



**A Mystery/Adventure
by
David Drake
For ages 10 to 14**

**The Boy
Who Could
See Into
The Past**

The Orvie Mystery Series
The Boy Who Could See into The Past

By
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Other Books in the Orvie Mystery Series
Featuring the boy who could see into the past:

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Book 3: The Mystery of the Duke's Diamonds

Book 4: The Mystery of the Ghost Ship of Windsor Island

Book 5: The mystery of the Treasure on Doubloon Island

Book 6: The Mystery of Gallagher's Ghost

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CHAPTER ONE: ORVIE

It was a terrible dream. It was a twist and turn and sweat and scream out into the black of the night dream. It was a sit up in bed and feel torrent after torrent of warm tears streaming down his face dream. It was Orvie's tear dampened cheeks. It was Orvie's restless terror. It was Orvie's terrible dream. Worst of all, it was not just some nightmare born out of left over, easily forgotten, snippets from scary movies or a runaway imagination there in the shadowy darkness of his bedroom. It was the boy's nighttime memory of the most terrifying event of his young life.

Well, the young life thing will need some serious explanation further on. For now, be satisfied to know that, Orvie – Orville, as named by his parents – is twelve years old. He wears his jet-black, somewhat wavy, hair long – below his ears on the sides, with bangs that sway against his eyebrows in front and locks that cover his neck in back. He is well built, beginning to take the form of a young teen with hips and the hint of biceps and widening shoulders. His well-tanned complexion, bright brown eyes and easy smile complete the picture of an attractive young man – that one in a hundred that always stands out in a crowd. That has been both a blessing and a drawback for Orvie. But more about that later, also.

Orvie had been orphaned years before and had been

mostly on his own for longer than would seem believable. He was creative and resourceful and had developed the talent for talking himself out of most any circumstance that threatened his bodily safety, general wellbeing, or his momentous secret – secrets would be more accurate.

Most recently, Orvie was occupying a small room on the second floor, rear, of an abandoned warehouse near the railroad in the small community of Jasper in a Midwestern state. He arrived by way of a boxcar several months earlier – early June – and took up residence in his now cozy room that same day. No one could know where he lived or that he was alone in the world. The authorities frowned on letting a lad his age be out and about, unsupervised, on his own. They would uproot him from the comfort and safety of his private life and take him to live with a foster family. He had been that route. It had some advantages – food, clothes, safety, friends – but they asked too many questions, questions which he was not about to answer. Those well-meaning parent-types also had waaaaaay too many rules. Orvie needed the freedom to be himself – to do what he wanted to do when he wanted to do it. That is pretty much how it had been back in his own home with his own parents.

He was a good boy. He never made trouble and was generally helpful. Orvie would never intentionally hurt anyone – except, perhaps to protect himself from bullies and the like. He could more than hold his own in his weight class. Most folks, including teachers, found him to be exceptionally bright and knowledgeable. There were few subjects about which he didn't seem to know more than those who were teaching him. That puzzled the school authorities because, although his test scores did show him to be a bit above average in intelligence, they were not nearly high enough to account for the tremendous store of wide ranging knowledge clearly packed into his head.

Orvie had secrets: secrets about his past and secrets about his special skill and the mission he had set for his life. He had survived partly because he had learned ways of coping and getting along in the world, but mostly because he kept his secrets well. He had a wonderful story to tell, but

knew he could never tell it. Few would believe him, anyway – perhaps a few other kids, but certainly not grown-ups. And so had been things for all of his 124 years of life.

Twelve years old? One hundred and twenty-four years? An explanation probably seems in order.

At the time of Orvie's birth the Civil War had only been over several years. Horses, buggies, and bicycles were the primary means of getting around. Things such as cell phones, radio, television, computers, telephones, soft drinks, breakfast food in boxes, contact lenses, teeth braces, cars, airplanes, and air-conditioning were still hidden in minds yet to be born.

Orvie's parents had been teachers, living in northern Minnesota. He was an only child. There was great love and much laughter in his home. His family was not poor, but certainly not rich. He loved being outdoors and all four seasons found him enjoying his world – tramping the woods, swimming in the lake, and working on his ever-growing, multilevel, treehouse in the single, huge, oak tree in the back yard. He tended to be a loner, not because he didn't like people, but because he preferred doing his own things in his own ways. Teachers had variously referred to him as smart, creative, stubborn, helpful, a leader, having a mind of his own, and trouble. Except for the latter, Orvie understood what they meant. He never intentionally caused trouble, but his observation was that often people didn't really want to hear the truth and his tendency to speak it did bring about trouble for those who chose to avoid or alter it.

It leads to the secret – well, it will eventually lead to the secret – but first the nightmarish tragedy. On his twelfth birthday – July 10th – Orvie was lazing his way across the little lake, which bordered his parent's property, on his log raft. It was sunny and warm, uncommonly warm since the usual lake breeze had hushed that day. He was about halfway to the shore opposite his home when the sky all quite suddenly began to boil with black, swirling, clouds, lit from behind by bright, broad, flashes of lightning. The wind picked up and whipped the glassy surface of the water into heavy, high, frothy waves that tossed his small craft about – sending it careening this way and that. The sail soon ripped and was

torn from the mast. Orvie threw the anchor overboard hoping to keep the raft more stable in the water. It was a five-gallon metal bucket filled with heavy stones. A chain connected it securely to the back of the raft. Orvie clung to the mast – a ten-foot, straight, strong, four-inch sapling inset into one of the logs near the front.

His initial fascination with the atmospheric happenings soon turned to fright and then fright to terror. He was a good swimmer, but knew his young body would not be able to fight such angry swells. He, also, knew that his best – maybe only – chance to survive was to keep himself on the raft. He clung tightly to the mast, locking his arms and legs around it. The raft would rise high and then dip low. At times two feet of water rushed across the raft's surface and he struggled to find air to breath. His situation quickly moved beyond unsafe toward perilous. His mind raced trying to work out a better survival plan.

Then it happened. A huge wave overpowered Orvie's grip and swept him overboard plunging him deep beneath the water. By chance he brushed against the anchor chain. He took hold hoping to use it to hand-over-hand himself up toward the surface.

Before he could break through into the air above, however, a bolt of lightning hit the mast and traveled across the wet surface of the raft to the chain and down into the water to the anchor. Along the way, it electrified Orvie from the hair on his head to the nails on his tightly clinched toes. He fell into unconsciousness and hung there, appearing lifeless, in the water.

Hours later he heard birds, felt the warmth of the sun on his skin, and detected light brightening his still dark world through his closed eyelids. 'Heaven?' he wondered for just a second.

"Son. Son."

He recognized it as his father's voice.

"Orville, Orville,"

It was his mother.

As the worst of the storm had passed, the two of them

braved the remnants of rain and wind to search for him. Eventually, they found him stretched out face down on the shore just fifty yards from their house. A log from his raft lay beside him. It appeared that somehow, he had managed to cling to it until it had been swept up onto solid ground. It was the kind of an experience that could, in the course of normal events, never be verified – never be reconstructed exactly – except that eventually Orvie would be able to see every second, would re-experience every shooting pain, would remember every terrifying image.

That would be how he was led to discover his amazing secret – the one alluded to earlier. It happened in this way.

Back at his home, out of his wet clothes, and wrapped in a blanket, the family sat close to the fireplace waiting to hear Orvie's story.

“Well, Son. What happened?” his father asked.

“The storm came up. Waves. Huge waves. They tossed the raft like a tailless kite in the wind. I was holding onto the mast and I guess lightning hit it.”

Immediately, Orvie knew that was incorrect. It was a kind of feeling – a kind of knowledge – he had never experienced before. It was as if he could see into the past. He described the events in great detail just as they had taken place – the waves, launching the anchor, clinging to the mast, being washed overboard, seeing the lightning hit the mast (something he could not have actually witnessed from below the surface of the water), grasping the chain, feeling the electricity surge through his body, lapsing into unconsciousness, releasing the chain, being pushed to the surface by the churning water, feeling the log slapping against his body, grabbing hold and being swept up onto the shore where he lay unconscious for several hours.

He looked down at the suddenly sore palms of his hands. The outline of chain links had been burned into them. His own puzzled face met the equally puzzled faces of his parents. They all three knew that since he had been unconscious, he could not have remembered most of those events and yet Orvie knew they were true. He would never

argue the issue, but he knew things had taken place exactly the way he had detailed them. His parents would never press the issue either, although they knew the fact was he could not have remembered things that transpired while he was lying nearly lifeless in the water. Those moments were left alone forever among them.

A year passed and Orvie was baffled. He grew more concerned as every month came and went. The hair that had earlier begun growing in new places on his body had not become thicker or longer or more widely spread the way it had on his friends. His arm muscles that had previously begun to develop, developed no further. The fuzz on his face remained just pale, limp, fuzz on his face. He had hoped for a whisker or two by thirteen. His height and weight were the same as they had been the year before. Something was wrong.

He paid a secret visit to Doc Webster. The doctor examined the boy from stem to stern and back again and had to agree with Orvie's conclusion. He had stopped growing. More than that, Doc said, "You have stopped aging. I can't explain it. Maybe that zapping by the lightning somehow affected you. I'll do some research. Never heard of such a thing."

Other things, however, had begun developing during that year. Orvie could sense when others were not telling the truth. In fact, he got flashes that told him what the truth actually was. At first it was fun – like a game. It made him giggle. Gradually it became a burden. He found that he really didn't want to know when his teacher was lying or his best friends were exaggerating the truth, and most definitely not when his parents were telling falsehoods. His teacher would lecture about historic events and Orvie would know when the retelling was inaccurate – even if it had not been an intentional lie.

Orvie soon learned it was not in his best interest to point out such inaccuracies to others or to confront folks over the dishonesty of their stories. It made enemies faster than honey drew flies. It made him an outcast even among those who had been his closest friends. In fact, it often turned on him and made it seem like he was the liar – just trying to get

others into trouble. He determined that he must keep his mouth shut about such things. It grew very uncomfortable there in his home town and he wished he could move and start over somewhere else.

His wish came true, although not in a way he would have ever hoped for. A tornado passed their way and wiped out his sturdy log house on a night he was camping out alone in the woods. His parents were killed. He was filled with the deepest sort of sadness, but came to see it as an opportunity to move on. Who knew what relative would be assigned to raise him? He knew that was not for him. Despite his twelve-year-old appearance he had lived fourteen years and had the experience and wisdom to back it up. Orvie immediately decided to strike out on his own. The townspeople would believe he had also been killed by the tornado – just blown off to parts unknown, perhaps dumped into the center of the lake.

He returned home under the cover of darkness, loaded a carpet bag with what essential belongings he could find, and headed south – moving upstream along the river that fed the lake. His emotions were mixed; the worst kind of grief, and yet he was filled with great anticipation about a better life – the grand adventure that awaited him. He would make or break it on his own. He would live by his wits, eat off the land when necessary, and take whatever time it took to sort out the strange facets that had become a part of him. Orvie had always had great faith in himself and his abilities. Those were things that his parents had taught him and would stay and guide his life forever.

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CHAPTER TWO: A Field Trip

Orvie found it easier to remain anonymous – be just an unknown face in the crowd – when he lived in cities, but he hated cities. They were, to his way of thinking, dirty and busy and, in his experience, generally populated with unfriendly types. Living there was expensive and through the years, life on the streets had become more and more dangerous. He preferred small towns. It meant he had to move from place to place often so his lingering twelve-year-old-ness didn't make others suspicious from year to year. He retreated to cities only when problems arose and he needed to disappear for a while.

He preferred the central states of the mid-west – Iowa, Kansas, Nebraska, Illinois, and Indiana – because of the four distinct seasons there. The little town of Jasper fit his requirements – about two thousand people in a mostly rural area of the mid-west with easy access to the woods and streams, hills and valleys. There were lots of retired folks with whom he could comfortably relate; after all he had lived through the same times they had – he just didn't show it.

So, you see, how, at twelve, Orvie had such an unbelievable store of knowledge and how he was, in fact, 124 years old. In each new community, he quickly became known as a wonderful story teller. His vivid accounts of historical

events transported his listeners back to the very moment. It was as if he had been there! The details. The emotions. The insights. Orvie seemed to have a story for virtually any event. Those he had not personally lived, he was able to reconstruct with perfect accuracy – not always the way the history books described them. He had to be careful. His ability was to see things exactly as they had happened and sometimes the records of those events had not been accurate for one reason or another.

So it was, that Orvie – a name he had given himself because he thought Orville sounded too old fashioned (and that had happened back in the late 1800's!) – had come to be a seventh grader for the 112th time. His cover story was that his father was a salesman who traveled most of the time and his mother was shy and uncomfortable around people. It was why he didn't take friends to his home, which, according to him was usually a campsite out in the woods. Most people took it as a reasonable explanation for why he was never seen with his parents and why they never attended school events. It had been the general story that had served him well for many, many, many, many years.

He hated guns but trapped rabbit and squirrel. He knew the wild fruits and nuts and vegetables quite well and with minimal amounts of flour, sugar, milk and eggs, he could bake bread, make pancakes, and whip up delicious cakes, pies, and cookies. Several times a week one or another of his older friends would invite him for dinner and send the leftovers with him for his mother. Orvie made out very well in the food department. He did odd jobs around town for spending money – books, school supplies, clothes and the like.

Orvie was a trusting boy, but knew he had to remain on alert at all times where his secrets were concerned. He had many routes he followed from town to his room in the warehouse – they all led through the woods, of course. He would always stop and sit a spell on a ridge or on a favorite limb of one of the big trees to make sure he wasn't being followed before continuing home.

Home was that upstairs room at the rear of the abandoned warehouse close to the railroad. It wasn't big, but

Orvie didn't need big. It wasn't fancy, but Orvie didn't need fancy. It had three windows across the back, which lit the room well during the day. At night, he covered the windows with pieces of plywood he had found in the building, so light from inside could not be seen from outside.

He had strung a wire from the electrical service that provided power to the lights and such on the railroad. It supplied him with electricity for heat, cooking, and light. He figured that cost the railroad company about twenty dollars a month. He gathered coal along the rails that fell off the coal cars as they made the sharp corner a mile west before straightening out for the run north town. He sold that at a bargain price to some of the older residents who still heated with coal. Then, on the first Monday of every month he would put a twenty-dollar bill in an envelope and mail it to the railroad office in Springfield with a simple note, "Thank You". He figured everybody won – him, the older folks, and the railroad.

Orvie was not a fancy guy and his room reflected that. He had carpeted the floor partly for insulation and partly because he hated wearing shoes so went barefoot when there. Carpet was a whole lot better than cold plank flooring on cold winter mornings. In other parts of the building, he had found several cabinets and a counter that he used for cooking. He had been found a small refrigerator abandoned beside a country road. The hotplate was electric; he had salvaged it from the dump and fixed it so it worked like new.

There was a couch, a table with two chairs, and a mattress that lay in one corner close to the electric heater. There were two fans for warm weather. He kept his large water container filled from a faucet in the park. He had discovered a way to get into the showers in the boy's locker room at school so would slip in there and clean up at night. It was one of the best set-ups he'd ever had and he was quite happy with his life there in Jasper.

The thing he missed most was a wood burning fireplace, but he couldn't risk having the smoke seen, giving his place away. As a little boy back home he would lie on the floor in front of it and read from the light of the flames. The light danced over the pages and he liked the smell of the

burning wood. Sometimes it seemed to him that his whole life had revolved around adapting to change.

By nature, Orvie was nose-y – especially about things that didn't appear to be quite right for some reason. So, it was with the Sheriff, there in Jasper. Oh, he smiled a lot and patted the little kids on the head. He rode in the parades and tipped his hat to the pretty girls and old ladies. He was well liked as indicated by the fact he had managed to get elected to six, consecutive, four year terms as Sheriff.

It had been during a recent campaign speech that Orvie had first become suspicious.

“You all know that since I have been your Sheriff, crime has disappeared from our county.”

Orvie got one of his images – feelings – that told him that had not been a true statement, and yet, everybody seemed to agree with what the Sheriff was asserting. Things were better – no burglaries, no muggings, no bad stuff at all. That is why they kept re-electing him. During his long/short life, Orvie had almost never been wrong when he received one of his 'pants on fire' images. It was the name he had given them, referring to a childhood rhyme: 'Liar, liar, pants on fire'. Of course, it made no sense, but then many childhood rhymes and folktales didn't.

Orvie's POFI's (short for 'pants on fire images') were most clear when he actually heard a person telling a falsehood related to some specific activity – denials about stealing from a mother's purse, spreading a rumor, not really losing a library book as stated in an attempt to avoid paying the fine, and so on. So, Orvie set out to find a way to prove his point about the Sheriff. A new mystery had entered his life.

Now, Orvie's experiences with law enforcement folks was not all that good. Often, some busybody would get the feeling something was fishy about the boy's story and have a policeman or deputy look into it. That usually signaled it was time for Orvie to move on quickly – that had been the case in his just previous situation. He kept his escape backpack fully loaded and stocked with food and water at all times. He also kept it hidden well away from where he was living.

It was actually the second time Orvie had visited Jasper. The first time had been fifty years earlier. At that time it had been a thriving manufacturing center where fine wooden furniture and boats and canoes for lakes and rivers were made. Those were now gone. The building in which he lived had been part of that. It wasn't that there wasn't still plenty of wood available in the forests that surrounded the town. It wasn't that there had not been skilled workers available to handle the work. It wasn't even that the demand for those products had died off. The fact was, the people of Jasper had become lazy.

A good-sized vein of gold had been discovered some ten years earlier – 60 years before Orvie's current visit. It made its owner super wealthy. After working it with his large crew for ten years he had accumulated more than enough money for the next several generations of his family to live very well. Jasper was his home town. People there had always been very good to him. So, he set up an arrangement to turn the mine over to the citizens of the little community. Those who lived there at the time all became partners in the 'Association'. They were to work the mine and receive all the profits.

It worked well for twenty years. They all grew rich and hired outside laborers to do the mining for them. The Association invested the wealth and to that very day, each of those original families received a substantial check every month – without working.

Twenty years after the Association began, there were a series of explosions, which caused cave ins deep within the mine. The sheriff had declared it unsafe to work. Every few years since there had been additional cave ins reported. It hadn't been worked for many, many, years.

Anyway, back at the time of Orvie's first visit, just after the Association had been formed, he developed a good friendship with a boy named Wayne, also twelve. They enjoyed roaming the hills, camping in the huge woods beside the streams, and swimming and racing and bicycling – the things all boys of that era liked to do. Orvie often slept over at Wayne's house. They were in the same grade and did several

reports and science projects together.

One such project involved fingerprinting everybody in town to see if the general design of prints were inherited. They wanted to find out if a print could be used to determine to which extended family somebody belonged. (They couldn't by the way.) They listed all the kinds of trees that grew in the county and attached samples to a large piece of plywood with labels and general information about each one. They enjoyed keeping busy and learning about new things.

[It should be noted that just before Orvie first arrived in Jasper all those years before he had lived in Winston, just one county to the south. Not wanting to chance that it would get back to Winston that he was still close by – he had come close to being found out while there – he decided to use the name, Jr. in Jasper. He had only intended to remain there a short while. So his friend, Wayne, had known him as Jr. rather than Orvie. Now, when his grandson spoke about his new friend, Orvie, his grandfather had no reason to make the connection with his own boyhood friend – so long as they didn't meet face to face.]

On this visit, Orvie discovered his friend had just turned 62 and had a twelve-year-old grandson named Ben and a fourteen-year-old granddaughter named Sarah. Within the first month Orvie and Ben had become good friends. Orvie, of course, had previously never confided in Wayne anything about his major secrets and made certain that, as much as he wanted to talk with him on the current visit, he avoided him at all costs. Ben had aged – white hair, wrinkles and such – but Orvie looked just like he had all those fifty years before. There was no way Wayne wouldn't recognize him.

There were two creeks that ran down from the hills just north of town. The one with its source near the old mine – Rakes Creek – turned west several miles north of town. The other – Purdy Creek – flowed through the center of Jasper, took a horseshoe shaped course around what became the City Park and then flowed on south.

At the time of the explosions, an underground supply of toxic gas was disturbed and began to flow to the surface under Rakes Creek. It followed the creek for a good mile or

more and polluted the water, making it unsafe for drinking or swimming. For that reason, the creek and the area alongside it had pretty much been abandoned and forgotten about by the time of Orvie's second visit.

One summer day when he and Ben were roaming the area north of town they followed Rakes Creek, throwing stones and looking for Arrow Heads.

