



**The Mystery
of the
Disappearing
Pine Trees**

**Featuring:
Orvie: the boy who
could see into the past**

By David Drake

**BOOK TWO:
In the Orvie Mystery Series**

Orvie and the Mystery of The Disappearing Pine Trees

Book Two in the *Orvie Mystery Series*

[Before reading *Book Two*, it is best to have read *Book One*,
The Boy Who Could See Into the Past]

By David Drake

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BACKGROUND FROM BOOK ONE

Orvie had been born soon after the conclusion of the Civil War in the United States – late 1800s. Due to an accident in a terrible electrical storm when Orvie was twelve years old two huge changes had taken place for him: He stopped growing older – forever to be a twelve year old, and he developed the ability to feel whether people were telling the truth about things in their past. He chose to use that skill to make life better for the good people he encountered. To conceal his agelessness he had to move every year or so – in order to keep those around him from becoming suspicious. Wherever he went, he ran onto new mysteries that needed to be solved. These stories take place in the *present*. At the time this story takes place, he had just finished seventh grade for the 112th time in a small town known as Jasper, and was moving on.

CHAPTER ONE: New Territory – New Friends

Orvie was headed home – well, at least back to northern Minnesota where he had been born and had lived the first dozen or so years of his life. He had never been back to see if there might still be remnants of the two-story log house he had called home. He supposed the woods behind it would still be there and the little lake that he had regularly explored in his log raft – the raft he had been on that day of his terrible accident.

It was early June. Except for the darkest and most protected areas of the landscape, most of the winter snow was gone and the World had greened and was alive with new plants and new leaves and a lush carpet of grass. His home territory had been in the pine forests of the extreme northwest part of the state that bordered Manitoba, Canada on the north and North Dakota on the west. He loved the ever-present pine smell that was always alive in the fresh, clean air.

Hiking was relatively easy since the ground was mostly level, a comfortable change from the hilly region he had just left behind to the southeast. He carried all of his possessions in a backpack and a small, strap-over-the-shoulder waterproof bag. Orvie didn't need much. He preferred a very simple life. He believed it allowed him to enjoy the 'real' things the world had to offer. In so many of the places he had visited the kids seemed to be completely absorbed by all the artificial and tech gadgets that sported screens, which stared back at them, that they failed to understand about the natural pleasures that always surrounded them. At least that was his take on it all. He would live his way and they could live theirs.

From the position of the sun in the sky he figured it was approaching noon. That was verified by the growling in his stomach. It was a pleasantly warm day for that part of the country – he figured the temperature was already approaching eighty degrees. He shed his shirt and was thinking about trading his jeans for the cooler cutoffs in his back pack when he got the feeling he was being watched – unlikely since in that wilderness area there averaged fewer than one person per square mile. It was basically just the gigantic pine trees in the expansive forests worked by loggers who moved from camp to camp as they cut, trimmed, and removed the logs. There were, of course, all the usual little critters that lived underfoot – squirrels, rabbits, chipmunks, field mice and an occasional doe (mother deer) with one or two fawns. Birds of all sizes and hues flitted about the pine trees looking very much like brightly colored ornaments on very tall Christmas trees.

It felt like home. He loved the area. He couldn't contain the smiles that emerged as each new plant and tree and animal came into view replaying some wonderful memory from his childhood. If it hadn't been so difficult to survive alone during the long, severe winters, marked by many feet of snow, fierce straight line winds and the unbelievable blizzards those things produced, Orvie

could have been content to make that area his permanent home. As it was, he was determined to enjoy his long overdue summer visit there.

But, back to his feeling that someone else was present.

There it was. Movement to his right at the edge of the forest from which a gently running stream emerged just ahead. A deer? A person? A bear?

He'd take the deer or person any day if those were his three choices. Suddenly it all became clear. Two boys were walking along the creek out of the forest right in his direction. It had been nearly a week since he had been in actual contact with other members of his own species. Although squirrels would chatter at him as he approached their trees, he found it difficult to carry on long, meaningful conversations with them.

The boys stopped and looked in his direction. One pointed at him. Orvie waved a high, arm extended, back and forth wave above his head. They returned it and picked up their pace to a trot. Orvie changed direction and moved toward the creek. There was a log that spanned it directly ahead. He stopped ten yards from the water's edge and watched as the boys skillfully worked their way across it as if it were a full-width sidewalk.

"Hey!" They said as one.

"Hey, hey, back," Orvie said thinking it was at least somewhat humorous that he had offered a 'hey' to each of them.

The boys smiled, so they had understood his intent. It was more than that the boys just smiled back at him. They each smiled the same smile from the same face. Clearly, they were identical twins. Orvie ignored the obvious.

"I'm Orvie, short for Orville – a name I've never really thought fit me."

"I'm Ted, short for Theodore – a name I've never really thought fit me, either."

They chuckled.

"And not to be outdone, the third kid, here, says, (they all chuckled) I'm Terry, short for Terrance – a name . . . well, you already got the idea."

"What you doing out here all by yourself?" Ted asked.

"Walking north, mostly."

Ted turned to his brother. "A comic, I'm thinking."

"Actually, Mom turned me loose for the week. My plan is to camp out, fish, and work on my tan." [There was no Mom, of course. It was a small fib he regularly allowed himself in order to remain on his own, untethered (not tied) by the restrictions of parents.]

"That's pretty much what we do all summer long," Terry offered. "We live in the forest, over there with our parents and three dozen, massive, smelly guys."

"I suppose that explains why you just emerged from it – trying to escape the big smelly men."

"OOOO. '*Emerged*'. Great word!" Ted said looking at his brother who nodded and raised his eyebrows.

"Jack would love that," he said in return.

"And Jack would be . . .?" Orvie asked.

“What’s wrong with you? Can’t you read our minds, new kid?” Terry asked through a grin.

Orvie did one of his smiles to himself. If they only knew just what he could read from their minds they might not be so comfortable about the ‘new kid’.

“Jack’s our teacher. He comes twice a month and stays for three days each time. We have a room for him at our place. Daily homework in between visits.”

Orvie nodded that he understood – well, understood enough to move on.

“I’ve been eyeing that creek with the idea of a swim,” Orvie said.

“Great idea . . . if you’re a polar bear,” Ted said.

“Still winter-cold I take it.”

“*Always*, winter cold,” Terry explained.

Ted offered an addition:

“We have an enclosed, heated pool back at our place. 85 degrees year round. You’re always welcome. How about coming back with us? It’ll soon be time for lunch. Mom makes an awesome lunch.”

It had been a week – seemed like a year – since Orvie had eaten a real, home-cooked meal. It was not a difficult decision.

“Great. Very friendly of you. Thank you.”

Ted hitched his head toward the creek and they moved off together.

“You ok walking the log?” Terry asked.

“I guess we’ll soon find out,” Orvie joked.

Ted crossed first, Orvie second, and Terry brought up the rear.

“Not bad for a new kid,” Terry managed actually sounding impressed.

“Comes from my days as a high wire walker in the circus.”

“Really?” the twins asked as one, momentarily buying the story.

“If you guys are really that gullible (easy to fool) I can see I’m going to have a great audience while in your company.”

The tale had been the truth, but Orvie delighted in telling such true stories knowing nobody would ever believe them.”

Terry reached behind his back and retrieved what appeared to be the largest cell phone Orvie had ever seen. It had been clipped to the boy’s belt.

“One humongous cell phone, I’d say,” Orvie said looking puzzled.

“A two-way radio. Cell phone reception is pretty hit and miss in these parts. With this gadget we always have a dependable line to Mom,” he explained.

