remember hearing the name, *Lake Ladoga*, but I couldn’t have found it on a map. Same with that Russian city – *Priozersk*.”

“I am amazed you can even remember those places, Willy.”

“My brain seems to be coated with some sort of memory glue, I guess.”

“The main thing I got out of that note is that our parents were a duke and duchess – royalty – and that must make us royalty, also. I have to wonder what brought them to America.”

“I wonder if they wanted us to go back there and rule the place. I don’t want to be a ruler, Rusty.”

“How about a yardstick, then?”

“Doofus. You know what I mean. Think of all the responsibility a ruler has. That’s just not for me, Rusty. I hope there will be additional notes that explain all that.”

“Me, too. That Archibald fellow would have been a grandfather or great, great, or something, right?”

“In the note they talked about the dukedom in the past tense, didn’t they – ‘it *sat* just to the west of Lake Ladoga’?”

“I think that’s right. We can check it when we stop for a break.”

“The dukedom was started hundreds of years ago,” Willy said. “That’s not at all specific – at least two hundred, but who knows how many, really.”

“Maybe they left books or longer documents about all that at one of our next stops.”

“I hope so. I’m thinking they would. They seem like very thoughtful people.”

“Fifteen hundred square miles,” Willy said doing calculations in his head. “That’s close to an area that’s 125 miles on each side. It’s like if Doc Potter’s Home had been one side of the dukedom, in all of our travels so far, we still wouldn’t have crossed all of it.”

“Yeah. According to our map we haven’t gone quite 100 miles yet.”

“That was not the smallest country in the World, I can tell you that. I can think of a dozen or so that are smaller.”

“So, it was really a something, you’re saying.”

“A something?”

“I mean not just some insignificant place.”

“I have no idea of its significance, but I do know it wasn’t the smallest ‘something’ – in your words.”

“Not to change the subject, but look back over your right shoulder – more of those smoke signals. Wish I knew what they said.”

“Maybe it says, *Tepee on fire – bring water.*”

“Doofus!”

Willy became serious.

“Often, they are like a prearranged, temporary signal – that day, three puffs might mean I’m still on the white kids’ trail. Six might mean I’ve lost them. Four might mean tell my wife I want venison steak for supper tonight.”

Rusty chuckled. His brother was something else.

“Should we take any precautions you think?” Willy asked, extending his backward glance for some time.

“Here’s my thought. They’ve been on our tail ever since we left Running Bear, so if they wanted us, they’ve had plenty of chances to get to us.”

“Or, maybe they’re waiting to see if we do something wrong

or go someplace they don't want us to go."

"Like?" Rusty asked.

"I have no idea, or I would have been more specific in the first place."

"Well, out here in the open, we don't have many options – no places to hide. I suppose we could find a town and stay there a while. Doubt if a small group of renegades would search for us in a town."

"You're right like usual," big brother. "It would be a safe spot. The white folks in Kansas are notorious for treating Indians very badly. I think they'd stay their distance."

"So, do we look for a town?"

"I'm eager to finish our . . . how did our parents phrase it . . . our trial of tasks?"

"We will soon need supplies, Rusty. Once our prepared food is gone we'll need flour and salt and sugar and salt pork and eggs and things like that."

"Are you suggesting we could kill two birds with one stone – evade the renegades and get supplies – by finding a town?"

"Maybe, and I hate that saying, by the way," Willy said.

"If we do that, I have a suggestion. These sacks Running Bear gave us are fine, but I think saddle bags would be a lot better – more room, more water tight, more like what white kids would use and much easier on the ponies. I'm thinking we may have enough problems just explaining the Indian ponies."

"All good ideas. Let's see if the ponies can find some water and we'll take a break and see what the map can tell us about towns."

"Lots of the settlements out here are probably not on the kind of map we have, but we can look," Rusty said."

They gave the horses their head (stopped guiding them) and, like in the past, they quickly picked up the pace, turning slightly north. Twenty minutes later they came upon a spring-fed pond surrounded by dozens of cows.

"I guess we wait our turn," Willy said. "I've never seen so many cows at one time, have you? Of course, you haven't. We've been joined at the hip since forever. If I haven't, you haven't."

"I love it when you hold conversations with yourself. Happy with how it turned out?"

Willy offered a smile and a shrug. They dismounted, and the ponies worked their way in among the cows to the water. The boys also drank. Willy pulled two pieces of hardtack (a thick, hard cracker) out of his bag and shared one. There was no shade, so

they stood – it felt good to stand and move around after the morning’s ride. Riding bareback was a good deal less comfortable than the saddle riding they had been used to. Rusty pulled out the map and unfolded it.

“I figure we are about here.”

He pointed. Willy nodded that he agreed. Rusty continued.

“The black dots on this map seem to indicate settlements. The larger ones have names. The smaller ones, don’t. There’s a small one up ahead. Looks to be within five or ten miles wouldn’t you say?”

“If we really are here, then yes, about that.”

“If we push the ponies to a trot we can be close to it by noon – an hour or so.”

“It’s settled then?” Willy asked.

Rusty nodded and refolded the map.

“Every time I touch this map, I wonder how old Jake is doing?”

“Me too. I got the idea he’d been doing pretty good for a long time, so I suspect he’s doing fine.”

Rusty nodded and returned the map to the bag. The boys had taken to finger whistling to call their ponies. Perhaps they had just stumbled onto a signal they already knew, or perhaps they were just smart ponies. Willy put his little fingers to the corners of his mouth and offered two, crisp, bursts of sound. Not only did they come immediately, but Sam went to Rusty and Mark to Willy.

“They seem to have figured us out, already,” Rusty said.

“Yeah – it’s like we have a family again – the four of us.”

Rusty nodded as they mounted up and urged the ponies slightly south west.

After ten minutes they came upon a two-track road, dug onto the ground by wagons and stage coaches suggesting it was well-traveled.

“It’s like a sign of civilization,” Willy said, feeling more relieved by it than he would have imagined.

They followed it until their shadows disappeared as the sun moved directly above them.

“Looks like smoke from chimneys up ahead,” Rusty said pointing.

Why he needed to point when ‘up ahead’ could only be in one direction, Willy didn’t understand, but, like usual when his brother emphasized the obvious, he just smiled and remained silent. It reminded him of the smoke signals and he turned to look back.

“They’re closer than they were, Rusty. Can’t be more than a

couple of miles away.”

As if on signal, they kneed their ponies into a slow gallop. Clearly, the animals loved to run fast.

Had they looked back again, the boys would have seen a cloud of dust closing on them fast – the dust of at least one skilled rider.

///

CHAPTER EIGHT

Meet Russel and William Jones

The hand painted sign at the edge of town, read, *Fascinating Kansas, pop. 198*. The road continued through the small settlement as its main street. The town consisted of that one, wide, street, plus a half-dozen others feeding into it. Among other businesses, there was a general store, a livery stable, a stage office, a blacksmith, Miss Mary's cafe, and a combination saloon and boarding place. There were several horses tied at hitching rails in front of the short rows of buildings that defined 'downtown'. The shops faced each other across the hardpacked dirt street. There were no adults in sight – probably smart, as hot as it was at that hour.

A rider approached from behind them, keeping to a good gallop. He passed them and pulled up in front of the stage office. The dust trailed him and even moved beyond where he had stopped. A boy about Rusty's age came outside to meet him. They exchanged canvas bags and a fresh canteen, while the horse drank from the water trough. As quickly as he had come, the rider was on his way again following the road west.

The boy spotted Rusty and Willy, and waved. They returned it and walked their ponies to where he stood on one of the two wood plank sidewalks that separated the clapboard, business buildings from the street.

"Hi there," came the boy's cheery greeting. "Don't get many kids coming to *Fascinating* – certainly not alone. I'm Kyle."

Willy was puzzled and asked his question as they dismounted.

"I thought the pony express went out of business fifteen years ago."

"Oh, Benny, you mean. He makes a run from Atchison down to Great Bend twice a week. With the coming of the railroads, the stage cut back to once a week. Hardly ever any passengers to or

from *Fascinating*. He brings the mail and sometimes small parcels.”

“Glad you could clear that up,” Willy said offering his hand for a shake. “I’m Willy and this is my brother, Rusty. If you need a last name, we’ll make one up for you.”

Kyle laughed out loud.

“You will find that unlike most folks here in town, I’m not at all nosey. I should warn you, they’ll definitely be more than a little interested in two kids traveling without adults.”

“We can ease their minds. Our father and uncle are camped about five miles east. We’re traveling northwest toward Nebraska. They’re front men for a railroad looking into spreading a line through cattle country up that way across to Colorado. They gave us the day off to come to town and whoop it up.”

Kyle smiled and shook his head.

“ ‘Fraid you won’t find much *whoop* in these parts. Good home cooking at Mary’s Restaurant. Good beds above Billy Joe’s Saloon. I got a ball we could toss around. We could shoot mark if you got 22 rounds – I’m out and broke. Don’t get paid ‘til Saturday.”

“Probably won’t be here very long. A home cooked meal sounds good, though,” Willy went on, looking at Rusty, hopefully.

“Sure does. You come with us, Kyle – our treat. We’d like to talk more with you. Been a while since we’ve actually chewed the fat with anybody younger than 40.”

“That would be great. Mary’s my great aunt so I eat free.”

At that moment a burly, bald man with a long, blond beard opened the door behind them and called out.

“Kyle. Where’s the messenger bag?”

“Right here, Uncle George. Seems really light today.”

He turned and handed it to him.

“New youngin’s, I see,” the man said walking toward them, hand out, clearly interested.

“Yeah. Rusty and Willy *Jones* from back east. Here with their father and uncle working their way up to Nebraska. We’re gonna go over to Aunt Mary’s for lunch. Can I bring you somethin’?”

“I’ll be fine ‘till later. Good meetin’ you boys.”

He returned inside.

“*Jones*?” Willy asked through a giggle.

“He’d a asked, so I just saved him the trouble. *Jones* sounds back east. Out here everybody is somethin’ *son* – *Johnson*, *Amundson*, *Erikson* and on and on.”

“Well, thanks, I guess, Kyle *Somethingson*,” Rusty said.

Kyle smiled and shrugged.

“Like I said, I’m not nosey.”

He hesitated, then went on.

“I should tell you that two men rode into town yesterday afternoon and asked around about two boys about your ages.”

Rusty and Willy traded glances. Rusty spoke.

“Any idea why they were interested?”

“Nope. I got the idea it wasn’t good, though.”

“Not good? I don’t understand,” Willy said pushing for more.

“They were bad looking dudes – dirty, smelly, rude, impatient.”

“Sound like a good pair to keep away from,” Rusty said.

“What did they look like – so we can avoid them if our paths cross?”

“They wasn’t the cowpokes they was makin’ out to be – there faces and hands wasn’t tanned. Their palms wasn’t working men’s hands – no calluses, you know. One more thing, the guy who done all the talkin’ had a ugly, jagged, scar across his forehead – made by a serrated knife in a fight, I’d say.”

“By serrated you mean a knife with teeth?”

“Right. Like a fishin’ knife. It was awful lookin’. Many years old, I’d guess.”

“Thanks for the heads up – no pun intended,” Willy said.

They walked across the street. The ponies followed. Willy spoke to them.

“You guys stay here. We’ll be back in a little while.”

An older boy – eighteen, perhaps – was coming out as they approached the door. Kyle turned to Willy, who had taken the role as spokesman.

“Edgar, here, works at the livery. He could fix your mounts up with oats and a brushin’ for two bits (a quarter), if you want.”

The boys looked at each other and nodded. Rusty put the ends of the lead ropes into Edgar’s hand hoping it would be like giving the ponies permission to go with him. They did, so apparently it worked. More likely it was the aroma of oats that hung on Edgar like perfume on dancing girls.

“I see they’re unshod. Daddy and I could shoe ‘em in under a hour.”

“Your father the blacksmith?”

“Yup. I will be someday if my arms ever muscle up.”

“I think we’ll leave them like they are – their hooves, not your muscles. Thanks though.”

Edgar and the ponies moved on down the street.

“Let me guess,” Rusty said. “Kyle is your cousin and his father your uncle.”

“Good guess. You’ve discovered our secret – everybody in

this town's related. A few from surrounding ranches have married in. If any of the girls see you two, they'll likely kidnap you hoping to get some new blood into the family lines. We marry young in Fascinating. Sixteen's an old maid. My plan is to stay single for a long spell, yet."

"We'll do our best to keep out of sight," Willy said.

Rusty wasn't so quick to resist the idea, and looked around in case any were watching them.

Inside, Kyle made the introductions and suggested inch-thick steaks, brown beans, taters', and apple pie. They agreed.

"We should have asked first, but how much will this cost?" Willy asked.

"How much you got on you?" Kyle came back with a smile.

Without thinking, Willy said, "Two dollars, but we will also need to pay Edgar.

"Works fine then. Sixty cents apiece for lunch will leave you more than enough for the two bits for the livery."

"I suspect you are not being completely truthful, Kyle," Rusty said.

"Not really. The steaks are seventy-five cents apiece without the family discount. Ponies won't eat as much oats as full-sized horses so twenty-five cents will handle it. I'll see to it all."

'Little does he know how much they've taken to oats', Rusty and Willy thought to themselves.

The boys had lots more money in their bags, of course, but they didn't want to make that public, so had only referred the silver dollar each of them carried in his pocket.

Inside, at the table, Rusty took his turn at making up a cover story – he doubted if he could do as well as Willy had done about uncles, the railroad and Nebraska. Still, he gave it a try.

"I'm finishing up a school project this summer and Willy's helping. I'm collecting rocks from streams. I'm labeling where they came from and when I get home I will make a geologic map of the area we covered this summer. My teacher says rocks from streams and creeks are the best representatives of the geology of an area."

"Interesting. We don't really have a school here in *Fascinating*. My ma teaches us – only eleven school age kids in town. Went through a baby drought (dry spell) a few years back."

"How did this place get its name – seems odd."

"Story is, my great grandpappy and his new bride was crossin' the plains in a covered wagon and it broke down at this spot. There's a huge spring just up the rise north of where this here Main Street is today. He looked around and he said, 'fascinating

place. Let's make this our home'. So, that's how we got three generations of Edmonsons right here in *Fascinating, Kansas*."

Once the food was served, Willy got down to business.

"I imagine you know the streams and creeks around here don't you. Maybe you could point us toward some – for my brother's project."

"I can do better than that, I'll draw you a map. I know every swimmin' and fishin' hole for seventy-five miles in every direction."

He went behind the counter and returned with a large sheet of paper and a pencil. For the next twenty minutes, while the boys ate, he held forth naming and drawing and describing the streams. He added sketches of bluffs, woods, outcroppings and so forth.

"You really know your stuff, Kyle," Rusty said. "This is beautifully done."

"I want to be a artist. Must have 500 drawings back in my room. Most of them are black and white. Colored pencils and paints are pretty expensive."

They continued talking for some time. Kyle clearly loved to chat – especially about himself. That seemed reasonable since everybody there in *Fascinating* already knew all about him.

They paid Mary and went out onto the walk. There were Sam and Mark waiting patiently. Rusty gave the quarter to Kyle who assured him he'd take care of it. He boys were sure he would. They said their goodbyes.

Once seeing Kyle back inside the stage office, their final stop in *Fascinating* became the general store where they purchased supplies – flour, salt, bread and such – and a set of saddle bags for each pony. They decided against saddles, thinking spending that much money at one time might raise questions. They would wait for another town.

It was nearly two o'clock when they were ready to head out of town. Willy suggested that they should leave the way they came to make their story seem correct – back to the east to meet up with their relatives.

A half mile out of town they turned south and a half mile after that they stopped at a small grove of scrub oak trees. They needed to examine the new map away from the eyes and ears of their new acquaintances.

"Well, one of the steams referred to in the note jumps out at me, how about you?" Rusty said/asked.

"You mean *Blue Bonnet Way* from the clue about an Azure Hat. I saw that, too. The other one isn't so obvious."

"I know. The clue is, Damp Shadder Rapids. We knew right

away that would be hard. What about this one, Dewey's Stream – dew is damp?"

"Two problems," Willy said. "It doesn't intersect with Blue Bonnet, so it would make the rest of the clue meaningless. There has to be a confluence."

Rusty nodded and went back to examining the map.

"Here's *Wetherly Creek* and it runs into *Blue Bonnet*," Rusty said.

"It starts with w-e-t, I'll give you that much," Willy came back.

"Yeah. I see. I doubt if it will be that – what's your word – too *esoteric*?"

Willy nodded again.

"Hey, way down here. This creek joins Blue Bonnet about halfway along its length. Before they meet, they run close together – hard to separate them. What's that stream's name?"

"Let's see," Rusty said running his finger along the line. "*Rain Tree Rapids*. That could fit the clue. Rain for damp. Bubbles for Rapids. I don't get the shadder part."

"You are pronouncing the word wrong, big brother. In the clue, it only had one 'd'. That makes the 'a' long not short – *Shāder*. And, shader could refer to a tree."

"Nice work, MBTG."

Willy flashed him a puzzled look.

"M-B-T-G?"

"Stands for My Brother The Genius."

"I like it, but don't begin counting on it. I know lots of stuff, but you're usually the one who can link things together in just the right way."

Rusty thought for a moment.