"Do you notice anything strange about the creek?" Orvie asked Ben.

"Like what?"

Orvie pointed into the water at a wide, slow moving section.

"What do you see in there?"

"Fish? Creeks have been known to have fish in them," Ben said kidding his friend.

"Creeks that are so polluted that the water can't be used?"

"I see what you mean. I suppose that gas that's bad for people would be bad for fish, too, wouldn't it."

"I'm sure of it. We need to get some samples between here and its source up the hill ahead. We can get it tested by the state lab. I have sort of a friend there who will do it for us."

"Why test it?"

"To see if it's still polluted."

"I see. I can tell you're thinking way ahead on this. What's up?"

"If it isn't polluted that means one of two things: Either the gas leakage has stopped or . . ."

". . . or there was never any gas or any pollution in the first place," Ben said completing Orvie's thought.

"You know how I think, for sure, Ben. There will be empty pop cans at the picnic tables over on Purdy Creek. Can't be but a half mile from here, right?"

"Right. I see. Use them to collect the water."

"We can wash them out good in what we know is the clean water over there and then come get our samples. We'll

mark each can so we know where we got the water.”

A half hour later they had begun making the collection. Six samples in all from four spots about a quarter of a mile apart. When they reached the area below the waterfall that represented the source of water for the creek, they filled the final can. Orvie was puzzled.

“There are still fish up here – big fish.”

“Lots of big fish,” Ben said nodding and pointing. “Doesn’t make sense.”

“I love things that don’t make sense. They always present a mystery that needs to be solved.”

Back at Ben’s they found empty jelly jars with tight lids and they transferred the water into them, marking the lids with a felt marker. They packed them in a sturdy box, and sealed it up. Ben found the address of the lab on the internet and it was soon addressed and mailed from the post office. They used Ben’s return address on the box and his email address on the letter they included. Although Orvie was not one to lie about things, they decided to make up a story about the water being samples from abandoned wells in the area. That wouldn’t hurt anybody and it would buy them time if what Orvie suspected was true.

One possible problem. What if the lab found pollution and for some reason was required to provide that information to the sheriff? If he was really a bad guy as Orvis suspected, that could make major problems for the boys.

CHAPTER THREE: Something's Fishy

Two days later Ben got an early morning email from the lab. He was eager for Orvie to arrive so he could share the news although he really didn't understand what it might mean.

"Got stuff, Orvie," he said greeting his new friend as he crawled in through the open window to Ben's second floor room. They used the oak tree next to the house as their easy access route in and out.

"What does it say?"

Ben handed over the page he had printed off. Orvie read it with interest and then spoke.

"It's just like we suspected."

"It is? What was it we suspected?"

"That the creek water is perfectly safe."

"It's not contaminated?" Ben said/asked. "I don't understand."

"Neither do I for sure. It could have just cleaned up naturally down through the years. Water running across rocks does that. If that's the case, the gas must have stopped bubbling up to the surface quite some time ago. Still, I have lots of questions. We have two things we need to do today. We need to get some samples from the rocks in the creek bed and you need to have a short conversation with the Sheriff."

“The only thing I really understand so far about all this is that we seem to have a mystery to solve.”

“Could be both a huge and very dangerous mystery. I’ll fill you in as we go.”

“What’s the thing about me talking to Sheriff Watson?”

“There are some things about me I can’t share with you. It’s for the protection of both of us. I have to ask you, as my friend, to just accept that.”

“I can do that, just hope you’re not in big trouble of some kind – or dying of some horrible disease.”

Orvie smiled to himself – dying was certainly NOT his problem.

“Nothing like that, I can assure you.”

“Okay, then. No problem.”

“Sometimes I can get useful feelings about people when I hear them talk. I can’t explain it beyond that. Maybe, if you get the sheriff talking about the pollution, I will get a feeling that will be helpful to us.”

“So, you’re a psychic?”

“Psychics can see into the future. My feelings mostly deal with the past. We need to close that conversation forever, right now, okay?”

“Sure. Sorry if I pried. What shall I say?”

“We’ll work that out on the way to his office. After that we’ll need another really sturdy little box that will hold small rock samples. We’ll also need a hammer of some kind to break big stones into little pieces.”

“Got a hammer in my tool box over there. I’m sure we can get a box at the IGA. I’m always buggin’ them for crates to build with. Or, the drug store often has sturdy little cardboard boxes.”

They were soon on their way and Orvie outlined the general nature of the conversation Ben needed to have. They would use the story they were doing research on the old gold mine to see how it had affected the people of the area. From there he would ask about how the creek became polluted.

“Morning boys. You’re up and about early. Social call or something I can do for you?”

The sheriff was always friendly. He eyed Orvie as if in some way suddenly suspicious about something. He had only been a preschooler back when Orvie had been there before so he doubted the man could remember him.

‘Oops,’ he thought to himself. When he had been there the first time, there was a five-year-old boy who got caught in a current while swimming in the creek and Orvie had rescued him. That boy’s name was Jeff. The sheriff’s name was Jeff. Later, Orvie would have to check that out.

Ben took the lead in the conversation.

“We’re doing a research project this summer, Sheriff. We’re going to write a history of the old gold mine and how it has affected the lives of the people here in Jasper down through the years. If it’s any good we’re going to print it up and put it in the library. Miss Prince, the librarian, says she’ll be glad to look it over and help us with it.”

Ben’s imagination had taken flight and added things that couldn’t be verified if the sheriff decided to follow up on it. Later in the morning they would have to stop by the library and set all that up with Miss Prince.

Ben continued.

“There seem to be several stories about how the mine polluted Rakes Creek and I figured you’d know which one was true, you being our great sheriff and all.”

Orvie thought Ben had laid it on a little thick, but what he ‘felt’ from the Sheriff was that he liked it. He always took flattery to be fact – a dangerous way of thinking Orvie had learned over the years.

The sheriff gave them the story that involved the explosion, the collapse of the mine shafts and the toxic gas it allowed to vent to the surface through a deep crack in the limestone that under laid the county. He told how the pollution was so bad up at the source that the trees and shrubs and grass had been killed and to this day nothing could grow within fifty yards of the cave opening. It poisoned the water and killed all the fish in that creek.

Orvie had a question that needed answering. It was one he hadn't thought of earlier in order to put it into Ben's questions. He went ahead and asked it himself.

"The creek's still polluted, the way I hear it."

"Oh yes. We have the water tested twice a year. Still very dangerous. You boys stay away from it. Just getting it on your skin can cause your skin to rot. Drinking it will certainly kill you. The soil is dangerous as well. It's why I have all those warning signs up along the creek."

Orvie thanked him and they turned to leave. The sheriff called after them.

"You new to town, I guess," he said directing the comment to Orvie.

"Yes, Sir. Just passing through. Mom and I are camping out just across the county line in Baker's Woods. Come September, we'll head back south for the winter down home."

It was a protective fib – about the only kind of falsehood the boy (well) let himself tell. He did have to survive and if his real story got out no telling what would happen. He might be carted off to a hospital to be studied by doctors, or put on display on the Tonight Show, or have scientists after him for DNA samples to study and maybe use somehow. None of those things could be allowed. Orvie really enjoyed being a 124-year-old twelve-year-old (you understand).

"You been here before?" the sheriff asked.

The only safe answer was going to be a lie. He allowed it.

"No, Sir. First time here for ol' Orvie. Really like it here. Friendly folks. Beautiful country. I hear we're all really safe here with you in charge."

He figured the flattery was a nice touch that should endear him to the man and distract his focus from his suspicions. It appeared to have worked. The boys left with smiles all around. He was pleased with how he had phrased his fib: it had been Jr. not Orvie who had been there before. That made him feel some better about it.

After a short discussion of the problem Ben had created when he included the librarian, they made their way the four blocks to the old library building that sat near the center of the City Park.

Miss Prince was happy to see them and delighted about being asked to help them with the project. She was a local history buff, herself. Orvie saw how that might be a big help to them.

They left and headed north out of town, coming upon Rakes Creek after about twenty minutes. It was already hot. They were glad they had worn cut offs instead of jeans. They had shed their shirts upon leaving the library.

“So, what did you ‘feel’ about Sheriff Watson.”

“Nothing he told us was the truth. You need to think about this before I go on: Do you really want to hear about it? Knowing the truth is always a big responsibility – especially when you may need to keep it secret for a while.”

“Do you think I’m not up to it, Orvie?”

“Oh, that’s not the problem. I’m sure you are. I didn’t mean that I doubted your ability to do it. I just want you to be sure it’s something you want to know – to have and to guard forever if necessary.”

“I can see that. Let’s get on with it.”

“Well, there never was any gas leak; that much I’m sure of.”

“If there wasn’t a leak then there wasn’t any pollution,” Ben added.

“Right. The question is, who wanted the people to believe it was polluted and why?”

“I think our little mystery just became a huge mystery,” Ben said. “So, what’s with the rock collecting?”

“Lots of the rocks that make up the creek bed are limestone. Limestone is very porous – honeycombed with microscopic tunnels that make it easy for liquids to penetrate it. The water that penetrated it all those years ago when the pollution was supposed to have taken place originally should have deposited some of that pollution inside the rock. We’ll

get some samples from the very bottom of the creek bed and send them to the lab for analysis.”

“I don’t understand something,” Ben said.

“What’s that?”

“How in the world do you know all this stuff? There never seems to be anything that comes up that you don’t know all about.”

“I just have lots of interests, I suppose.”

“In other words, it’s all part of what I can’t know about you.”

“Thank you for comprehending that and you have my eternal appreciation in advance for not pursuing it in forthcoming discussions.”

“Sometimes you talk like an old man. I think that’s what I’ll start calling you, Old Man.”

Orvie smiled. It was the last nickname he wanted, but what would be would be he guessed.

They walked along the creek for some time until Orvie decided the place looked right. It was just downstream from a very narrow area in which the water roared through a crevice in a stone outcropping.

“This is our spot,” he announced.

“Aren’t rocks, rocks? Why here?”

“That narrow area has kept the water flowing at a high rate since the creek began, probably. That means it has dredged a deep channel and those rocks from the very bottom have been pushed along and we’ll find them right out there. It’s the oldest limestone that we need.”

“Old enough to have absorbed the pollutant, you mean.”

“Right on. We’ll make a scientist out of you yet, Ben.”

Ben grinned. Like the sheriff, Ben, also, liked to hear nice things about himself. (Who doesn’t, huh?)

They shed their tennies and waded into the water. The creek was about six feet deep in the middle. That’s where Orvie wanted to find the samples. He showed Ben the sort of

rock they were searching for. He dove under the water first and came up empty handed. Ben gave it a try and stayed down a long time. He sputtered to the surface, his face barely out of the water.

“A little help here, Old Man. Got a big one.”

Orvie offered his help and they managed it to the shore.

“Perfect!” Orvie offered. Out of the mud on the bottom. That’s about as deep as it gets. Good going.”

They tossed it up onto the bank. While Ben caught his breath, Orvie went back down and found a second good specimen.

“How many do we need?” Ben asked.

“That’s all from here. Let’s chip off a sample from each one and then go on up stream. We need a few from close to the source.”

“Like from the pool under the waterfall that feeds the creek?” Ben said.

“Yes. That should give us some good stuff. The pool below a waterfall is typically deep. I’m thinking this one will have a smooth rock bottom so we may have to take the hammer to it under water.”

The water proved to be extremely cold and uncomfortable.

Still, they managed to get chips of stone and were soon back on shore appreciating the warmth of the air and sun. They put the samples in a plastic sack Ben had brought along. They tied shoelaces together and hung their shoes over their shoulders as they made their way on up the slope, north. Orvie’s feet were well callused so he wasn’t bothered in the least by the stones and sticks and such along the way. Ben, not so much. They slowed to a pace that was comfortable for Ben. He picked his way along in the softer, grassy areas.

As they neared the crest of the hill, which overlooked the falls, they couldn’t believe what they saw. They hunkered down behind a huge fallen tree trunk and watched, fully amazed and rightfully scared.

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CHAPTER FOUR: The Plot Thickens

“Space men?” Ben asked clearly puzzled.

Orvie put his finger to his lips and put his hand on his friend’s shoulder, pushing him further down behind the large log. They surveyed the scene for several minutes before Orvie spoke.

“Three men wearing white protective gear. They seem to be spraying something from their backpacks. I’m guessing something dangerous or they wouldn’t be covered from the soles of their white boots to the helmet on their heads.”

“Why? Why up here. I don’t get it,” Ben said clearly puzzled.

“I’m not sure. Let’s just be quiet and watch.

The men were half a football field away walking north, away from the boys with some ten feet between each of them. They had brass tubes attached to hoses running from their backpacks. They were spraying a white substance all over the ground.

“Listen,” Orvie whispered.

“I don’t hear anything.”

“That’s the problem. No sounds. No birds. The woods we just came through was filled with birds and little animals. The squirrels should be setting up a world class

clamor at this invasion of their space. And the grass and bushes up here are stunted. It's like it's all new growth."

"And the leaves on the trees are yellow-like. Sure not green, like they are just a ways back there."

"I'll bet that chemical they're spraying is a defoliant," Orvie said.

"A de-what?"

"Defoliant. A chemical that strips trees and plants of their leaves and kills grass and usually all the insects that live among them."

"I don't get it."

"I don't either, but you can bet it has something to do with the Sheriff's fake water testing and why he wants to keep people away from up here. Anybody who saw this landscape would be convinced the toxins from the mine disaster were still at work."

"Like somebody's faking the pollution, you mean?"

"Looks that way – and they must be spraying regularly to keep it this way. Let's go back into the woods a way back and wait for them to leave. Then we'll return. We don't dare risk being caught here if they are bad guys."

Ben nodded and they carefully and quietly retreated a quarter mile into the woods.

"We're not far from grandpa's old campground, one he and a friend made when he was a kid. It's a bit south, actually."

Orvie knew the spot well, since he had been the friend.

"Oh? Can you find it? Sounds like a good place to hang out for a while."

Ben knew right where it was. It brought back a flood of great memories for Orvie. He and Wayne camped out there for weeks at a time, trapping small game, catching fish, and maintaining a fire to cook over and for warmth in the evenings. They swam in the creek and swung from ropes tied high in the trees – playing Tarzan. They had built a lean-to with a frame of sturdy saplings and covered with the tall grass that grew along the creek.

“I’m hungry,” Orvie said. “Are there apple trees or berry bushes nearby?”

“Sure are. A great big old apple tree a dozen yards south, and berries just over there to the west.”

They spent a half hour filling themselves with fruit, then lay back in the soft grass that blanketed the campsite. The old oak trees formed a canopy overhead. It was in all ways a very private – secret, even – place.

They lay in silence looking up at the branches and watching a few rays of sun slip through the leaves to the ground. Ben spoke.

“Sarah likes you, you know.”

“Your sister? Isn’t she like fourteen?”

“Yeah. Fourteen. She says you’re more mature than most of the boys in her class.”

“Does she? Okay with you if I talk with her sometime?”

“Sure. The free Saturday night movies down on Main Street start this week. Maybe the three of us could go together.”

“Sounds like fun.”

More silence. That time Orvie broke it.

“You got a girl friend?”

“Not really into that stuff. I hang with a group of kids – boys and girls sometimes on the weekends. Mostly in the park. Badminton, catch, Frisbee, talking, hotdogs, things like that. No real pairing off into couples.”

“Sarah a part of that group?”

“Sort of. Kids her age are pretty much paired up even if the pairs change every week. I really don’t fully understand it yet.”

“Plenty of time before you – or I – need to start pairing up, as you put it,” Orvie said. “You get full?”

“Enough, I guess. Got two extra apples in case we get hungry later on. We could fish if you think it’s safe to be out in the open, but then we’d need a fire to cook them. Probably not a good idea, but there are lines and hooks here.”

“I’m wondering when it’ll be safe to go back up to the waterfall,” Orvie said. “I assume the opening to the gold mine is up there close by.”

“Yeah. Just the left side on the front of the hill, no more than fifty yards from where we hid behind that log. I hear it was sealed closed with a huge pile of rocks back in the old days.”

“It’s nearly noon, isn’t it?”

“Just after, according to my phone.”

Orvie chuckled out loud. He just couldn’t get used to all the things a phone did those days. Of course, the telephone hadn’t been invented when he was born and the first one he had ever seen was a big wooden box the size of a microwave that was bolted to a wall. In the present time, of course, a phone could tell time, take pictures, provide music and videos, and access the internet while small enough to slip onto a shirt pocket. It could also make calls, of course. Ben’s was also a flashlight, a level, and a sound effects machine that could churn out noises of clucking chickens, speeding locomotives and dozens of other sounds at the press of an icon.

“What’s so funny?” Ben asked.

Orvie had to come up with something in a hurry.

“Oh, just got to thinking about a funny movie I saw some time ago. Your mention of Saturday night brought it to mind, I guess.”

Ben really didn’t buy it, but he was a good friend and he wouldn’t question it.

They decided to wait until two o’clock. Ben figured if the men were in a truck they would take the old cart trail, he’d read about, that led on down the back of the hill to the valley from the mine entrance. It supposedly hadn’t been used for decades, but they would look into that.

They were back at the fallen tree at 2:20. The men were nowhere in sight. The air smelled foul. One thing was immediately noticeable. The grass was already lying over on the ground, soon to be dead.

“Let’s move up cautiously,” Orvie suggested. “Better

put our shoes on and try to keep from touching any things they sprayed. If it can do that to the grass it can probably do bad stuff to us as well. Before we leave we'll get some blades of the treated grass and maybe get them analyzed to see what the substance was they were spraying."

The tall waterfall was off to their right. It dropped some fifty feet into the pool where the creek got its start. They had already visited it to get rock samples. The side of the cliff leading down to it was very steep and mostly rock. They stayed well back from the edge. There was a fairly level area between the edge of the cliff and the steep hillside to the left in which the mine shafts had been dug. It sloped gently up another twenty yards.

They slowed as they reached the top. Then, cautiously, they peeked around the side of the hill to their left. Again, there was nobody to be seen. The grass and foliage had suffered the same fate up there and on down the northern slope for quite a way. The hot sun had dried the spray and it had left a white powder clinging to the leaves of the plants.

Before they could move along the north side of the hill toward the entrance of the mine they heard voices. Two men were walking up the cart trail. Orvie plucked a hand full of grass and they took off running down the slope south along the creek back to the old camp site.

"You got a plastic bag to put this grass in," Orvie asked still puffing as they stopped just inside the wooded area.

Ben seemed to always have a plastic sack in his hip pocket. Orvie didn't ask why.

"Sure. Here.

He dug it out and the grass was deposited safely inside. Ben tied the top shut while he talked.

"You better get your hands washed in the creek right away before that spray from the grass, rots them off your wrists."

"What a terrible picture you paint, but I agree. We need to head back to town anyway."

They made their way across the open meadow to the creek and Orvie cleaned up his hands and cautioned Ben to

clean up the soles of his shoes before he touched them. Orvie would do the same later. It was going on four o'clock when they reached the edge of town.

"Can you stay for supper?" Ben asked. "Or do you have to check in with your mom?"

There was something in the tone he used when he said, mom, that bothered Orvie. He decided it needed to be dealt with right then and there.

"What's with the, mom?"

"Nothing. Well, yes, something."

"Spill it!"

"I've been thinking that the way you come and go at all hours and how you keep your mom out of sight and just refer to her when you need an excuse of some kind, that maybe you don't really have a mom out there. I haven't said anything about it and I never would. Your business should be your business. But I'm your friend and I'm worried about you – if there really isn't a mom in your life, I mean."

The same situation had come up with Ben's grandfather all those years before. He decided to handle it the same way he had back then.

"Two stumps, there, take a seat," Orvie said pointing. They were at the edge of the woods. They sat, facing each other.

"Here's the deal, Ben. You're my friend and I trust you. So far you've kept any of my secrets I've asked you to. Here's the last one I can tell you about. You're right, there is no mom waiting out there at a campsite. I'm all alone in the world and that's okay. I'm doing fine. I'm used to it. That's all I can say about it. I'm not a runaway if that's what crossing that inquisitive mind of yours. I'm not in trouble of any kind. You understand why nobody can know about it. The authorities would send me live with a foster family and my freedom would be over. I got your word on it, right?"

"I swear. You're the best friend I've ever had. You can count on me. Maybe I should tell you my secret to sort of seal our pact."

“Your secret?” Orvie asked with a puzzled face.

“Yeah. Earlier I said I didn’t have a girlfriend, and that’s true, but what I didn’t say is that I’d really like Becky Sue to be my girl. I think she likes me.”