“It has one major drawback,” Ted added.

“And that would be . . . ? Orvie asked.

“Mom can dependably reach us, also.”

“I suppose you could choose not to answer,” Orvie said.

“We could, but within five minutes the area would be crawling with an army of six foot six, two hundred and fifty pound loggers, really unhappy with us for having pulled them away from their work.”

“Loggers?”

Ted answered as Terry used the radio to alert their mom they had a picked up a stray for lunch.

“Dad and Mom own the forest – nearly 8,000 acres. We’re loggers. Have three dozen men working for us.”

“Seems like a lot of workers.”

“Have to do a year’s work every summer. Not a whole lot of cutting come the snows in the late fall.”

“I should have thought of that. So, I say, finally stating the obvious, you two are identical twins.”

The boys smiled and as one they checked their wrist watches.

“Maybe six minutes, you say?” Ted said.

“I’d say more like seven.”

“Either way an all-time record.”

Orvie smiled, enjoying their byplay even though he had no idea what was going on. Ted explained with a broad grin.

“We have this thing where we time people on how long it takes them to tell us we’re identical twins – as if we just might not know. Usually within thirty seconds – often within fifteen. Seven minutes is undoubtedly the longest elapsed time in our twelve year old history of being identical twins.”

“And what does that tell you about me – a good thing or a bad thing?”

“Oh, definitely very, very good,” Terry said.

Ten nodded his agreement and offered an explanation.

“We figure it means you’re more into us as individuals than as twins – something we both really value in our relationships with others. It is fantastic to have a twin brother, but it is also fantastic when people relate to us as individuals.”

“I can understand that. Back when I was an identical twin . . .!”

The twins – that is the *two individuals* – almost bit on Orvie’s intentional misrepresentation. They all had a good laugh about it.

“Not to be outdone by all the others who have asked about you, how is it to be twins?”

“Like Terry said, it’s fantastic. Can’t imagine life being any other way. But, there are lots of things about us that aren’t identical.”

Orvie remained quiet, but allowed a puzzled look to wash across his face.

Ted set the explanation:

“You see, we were born on different days, in different months, in different states, in different countries and in different years.”

“You definitely have my attention, guys!”

Terry continued:

“Mom went into labor with us near midnight in the middle of a late December blizzard. The hospital was just across the border in Canada. Our aunt was staying with us to help out after we were born. Dad put them in the back of our SUV and they started out through white-out conditions. Ted was born first just before they crossed the border so he was born in the United States. I

waited a few minutes and was born in Canada.

Ted: "Terry was born in Manitoba, and I was born in Minnesota."

Terry: "Ted was born 11:55 at night on December 31st during the old year and I was born at 12:11 in the morning on January 1st in the new year."

Orvie smiled his wonderful smile.

"I'll say *not* identical in lots of ways. I wonder if that has ever happened before in the whole history of human baby borning."

"Borning?" Ted asked.

"When I can't quickly find a suitable word I often invent one. You may need to keep notes. At any rate, I do hope I won't be tested on all that!"

"Oh, but you will and we have huge red pencils to put check marks beside any wrong answers."

Orvie liked his new acquaintances. They had good senses of humor and seemed to have a great outlook on life. He felt immediately comfortable with them. He wasn't sure he really liked that. Once he began feeling comfortable it became exceedingly difficult to move on.

CHAPTER TWO: Getting Acquainted

Non-identical, identical twins. What a novel situation, Orvie thought. He, of course, was no stranger to living out a novel situation!

They continued on mostly east along the creek in single file, the twins often conversing as if Orvie weren't present. It tickled him and he was happy just to listen. Many years before he had learned the best way to learn about somebody – in that case, two somebodies – was to be quiet and just listen. That seemed true whether you had his special power or not.

They clearly loved their life there in the wilderness. They did well in their school work, scoring near the top of the charts on the tests they took at the end of each school year. They loved the outdoors and exploring dangerous places, which they were certain their mother would not approve of. There seemed to be little competitiveness between them - only a deep sense of loyalty and desire to be supportive and helpful to each other. Orvie figured the world could learn a good lesson there.

He found himself the slightest bit jealous of them and their situation – a mother and father, lots of freedom, eight square miles of pine forest to roam and call their own, their own beds to sleep in at night, built-in best friends, and, not the least of all, three apparently really great square meals a day.

His stomach growled.

"You been eating regular?" Terry asked plainly concerned.

"Oh yes. Walking all day tends to empty my stomach in a hurry."

"The camp is just ahead," Ted said, pointing at an area where the trees began parting back from the creek.

"Camp? The place you described to me didn't sound like a camp."

"Camp. It's the term for wherever loggers spend the night. Ours just happens to include a ten room, two story, log house, an indoor pool, a recreation hall for the workers, and other wonderful amenities you will soon discover."

Orvie grinned. "*Amenities* (comforts, features)! "I just imagine Jack likes that word."

"He probably taught it to us," Terry said. "He's big on vocabulary. He says the more words a guy knows the more precisely he can think about things."

"I see. I like this Jack guy already. I assume he's not here today."

"Right," Terry continued. "Left yesterday. Two weeks 'til he returns."

"Well, eleven days, really," Ted said, clearly serious about correcting his brother.

"Split a month in two and you get two, two week periods," Terry replied.

"But two weeks, minus the three days he's here is eleven, days, not fourteen" brother dear."

Again, Orvie enjoyed the playful interchange. He assumed it was a well engrained part of the way they normally interacted. He spoke.

"Do I need to intervene before you come to blows?"

They smiled and Terry explained.

"It's how we are. Another non-identical thing about us, I suppose. Ted tends to be overly precise. I tend to be just the opposite. His shirt tail is always tucked in, mine is always out. He takes fifteen minutes to take a shower. I'm in, out and dried off in five."

Orvie interrupted, glancing back and forth at the tops of their heads: "And his hair is always combed and yours, well, clearly, yours isn't."

Terry turned to Ted and in his best English accent, (which was really terrible) offered:

"I do believe this young transient (temporary resident) has us pegged, old man."

"It would seem so, old chap. Shall we keep him, then?"

"I jolly well think he'd make an adorable pet."

"What shall we name him?"

"I'm leaning toward Kid – or perhaps Orvie."

"Or, we could use both and see if he's bright enough to catch on."

"Jolly good, Mate. I think we have a plan."

Orvie figured being so isolated from other kids they had grown up having to learn how to make their own entertainment and apparently they had succeeded. What fun this could be.

The camp was all they had said it was. The two story house reminded him of his own original house – thick pine logs laid high enough so the interior ceilings probably came in at nearly ten feet. A number of huge outbuildings sat back farther on east. Attached to one side of the house was the glass enclosed pool. A tennis court and putting green occupied the area on the other side. It was like living at a Holliday Inn year 'round.

"So," Orvie began, "You make out okay roughing it here like you obviously have to?"

The twins grinned.

Ted responded.

"We've found ingenious ways to survive. There is one really serious down side to living way out here, though. For some reason we only recently discovered it."

"The total lack twelve year old girls?" Orvie offered as a question.

"He's insightful as well as adorable," Terry said, turning to Ted.

"He's a keeper, for sure."

"Mom will love him."

"Do you suppose he knows how to do dishes?"

"That would be a big plus, wouldn't it?"

Orvie chuckled.

"I assure you I'm a world class dish washer and always eager to help out."

"Hear that?" Ted said. "Not just willing but *eager*. Those kinds just don't come along very often."

"It seems I'm becoming more of an asset (a plus) than I realized. Perhaps

I'm in a position to float a bargain that will favor me. What will my continued presence here be worth to you?"