"Let's see, that would make me, TOWCLST?"

"What?"

"The One Who Can Link Stuff Together."

"I prefer, MAB."

"Now, I'm the one with the puzzled look."

"My Absurd Brother."

"And don't you ever forget it!"

It produced an extended roll of chuckles between them. That was followed by a short period of silence. Willy broke it.

"I know I haven't told you often enough, Rusty, but out of all the people in the world, I'm glad you're my big brother."

"I love you, too, squirt."

For some less than obvious reason, it called for another tussle – not long, not hard, but a tussle. Rusty had long known that

their tussles had always been their way of saying, 'I love you'. That was the first time, however, Willy had fully understood that. It had been an important moment.

"The spot where the creeks meet looks to be a good 12 or 14-hour ride from here," Rusty.

"Yeah, it looks that way to me, also. If we ride until sundown today, we can probably be there by sundown tomorrow."

"How many days will it take us to get to where the 'K' in Kansas is on our map?" Willy asked.

"You figure it. I'd estimate we've come a little more than 100 miles toward the west side of the state."

"So, the state is about 400 miles wide – that leaves 300."

"But, we know we won't be riding in a straight line. We have to move up and down each county in our search."

"That's right. So, let's add that hundred back in. If we walk and trot the ponies for maximum distance per day that's about six miles an hour or sixty in a ten-hour day. 400 divided by 60 is about seven more days. That's not really so long, is it?"

"I guess not," Rusty said. Like you, I'm just eager to get everything figured out – read all the things our parents want us to know – see what they may have left us at each place."

"I get you, still, seven days out of a lifetime isn't all that much. I've enjoyed the trip so far. We've met some interesting people – Running Bear, Jessie and his wife, Kyle and Edgar. It's showed me something important."

"What's that?"

"That, in general, people are pretty nice."

"Remember what Doc used to say about that?"

"Yeah," Willy said. "Nice people find nice people. I suppose so far, at least, we've proved that. I think we're very nice people, don't you?"

"I do, Rusty agreed. I was thinking about that last night and decided our parents would be very pleased with how we are turning out."

"I wonder if that's because we were born to be nice people or if it's due to Doc's good influence on us?" Willy asked.

"Some of both, I'm thinking."

Willy nodded, thoughtfully, but had nothing to add, so let it drop.

They reset their path slightly south west. In addition to the possibility of problems with the renegades, it appeared they had to add Scar Head and his companion back in to their situation. They had hoped those two were a thing of the past. Apparently, Kyle had

gotten close enough to get a good look at them. What he said verified what the boys had assumed.

They made several watering stops at ponds and small streams, but their intention was to put on as many miles that afternoon and evening as possible. They settled for chunks of bread pulled from the new loaves, and jerky, eating while they traveled. The land became slightly rolling the further they rode. It made for a more interesting view, but the upping and downing only added to the number of steps their mounts had to take.

“Sun’s about down,” Willy said at last. “We need to find a place to make camp for the night.”

Rusty nodded and suggested, “Let’s give the ponies their head. They’ve done a good job so far finding spots for us to bed down close to water.”

Half an hour later, in the twilight, they were rolling out blankets on a sandy area at the bottom of a shallow valley alongside a trickling stream, deeply cut into the ground. The ponies drank, and the boys filled their canteens. The breeze was from the south – warm and gentle. Although it wasn’t really needed for heat, they made a small fire. The rule was, that flames kept the wild animals away and attracted the mosquitos, so they burned themselves up in the flames. They figured those were two good reasons for a fire

“I didn’t see smoke signals this evening,” Rusty said.

“Maybe that means the renegades have veered off to the north or turned back,” Willy said, hopefully.”

Rusty nodded.

“I can’t see why renegades would be following us in the first place. Like I said, they could have had us anytime they wanted.”

Willy really wanted to believe his brother, but deep down inside he wasn’t convinced.

The campsite was up against the fairly flat side of the hill that formed the north side of the valley – more like a dip than a valley. It didn’t provide shelter from above but worked to hide them and the fire from prying eyes. They spread their blankets close to the hill, removed their boots, and lay down.

“I’m amazed at how much these saddle bags hold,” Willy said stroking the pair he had selected. They each kept his close to him.”

“That reminds me, if we’re going to keep using that story about me collecting rocks, we need to put some in one of my saddle bags in the morning – just in case we meet somebody who’s overly inquisitive.”

"We did spin some great stories about ourselves, didn't we?" Willy said grinning.

"Yeah. Where on earth did you get that tale about our dad and uncle and the railroad?"

"Who knows. My mind just has a way of providing what my tongue needs in times of crisis."

That required no response from Rusty. He'd witnessed it dozens and dozens of times.

"So, shall we continue to be the Jones boys?" Willy asked.

"Can you see any reason we shouldn't? It's short and common."

"One thing, maybe. Would it be better if we changed our name every time we met somebody new, so it would be harder for Scar Head to track us?"

"A great point. I hadn't thought about that. So, who shall we be tomorrow?"

"How about Brown? There were lots of Browns back home."

"Brown, it will be, then."

Willy giggled.

"What?" Rusty asked.

"It just seems odd for two such lily-white, blond headed kids to be named Brown."

"Your head spins crazy concerns, you know."

"Yes, I do. Thanks again for noticing."

"The next day we can be the *White* brothers. That make you feel better?"

"I didn't say I felt bad about being brown. You need to listen better."

"And YOU need to go to sleep. Goodnight."

"Goodnight. It's been a good day, hasn't it?"

"It has, and it will be even better when you stop chattering."

The chattering stopped. The giggling didn't.

* * *

Willy had always been an early riser, so he was up with the first hint of the sun's return over the low hill to the east. That morning it spread soft, indistinct, narrow bands of pink and orange, at first barely visible, eventually brightening into long fingers of brilliant scarlet, reaching out over them toward the west. To Willy, it looked like the hands of Mother Nature proving she was there watching over them. He would not share that with his brother. Willy enjoyed beauty in all its forms. In recent years, Rusty only seemed interested if it assumed the form of a teenage girl.

As he was watching the colors from the sky reflect on the sand, something not at all beautiful jumped out at him. He worked his brother's shoulder to rouse him.

"What?"

It was not the most pleasant, *what*, Willy had ever heard from him.

"Things you need to see here all around us here in the sand."

Rusty sat up and stretched. Willy pointed to several spots on the ground.

"You'll need to explain," Rusty said pulling on his boots.

"Prints. Foot prints. Indian moccasin prints."

That, got Rusty's attention. He moved closer and knelt to examine them, moving from place to place.

"What you make of it, Willy?"

"One: there were Indians all around us here last night and that doesn't seem good. Two: they didn't slit our throats or strip us and tie us over ant hills, and that seems good."

"The renegades, you think?"

Willy shrugged, understanding there was no way of knowing. He had a thought, however.

"There aren't any marks suggesting horse hooves and that tells me they left them some distance away and walked to us. They didn't want us to wake up."

"Is anything missing? Have you examined the saddle bags? And, where are Sam and Mark?"

They each pawed through his supplies.

"Nothing missing, here," Rusty said.

"Here either. This is weird."

"Maybe nothing we had was anything they could use."

"Maybe," Willy replied. "I suppose the good news is that we didn't wake up dead."

Rusty gave him a quick glance and a shake of his head. Who but his little brother would have thought such a thing, let alone say it?

Willy didn't understand Rusty's smile, but he didn't ask. Instead: "Maybe the renegades were just sending us a message – that they are here and can come to get us anytime they decide to."

"But get us for what? We're kids. We're unarmed. They have no way of knowing that we have all those coins."

"You still have your share of them?" Willy asked. "Did you check for them in your saddle bag?"

"No, because I keep them under my blanket at night."

“Smart. Wish you’d have told me.”

“Figured if you didn’t know you couldn’t tell anybody if bad guys accosted us at night.”

“Accosted? My brother uses the word, *accosted*?”

“It means waylaid,” Rusty offered.

“I know what it means. I’m just surprised you do.”

“I’m not a complete doofus.”

“Oh, I didn’t mean that, Rusty. Sorry if that’s how it sounded.”

“I’m fooling with your head, Squirt. We’re fine.”

“Fine until those renegades decide to come down on us like a coyote on a Jack rabbit! I’ve got it. If they know we are friends of the chief’s son, Running Bear, maybe they plan to kidnap us and trade us for something.”

“You could have talked all morning and not said that. Let’s eat and get on our way.”

“That may be more difficult than you think if the Indians took our ponies.”

///

CHAPTER NINE

A Red-Eyed Ogre. Really!

Willy whistled several times and the ponies arrived on the trot. The boys were relieved, of course.

They picked up their pace as they headed on toward their next destination. To keep their minds off the renegade scare, they talked about other things.

“Why do you suppose our parents chose to use the confluence of streams and creeks as the clues for us?” Willy asked.

“I suppose there are hundreds of things they could have selected like county court houses, or so many paces in some direction from city limits signs, or the intersection of trails or roads. Of all the possibilities, the point of confluence is probably just about the last place anybody would think of. Also, they could carefully choose out of the way spots that would be of little interest to anybody else – so no one would be likely to stumble onto what they left behind for us.”

“That’s good thinking, Rusty. I imagine you’re right. Our parents just continue to prove how smart they were.”

Rusty nodded.

“They put a huge amount of planning and work into all this, didn’t they?”

Willy nodded and continued.

“You think there will be a box like the first one at every place – tar-treated wood with a metal, water-proof lining?”

“We’ll be better able to predict that after we uncover this next one.”

Willy nodded.

“It’s pretty wonderful that they gave us credit for being smart without really knowing us – I mean as older kids. They knew you, of course, so I’m sure they knew you were intelligent. But me? The last time they saw me, all I really knew how to do was cry and

poop.”

“But I just imagine you did both of those things with extreme skill.”

They shared a smile and chuckle.

By mid-morning it had grown hot, so they shed their shirts. Each time they stopped to water the ponies, they soaked their hair, hats and the bandanas they wore around their necks. Still, they remained hot!

“The ponies don’t seem to be affected by the heat as much as we are,” Willy observed at one point.

“Bred for it, I suppose. Their sweat keeps their hair wet enough to help cool them, I suppose.”

It really wasn’t a verified answer, but it was as good a ‘suppose’ as Willy could come up with.

By mid-afternoon, they began taking serious steps to find the creeks they were looking for.

“I’m sure we are in the general vicinity,” Rusty said as he pulled Sam to a stop.

He took out the map. Willy and Mark moved in close, so Willy could also have a look. Rusty pointed and followed the river with his finger. The *Bluebonnet* runs from the northwest corner of the county all the way down, almost to the south-east corner. *Rain Tree Rapids* meets it about half way down its length. I’m not sure where we are in the county, but if we keep moving west we have to come across the Bluebonnet.

“How will we know it’s the Bluebonnet?” Willy asked.

“I assume it will be the only creek wearing an azure colored hat.”

They chuckled and moved on.

Not only had Rusty been correct (about meeting it, not the hat) but no more than thirty minutes later, there they were standing on its bank.

“Got here sooner than I thought we would,” Rusty said. “Which way should we head – upstream or downstream to look for the ‘Rapids?’”

“Upstream is to our right so maybe that’s the *right way*.”

It was worth a smile. Once the four of them had quenched their thirsts, they headed north, keeping close to the stream.

An hour passed. Two hours passed.

“Think right was wrong?” Willy asked at last.

“The county looks to be about 50 miles north to south. We’ve established that the *Rapids* seems to enter the Bluebonnet about half of that length from the top. Let’s give it another hour. We may

have drifted further south than we figured. It'll be getting dark by then so if we haven't found it we'll make camp for the night, and start over in the morning, okay?"

"Sounds good. I'll be ready for a swim to cool off and to wash away the layer of dust that the breeze has laid on us."

Rusty nodded.

Half an hour later the ponies shifted gears from a walk to a trot.

"I wonder what this is about?" Willy asked.

"They seem to know something we don't."

"I hope they haven't picked up the scent of some of their old pony friends that the renegades stole when they left Running Bear's village."

"You worry too much," Rusty said.

"I will remind you of that while they are lighting the fire at the bottom of the stakes we're tied to."

It had been both humorous and scary, so didn't warrant a chuckle.

They soon found themselves at an easy gallop.

"Hear that?" Willy said.

"I do. The Rapids maybe?"

"I'm hoping so."

They let the ponies do as they wanted and presently there it was – the spot where the two creeks met. Rain Tree Rapids came down a moderately steep rise. That, paired with the substantial number of rocks sticking up above the surface, forced the water into raging, whitewater rapids. In spots, water sprayed several feet in the air. The noise grew louder as they drew near.

"Look!" Willy said. "Little rainbows all over the place in the mist. I think it should be called, *Creek of the Dancing Waters*."

The water churned angrily into the Bluebonnet, having caused a wide, deep pool there with a large, permanent whirlpool near the center.

"I bet if a fish gets caught in that, it'll be dizzy for the rest of the day."

That had been Willy, of course.

They dismounted.

"Which first – make camp or swim?" Willy asked.

"Probably make camp. I'll feel better once we settle on a good spot. I see lots of kindling just waiting for us along the bank."

They turned away from the stream and surveyed the area. There was a small stand of scrub oak not far away. Willy began walking toward it. Mark followed while Sam waited with Rusty.

Rusty rubbed his pony's nose and forehead.

"You're a good and loyal pal, Sam. I feel fortunate to have you in my life. Best of all, I suppose, you don't seem to care one whit that I'm white and not Indian. You could teach a lot of folks a great lesson about life. I'll see that you get an extra portion of oats tonight."

"Hey, come see this," Willy called enthusiastically.

Rusty trotted to his brother's side.

"Well I'll be. An old lean-to."

He circled it, looking it over.

"Good roof. Sturdy sides. Doesn't look like anybody's used it recently."

The structure was eight feet square and had a slanted roof, high at the front, sloping down to the ground at the rear. The sides and three quarters of the front were made from four-inch-thick logs, set upright and sunk a foot or so into the ground. The roof extended out over the front. The tattered remains of a sheet of canvas that had once acted as the door covering, hung beside it.

"Sturdy for sure. I'd say we have a home for the night."

The ponies took turns looking inside, but soon lost interest. The boys removed their saddle bags and blankets and the tired animals trotted back to play in the water.

"A fire circle," Willy said pointing to a small, shallow pit surrounded by stones.

It sat no more than three feet from the opening in the lean-to, clearly used as a source of heat as well as for cooking. Willy took his turn to circle the tiny structure.

"What's with the round rock on the roof up near the front?" he asked.

"I didn't pay attention. Come around to the front and I'll boost you onto my shoulders, so you can examine it."

Several minutes later Willy had the answer – well, part of it.

"It covers a hole in the roof. I don't understand."

He jumped to the ground and went inside, looking up.

"Dark in here, but I see the bottom of the rock."

"So? What?"

"Maybe when the stone's removed it can act like a chimney – a hole for smoke to escape when you build a fire inside – for cooking or warmth on cold, winter nights."

"Makes sense. We should have bought a lantern or a box of candles when we were in Fascinating. Then we could see in here."

"Think caveman, brother."

"Huh? Oh! *Torch*, you mean?"

No response was needed. Rusty changed the subject.

“We can explore more in there after a swim. It’s still really hot for evening.”

They enjoyed the water for an hour, then collected wood from along the Bluebonnet. The breeze quickly whipped up into a wind strong enough to make the tree branches sway. It brought refreshingly, cool air. Darkness would be upon them during the next half-hour, so they moved their supplies and equipment inside the lean-to. Willy started a small fire in the pit outside. It was a north wind which scooted right up over the roof and pretty much left the fire to burn steadily.

Rusty selected a three-foot-long, two-inch-thick piece of dry wood and lit one end. Holding it upright, they entered the little hut and had a serious look around. With little head, room they managed their search on their knees. They discovered another, smaller, fire pit directly under the hole in the roof, confirming Rusty’s suggestion about it. Between it and the front wall was a flat slab of rock two feet square and two to three inches thick. It stood up against the logs, its clear purpose was to shield the logs in the wall from the flames and heat. The floor was hard-packed, sandy clay. The place was completely empty. Somebody had gone to a great deal of work to build it. Rusty was thankful they had come upon it. Willy, his imagination engaging for the night, hoped the seven-foot-tall, red-eyed, green ogre, with sharp teeth and claws that had built it, would not return to claim it!

They sat, cross-legged, watching out the door at the gathering storm.

“A great night to have found real shelter,” Rusty said.

Willy nodded but had another concern.

“The ponies seem to be restless. The wind I suppose.”

“They’re smart enough to find good shelter,” Rusty said, becoming the big brother for a few moments.

Again, Willy nodded. Rusty tried to get his mind off the storm by setting a small fire inside.

“Let’s make a hot meal tonight. I’m thinking eggs, fried potatoes, and fried salt pork. How does that sound?”

“Great. The new skillet we got in Fascinating and all those other things are in my saddle bags.”

They had dropped into opposite rolls that evening – Willy usually handled the fire and Rusty the food.

“We forgot to ‘oatify’ the ponies tonight,” Willy said.

Rusty smiled at the English language’s newest word, and nodded.

“Double in the morning, I guess.”

He looked out the door.

“They have left to seek shelter. I imagine they’ve forgotten, also.”