“Okay. Fair enough. We traded secrets and we trust each other with them. I’ll work hard not to let yours slip and I know you’ll do the same for me. If mine gets out, I’ll have to pull up stakes and leave immediately. I might not even have time to say good-bye. You understand that?”

“Yeah. I do. Sorry about that, but then you say it’s how you want it to be so I won’t stew over it.”

“Thanks. You are a true friend.”

Orvie stood and offered Ben a hand up. They made their way on into town.

“And, oh, about supper. That sounds really good.”

“You might as well sleep over, too. Since you are your mom I suppose it isn’t really lying to say she gave you permission.”

They laughed about that the rest of the way to Ben’s house. There seemed to need to be a lot of pushing and shoving along the way. A way guys often handle anxiety and tension.

They firmed up the sleep over arrangements with Ben’s mom and bounded up the stairs two at a time to his room.

At the top of the steps stood Sarah, Ben’s sister. She spoke.

“I saw you guys coming into town when I was looking out my windows a little while ago. What’s in the sack?”

“Grass,” Orvie said without thinking it was a nickname for pot (marihuana).

“Dad won’t allow pot in this house. I’m surprised at you.”

“No. No. No.” Ben said making the timeout signal with his hands. Orvie just stood there looking confused. It’s real grass from up in the woods.”

“Why would you bring plane old grass to the house?”

We have lots of it out in the lawn – the lawn you’re supposed to be mowing this afternoon if I heard dad right last evening before he left for Springfield.

Ben looked at Orvie. He had no good answer and panic showed in his expression. Orvie took the sack and opened it exposing a few blades without touching them.

“See the white coating on it and how dead it looks. We ran across it up there and wondered what was wrong with it. I thought I’d take these samples to the County Agricultural Agent and see if he knows what it is.”

“You’re always looking into things, aren’t you,” she said apparently satisfied by the dual explanations. “Did I hear you’re staying the night with Ben?”

“Sarah has the biggest ears in the county,” Ben offered. “If it’s said within the walls of this house, she hears it.”

Orvie ignored the comment and answered her.

“Yes. That seems to be the plan. I had mentioned the possibility to mom this morning so she’ll understand.”

“I’m making the salad for supper. I hope you’ll like it. Fruit on a bed of lettuce with raspberry vinaigrette dressing.”

Orvie was sure he had no idea what raspberry vinaigrette dressing was so opted for what he hoped was a polite, non-incriminating answer.

“Oh, I’m sure I’ll like anything you make.”

He hurried the two of them into Ben’s room and closed the door thinking, ‘What a dumb thing to say to a girl – I’m sure I’ll like anything you make.’

It went over Ben’s head, who got right to the problem at hand.

“What we really going to do with the grass?”

“Do you think we can trust the County Agent?”

“I suppose you can find out with your listening to his past, thing.”

“Is there time before supper?”

“We eat at five thirty. There’s time.”

They were out the window and down the tree in nothing

flat. They jogged to Main Street and then walked the five blocks to the agent's office so as to not look suspicious. They passed the Sheriff's office. He was sitting on a chair out front on the covered porch of the old-fashioned building.

"Afternoon, Sheriff," Ben said as they passed.

"Having a good day?" he asked in response. He didn't wait for an answer. "Going to be another hot one tomorrow. I suppose you'll be hitting the creek to cool off. Spent a lot of time in there myself as a kid. Stay away from Rakes, you know, and the rapids up on the Purdy."

"Love Purdy Creek, Sir. We'll most likely be there."

The conversation had been entirely with Ben.

Orvie managed a modest wave as they moved on by.

He didn't like the way the sheriff's eyes watched them all the way to the Agent's Office, but he'd deal with that later. Ben had brought the grass in the sack, slipped inside the front of his pants for safe keeping. First, they would let Orvie get his feel about the man's trustworthiness. If he passed that test they'd show him the grass.

"Hey, Jasper," Ben started. "Have you met Orvie here? He's new to town."

"Don't believe I have. Welcome."

He offered a shake and Orvie accepted his hand.

"Just chatted with the Sheriff for a minute when we passed his office. Nice guy," Ben offered as an ice breaker.

Jasper nodded.

It had been Ben's way of engaging Jasper's thoughts about the sheriff so Orvie could do his thing. Orvie detected no problem other than Jasper really didn't agree that the sheriff was a nice man. His nod had not been sincere. That was as good sign, Orvie thought. He nodded and Ben pulled out the sack and began opening it as he explained.

"Found some funny looking grass by the creek – way north on Purdy Creek – this afternoon. Wondered if you could tell us what it was all about."

Jasper put on his glasses and gave the sample a once over. He returned his glasses to his pocket.

“It’s a potent weed killer. Up at the Jamison farm, I’ll bet. He uses it sometimes. I tell him to be more careful with it. Nothing you want to get on your skin.”

“That’s where we found it, alright. Up at the Jamison farm. Hoped it wasn’t like some kind of grass disease, you know. Figured you’d know. Thanks. Gotta get home for supper. Mom doesn’t like it when I’m late.”

Outside, Orvie suggested they make their way back to Bens by way of the alley behind the agent’s office. He was worried about things the sheriff might be wondering about him and decided to just avoid him whenever possible. When the sheriff was remembering about swimming as a kid his thoughts were terrifying not happy as he led them to believe. Orvie was sure he had found the grown-up edition of the Jeff he had saved from drowning. Also, the sheriff clearly knew Rakes Creek was safe even though he reminded them that it wasn’t. Orvie couldn’t put his finger on what he was thinking about him, but he was convinced the sheriff suspected something. He wondered if it was already time for him to move on.

CHAPTER FIVE: Nightmares and Dirty Dishes

Ben took it upon himself to inform his mom – and thereby his entire family – that Orvie’s life had contained many sad aspects and that he didn’t like talking about it or himself. It was in most ways true and they abided by the request, keeping conversation focused on current things. Of course, the brother and sister at the supper table had all kinds of tales to tell on each other. That is like the most important job siblings had – to constantly embarrass each other.

Sarah passed food to Orvie more often than was really necessary. Orvie smiled at Sarah more often than was really necessary. Ben rolled his eyes more often than was really necessary. The mother seemed amused at it all.

Orvie steered the conversation to the history of the ‘Mine Association’. It was basically like he remembered it and it was clearly still providing regular checks for each of the original families. There were few new families in the community – one reason the population had been reduced by half in recent years. As children grew to adults and had families of their own, the size of those checks had shrunk since the income had to be spread out among more and more families. But, still, everybody was doing quite well financially. The sheriff was chairman of the five-person committee that oversaw the Association. The Bank President managed the

investments. It all seemed to be working like clockwork. Orvie supposed one reason crime had dropped to next to nothing was that nobody needed money – everybody had more than they needed. One thing really bothered him, however.

When he had heard the sheriff talking about how there was no crime in ‘his’ county (at a speech the first day he had been back in Jasper), he got the impression it was an out and out lie. That’s the only impression he received – no specific details like usual. Expert liars sometimes caused that kind of interference. And yet the fact was, there really hadn’t been a robbery or mugging or fight in all the time he had been sheriff. What was that all about? The man’s statement of how things were did not match up with how his memories seemed to indicate they were.

After supper, the boys took their shoes to the basement and scrubbed them cleaner than they had been since the day they were purchased. They would smell like Lysol® for days – something they most certainly had not thought about beforehand. They supposed they could live with being called the ‘Perfume Boys’ by the other guys for a few days.

“You up to a hike back up to the mine in the dark of night?” Orvie asked.

“You know I am,” Ben answered with new excitement in his voice.

“We’ll need four plastic sacks.”

“Four? Got ‘em. What for?”

To put over our shoes when we get up the sprayed grass. Keep us from having to do the scrub thing again.”

“Good idea. What do you think we’ll find?”

“I have no idea. That’s what makes it so intriguing (interesting).

“Any more ideas about the spraying?”

“Nothing worthwhile, but it has to play an important part in solving the mystery.”

“About that,” Ben said. “Just what is the mystery do you think?”

“Again, I’m not sure. It’s just that the clues all point to

something big.”

“The clues, meaning the unpolluted Rakes Creek, the killing of the grass, and the sheriff’s untruthfulness about the condition of the water.”

“Right.”

“It’ll be cool up on the hill tonight. Better wear jeans. You can borrow some of mine. We have like twin bodies.”

Ten minutes later they were outfitted with flashlights and on their way. The moon was only a tiny slip in the sky leaving the world almost completely dark. They jogged to the creek and then slowed to a walk, following it north toward the waterfall. What light the moon did produce was reflected off the water making it easy enough for them to see where they were going as long as they stuck close to the edge.

Fifty yards before arriving at the sprayed area they slipped their shoes into the sacks and tied them around their ankles. It worked surprisingly well. They moved on up the slope. They both noticed the beauty as the moonlight played among the tumbling streams of water in the waterfall, but neither one mentioned it. Boys their ages seldom spoke much about beauty. The faint murmur of the splashing water from way down below was the only sound out of the night.

They slowed to a careful, slowly-put-one-foot-ahead-of-the-other, pace as they topped the rise. They stopped to listen. There was dead silence in the inky blackness of the night. What moon there was, hid behind the hill to the left (west). If they had let themselves stop to think about it, it would have been downright scary.

“Lights on, I guess,” Orvie said. “Let’s find the mine opening.”

They continued to move cautiously, understanding that if men had been there earlier, men might still be there.

“We’re looking for a major sized pile of rock up against the side of the hill,” Ben said. “Like I said, it’s how the opening was sealed.”

“OR,” Orvie continued, directing his light head high toward the hillside, “one large opening with rail tracks leading right up to the very front.”

He moved his light around searching the whole area. Ben did the same.

“Interesting, wouldn’t you say,” Orvie said.

“What was your word? Intriguing, I’d say.”

Orvie turned, facing away from the opening, and began moving the beam of his light across the ground down the hill to the north. He found the old cart trail. It was clear of grass with shallow, shallow, hard mud ruts where wheels would travel. Clearly it had been used a lot and recently.

Out of the darkness came a gruff, man’s voice.

“Somebody there? Harvey that you?”

The boys immediately doused their lights and moved back to the place where the hill rounded west from the slope. Orvie signaled them to hang back close to the hill out of sight and wait to see what happened.

There appeared to be something moving on the other side of the opening. In the dark they couldn’t determine what it might be.

“You can bet it’s not a wild animal in this area where the grass has died,” Orvie whispered. “They’re way too smart to risk getting sick up here.”

The movement continued on a track directly toward them. Clearly it had to be a man, but it appeared he had no flashlight. Chances were, the only sort of man that would be hanging out up there was not the kind you’d want to meet in a dark alley – or on the top of an isolated, dark, hill in the middle of the night. They each privately envisioned a two hundred and fifty pound, well-muscled, man extremely upset that his quite had been disturbed.

Orvie gently nudged Ben in his side indicating he thought they should move out. Ben was more than ready. He followed Orvie’s lead and they bent down low as they made their way back down the slope.

“That was a close call,” Ben said as they collapsed onto the grass beside the creek.

“Yes, but a close call with what?”

Ben nodded that he understood the question, but it

couldn't be seen there in the darkness.

They just sat there comparing notes.

"So, what have we discovered?" Orvie asked.

"That the mine isn't sealed anymore for one thing," Ben offered.

"And that the old trail that goes down the other side of the hill into the far valley seems to be in use," Orvie continued.

"And that men seem to always be around up here, even at night," Ben added suddenly understanding that they may have just put themselves in genuine danger.

"Think about the mine itself," Orvie said. "The story is there was an explosion and a section of it collapsed, right?"

"Right."

"Then what use could it possibly be anymore?"

"No idea, Old Man. My grandpa knows all about the collapse and all. He worked on the newspaper and wrote stories about it at the time. We should probably go see him in the morning."

That, of course, was something that Orvie couldn't risk – as great as it would be to reunite with his old friend. How was he going to handle it?

"I just imagine the newspaper office still has copies of those old papers, doesn't it?"

"I'm sure they do. I've used old papers there when I was working on reports for history and English. What you thinking?"

"I'm thinking that maybe two perspectives will be helpful here. Why don't I see what your grandpa's newspaper articles had to say at the time of the collapse and you talk with him to see how he remembers it all today. He may have learned or come to suspect things since he wrote the articles."

"Like I've said before. Sometimes you think more like an old man than a kid. That's a compliment – don't take it wrong."

Both of their smiles were lost into the darkness.

They walked on home, retracing their path along the

creek. They both looked at the water thinking a swim would be a great way to unwind, but they both knew that although the creek water was pleasingly cool during the day, at night it was downright cold. They'd wait until the next day.

Ben had bunk beds. He reserved the bottom for himself. Orvie was happy to take the top. They were both tired and soon asleep.

A few hours later Ben was awakened by an unfamiliar sound. As the blurriness of sleep washed away, he realized it was Orvie, talking in his sleep. Well, talking was not at all the best description. He was rolling from side to side. He was calling out words that were disconnected in all ways except they spoke of something fearful, terrifying, perhaps. Ben stood up and looked as his friend, uncertain how to react as he continued to listen.

“Waves! Angry waves! Lightning! Swirling round and round! I must hold on tight! I'm losing my hold! Somebody help me! Please! I'm being washed away! Help! I'm sinking deeper and deeper! I can't breathe! My hand feels afire! I'll be dead in seconds! This is terrible! I don't want to die! I don't want to die! Help! Somebody please help!”

The general sequence was repeated several times. Ben just stood there continuing to watch. Orvie's body was drenched in sweat. His head turned from side to side as if he were in great pain. Tears streamed down his cheeks.

Ben was not sure what he should do. He had heard other kids say that if you woke somebody up while they were having a nightmare they would die. He really didn't believe it, but didn't know if he should chance it.

Fortunately, he would not have to make that decision. As suddenly as it had begun it stopped. Orvie stopped babbling. He stopped rolling from side to side. The deep creases in his forehead smoothed. He clearly relaxed. His breathing returned to normal. He rolled onto his side facing the wall and remained asleep.

At least one of them could sleep. It had been a very strange episode – frightening in many ways for Ben. He lay awake for a long time thinking about it. Should he mention it

to Orvie in the morning or should he not? He wondered what it was all about. He figured it was probably related to his secrets. He suddenly had the feeling they may have been secrets of something all quite horrible. He felt bad for his friend. He felt helpless.

Ben must have fallen asleep because at 6:30 he felt Orvie shaking his shoulder.

“Time to rise and shine, sleepy head. Got things to do today. I assume a sleepover comes with breakfast. I’m starved. I feel like I worked all night long.”

Ben was not a morning person and although he allowed his friend to go on about things, he really wanted to cover his head with his pillow and go back to sleep. That was not to be. Orvie finally rolled Ben out of bed and dropped him to the floor.

“I get the idea you just might want me to get up,” Ben said trying to put a humorous spin on it all.”

Orvie smiled as he finished dressing. It felt good getting back into his roomy cutoffs. Jeans kept him warm, but he hated how they were so tight and rubbed all over his knees and legs. The baggy trousers of his early life had been much more comfortable. He had often suspected that he had been built more for wintering in the warmth of Florida than there in cold and blizzards of Illinois and Indiana.

Breakfast consisted of pancakes, sausage, eggs, and juice. It was tailor made of Orvie’s favorites. He enjoyed passing the time of day with Ben’s mother. Ben enjoyed watching and hearing him pass the time of day with his mother. He was bothered by the fact that their relationship seemed to have changed in some way since the nightmare episode. He couldn’t put his finger on it, but it had changed. It was all on him and his feelings. Orvie seemed fine.

Orvie insisted that he and Ben do the breakfast dishes. Ben’s mother playfully took off her apron and tossed it at him. It produced a chuckle and smile between them. Ben reluctantly went along with it. Dishes were far from what he thought boys – almost men – should be doing around the house, but allowing your best friend to make you look bad in

front of your mom was not something he was willing to let happen.

Dishes done, they moved to the back yard to plan their day. Swings from childhood still hung from branches on opposite sides of the same huge old oak tree. They sat in them and moved quietly while they talked.

“When does the newspaper office open?”

“Eight. It’ll be open when you get there. Grandpa is up with the birds so I can go over there any time. I guess those are the first things on our agenda today, right?”

“That’s how I see it. Let’s meet back here at ten. If I’m not here it will probably mean I’ve found some really interesting things in the papers. You can come and join me, okay?”

“Sounds like a plan to me. Someday we have to get you and grandpa together. I think you two have lots in common.”

“Oh. Like what?”

“You both use big words. You both think about things in ways nobody else ever does. You’re both really smart. I’ll bet if you were the same age you’d be best friends like me and you are.”

It had brought back another wave of wonderful memories for Orvie, but, of course, he had to keep them to himself. He ignored the ‘get together’ suggestion and they went their separate ways.

Immediately upon entering the newspaper office, Orvie sensed a potential problem. The editor was a woman, who, according to her name tag, Amy Goodchild, he had known as a girl all those years before. She looked to be Ben’s grandpa’s age. He’d been in such situations before and would just deal with whatever came up. He had a story for every occasion and a few for things that hadn’t even come up yet. If Orvie was anything, he was always prepared.

He introduced himself and gave her essentially the same story Ben had given the Sheriff and the librarian – the two of them were writing a history of the mine and how it had affected the lives of the local people.

He saw she was giving him more than the typical once over. She realized he had tuned into that so she spoke.

“Sorry for staring, son, but you resemble a boy I knew when I was about your age. The likeness is uncanny (eerie).”

“When would that have been, if that’s not too personal a question?”

“Goodness. I’m sixty-two come September. I suppose it would have been fifty years ago. Hard to believe anything in my life could have been that long ago.”

“My grandpa used to tell stories about spending a year here in Jasper when he was about my age,” Orvie began. “It’s the main reason I’ve come to visit. I want to see the things he talks about – the hills, the creeks and the nice people. He loved the place so. Do you suppose that boy could have actually been him? My school pictures do really resemble him at the same ages.”

“Wouldn’t that be a hoot? He went by the name, Junior. He’d never say what his real name was. It leant an air of mystery to him that excited all us girls.”

She leaned closer across the counter and became confidential in her tone and appearance.

“He and I shared a secret. He was the first boy I ever kissed and, according to him, I was the first girl he ever kissed. Doesn’t matter if I was or not. I knew boys fibbed about such things. But, he was my first love, you know. How nice to know he had a family. I assume he had a happy life.”

“He has had a wonderful life – lives down south.”

“What a wonderful few moments. Thanks for them. But, you say you dropped in for some reason other than to hear an old lady reminisce about her early teen years.”

“Yes, actually, although it is really nice to meet somebody he knew. Provides a genuine connection to this place. I guess my main question is about whether or not you still have copies of the newspapers from back around time of the mine closing.”

“Sure do. Those were put on microfiche years ago – you know about microfiche?”

“Yes, like pictures of every page on reels of film and stored to be read on a special reader.”

“Not many kids your age know about that. It’s all computers for kids these days.”

“Kids!” Orvie said, shaking his head, trying to be humorous. If she only knew!

He felt he had handled the identity problem pretty well. He had one loose end to try and tie up before he started his research.

“Grampa had a close friend back then and I want to surprise him later when we finish the story. So, I would appreciate it if you didn’t tell anybody who I am. I’d hate for it to get back to him and spoil my surprise.”

She zipped her lips.

“No one will hear it from me. I remember about the two of them. We’d go to the Saturday night free movie with them as a group. It was Wayne, Ben’s grandfather. He’s a fine man. It will be a wonderful surprise.”

She showed him to the machine, pulled the reels he was interested in and got him started. She also provided a yellow pad and pen for notes, since he had come unprepared. ‘Twelve-year-old boys!’ she thought to herself. “Some things never change.”

CHAPTER SIX: Maps and Cheeseburgers

At ten o'clock they met back at Ben's place and began comparing notes. Nothing was really new from what they had already learned. His grandfather did say that a few years before he heard the rumor that some big company from out west was interested in making an offer on the old mine, but the Association leaders had turned it down. He didn't know any more than that. Orvie made a note to ask Amy – Miss Goodchild – about it at the newspaper office.

"I wonder why they wouldn't sell it," Orvie said, thinking out loud. "It's doing nobody any good just sitting up there in that hill and a sale like that probably could have added a considerable amount of money into the Association's investment account."

Ben shrugged. He really didn't understand about money. Money had never been a problem for him. Every Saturday morning his father handed over a sizeable allowance to him and his sister. In most ways, he could not comprehend the idea of working for a living or having to do without whatever he wanted.

"I did have an idea about the mine," Orvie said.

"What's that?"