He was kidding of course but the twins went along.

"And a savvy business man as well," Terry added.

Ted: "Three squares a day."

Terry: "All the junk food between meals you can possibly consume."

Ted: "Terry will make your bed every morning."

Terry: "Ted will do your washing every Sunday morning."

Ted: "You can play your preference in music in our room from eight to ten every night."

Terry: (Turning to Ted) "That seems like an unreasonable burden on the two of us. Eight to ten. Really? What if he's into Bruno Mars instead of Bing Crosby?"

Ted: Sometimes we just have to make sacrifices in order to survive in the style to which we have become accustomed.

"You guys crack me up. This go on all day long?"

They turned to each other and then back to Orvie, saying as one:

"Pretty much. Yeah."

They entered through the kitchen door. Their mother was working at the stove.

"Look what we found about to turn himself into an icicle in Cutter's Creek."

Their mother put on a shiver.

"Glad you saved him from that cruel fate."

With that shiver and that funny remark, Orvie knew he liked her as well.

"Wash up. Grilled bacon, tomato, cheese sandwiches, tomato/cheddar soup, stewed tomatoes in thick cream, and chocolate éclairs for dessert."

Ted added a side note: "The tomato plants in our greenhouse are over producing right now."

"Well, in my opinion, THAT sounds like a lunch worth washing up for," Orvie joked – in reality, it probably really hadn't been a joke. His three, early morning, sticks of breakfast jerky had pretty well vanished from his system.

"We are required to wash up in our bathroom upstairs," Ted said, "since Terry the Terrible here tends to leave the sink a disaster. At least he has the courtesy to let me – us in this case, I assume – use if first. I'll give him that."

Orvie's backpack and bag were deposited in the boy's room. The washing up was completed. In Orvie's opinion, Terry really wasn't all that messy. From watching Ted meticulously (precisely) wash his hands – which included scrubbing under his fingernails with an old toothbrush – he got the idea Ted set the cleanliness standard WAY too high. He shared an understanding smile with Terry.

Their mother, Alice – Mrs. Carter, to Orvie – joined the three boys at the kitchen table. Conversation flowed easily. There was lots of laughter and each one seemed genuinely interested in what the others had to say. It came out that their father, Adam, and the logging crew worked out in the forest from seven a.m.

to six p.m. six days a week, weather permitting. They had the evening meal at seven thirty so he could be with them. The loggers ate in a mess hall attached to their bunking quarters in one of the big buildings Orvie had seen as he arrived.

As the boys were clearing off the dishes after they had finished, Terry turned to their mother.

“So, can we keep him? We promise to take good care of him and keep him out from under foot.”

“From what I’ve witnessed so far, sons, I think his gentle, kind, mature, helpful demeanor (manner) will be a delightful addition to our home.”

“Demeanor. Good word mom. Is that one Jack left for you to sneak in on us?”

“Whatever are you referring to? Jack? Have *me* as his accomplice? An outrageous claim – wouldn’t you say, Orvie?”

“Absolutely shocking and contemptible,” I’d agree. “Even though I’ve never met the gentleman I’m certain he would never promote such an egregious (shocking) covenant (pact or arrangement).”

Mrs. Carter looked over the top of her glasses at her sons.

“I do believe this young man will be able to improve even *Jack’s* vocabulary by leaps and bounds.”

Ted turned to Orvie.

“Do you have a standard fee for doing other kid’s homework or will we need to negotiate that?”

“Which reminds me gentlemen,” Mrs. Carter said, “homework for two hours right after lunch, you remember.”

“But mo-om,” they whined together.

Terry: “We really should be entertaining out guest.”

Ted: “Yeah. It just wouldn’t be polite to ignore him for two hours.”

“I’d really like to see what you’re studying, guys.” Orvie said. “Let’s get these dishes done and then settle in for time with the books.”

“You know, Orvie,” Ted said. “Keep up that kind of talk and mom will insist on adopting you.”

It was worth a prolonged group chuckle.

As it turned out they were studying the history of Minnesota. (Any ideas who in that group just might know something about that?) Orvie regaled (entertained) them with story after story about the old days, including the lives of the Chippewa and Sioux that roamed the northwestern area of the state for a good century before the ‘white man’ entered the area. He told about the discovery of the headwaters of the Mississippi river not far south of them and of life just after the Civil War. He went on for three hours. Eventually, their mother came up to check on them. She knocked on the door. Ten went to open it. The rule was in that house that everybody respected the privacy of everyone else when their door was closed.

“What’s up. Thought maybe Orvie, here, was actually a kidnapper in disguise and had whisked you boys off to some secluded dungeon in the forest

about to make a ransom demand.”

“Nothing like that,” Terry said. “He knows everything about Minnesota history and he’s been going on and on. It’s like having a live-in encyclopedia of everything.”

“My. I must say I’ve never seen you two so excited about school work. So, Orvie, what will you charge to live with us forever?”

They all chuckled. Orvie wondered if he had taken things too far. It was just that once he got started on his very favorite subject, he forgot to turn himself off. He’d need to rein in that sort of monologue in a bit in the future.

“One problem, mom,” Ted said. “We got so involved in what Orvie was telling us that we didn’t get any worksheets done.”

“I suppose we can allow that today.”

“Sorry, Mrs. Carter. It’s like a hobby with me. I’ll control myself better in the future. Worksheets first, my stories afterwards, from now on.”

“Are you sure you’re not really an old man in a boy’s body?” she said, joking.

If she only knew!

She left.

“How about a swim?” Terry suggested.

“Aren’t you supposed to wait for two hours after homework to swim?” Orvie joked.

“That’s after eating and it’s been proved to be false,” Ted added feeling the need to set the serious record straight.

They enjoyed the pool for an hour. As it turned out they were all three pretty much equal in water-based activities – speed, diving form, underwater things. It was a very nice time although to Orvie the water temperature was a bit warm and a cement bottom rather than the gravel of the streams he was used to was unfamiliar and harsh. He’d try to get used to it for the short run, anyway.

He had certainly been made welcome and he appreciated that, but he needed to keep his emotional distance so when the time came for him to leave it wouldn’t be unpleasantly difficult. He had just left that sort a relationship.

Later, at dinner, the boys’ father turned out to be every bit as much fun as the rest of the family. The boys’ conversation centered on Orvie. After a half hour it was downright embarrassing for him. Adam, their father, tuned to Orvie and asked, in all seriousness:

“And just how long have you been a Saint, young man?”

The whole group broke up in laughter. Orvie appreciated their quick wit and the ease with which laughter arrived among them. The conversation eventually turned to a serious topic.

“Lost another half dozen trees, yesterday,” Adam said.

Orvie just sat and listened wondering how a six, one hundred foot tall pine trees could get lost.

It seemed his wonderment was soon to be answered. Clandestine (undercover) thieves, in a manner similar to the cattle rustlers of the old west,

were entering his acreage, cutting trees and hauling them away. A half dozen such huge trees was worth a great deal of money.

“I just can’t understand how they’re removing the logs from our property without us being aware of it. I’ve alerted the State Police and the Sheriff to be on the lookout for suspicious log trucks. They know my vehicles. They’ve not seen anything out of the ordinary. In fact, every truck they report, is a truck I can account for. We would *hear* helicopters. It’s a real mystery.

Orvie heard the magic word – MYSTERY. In all of his 112 years as a twelve year old (well, you understand) he had never been able to pass up a good mystery. He listened for more details.