He had sensed his younger brother’s discomfort about the storm so didn’t mention the wind had picked up considerably and the temperature had dropped a dozen degrees since they were sitting watching. The thick log walls and roof kept the outside noise to a minimum. The torch, which Rusty had sunk into the floor, was burning low. He picked it up and searched around the door. He found what he was looking for – four nails protruding across the top of the opening. He lowered the torch and lay it on the fire where it could burn out safely.

He unrolled his blanket, doubled it, and hung it from the nails to cover the opening. It was longer than the door, so he could set rocks along its bottom to keep it from blowing around. The little room seemed to immediately grow warmer. Willy felt it.

“Good thinking. We’ll be cozy as a bug in a rug in here tonight.”

Rusty hoped that was going to be true.

They were soon enjoying that promised hot meal. Rusty always ate twice as much as his brother – an age and size thing at those periods in boys’ lives. They ate from the skillet with tin spoons, which Jessie and Bessie had packed in with the things they had given them.

“That really hit the spot, Rusty. By the way, I’m feeling better now, so you can stop acting like a big brother.”

“You noticed.”

“I got a nose that sniffs out love faster than a coyote can smell a ground squirrel.”

Rusty tousled Willy’s hair. It’s what a big brother did when he couldn’t find the words he needed to respond to such a comment.

“We can share my blanket tonight,” Willy said. “If we keep the fire going low, it will stay plenty warm in here anyway.”

And that was the way they began the night. It reminded them of how, when Willy was just a little boy, he would sometimes crawl into bed with Rusty when the shadows seemed scary or he was not feeling well. Like Willy had said, he had the best big brother in the world.

They were soon asleep.

They were soon wide awake, again.

“What’s that awful noise?” Willy asked sitting up.”

“Must be the wind.”

“Sounds like a locomotive coming at us at full throttle.”

“Can’t be that, of course,” Rusty said moving to the door.

He pulled back the blanket just enough, so he could look out. It was not something he wanted Willey to see – a tightly whirling tornado not a half-mile downstream from them.

He hadn’t acted quickly enough; Willy was already beside him, also looking out at the storm.

Sticks, limbs and grass were flying through the air in unpredictable paths. The noise became deafening. It was as if the very air was being sucked up and out of the room through the chimney opening. It became difficult to breath.

“Over to that front corner away from the door,” Rusty said.

They sat, legs out in front of them. At the same moment, they reached out for each other and scooted back against the wall. The building vibrated. The blanket was blown off the nails. Rain blew inside, and the floor sat an inch deep in water. There was a near-by lightning flash that lit the room. That was followed quickly by a powerful thump against the lean-to.

“I think a tree has fallen against the hut,” Willy said.

“I agree. It only shows how substantial this hut is. I’m feeling better about things.”

Sometimes Willy wondered about his brother. There they were in the middle of a severe, lightning flashing, thunderstorm, with trees falling all around them and a tornado headed their way, and Rusty says he’s feeling better about things!

Presently, the rain stopped blowing in through the door. The fallen tree was protecting the opening from both the wind and the rain. The storm raged on for some time. The boys had no way of knowing what time it was. They were worried about the ponies. With the tree laying on it, the hut was less likely to be blown away – which would leave the boys to face the storm out in the open. The fire had flooded out as the rain covered the floor. It became noticeably chillier inside.

Then, almost as quickly as it had all started, it was over. Rusty crawled to the door and looked out. The world was still dark, but he could see the tree laying there protecting them.

Willy picked up the blanket and the two of them wrung it out just in front of the door. He took it back inside and began sopping up the water from the fire pit.

“Still some dry wood on top of the pile we laid inside. I think we can have a fire going again in a few minutes. I’ll work at that while you hang up the blanket again.”

It all worked out just like Willy had said it would. What water

had not rolled off the hard-packed sandy clay floor, seemed to have been absorbed, and although the floor couldn't be called dry, it certainly was no longer flooded. Willy's blanket was soaked as well, so they wrung it out. Rusty draped it over the fallen tree branches so it could begin drying.

Willy pointed east where the sun was beginning to brighten the horizon.

"Time to get up anyway, the way it looks."

Rusty nodded. They looked around as the world gradually took form again – spotty reflections of the moon became the streams – deep shadows become stands of trees.

"Debris everywhere," Rusty said. "Call the horses."

"You really need to learn how to finger whistle. Expect lessons later in the day."

Willy whistled, and they were soon there. Mark had a nasty scratch across his left flank, but it was not deep. Sam had apparently endured the night without consequence. Neither of them seemed bothered about any of it. A new day was a new day for them with no lingering fright. Willy understood that, and was determined to follow their example.

Several things became evident in the light of day. Their clothes were caked in mud from top to bottom. That called for a washing. They each had a change of clothes – shirt, trousers, socks. They took a quick dip in the water to clear their skin and hair of the mud the floor had so unselfishly shared with them, then dressed. They took advantage of the cooking facilities and again cooked eggs and warmed the last big slice of ham Bessie had provided. The ponies chose to be pests, hanging way too close until they received their oats. They didn't object to the fact they had become wet during the night.

The next – the main – item on the schedule was to uncover the hiding place of the new clue. They felt certain they were at the right spot. No other nearby streams could be construed (interpreted) as doubles for the clues they had received, and they *did* come together right there.

They walked to the point of land where they joined – looking north it put the Bluebonnet on their right and the Rapids on their left. They turned around and, like they had done before, began a meticulous (careful) search of the area between them. The land rose to the right and remained flat ahead and to the left – west. An hour later, they had covered twenty yards to the north, moving back and forth within the ever-widening space between the streams.

"What's that?" Rusty said pointing due west, to a spot

midway between them.

They met at a slightly raised area, covered in three-foot-high prairie grass. It had been a reflection of light from something at the spot that had drawn Rusty's attention.

"A grave stone," Willy said, pushing back the grass.

"Sure looks that way. The shiny marble reflected light back at me. Can we make out what it says?"

The headstone sat on a larger, flat stone, that lay on the ground providing a solid base. The main marble slab stood almost three feet high and was eighteen inches side to side and four inches thick. It was somewhat weathered but easily read.

"Okay, I read it this way," Willy said.

He dropped to his knees for a more direct view.

R.W. (Duke) ORPHANY

1838 - 1870

Son of a fineland,
a Grand family, and
a shady history.

Rusty was the first to respond.

"We need to copy that down. I have paper in my saddle bag. Give me a minute."

He carefully copied it in words and in form – line by line. He sat down in the grass beside Willy and together they studied it.

"So, the grave of somebody named, R.W. (Duke) Orphany. That has lots of possibilities for us," Rusty said.

"You mean like R for Russel and W for William?"

"Yeah. And his nickname – Duke. Our father was a Duke."

"Yes, and I think I got the next part. You?"

"Oh, yes – Orphany as in orphans – you and me – R and W."

"I don't immediately get the dates," Willy said.

"Let's do some figuring. Let's guess it refers to our Father. It is now 1880. We arrived at Doc Potter's ten years ago – 1870. From all we can tell, that would be when our parents died. If I am fourteen like Doc contended, then I was born in 1866. If Father was in his late 20s at the time I was born, it could well be that 1838 was the year of his birth. That's probably something we can verify when we get some place with reference books."

"Okay. All that seems to tie us to this spot, for sure. What about the rest?"

There was a moment of thoughtful silence as they each read the words to themselves.

“Son of a fineland? Meaning a *good land* like the United States you think?” Willy asked clearly puzzled.

“Think where Father’s kingdom was.”

Somewhere close to the border between Russia and Finland. Ah. Fineland refers to *Finland*. I wondered why those words were not separated by a space – *fine land*. Another tie to us. What about, ‘a Grand family’?”

“I’m going with Grand Duke – his family, us, we could be thought of as a Grand family.”

“This is exciting. Now that last line. ‘A shady history,’ like maybe referring to a gangster or bank robber or something. I don’t get it.”

“Hmm? Me either. Shady can also mean not clear or partially covered up, right?”

“Right, though I don’t see how it helps. History is pretty much just about the past. Maybe it means the Duke had an unknown past.”

“You’re a genius.”

“Of course, I am. What did I say this time?”

“Who do we know, intimately (closely) who have an unknown past?”

“Well, there’s the imaginary old Duke laying in the ground, here, apparently – oh, I get it. You and I have an unknown past – to us at least.”

“I guess that pretty well wraps it up. This is our spot, but what are we supposed to do with it?”

Rusty stood and pushed on the stone – right, left, back, forward. Nothing happened.

“Well, it seems to be attached quite permanently.”

“Surely we haven’t come this far to let ourselves be beaten by a tombstone in the middle of nowhere – have we?” Willy asked.

CHAPTER TEN

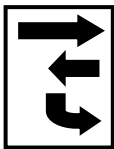
The wolf leaped at Willy!

“Maybe we will have to dig up the grave,” Willy said. “Maybe this time whatever it is, is so big it took a casket to hold it.”

“We’ll have to find shovels or something that will substitute for them,” Rusty said walking to the area north of the gravestone to examine the ground which might be covering a casket.”

“Hey, Willy! Look here! On the back of the tombstone. Something we didn’t see.”

They bent down closer and studied the marks that had caught Rusty’s attention.



They were etched into the marble and sat at the lower right corner, covered by the tall grasses.

“So, we’ve seen arrows before – the instructions for using the key,” Willy said.

“This seems trickier. We knew from the start that a key, once slid into a lock, could only turn two ways. We followed the arrows and turned it the correct ways. But, here? No key, or hole for starters. What do you make of it? I just figured each place would have a key hole – it seems to be what the instructions suggested.”

“Maybe we have like a two-stage process here. First, do these arrow moves, and then somehow the key will become useful – like double security.”

“You could be right.”

“If there’s no key hole to use, then it must entail moving the

entire stone,” Willy came back. “The stone seems to be all we have.’

“But I tried pushing it in every direction.”

“Did you do it in the order shown here?”

Rusty thought for several moments, making hand gestures that mimicked his movements, then spoke.

“Not at all. The top two arrows seem obvious: slide the stone to the right – probably as far as it will go – then back to the left half way. The third symbol isn’t nearly so clear.”

“Well, it looks to me like it is signaling a turn or a swivel.”

Rusty nodded.

“Makes sense.”

“Shall we give it a try?” Willy asked.

“Of course. I guess just push it as far as it will go to the right, first,” Willy said. “I hope it doesn’t fall off the base.”

“And we agree that is to the right as we face it from the back – as we stand here facing the arrows?” Rusty asked.

“Hadn’t considered it would be from the front.”

“Actually, when I was pushing on it I did try to push it to the right from the front and nothing happened. Shall we try all the moves from back here, then?”

“Seems right . . . er. . . correct. If you need help just ask. I have reason to believe there may be a big, green ogre nearby.”

“What?”

“Forget it. A sometimes-nighttime visitor to my imagination.”

After ten years with the boy – eight of them talking – Rusty was used to such off the wall comments so didn’t think twice about it.

“Here goes.”

He straddled the large stone that had been sunk into the ground to hold the tombstone, bent down so he could place his shoulder half way up the right edge, and began pushing. It wasn’t an easy move but with persistence (sticking to it), it began to slide, and continued to slide for about ten inches – right to the edge of the base stone.

“Great!” Willy offered.

Rusty moved to the opposite side.

“You mark half way with a stick, so I don’t push it too far.”

Willy had already thought of doing that but didn’t mention it. Rusty pushed again. It seemed easier that time. He stopped at the stick.”

“Now, which way do we try and swivel it?” Rusty asked.

“I’m pretty sure that curved arrow means toward the rear,”

Willy said. "It looks like the left edge is supposed to be turned to our right as we face it from the rear."

"I agree. I wonder what will happen?" Rusty asked.

Willy only hoped that Ogre didn't pop his head out of some suddenly opened hole and make a meal of them. Again, he kept quiet.

Instead, he said, "I guess if we have it figured right, we're about to see."

"If it really is built to swivel in that direction then I need to push away from us on the right side of the tombstone, right?"

Willy thought for one more moment and nodded.

"I can't figure it could mean anything else."

"Here goes, then."

Randy positioned his shoulder against the back of the stone, at the right edge. At first nothing happened.

"I guess I need to push harder."

He tried a second time. It moved an inch and then turned more easily, until it was turned directly front to back, across the base stone.

"Watch out?" Willy called as the two stones fell back onto the ground in the opposite direction from them – toward the front."

"That opened up a hole underneath the bottom slab," Willy said.

Rusty nodded and continued to describe their find.

"A hole laid up with bricks across the bottom and up all four sides. Two feet square and about that deep."

"Perfect to hold that black box," Willy said.

Rusty pointed.

"Look. This one has handles on opposite sides. On our knees. You over there and I'll stay over here. We'll lift it out. . . . Ready . . . ? Lift."

It was an odd angle making it more than a little difficult for Willy. Rusty ended up dragging it out on his side.

Soon, he had worked the golden key and, just as before, the box lid clicked open.

"Looks like another envelope and another pouch," Willy said.

He reached for the envelope. Rusty removed the pouch. It contained another assortment of coins – mostly of the higher values.

"Our parents wanted to be sure we had plenty of money," he said. "What's in the letter?"

Willy removed it and began reading with Rusty looking on over his shoulder.

Many generations later, gold was discovered in Svenstonia, and the descendants of the good king who had created the country – primarily its greedy ruler at that time – wanted to absorb the Dukedom back into the original country in order to obtain the gold. That could not be done legally, so he set out to retake the area by wicked means. The original arrangement stipulated that if a time came when there were no longer any survivors – heirs –in the royal Svenston line, the Dukedom would revert to the kingdom from which it had been carved.

Your next clue: Hair snare and Bloody curve.

We love you.

“I can see now how they came by all the coins,” Rusty said.

“Yeah. If there are going to keep being lots of coins at every clue place, we’re going to be rich before we get to wherever it is they are directing us.”

“The note makes me think this Scar Head fellow is one the heirs from the old Kingdom who is trying to get the gold from our Kingdom by knocking off the people in our family,” Willy said. “And, you and I are the last two needing to be knocked off!”

“That seems to have cleared that up.”

“I suppose we put the empty box back like we did before,” Willy said really asking the question.

“Unless we can think of some reason not to. The box might give Scar Head and his accomplice some clue, so I figure it’s best to put it back where it has remained undiscovered for ten years. That has proved to be a great hiding place.”

Without more discussion, they lowered it back to where they had found it.

“I assume it will be much more difficult to tip the tombstone back up into place than it was to lower it onto the ground,” Willy



said, looking it over from several angles.

“We need a long lever and a fulcrum.”

“We can cut a sapling for a lever and I’m sure we can roll a stone into place for the fulcrum.”

That had been Willy, again.

Within fifteen minutes the boys had felled the tree, stripped it of its branches, and found and rolled a large stone onto the ground just at the top of the toppled tombstone.

“Hmm? No room to scoot the lever in under the tombstone,” Willy said.

“So, we dig out a little slot for it underneath,” Rusty suggested.

They soon had created the perfect slot. They slid the sapling into place, resting it on the big stone they had rolled in. They moved to the back end of the pole.

“Ready?” Rusty asked.

“Let’s do it!”

The boys put their combined weight on the lever and, as if by magic, the tombstone was soon sitting back in place.

“Looks just like when we first found it,” Willy said.

“What I thought, too.”

Rusty gave it a few pushes and pulls just to make sure it was secure like it had been originally.

“Good work,” I’d say,” Willy offered, giving it all one last looking over. He fluffed up the tall grass they had trampled down.

They walked back to the creek and sat on the bank. Rusty took out the maps and they began making calculations about the location of the next spot on their journey. Willy repeated the clue.

“*Hare Snare* and *Blood Curve*. Like for this one, we may just have to run onto some streams whose names somehow fit the clues.”

“Maybe, but here is something, maybe,” Rusty said.

Willy smiled. “When before in the history of the English language has anybody, both started and ended a sentence with ‘*maybe*?’”

Rusty chuckled and nodded.

“I sure did sound certain, didn’t I?”

“Whatcha see on the map?”

“Look, here, on Jake’s big map! A small town called *Red Bend* and it’s on a river or creek that turns 90 degrees east from running north at the east edge of town. *Red Bend* – *Bloody Curve*? You think?”

“Sure could be. Does it join up with any other streams?”

“Hard to tell, but so far they haven’t even been big enough to earn a place on this map Jake gave us.”

“You’re saying it may just be some insignificant (unimportant) stream that hooks up with the bigger one?”

“Right. It makes sense, not using major or well-known creeks. Out of the way is always best when your goal is to hide something, wouldn’t you say?”

“I would. How far?”

“In time, another two, long days. There may be a few low hills over there.”

“That’s interesting, Rusty.”

“What, I ask, almost afraid to hear what young brother’s mind finds interesting about it?”

Willy managed a full-blown smile, but that didn’t stop him from talking.

“I asked how far – as in miles – and you answered in time – how long – because that’s more important to us than distance. It reminded me that ancient Chinese maps were drawn, not to represent measured distance, but how long the travel time would be. Mountains would be drawn really wide and far apart because they’d take a long time to cross, but flat plains would be shown as narrow bands, since they would take less time.”

“Interesting, but this wasn’t made in China.”

“I know that. I was just trying to edify you.”