"It would be a great place to hide something you didn't want anybody to find out about."

“Like what,” Ben asked.

“I’m not sure – stolen things most likely. Maybe cars or . . . I’m stopped right there. I don’t know what, but I do know it would be a great place to hide things – big things, probably.”

As if their brains were hooked together they said as one: “We got to get inside that mine.”

“First, we need a map of the mine. Suppose there is such a thing?”

“Oh, there is such a thing. Only one that I know of, but you aren’t going to like where it is.”

“Why’s that? Where is it?”

“Hanging over the sheriff’s desk in his office.”

“Ouch! You’re right. Not something I wanted to hear. I guess we need to get into his office before we go back to search the mine.”

“Are you serious? Break into a sheriff’s office?”

“Not what I had in mind.”

“So, what do you have in mind?”

“Well, nothing at this point, but something will come to me.”

“While you wait for that to come to you, I need to check my e-mail,” Ben said.

They went up to his room. Orvie climbed up onto the top bunk to think while Ben sat down in front of his computer. It was the finest computer Orvie had ever seen. According to Ben it was loaded with every conceivable piece of software and such you could want. It had so much memory it made Mensa (a club for geniuses) look downright stupid.

‘Money just may have a few advantages’, Orvie thought.

“Hey, got a reply on those rocks we sent to the lab.”

“So?”

“I’ll print it out.”

“Don’t waste time. Just read it out loud.”

“It’s short and sweet. No hazardous deposits found. The limestone is from the deposit that underlies the whole

northern part of the state. It names the limestone formation if you want that.”

“No need. We have what we were after. That stream has never been polluted. The sheriff is lying about it. That pretty well ties him to whatever is going on up at the mine. The whole pollution story was fabricated (made up) to keep folks from going up there. I’m surprised the sheriff hasn’t set some sort of fine for trespassing.

“Can you bring up a satellite view of the area around the mine site on that Illiac of yours?”

“I don’t understand, Illiac, but if it’s available this puppy will find it.”

While he worked his magic, Orvie explained his reference. Illiac had been the name of one of the very first computers ever developed. It was made of giant electrical tubes – six and eight feet tall – like big versions of the smaller ones that were in the first radios and it was so big it took an entire abandoned basketball arena at the University of Illinois to house it.

“Wow. That must have been really, really, powerful.”

“Actually, not. Your cell phone is easily a million or more times more powerful than it was. As I recall it could add, subtract, multiply and divide and sometimes win a game of checkers. Undoubtedly other things, too. You can look it up if you want to. I’m sure it has to play an important part of the history of computers. The way I spell it may not be accurate.”

“Got it – the satellite view of us here in Jasper. There’s the area where the mine is.”

He pointed to the screen and Orvie slid down off the bunk to take a closer look.

“What do you see?” Orvie asked?

“Same thing you see, I guess. The area up there is – what’s the word – barren – nothing growing.”

“Somebody’s pretty clever, I’m thinking.”

“I don’t follow that at all, Old Man.”

“If somebody wanted to make sure people believed the story about the unending pollution up there, what better way

than to kill off all the vegetation?”

“Got it! Even the official satellite views would substantiate it. That’s what the spacemen were doing up there – giving the area another dose of ‘pollution’ – defoliant you called it.”

“I wonder how often they have to do that. I wonder who does it. I wonder how the sheriff is involved. I wonder what in the fiddlesticks they are really doing up there.”

“Fiddlesticks?” Ben asked with a smile and a chuckle.

“Mom – my real mom – suggested when I was little that I use that term instead of the ones I had picked up from the big boys in town.”

“They used colorful language, you say!”

“The most colorful as I look back on it. I had no idea what I was really saying, of course, but I figured if that’s what it took to be a big guy, I was in.”

“You don’t swear, now.”

“Gave it up by six. My mother had a way of washing my out with soap every time she heard a swear word. My mouth foamed for a month until I got the message. Later on, I decided swearing is really largely lazy speech. People who use swear words are too lazy to find the real word they need to use. Find a filthy mouth and find one of the mentally laziest people you’ll ever come upon. It’s like a big neon sign over their head. That’s how I look at it.”

Ben smiled.

“So sorry you don’t have an opinion on the subject.”

They chuckled together.

“I do go on about things sometimes. Sorry. Of all the folks I know you’re about the last one who needs that sermon. I appreciate that about you. Real words let me know exactly what you are thinking.”

“Boy, can we get off topic,” Ben said still smiling.

“When you’re good, you’re good!”

It deserved a knuckle bump and got it.

“Now, we need to be good detectives. As I see it we

have two big things out ahead of us.”

Ben interrupted.

“Find a way to get a look at that map of the mine and get up there and explore it?”

“Right. I have an idea about the map.”

“I hold the sheriff at gunpoint while you take the map off the wall and then we both run like fiddlesticks?”

His tone made it a question. Orvie chuckled.

“Ideally, that would be ‘Run as fast as we can’ if you were really trying to say what you meant, but that was not my idea. How about we go see the sheriff while he’s in his office, sitting behind his desk? While you engage him in conversation – he feels more comfortable with you – I’ll take a picture of the map on the wall. Then we come back here and work some magic between your phone camera and some sort of computer software that will allow us to print out a good copy of the map.”

“I like that. Do you have any idea how to operate a cell phone?”

“Absolutely none at all, but you’re a good teacher and I’m a good student.”

Both of those things turned out to be correct. In two minutes Orvie had mastered the camera aspect of the phone. They’d wait and work on the phone’s other 77 functions another day.

“How we going to do this? You can’t just walk up to the map and snap a picture. You think the sheriff is suspicious of you already. It will have to be sneaky.”

“Sneaky is my middle name. Let’s find one of your shirts with a pocket deep enough so the entire phone will slip down inside. An old shirt would be best.”

“Got tons of them.”

Orvie smiled to himself. He owned one pair of jeans, two pair of cutoffs, three shirts and a hoodie. And oh yes a couple of pair of socks and one pair of shoes. It seemed like plenty to him.

Ben dug around in a large hamper behind his desk.

“Here’s the ticket. Why old?”

“So we can cut a slit in the front of the pocket through which the camera lens can see what we’re after. I can pretend to scratch my chest while in reality I’ll be pressing the camera button on top of the phone.”

They soon had the shirt remodeled and ready for action. Orvie practiced a dozen or so times aiming at things about as high as Ben remembered the map was off the floor. All but the first shot turned out perfectly. They were ready to go and take on the sheriff.

It was eleven. Lunch was at noon sharp. They had plenty of time.

“Be gone about a half hour, Mom,” Ben called to her as they left through the front door.”

“Cheeseburgers be okay for lunch, guys?” she called back.

“Sounds great. You did say lots of cheeseburgers, right?”

They were on their way before she could respond. Luck seemed to be on their side. The sheriff wasn’t in the chair on the front porch. It was where he spent most of his hours every day.

“He must be inside – right where we want him,” Ben said as they crossed the street to the office.

He opened the door and they entered. No sheriff in there either. Ben checked the back room and the rest room.

“Not here. Go to it,” he said just as the front door opened and in walked the sheriff.

“Go to what,” he asked in more of a gruff voice than the boys had heard before.

Ben gulped, leaving it all up to Orvie who crossed his legs and bent slightly forward.

“Go to the restroom. My three Pepsi’s don’t want to seem to wait patiently until we get back to Ben’s place.”

The sheriff laughed and pointed to the restroom door.

Orvie was not the only quick thinking member of the

team.

“Stuffy in here, sir. Think I’ll wait outside,” Ben said.

The sheriff sniffed the air.

“I agree. Why be inside when there’s a whole big world waiting outside.”

Orvie had heard the conversation. He waited for the door to close so he could go out into the main room and get the picture. He heard no closing of a door. The sheriff had taken Ben at his word and left it open to air out the stuffiness.

Orvie carefully cracked open the restroom door and peeked out. The room was empty. He chose to leave the phone in the shirt pocket as planned, just in case the sheriff returned. He quickly got several shots from several angles and made his way back outside.

The sheriff tried to engage Orvie in conversation about him and his family.

“Mom and I love to camp. We decided that this summer we would camp our way across central Illinois and Indiana. We’re about half way through our itinerary.”

“Itinerary. A big word for a boy your age.”

“He’s full of big words,” Ben said hitching his heard in Orvie’s direction. “I’ve been learning lots of them - unique, intriguing, imaginative, innovative, and even fiddlesticks, all just in the past couple of days.”

That line of questioning came to an abrupt halt.

“Never see your mom in town.”

“Really. She comes and goes. Shops mostly at the produce stand at the west edge of town. I trap for meat and we slow cook it over wood embers. Best way to prepare wild game, don’t you agree?”

“Must say I’ve never given it much thought. There is something I have given some thought to though, Orvie. When I was a kid there was a boy here, about your age I’d say, who could have been your twin. He saved my life in the creek.”

“Really? Two such handsome dudes in one World? Miracles never cease I guess.”

He could tell the sheriff wasn't buying the diversion.

"Actually, like Amy at the newspaper and I were talking about this morning, my grandfather was here in Jasper when he was about my age. Went by the name of Jr. back then. My school pictures really resemble him when he was a kid. It could have been him. That's really great, to think he was some kind of hero way back then."

"Amy, you say?"

"Yes, sir."

It seemed the story was to be checked out. Orvie had that in mind well before he had offered it.

"It's been nice talking with you, Sheriff, but we gotta get home or we'll miss out on a couple of mom's delicious cheeseburgers. Probably fried potatoes and baked beans to go with them. I suppose you'd be welcome to come with us."

Orvie chocked. Why in the world would he invite the enemy into their camp?

"Got a lunch meeting with the Association Committee. Maybe another time. Thanks for the offer, though. You boys have a good day."

"That's always our intention. Hope to explore the woods south of town this afternoon. Thanks for the use of your restroom."

The boys moved off toward Ben's at a leisurely pace. The sheriff kept his eye on them. That made Orvie very uncomfortable.

They were back in Ben's room by 11:30. By 11:31 Ben had the picture files uploaded into his computer. By 11:32 they were viewing them.

"They are all great shots," Ben said. "I can get them cleaned up and printed out in ten minutes. There's a glare spot on each one, but each in a different place. I'll do some copy and paste stuff and we're going to end up with one fine map."

He was correct. They discovered that the main tunnel went straight in for about fifty yards then forked left and right. The right fork gradually rose some ten feet over a length of

another fifty yards then stopped. The other one went downhill, but was shorter and with less of grade than the one to the right. It was only twenty yards long, but had a huge irregularly shaped 'room' at the far end. It was labeled, 'Lode'. In mining terms that meant where a dense gold deposit was located.

"I wonder where the cave-in occurred."

"I got that in one of the newspaper articles," Orvie said slipping several folded yellow pages out of his rear pocket. "Let's see. About ten yards before the main tunnel branches."

"That would be right here," Ben said pointing.

"Mark that with an X or something. If the passage is still blocked it still provides a tunnel some forty yards long. How wide would you say the tunnel is?"

Ben did some measurements and calculations and finally offered his opinion.

"That main entry tunnel varies a lot in width – from about ten feet to maybe thirty feet in other places."

"Those wider places are probably where there were smaller lodes that they dug out along the way," Orvie suggested. "It must have been like Christmas when they stuck that main lode."

Ben looked up and nodded.

"Can you make three copies for us? We'll each carry one and we'll leave one here."

"We really don't need to print one for here. It's on the computer and we can print one any time we want it. I'm going to send it to my phone, too."

Orvie nodded, conceding Ben had it right. They carefully folded their copies and slid them into their rear pockets.

The young detectives suddenly became distracted by something remarkable. What would it take to disrupt their keen focus on solving their mystery?

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CHAPTER SEVEN: Grass, Stains and Tornados

“Cheeseburgers in five minutes!” came the call from the bottom of the stairs. The aroma had preceded her message.

That would be enough to distract most any hungry twelve-year-old. It called for a pushing and shoving and laughing and smiling rumble down the steps to the dining room.

“Wash up!”

During his 112 years as a twelve-year-old, two things had remained constant for Orvie. Twelve-year-old boys’ hands were always dirty at meal times and mothers always reminded them to do something about it. ‘Maybe it’s in our genes,’ he thought to himself and smiled.

Ben had learned that Orvie smiled to himself a lot and that asking about it was never really fruitful so he usually let such things pass.

Sarah was helping her mother put the food on the table when the boys entered the room.

“Hi, Orvie. Seems like I never see you except at meal time.”

Orvie had no idea how to respond. Ben saved him.

“I been keeping him busy with the project we’re working on. If we’re going to grow up to be famous writers we got a lot of practicing to do, you know.”

Orvie knew he owed him one. Ben knew he would find a way to collect. It was how guys were at that age. Ben’s mother joined the three youngsters at the table. Sarah continued trying to engage Orvie in conversation.

“Still going to the free movie tomorrow night?”

“That’s our plan, right Ben?”

“That’s our plan. Plans change sometimes.”

It had intentionally not been a satisfactory answer. Boys seldom give their older sisters a satisfactory answer if there is any other choice.

“Mom makes a grocery sack full of popcorn and we take cans of pop in a cooler. Probably be about a dozen of us sitting together.”

It hadn’t seemed to call for a response, but she paused as if expecting one.

“Sounds like fun,” Orvie finally managed.

He plunged the burger back into his mouth hoping he wouldn’t be expected to say more. It wasn’t that Sarah wasn’t pretty. She was. It wasn’t that Sarah couldn’t have interesting things to talk about. She could. It wasn’t even that Orvie couldn’t imagine spending time with her. He could. But, she was older and more experienced in boy/girl things and he had the definite idea she was going to want things from the relationship for which he was not ready.

The family members began talking among themselves about local matters. Orvie’s thoughts became private and drifted back to the conversation he had with Amy at the newspaper office that morning. He remembered her quite well from years before. She had been a kind and gentle girl and they had lots of fun together. She had a wonderful laugh and offered it often. They went on picnics together and long walks in the hills – sometimes with Wayne and his girlfriend and sometimes alone. Orvie thought of her as a really good friend. Amy was hoping for something more. (In his experience, girls often hoped for something more!)

It had been Orvie's first kiss – he hadn't fibbed about it. From sensing her past while they had talked that morning, it had really been her first as well. Clearly it was more of a memorable event in her life than in his. He hadn't thought much about it for – well, fifty years.

For the first sixty-five years of Orvie's life as a twelve-year-old boy, young people that age – those considered to be nice young people – didn't kiss each other. So, at that point in his life – his first visit to Jasper – such things had just begun to change. Bottom line, Orvie was completely inexperienced in matters such as kissing. It had been okay, but wasn't anything earthshattering as far as he was concerned. He often wondered how such feelings might have developed for him if he had continued to mature, but stopped fretting over it many decades before.

He was brought back into the general conversation when he heard the three most dreaded words of any twelve-year-old boy: "Mow the lawn!" Apparently two days had already elapsed from when his father had first asked him. He would be away on a business trip for several more days. Nevertheless, there would be no way out of it that day.

After lunch the boys got the lawnmower – a riding mower – out of the shed and Ben began instructing Orvie in how the machine was used. Ben just seemed to assume that his new friend had been raised by wolves and knew nothing about civilization. (Well, maybe not quite that bad.) Orvie had learned to be patient about such things.

Ben cut the first swath around the back-yard jabbering instructions and suggestions all the while. He stopped and let Orvie take the next one. They continued alternating in that fashion for the next forty minutes – it was a huge lawn that surrounded a big house at the west edge of the small town. It could have been thought of as being out in the country. It could have been thought of as being part of the town. Apparently, it was the second of those that was true in the minds of the locals.

By 1:30 they had cleaned the excess grass from the blades and under the blade guard and parked the mower back in the shed. They had to admit the lawn did look much better.

Sarah brought them each a glass of lemonade – Orvie’s in a noticeably larger glass. The boys shared a glance and grin about it. Ben rolled his eyes. Orvie continued to try and be polite with Sarah as he grew more and more uncomfortable with her pushy approach.

Eventually, her mother called her to the house and Orvie breathed a sigh of relief. Ben fell to the ground and held his stomach laughing, thinking the whole uncomfortable series of exchanges had been hilarious. Orvie immediately dived on top of him. They rolled each other over and over from time to time one seeming to have the upper hand and then the other. As Ben had noted, their bodies were just about identical in size, shape and strength.

Before long, they called it a draw and both rolled over onto their backs breathing hard and smiling.

“What is it? Going on two,” Orvie asked.

“Let me check my phone. Nope?”

He let the answer drop.

“Nope? What do you mean?”

“It’s 2:04 and that’s not going on two.”

Orvie smiled and nodded. He’d been had and that was okay. Perhaps that had been pay back for Ben saving him at lunch. Perhaps not. It was usually impossible to predict such things between guys that age. In fact, payback often occurred when there was nothing to be paid back. (And some folks wonder why girls have such a hard time figuring them out!)

“So, what’s next?” Ben asked as if just assuming Orvie was the one to take the lead.

“Can’t go back to the mine in daylight. I for one am filthy from mowing. Look. My ankles are green.”

“Might help if you wore socks,” Ben pointed out.

“Then the socks would be green and they’d need to be washed. I hate socks, they’re tight and hot, but then we’ve been through the clothes thing before.”

“We could hit the creek and go for a swim,” Ben suggested. “That first place we got rock samples from was deep and, what, about twenty yards long?”

“Yes, at least that, I’d say. I’m up for it.”

Ben yelled in through the open back door.

“Going to hike the woods up north a while. Be back in time for supper.”

“Be careful. I’d hate to fix supper and not have anybody show up to eat it.”

On the surface her remark seemed cold and unfeeling. The boys took it as being quite humorous – which had been her intention. Since the mothers of twelve-year-old boys were always worried about their welfare any time they were out of her sight, it had just been her way of dealing with her uneasiness about having them leave. She trusted her son – and Orvie, for that matter. It wasn’t a matter of trust. It was a matter of knowing boys that age didn’t always demonstrate the best judgment; they tended to just charge into unsafe situations without being cautious enough. She understood they needed their freedom – how else would they learn to make good decisions and to take good care of themselves? At any rate, the well-being of twelve year old boys was always a major concern for their mothers.

That afternoon they were in no hurry so walked most of the way. They had shed their shoes and shirts and left them on the back porch. It was hot and humid. Ben figured a storm was brewing for late afternoon. If that actually blew in, they might have to put off their nighttime expedition to the old mine. In the meantime, they looked forward to cooling off in the creek.

They swam a few races – the length of the swimming hole and back. It was usually a tie or close to it. They rolled a log into the water and played with it in a dozen ways. They dived for rocks and had breath holding contests. For some reason Orvie always won them. Hundred and twenty-four-year-old lungs likely had a larger capacity than the actual twelve-year-old model. They talked and laughed and just enjoyed the time together. Orvie’s ankles cleaned up quite nicely with virtually no attention at all.

Before they realized it, the sky had darkened and huge, black clouds began swirling and rising at a rapid rate. The

makings of a thunder storm for sure. The wind picked up and could be heard and seen blowing through the tree tops. Far off lightning flashes warned of a major storm on its way from the southwest. Times like that always made Orvie uncomfortable – not really frightened – but they still seemed to draw up emotional memories from his horrendous accident on his raft all those years before.

They climbed out of the creek and started on a trot for Ben's place just as the cold rain began pounding their bare backs and the ground, at first kicking up dust everywhere the huge drops landed. It was as if they were attacking the very soil beneath their feet – an attack from outer space. It was time for a full-out dash to safety and safety was not going to be the house still fifteen minutes away. Orvie pointed to the right and they veered off into the woods. The branches and leaves overhead slowed the force of the rain, but did nothing to diminish the amount that fell on them.

“Follow me,” Orvie called.

He took off straight west, scanning the tree tops as he ran. Presently, he pointed again, that time high into a huge oak tree. Ben immediately saw it – an old treehouse he didn't know existed. It was up a good thirty feet off the ground. They slowed and Orvie directed them to the far side of the trunk where they found pegs that had been inserted straight into the tree. They were two inches thick and protruded some four or five inches out of the bark – a permanent ladder.

Orvie pointed up toward the structure and gave Ben a leg up so he could more easily reach the first peg. A minute later they were both safely inside. It was only six feet square, but it had plank sides and roof, one two-foot-high entry opening near the trunk above the ladder, and one small window up high on the opposite side. There was a sizeable stack of short boards and sticks in one corner. The bark had fallen away from the sticks making it appear they had been there a very long time. The roof leaked a bit but it was a gazillion times better than being out in the wind-driven downpour. A small, iron drum – two feet tall and one wide – sat on a slab of cement in the center of the floor.