“We never hear the typical logging sounds from places they shouldn’t be – truck engines, chain saws, dozers. It’s like a group of invisible ferries swoop down, pluck the trees out of the ground and make off with them in the dead of night. I just can’t understand it. The Sheriff has looked into it and he has no useful ideas either. It’s bad enough to be losing all those valuable trees, but the interlopers (intruders) are cutting indiscriminately. I cut two, side by side, trees for every twenty on a given plot of land. That maintains a solid root grip on the soil and allows sun to reach the ground in order to nurture the three new trees we plant to replace those we harvested. These guys are taking six at a time from the same plot, leaving huge empty areas with possible erosion problems. We’ve been replanting, of course.”

Orvie jumped in – well, more like eased in quietly, which was his style.

“May I ask from where they’re taking the trees?”

“From all over the map. There doesn’t seem to be any rhyme nor reason to their pattern.”

“Any particular time of the week or month?”

“No pattern I can find.”

“How do you remove the logs from the forest – asking as a novice (beginner) in such things?”

Ted answered.

“Dad invented what he calls Slim-Line trucks. The cabs are half as wide as normal. They just carry two logs, two high.”

“I don’t understand the reason for such a design.”

Terry continued the explanation.

“So the truck can maneuver in among the trees without disturbing them. With trucks of regular width, they’d have to sometimes cut trees to make a path.”

“I got it. Thanks.”

He had more questions.

“How far away can you hear the engine of a logging truck?”

Mr. Carter answered:

“Depends on several factors. Wind direction, density of the forest, things like that. In general, I’d say a mile or so.”

“And chainsaws?”

“About the same.”

Orvie was hooked. Silent trucks that disappeared into the night. Silent chainsaws. Invisible transportation. Now *those* were the kinds of things that set up a mystery he could really get into. Watch out, Bad Guys? Orvie's on the case!

CHAPTER THREE: The Investigation Begins

Back in the boy's room Orvie asked if there were a map of the acreage their parents owned.

"First," Ted began.

Terry rolled his eyes and offered a comment.

"You'll find that when my older brother – by sixteen minutes – begins one of his monologues (a drawn out one person speech) with, 'first', you're in for anything but a treat."

"May I proceed," Ted asked.

"Go ahead. Orvie and I will just complete three games of Monopoly while you carry on."

"First, yes we have a number of different kinds of maps. Second, Dad insists we think of this land as *our* family's land, not his or his and moms. Someday he hopes we will take over and run the business. Now, was that really so bad?"

"I'm going to assume that was meant for your younger brother by sixteen minutes because I'm not about to get into the middle of what is clearly a life long battle between you two."

"Wise, as well as fantastically intelligent. A good balance," Ted said directly to Terry.

"Here," Terry offered. "Have some M&Ms."

"Bribery?" Orvie asked.

"Absolutely!"

"Bring it on, then. I'm always open to bribery with sweets – or steaks or pot roast or chips or . . . Enough for you to get the idea, I suppose?"

Terry looked at Ted.

"I'm glad we decided to keep him, aren't you?"

"Depends on how big a dent he puts in our goodie trunk."

"Trunk? You have a whole trunk full of goodies?" Orvie said only partly joking.

"We will reveal its hiding place once we learn we can trust you," Terry kidded.

"I don't suppose that trunk sitting under the window with the initials GT on could have anything to do with a Goodie Trunk, right."

It had been pure foolishness, but then lots of time in twelve year old boys' lives is given over to pure foolishness. It was one of the things that made being that age absolutely fantastic.

Ted produced a folder of maps.

"What you wanting?"

"Just thought it would be useful for me to learn the terrain and layout if we're going to catch the bad guys who are pilfering (stealing) you dad's – sorry – the family's trees."

“Us?” Terry asked looking Ted directly in the face.

“Of course us,” Orvie said. “Three intelligent, virile (manly), almost young men like us should be able to take down some little old fantastically organized band of despicable (awful, dangerous) thieves, don’t you think?”

Again the twins looked at each other without committing themselves to Orvie’s suggestion.

“I suppose I could do it alone, take all the credit for it and receive whatever wonderful reward your dad will decide to bestow on me.”

As one the twins responded:

“We’re in.”

Ted continued.

“Just never considered that kids could undertake such a thing.”

“You did say this was *your* acreage, correct.”

“Well, yeah.”

“And you do want to have at least a few saplings left to harvest when you eventually take over, right.”

“First,” Ted began.

The other two held their stomachs and rolled on the floor in laughter.

Presently, they calmed down and looked up at him from where they lay.

“First,” Ted repeated, “yes, we do want to have the growth continue for generations to come. Second, young pine trees are not referred to as saplings – that for deciduous trees not conifers.”

“Ooooo,” Terry said. “Now he makes with the big scientific nomenclature.”

“Great words, guys – deciduous (trees with leaves), conifers (evergreens) and even nomenclature (formal classification method). “Should I begin taking notes so I can let Jack know how well you’ve been speaking in his absence?”

“Well take anything we can get in that department,” Terry said going along with the joke.

“Sometimes I get the idea you guys haven’t really begun to take this tree farming operation seriously.”

The twins looked at each other clearly puzzled.

“Of course we have,” Ted said. “But we’re just kids. Once we’re men we’ll get into it.”

“I’m just thinking that’s wasting a whole lot of years you could be learning things about all your babies growing out there.”

“Like what’s there to know?” Terry asked. “Plant ‘em. Let ‘em grow. Log ‘em. Seems pretty simple.”

“Well, for example did you know White Pines are rich in Vitamins A and C? The Native Americans who roamed this territory had their older people and pregnant women chew on pine twigs to prevent night blindness and birth defects – two things Vitamin A deficiency may cause. They boiled pine wood and bark in water and fed it to folks who were wounded and those who had persistent colds. Those are things Vitamin C helps heal. They had no knowledge of Vitamins, of course, but somewhere along the way their ancestors made the right

connections.

“Did you know you can make flour out of the pine tree’s inner bark? I’ve done it lots of times. Makes fantastic biscuits for a hungry camper.

“Did you know pine seeds are edible and when soaked in water for a few minutes make great topping for salads?”

“Did you know that by chewing on the inner pitch of pine trees you can eliminate bad breath – a great thing to remember the next time you’re taking a girl for a romantic stroll through your forest?”

“Did you know the pain that often accompanies skin infections can be eased by applying warm pine sap to the affected skin?” *

The twins shrugged their shoulders in unison.

“Guess there’s lots of things we don’t know that we could know, huh?” Terry said, again, directly to Ted as if Orvie were not in the room.

“Seems so,” Ted answered. “Have you noticed how that new kid around here keeps bringing us back to thinking about our responsibilities as if they might really be important? Not sure I like that.”

“Perhaps we should have dropped him off on a city street corner when he was a pup.”

“What a terrible thing to say about such a cute little guy,” Ted came back with some real emotion showing through the ‘all business’ exterior he typically tried to exhibit.

“Hey. Orvie calling Earthmen. Orvie calling Earthmen. I have landed. I am here.”

They all had a good laugh and were soon deep into studying the maps. Orvie would ask questions about features he didn’t understand. There was one creek that meandered (twisted and turned its way) across the property from the northwest corner to the southeast corner. In the end it seemed to feed a small lake that was nestled into one of only two sizeable rock outcroppings on the property.

“Where does the water go after it enters the lake?” Orvie asked.

“Just stays in the lake.” Terry said.

“Seeps into the ground I suppose,” Ted added.

“Lots of it probably evaporates,” Terry came back.

Orvie nodded not really buying the boy’s fully unscientific explanations.

“What’s this word that’s been scratched out alongside the creek?”