“Edify?”

“Improve your fund of knowledge.”

“Well, thank you, then. Consider my *fund* appropriately *edified*.”

“I seem to be on a roll so how about one more? The Chinese always put China at the top of a map – China is in an area of the world referred to as the *Orient*. When you orient something, you position it properly. The word *orienting* came from the practice of putting China at the top. You’re welcome.”

“So, when, in the mornings, I say, ‘we need to get oriented,’ I’m using a word that came from Chinese map makers thousands of years ago. I like that. And now that you have ‘oriented’ me to that, we need to be on our way.”

It was worth brief smiles but not outright chuckles.

Since they had not unpacked the night before, it took only a few minutes to make ready to head out. They followed Bluebonnet south to the first shallows where they crossed, again heading their sights west.

The rest of that day was uneventful, although the large,

black vultures circling overhead gave Willy the Willies.

"I hope they're not waiting for us to need their services," he said.

"Speaking of strange sentences, as you often do, that one ranks right up there with those that have probably never, ever, been uttered before – *I hope they're* – the vultures – *not waiting for us to need their services* – to die off so they can eat what remains of us."

They exchanged smiles and picked up their pace across the wide, flat expanse of knee-high grass that lay ahead for as far as they could see.

"What happened to the famous Kansas summer breeze?" Rusty said as they puled up beside a tiny spring-fed pond.

Willy offered no response, but enjoyed the long drink from his canteen – even though the water was bath temperature hot. The ponies had drunk their fill no more than an hour before, so they merely piddled in the water. The boy's canteens were mostly full. Still, in the heat, all four of them could use a good dunking in a creek.

They loosened the bridles and, as if by plan, the ponies turned south and moved up from a walk to a trot. Before long, that had become a slow, steady gallop – hitting a pace of ten to twelve miles an hour. That allowed them to cover lots of territory in a short amount of time. A good horseman would not push his mount that fast unless he was sure there would be water at the end. With the ponies in charge, that was a foregone conclusion.

"Green trees," Willy said, pointing off to the right. "Bound to be a pond or spring or something."

It was a pond, probably fed by a slow flowing spring, since it was nearly full in the heat of summer, but not overflowing into a stream.

They dismounted and made ready to fill their canteens before riling it up with a swim.

The ponies approached the water and lowered their heads, then pulled back sniffing and snorting. They lowered their heads a second time and a second time they pulled back.

"Don't fill your canteen," Willy said. "I think the ponies sense bad water. I read they can do that and will refuse to drink it even if they are terribly thirsty. I'm thinking no swim either."

"Okay. Thank you ponies," Rusty said. "Shall we just move on?"

"Good idea. See the size of that rattler in the grass at the edge of the water?"

They backed away. The ponies followed, and they were

soon heading due west.

“That was remarkable,” Willy. “I’d never heard about such a thing – horses and bad water.”

“I suppose there will be a lot for us to learn now that are no longer city boys.”

Rusty nodded.

* * *

By late afternoon they had come across a well-worn trail and began following it west.

“I imagine it leads into *Red Bend*,” Rusty said. “It’s getting time to find a place for the night.”

Although the area was not hilly it was more rolling than what they’d just left behind them. Earlier, they had found a wide, clear, stream, and were refreshed, quenched (having drunk enough water), and clean.

“A sign,” Willy said, pointing ahead to the right side of the road.

“Leaving McPherson County,” he said reading it aloud. “That’s not much help telling us what county we’re leaving.”

“In a way it is. The new one is Rice County, according to the map. It is where we’ll find the next confluence.”

They continued along the road for some time, eventually coming upon a small woods.

“Looks like that’ll become our home for the night,” Rusty said nodding in the direction of the trees.

“Seems friendly enough, although I can’t get the picture of that rattler out of my head.”

“We’ll sleep with the bottoms of our trousers tucked inside our boots. We’ll be fine. Let’s see if we can find a safe place to build a fire. Don’t want to risk a prairie fire out here.”

A short search led them to a bare, well-used, open spot in among the trees, complete with a sunken fire pit. Willy got a fire underway while Rusty pan-fried slabs of salt pork, sliced apples, and the last of the eggs. Willy added slices of bread and they figured they had a feast.

“The map shows this road runs along the north edge of the Red River, so I expect before this time tomorrow we’ll have found the second creek – what was the code name? Hair Net?”

“*Hare* – h-a-r-e – *Snare*. Hare, as in prairie rabbit, sometimes called a Jack Rabbit. A large member of the Rabbit family. We oughta try to trap one. The stories I’ve read make them sound like a really tasty treat.”

“I suppose you know how to make a trap.”

“Of course – well, not really, but it shouldn’t be too hard to figure it out.”

“Of course not – I sometimes forget I’m traveling with ‘Merlin: boy genius’.” (Merlin: A great magician of fiction.)

“Back to our plan, please,” Willy said. “I guess we just follow the Red River until we come to the Hare Snare, is that your thought?”

“Yup. Looks like the little town of Red Bend isn’t more than 20 or 25 miles from here. We should be on the confluence we’re looking for well before noon.”

“I vote we get to sleep so we can get up early. I’m getting eager to get this ‘trial-thing’ over with.”

“I’m with you, little brother. You tired?”

“That’s irrelevant – when it is time to sleep, I just go to sleep.”

“You’ve always been that way. I have never figured out how you can just turn your head off like that.”

“I’m Merlin: boy genius. Have you not learned anything in the past two minutes?”

They tucked in their trousers, spread their blankets and lay back ready for sleep. The moon had gradually grown from the tiny slip it had been the night they began their journey, into something considerably larger. It provided fairly good light. They were both soon asleep.

A few hours later.

“Willy,” Rusty whispered. “We got company.”

He reached out and jiggled his brother’s shoulder.

“What?”

“Shh. Something’s out there.”

“Like what kind of something?”

“Look. You can see its eyes reflecting the fire.”

“What else?”

“A low growl maybe. Panting. Listen.”

“A dog?”

“I’m thinking a dog wouldn’t be shy of a fire. Whatever this is, it seems to be afraid.”

Willy put on another good-sized log. Rusty fixed two torches. He had learned not to go to sleep without having some long sticks close by. Once lit, they waved them gently back and forth to see if they could provoke some sort of reaction.

A reaction they got. It howled. Neither of them had ever been close enough to wild animals to recognize their various ‘voices’. It could have been a coyote, they just didn’t know.

"Has to be within ten feet," Rusty said.

"Directly south of us. What do you suggest?"

"Wave our torches out away on each side of the fire. Maybe it will make it appear to be a much larger fire and discourage whatever it is."

"Like this?"

"Exactly."

The howling continued off and on for several minutes, often fading into a whimper at the end.

"I'd throw a burning stick in its direction, but I don't want to risk a grass fire," Rusty said. "I'm getting out the steel knife and the axe. Which one do you want?"

"Want? Neither. Which one will I take – the axe, I guess."

With their hearts throbbing wildly, they moved up onto their knees prepared to do battle.

"I suggest you hit it on the top of its head with the axe. That might stun him long enough for me to move in and cut its throat."

"I think I'm going to be sick to my stomach just thinking about it."

The howling became softer. Presently, there it was, inching into the circle of light spread by the fire – by then, not six feet away. It was on its belly, creeping in closer and closer, apparently seeking the warmth. The howl faded, replaced by an easy, low, rumble from its throat, and finally, a prolonged whimper.

"That's no coyote, you know, Willy said. "Looks more like a young wolf – a silver wolf – not native to this area of the country."

"But look at its ears. Too large for a Wolf and its nose is not pointed enough."

"Maybe a mixed breed – wolf and dog – Shepherd, I'd say."

"Let's see what happens if we put the torches down – back into the fire," Rusty said.

Cautiously, they laid them on the fire and let go and sat back on their legs.

At that, the animal, though keeping his belly on the ground, raised its head and whimpered.

"Looks skinny for either a wolf or a Shepherd," Willy said. "I'm going to try something."

Rusty always shuddered when his brother said that. It had previously been the lead up to broken bones and more cuts and bruises than could be counted.

Willy reached into one of his saddle bags and, after a few moments of feeling around, removed his hand. It contained a half-dozen strips of raw bacon. He tossed one piece in the animal's

direction. With no more than a quick sniff, it took it into its mouth and ate it. It crept a bit closer, more toward the side of the fire where Willy sat.

He tossed another piece, that one not nearly as close to the animal. Willy wanted to see if he could lure it closer. He believed that would tell them if it was used to human companionship. With little hesitation, it moved in on the second piece and was soon chewing on it, with less urgency than the first one.

“Please be careful, over there,” Rusty whispered.

Willy nodded, but had no intention of following the request. He began speaking.

“Good boy. Nice doggy. Are you lost, big guy? Huh? You look like you’ve been starved. Can’t you run down the rabbits and ground squirrels?”

The animal kept his eyes focused on Willy’s face. Willy held out another piece of meat, but didn’t let go of it. The animal whined and moved its head back and forth, then inched ahead, bit by bit. It was soon close enough to thrust its head forward and lap the bacon out of Willy’s palm.

Willy reached out and touched the animal on the very top of its head. He began scratching it, gently, slowly. The animal moved even closer, sniffing as if in search of more food. Trying to make the food last, Willy tore a piece in half and offered it. The dog took it.

Still in a whisper, Rusty spoke.

“You’ve sure got it calmed down over there, little brother. Nice going.”

“You try talking to it,” Willy said.

“Okay. Nice doggy. You sure are a pretty boy – silver, gray, black. I’m sorry you’ve had a rough time of it.”

Through all of that, the animal kept his eyes on Willy, managing only an occasional glance in Rusty’s direction. Willy gave up the final pieces of bacon.

By then the animal was letting him run his hand down his neck and back.

“He’s used to people, for sure,” Willy said. “What shall we do about him?”

“We’ll have time to think on that tomorrow. If you’re convinced it won’t kill us in our sleep, I suggest we get some – *sleep*. If *Dog* wants to stay with us, *Dog* will stay. If not, he will leave. Either way, we will get some sleep.”

At that moment, the animal jumped to its feet and charged in Willy’s direction, its long, sharp teeth gnashing as if it were going in for the kill.

///

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Where's a good saddle when you need one?

Willy dodged to his right, rolling flat over onto his side. *Dog* flew by him on his left, pouncing as he lit several yards behind the boys. He seized something in his teeth, and shook his head from side to side, vigorously. Presently he dropped it to the ground. Rusty raised a torch to light the area as *Dog* backed up toward Willy.

"I think it's safe to say that mixed breed, bacon eating, dark night howling, shiny eyed, canine, just saved your life, little brother. It was a rattler – and I mean was. Now it's laying there in shreds."

Willy put his hands to his neck – the universal sign for, 'Did I just about die?'. He reached out and pulled *Dog* close, bending down so head met head. He gently rubbed the animal's beautiful coat.

"Thanks, boy. I mean really, really, thanks. How did you know to do that?"

"Like you said, he's used to being with people – and apparently, protecting them. Somehow he got separated from them."

"Seems to me, we may have just become his people. I'm sure ready to claim him as part of our family."

"That sounds good. One thing you have to keep in mind, Willy, is that if he and his folks get back together somehow, we have to be willing to give him back."

Willy nodded, understanding but not liking it.

"You got any scrap food left in your saddle bags?" Willy asked.

"Half of one of your interesting baked bean sandwiches from yesterday."

"I can tell how much you don't want to give it up, but how about doing it anyway. You see how skinny he is?"

Rusty held it out toward the animal. Humorously, Dog looked back at Willy as if asking his permission before accepting it. Willy nodded and urged him to take it. He did, carrying it to the other side of the fire before going after it. Willy's 'cooking' apparently had a new fan.

"Me thinks ye have a dog, laddie," Rusty said, attempting a terrible Irish accent.

"You mean, 'we'."

"No, I mean, 'you'. I can guarantee that if I lunged toward you in a threatening way he'd be all over me before you could say Eldest son of the Grand Duke of Svenstonia."

Dog finished his sandwich – with no complaints – then moved close to Willy and lay down.

"Shall we try this sleep thing again?" Rusty asked already positioning himself on his blanket.

"I'm sure I'll never be able to sleep after all that's happened."

"I'll bet you all the coins in my saddle bag you'll be asleep in no time."

"Not fair, they already belong to both of us."

"For a little squirt, you're really not all that dumb."

In the light of day, out in the open, those words would have called for a tussle. That night, a smile seemed sufficient.

* * *

Willy was awake well before daybreak. Dog was gone.

"I wasn't all that attached to him anyway," he muttered under his breath trying to convince himself it wasn't all that big a deal – but it was.

He stoked the fire and fried up a batch of eggs into which he sprinkled small pieces left over from the final slab of ham. If that wasn't enough, he'd mix up a batch of hot cakes. They hadn't yet tried the honey that Running Bear had brought them.

The ponies moved in close when they saw the movement and smelled breakfast. That, usually meant their oats weren't far behind. On their heels trotted *Dog*. He was soaking wet, which made him look even skinnier. The ponies were also wet. Willy figured they had hosted a swimming event as their getting acquainted party for Dog. They seemed to be getting along just fine.

Dog moved right to Willy's side. Sam went to sleeping Rusty and nuzzled him into wakefulness as if to say, 'enough of this lazy attitude when it's time for our oats'.

While Rusty and Willy made small talk – mostly about the frightening moments the night before – Rusty saw to the oats. *Dog* became interested and moved in for a closer look and sniff.

“Do dogs eat oats?” Rusty asked.

“No idea. Probably too dry, wouldn’t you think?”

Rusty shrugged, dumped several hands full into a pan and added water from his canteen. Once they appeared to be thoroughly soaked, he sat the pan down on the ground. Dog lapped them up as if they were his favorite dessert.

“Willy, I’d like you to meet Sam Oats, Mark Oats, and Dog Oats,” Rusty said in fun.

Willy offered a smile, nod and chuckle as he pointed to the skillet.

“Breakfast.”

“What? No fried rattler?”

Willy offered a shudder. Once the ponies were finished, they moved away. Once he was finished, Dog moved back close to Willy.

“So, what you gonna name, Dog?” Rusty asked, clearly approving of Rusty’s cooking.

“I have two ideas, but you should have some say in it, too.”

“Nope. I believe a guy should name his own dog.”

Willy liked that idea but tried to play it cool.

“Like I said, two ideas. When we first saw him last night all we could see were his two eyes shining in the darkness like diamonds – I was thinking of *Diamond* for a name. Then, when he jumped up and over the fire to go after the rattler, he appeared like a silver streak – so, *Silver Streak*, is another possibility.”

“I like them both. How you gonna decide?”

“Your grammar has been slipping since we left home, Rusty. ‘Gonna?’ And twice within one minute! I declare, that would have gotten you dish washing duty for a week at Doc’s.”

“Sorry, pard. I jist figured that out here ‘bouts on the opin range, we could dummy up an English jist a bit.”

“You are impossible, big brother.”

“Hmm. Isn’t that supposed to be *your* role in our relationship?”

Attack dog or not, that called for a tussle – not just a piddly little roll here and roll there, sort of tussle. No, sir. It was to become an all-out, get to your feet and get tackled, roll down the hill and into the stream sort of tussle. It lasted fifteen minutes. The three animals followed along, the horses snorting and Dog barking, each of the three clearly rooting for its favorite. Interestingly, Dog didn’t intervene. Perhaps he understood about brothers.

Their plan to be on the road by sun-up did not come to pass that morning. They dried off, changed into dry duds and packed up.

As was part of their morning ritual, Willy doused and stirred the ashes making sure there were no embers. They mounted up, and continued their journey. The narrow river took a deep bend to the south of the road and they followed it. Rusty verified it on the map. They could see that after about ten miles it looped back north and crossed the road on its way around the east and north edges of the village of *Red Bend*.

Dog, trotted along-side, seeming happy to be a part of whatever it was he was a part of.

An hour into the day, they came upon an old man fishing. He said he lived in a cabin not far away and invited them to share his fish with him. The boys politely declined the offer – they were more interested in pursuing their Trial of Tasks, set forth by their parents. Willy did manage to get the names of several tributaries to Red River. One, immediately caught their attention – Rabbit Trap Creek. They moved on.

“You think our Hare Snare, is Mother Nature’s Rabbit Trap?” Rusty asked, not really having needed to.

They had already urged the ponies up to a trot. They continued for some time.

At the point where the bend straightened to the north, a tiny dribble of a stream joined it on the south west side. The old man had described it as ‘a sickly little stream’. They figured what was one man’s *sickly*, just might be another’s *dribble*. Dog took advantage of the stop to drink and soak his coat to cool off. The ponies played at drinking from the new stream, not really thirsty yet. The boys drank.

“*Rabbit Trap* has clear flowing water, not like the red silt that’s being carried in the Red River,” Willy said after joining the animals at the new stream. “The ponies say it’s good water. I’m filling my canteen here. Toss me yours and I’ll take care of it for you.”

Rusty handed it over and began surveying the area. The land fell gently from the north to the confluence – the water flowed to the south. There were several tall, vertical, standing, rock structures, looking like out of place strangers on the otherwise flat, grassy plain. The largest of them had the company of a dozen or so trees and butted up against the east side of the stream.

“Those rocks look like soldiers on guard duty,” Willy said.