“What's that, do you suppose?” Ben asked pointing at it

as he sat back against the wall, feet drawn up in front of him, shivering the shiver of all shivers.

“My guess would be a stove. Look. An opening here at the side and a little circular hole in the top.”

He bent down as if to examine the inside.

“Been fires in there, for sure. Take a look.”

Ben looked and agreed. The whole inside was scorched and soot still clung to the inside of the top.

“Got matches?” Orvie asked.

“In my room,” Ben said.

Orvie stood up and felt along the outside wall up close to the roof. It was understandably dark in there with only one small window and no sun to filter down through the trees. He found what he was searching for – almost as if he knew it would be there. Hmm.

“Would you believe it? Here’s a flint and stone.”

He sat back down next to Ben.

“You’ve been here before. Seems like you know about this place.”

“Back when I first arrived here, before I met you, I spent some time out here. That’s how I knew about it.”

It had not been a lie, well, not a sizeable one anyway. He and Ben’s grandfather had built it and spent many happy hours up there, believing at the time, they could happily just live there forever. If Ben didn’t believe the story he gave no indication of it. Orvie continued.

“We’ll need a bunch of little splinters cut from one of those small boards to use as kindling to get this fire started.”

“Wish we had some paper,” Ben said knowing it would be difficult to catch even the smallest splinters on fire from the flint sparks.

Orvie pulled the map from his back pocket. I just happen to have some paper. How about you?”

“Good thinking. Looks like we’re going to be able to use our map today after all. Most of it’s even still dry.”

“It was worth a pair of cheek busting grins.”

They got to work and in ten minutes had a tiny fire going on the floor of the stove. What little smoke it produced was sucked up and out the little window. Ben added a few small pieces of wood from the branches and then a small chunk of two by four.

“This place is so small it won’t take much of a fire to keep it warm,” Orvie said. “I’m told the Eskimos used to keep their igloos at seventy degrees inside just from the heat of a single candle. Of course, those were much tighter structures than this place.”

Nevertheless, in ten minutes the place was toasty warm. The storm outside grew worse. The winds became so strong that even the gigantic oak tree they were calling home at the moment was swaying just a bit. Ben was concerned. Orvie was not. The treehouse had endured great storms for fifty years – the tree for a hundred. He figured it would survive that one. What he knew and couldn’t say, was, of course, of no comfort to Ben. Orvie offered a generic statement.

“Hey. This place is obviously really old. That means it’s been up here through a lot of storms. I’m sure it’ll keep us safe. And, we are protected by all the trees surrounding us.”

That made sense to Ben and he relaxed about it.

Ben’s cell phone rang.

“Oh, Oh,” he said.

“What’s wrong?”

“Got a deal with mom that when I get into dangerous situations I’ll always give her a call. I didn’t.”

“Just tell it like it’s been. What we’ve needed to be doing. She’ll understand.”

Ben answered and followed Orvie’s suggestion. It seemed to work. His mother, however, had serious news. There had been a tornado sighted ten miles west of town. She and Sarah had gone to the basement for shelter. Since his dad was out of town the two of them were on their own. Ben felt like he should be there at home for them, but understood that couldn’t happen.

“You check in every fifteen minutes for a while, son.

You hear me?"

"Yeah, Mom. Every fifteen minutes. Keep your heads down."

He hung up.

"Did you really just tell your mother to keep her head down?"

"I guess I did. It's one of those dumb things that just slips out when I know I should say something, but have no idea what."

"Been there. Done that, my friend."

"I can see I built up too big a fire," Ben said. It should last quite a while."

They talked – some about girls, but mostly about boy stuff. They relived some of the highlights from their time in the swimming hole, needing to laugh hysterically about several humorous things that had happened. Things finally got around to their relationship.

"You're a good friend, Orvie. I've only ever had couple of good friends. Their families were outsiders and they moved on a year or so after they arrived. It's the outsiders that run most of the business in town. They have to earn a living. Us old stock live on the Association check. I suppose you've worked some."

"Some. I'm still a kid, remember. I do enough odd jobs to cover my expenses. Actually, I like to work, like mowing today. That was great. Find something that needs doing and then work up a sweat getting it done. I've never had much use for money above and beyond what I need to cover the essentials of life."

Ben nodded, but not convincingly. They had been raised according to different sets of values and expectations. Ben assumed he'd always have everything he needed. Orvie believed he needed to provide everything for himself. They would probably never really understand that part of each other's lives.

"Other kids have always thought I was a bit odd, I think," Orvie said.

“Well, you certainly are a bit different – all the stuff you know about and how you can tell stories about things that’s happened a long time ago just like you’d been there, like it was a firsthand account. And, you dress sort of odd, too.”

Orvie smiled.

“You mean you think my third hand duds (clothes) aren’t fashionable?”

“Well, they aren’t, but that’s not really the odd thing about it.”

“Oh? What then?”

“That you don’t care what people think about your clothes, or, about anything else about you really.”

“Like?”

“Like the words you use. Lots of them are really old fashioned like you learned them from reading *Treasure Island* or *Moby Dick* or some books written a long time ago.”

“I have read a lot of books like that.”

“That’s not all. You use big words that no kid our age ever uses. And, like Mom has said, you are way more mature in the way you handle yourself than most kids.”

“Are you saying those things are bad?”

“Oh, no. Not bad. Like I said, different, odd, strange, unexplainable. I’ve decided it has to do with your secrets and that’s fine with me, but I can’t defend you to the other kids because I can’t say anything about all that.”

“First, thanks for being my friend regardless of how odd I may seem. Second, you never have to defend me to anybody. I’ve always figured that I am going to live my life the way that seems right to me. I never set out to hurt anybody or put them down. I always try to be helpful. I can see no reason to try and be just like everybody else – that would be like giving up my right to be me. Can you imagine a world in which everybody is just like everybody else? That’s really scary to me. If that happened, you might as well give everybody the same name because it would be like everybody was the same person.”

“I like that about you, Old Man. I’ve never ever met

anybody that's anything like you."

"How wonderful."

"I figured that's what you'd say. We need to talk more about that. It's really hard to be odd – unique might be your term – in small towns like Jasper, especially when that's where you have to stay forever. Fitting in becomes really important. The pool of potential friends your own age is pretty small. I don't think I could talk to the other guys about some of the stuff we talk about. They'd brand me an oddball. Thanks."

"Any time. And speaking about talking, it must be time for you to check in with your mom."

The news was not all good. The tornado had passed just to the west of Jasper, tearing trees up by their roots and taking out a half dozen barns. At least with it away from Jasper, his mother and sister would be safe. However, it was heading for the woods north of town. Ben and Orvie were in the woods, north of town.

"Sounds like we're in for a rough ride, Ben. I believe we're safest right here."

Ben nodded. One end of a plank blew loose from the roof and rain began pouring inside.

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CHAPTER EIGHT: What's the Worst That Could Happen?

The two of them soon had the roof fixed. From inside, they tied the end of the wayward plank back down in place with bailer twine from a spool of it they found in the treehouse. Orvie hoped that was the last loose plank because if a tornado was on its way, they hadn't begun to feel the worst of the storm.

They talked about various things and chuckled as their empty stomachs growled back and forth at each other. They planned to leave for Ben's as soon as his mother reported an all clear from the weather service.

Suddenly a hush fell over the world outside.

"What's that, not?" Ben asked, sitting forward turning his head one way and then the other.

Orvie reacted with a 'hold his stomach and laugh til the tears came' laugh.

"What's that, NOT?" he managed at last.

"Yeah. It got quiet. That's NOT noise."

"I think it's called the lull before the storm. A quiet period often precedes the largest turbulence – the eye of the storm I think. I'd give it five minutes at the most until our teeth begin rattling in our jaws."

"You paint such a reassuring picture, Old Man. Been

through storms like this before I assume.”

“Some.”

With that Orvie closed the topic of his past meteorological encounters.

After a moment of silence, Ben spoke, pointing to Orvie’s hand.

“Can you tell me about that scar on your left palm? If you can’t, no problem, understand.”

“When I was a little boy I grabbed hold of a really hot chain and got a bad burn.”

“Wow! That must have really hurt.”

“I passed out and, fortunately, it was plunged right into cold water so it could have been a whole lot worse, I suppose.”

He held out his hand so Ben could examine it more closely. The explanation was essentially true. In reality it had faded a great deal through the years, but the outlines of the four links were still more than a little visible. He was always aware that when he revisited an area he had to make sure that was kept out of sight – especially when around folks from his past.

“I’d rather you didn’t mention it to anybody, ok? Just a thing I have about it.”

Ben nodded and shrugged. Many of Orvie’s requests seemed odd, but never really unreasonable. Even without his secrets, Ben figured Orvie was a private person who kept most things about himself to himself.

As quickly as it had faded away, the howling wind returned. It caused an updraft through the structure that caused the fire to blaze brightly as the air and smoke was drawn out the little window. It lit up the suddenly darkened treehouse.

“I guess it’s hold onto our teeth time,” Ben said scooting just a bit closer to his friend. He was clearly more frightened than Orvie whose mood could be described more as ‘justifiably concerned’.

Lightning flashed so continuously that the outside

resembled mid-morning. It created long, dark, lively shadows cast from trees that were whipping back and forth. Rain poured down through the branches, at times even being blown up through the cracks in the floor by the swirling wind. Their cutoffs, which had become relatively dry there in the warmth, were soon soaked again. Orvie's long black hair hung in sopping, twisted strands down his cheeks and across his forehead.

"You look like a drowned rat," Ben said, looking into his friend's face. It provided a mutual chuckle and shared smile there in the midst of the terror that was consuming their attention.

Then, the telltale sound of an approaching locomotive grew louder and louder. That was the way the terrifying sound of a tornado was most often described. Loud, harsh, vibrating one's very bones. The tree swayed. Limbs from the smaller surrounding trees split under the force of the wind and went crashing to the ground – one lit on the roof.

The boys waited breathlessly to see if it would produce some terrible damage. They both understood the worst of that possibility – that the treehouse would fall, disintegrating into bits as it smashed into the ground. More than that, of course, was the question of whether or not they would also be smashed into bits as they met the ground.

Sensing his new friend's trepidation (fright), Orvie reached out and put his arm around Ben's shoulders, drawing him closer. Ben made no attempt to resist, but did feel the need to make a comment.

"I guess this way, when we're sent whirling thorough space, at least we'll go whirling together."

He moved his arm around Orvie.

"We are going to be just fine. Tell you what, if it kills us, it's my treat at the Dairy Queen tomorrow."

"Not funny, Orvie. Not funny at all."

"Sorry. To me the picture of two young, white sheeted ghosts licking ice cream cones while sitting on the curb in front of a DQ seems really humorous."

Orvie thought it had been hilarious, but refrained from

chuckling – out loud.

The storm kept to its constant rage for another ten minutes before it began to gradually calm down. Fifteen minutes later the quiet had returned. It had coincided with the last flames of their fire.

While Ben called his mother, Orvie used a stick to spread out the ashes and make certain no live embers remained.

“We just survived the worst storm in the history of mankind,” he opened as his mother answered. “It was awesome. I can hardly wait to have grandkids to tell about it.”

“My hope is that you will wait a few years yet to have grandkids.”

They chuckled together understanding it had been their way of winding down from the fear and panic of the previous hour or so.

“We’re heading for home in a couple of minutes. We’re starving, you know.”

“I just imagine I can handle that for you. First, I’ll need to call your father and let him know you’re okay. When I told your grandfather about your refuge up in the tree, he said that he and a friend built that treehouse when he was a kid. I suppose you need to thank him for that.”

“I suppose so. Think of that. My grandpa saving my life even before my dad was born. Life is interesting. See you in twenty.”

Orvie silently agreed that life was most certainly, interesting!”

Even the grassy areas were muddy and slick so they picked their ways carefully as they headed south toward Jasper. Many dozens of sizeable branches and about a billion smaller ones cluttered the ground. They couldn’t see any major damage other than that.

Ben’s mother sounded a lot like a mother as they entered the kitchen through the back door from the porch.

“You’re filthy! Upstairs. Dry off. Get into dry clothes. Then, I’ll have a huge hug for both of you.

They did and she did!

Sarah entered the kitchen and Ben immediately went to her, repeating the hug thing. That was a seldom seen event – Ben offering anything resembling affection to his sister. Ben’s mother and Orvie raised eyebrows at each other. Sarah accepted it, really wishing it had been coming from the other young man in the room. Their eyes met over Ben’s shoulder and Orvie flashed a smile and nodded, indicating his happiness at her wellbeing.

It was toasted cheese sandwiches – three apiece – tomato soup – two bowls apiece – and ice cream until the container was empty.

Somehow it had gotten to be nearly seven o’clock.

“I need to get back and make sure my mother is okay. I’m sure she is. We made camp in front of a sizeable cave. She refers to herself as a frontier woman born in the wrong century. Still, she’ll be concerned about me.”

Ben walked him out to the back porch.

“I have no idea what you’re up to, but be safe. When will I see you again?”

“I just need to get back to ‘my’ place and make sure things are all okay. I’ll be back for breakfast if I’m welcome.”

“Of course, you’re welcome. I’ll see you then.”

Orvie offered a question before he left.

“Considering that we’re pretty sure the sheriff is up to no good in this mine thing – whatever it is – we really need to make some connection with another law enforcement agency. You have any ideas?”

“Grandpa’s best friend is about to retire from the State Police. Is THAT the kind of law enforcement connection you mean?”

“Good old grandpa,” Orvie said. “Exactly what I meant. Not sure when or how to approach him about it. Probably not until after we see what gives up in the mine. What do you think?”

“I agree. His friend lives down in Centerton – about three miles south.”

"I know where it is. What's his name, by the way."

"Grandpa's?"

"No. The State Cop, doofus!"

"Billy, well William, I guess. Grandpa calls him Billy. Franklin is his last name."

"Okay. Well, I'll see you in the morning."

Orvie was relieved that the name was not familiar.

Orvie picked up his shirt and shoes that had been left there on the porch earlier in the day and took off going east down Main Street. Once out of sight he moved a block south and then circled back west toward his nest in the big old brick building he called home.

Everything was in order. He had been afraid that since the tornado had touched down to the west of town that there might have been some damage. Once inside, he hoisted the big sheets of plywood over the windows for the night and turned on the light. It was chilly so he set the electric heater on high hoping to heat things up in a hurry. It had been nice at Ben's with a family around, but he really preferred his own place. He didn't have to be on guard about revealing any secrets there. His life could just be tension free. It wasn't that Orvie didn't like people. He did. But after a day or so among them he treasured his solitude (time alone).

He fluffed up his pillows, set them back against the brick wall beside his floor-based mattress, pointed the heater in his direction, and settled in with a book. He was more tired than he expected he'd be, and fell asleep with the light on.

He woke up tired and feeling anxious. Those were sure signs he'd had his nightmare again. He had a faint memory that it had, in fact, taken place. It reminded him that he had experienced a similar feeling after that first night at Ben's. Ben had said nothing about it. He wondered if he should ask. Those terrible dreams had begun soon after the experience in the storm on the lake. His parents would often come into his room and awaken him from them. His mother would hold him close until he could sleep again. He missed his mother and father. It didn't seem fair to him that they had been taken from him so early in life.

But, if Orvie was anything, he was a survivor. Unfair was unfair, but once passed there really wasn't anything that could be done about such things so he had learned to live with them and move on. He certainly never spent time contemplating revenge. He never let himself become bitter about such things. Each setback along life's path just made him determined to smile more and try harder. It had become a very good formula for him to live by – at least it had seemed that way for some 124 years – 112 of them as a twelve-year-old.

Orvie still hadn't decided how long he would be staying in Jasper. It was generally a comfortable place – that was probably the main reason he had returned. Returning to a place he had lived previously always presented the problem of being recognized by the older folks. He needed to figure out a way of dealing with Wayne, Ben's grandfather, if he were going to remain there much longer. It didn't seem likely he would continue to be able to avoid him.

He arrived at Ben's to the pleasing aroma and sounds of bacon sizzling in the kitchen. He stuck his head in through the back door playfully and said:

“Hungry boy passing by.”

“Morning,” she said clearly happy to see him. “Is everything ok with your mother?”

“She's just fine. She thrives on things that most people find discomforting.”

“Discomforting? Where in the world did you come by that word?”

“Undoubtedly one of my grandfather's books. I've read every book he ever owned.”

“I wish some of that would rub off on Ben. Can't get his nose out of that computer long enough to remember there are things called books in this world.”

“I'll work on that for you. Where is Ben, by the way?” Orvie asked.

“In the living room. Somebody else dropped by for breakfast this morning. Ben's eager for you to meet him.”

“Anything I can help you with in here?” Orvie asked.

“Got things under control, but thanks. It would be ok if some of your thoughtfulness rubbed on my son, too.”

She smiled and continued.

“Get that crew in the living room to wash up. Things will be ready in just a few minutes.”

Orvie moved into the living room. What he found there was NOT what he had wanted to find there – or anywhere else in town for that matter.

“Hey, Orvie,” came Ben’s cheery greeting. He sprung up from where he had been sitting cross-legged on the floor. “I want you to meet my grandpa – Wayne. I’ve been telling him about the great times me and you been having.”

Orvie looked directly into Wayne’s face. Wayne returned a steady gaze, his brow furrowing as he looked back into Orvie’s face. Orvie moved across the room and offered his hand, the wheels in his head turning at top speed as he tried to decide how to handle the unanticipated meeting.

“Nice to meet you, Orvie,” the old man said. “I understand you got to see some of my early handiwork yesterday out in the woods.”

“Your early handiwork, as you refer to it, probably saved our butts yesterday. So, thanks, I suppose.”

It seemed to have become a chess match. Orvie wondered where it would lead.

“Quite a sturdy structure, sir. You can be proud of your work.”

“I had a good helper, that summer. He seemed to know everything about everything.”

“That’s must like Orvie, here, grandpa,” Ben said offering a big grin. “He knows stuff that Father Time doesn’t even know.”

They had turned to look at Ben when he jumped into the conversation. Their gaze immediately returned to each other’s faces. The old gentleman responded with a single word.

“Interesting.”

“Well, the boss out in kitchen says it’s time to get cleaned up for breakfast, guys,” Orvie said hoping to extricate (remove) himself from a most uncomfortable situation. He was certain that Wayne recognized him. He wondered if the ‘grandson’ story that Amy had bought would work with him. He doubted it. They had been extremely close friends.”

Ben dominated the conversation over breakfast with grand tales of surviving the ‘storm of the century’, as he put it. The glances between Wayne/grandpa and Orvie became less strained although that did nothing to relieve Orvie’s chest tightening anxiety.

“Orvie,” Ben’s mother said at one point. “You seem to be off your feed this morning. Sure you’re alright?”

“I’m fine. Probably just still full from all the food you stuffed down us after the storm last evening.”

Breakfast was finally over. Orvie offered his and Ben’s services to do the dishes. That was something Ben’s mother seldom refused and it would separate him from the old man for a few minutes. He needed more thinking time.

“Ben,” Wayne/grandpa said, “let me take your place in the soapsuds this morning. It’ll give me a chance to get to know your new friend.”

Getting out of doing dishes was something that Ben seldom refused. (How unlike a twelve-year-old boy!!!)

The switch was made with the exchange of a simple nod between them. Orvie thought his heart was going to beat a hole right through the front of his chest. In a few minutes, he would be alone with the person he didn’t dare be alone with.

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CHAPTER NINE: Friendship Spans Time

“You clear the table, Orvie, and I’ll get the suds ready,” the old man suggested.

He moved on into the kitchen.

At least that bought Orvie a few more minutes to think. So far, his usually quick mind had come up with nothing that seemed at all helpful. He had once read that a blank mind was a useless mind, so he always tried to be thinking about something useful and constructive. At that moment, his mind was most definitely useless. His emotions seemed torn between great happiness at seeing his old friend and the worst of all possible fears at being revealed to him. He figured that had to be the most difficult conflict one’s emotional center could experience.

As had to happen, a few minutes later the two of them were alone together in the kitchen.

“So, where you from young man?”

“Down south, er, Sir.”

“Don’t detect a southern accent.”

“My parents were from Springfield, Illinois before moving south where I was born.”

The chess match continued.

The old man chuckled and shook his head. Presently

he put down the dishrag, turned directly toward Orvie, reached out, took his left hand in his, and spoke.

“I have no idea what’s going on, you know. I’m completely baffled. This is like one of those science fiction stories a friend of mine and I used to write back in Jr. High.”