The twins broke into far more laughter than Orvie could imagine might be reasonable. Terry explained.

The creek’s name is Bear Creek. One day when we were nine, Dad came upon us skinny dipping in it and he said he guessed a better name would be Bare Creek. It’s been Bare Creek ever since.”

“So now you call it Bare instead of Bear. The words sound identical, guys. How do you know somebody’s referring to it as B-a-r-e instead of B-e-a-r?”

“I guess you have to be part of the family to hear the difference,” Terry said and it sent them into rails of laughter all over again.”

Ted managed, "I guess you'll just have to *bear* with us on that."

And there they went again!

Orvie really wanted to tell them that at times like that they *barely* seemed sane to him, but he let them make the jokes about it and just smiled and nodded.

"If you go swimming in it, that creek must be considerably warmer than that 'Polar Bear' creek where we first met – what did you call it – Cutter's Creek?"

"It is, actually. It drains south from a shallow lake just north of us about five miles. The sun keeps that lake warmer than the ground around it. It's like bath water come late August."

"Good to know. By late August I'll be due for a bath."

"You're kidding, right," Ted asked mostly seriously.

It was clear that something as serious as not bathing would drive that lad nuts.

"Yes. Kidding. I bathe once a month, need it or not."

Even Ted could smile at that although it did prompt a comment.

"As long as you're here with us, the red towels and wash cloth in our bathroom will be yours. Green mine. Blue, what's his names."

Another chuckle.

"About that. You have to understand I'm not going to be around very long. I have to keep moving."

"But we got this big mystery to solve," Ted said.

"Yeah. You have to stay until that's taken care of," Terry added.

"We'll see. Perhaps with really astute colleagues, who finally get serious about their responsibilities around here, we may get it solved before my legs decide to take me out of here."

"So, you think with your legs? Now, we know his secret," Terry said only to Ted.

"Getting serious," Ted asked, "where do we begin solving this mystery. Biggest mystery my brother and I have ever had to solve was how to make 24 bags of chips last 30 days – our family just goes shopping once a month."

"I believe I might have gotten that even without the addendum (added explanation)."

Orvie went back to the map that was laid out on the table.

"How about you take me to the little lake in the morning so we can snoop around."

"Ok, but we've snooped all the snoop out of that place in the last five years since our parents have given us free run of the forest."

It had been from Terry.

"I've found that new eyes often bring new perspectives," Orvie said hoping to close their reluctance. "Besides, although your pool is great, I favor nature's own bodies of water."

His remark drew neither agreement nor disagreement. Apparently he was to be allowed his opinions just as he allowed them theirs. That felt *very* comfortable. And being comfortable there felt *very* uncomfortable.

The conversation returned to the mystery.

“What pattern of cutting down trees does your dad use? Stay in one section all summer. Jump around randomly. Move regularly in some direction.”

“I’ve heard him say each year he harvests from about a quarter of the acreage,” Ted said.

Terry tried to clarify:

“He usually starts on the north edge and moves south through a mile wide swath.”

“And,” Ted went on, “after those four years he changes and moves from west to east for the next four summers. Remember they only take one of ten trees.”

“Quite systematic. Do you know where the theft has been taking place this summer?”

“All over the map. Unpredictable the way I hear him talk,” Terry said.

“Let me try it another way. Show me where your dad’s harvesting now.”

Ten pointed and indicated the path they would follow south along the western edge of the property.

“And where have the thefts taken place?”

Ted pointed again. It had already occurred seven times.

“Does it appear to you they stay quite a ways away from where your dad is working?”

“Hadn’t thought about it. I suppose,” Terry said. “But, still, they don’t seem to keep to any pattern.”

“Would you if *you* were in their shoes?”

“I suppose not,” Terry answered assuming the question had been directed to him.”

“I assume your dad has tried to find them.”

“Yeah. Like every night he sends out guys to search.”

“Just at night?”

“I think so. That’s when they’re doing the stealing.”

“Is that a known fact or just a supposition?”

They shrugged a duet of shrugs.

“I guess dad figures he’d hear them during the day when he and his crews are out there in the forest,” Ted said sounding as if he needed to defend his father.

“So, Terry said trying to move on, “tomorrow morning it will be the lake.”

“If that’s ok with you guys,” Orvie said.

“Sure,” Ted said. “When do we tell mom and dad what we’re up to?”

“In my experience it is always best to put that off until we’ve built some sort of solid case about something.”

“If I’m allowed, that doesn’t sound real positive – some *sort* about *something*?”

“I can see what he’s saying,” Terry said. “I think we should go along with it. When any of us thinks it’s time to get them involved we can sit down and

discuss it among the three of us, Ok?”

“Sounds good to me,” Orvie said.

“Ok. I’m in, too. This could actually be exciting – us against the bad guys.”

In Orvie’s experience going up against bad guys *was* often quite *exciting* – often not *safe* and often not *sensible* and almost never a *rational* idea parents would go along with, but definitely *exciting*. The other two would soon understand.

*Lots of facts about pines available at: <http://www.2020site.org/trees/pine.html>

CHAPTER FOUR: The Preliminary Investigation

Orvie had been set up in Jack's room – more the size of a windowless, walk-in closet that opened into the twin's room – a single bed, a dresser and a nightstand with lamp. They awoke early. The uniform of the day was cutoffs – Orvie's favorite way to dress on warm days. They added tennies and went down to breakfast.

Orvie sniffed the air, head back, eyes closed.

"Wow! Did I ever pick the right set of twins to run into – the ones with the mom who knows just how to fix my all-time favorite breakfast. Sausage, eggs, buttermilk biscuits and gravy, pancakes and juice. Thanks in advance, Mrs. Carter."

"You can smell juice?" Terry asked

The others ignored the comment.

"You are most welcome," Mrs. Carter said. "It's always nice to cook for somebody who expresses their appreciation."

She looked at her boys. They looked at each other. Terry spoke to Ted, but loud enough so all could hear.

"The more I think about your idea of that far away city street and our puppy, the more merit I am coming to see it may hold."

It was worth smiles all around. Although Mrs. Carter didn't understand she didn't ask. Long ago she had learned most such things were best left right where they lay.

"Where you off to this morning, if I'm allowed to know?"

"They've offered to show me the little lake at the end of Bear Creek."

"I suppose they've let you in on our family joke about the name of that creek."

"They have. I hope I just pronounced it right."

The twins laughed themselves silly. Mrs. Carter winked at Orvie. He shrugged in return. He really liked this woman. Of course he was still waiting for her questions about his own family and why they so recklessly allowed him to roam the bear infested area alone – at least that's how he figured it would eventually come down. Breakfast finished without that conversation. The twins took their dishes to the sink so Orvie followed suit.

"We can have these done up for your mom in five minutes," he said, looking at the boys.

"Got nothing better to do this morning," Mrs. Carter said. "Thanks anyway. You be coming in for lunch I assume – homework at one, you know. And, today I think I'll need to see some worksheets."

"We'll be home by noon. One of us will call you if the other two are eaten alive by the lake monster."

Orvie smiled. They didn't realize it, of course, but it was really hard to pull that kind of prank on an almost 125 year old twelve year old.

It was a forty minute hike. Orvie had lots of questions about things they came upon in the forest – names of wild flowers, what kind of pine trees were there, the nature of the small creature wildlife, things like that. By the time they reached the lake he had learned a lot of new things.

“Thanks, guys. I must say you were able to answer every single question I had to ask this morning.”

“We did, didn’t we? Good for us!” Ted said.

“Yeah, smarter than I figured we were,” Terry added clearly seriously.