“Pretty tall soldiers, I’d say.”

“I have come to the conclusion that your imagination sleeps during the day, Rusty, and only reveals itself in the darkness of evening and night.”

“You calling my imagination, nocturnal?”

“I am – *nighttime*. Not knocking it, just calling things the way I see them.”

They paused and watched the water make its way down the gentle slope.

“Rabbit Trap dribbles and dabbles all the way down the hill over a base of small rocks.”

“*Dibbles and dabbles*, Willy?”

“Got better words?”

“Probably not – runs over or splashes across, maybe.”

“That mean anything to you – all the small stones?” Rusty asked.

“Not really, other than It purifies the water for safe drinking.”

“So, what was the purpose of this conversation, Willy?”

“To pause and appreciate one of the wonders of nature.”

“Tell me when you get done appreciating, squirt, and we’ll get back to work.”

Willy looked over at *Dog* who snuggled in close to him every chance he got.

“We done appreciating, yet, Silver Streak?”

The dog, apparently now, *Silver Streak*, yipped. Willy took it as a yes and stood to join his brother.

“Those standing rocks look like the best bets to me,” Rusty said.

“Three sets of them on the west side of the dribble and three on the east,” Willy pointed out. “I’ll take those to the west. Dividing them up should speed things along.”

Rusty nodded and Willy and Streak took running leaps over the small stream.

They moved from one set of the tall, skinny, rock formations, to another, giving each a thorough examination – pushing, pulling, kicking, and scanning the ground for indications of who knew what.

Twenty minutes later Willy called across the rill to his brother.

“Don’t see anything here, Rusty.”

He walked back toward the stream.

“I might have something over *here*,” Rusty called back.

“Where are you, brother?”

“Up the hill at the rocks by the stand of trees.”

Willy patted Streak and said, “Go find Rusty, boy. Sickem!”

He moved his hand and arm in that direction, pointing.

Mostly unexpectedly, Streak jumped the stream and headed up the hill to the stand of rocks and trees.

“Well, I’ll be a monkey’s uncle,” Willy said to himself. “Nobody better try calling him a dumb animal.”

Willy jumped the water some distance up stream where it had cut a deep trench and the channel had narrowed. He trotted to Rusty, and found him bent down, giving the dog the first real petting it had allowed from him. That seemed like grand progress to Willy. Rusty was pleased to finally be included in the relationship.

“Whattcha found?” Willy asked.

“From that phrase, apparently somebody willing to become a ‘dish-duty buddy’ back at Doc’s.”

Willy could smile about it. There had been some merit in his brother’s comment, earlier.

There were five irregularly shaped rocks in a circular cluster, tall to eight or ten feet, and three to four feet thick – roundish or squarish. Their once sharp and jagged edges had been softened down through the years by rain and snow. Their once bright red finish had dulled to a muddy, reddish brown.

Rusty stood and pointed to a spot shoulder high on the rock that stood near the center of the group. He traced around a discolored area with his finger.

“I see. All these rock faces in here are basically reddish-orange, but that part is more orangish-red.”

“You put it into words – I didn’t have them.”

Rusty took out his knife and worked the point of the blade into a crack that followed the path he had outlined with his finger.

“It’s nearly a squared trapezoid, 18 inches in all directions.”



“How deep can you go with the knife?”

“Not very, because the blade gets thicker away from the point.”

“Think it’s like a block that slips out?”

“Maybe, but I can’t see any way to make that happen. No room to get a hold on it. Cleaned out, that crack’s no wider than an eighth of an inch.”

Willy walked to the other side of the big rock.

“This might be interesting,” he said.

Rusty joined him.

“I see. A hole the size of a half dollar at nose height. Doesn’t look natural. I mean none of the other rocks have anything like that.”

“What are you thinking, Rusty?”

“I’m thinking maybe it’s there to have something stuck into it – a rod or stick – that maybe triggers something that somehow

releases that chunk of rock on the opposite side.”

“As complicated as that tombstone contraption was, you could be correct. Our parents spared no degree of difficulty in concealing the clues. Let’s see if we can find or cut a stick. Needs to be three or four feet long and no bigger than an inch or so in diameter.”

They walked to the stand of trees that encircled the rock formations. As the boys picked up sticks to examine, Streak would take hold of the other end, wanting to play.

They searched for some time, discarding everything they found. Presently, Streak left and returned dragging a perfect one with his mouth.

“I don’t know what to say about that animal of yours,” Rusty said as Willy accepted it. “Let me take my knife and get rid of a few of the twigs and bumps and such.”

Streak lay down to watch and supervise – after all, it was his stick and he fully intended to get it back!

“I’m taller so let me insert it. You go around and see if you can tell if anything is happening. If I have to push it out, that won’t happen with this flimsy stick.”

Willy waited for something to take place. Rusty described what was happening on his side.

“It’s inside the rock about two and a half feet, I’d say and hit something. It won’t go in further. Ideas?”

“One. Try tapping it against whatever it hit – you know, withdraw it a few inches and then insert it again with some force. Maybe vibrations will do something.”

“Interesting! Here goes.”

They could hear the solid rap against the stone each time Rusty inserted the stick. Rusty spoke again.

“You better step away in case it drops out in your direction.”

It immediately dropped out in his direction.

“Thanks for the almost way too late warning. I think Streak must have heard some movement inside the big rock, because he was on his way to push me when it fell. Came close to smashing him into the ground.”

Rusty rounded the tall rock.

“You both okay?”

Willy nodded. Streak approached the fallen slab of rock, teeth showing and growling, clearly ready to do battle if necessary. It seemed humorous to the boys and rated a chuckle and an extended moment of pull-close-petting to calm him down.

They began examining the rock that had been dislodged –

just how it had been accomplished, they had no real idea.

“Must have been some sort of triggering mechanism in there brought on by the tapping,” Rusty said. “Good suggestion, squirt.”

“Apparently, the *Best* suggestion!” Willy say joking, then continued.

“Look, the back fell off.”

“I see. A flat piece of stone was wedged inside the larger piece that has been hollowed out to make a stone box. That took both time and skill.”

“And there inside is our old friend the tar covered wooden box,” Willy said.

Together they repositioned the stone so there was room to pull the box free.

“Looks just like the others,” Rusty said, again stating the obvious.

His brother’s unneeded remark caused Willy to smile. His brother had either not seen it or decided not to ask. He often made such a decision when Willy was having one of his private, tangled thoughts.

Like some of the others, that box had handles on each side. Rusty held the rock container still, while Willy worked the wooden box out onto the ground.

“I’ll need to get the key from my saddle bag,” Rusty said and left on a full run.

A few minutes later he inserted it and, before making the first turn, rehearsed the process out loud so Willy could verify he had remembered the procedure correctly. Fifteen seconds later the lid was open.

“This is getting monotonous,” Rusty said. “Look! Another envelope and pouch.”

He reached in and removed the envelope, passing it to Willy. He then removed the pouch.

Willy slid out the sheet of paper and began reading.

The bad king arranged for family members to ‘disappear’, never to be heard from again. Finally, only the reigning Grand Duke, Fredrique, and Duchess, Wilhelmina, were left. With the help of our loyal subjects, we escaped with our lives and a huge, metal container, filled with gold. We made our way to the United States in the hope of

finding a lifetime of safety for us and our children (yet to be born). We searched for just the right place in our vast new land.

“More like it,” Rusty said. “Now it’s getting exciting!”

“Better than that, I’d say, now we know our parents’ names – Fredrique and Wilhelmina.”

“I’m thinking that explains the lets F / W on that first note – their initials,” Rusty added. “It was their signature on the note.”

“And, the GDd that we couldn’t figure out must mean Grand Duke and duchess.”

“I wonder how large a *huge* metal container is?”

“And *where* it is,” Willy added.

“Probably at the end of all this, don’t you suppose?”

Rusty nodded as he opened the pouch.

“More coins – lots more. Why did they provide so many for us?”

“For one thing they had always lived like rich people – royalty – so they might not have understood how little money was really needed to live on.”

Rusty nodded, deciding not to tally up the value of the coins. He tied it back closed and handed it to Willy for safe keeping.

“I suppose we should put the wooden box in the rock box and insert it back where it’s been all these years?”

It had been a question and Willy understood that.

“I suppose. I suppose like the others, if it hasn’t been found in ten years it’ll be safe for a while longer.”

Willy moved to close the wooded box.

“Wait. One more thing in here. A cylinder of rock – about the diameter of a half dollar and four inches long. How did we miss that?”

“We had a preconceived idea about what we’d find – just the pouch and envelope. Why do you suppose it’s there?”

“I know what I suppose. Think about it? What else have we found that’s the size of a half dollar?”

“The hole on the back side of the standing rock, you mean?”

“Right. They provided a rock plug for us to insert into that hole so nobody else will find it and mess with it. Can’t be sure why, but I think we should do that, don’t you?”

“Of course. I suppose it will fit.”

They moved to the back side.’

“It’s heavy,” Willy said.

He lifted it and placed it at the opening.

"I can see it will need to be forced in – not much but just enough to make it stick, I imagine."

Rusty was soon there with a larger rock.

"Hold it in place and I'll tap on it."

"Gently, now so it doesn't break."

"That's why I said 'tap' instead of 'pound'."

Once started, it slid into place perfectly, looking like a very natural imperfection on the surface. With that finished, they went back to the boxes on the other side.

While Rusty slipped one into the other and hoisted them back into the hole, Willy had things on his mind.

"What do you think about Scar Head and the renegades? We haven't been being very careful in case they're close on our trail."

"We haven't, you're right. Haven't seen smoke signals recently. Maybe that visit they paid us during the night really did convince them we didn't have anything useful to them. I do wonder why they didn't take our ponies. Ponies are like wealth among Indians."

"Maybe they did take them, but they escaped and came back. They have become quite attached to us."

"Us and our oats! I guess we'll never know."

They walked back to their camp. Rusty divided the coins between the two sets of saddle bags. Willy slipped the new note into an envelope with the others.

They ate an early lunch in silence, each lost in his own thoughts. They knew their parents' names. That was great. They wished they knew what they looked like.

Streak turned up his nose at the salt pork Willy offered.

"I imagine he's been hunting on his own. He's getting his strength back and filling out. That's good if he takes care of himself that way."

Even before the sun was directly overhead they were on their way west.

"How far to our next stop, Rusty?"

"Of course I can only estimate, but we have crossed all of Barton County to get to Rush where the big 'N' is on the map we've been given. Figuring we have to go half way across that county, I think we have about 60 miles to cover. If we mix walk with trot I imagine something between seven and eight hours. I see lots of streams in that county. By the way, you didn't tell me the new clue from the note."

“Sorry. *Not red or brown, & dangerous pet?*”

“Not red or brown? That leaves us with a billion other colors to choose from,” Rusty said, clearly disappointed at the quality of the hint.

“Maybe not. Why did they choose red and brown instead of pink and yellow?”

“Because the color has to do with red and brown, you mean. I see where your head is going. Reddish-brown?”

“That’s my guess. You remember when that artist spent a week with us at Docs and showed us about the basics of drawing and painting.”

“A couple of years ago. Yeah.”

“I watched him mix paints,” Willy went on. “He said he would show me some magic. First, he pointed to a reddish-brown spot on the painting he was working on – an area on a tree trunk. He added a tiny bit of brown to some red and it sort of turned reddish brown but was a pretty ugly color – dull like mud. Then, he mixed equal parts of orange and purple and when he applied it to his canvas it made the most beautiful reddish-brown you can imagine.”

“That does seem like magic. What color did he call it?”

“Russet. If that turns out to be our clue, I think one of two things: Either our parents did not know how to mix russet, or they figured we wouldn’t know, so tried to make it obvious by directing us to a color between red and brown.”

“Makes sense. What about the rest of the clue?”

“*Dangerous pet?* That has a question mark at the end, like maybe it means a dangerous not-pet, or a pet that may not be dangerous. I find that part very confusing.”

“I sense our ‘trials’ are becoming harder the further we go.”

Willy didn’t respond. Rusty continued.

“Like many of the other clues, we’ll just have to try and make sense out of intended things when we run across them. I wish the big map from Jake was more detailed and included more streams and creeks.”

“But it isn’t, so we do with what we have.”

It had been Willy, of course.

* * *

They had spent six hours crossing a large, flat expanse, covered in prairie grasses. They stopped only once at a good-sized creek – the *Montana Creek* according to a hand painted sign at the site. Trees had been few and far between and when they did come into view they were usually lonely scrubs no more than ten feet tall.

The ponies became uneasy and tugged at their bridles.

Streak began running in circles and barking. Something was not as it should be.”

“Smell that?” Willy said sniffing the air.

“Smoke!”

As one, they turned to look behind them.

“I’ll say smoke,” Rusty said. “The whole prairie is on fire and it’s chasing us at a pretty good clip.”

By then the ponies had taken command of their bridles and headed off to the north west. The boys lay low against their necks, holding onto their manes. It was the fastest they had ever ridden. Saddles and stirrups would have really been helpful about then.

CHAPTER TWELVE

“Wait Rusty. You can’t just shoot them!”

With the wind at their backs, the line of flashing, red, flames leaped higher and higher as it chased them across the plains. The boys were counting on the ponies to find water. A creek would help. A pond would be better and a lake, better yet.

“I feel the heat on my back,” Willy said.

“Stop looking back. Our job is to stay on the ponies. Hang tight. Hug your pony’s sides with your legs.”

Soon, the fire was close enough that they could hear it crackling and roaring, gaining on them second by second. The wind was both fueling the flames and kicking up sparks and dust. They squinted and bent low, burying their faces in their ponies’ manes, as they rode on through a bank of scorching, swirling smoke. Tiny, airborne embers hit and rolled across their backs; they could feel the pain and smell their flesh burning.

It seemed like that race to save their lives went on for hours. It had only been minutes, but that had not relieved their terror.

Suddenly things changed.

“Either I just wet my pants big time, or we’re up to our ponies’ chins in water,” Willy said as the animals drew to a halt, continuing to breath hard.

The thick cloud of smoke hung heavy around them.

“Looks like a lake,” Rusty said. “Can’t see much through the smoke. Pull your bandana up over your mouth to filter it out.”

The horses turned to face the fire. They were twenty yards from the shore. The fire burned up to the water’s edge and fizzled out.

“That must be hundreds of acres burnt back there,” Willy said surveying the expanse of black, smoldering, stubble.”

“I’m sure you’re right. Thousands, maybe. You okay, by the

way?"

"Fine. You think Sam and Mark are okay? They really worked hard saving our lives. Where's Streak?"

They sat up high, surveying the lake and the surrounding area.

"I don't see him anywhere," Willy said.

"I'm sure he found his way to safety. Maybe on the other side already."

"Or," Willy began, pointing a few yards away through the settling smoke, "he just might have come across a friendly log in the water and managed to straddle it."

Willy urged his pony toward him.

"You stay right where you are, boy. We need to get to the other side. I'll pull your log along with me."

The lake became deep almost immediately, so the boys slipped off and into the water to make swimming easier for the ponies. It was a large lake. Rusty pointed off to their left.

"No fire along the southern bank. Let's head for that. Much closer than the far side."

Ten minutes later they were all safe back on land.

"A stream, there, 100 yards to the west," Willy said pointing. "It must have stopped the fire from continuing over this way. Yea, stream!"

The ponies walked back and forth like fathers pacing at the time a child was being born. Apparently, they knew they needed to cool down gradually. Sometimes, Willy wondered if their animals were smarter than boys.

"So?" Rusty asked.

"So, back at you. We just came within a hairs breadth of being killed."

"All in all, that sounds like a *good* thing," Rusty came back. "I can see your heart still pounding through your chest. Relax. Things are fine."

Streak yipped, adding his agreement and lay down needing to rest. Animals were smart that way. When they needed to rest they rested. When they needed to eat or drink, they ate or drank. When they needed companions, they found them.

"Back to my original question," Rusty said. "So?"

"So, what? We stop here for the night? We move on for a few hours?"

"Yup. What you said."

"The animals are tired. My vote is to stay here," Willy said

"I agree and suggest we back off from shore – it's all open

and we'd be visible for a half mile in all directions. The fire undoubtedly drew the attention of lots of folks to this area."

"A stand of pine over there – a quarter of a mile, I'd say."

"A night among the pines it will be."

They walked toward a friendly looking spot. The animals followed, each one staying close to its person.

"They seem to know who they belong to," Rusty said.

"Or," Willy came back, "they think they know who we belong to and they stay close to take care of us."

It raised both smiles and serious wonders.

They found a fine camping spot recessed among the trees, but with nothing blocking their view. As the camp fire took hold, all five moved in closer. Streak stood and walked to the edge of the clearing looking north. He growled low and steady.

"A lone rider coming this way," Willy said.

"We really need to get a weapon of some kind," Rusty said.

"Yeah. I can see it now. Us, taking on a sharpshooter with ten notches on his gun."

"You always think the worst," little brother.

"What you call *worst* I call being *cautiously realistic*."

Just like Willy was afraid would happen, the rider spotted the smoke from their fire and headed in their direction.

"Hey boys. Not out here by yourselves, I hope."

That had become every adult's opening line.

"Waitin' on our pa. He should be back by mornin'."

That had been Willy, trying to sound local. The man continued.