The emphasis on Jr. had not escaped Orvie. He took a deep breath, still not ready to speak about it. The old man continued.

“That friend had some secrets and asked that I never ask about them. I never did and I wouldn’t to this day. I truly loved that friend. Do you understand?”

Orvie nodded, but still didn’t respond in words.

“So, we good?” the old man asked.

“Yes, sir, grandpa, Wayne, whoever. We’re good. Thank you. Can’t verify or admit to anything, you understand.”

“I understand – well, of course I don’t even come close to understanding, but whatever is going on is safe with me. Friendship spans time. I remember talking about that with somebody a long, long time ago. And, why not keep it ‘Wayne’. That feels right to me.”

As if the cavalry riding to the rescue, Sarah entered the kitchen.

“I can help dry if you want.”

Her grandfather handed her the dishrag.

“How about you wash? I forgot how my fingers wrinkle up when they get into hot, soapy water.”

She seemed happy about the arrangement. The old man walked toward the dining room door. Orvie called after him.

“Thanks for the talk, Wayne. I really appreciate how easy you are to talk with about things. Wasn’t sure how it might be, you know – you being older.”

Wayne raised his hand without turning around. It meant, ‘no problem’, well, actually, it meant ‘no problem my dear old friend’. They both understood that.

“So, what do you think of our grandpa,” Sarah asked.

“Just like I pictured he’d be, actually.”

He allowed himself one of his unexplainable smiles.

Sara moved on to what was really on her mind.

“Ready for the movie tonight?”

“I suppose I’m ready. If there are things I need to do in order to get ready, I wasn’t aware of them.”

“I like you, Orvie. Most of the boys in this town are spoiled brats who never mature beyond kindergarten age. You’re different.”

“Thanks, and I’m sorry, I guess.”

Sarah looked puzzled. Orvie explained.

“Thanks for what I assume was a compliment and I’m sorry you feel that way about the local boys.”

She nodded.

It seemed to Orvie she worked on every dish far longer than was necessary just to draw out their time together. A girl thing no doubt. Even after 124 years of being a male, he typically had no idea what girls were really about. With a guy, you always knew. Guys said things straight out. Not so much with girls. They had a way of meandering around inside a topic until – Whammo! – suddenly they had the guy trapped into something he had no interest in. At least that had been his experience. He sometimes wondered that if he had matured physically just one more year he might understand them better. If older guys didn’t really understand them either, they sure seemed to enjoy being around them while they were not understanding them.

What he did understand from their conversation was that they’d leave for the movie at eight and that between what Ben’s mom fixed and what other mothers fixed, there would be lots of great ‘junk’ to eat. Even with jabbering girls around, that didn’t sound too bad.

The movie would be over at about ten. Assuming the girls had not bound and gagged them by then, there would be plenty of time to get up to the mine.

“Do we need to get in a supply of batteries for our adventure tonight?” Orvie asked once he and Ben had freed

themselves from the other family members and returned to Ben's room.

"I have three super duper flashlights that have internal generators. When the light begins to dim you just shake them vigorously and they're up and running again."

"Cool."

Orvie was always tickled when he heard himself using the slang of the present-day kids. When he had first been twelve, 'cool' would have been 'neat-o' or 'darby'. The Western movie they were going to watch that night, would have been called a 'gun opera'. If everybody enjoyed the movie it wouldn't have been 'great' or 'awesome'; it would have been, 'that really panicked the house'. A pretty girl like Sarah, would have been referred to as a 'peacherino'. Beginning about 25 years into his life as the perennial pre-teen, he had to begin being much more careful about his use of slang than of his big words. The slang a person used forever revealed the generation to which he belonged.

They printed out new copies of the map of the mine and spent a good deal of time studying it and talking about it. The tunnels were sizeable. They had been worked for decades and kept growing both in width and length. The legend in the lower right corner noted the average height of the tunnels was ten feet, but ranged from six to eighteen. Each section of a tunnel had been given a name – Barry's Tomb, Catwalk, 16 Souls. Orvie was certain they each held real meaning for the miners even though the two of them had no idea what they meant. Maybe Amy would have an idea about how to find out, although that probably had nothing to do with the report she and Miss Prince were expecting to receive by the end of the summer. Somewhere along the way they'd have to take time and actually research their stated topic. With Ben's superior internet research skills, that really should not take long.

Ben's mother had set a light supper, knowing they would be gorging themselves on junk food all evening at the movie. The boys still managed to put away four hot dogs apiece and clean the potato salad bowl so clean they figured it wouldn't even need to be washed. Not so, of course, in Ben's mother's kitchen.

“I promised grandpa we’d stop by this evening and move a branch that fell across his driveway yesterday,” Ben announced. “He’s still in pretty good shape, but he’s going on sixty-five. I’m sure he’ll want to help us.”

Again, Orvie’s chest felt tight. He’d go through with it, but this new situation was going to take some getting used to.

It took them an hour – there were actually quite a number of branches down in the yard and they went ahead and dragged them all into the back yard. Later on they would be cut into fire wood for the old man’s fireplace.

“I certainly thank you boys,” the old gentleman said. “Got lemonade, Ben – Grandma’s recipe.”

Ben turned to Orvie.

“You gotta taste grandma’s lemonade. It’s the best in the universe.”

“Well, I’d never pass up the best in the universe of anything.”

The boys took seats on the steps of the back porch. The old man was soon back with a tray – three glasses and one huge pitcher. He set the tray on a chair and took a seat in a rocker on the porch. The boys moved in close to serve themselves.

“It is delicious, sir, er, Wayne,” Orvie said stumbling over the words.

“I told you,” Ben said.

“Some peanut butter cookers under the napkin,” Wayne went on. “I loved them as a boy. Peanut butter cookies, with raspberry sherbet was just about my favorite treat when I was your age.”

Orvie understood what was going on. Wayne was reminiscing with him about the old days. Orvie relaxed a bit and thought about how he might enter into the strange, but fascinating game.

“I’m with you on the sherbet, but have always favored sugar cookies. They tend to be larger and chewier.”

“You know, there used to be a bakery down on Main Street – Betty’s Bakery. She made wonderful sugar cookies.

And then there was Pete's Pizza down there where the candle store is these day. Believe it or not, Pizza was a relatively new treat in this country back then. I'd save my allowance for two weeks in order to take my girl there on a date."

Ben looked amazed.

"A pizza cost a hundred dollars?"

He had just let slip the amount he received weekly for his allowance. Orvie figured he could manage a pretty decent life on a hundred bucks a week. He wasn't sure he'd ever had a hundred dollars all at one time in his whole life. He responded to what Wayne had said about Pete's Place.

"I can imagine a hang out like that holds lots of really great memories, doesn't it?"

"The greatest. You know, you boys will grow up and make lots of friends during your lifetime, but the ones you have at your age will always be the most important in your memories."

He wiped a tear from the corner of his eye. Ben had no idea what was going on. Orvie had one of his own to deal with. He turned away and did a quick wipe thing with his knuckle.

"Pete's Pizza you say," Orvie said. "Sounds like a quaint little place with red and white checkered curtains and table cloths."

Wayne winked at Orvie. Orvie chose not to wink back, but managed a quick smile and nod. He wondered if those few minutes were going to be the extent of their remembering together. As one happy memory will do, it chained to lots of others that Orvie hadn't thought about in many years. The old gentleman had been correct – friends from that age were the ones remembered with the greatest satisfaction.

The boys got back to Ben's just in time to clean up and leave for the movie. Sarah was waiting along with one of her friends. Somehow, Orvie found himself between them, arm in arm, walking toward Main Street. Ben brought up the rear carrying the popcorn and cooler. Orvie looked over his shoulder. Ben smiled and shrugged. There was some Imp in the lad that was enjoying his new friend's discomfort.

Becky Sue, the girl Ben liked, was waiting for him, and it seemed to Orvie that his friend was not at all surprised. Orvie figured there was subterfuge afoot (a boy girl plan he had not been let in on ahead of time. Ben would pay for that later!). They joined a group of other kids of and about their ages and spread blankets on the pavement at the girl's favorite spot for movie watching. It seemed pretty far from the screen and deep into the shadows as far as Orvie was concerned. But he was the guest so made no suggestions. (How could a 124-year-old twelve-year-old boy be sooooo dumb about the girls' intentions? It really wasn't about watching the movie for the girls.)

From what the boys were able to see of the movie it was pretty good. Lots of horseback chases, shooting, and pretty dancing ladies in the taverns. They managed to survive the ordeal and even enjoy some parts of it they really hadn't expected to. They would compare notes at a later date.

Even though there would be no moon during their trek up the hill that night, the boys dressed in in dark colored clothes – black hoodies and jeans – so they wouldn't be as likely to be spotted by prying eyes – if any happened to be there. It had grown chilly while they were at the movie. Why the girls hadn't brought sweaters the boys couldn't figure – well, not until Sarah and Ben's friend mentioned how chilly they were and began to cuddle up close to the boys.

They were down the tree beside Ben's window at eleven thirty. The walk up the hill had been mostly uneventful. At the outset, they took turns stumbling over fallen limbs, but once they reached the creek they stayed close to it. Few of the fallen branches had settled that far from the woods. Once again, they found themselves hunkered down behind the big log just yards from the top of the rise. Ben lowered his backpack to the ground. They had brought supplies – candles, matches, bottles of water, a compass, a hundred foot roll out tape measure, two hammers, several chisels; just the routine stuff for a guy's late night hike. They figured they were prepared for most anything. That remained to be seen.

“Well, this is it,” Ben said.

“You ready?” Orvie asked.

“I figure if I could live through whatever that was with the girls earlier, I’m ready to tackle anything.”

They shared a chuckle that was well above the whispers they had been exchanging.

“I’ll carry the backpack,” Orvie offered. You hauled it all the way up here.”

Ben handed it over without any discussion. They kept to a low crouch as they cautiously approached the top of the ridge. They moved more on instinct than anything else. They had decided not to chance the use of flashlights outside.

“Man. I didn’t realize dark could be so dark,” Ben said.

Orvie smiled, silently agreeing, but didn’t respond. He nudged Ben closer to the hill. They could keep a hand on its steep, rock side to help them maintain their bearings.

They reached the front side of the hill and were soon moving slowly to the left (west) toward the mine opening. It was as quiet as either of them had ever heard, quite. Ben was sure he could hear Orvie’s heart beating – that’s quiet!

Pitch dark! Absolutely quiet! The possibility of bad guys just ahead! Had this really been a good idea?

CHAPTER TEN: Into the Belly of the Hill

Ben pointed. They were nearing the large opening to the mine. It was probably fourteen feet high and wide, arched slightly at the top with generally straight, solid stone sides. It was well known locally that the core of the hill was nearly solid rock covered in eight to twenty or so feet of soil. The Jasper lode was the only major gold discovery in the central mid-west and one of the few east of the Mississippi river. Kentucky had some. Its origins had geologists baffled although one theory was that the hill may have been a giant bubble of debris filled volcanic magma (lava) that made its way up through a fissure (crack) in the rock layer hundreds of yards below the surface. Gold usually occurred intermixed with one or more other minerals. The Jasper deposit was primarily gold and pyrite.

They boys hesitated at the entrance and then, exchanging a nod, moved in, side by side. They felt their way along the wall until Ben figured they were fifty feet inside. He turned on one flashlight and played it about the tunnel. Two sets of rails running side by side down the middle of tunnel had been the tracks used by the little cars that had hauled the ore out from deep in the mine. Why two sets, was not immediately clear.

In the beam of a single flashlight they continued to go deeper into the tunnel. Orvie pointed at the rails.

“What do you notice about the rails, Ben?”

He shone his light back and forth from one to the other.

“The one on the right is dull and the one on the left is shiny. I’m guessing that dull finish means not used recently and shiny means just the opposite.”

“That’s what I’m thinking. According to the map the cave-in should be close up ahead.”

They continued to walk. No blocked tunnel. They walked further. No blocked tunnel.

“What gives?” Ben asked.

“I can see at least two possibilities,” Orvie said. “Either the fallen rock has been cleared away or there never was fallen rock in the first place. The lie about the polluted creek confirms that whoever is behind this is not bashful about changing the facts to fit his purposes.”

“More lying, you mean.”

“Right. What actually happened probably is of little use to us right now. We need to find out what goes on in here.”

Eventually they came to the ‘Y’ in tunnel. There was a switch arrangement where the tracks separated, one going right and one west. That explained the two tracks in the main tunnel. It appeared the track from the right could be switched so those cars shifted over to the left-hand track in the main shaft. From what they could see there, the tracks in both side tunnels – left and right – were shiny.

“Seems like both tunnels are being used from the look of the tracks,” Ben said.

Orvie agreed.

“How about we go right first,” Ben suggested.

“Sounds as good as left,” Orvie said.

That tunnel was narrower and lower and ran a gradual rising incline. The beam from Orvie’s recently lit flashlight picked up sparkles from the floor outside the tracks. He stopped and knelt in order to get a closer look. The area was strewn with small chunks of rocks. They contained flecks of a mineral that reflected the light.

“Gold?” Ben asked bending down close.

“Fools gold, is my guess. Iron Pirate. Has a faint resemblance to gold in color and texture. Is often mistaken by amateur miners for the real thing. It frequently occurs alongside gold in old rock formations like this. Gold is always found mixed in with other minerals.”

“How do you know all that stuff like that?”

Orvie smiled.

“From back in the days I spent helping prospectors in Colorado, a hundred years ago.”

He offered a broad grin. He’d just told the truth, but understood his friend would never believe it.

“I’d rather think it came from all the reading you do. Doesn’t matter. Do we go on?”

“Why not? Haven’t found anything that seems to tell us anything really useful, yet.”

That was about to change.

The beams of their lights converged (met) twenty yards ahead.

“Heavy machinery,” Ben said suddenly back to a whisper.

“Several mini dozers and front loaders and some sort of boring machine,” Orvie said walking in among the machines.

“And a line of five little open train cars – like mini coal cars – sitting on the end of the track. They’re called trams,” Orvie said.

“The front one is loaded with rocks,” Orvie pointed out.

“Sparkly. Gold or Pyrite, do you suppose?”

“Maybe some of each.”

Orvie stopped and thought. A question came to mind.

“If somebody’s really mining this place again, how are they transporting the ore away from here? Is there a railroad near-by?”

“Closest is on the other side of the hill to the south of here. The cart trail goes down the back of this hill into a valley. Then there’s another tall hill, Hunter Hill, a lot like this

one. Then the valley on the other side of that. That's where the railroad tracks are. They're still in use daily. They turn south and run by the west side of Jasper."

"Do you know how they transported the ore out of here in the old days?"

"There was a railroad spur that came right up to the lower end of the cart path in the valley. It connected with the main track on west about a mile – the track that still operates."

"That spur still here?" Orvie asked.

"No. The railroad company dug it up decades ago. All grown over by now I'd guess."

"We may need to check that out later. Any way to get to that valley without having to come up here first?"

"I'm sure there is – the ridge on the east side of the waterfall probably connects. Never done it – went that way."

"Let's pick up a few of the smallest rock samples here, then go explore the other tunnel," Orvie suggested.

They were soon back, deep into the left-hand tunnel. It descended at a gentle slope. The tracks there were also shiny. The huge, irregularly shaped 'room' at the end of the tunnel also held mining equipment – two small dozers, three front loaders, two boring machines and a generator. The ground was strewn with rocks that glittered in the beams of their flashlights. They collected more samples in a separate bag. Ben spoke:

"The air is really stuffy in here. I don't see how anybody could stand to remain in here for very long."

"And just think of how bad it must get when the diesel-powered machines are running," Orvie added.

Having seen enough, they began the trip back toward the main tunnel, Ben in the lead.

Orvie stopped suddenly, reaching forward and grabbing Ben's shirt to stop him as well.

"Shhhh!"

He began whispering.

"I think I hear footsteps out in the main tunnel."

Ben listened for just a few seconds.

“I do, too. Where’s our cloak of invisibility when we need it?”

Under other circumstances it would have been quite humorous.

“Back to the big room,” Orvie said.

They quickly surveyed the room for possible hiding places. Orvie pointed to the buckets on the front loaders. They were raised high – stored up and out of the way, he assumed. He whispered to Ben.

“Got a better idea? I’m sure we can’t be seen up inside them.”

Without any more conversation, they each chose one of the machines. They doused their lights and went about the process of hand over hand climbing up the iron arms that held the buckets. It was difficult getting inside once they were at the top, but they both managed to drape a leg up and over and had soon dropped themselves into the large buckets.

“I’m in,” Orvie said in as loud a whisper as a genuine whisper could be whispered.

A few moments later, Ben signaled he had also managed to make it. They settled in and remained quiet. Orvie had found himself in some very uncomfortable spots during his long lifetime, but certainly few had been more uncomfortable than that one.

Presently they could see the beam of light from their ‘visitor’ flashing here and there across the walls and ceiling of the big room. From its pattern of moves, Orvie determined whoever it was, was searching to see if anything seemed out of place or strange – the way a night watchman would do on a routine patrol. If that were the case they were probably much better off than if their presence, there in the mine, had actually been suspected and he was searching for them. He wished he had cautioned Ben to breathe through his mouth. Mouth breathing is typically silent. Nose breathing often isn’t.

Whoever it was walked a circle around the room. From where they were at the bottoms of the buckets they could only listen and see the occasional flashes of light as the beam

moved across the ceiling above them.

Suddenly one of the machine motors came to life. It was small and distant. Orvie figured it was probably the generator. That was proven to be correct as the lights came on in the room. It was suddenly so bright it hurt the boy's eyes. A noticeable draft developed flowing in from the main tunnel. Some sort of ventilation system had been activated to exchange the air. Orvie figured the man was at least partly there to clear the air so when the workers came back in the morning – assuming there were workers who would come back – they would have clean air to breathe.

He wondered if the ventilator would remain on until morning. Well, it was morning – close to one o'clock he figured. Fifteen minutes passed. Ben was really scared and hoped his shaking didn't make the bucket swing or vibrate. The more he wondered the more he shook.

Another fifteen minutes passed. They heard the man's footsteps again – just a few. The sound of the motor stopped. The room went dark. They could no longer sense the breeze – the air movement. The sound of his steps moved down the tunnel and presently had faded away.

Orvie spoke first – still in a loud whisper.

"I'm getting out."

He swung over the side and dropped the ten feet to the floor of the cave. Ben was not far behind.

"Flashlight?" Ben asked out of the darkness from some twenty feet away.

"One. Yours. Keep it pointed at the floor right in front of you."

It was just what Ben had been thinking. The light came on. Orvie walked to meet it.

"You okay, I guess?" Orvie asked.

"Still got dry pants so I'd say I'm okay. You?"

"About the same."

"Now what?" Ben asked. "Do you think it's safe for us to leave?"

"I'm thinking that either he went into the right tunnel to

check things out like he did in here or he left down the main tunnel for the outside. Either way we should be okay. It took him a half hour in here so he wouldn't catch us from behind if he's up there. We just have to make sure that if he's ahead of us we don't get close enough that he can see our light or hear us walking behind him."

"Makes sense. Let's get out of here."

"I agree."

At that moment, a huge rush of air came directly at them in through the main tunnel. They immediately knew the man had gone up the other tunnel and was repeating the routine from the one they had been in. They breathed much easier, but would remain cautious.

They slowed as they neared the opening. There was no indication – light or sounds – that the man was ahead of him. The breeze was still flowing into their faces. They were convinced their first take on where he was had been correct.

Once outside they turned right, made their way without light across the front of the hill, and took another right down the slope toward the fallen tree trunk. They fell to the ground behind it to rest and think together about what they had found.

"Seems pretty dumb of somebody to leave that opening open. Anybody could stumble onto it," Ben said.

"Which 'anybody' when everybody has been made afraid for their lives if they would come up here into the pollution?" Orvie pointed out.

"I guess I see what you're saying. I'll bet nobody's been up here for decades – except whoever is working the mine."

"The noise they make must be completely contained inside the hill. I imagine fifty feet of solid stone could do that."

Ben agreed.

I think a hike around the waterfall from the east is in order for tomorrow, don't you?" Orvie said.

"And," Ben suggested, "I'd like to get close enough to see them working the mine. Lots of questions about that: How big a crew? Where are they from? What are they're

taking out of the mine? How are they transporting it? Where are they taking it?"

"And," Orvie added, "Who's the big boss, the mastermind of the operation."

"I figured we thought it was the sheriff."

"Could be, or he could be protecting somebody else – somebody that's paying him off in a big way to keep folks away from up here," Orvie explained.