“So, here we are at the lake,” Ted announced as if it had really been necessary as the three of them stood there on shore looking across the water.

“Circular. About a quarter mile in diameter?” Orvie asked.

“Mostly,” Terry said. “It’s sort of a squished circle.”

“That’s often called an oval,” Ted said correcting him.

“Mostly,” Terry repeated sarcastically. “It’s sort of an OVAL. It’s a bit longer than wide. As you can see it’s cradled in a low rock outcropping on the other three sides. Like a big bath tub. Bottom is mud, but only a few feet thick. Under that it’s solid rock.”

So much for the seeping down into the ground theory one of them had put forward, Orvie thought.

“How deep at its deepest spot?”

“It’s deepest down at the south end where that little rock bluff stands up the highest. What would you say, Ted, maybe fifteen feet deep?”

“About that, I’d say.”

Orvie tied two, three foot long sticks together with long blades grass and forced a third stick between them so it was standing up like a mast on a ship. He placed it into the water and gently nudged it out away from shore.

“We got real toy boats with motors and remote controls if that would be any better,” Ted announced.

“This will do just fine.”

“What you up to?” Terry asked clearly puzzled.

“Watch and learn.”

“Terry is not what you’d call the patient type, Orvie. He’s more into immediate answers and rapid outcomes.”

“We can come back to that. Do we have time to walk around the lake?” Orvie asked.

“It’s still almost four hours to HW. We’ll have lots of time to spare.”

“Am I to be privy to (in on) what ‘HW’ stands for?”

It was Terry.

“Homework. There are two corollaries (things that naturally follow other things) to that. PHW and AHW – Pre homework and After homework. You’ll catch on.”

“I don’t know, guys, your system seems VERY complicated.”

It was worth another chuckle. Orvie liked how the boy’s lives were so abundantly sprinkled with chuckles. It was how he tried to live his own.

As they circled the lake they came across all kinds of wildlife – from the plentiful fish and minnows and several large mud turtles in the water, to field mice scurrying across their feet, squirrels fusing at them from up in the trees and a mother deer with her two babies who looked up just long enough to give them the once over before returning to their breakfast.

“Aren’t twin fawns rare?” Orvie asked.

“About ten percent of the time. That doe is Matilda – see her white throat. She always has twins.”

“You name all the forest creatures, do you?”

“No. Just Matilda. In her face she looks like a minister’s wife in town whose name is Matilda. We don’t let that be known widely, you understand.”

“That the minister’s wife has a face?” Orvie joked.

It seemed good enough to draw twin smiles, but missed the level necessary to produce chuckles.

They were soon at a spot that was opposite across the lake from where they started.

“Where’s your boat doohickey?” Terry asked looking to where he expected it would have stayed.

Orvie pointed south – halfway between where he had slipped it into the water and the far end of the lake by the big rock outcropping – the bluff as the twins referred to it.

“Must be more of a wind out there than we can feel here on shore,” was his full response. Orvie didn’t comment.

They continued to the south end and the twins demonstrated their rock scaling skills at the bluff. Orvie joined them for a good time. They managed their way to the top of the low bluff and sat there, legs dangling over the edge some twenty feet above the lake.

“Thar she blows,” Terry said, pointing at Orvie’s boat as it approached the rock wall below them. Presently it hit the wall and remained bobbing there among other sticks and leaves that had accumulated.”

“You guys got scuba gear – air tanks, anything like that?”

“Yeah,” Ted said. “We pestered our parents for them on our tenth birthday. Used them a few times and lost interest. Why you ask?”

“I’d like to take a look at what’s going on down at the base of this bluff.”

“Underwater?” Terry asked.

“That would be why he asked about the scuba gear, odd boy,” Ted said answering for Orvie.

“Hey, if I’m an odd boy you’re an odd boy. Everything I got you got it, too.”

“Question, guys. Do you ever actually come to blows over stuff like this?”

They broke huge grins.

“Never hit each other since we traded in our diapers for big boy pants. We do tussle – often, but that’s mostly just pouncing on each other and rolling around on the bed or the floor or the ground.”

“Anybody ever win?”

“We have an unstated agreement about that,” Terry began.

“All tussles must end in a tie,” Ted finished.

“I like that, but how do you know when the tussle is over?”

“Usually, when we’re too tired to continue. Another twin thing, I suppose,” Ted went on. “We always tire out at exactly the same moment.”

“How convenient, I suppose.”

“That’s our story and we’re sticking to it!” Terry said effectively ending further discussion.

Terry reached out and drew Ted close as they sat there. For just a moment they leaned their heads against each other. It was one of those wonderful moments that separated humans from most other species. Orvie loved to witness those times.

Orvie stood up.

“So, fifteen feet deep here you say?”

“Yup.”

“How certain are you of that?”

“One hundred percent.”

At that Orvie slipped out of his shoes and managed a very good swan dive into the water – perhaps rating a 6 or 7 out of 10. When he surfaced the others were clapping. Their feet were soon also bare and in they came – cannonballing rather than diving, but we each do what we can do.

They played in the water for a half hour. Orvie often submerged as deep as he dared along the bluff. Everything that he had seen and everything that he knew, told him there had to be an outlet down there somewhere. He’d need the diving gear to locate it. Why that seemed important to him he could not have said. Orvie often had things he just needed to find out. They were like mental itches that kept on irritating him until he found an answer.

They got out and sun dried. Orvie had new questions.

“All this land flat?”

“Mostly. Behind the bluff, there, it continues as a low hill on south beyond the edge of our property. Dad figures the bluff here is just the outcropping from a long section of limestone that gradually sinks down below the surface a mile or so beyond our property line.”

“Makes sense, I’d say. This has been a great morning guys. What is it now, about ninety minutes PHW?”

“Almost forgot,” Terry said. “Life does go on back at the old homestead. We better get on our horses for home.”

“I’ll go collect our shoes,” Ted offered and climbed the back of the bluff.

While he was gone, Orvie talked with Terry.

“You have *real* horses out here in the wilderness, I assume.”

“Yup.”

“Do you ride often?”

“Ride?”

“That thing people do when they climb on the backs of horses.”

“Oh, ride? Yeah, once, maybe twice a week. How did you know we had horses?”

Orvie pointed to several spots on the ground.

“They tend to leave calling cards behind.”

“I see. But there’s a problem. We never ride out here. Have to come through the forest to get here. Can’t ride fast while going through a forest. We don’t ride if we can’t ride fast. We ride over on the meadow where we met you. I can’t understand this.”

Ted had soon rejoined them. They sat on the grass and put on their shoes.

“Hey, Ted. What’s with the horse poop over here?”

Ted turned to Orvie.

“My brother is so sophisticated. I hope you’re not intimidated (made uneasy) by his high class language.”

“I think I’ll manage. But, back to the find. Any ideas why there would be horses over here?”

“Not really. Sometimes tourists get lost and wander onto our acreage without knowing they’re really trespassing. We don’t mind if they’re careful and don’t destroy anything. They’re usually on horseback.”

“That could explain it,” Orvie said, not sounding convinced. “Some of those droppings are no more than a day old. Any visitors you know of that recently?”

“No, but I’m sure we don’t hear or see most of them, you know.”

They started the trek back through the forest.

“Bear in here?” Orvie asked.

“B-E-A-R or B-A-R-E?” Ted asked with a grin.

“The first of those.”

Ted continued.

“Dad says he’s never seen one in the forest and he’s lived here all his life. His dad, our grandpa, and his dad, our great grandpa, planted the forest. Land’s been in the family for over a hundred years.”