"That prairie fire probably drove lots of animals in this direction – coyotes, bobcats on the dangerous side, rabbits and ground squirrels on the useful side. I suggest you sleep between two fires that you keep built up and blazing."

"Thanks for your advice. We appreciate it," Willy went on as spokesman.

"What lake is this?" Rusty asked. "We're just passing through on our way up to Nebraska."

"*Barton Lake*. Good fishing. Attracts deer and elk. There's a settlement on the west bank in case you need anything. Real nice people – a passel of kids there."

"Thanks. I hope they were spared any damage from the fire."

"Just came from there and they are doing fine."

He pointed to the south along the edge of the lake.

"Fortunately, the fire didn't jump Russet Brook – a fancy name for a muddy red, slow movin' crick. It's a long one as cricks go."

Runs plumb across Rush County from the west before sideswiping the lake, here. Not navigable but pushes a lot of needed water into ranch country.”

“Thanks for stopping, Sir,” Willy said, more than ready for him to leave.”

“Any time. You do like I said about those fires now, you hear me?”

“Yes, sir. We’re on it.”

He tipped his hat and rode on west as if going to inspect the fire damage.

“You see his saddle bags?” Willy asked.

“Didn’t notice, I guess.”

“They said, U S Marshal.”

“So. Good to have him around, I suppose.”

“Yeah, in case we need him to arrest a coyote or a bobcat!”

“Doofus.”

“I kept waiting for him to say we shouldn’t be out here alone and make us go someplace – to that settlement, maybe.”

“I didn’t understand why you were hurrying him on.”

“I’m uncomfortable about all these people being so close,” Rusty. “There’s still three hours of daylight. Even if we took it really easy, we could put on another ten miles yet today. And, I think he gave us the name of one of our streams – Russet Brook. We can just follow it until dark. We can walk if you think it’s too much for the ponies.”

“You’re really getting itchy about this, aren’t you?”

“I guess I am. Until we find out all there is to find out, we can’t begin planning our next few years. We need to find good teachers. We need to find you a girlfriend. We need to establish a place to live – a safe place to live.”

Rusty smiled.

“I thought you were against girls.”

“For me, not for you. Haven’t you been listening?”

Rusty chuckled. Willy didn’t understand. He had been serious.

They had soon put out their fire and were moving west again – all five walking at the outset. They skirted the settlement to its south not wanting to get involved, and be required to furnish explanations, and turn down invitations. They were on the move.

Ten miles took them to a bridge over the *Russet*. On the Bridge was a plaque, which indicated they were at the county line, entering *Rush County* – ‘N’ on their KANSAS map. It was nearly dark. The moon was already up at fifteen degrees even though the

sun still sat on the western horizon.

They found a good place to camp just beyond the bridge. That bridge was of no help to them since it crossed the stream north to south. They took the man's suggestion and made two good sized fires to keep unwanted animals away from both sides.

After eating, they spread the blankets and prepared to sleep.

"I imagine lots of little animals were killed in that fire," Willy said. "That's really sad."

"That's how it is in life, squirt. Everything can't be rainbows and roses."

"I know that. Still, it seems sad to me."

They were immediately asleep. Streak occupied the few feet of space between the boys, and the ponies went to do whatever ponies went to do at night when they were exhausted.

Awake at first light, they were on their way by sun-up. The smell of the smoke hung heavy in the air even that far away from the burnt prairie. They let the ponies set their own pace, deciding they'd know best.

"I figure we're pushing six miles an hour this morning," Rusty said. "That's good time with tired mounts."

They stopped for a bite as the sun stood above them. Streak left to go hunting. The ponies grazed and spent some time standing in the water.

"Going to be the hottest day yet, the way it looks," Willy said.

They had long since shed their shirts.

"A swim sounds good," Willy went on, "but maybe when we stop this evening. I want to keep pushing it."

They were soon back on the trail – one they had come upon an hour or so earlier. It followed the north bank of the stream.

"Look, up ahead," Willy said. "Another bridge. We must be in a rich part of the state where they can afford such things."

The bridge was constructed with three large logs set in place across the stream, laid over with planking forming a single lane. That stream was narrow and generally quiet.

"Another plaque – maybe we *are* in a rich part of the state," Rusty said as they rode over to see what it had to say."

"*Coyote Rill?*" Rusty said as if a question. "What's a Rill?"

"A small stream – think river, stream, creek and then rill in order of size."

Rusty nodded.

"Hey, wait a minute," Willy said. "I think we have something here."

"Something?"

“Yeah. A coyote would certainly be a questionable pet, right?”

“I guess so. Yeah, for sure. You think this is it?”

“I think it’s worth a thorough look around.”

They dismounted, removed the saddle bags, and scooted the ponies out of the way.

“The obvious structure here is the bridge,” Rusty said looking around.

“But bridges get washed away. You think our parents would have chanced that?”

“You’re right. Probably not, and yet what else is there?”

They walked the banks for some time. Nothing.

“You remember seeing that broken up row boat down on the bank, just east of the bridge?” Willy asked.

“Yeah. Like broken in half with the rear sunk clear down into the ground. Painted gray with black caulking between the boards.”

“Wow! I’ll say you remember seeing it. What made you pay such close attention to it?”

“It’s embarrassing.”

“What. A boat’s embarrassing?”

“No. Let’s go take a look and I’ll show you.”

They stopped ten feet from it and Rusty pointed to a carving attached near the point up front – a mermaid wearing not a shred of clothing.

“You find that interesting?” Willy asked.

“Yes. I do.”

“It must be a sickness that boys your age all acquire. Me, I’m going to eat my vegetables and see if I can become immune.”

Nothing more was mentioned about it.

Willy ran his hand across the surface of the wood.

“Hey, brother. Feel this. It doesn’t feel like any wood I’ve ever felt.”

“You’re right. It’s cement or concrete. I never understood which is which.”

“Concrete is made up of sand, gravel, and cement – the cement holds it all together. The older it gets, the harder it gets. Anyway, a concrete boat? What sense does that make?”

“Actually, *half* a concrete row boat made to look like it had broken in two and was abandoned here. See how it sits back in a depression in the bank, which hides it from view up on the bridge.”

“Yeah. No telling how deep it’s really set into the ground. If it’s from our parents, you can bet it’s set plenty deep enough to keep it from shifting with floods or erosion. It was designed to sit

tight right there for more than a decade.”

“So, assuming it holds our next clue, where do we begin?”

Streak, who had proven to be intensely interested in everything the boys did, was already inside, giving it a very thorough sniff test. It seemed to pass, since he lay down on the bottom as if to say, ‘It’s all yours, now, guys’.

Willy got in and pulled and pushed on the seat and several places made to look like authentic parts of the sides and floor. He sat on the upturned edge of the seat and shrugged.

“This does have to be it, right?” he said/asked.

“I’d bet on it.”

“Something about the mermaid that interests me,” Rusty said.

“I thought we already established that!”

“Doofus. I’m serious.”

“So was I.”

Rusty got onto his knees and bent low so he could get a look underneath the ‘carving’.

“Okay, come take a look at this.”

Willy jumped out and was soon at his brother’s side.

“See. Touching the underside of the mermaid. A ring sticking out as if supporting the carving.”

“Yes, I do see. Any ideas?”

“Just one – pull on the ring and see what happens.”

“Go for it – it’s *your* mermaid.”

Willy chuckled on about that for some time. Rusty worked at the ring.

“Doesn’t come out.”

“Try turning it.”

“Good thought. It will turn I think, but its corroded in place. Find me a foot long stick I can feed through the hole and use like a lever.”

Willy was soon back.

“Perfect. Now, let’s see if I can rock it back and forth to get it started.”

He worked for several minutes.

“Okay. It turns freely now, 360 degrees. But, nothing happened. Hmm?”

“Here’s an idea; maybe it wasn’t just supposed to be turned. Maybe, like we thought originally, it was meant to be pulled, but until you freed it by turning it, it was set in there too tightly.”

“It seems you are right, genius brother.”

Rusty removed it and handed it to Willy for examination.

“Three inches long, a quarter of an inch thick, with a one-inch hole as the ring. If it were supporting the carving it doesn’t seem like it was needed. The carving is still there.”

“Maybe it tilts down in back – swivels on a pin or axle somewhere on it.”

Rusty pushed down. It didn’t move.

“How about trying to pull it up?”

Rusty pulled up. It didn’t move.

More, ‘hmms’.

“How about on the inside?”

“Good thought. Let me get back in and take a look”

“Aha, sage older brother who knows all mysteries of life. Another ring. Stuck like the first one. Hand me your stick.”

Five minutes later, Willy had the second ring turning freely and removed it.

“Try and move the mermaid, now.”

“I already did. Nothing.”

Willy got out and ran his hand over the carving. He shook his head fully stumped.

Rusty stepped up and took the carving firmly in both hands and tugged on it – something he had tried earlier before the rings had been removed.

“It moves,” he said.

He continued rocking it back and forth and presently it sat three inches out away from side of the boat, connected by two thin, iron rods which ran into holes behind where the carving had hung. Streak, still in the boat, began growling. He stood and backed up.

“What’s got into him, Willy?”

“What do we need to have happen here, brother?”

“Well, it would be nice if a twelve-inch square would pop up out of the floor and reveal one genuine, tar infused, wooden box with a water proof metal lining.”

“Well, I can promise you the twelve-inch pop up square. The rest remains to be determined.”

“Really? You mean, really?”

“Real as real can be. It’s okay Streak. Good stuff for all of us.”

Streak backed off.

Rusty looked over the side to see what Willy had just described.

“Will it open further?”

“Haven’t tried. Suggestions?”

“Fingers under each side and lift.”

"I suppose I could have figured that out given enough time," Willy said grinning.

He reached down and administered a gentle tug. Nothing. He moved his feet in closer, so he could use his back. He administered a not so gentle tug. Still, he had nothing.

"How about using the other two sides?" Rusty suggested.

"Like this, you mean?"

"Yup."

With one foot on each side of the concrete slab – front and back that time – he tried again. He wasn't able to lift it out, but the front edge swung up.

"Great!" Rusty said. "What you see in there?"

"Just what we expected right down to the handles on each side. It'll take your strength to lift it out. The confinement offers only an odd angle."

They exchanged places. Streak moved with *his* person.

Rusty tried several different grips before finding one that allowed him to remove the box without scraping the backs of his hands on the concrete sides of the hole.

"Go find Sam," Willy said to Streak having no idea what to really expect.

Within a minute the ponies came on a trot, following their newest friend.

"I'd a never believed it. You been up nights training Streak tricks?"

"Nope. Like I've contended all along, he's used to being with people. He takes note of things like names."

Willy was already working his way through Sam's saddle bags looking for the original leather pouch that now also carried the golden key. He handed it over and Rusty soon had the lid standing open.

"Another pouch and envelope," he said, handing them out of the boat one at a time.

With that, the animals became bored and left to do whatever bored ponies and dogs do.

"I'll put things back like they were, then we can see what we have," Rusty said.

It took very little time. He sprinkled just enough sand over the concrete 'hatch' in the floor to conceal the crack that ran its circumference. It was how it had been before Willy began moving the sand around in the bottom of the boat during his search. Another minute and Miss Mermaid was securely back in place.

With that done, the boys turned and scampered up the bank

to the grass. What they encountered was not what they expected. There stood Scar Head and his sidekick; his sidekick was holding a six shooter on them. Scar Head appeared to be unarmed.

“Stand as you are, boys,” Scar Head bellowed.

The boys froze in place, neither responded. Scar Head went on.

“Put the little sack and the envelope on the ground and step back four paces.”

They did as they were told.

“Now, turn around and get down on your knees with your hands behind your heads.”

They both understood ‘execution position’ when they came across it. They had to do something immediately. Willy called out in what for him was a loud voice:

“Sickem, Streak. Sickem!”

The boys could not see how the men were reacting or *anything* that was transpiring, for that matter. They could *hear*. Streak was growling and barking. There were the sounds ponies snorting and of hooves pounding the ground. The men yelled out, apparently in pain.

At that point the boys turned around and got to their feet. The ponies were standing over the men, front hooves on their chests, not allowing them to move. Streak had the sidekick’s wrist in his mouth – the gun had fallen to the ground. Rusty rushed to pick it up. He began speaking.

“You naughty, naughty men. Didn’t your mothers teach you how to play nice with young people.”

“Don’t shoot us, son,” Scar Head said raising his hands in front of him. “We were just playing a little game with you – you know – men teasing boys – it goes on all the time.”

Suddenly, Rusty had a plan – a fully untried plan, but a plan.

“Here’s a little game I’m sure you fun-loving gentlemen will enjoy, then. *First*, Willy, remove their saddles, reins, and saddle bags from their horses. Take your time; I have other things for our guests to do in the meantime. *Second*, you men sit down and take off your boots and very gently toss them toward your horses. I’ll wait.”

It took a few minutes. Boots were like that.

“*Third*, Little Guy, remove your holster and toss it over there with your boots. *Fourth*, both of you remove your trousers.”

“What?” Scar Head said clearly objecting.

Rusty fired a shot that kicked up dirt near their feet. They shed their trousers.

“Toss them over toward your boots.”

Willy did his best to cover his grin. The men looked ridiculous.

“*Fifth*, now your socks – you know what to do with them.”

Willy, you and Streak run off their horses. Make sure they don’t head back.

Streak got the idea with very little prompting and without Willy’s help, kept after them until they were a good half-mile back along the stream. Rusty waited for Willy to return.

“Okay, you jackasses, stand up and take off your shirts. Drop them.”

He waited.

“Now, you see that pass between those two low rises to the northeast – a mile, maybe three over there?”

He pointed.

“Walk toward that pass and don’t stop until you get up and over it. Willy bring me that rifle from Scar Heads saddle. Oh! Nice! Glad you have such a powerful, new Remington, here. I had to win the last two marksmanship contests at the County Fair with my grandpappy’s old Winchester. I’ll be watching your progress. Now, git! *Run* the first hundred yards.”

The ponies stood facing south clearly waiting for Streak’s return. He was soon there, and from the reunion one might think they hadn’t seen each other for months.

“You think animals can love each other?” Willy asked.

“Why don’t you ask Streak – he seems to be human in most *other* ways.”

“You were fantastically remarkable, big brother. I understand what you did now, but you sure had me going, there. They’re each going to be one big, sunburned, bleeding ache, by the time they reach that pass.”

Rusty lifted the rifle and pointed it in the direction of the men.

“Wait, Rusty. You can’t just shoot them!”

///

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

They shoved the boys' heads underwater.

Rusty raised the end of the rifle up at a thirty-five-degree angle and fired well over their heads.

"Why did you do that?"

"They stopped running after fifty yards. I guess their mothers didn't teach them how to follow instructions, either. You didn't really think I'd shoot at them, did you?"

"You have been so believable during the past fifteen minutes, I guess I just let my imagination follow the wrong path. Sorry."

Rusty shrugged as he pointed after the men.

"I'd say they're on the run now."

"Why didn't we tie them up and take them to a sheriff or marshal?"

"Too many things could go wrong. Remember, they are well practiced bad guys; we aren't. I'm surprised I was able to do as much as I did. I tried to keep things moving along so they didn't have time to think. Given time, they'd have had us back on our knees before sunset. You can bet on that."

"I hadn't thought about that. Good riddance, then. What do we do with their stuff?"

"Burn their boots and clothes. We can use extra saddle bags. We'll keep the rifle and the rifle holster. Put the six-shooter and the gun belt in one of their saddle bags. The saddles are way too big for Sam and Mark; anyway, we like riding bare back. We can take their bed rolls and leave the saddles near the bridge for somebody to find."

During the next ten minutes, they accomplished all those things. Rusty shaded his eyes and looked up.

"Sky says what, about four o'clock?" he asked.

"I'd say more like four-twelve o'clock."

It produced smiles and chuckles.

“Let’s get to the note and pouch,” Willy went on.

Rusty pointed at a shady spot under a clump of trees. Rusty fired one more shot for good measure. They chuckled and sat down cross-legged. While Rusty untied the pouch, Willy began reading the note.

After months of research and deliberation, we decided to settle in western Kansas. It was remote, sparsely populated and warm – Svenstonia rarely got above freezing even in the summer. We purchased 1,000 acres of land near the border with Colorado close to a place known as Mount Sunflower Peak – a low lying hill which barely rises above the flat plains of Kansas. There, your father raised horses – the finest in the area. Of course, we took on new names to disguise our past. We hid our gold in a secret cave and lived happily for a number of years during which time you boys were born.

“I suppose the *Mount Sunflower Peak* they talk about is our final destination,” Willy said.

“I suppose. It feels good to know where we were born.”

“Yes, it does. Ready for the next clue?”

“Fire away.”

“Small copper utensil, and Joyful (?) damp ribbon.”

Willy reached the paper out toward his brother.

“See how the question mark is inserted there?”

“So, it somehow refers to, joyful, would you say?”

Willy nodded. His face remained puzzled as he spoke again.

“A utensil is like a table knife or spoon or fork. The clue suggests it is small and made of copper – not tin or silver like most utensils. Hmm?”

Rusty offered his thought about the second part.

“What could be a question about joyful? Not happy, sad?”

“I doubt if it means, opposite, or they’d have just said ‘sad’ or

some such thing. I just hope it all makes sense when we come upon the right place.”