"I hadn't thought about that possibility. Your feeling thing didn't tell you anything about that, I guess."

"It didn't. We haven't been able to get him talking about the right topics for me to feel what's really important. Here's an idea. Are the Association meetings open to the public?"

"Don't know. Suppose so. Grandpa will know. What are you thinking?"

"I'm thinking if we can get somebody to ask him the right questions and I'm there with him, I may be able to get us some answers."

"You know grandpa will help."

"In the morning, we'll need to find out when the Association's next meeting is and figure out exactly the right questions to ask – the ones that will have the best chance of making the sheriff think back on everything wrong that's been going on. If the Association still owns the mine, and if something is being taken out of it without its knowledge, that's stealing plain and simple."

"And," Ben added, "If it's worth all the expense it seems somebody's gone to buying the dozers and all, and paying workers, it must be making somebody a whole lot of money."

"Okay, we've planned a pretty full day for tomorrow. We better get some sleep."

They stood up and began moving on down the slope. When a little more distance had been put between them and the top of the rise, they turned on the flashlights and picked up their pace. It was going on 2:30 when they entered Ben's window. Their night was going to be very short.

CHAPTER ELEVEN: A Treacherous Hike Into Unknown Territory

As plans for twelve-year-old boys often do, Ben and Orvie's plans changed. They stopped by Ben's grandpa's place right after breakfast to talk about attending a meeting of the Association Board. It was meeting that noon and the meetings were always open to the public although nobody ever attended.

They spent time explaining to the old gentleman that they needed answers to several questions as a part of the manuscript they were researching. He agreed to help, of course. Wayne had always been up for anything that promised a little excitement.

"I don't know what the two of you are really up to, but it seems to me it must be about something more important than the manuscript. I trust you both and I won't meddle. You know, I hope, that if there is anything you need from me, I'm here for you. How about we meet at the City Hall a few minutes before noon? The meetings are held in a back room there."

The boys agreed. It was eight o'clock straight up. They left.

"Can we make it back to the far hill past the waterfall and get back here by noon?" Orvie asked.

Ben made some mental calculations.

“An hour to get there. An hour to get back. Two hours up there. Assuming we’re not captured, put inside a big trunk and shipped off to China where we are forced to work in the rice paddies for the rest of our lives, we should have time.”

“Let’s get to it. We’ll travel on the east side of Purdy Creek so we can jog most of the way without appearing to be suspicious over there if anybody sees us, right?” Orvie asked.

“Right. We need to stop at my place and pack a backpack. I figure we’ll need some binoculars, lunch, and a note pad, minimum. It’s all trees, grass and bushes up there so we ought to change into green camo I think. I got shorts and T’s and hats we can wear.”

Orvie wondered if there was anything the boy didn’t have.

“Mom?” Ben called as they entered the back door. “We’re going up to look over Hunter’s Hill this morning. Then we’re going with grandpa to attend the Association Board’s meeting. What can we put together for a lunch?”

“Bread in the breadbox. Luncheon meat and soda in the door of the fridge. Should be a few small bags of chips in the cabinet over the stove. Have fun and keep safe.”

They were at the edge of town by 8:15. Orvie set a fast pace – too fast for much talking. Ben could tell his new friend was eager to solve the mystery. He hoped that wouldn’t mean he’d then think it was time to move on. It would be great to have such a good friend for at least one full year. No promises about that had been made, but then none had been asked for.

They’d slow to a walk every so often, but were soon back jogging along at a good clip. At 8:45 they stopped to rest at the waterfall. They lay back and looked the water up and down as it poured over the cliff above and tumbled into the pool beside them. It resembled liquid silver as the sun’s rays played off its ever-shifting surface. The day was heating up. The water looked very tempting.

“If we get done quickly maybe we can take a dip on the way back,” Orvie said.

“You remember how cold that water was when we went

in to get those rock samples?" Ben reminded him.

"You realize it's going to hit 100 degrees by noon today?"

Ben shrugged.

After a few minutes, they were on their way again. There was no trail to follow and the terrain was overgrown with brush and tall, sharp grass, which slowed them down significantly. Also, the hillside they had to climb was steep and the footing unstable. The ground was covered with loose rock. They had both slipped a number of times before they arrived at the top. Hunter Hill was directly across a valley from where they were. The two hills were connected by a curved ridge to the east – their right. Once they reached a spot just opposite from where they were standing, they'd be in position to look directly back at the mine opening.

The crests of the hills were fairly flat, but grown close with tall pines and oaks. The boys were therefore able to make much better time up there than they had on the climb.

Fifteen minutes later they were on Hunter Hill and were making their way west. Orvie pointed to a small, flat rock overhang just ahead to their left. He figured they could belly down on it and have a clear view of the mine opening just back across the valley. They could also see the cart trail that ran down the hill in their direction.

Ben removed the binoculars from the backpack – he had two pair – and they began scanning the area across the valley from them. There were at least a dozen workers at the mine opening, unloading by hand the contents of the trams into dump trucks.

"Why not use a dozer?" Ben wondered out loud. "Seems like it would be faster and lots easier."

"The noise, I imagine," Orvie offered.

Ben nodded. That made sense. Once loaded, the trucks went down the cart trail all quite silently, apparently rolling without starting the engines. Another way to cut down the noise they figured. Coming back up would be a different matter.

"What do you think, Ben, it takes about one tram per

truck and about fifteen minutes to get it loaded?" Orvie asked.

"About that, I'd say."

The empty trucks backed up the trail, stopped, cut their engines, got loaded, and rolled back down the hill. The whole process took about twenty minutes.

"I estimate three trucks and hour," Ben said. "That's fifty a day, give or take one or two. A lot of something is going somewhere to make somebody a bunch of money."

Orvie nodded as he offered a comment.

"I can't figure where the trucks go when they get to the bottom of the hill. We can't see the valley floor through the trees from up here. We need to get down there into the valley. You know a way down?"

"Not a clue," Ben answered. "What we came through to get this far was really steep. I'm thinking we need to go on west along the ridge a way and see if it gets any less treacherous."

"Treacherous! A good word," Orvie said.

"Not if you are the one being treacheroused!"

"Treacheroused?"

"The act of putting oneself in grave danger from which you are likely never to survive."

"Oh, that treacheroused?" Orvie kidded. "You use inventive language."

"And if we actually survive this trip down into the valley I plan to have that word added to the dictionary."

No more than thirty yards on west they found a natural path that wound toward the bottom. They were soon cautiously picking their way down the side of the hill. A thicket of bushes had grown along the point where the hillside met the valley. It provided ideal cover for them. They moved on west toward the spot where the trail from the mine should come down into the valley.

Suddenly the cover of the thicket stopped. The cart trail, which originally had stopped at the bottom of the opposite hill where the railroad cars would have been waiting, continued across the valley floor toward the hillside just in

front of them. They were amazed at what they saw. For one thing, a second dump truck was waiting there just off the trail to the north. Orvie pointed out the second thing.

“Look! Another tunnel that looks like it runs right through the base of Hunter Hill.”

They dared not show themselves in order to take a look inside that tunnel for fear the truck driver might spot them.

“How we going to find that out for sure?” Ben asked.

“Well, it’s a sure thing we can’t enter it and follow it with trucks moving back and forth through it. It’s what, maybe eight feet wide at the most?”

“About that, I’d say. No wiggle room for pedestrians who need to remain invisible.”

Orvie looked back up the hill.

“Up and over, down the other side I suppose. You said the railroad still operates over there, right?”

“Right. I hear the locomotive twice a day. Late morning and mid-afternoon. The late morning train doesn’t run on Sundays.”

They hunkered down in the brush as a dump truck rolled down the hill and across the valley floor. Without missing a beat, the engine started a few yards before it entered the tunnel.

“Up and over, I guess,” Ben said once the truck passed.

It was a difficult climb. The camo had been a very good idea. They blended right into the variegated green vegetation. They doubted if anybody that might be watching from across the valley would be able to make them out.

At the top, they sat to rest a few minutes before continuing down the other side. It was less steep. At the bottom, they immediately understood the operation. In addition to a small, empty bus parked there, there was a wide dirt ramp built so it backed up to a siding spur of train tracks. There were four open cargo cars waiting there. The truck they had seen enter the tunnel had easily beaten them and had apparently already backed up the ramp and dumped its load into one of the cars. They arrived just in time to see it drive

down the ramp and head back into the tunnel.

“So,” Orvie said trying to summarize things, “the trucks are loaded up at the mine entrance; they roll silently down the hill and across the valley, enter the tunnel and drive to the current train tracks, where they dump their load, return through the tunnel and wait their turn to back up the hill and be loaded again.”

“That’s how I see it,” Ben said with a confirming nod. “And the bus suggests the workers are transported here together, maybe, and enter the mine area through the tunnel.”

Orvie nodded and pointed.

“See the numbers on those open cargo cars?”

“Yeah,” Ben said.

“Make a note of them. They are like an ID number. They can be tracked to their destination. With a little luck we can find out where the rock is being sent. That should give us a good idea of what’s going on and who’s involved.”

“Got ‘em noted in my phone.”

Orvie shook his head amazed, once again, at the things a phone could do those days.

“Ready to make tracks out of here,” Orvie asked knowing the answer and starting back up the hill before Ben could open his mouth.

Before long they were heading back down the hill to the east of the waterfall. Ben shed his T-shirt. Orvie did the same. They tucked them into their shorts. Once out of the cooler woods and into the sun they suddenly realized how really hot it was getting.

“The water sure looks good,” Ben said, “but we really don’t have time. Maybe this afternoon at the hole on Rakes Creek. I like that place better anyway.”

Orvie nodded.

“Food,” he said.

They raided the backpack and were again on their way, munching and drinking. There would be time for talking later.

Ben’s grandpa was a half block from City Hall when

they caught up with him on the sidewalk.

“You boys have a successful morning, did you?” he asked.

“I’d say so, yes,” Ben said looking at Orvie for confirmation.

Orvie nodded.

“One thing, gentlemen,” Wayne said as he stopped them just short of the door.”

“What’s that?” Ben asked.

“I believe shirts will be required inside.”

The bare chests were easily and soon covered. They went inside and made their way to the back room. Since no guests had been anticipated the boys brought three extra chairs in from the main meeting room.

“Well, this is a pleasant surprise, Wayne,” the sheriff said extending his hand to Ben’s grandpa. “What brings you folks to our meeting today?”

Grandpa replied.

“The boys here are working on a project about how our mine has affected our citizens down through the years – positively and negatively, I imagine.”

He looked at them for verification. They nodded simultaneously.

“We hoped we could ask a few questions,” Ben said.

“Certainly. Anyway, we can help.”

The last of the board members arrived and took a seat at a large table where the other members were gathered.

“Why don’t we just deal with the youngsters’ questions first?” the sheriff said aiming it as a question to the other members.

They nodded and smiled, fully unused to having an audience. Getting them out of their hair early seemed like a good move on the sheriff’s part.

“So, let’s hear what’s on your mind, boys.”

“Actually, they prepared a list and asked that I do the asking if that’s satisfactory,” Wayne explained.

“Certainly. Go ahead.”

Ben and Orvie were suddenly nervous. What if Orvie was unable to feel anything from the sheriff’s answers? What if other members chose to answer instead of the sheriff? That would mess up the entire plan! It would probably be their only chance to ask the questions so it had to work.

Ben sighed. Orvie sighed. Grandpa cleared his throat and began.

CHAPTER TWELVE: Questions and Responses

Grandpa began asking the questions Orvie had so carefully designed.

“Sheriff. This is a two-part question. You say there has been virtually no major crime going on in our county during the past decade, correct?”

“That’s correct. Aside from speeding and a few tipsy visitors we just don’t have crime here.”

[Orvie felt: There is one major crime continuing from several decades ago. It has to do with a huge theft from the old gold mine.]

“Part two of that question: Has anybody in your department ever been suspected of misrepresenting anything about the problems that have been reported about the mine closing?”

“Absolutely not. I have a dependable and honest team working for me.”

[Orvie felt: My staff has been handpicked to cover up the misrepresentation of the collapse and the subsequent false stories about the pollution of the ground around the mine and Rakes Creek. They all know better than to cross me.]

“Obviously, the gold was not depleted at the time of the closing. Do you believe it will ever be able to be reopened so

we citizens can benefit again from its riches?”

“That’s very unlikely. The ground and source water continue with such high pollution rates that it will take perhaps a hundred years before it is no longer harmful to animal and human life.”

[Orvie felt: There has never been a pollution problem and by the end of next year we should have mined everything worth mining.]

“How long do you predict our citizens will continue to reap financial gains from the trust fund?”

“Each year the fund grows slightly, but the number of people who are eligible to receive dividends from it also grows. The fund will never end, but the amount each person receives will continue to fall as families continue to have kids.”

[Orvie heard: The fund could be growing at a far faster rate, but Jacob (the banker) and I have been able to siphon off most of the growth every year without being detected.]

“Recently there have been rumors about some public officials having lavishly expensive homes and property elsewhere in the country. Do you believe that is true and if so is there any chance they have in some way got hold of some of the money that should be coming to the members of the association?”

“What an outlandish accusation, Wayne. Where do you hear such fiction? Nothing like that could take place. Our board keeps track of every penny. We hire outside auditors every three months. No. Such allegations are patently false.”

[Orvie, had just fabricated (made up) the claim on a hunch to see how the sheriff might react. He felt: It sounds like we just may be in trouble. It is all true. We pay off the auditors to overlook the inaccuracies. Has somebody there leaked what’s going on? I need to get rid of my property in Las Vegas.]

Grandpa looked at Orvie who nodded, stood and spoke.

“Thank you, Sheriff, and Board members. You’ve been a lot of help. And, by the way, we were sure the rumors couldn’t be accurate. Keep up the good work.”

“Always a pleasure to talk with our members,” the sheriff said. “I’ve been interested in your project right from the start, boys. I’m eager to see the finished report.”

Ben also stood and the three of them left. They each wished they could have remained in the room as mice in the corners to hear the conversation that would follow.

The boys thanked Ben’s grandpa for his help. He stopped for a haircut and they trotted across the walking bridge to the City Park. They picked a grassy area and sat, backs against a low, stone wall.

“So? Give!” Ben said. “Anything?”

“Everything, my friend. Everything!”

He went on to relate the true information he had received.

“That’s even worse than we thought. What do you suppose the sheriff will do next?”

“If he’s smart he’ll shut down the operation, remove the equipment and block the mine entrance like it was supposed to have been blocked all these years. I think we need to work fast. Your grandpa will need to contact William, his State Police friend immediately. The problem, of course, is that we have no proof of anything that I felt.”

“I have one idea,” Ben said. “For a school project last year I learned how to find out who owned property – land and buildings. It’s all in computer files in county offices throughout the country. Let me look and see if I can find the Sheriff’s name attached to any property in Las Vegas.”

“Excellent. That’s Clark County, Nevada, by the way. Also, can you find out what auditing firm the Association Board uses?”

Ben shook his head, again amazed at Orvie’s fund of information. He spoke without referring to it.

“I’m sure that’s public record here in the county. Probably no more than a half dozen keyboard clicks away.”

“Okay then. Here’s a plan”, Orvie said. “You get on the computer and find the sheriff’s property in Nevada, find the name of the auditing firm, and see if you can figure out how to

trace those railroad cars. I'll come along to your place with you and get the auditor information, then I'll get together with your grandpa, and he and I will see if we can put some pressure on the auditing firm. The more havoc (disorder and confusion) we can create for the sheriff and his board members right now the better."

"Let's go," Ben said. "I'm beginning to feel like James Bond or some super detective."

"We're into something really big, Ben, and the bad guys will do whatever they need to in order to protect themselves. We may be in danger. We need to stay in the shadows – keep out of sight until we see how this thing plays out."

Ben found the name and number of the auditing firm and Orvie was off on a trot to find Wayne. He was just leaving the barbershop.

"You have to trust me on this, Wayne. Ben and I got ourselves in the middle of a really bad situation. I need your help to put a little pressure on the company that the sheriff is paying off to doctor the financial books of the Association. You up for that?"

"You know I am. What's your plan?"

"You will need to call the company, present yourself as an Association member – which you are, of course – and come down hard on them about having discovered they have been filing false audit reports. Tell them you'll give them until eight o'clock in the morning to report their 'mistakes' to the State Board of Auditors. They are to prepare a complete statement of their evil deeds . . ."

"Evil deeds! Now that sounds like the Jr. of old."

They exchanged a knowing glance. Orvie allowed the secret to come out into the open.

"I have missed you so much, Wayne. You can't know how much it pleases me to see that you are in good health and have had such a wonderful life, but we will have time for catching up later – as much catching up as I dare share, you understand."

Wayne nodded. He was ready to get back to the problem at hand.

“What do I say about the complete statement you were talking about when I interrupted you?”

“Have it delivered by early morning to your friend in the State Police; will that work?”

“There will be no problem. Ben said I should be ready to get him involved just in case. How about I just ask him to stop at their office and pick it up?”

“That sounds great. The sooner we can make that call the better. Ben even got the name of the head auditor that works on the Association’s books.”

“Good going Ben. He does have my exceptional genes, you know.”

It was worth a quick chuckle between them.

They walked to Wayne’s house together to plan the call.

“We can’t let them trace the call back to you, Wayne. Any ideas how we can fix that?”

“That is no problem for an old newspaper man, Jr. . . or, Orvie. I’m a certified member of the computer age – that’s not just for my grandson.”

They went into his den and as Orvie talked, Wayne made notes to use during the call. He knew exactly how to wade through a few websites and acquire a temporary, untraceable phone line. Orvie left him to take care of the call and raced the two blocks back to Ben’s house – traveling the backyards to keep out of sight.

He had a very bad feeling about the sheriff. As they were leaving the meeting room the feeling he received from the sheriff was not that he had been interested in the project right from the start, as he said, but that he had been fearful of what they might find, right from the start. If they happened onto things that incriminated him, he was prepared to put a stop to it – meaning, Orvie was sure, put a stop to Ben and him. His past 124 years had proved to him over and over again that nothing could end his life, but that was not the case for his friend. Things were getting well beyond serious.

Ben was close to finishing the things he had on his to

do list.

“How dumb can the sheriff be,” he began. “He bought a six-million-dollar estate just north of Las Vegas in his own name – ten years ago – paid cash. I had a copy of that deed sent to grandpa – overnighted. Credit cards are wonderful! And, the railroad car’s destination is a smelting (melting down and purifying) company in Minnesota. I called them and got a chatty secretary. This twelve-year-old boy’s voice change thing really came in handy. I lowered it as much more as I could and I passed myself off as the sheriff – using his actual name, of course. I inquired if ‘my’ last three cars of ore had arrived yet – I gave her the numbers. It took her a few moments and she was back. She said they hadn’t and weren’t expected for three more days. I made up an excuse for ‘my’ mix up and I’m quite sure she bought it. She asked if I wanted a call when they arrived.

“Now get this. You won’t believe how brilliant I can be. I asked her what phone number they had on file for ‘me’. She rattled it off – it was the sheriff’s home number. I told her never mind after all, thanked her, and hung up.”

“I will have to say absolutely brilliant, my friend. Put all that on a sheet of paper so we’ll have it.”

“Or, I can save it in my phone.”

“That phone may not be as safe as you’d think. How about emailing the information to yourself and your grandpa.”

“You think like a detective – a really, really, sneaky, detective, old man. There it’s done. I also did a blind copy to grandpa’s police friend. He’ll recognize the last name and contact grandpa.”

“To get the sheriff where we want him, we need one more major piece of information,” Orvie said. “It will probably be dangerous obtaining it. I think you better stay here and let me go after it.”

“What’s the deal? Why risk your safety? We’re a team. No deal.”

It put Orvie in a bind. He couldn’t tell him the real reason – the little thing called risking Ben dying at the sheriff’s evil hands. He wished he hadn’t brought it up. He could have

gone by himself that night after he 'left for home'.

"Okay. We need to set up a few safeguards first."

"Safeguards? Like?"

"Here's my plan. As soon as it gets dark – that's about 8:30, right."

Ben nodded

"We'll head back up to the mine. We need to get pictures of the vehicle identification numbers on as many of those mining machines as we can. They will trace back to the owner."

"The sheriff, right?"

"Probably, but if not him then some accomplice. Either way it will put the squeeze on the bad guys."

"Excellent."

Ben's cell rang. It was his grandpa.

"Operation audit complete."

It brought a broad smile to Ben's face.

"Let me put you on speaker, grandpa. Orvie's right here."