Terry continued:

“Sometimes bears do walk Cutter’s Creek down from Canada when fish get scarce up there. That’s usually in early spring when the bears wake up from hibernation and the streams up in their home territory are still frozen over. Ted and I have seen a couple out in the meadow you were walking.”

“That’s too close for comfort, I’d think.”

Ted switched his fanny pack around to the front and opened one compartment. He pulled out a spray can and explained.

“Bear repellent. Pepper spray, actually. Dad says one blast in a bear’s face and it’s 100% effective in sending the beast packing.”

“Good to know,” Orvie said. “Good to have along.”

“Our parents are very lenient about what we do and where we go here on our acreage, but they do insist on certain safety measures.”

“Like,” Terry said, “we need to check in with mom and tell her we were unable to lose the stray kid in the lake according to her plan so she’ll have to

arrange lunch for him still again.”

“Do you ever have kids come out to see you?” Orvie asked, becoming concerned that the two of them only ever had each other with whom to interact.

“Cousins come at holidays. Sometimes Jack will bring a kid along with him. We get the idea he takes in kids in trouble and sets them back on the right path. Nothing’s ever been said about it – they just always seem like that kind.”

Orvie didn’t pursue the point and moved on to something else that was on his mind.

“I’d like to see two kinds of things out here: First, - he and Terry immediately looked at Ted and laughed. He continued. “First, I’d like to see what a plot – I think your dad called them – looks like after he and his crew is finished cutting the trees in it. Something very recent. Then I’d like to see a spot where the thefts occurred.”

“We can take care of the second of those now,” Ted said. “The last tree rustling happened a few hundred yards north of the path we’re following home. We got plenty of time. I’ll let mom know we’ve decided on a short detour.”

They turned north and were soon there. Orvie counted the freshly cut stumps.

“Six,” he said, mostly just thinking aloud.

“It’s always six, dad says,” Terry said adding to Orvie’s information.

He walked among them running his hands across their surfaces. He looked up at the surrounding trees that remained. He walked up to several and put his arms around them. His hands never met on the far side. He did the same with several of the new stumps. His hands *always* overlapped on the far side.

“Do you climb these trees?”

“Yeah,” Terry said. “We climb a lot.”

“How do you get up to the first branches? They seem to be twelve or more feet above the ground.”

“Spikes,” was the one word answer that Ted provided.

“More, please.”

“They’re gadgets that fit under and along the inside of boots. You strap them on tight and stick the spikes – about three inches long – into the trunk and you can climb them like a squirrel. Loop a rope around the trunk to hold on to and then hitch it up as you go higher and higher.”

Orvie nodded. He examined the trunks of several of the tallest adjacent trees.

“You two been climbing here recently?”

“No. Never in fact,” Ted answered as the twins moved close to him.

Orvie pointed to some small holes in the side of a trunk.”

“This the kind of mark a spike leaves?” he asked.

“Sure is,” Terry said nodding and reaching out to touch it.

“On our next outing I’d like you to show me how to climb with spikes and I’d like for us to go up a few of these trees right here.”

“And will that be for fun or as part of the solution to our mystery?” Ted asked.

“The mystery for sure, although the activity would seem to embrace the prospect of being both entertaining and a useful didactic contribution.”

“Sorry, Orvie,” Terry said, “but we only speak English here – well, our French is pretty good also. Mom’s from French speaking Quebec.”

“Yeah. You’re sounding like that old man that seems to live somewhere inside you again,” Ted added.

(If they only knew!)

“Translation,” Orvie said, “Looks to be both fun and educational.”

For just a moment he let himself feel like an old man. That had lots of advantages. Then, his youthful Orvie smile returned and they set out on a trot for the big log cabin in the woods and the lunch it promised.

CHAPTER FIVE: Horse Droppings

The twins scarfed down their lunch so they could get an early start on their homework. Orvie kept up with them so he wouldn't be alone with their mother, offering an opportunity for her to have the 'tell me about your family' talk with him. Upstairs he read a book about the history of Minnesota. He found it to be generally accurate, although he could have greatly improved some of the facts about the period just after the Civil War.

By 2:30 they were back down stairs, the twins passing on folders of their completed work to their mother. She hefted the folders and turned to Orvie.

"Before you leave I'll need to know your secret, you understand. They've never got this much done in one study session ever. So, tell me: thumb screws, bamboo shoots under the fingernails, what?"

"Spikes, actually. I'll leave their use up to your imagination."

He smiled and they left a baffled mother of twin boys behind in the kitchen.

They picked up three sets of climbing spikes and three climbing straps. Terry demonstrated how to wrap the strap several times around their waste and snap it tight for the purpose of carrying it. The spikes they placed in a backpack. Orvie offered to carry it."

"We trade off backpack every twenty minutes so none of us gets tired," Terry explained.

Ted, of course had a comment.

"We could each actually last thirty minutes with it, but my brother can't count that high."

Orvie sensed that under normal circumstances that would have led to one of their tussles. That time it settled for daggers from Terry's eyes to Ted's.

"Walk, trot, or run?" Terry asked.

Before any answer was forthcoming, Orvie took off on a full-out dash across the camp and into the trees. The twins followed, clearly enjoying the chase. The three of them were a good match in speed, strength and endurance. Eventually they settled into a brisk jog. Orvie motioned Terry on ahead to lead the way, although he believed he could have navigated them right back to the spot. He was correct, but would not mention it. He liked helping others feel important.

The twins showed Orvie how to put on the spikes and Terry demonstrated how to climb using the spikes and strap arrangement.

"Make sure the spike is well set into the wood of the tree before trusting your weight to it," Ted (who else?) warned him.

None of that instruction had really been necessary although twelve year old Orvie hadn't used the arrangement since he roamed the Sequoia forests of the west coast some seventy five years earlier.

The twins were amazed at how fast he 'learned' and how quickly he made it up into the nearly ninety foot tree he had selected. It had been one he had

found the spike marks in earlier. Terry followed. Ted remained on the ground.

Near the top where the trunk was still a foot in diameter Orvie stopped and called to Terry.

“What do you suppose this is all about?”

Terry joined him, moving around from the other side of the tree.

“Got nothing except it has no business being up here.”

Orvie had pointed to a scar mark that circled the trunk, having removed most of the bark along a one inch path exposing the raw wood.

“Wish you had a cell phone with you. I’d like a picture of that ring,” Orvie said thinking out loud.

“Oh, we carry cells. I said they were undependable out here, not that they didn’t sometimes work.”

“Good going for ‘sometimes work,’” Orvie said while Terry snapped a picture.

“Can you email that down to Ted?”

“Already did. Habit. Twins tend to keep each other informed about *everything*.”

He called down to his brother.

“Check your e-mail. A picture of something Orvie found up here. What do you make of it?”

“First, (the two overgrown squirrels in the tree chuckled together) the bark seems to be worn deeper into the tree on the far side – Orvie’s left, your right. Second, it’s irregular, not smooth. No idea what all that means, but that’s what I see.”

“Very good observations,” Orvie said. “You up to climbing that tree on the other side of the little clearing?”

“Sure.”

“Make sure it is the other one with spike marks already in it.”

“It is.”

“Ok. Climb up to our height. I’m thinking you’ll find a scar ring there similar to the one we found here.”

“Spike climbing, when done in a safe manner, is not a speedy activity. He reached the spot about five minutes later.”

“Found it. Looks to be a twin of the one in the picture – more identical than fraternal, I’d say.”

“Nice work. Get a picture and we’ll meet you down below.”

“In Hell?”

“On the *ground*, stupid,” Terry added shaking his head at Orvie as if to say you’ll have to excuse my bother. Sometimes he misses the obvious.”