“So far, their clues have been perfect. We have to believe this one will be, also.”

“Let’s find the area on the KANSAS map,” Willy said.

Rusty removed the maps from his saddle bag and in a few moments, was circling the area with his finger.

“Right there at the ‘A’. The big map says that’s *Lane County*.”

“How far?”

“Let’s see, sixty or seventy miles. We can cut that down to fifty or sixty for tomorrow if we put on another ten this evening.”

“I’m for that,” Willy said. “You think the animals are ready for that. We’ve been pushing them really hard the past several days.”

“But, we’ve kept to a very reasonable pace – not like we were demanding a gallop the whole way.”

“Okay, then. Let’s eat first,” Willy said.

“Do we actually have anything left?”

“No, but that’s the wrong question.”

“What? You been out in the sun too long?”

“Probably, but that doesn’t figure in here. When I went to put the holster in the men’s saddle bag, I found a large tin box. Inside the tin box I found our supper.”

“Really. Well, I guess even disgusting scumbags can be good for something. What we got there?”

“Didn’t look that far.” He removed the lid and continued. “A couple of huge dill pickles for starters. Then I imagine these are man-size sandwiches wrapped in butcher paper, a pint jar of potato salad, and two bottles of beer.”

The sandwiches *were* huge – thick slices of ham, slathered in mustard.

“Everything’s cold. How can that be?” Rusty asked.

“There is a smaller tin box inside the big one – a cold tin box – which, I imagine, carries ice, or did once.”

They took their time and enjoyed their unexpected windfall (handout).

“Sam and Mark got a present from them, too,” Willy said.

“What? I don’t think they drink beer.”

Smiles!

“One saddle bag carries a sack of oats. We’ve been out of them for a while.”

They dumped the beer and chuckled as Streak lapped it up.

“Nothing like traveling with an intoxicated canine,” Rusty

said.

There were no dishes to do and they started stowing all the gear – old and new.

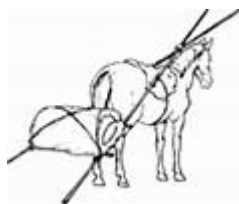
“No way it’s all going to fit on two ponies,” Rusty said. “What shall we leave behind?”

“I vote, nothing,” Willy said.

“Now, I *know* you’ve been out in the sun too long. I just said . . .”

“I read about this trailer sort of thing plains Indians use. I think it’s called a *Travois* (trav / oy). Two long poles with a couple shorter ones tied across them. The front ends of the long poles cross each other in front of the rider and the rear ends spread out and drag on the ground behind the animal, producing very little friction. The cargo is tied in place. We can make one in a half hour and trade back and forth between having Sam and Mark pull it.”

“I remember seeing drawings of them. Good idea.”



The saplings that stood nearby worked perfectly, and using the ball of hemp twine in the men’s saddlebags they had it bound together in no time.

Willy whistled, and the animals came. The ponies clearly recognized the travois and after sniffing for several moments, seemed to lend their approval.

After a treat of oats, they were on their way again. Sam got the first turn pulling the new gadget.

“Three hours should get us near or maybe into *Ness County*. According to Jake’s map, there is a new settlement in the center of the county called, *Ness City*.”

“How do you know it’s *new*?”

“I read that in order to keep old maps up to date, some publishers print updates right over the old ones they have left in stock. When we stop, I’ll show you how the words *Ness City* are set in a different style type than the rest. I’m thinking that means *new* and that *new* probably means small.”

“The longer we share the trail together, partner, the more good things I find out about you. I don’t mean it as a put down, but I

didn't realize you had read so much."

"I've endured (lived through) twice as many years in school as you have, squirt. Reading was not always my choice, you see, but I did it. I guess you never know what of all the stuff you learn might come in handy someday."

They rode as long as they felt comfortable in the low light, stopping at last at an outcropping of red stone that formed a mini-mesa-like mound some twenty feet square. Its base on the south face sloped inward, so that's where they made camp. It was partially sheltered from rain, should that unlikely event occur.

By the time the sun disappeared in the west, they were already asleep.

After a ham and fresh eggs breakfast, thanks to Scar Head's saddle bags, they made ready, and continued west.

"I'm amazed at how *fresh* the ponies seem," Rusty said.

"More than I can say for you, *big* brother. You stink like a teen age boy after running a marathon (about 26 miles)."

Humorously, Rusty lowered his face and smelled his armpit.

"Yuck. You're right. Sorry. Next water hole. Be thankful your 'stink hormones' haven't kicked in yet, squirt."

Not really understanding, Willy shrugged and urged Mark up to a trot.

"So, it's a race your bruising for this morning is it, *little* brother?"

Rusty and Sam pulled up beside him. Willy was already laughing as he pressed his pony into an easy gallop. Sam stayed with them. The easy gallop became a good gallop. The good gallop became a tear-up-the-trail, barn burner of a full-out gallop. The laughter between the boys became louder. At last, Willy let up. They were soon back to a walk – the ponies were well lathered (wet in sweat).

"They love to run, don't they?" Willy said.

"That your way of distracting us from the fact Sam and I won," Rusty said.

"Not on your life did you guys win. Mark was a full head in front when I decided to call it off."

"Oh, so now it's 'called it off' instead of 'lost'. Showing your true colors, I see."

It was worth smiles and nothing more would be said of it.

As fortune would have it, they came upon a good-sized river – six yards across and flowing at a good rate for the flat land through which it ran. It followed a path from north, northwest, to south, southeast.

"I don't think we should discount this one," Rusty said. "After we swim for a few minutes, I think we follow it a way and see if we can't find out its name."

Willy nodded, remembering he'd wanted to swim for two days. The boys stayed in the water for over a half hour. They had not allowed themselves much time for pure old fun.

"Hear that? Sounds like a horse and buggy," Rusty said. "Do we get dressed or stay in the water?"

"Not much choice. It'll be here before we could get one leg into our trousers."

He was right. It was hugging the river as it moved north. The boys were relieved to see it was an older man riding alone. He pulled up and waved his hat. The boys waved back.

"Great day for a swim," the old gentleman said. "You must be new around here. I'm Doc Morgan. Not many settlements in these parts so I ride a wide circuit hitting lots of places once a month."

"We are more passing through than *new*, I guess you'd say," Rusty offered, ignoring the name thing."

"Where you headed?" Doc asked.

Willy doubted that he was nosey – just interested. He had a comeback ready.

"Were meeting our Father and Uncle just west of Ness City then riding on out to Colorado. My uncle owns some land out there."

"The land slopes up toward the Rockies out that way, not much, but some. It'll tell on your mounts before it does on you. I suggest you high tail it to meet your people. There are highwaymen (robbers) working this area the past few months. They are ruthless. If you get mixed up with them, do exactly like they say – give them whatever they want. Like I said, they are *ruthless brutes*."

"Thanks for the heads up, Sir," Willy managed, feeling his knees begin to shake.

Well, I better be on my way, young men. Mrs. Olson is due any day now. Glad to have met you."

"Same from us, Sir," Rusty said.

"By the way, does this river have a name. It seems to be a mistake – so much water out here in Dry Gulch Kansas."

Doc chuckled.

"An artesian spring about eighty miles southwest, it curves south here and then heads under a hill about twenty miles on south where it disappears. The Indians call it *Disappearing Creek*, but white folks named it *Mary Everett River* after the late wife of a

prominent rancher. I've always wondered what it called itself."

He chuckled to himself and tipped his hat. The boys had *nothing* to tip.

He pulled the reins hard, coaxing his horse away from the water, and rode on north.

"Do either of those names help us any," Rusty asked as they left the water.

"Well, I don't make any connections with, 'small copper utensil', Willy said. The other clue is, Joyful Damp Ribbon. I suppose a river could be a damp ribbon if you used your imagination."

"Actually, a pretty good description of how a river is depicted on a map – blue for damp and a wide line like a ribbon."

"What about, Mary – a woman's first name?" Willy said, more thinking out loud than asking.

"It's spelled wrong, but *Mary* might refer to *Merry* and *that* could be like joyful."

"And," Rusty went on with some enthusiasm, "that could be exactly the reason for the question mark – 'Merry' being spelled 'Mary'. You think?"

"I think. We should have asked Doc about streams that meet up with this one. Now, the other one could be either direction from here."

"So, which way do we try first, south to where it disappears or, west to where it starts?"

"My thinking goes like this, Willy. Check it out. Looking at the map, we aren't nearly to where that 'N' sits, and so far, our clues have put us almost exactly at those letters. Therefore, I suggest we follow it on west – toward the 'K'. Doc said it begins some eighty miles west. The confluence we're looking for should be just a bit short of that big spring."

"Sounds good to me. An erudite thought process, my friend."

"Eru-what?"

"*Erudite*. It means scholarly or well educated."

"Probably something an *erudite* person such as myself should have known then, huh, Willy?"

It was cause for smiles.

They were soon on the way west, sticking close to the river except for spots where the nearby stands of trees extended far enough to lend significant shade.

At noon they ate while they rode – beef jerky, compliments of Scar Head and his friend. They rode into the evening.

"Look. The moon's grown well past a quarter. Gives us a lot

more light, longer into the evening.”

“That’s not all it provides,” Rusty said slowing and looking back over his shoulder.

“It lets us see more smoke signals,” Willy said, sounding disappointed. “I hoped we had lost them.”

“At least now we have two weapons,” Rusty said, trying to put a positive spin on it.”

“Against a dozen, angry, renegades that eat ten-year-old boys for breakfast?”

“I see your point. Still. I feel better having them.”

They kept the fire low and each of them slept with a gun under his blanket that night. Willy hated absolutely, every, possible thing about that.

* * *

It was close to noon the following day when they came to a road running north and south. It forded the river at a wide, slow moving spot. There was a tall pole with several signs nailed to it, each in the shape of an arrow and pointing in one or another direction. They pulled up and Willy read them.

“So, the *B Bar B Ranch* is ten miles south. *W. A. Watson*, fifteen miles north. *Ness City*, back the way we came from. *Little Blue Fork Creek* straight ahead, no distance given.”

Willy began chuckling and shaking his head.

“What,” Rusty asked meeting his chuckle with a broad smile.

“That’s our place – Little Blue Fork Creek.”

“I don’t get it.”

“Let me enlighten you, older brother who is clearly losing his mental prowess (skill). From the clue – small, copper, utensil. What happens to copper after it gets left out in the elements?”

“It corrodes – turns bluish. Ah! A copper utensil might turn blue. And ‘Little’ and ‘Small’ might be interchangeable.”

“And, the creek ahead is not named Little Blue Spoon Creek, but . . . ?”

“I see. Little Blue *Fork* Creek. Again, your genius shines. Do we cross the river here or continue on this side?”

“I guess that’s a tossup.”

Sam had clearly had enough chit chat and moved out, staying on the side they had been traveling.

“Decision made, the way it seems.”

In less than a mile, they came across, a tiny Creek feeding into the river. It was more like a rill according to Willy’s size-chart. As they drew closer they could see that the water had a definite blue tinge to it, likely caused when it ran through a copper deposit.

“Once again, here we are, a new trial I suppose,” Willy said. “They’ve sure been getting harder.”

“But we’ve certainly been up to them, haven’t we?”

“Yes, we have.”

They dismounted, unhooked the travois, and removed the saddle bags. The ponies first went to Little Blue Fork, but snubbed it in favor of river water.

“I’ll feel better if we put all the coins in one saddle bag and hide it,” Willy said. “That last pouch must have had thousands of dollars in it.”

“Okay. Not a bad idea. Let’s find a good place.”

They walked the area. It was flat and grassy back ten yards from the streams. The thick stand of grass gradually thinned and became the spotty prairie grass through which they had been riding for days.

“A large, flat rock over there,” Rusty said walking in its direction.

It was generally rectangular, two feet long and almost as wide.

“If we can lift it we can hollow out a place under it for the bag,” Willy suggested.

They had soon done just that. The coins should be safe.

“Now, find the box,” Rusty said turning back to the point where the streams met. “Anything look interesting?”

“Nothing jumps out at me. You?”

“Nope. There are no structures – natural or manmade – to get our teeth into.”

“What if it’s underground, then?”

“Or, under water?” Rusty came back.

“We used the only obvious underground place to hide our coins. That seems like it only leaves underwater if those are really our only two choices.”

“If that’s so,” Rusty began thoughtfully, “I’m betting on the little Blue fella. The river flows with way too much power.”

“Probably a good take on it. Shall we walk the little ‘Blue fella’ as you call it?”

“Okay. I’ll take the other side and you take this side. We’ll walk together. It seems to stay to a two foot to three-foot width. Lots of water passes through it though.”

“Yeah. I think it has cut a very deep trench – maybe six to ten feet. See what you think.”

Rusty picked up a long pole and stuck it into the water.

“It’s a good eight feet right here. You’re probably right. And

it is running fast.”

They walked on further and further away from the big river.

“I think we’re getting pretty far from what we could call the confluence – the point where the streams of water meet.”

It had been Willy. Rusty seemed to agree, nodding and turning around to survey the area they had just searched.

“Sight down the path that the water takes from here to the river,” he said.

“Okay. What? You mean see how straight a course it runs?”

“Partly, yes. Look at the width, in particular.”

“Like you noticed earlier, two to three feet.”

“Let me ask it this way: of the hundred or so feet we can see of Little Blue Fork, what percent is narrower than three feet?”

“I see. Only about six feet – all in one place – down near the confluence. That would be six percent, to answer the question you actually asked.”

Rusty smiled as they walked down the gentle slope to that spot. It was twenty feet from where it dumped its water into the river.

Rusty knelt and bent over to get a better look. He slipped his arm down into the water.

“Cold!” he said. “Something else. You do it and tell me what you discover.”

In went Willy’s arm. He felt around.

“Burr! That *is* cold. Must come from a spring deep in the ground.”

“Yes, but what else beside the temperature?”

“Oh, you mean the concrete sides with the little rocks embed in it to make it seem just like the natural part of the stream.”

“Yes. That. What does it mean?”

“For one thing,” Willy began, “it’s the reason that while the rest of the stream has been eroded back on each side to a width of three feet, this narrower section has not. If this part was installed ten years ago, there is bound to have been some gradual erosion in the stretches that aren’t laid up in concrete – the soil and rock sections.”

“Well put. My ideas were more scattered than that, but our heads ended at same place. The question now is, why?”

“No,” Willy continued. “I imagine *why* is easily answered – to somehow hide our box. The real question is *how* does it work to hide our box?”

“You’re right, of course. That’s the only important question for us. It seems way to shallow here to be carrying all the water

from upstream. I bet if we figure that out, we will have our other question answered, little brother.”

“Only one answer to the water flow thing – there is an open area beneath this shallow, cemented area that allows it to pass through, underneath.”

“Maybe this entire concrete trough lifts out,” Rusty said.

Their conversation would have to end there.

A deep voice startled them from behind.

“You’ll never catch anything just using your hands, boys.”

They turned to find themselves looking up at four men, each leading a horse. They were all dirty. It was difficult to tell which smelled worse – the horses or the men. Two of them had drawn guns. Willy moved his eyes toward his brother, drawing his attention to the leader’s hat. It had once belonged to Scar Face – the piece of clothing Rusty had allowed him to keep.

“We understand two boys about your age have some sort of treasure map and that they are roaming around here in western Kansas – looking for it. I’ll take the map.”

“Map, Sir?” Rusty asked, hoping his voice wouldn’t crack and give away his fright. “I have a map of Kansas, so we don’t get lost. We’re meeting up with our father and uncle to accompany them on out to Colorado. But I don’t know nothin’ about no treasure map.”

“Let me give you one fact, kid: we know you are the two we’re lookin’ for. One of your saddle bags has the monogram, ‘J S’ on it – Johann Svntson, a well sunburned gentleman we did some business with earlier in the day. You will hand it over to me or you will both regret it.”

He hitched his head at two of the others. They were huge, brutes of men, and they picked up the boys and tossed them to the ground beside the Little Blue Fork.

“Show the boys what’s in store for them if they don’t cooperate.”

The big men dragged the boys to the water edge and forced their heads underwater. They were allowed to come up sputtering after a minute or so.

“The map, now!”

The boys were, of course, frantically thinking about how to deal with the problem. Two boys against four, large, well-armed men suggested no pleasant outcomes. They could drown them at will. Back their heads went into the water – longer that time.

///

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

The Final Trials

By the fifth time they had been dunked, Willy had taken some water into his lungs and was ready to give up. Neither of them had come up with a solution. They were terrified beyond anything they had ever imagined.

Suddenly, a flight of arrows crossed the opening – thud, thud, thud, thud. The four men fell to the ground screaming in obvious pain, grasping arms, legs, wrists, and hips. The boys rolled back from the edge of the stream, laying on their sides, coughing and sputtering and trying to make sense of what was going on.

At the same moment, through the fog that still clouded their minds, they heard, “*a-su-ge-da-u-lo-le-s a-nv.*”

Willy moved, raising his head and shoulders, supporting himself on one elbow.

“*Strawberry Bread?*” he said. “I must have died and gone to heaven – and as it turns out it’s the heaven of the Plains Indians.”

“Hello, my friends,” came a familiar voice.

“Running Bear?” Willy asked, looking around to locate the boy that went with the voice.