"When I called, I got some underling to begin with, but when I spoke my piece and mentioned the head auditors name, he transferred me to a second person who soon had me speaking with a vice-president. It was amazing how cooperative he became when I mentioned both the trust fund audit problem and the mine production audit problem. I wouldn't be surprised if he ran the report to us by himself all the way from Springfield. You're still a genius, J-orvie."

Orvie spoke.

"You'll be receiving an email from Ben in a few minutes. We really hope you'll follow our wishes in it and not go off halfcocked about it."

"You have stimulated my interest by that, of course. You know I'll follow your wishes if I can, but before you send it I must tell you I'll have to use my best, old man's judgment."

"Understood. Thanks for everything," Orvie said.

Ben hung up.

“What was that all about?”

“I believe we are in danger. We need to send that email to your grandpa telling him where we will be tonight and what we will be doing. If we don't return he'll know that much at least.”

“Or, he could send the cavalry out after us.”

“That's what I'm hoping he will hold back on. Add to the email that we will text him as soon as we are in the clear. Do it.”

Perhaps a minute elapsed before the email was sent.

“Now, we need to get out of here in case the sheriff or one of his thugs comes looking for us. You up to an out and out lie?”

“If it'll save our necks and not hurt anybody, you bet I am.”

They conferred about Orvie's plan as they filled two backpacks with their dark-of-the-night expedition clothes – blue jeans and the black hoodies. Ben removed one black and one dark blue ski mask from a drawer and held them up. Orvie nodded.

“That genius showing through again.”

They exchanged smiles.

Opting to remain in their camo until they were well on their way, each hefted a backpack and went down stairs. They were making peanut butter sandwiches – six – when Ben's mother entered the kitchen. (Here enters the lie.)

“Mom. We're going to camp out over on Purdy Creek tonight. Plan to catch lots of fish and cook 'em over a campfire.”

“And that's why you are preparing enough sandwiches to feed a regiment? Because the fish will be so plentiful? I baked a chocolate cake today. Might as well take it along. I hear fish live chocolate. Out of chips, I'm afraid since a couple of large squirrels raided my kitchen early this morning.”

The all exchanged smiles.

“There's a half gallon of milk you can put in the big thermos if you want it. Use the shoulder harness you made for

it. Should stay cold quite a while.”

They were soon on their way out the door.

“Check in every once and a while,” she called after them.

She would worry about them, of course. That’s what mothers did. It was of some comfort to her that there were two of them together, and Orvie was clearly a responsible young man.

(Sure, he was, Mom – leading your son off on the most dangerous mission of his life in which the sheriff himself just might be waiting around any bend to do them in!)

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CHAPTER THIRTEEN: The Dangerous Mission

They started east as a distraction to anybody who might be interested in their activities and then circled back and hit Rakes Creek from the east that time a bit south of the swimming hole.

It was going on three.

It was 102 degrees in the sun.

It was an afternoon with no breeze.

They put down their backpacks and were soon prepared for a nice log dip in the cool water. Although they remained vigilant for intruders, they felt safe there where no one had been for decades. The folks up at the mine clearly entered from the valley below Hunter Hill. They had never come across any indication that the path they had been taking was ever used by anybody else. They were tense about what lay ahead that night and remained quiet, speaking only occasionally. The swim was clearly to keep cool and fill time rather than for fun and horseplay.

Presently, Ben spoke.

“What do you suppose grandpa meant when he said you were still a genius?”

“I guess I didn’t catch that. Probably some short circuit inside his head. It happens in older folks.”

Ben really didn't buy it, but then he had no real reason not to.

"He also called you Jorvie. Did you catch that?"

"Yeah. That I caught. He must have had more than a little stray electrical interference going on in his gray matter this afternoon. Maybe the hair clippers shorted out on his scalp at the barbers. Do you have a guy friend whose name begins with 'J'?"

"Two, actually, Jerry and Jack."

"That may explain it. Started to call one of their names out of habit by mistake and caught it part way through."

"Probably."

"We got lots of time 'til the sun goes down. Want to actually fish?" Ben asked.

"Then we'd need to build a fire and that's probably not such a good idea, do you think?"

"I guess not. I'm just really itchy to get on with things. Hate this waiting around."

"Well, I for one am really tired after getting only three hours of sleep last night. After we finish our swim I'm thinking about a nap."

"What twelve-year-old boy in the whole history of twelve-year-old boys has ever taken an afternoon nap?" Ben asked, mostly teasing.

"You're not tired?"

"Well, yeah. I suppose."

"We need to be sharp and up to whatever physical tasks our evening excursion requires of us," Orvie went on.

"Makes sense, I guess. But you are to NEVER tell my friends I took a nap!"

Orvie smiled.

"Got it. N-E-V-E-R!"

They stayed in the water for about an hour and exited the stream on the west side across the meadow from the woods.

"So, we need to find some shade, I think," Orvie said

looking around.

“Only shade’s over by the woods,” Ben said.

“Probably not a bad idea to go on into it a way where we’re sure we won’t be seen. Asleep, somebody could sneak up on us.”

They gathered shoes, shirts and backpacks and soon found a good spot some twenty yards inside the woods. Orvie turned his T-shirt inside out, stuffed it with grass and leaves for a pillow and lay down on his back.

“It would seem you’ve done this sort of thing before,” Ben said, following Orvie’s lead with the pillow thing.

“A few times, I suppose. Please don’t tell my friends I sleep outside on a p-i-l-l-o-w?” he said mocking Ben for his earlier concern about napping.

If Ben hadn’t been so tired he’d have made a flying leap and started a tussle. He thought better of it but did ask:

“Sandwich before you drift off?”

“That sounds good, and some milk and some cake and . . .”

“That’s all the ands we got in here, pal.”

Ben broke out the food and they devoured about half of it. The rest they’d save for an after-the-mission snack.

Stomachs full and backpacks repacked, they were soon asleep in the relative coolness of the woods – shade from the trees above them and soft grass beneath them.

At eight o’clock Ben’s phone alarm went off. It woke them both. They were amazed they had slept that long and that soundly.

“Guess we were tired,” Ben said stretching and yawning.

It was nearly pitch dark there in the shadowy woods. They changed into their dark outfits, both immediately finding them uncomfortably hot. That was not mentioned, however. They had a sense of purpose. They knew exactly what they were about. The sun had set, but complete darkness had not yet fully overtaken the world outside the woods.

“There may be a slip of a moon tonight,” Ben said. “Not sure if that’ll help or not.”

“I guess we’ll deal with whatever’s out there,” Orvie said.

“How about another sandwich to fortify us for the next couple of hours,” Ben asked, already into the backpack.

“Sure.”

They munched their way back to the edge of the woods. In truth, it wasn’t a whole lot lighter out there. They turned left and headed for the mine, staying close to the woods for as long as they could still see well enough. Ben had been right. There was a slip of a moon in the sky. It would help like it had several nights before, reflecting off the creek water.

“Keep an ear out for noises up ahead. It’s possible they will try to move out the machinery tonight,” Orvie said.

“You think?”

“I’m hoping at least not until after mid-night. That will give us time to do what we have to do. I’d think they’d believe that later would be safer for them. They’re bound to make some outside noise running all that heavy equipment. Doubt if a dozer’s going to just quietly roll itself down the cart trail.”

In ten minutes, they were at the huge, fallen log that had become a familiar marker for them on their journeys up and down the hill.

“No reason to wait, I guess,” Ben said.

With that they pushed on up the gentle slope to the top of the hill.

“One thing we should have done that I didn’t think of until right now,” Orvie said.

“And that’s . . . ?”

“Should have had you look up where we will find the VINs on the big machinery.”

“Not to worry, Grasshopper. Ben the Magnificent took it upon himself to do that. Actually, I had no idea what a VIN was when you used the term, so I looked it up and that reminded me to ask where they were on dozers and such.”

“Good going. Since you know where to look and have the camera you can locate them and get pictures – they have to be clear. You’ll need to be ready to send them in an e-mail the minute we’re back outside. Don’t dare risk not getting them to the State Police.”

“Understand. And you will be doing what?”

“I brought along a friend and he and I will be spending some time together.”

“A friend? I don’t get it.”

“You’ll see once we’re inside.”

There was no noticeable activity anywhere up top or down along the trail to the valley. That was a relief.

“We have to work fast,” Orvie cautioned. “Can’t risk being caught inside if they are going to come and remove stuff after while. Oh, one more thing. It is probably a good idea to e-mail your grandpa and have him alert his police friend that within the hour we will be sending him some VINs for identification – as jpeg attachments, I guess.”

Ben nodded.

“You have the cop’s cell number I assume.”

“That’s the second time I remember you using the word, Cop. You may learn how to fit in around here yet.”

They were soon inside the main tunnel. Shall we risk flashlights?” Ben asked.

“One should be enough. Keep it pointed down so it won’t show up far off.”

They hurried along at a fast walk.

They came to the ‘Y’ in the tunnel and both automatically moved right the way they had the first time. A few minutes later they came upon the heavy machinery, right where it had been before at the end of the tunnel. Orvie turned on his flashlight and opened his backpack removing a battery powered drill he’d borrowed from Ben’s tool chest and a bottle of water.

“Let me introduce you to my friend.”

“What the?” Ben said clearly puzzled.

“I figure that one, quarter-inch hole in each fuel tank should make the removal process quite a bit more difficult. Scoot. Go attend to your VINs.”

“Like grandpa said, you’re still a genius.”

They both set to work. Ben found the numbers right where he had been led to believe they would be. Orvie found the fuel tanks right where they were supposed to be. Ben was finished before his partner since Orvie had to let the drill bits cool down between tanks so as to not cause an explosion from overheating. It was a dangerous – perhaps foolhardy – thing to be doing in the first place. Each time he stuck the bit into a bottle of water to speed the cooling process.

Ten minutes later they were moving back down the side tunnel toward the main one. From there they veered right, turning into the other side tunnel. In a few more minutes they were in the big room. The equipment was still there, also. There were more machines in that room than there had been at the end of the first tunnel, but they had already learned things about how to do their jobs and were faster than before.

It was like a repeating nightmare. Before either one could get started, they heard footsteps out in the main tunnel. They had come quite close to the big room before the boys recognized them.

Orvie pointed up at the buckets. With backpacks, it was a bit more difficult than it had been before, but, again, the previous practice had taught them how to do it. Just before the flashlight entered the room they were both safely into their hiding places. It had been way too close for comfort and they realized it. They needed to be more careful.

The man’s routine was different than before. He went directly to the generator and started it. That time only the ventilation system roared to life. The lights remained off. The man’s footsteps could be heard leaving and turning into the other shorter tunnel.

They hit the ground at the same moment.

“I’m guessing to clear the air for the big moving out project that’s about to begin,” Orvie said.

“Shall we continue or leave?” Ben asked.

“Continue. He’s walking pretty slowly. We have six or eight minutes before we hear him bellowing all the cuss words he’s ever heard.”

“I don’t understand,” Ben said as he climbed into the cab of the nearest dozer and got to work.

“He’ll see and smell the diesel fuel all over the floor. You can bet that’ll send him back on the run.”

They picked up the pace and were finished in five minutes – undoubtedly an all-time record for photographing VINs and drilling holes in fuel tanks in the innermost region of dark, suddenly very scary, mine tunnels.

“Both lights and run as fast as we can,” Orvie said as they entered the main tunnel. “We have to be out of here before he sets up his howl. Who knows who else might be close enough to hear by now?”

The timing was not what you might call stellar (excellent). Just as they reached the entrance, the watchman’s bellow followed them outside. Half a dozen flashlights blinked to life in the area to the boys’ left (west).

“That can’t be good,” Ben said.

Orvie shoved him into a trot to their right.

“Run like the wind. When we reach the slope, let’s separate. Douse the lights. You head into the woods and I’ll follow the creek. It’s black as . . . well, night . . . out here. Chances are that their flashlight beams won’t find us. We’ll meet at the treehouse later.”

The men began yelling in angry voices. The extent and diversity of their colorful language could have filled an entire dictionary of profanity. The number of lights increased to more than a dozen as the men spread out across the open area at the top of the slope behind them. Someone fired a gun. The boys hoped it had been meant as a warning shot into the air for the purpose of scaring them into stopping and had not been aimed at one of them. Their hearts raced and their legs grew tired and ached.

Knowing the terrain, the boys had the advantage. They heard the men who were in pursuit falling – often – tripping as they tried to hurry after them. The area between the creek

and the woods was still strewn with fallen branches. The boys knew what to look out for and hurdled the debris like graceful deer. Ben was soon into the woods and continued straight into the interior for a number of minutes before turning south toward the treehouse. He paused to listen. It was clear from the crackling of twigs on the floor of the woods some distance behind him that he was being pursued by more than one person. He continued at a much-reduced pace to minimize the noise he was making.

When Orvie finally got far enough south so he was even with the far edge of the woods, he set a zig-zag path across the open space to his right until he, too, was into the woods. His plan was identical to Ben's; run straight in for a significant distance and then double back toward the treehouse. When he paused, he heard angry voices, but they were faint and he couldn't determine if they were part of a continuing chase. He slowed and made his way as quietly as he could through the inky blackness in the general direction of the treehouse. He kept his arms out in front of him as he felt his way, moving from trunk to trunk.

It took Orvie some time to find the big tree with the pegs in its trunk. Still, he arrived first and hurried up the trunk moving immediately to the window to see if he could tell what was going on outside. It became clear that unless there were telltale spots of light for him to see, that approach was not going to be helpful. Five minutes passed and no Ben. Ten minutes passed, no Ben. At fifteen minutes Orvie heard a series of three shots. They were a good distance away back toward the mine. Again, he hoped they were warning shots.

"Room for one more squirrel up here?" Orvie heard at last as Ben stuck his head in through the low door opening.

"Sure is. Great to see you. You okay? I heard shots."

"I'm fine. You?"

"Yes. I think we lucked out this time."

They sat on the floor and Ben continued to pant for several minutes.

There was a noise down below. They stood up and went to the window. One of the men was standing less than

ten feet from the base of the tree. He was searching the ground and the area around him with the beam of his flashlight. The beam raised, darting about all quite randomly. Presently it made a pass by the treehouse – they could see it through the cracks in the plank sides.

The light returned and cast a steady beam up at them. They pulled back from the window and looked at each other. From the movement of the light they understood that he was circling the tree. In the darkness behind the light they couldn't tell how big a man it was, but they both figured any man who had been tossing large rocks around for a living was not likely going to be weak and wimpy.

Orvie pointed to the stove, gesturing that he wanted help lifting it off the cement slab on which it sat. That done, he indicated they should try to move the slab to the door opening and stand it up to cover the entrance. It couldn't be slid across the floor because that would make too much noise. The longer the man didn't know for sure they were in there the better. They worked their fingers underneath opposite edges and with great effort managed the move and stood it in place. It completely covered the entry opening.

Orvie sat down with his back against it to hold it in place. When Ben saw what he was doing, he joined him. Almost immediately they felt pressure against it from the outside. The man had climbed up and was pushing – pounding – against it. They remained silent and pressed back. It appeared they were losing the battle. The slab was inching forward, pushing them with it.

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CHAPTER FOURTEEN: Where's the Cavalry When You Need It?

It was Ben's turn to use hand signals. He pointed to the stack of short boards in the corner and mimed using one as a bat – a weapon. Orvie understood and nodded. It meant Ben would have to stop helping keep the slab in place for a few seconds and they each understood that meant it would soon be pushed back from the opening.

Orvie decided to use the man's strength against him. As soon as Ben had a four-foot section of 2 X 4 in his hand, Orvie jumped out of the way and the slab fell in under the man's pressure and tipped over flat onto the floor. The man's upper body lunged inside along with it.

Ben delivered one powerful blow against his head and the man fell backward out of the tree and onto the ground below.

"He's not moving," Ben reported as he looked down from the door.

"I'm going down," Orvie said. "Toss me the ball of bailing twine once I'm there."

He was immediately down the side of the trunk, jumping the final six feet. He rolled the huge unconscious man over onto his stomach and began binding his hands behind him. Ben arrived with his pocket knife open, ready – among other things that crossed his mind – to cut the twine.

They bound his ankles together in a similar fashion, dragged him to the closest tree and raised his legs so his shoulders dragged the ground. They wound the heavy twine around the tree catching his legs. They wound it again and again and again all the way down to his belt. He would not be going anywhere soon. The rough bark helped hold the twine in place. He remained unconscious but breathing.

“Looks like two Itsy Bitsy Spiders just caught a big bad fly in their web,” Ben said.

Before Orvie could reply, another man’s deep, steady, slow, voice spoke from behind them.

“It sure does look that way!”

A feeling of terror ripped through each boy’s chest. Their hearts began racing. They turned – very, very slowly – to face whatever unimaginable fate was about to befall them.

It was a State Trooper. He offered his hand for a shake. The boys accepted it as they realized they just might live to see another day after all. Their hearts continued beating wildly and their lungs pumped overtime to catch up.

“You my grandpa’s friend?” Ben asked.

“One and the same, provided you’re Ben.”

Ben nodded.

“Then I guess that makes you Ben’s friend – Or-somebody.”

“Yes, sir. Orvie to my friends, and at this minute I’m certainly including you as one of my all-time very best friends. I’m Orville to my parents – although I really sort of like your rendition of ‘Or-somebody’. You know about what’s going on up at the mine?”

“Have two dozen Troopers up there cleaning things up. Between what Wayne could tell me and suspected, and the information Ben sent me, everything fell into place in a hurry. Let me make a call and get some deputies in here to take care of the big fella you have hanging upside down from the tree. Later, I really will need to hear how in the World the two of you managed that.”

“Short version,” Orvie offered, “ten percent planning,

ten percent luck, and eighty percent pure old fashioned adrenalin.”

When the Trooper got off the phone, Ben had questions.

“The sheriff?” Ben asked.

“In custody. His deputies are singing their little black canary hearts out as we speak.”

“Did you trace the VINs?” Ben asked.

“Yes. Interestingly, to the Bank President who is vice chairman of the Association Board. The two of them were the masterminds of the operation. It’s still unclear if the other board members knew anything about it all.”

“Glad that’s settled,” Ben said.

“You guys really did a number on the machinery up there. Quick thinking on somebody’s part.”

“When it’s quick thinking around here you can pretty well bet it came from Orvie,” Ben said smiling over at his friend.

“What does all this mean for the Association Members?” Orvie asked.

“Several things, probably: All the assets from the two bad guys will eventually be placed in the Association Trust Fund. If the mining operation is continued, that fund should grow by several million dollars a year. Apparently, the pyrite that occurs along with the gold has become a valuable commodity in itself. It’s an essential ingredient in Lithium batteries. Adds considerably to the value of the ore. A new board will have to be selected by the Association Members. The talk I’m hearing is that Wayne is the runaway choice for the new Chairman. We may have to twist his arm a bit.”

“We’re two Olympic Class arm twisters, sir,” Ben said with a smile. “You can count on us.”

“There will be a sizeable reward for the work you two did in solving this mystery and bringing down the criminals.”

“I don’t need any money,” Ben said. “Arrange for it all to go to Orvie.”

Orvie didn’t react to the offer.

Fifteen minutes later they were back at Ben's house. Grandpa Wayne was there and the Trooper stayed for lemonade and huge, frosted, cinnamon rolls. (Ben's mother baked when she was worried!)

Ben got his father on his cell phone so he could hear the reports of the various parts of the operations as they came into the Trooper.

Ben's grandpa had the last word. He looked directly at Orvie and offered a knowing wink: "I can tell you for sure, never in fifty years would I have thought my grandson and his best friend would be the ones to expose a major crime ring and save our community."

Orvie offered his own wink in return.

* * *

For all the attention Orvie received for his part in taking down the Sheriff, the Bank President and the accounting firm, no questions arose about him personally – where he was from, questions about his mother, and so on. He figured Wayne had played a big part in that.

On August 15th Orvie opened a joint bank account with Wayne. (Orvie really didn't have the proper identity papers to open one for himself.) There would only ever be one deposit made into it – a reward check for \$100,000 from the Association. On August 16th, the local library and the children's division of the local hospital each received an anonymous donation of \$50,000. On August 17th, the bank account was closed forever.

Orvie chuckled to himself. Ben realized that he had all the money he would ever need and he (Orvie) realized that he really never needed any money.

Orvie remained in Jasper until the end of the following May. He finished seventh grade for the 112th time. Ben continued to try and get close to Becky Sue. Orvie did his best to stay away from Sarah. It was a fantastic year for those two, intriguing, imaginative, innovative twelve year olds (well, you understand!)

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THE END