“Yes. You seem to have come through your ordeal. Can you sit up? Here, let me help.”

A brave did the same for Rusty, leaning him forward and patting him on his back.

“There is nothing about this that we understand, Running Bear,” Willy said.

“My father, the great Chief, believed that allowing you two to cross the Plains without adult supervision and protection was – how did he put it? Oh yes – *crazier than a mule with its tail on fire*. So, he selected a few braves to follow you at a distance and keep an eye on things. I convinced him I should come along since I was the only one who you knew. We were all ready to swarm in on the bad

men at your last stop before we saw you had it well in hand. I congratulate you on that. It will amuse the chief – how you handled it.”

“So, the smoke signals weren’t from the renegades?”

“No, they were ours. I apologize if they caused you concern. Our braves caught the renegades the day after I left you.”

“And the night you visited our camp – I mean we thought it had been the renegades then, too.”

“You saw us?”

“Oh, no. Your moccasin prints the next morning.”

Running Bear nodded and spoke.

“I felt the need to make sure you had sufficient supplies.”

“So, now what?” Willy asked.

“Now, we will tend to the four wounded men and drop them off at a marshal’s office. We have seen their likenesses on wanted posters. There may be what you call a reward.”

“We’re not into taking rewards. Use it for your education. Having them put away will be all we want.”

“May I ask if you are nearing your goal? How much longer it will take?”

“We have some work to do here and then one more time on west some 75 or 80 miles. If things go well, we will be at our destination in two or three more days – four at the most.”

Running Bear smiled and nodded clearly happy about their progress.

“We will go now. I must return to my village to attend a ceremony – one of several I have to participate in on my way to becoming prepared to be chief. It has been very nice having you as my friend. Good bye, now. May life be good to you.”

They disappeared as quickly and silently as they had appeared.

“My,” Willy began, thinking about Running Bear’s words. “If we have to keep going through the experiences we’ve had the past few days in order to have life start being good to us, I’m not sure it’ll be worth it.”

“That’s just the water in your lungs speaking. We are doing just great. Here, let me hold you up by your heals for a while.”

* * *

Before sundown they had discovered the hiding place – right where they had suspected. The front four feet of the concrete trough did lift up – hinged at the rear. The box – boxes, actually – had stood the test of nature’s elements very well. The box they

were used to finding had been placed inside a slightly larger, tar soaked box to assure it would remain water tight. The pouch contained – big surprise – many more coins. The note read like this:

In 1870, agents of the wicked king showed up, determined to kill the rightful heirs to Svenstonia - your parents, the Grand Duke and Duchess – and find the gold regardless of what they had to do to get it. We fled back east across Kansas with you boys, leaving the gold behind in our secret cave. We settled just across the river in Missouri for a few months, feeling safer in a metropolis. As the King's agents closed in on us – still not having found the gold – we entrusted Dr. Potter with our sons' care.

The clue to the next stop read:

Scarlet Feathers Squeak, and Incapacitated Brown Cow

* * *

Two days later, they arrived in the general area of letter 'K' on the **KANSAS** map. It was in a territory just on the verge of becoming a county, although already a legal part of the state of Kansas.

“Read that clue again, Willy.”

They were watering the animals and themselves at a public pond. It was mid-afternoon. They had come upon a well-used trail earlier that morning which helped them make good time that day. Willy repeated the clue and then tried to make a joke.

“I suppose if *Scarlet Feathers Squeak*, they need to be oiled.”

Rusty offered a smile and even a chuckle.

“And, why would anybody name a creek after a lame cow?”

That question could not be answered, so they continued west along the two-track trail – clearly, in addition to riders, many wagons and buggies also used it.

As it approached five o'clock, they came to a crossroad. Standing several yards back from the north-west corner of the crossroad, was a post constructed from rocks held together by

concrete. That is what caught the boy's attention. The concrete boat. The concrete trough. Now an oversized concrete post almost ten feet high and two feet square.

"You see it, too," Willy said.

Rusty nodded and said: "It's similar to the wooden one we came upon earlier, complete with signs pointing to places along each road."

"Let's see," Willy said. *Topeka, Kansas*, 400 miles back the way we've come. *Great Bend, Kansas*, 120 miles, also back the way we came. Look, that's interesting, *Mount Sunflower Peak*, 80 miles straight ahead. Two more: *Red Crow Creek*, north 40 miles, and *Buffalo Falls*, south 55 miles."

"There are two streams listed," Rusty said.

"But they seem to be 95 miles apart – north to south – big brother. Not going to be a confluence between them."

"Hmm?"

Rusty continued thinking.

"What if *this* crossroad is the confluence? Do those two streams fit the clues we have?"

Puzzled, Willy was willing to go along with his brother's request.

"Let's see. *Red Crow Creek*. Red could sure be a substitute for Scarlet."

"And maybe the feather for Crow – I guess that's a long shot."

"Maybe not. Think about it. An old floor may squeak when you walk on it. It could also be called creaking. Different spelling, but Squeak could equal Creek – Red Crow Creek."

"Okay. What about the other one: *Buffalo Falls*?" Rusty asked.

"I think we win again," Willy said beginning to laugh. "Brown Cow – Buffalo. What would an incapacitated (lame or sick) cow or buffalo probably do?"

"I get it, it would *fall* – Buffalo Falls."

"Okay. But why here at this crossroad?"

"I know it's a strange connection, but the roads to each of those streams meet here – sort of a confluence – plus more concrete."

"Okay. Let's give this post a good going over," Willy said, agreeing it was worth a shot – even if it were a l-o-n-g shot.

To examine the top half of the post, Rusty stood on Sam's back. Willy went after the bottom half. Their first once over came up empty. Rusty jumped to the ground.

“Anything interesting down here,” he asked.

“Lots of interesting things – pretty colored stones. A couple of say-nothing bronze medallions sunk into the concrete. Nothing that jumped out at me.”

“Medallions, you say? Show me.”

There were two, circular, both about 2 ½ inches in diameter, definitely bronze.

“You make sense out them, Rusty?”

“Not at all, but it gives me an idea.”

He pressed them and was clearly disappointed when nothing happened.

“What made you react so quickly to hearing the word medallion?” Willy asked.

“There are two up toward the top but just opposite these on the back. They look similar to these. I poked at them, too, but nothing happened. They didn’t budge.”

While Rusty had been thinking out loud, Willy had been examining the lower medallions more closely.

“I don’t think they are actually held in place by the concrete, Rusty. Look, I can run the edge of my knife all the way around – and into a depth of a half inch in some places.”

“You remember that Chinese Box that Buster had back at the home?” Rusty asked.

“Yes. To open it, you had to pull several slides out to just the right length. But we can’t pull these out.”

“Right. All we could possibly do is push them in because of how they are set back inside the big post. I have an idea. I will need to get back up to the top.”

Once again, Rusty stood on Sam’s back. Sam seemed to be enjoying the game. Rusty positioned himself directly in front of the medallions.

“Okay. Here’s my idea. When I say push, you push on both of those down there. I’ll do the same up here. Maybe several of them have to receive pressure on them before any of them can be depressed. We may have to try several different combinations. Ready.”

“Ready.”

“Press on three – one, two, three.”

“This time *you* are the genius, Rusty. You’ll have to see this to believe it.”

Again, Rusty jumped down. Sam waited to see if there would be more to the game.

“Well I’ll be,” Rusty said. “Like a door flopped down from the

post right there at the ground. Have you looked inside?”

“Yup. It’s there where it’s been waiting for ten years – the box. You pull it out.”

Before long they had it open revealing a pouch and an envelope.

“Don’t just sit there, read, little brother.”

Before our trip back toward the east across Kansas, the Grand Duke – your father – made six, small, sturdy, metal lined, waterproof, wooden boxes, each locked with the same key – a golden key – in very special locks. He made a small version of the key for Russel to wear around his neck. Along our trip back east from Mount Sunflower, we planted those boxes every 50 or 60 miles in places you boys could find with help of a few clues. In the end, we left a leather pouch behind with you boys at Doctor Potter’s place. It contained the key, a map, and other information necessary to get you started. Also included, were a handful of silver dollars – different from gold to throw the agents off the track and protect you in case the pouch and its contents fell into the wrong hands.

“I guess that completes our story, Rusty.”

“I guess so. Can you be comfortable with what we have leaned?”

“I can’t see why not. There is still one more clue here on this sheet. It appears to relate to Mount Sunflower. Earlier, they mentioned their home and a secret cave. Maybe this gets us to those things.”

Mount Sunflower dinnerware. South 227 one before the other. Bone yard. 3rd rock from morning sun. 5th incorrect. Pebble N&S III Xs. Think doll house nape string entry.

John and Mary Winters. (MORE)

“I don’t get any of it, especially the names and the word,

'MORE',” Willy said.

“Well, *more* usually means *more*.”

Willy rolled his eyes. Rusty continued.

“Listen to me. We have the usual pouch. We have the usual envelope and note. They were all in the usual wooden box. That’s all the *usual*. What could be the *more* – *something in addition to the usual things?*”

“That’s good stuff, Rusty. If it means something more coming from our parents, I suppose it would have to be in or on the box. It’s all we have they could use to deliver *more* to us.”

Rusty sat the box between them and opened it, again. While he examined the lid, Willy looked inside.

“Well I’ll be,” Willy said, “an empty, square, black hole.”

Rusty pushed him aside and took his own look.

“Or not,” Rusty said reaching inside, himself. “Here, glued to the bottom, a large, black, envelope, sized to just fit the bottom.”

“Here’s my knife, Rusty, if you need something to loosen it.”

“I do. Thanks.”

A few moments later, he had removed it, taking great care not to tear it.

“It’s sealed,” he said.

“Unseal it, then, big doofus.”

He used his knife and soon had the flap freed. He reached inside with his fingers and removed several sheets of paper, of several sizes and weights. He handed roughly half of them to his brother and they began sorting through them.

“I have three birth certificates,” Willy said: “One for Russel Fredrique Svenston, one for William Fredrique Svenston, and one for Johnathon Russel Winters.”

“And here,” Rusty, said, “I have one more birth certificate: Thomas William Winters.” It has your birth year on it.”

“Let’s see,” Willy said, sorting through the papers he had. “The one I have for Johnathon Russel Winters has *your* birth year. I think I’m beginning to understand about the John and Mary Winters signatures. To live safely away from their real lives, they changed their names – adopting the last name Winters. Why the two certificates for each of us do you suppose?”

“Can’t say for sure, but here’s my idea. They wanted us to be born into the royal Svenston Family – to preserve our heritage, I imagine. Then, they immediately had our names changed to fit theirs – the Winters certificates. Notice here, both Winters’ certificates have a note in long hand: *Dual names for dual citizenship, granted by Judge Cornelius P. Oberholzer*, and they are

dated like the certificates. I think it means we are citizens of Svenstovia under the names we have been using, and citizens of the United States under these new names.”

“It probably also means that the property we will be looking for at Mount Sunflower, will be under the Winters name. What’s that last piece of paper you have there.”

“It is a deed to the property and it is in the names of John and Mary Winters. We will need our birth certificates in *that* Winters name to claim the land.”

“Wow! And I said our story was complete, way before it was *really* complete.”

Willy became immediately sober.

“So, does this mean we aren’t who we’ve always thought we were?”

A tear trickled down his cheek.

“No. I think it means we are each *two* very lucky people, belonging to two countries and having a whole lot more still to learn about ourselves and our parents. You, of all people, should think that’s the greatest thing ever – sort of like absurdity turned inside out.”

“Thanks for that. I do. And if you ever stop acting like a Grand Duke, I’ll pull out your Russel Svenstson birth certificate and bring you back in line.”

“It’s a deal then, Grand Prince of Svenstonia. You can expect the same from me.”

They shook on it.

“I guess this means we have to get used to new names,” Willy said. “What should I call you?”

“Johnny, I suppose. How about you?”

“Tommy, I guess – maybe Tom and John when we get older. Although, you see they made our original first names into our middle names – maybe in case we wanted to keep using the originals.”

“Sounds like you aren’t sure which way to go.”

“Oh, I’m with you – for safety sake if nothing else. I was just thinking that when we mess up in front of other people and let the wrong name slip out, we have a good way of explaining it – the middle names.”

* * *

Four days later, they arrived at Mount Sunflower. They had remained in a small settlement for two days awaiting a response to a telegram they had sent to Doc Potter’s Home. It contained good news. Doc survived the shooting and was doing well. He was pleased they were safe and, also doing well.

Twenty miles on, they came upon a large, stone house, snuggled back into a depression in a low rise. Over the front gate was a sign: *Winters Haven: Everybody is Welcome*.

"That's a really nice motto," Willy/Tommy said as they rode up to the wide porch that ran the width of the beautiful, two-story, tannish-russet, stone, structure. The roof was covered in dark orange tile and there were three chimneys.

They remained mounted for several minutes taking in the scene.

"Can you imagine mother and father up there on the porch?" Willy asked.

"Sure can. This isn't the first time we've been here, remember. It was our home once, too."

"Well then, isn't *it* lucky to finally get *us* back? Do you remember it?" Willy asked.

"Maybe. Hard to say. Something about the porch, maybe."

They dismounted, and the animals moved on to the tiny stream (sorry, *rill*) that ran down the rise a few yards from the north side of the house.

"Ready to go inside?" Rusty asked.

"I'd rather try to solve this final clue first – like once that's done, we can look back on the first part of our lives and then walk inside to begin our new one."

"Let's get to work, then, brother."

They translated, *Mount Sunflower dinner ware* as, 'the metal name plate at the top of Mount Sunflower'. It merely held the name and the elevation – 4,039 feet above sea level.

South 227 one before the other became, '227 paces south from that plate'.

Bone yard referred to a small 'cemetery' they found at that spot. It was enclosed by a wrought iron fence.

3rd rock from morning sun was, 'the 3rd tombstone to the west'.

5th incorrect, directed them to the 5th tombstone to the left (incorrect = not right = left).

Pebble N&S III Xs, took some time to figure. In the end, it came to mean 'Rock north and south three times'. (rock as in rock a baby's cradle)

Finally, *Think doll house nape string entry*, became, 'In the tiny key hole use the key from Russell's necklace' (nape, refers to neck).

With the turn of the little key, the tombstone lay back, away from them, exposing a narrow staircase rather than the expected

casket or huge container of gold. Using tar-based torches that were found hanging along the tunnel, the boys lit their way, moving south, at a downward angle, through a six-foot high passageway. The entrance at the cemetery closed behind them with a jolting, thud. Maybe not such a good thing. Could it all have been an elaborate trap? Willy reached forward and grasped the back of Rusty's belt. They kept moving forward.

After a few minutes, the tunnel opened out into a natural cave as long as a box car and twice as high and wide. There was a large container – like the one referred to in one of the notes. In the least, it was half the length of the cave. They opened it to find enough gold to run a small kingdom for 1,000 years. Just beyond the container was a ladder. Standing at the bottom, the boys could not see the top. Of course, they climbed it – that had been Willy's idea.

It led into a secret room in the big stone house. They had soon explored it room by room, started a fire in the living room fireplace to warm the meals they had purchased in the settlement. Streak took the tour of the house with them, but decided he'd rather be outside with his best friends – Sam and Mark.

"Look, above the fireplace – the huge painting," Will said. They moved closer and read the caption at the bottom.

"The Grand Duke, Fredrique Stvenston. The Grand Duchess, Wilhelmina. The Grand Prince, Russel Stvenston, age four, The Grand Prince, William Stvenston, newborn."

"Wow! There they are – father and mother," Rusty said.

"I know, and us," Willy said. Wow!"

"Our story just doesn't seem to come to an end," Willy said.

"That's how I think it should be," Rusty said thoughtfully. "The only sort of a life worth living is one that just keeps growing and growing in unpredictable ways. A guy just has to follow every opportunity that comes his way."

"And I guess from this point forward, that's going to be up to us, isn't it – how it grows?" Willy said, seriously. "I hadn't realized how serious a thing life really is until this journey we've been on."

Rusty nodded.

"Well, *Tommy*, I think our first task will be to go to the court house tomorrow and get the legal things done that transfer this property to us."

"The next thing, *Johnny*, will be to figure out how we're going to get rid of all this gold. Nobody ever needed this much and there are so many people who have none."

"I want to send a chunk of it to Doc Potter for the other boys,"

Rusty said.

“We can send enough to see that all of them who want to go to go to high school will be able to go.”

“And college, too?”

“Of course. And then, Tommy began, we don’t want to overlook Jake – Lazy Boy needs a new coat of paint, and Bessie and Jessie so they can bring their son’s families home for a reunion, and Running Bear for his education, and send enough to Kyle at Fascinating Kansas so he can buy paints and colored pencils and so they can build a school and hire a teacher. And, of course, we’ll have to buy some more four-legged friends for Sam and Mark, and a girlfriend for Streak, and then . . .”

The End? (not on your life!)

* * * *

IF YOU ENJOYED THIS BOOK, YOU MAY ALSO ENJOY THE FOLLOWING THREE, ADVENTURE SERIES BY THE SAME AUTHORS.

- Jericho and Red Eagle: Two Boys’ Adventures in the Old West.
- Doc and Johnny’s Old West Mysteries
- The Orvie Mystery Series.