They exchanged a nod and a grin and made their ways back down the tree – a more difficult task, Orvie suddenly remembered, than climbing it in the first place.

On the ground they removed the spikes and returned them to the backpack. They rewound the straps around their waists. Orvie took a seat on

the ground, back against a stump. The other two were soon sitting, cross-legged, looking at him.

“So?” Ted asked as if expecting a full explanation of the tree rustling right then and there.

“Follow my thinking and make suggestions. The stumps left here are smaller in diameter than the two trees we just climbed. Do you agree?”

They examined each briefly with their eyes and nodded.

“Question: Would that tend to make them shorter as well?”

“Yeah. Most likely,” Ted said.

Terry nodded his agreement.

“Do you think it is likely those tree rings could have been made by large chains?”

“Sure. Likely, even,” Terry said. “We’ve seen it often on logs the crew’s pulled for quite a ways.”

“Paint this picture in your heads. A strong chain secured around the tree top on the west, its other end hoisted up and secured in the same way around the tree to the east. It becomes like a chain tight rope between the two trees.”

“Got it,” Terry said.

He had closed his eyes for the exercise.

“Now, envision a large pulley that had been previously attached in the center of that chain span and a thick rope running through it draping down to the ground on both sides from across the wheel in the pulley. Then, see one end of that rope attached about three quarters of the way up one of the smaller trees as it stands, uncut. Once cut, the tree hangs on the rope from the chain. The other end of the rope is attached in some way to a team of horses on south about twenty or thirty yards. The horses back up. The tree is laid down flat on the ground. The branches are trimmed off and the horses drag the new log off to – well, that’s where my theory stops at this time.”

“I think I see. Lowering it slowly like that would make the process almost noiseless so dad and his crew couldn’t hear it.”

“A big problem remains,” Ted said.

That time Orvie answered.

“The sound of the chain saws.”

The twins nodded as if deep in thought about the problem. None of the three had any useful response.

“Silent chain saws aren’t very likely,” Ted said at last.

“How about hand powered cross cut saws – one man on each end to cut through the base of the tree and small one man versions to trim off the branches.”

“A possibility, it would be quieter for sure, but that would take forever to get through one of these big babies. Some of these trees are nearly four feet thick at their base,” Terry added.

“And with only one chain and pulley arrangement only one tree could be handled at a time. How long does it take a crew to trim all the branches off a sixty

foot tree?”

The twins looked at each other. Ted spoke.

“Six men, each with a chainsaw, maybe a half hour – that what you figure, Terry?”

“Pretty close, I think. And that would be with another half dozen guys dragging the cut off branches out of the way. Some of those huge lower branches must weigh several hundred pounds each.”

“So,” Orvie continued, “at thirty minutes each, trimming six trees would take about three hours. Add time to put up the chain and pulley arrangement, cut through the bases of six trees, and drag the logs out of your property, and we still have an unknown amount of time. That musing (thinking about) wasn’t worth the brain cells it energized.”

“Seems to be two main problems, then,” Terry said. “Silent saws and transportation. Hand saws handling the branch removal would be lot quieter, but that would take four, maybe six times longer. Using horses would be virtually silent compared to a diesel powered truck or tractor, but a team could only handle one log at a time.”

“Plus, trying to work a side by side team through the tree trunks in this forest would be almost impossible – too wide – too many turns a 60 foot log couldn’t make.”

Ted commented on Terry’s explanation.

“*Virtually not almost. Virtually is our new word for the day.*”

Orvie waited and smiled. He expected a reaction from Terry, but none was forthcoming. Clearly his new friends were focused on the problem.

Orvie stood up and walked south across the open area.

“How are you guys at tracking horse droppings?”

“Terry has a nose like a bloodhound,” Ted offered expecting to be physically attacked by his brother.

He wasn’t.

“That’s a good idea,” Terry said. “Track them and find where they’re leaving the forest.”

Ted tried to bring them back to reality.

“Remember, guys. Horses only drop their droppings once or twice a day. It’s not like following rabbit tracks in the snow.”

“Although that’s technically accurate,” Orvie began, “think about a path used six times a night, over and over again, several times a week – and in both directions I assume – coming and going. Lots more opportunity to follow the trail they leave behind.”

“Good thinking, as usual,” Ted said. “So what’s the plan?”

“Let’s begin with an educated guess. We see evidence of horses here at the site of the theft. We also saw evidence of horses beside the lake. Using those two points let’s follow a likely path between the two. We can separate by an arm’s length and walk the path together. That will span about five or six yards. When any one of us spots something we will readjust our course in that

direction, always keeping the middle man at the spot of the droppings.”

Terry turned to Ted, again as if Orvie were not present.

“You’d almost think the kid here had done this before. He must have a very interesting story to tell about his life.”

“I think you’re right, but have you noticed how he always avoids talking about it?”

“I have, observant brother. How do you suggest we get him give it up?”

“Patience. Listen. And if all else fails we’ll tickle him senseless after he gets in bed tonight.”

“Sounds like a plan.”

“By the way,” Orvie said, “did I mention I think I’ll go sleep under the stars out by ‘Polar Bear’ creek this evening?”

It was worth a set of grins.

They stretched themselves out in a line according to Orvie’s idea – Ted in the center – and began moving in a generally southeast direction through the forest. Just as Orvie had predicted there was much more of a trail to follow than they had originally thought there would be.

Orvie had a question.

“In what direction from here were the other recent thefts?”

“Pretty much directly behind us to the north,” Terry said.

Ted agreed and continued.

“Yeah. If you’d draw a line north that extends the path we’re walking now, there would be a few of those spots just off to either side. Some were much further west up near the north edge of the property.”

“That would explain why this path has been used so frequently – all the evidence of the horses. From wherever they’ve been cutting north of here, they hook up with this as the main path to somewhere, which, I’m thinking is the lake.”

“But why the lake?” Ted asked. “It’s not like it goes anywhere. It just sits there where it’s always sat. No boat there is going to pick up the logs and cart them off. I don’t get it.”

“I don’t get it either,” Orvie said. “Isn’t that wonderful? A mystery to solve!”

“The double horse team problem remains,” Ted said. Look here. No way that a side by side team of horses could go in any direction from where we’re standing right now. The trees occur in no pattern whatsoever and here, with all the new starts, they’re just too close together.”

“What did you call that truck cab your dad invented – a slim line cab, only half as wide as the usual kind?”

“I see where you’re going,” Ted said.

Again, Terry finished it.

“Not a side by side team, but a front and behind team arrangement – one horse following the other. That could easily make the passage through here.”

In less than a half hour they had arrived at the west side of the lake – the place they had been that morning.

“Something here I hadn’t noticed his morning, guys,” Terry said pointing at

the grassy slope that led down to the water.

The others moved to examine what he had found. Long narrow furrows in the ground that were mostly covered by the grass.

“Log marks?” Terry asked clearly puzzled.

“Looks that way,” Ted said.

“Or,” Orvie offered with a grin, “the imprints from the toes of one humongous giant who comes here occasionally to bathe.”

Terry looked around back into the forest as if concerned. It struck the other two as hilarious and they rolled on the ground in hold-their-bellies laughter. Terry would not easily live that down.

Orvie was less concerned about the possibility of a super-sized Big Foot than he was about why in the world the logs were ending up in the lake – a clear dead end. Maybe it was the spot over which the aliens hovered in their flying saucer and beamed the logs up into their ship to burn in their fireplaces. He’d not make that suggestion out loud or *he’d* be the one never living *that* down.

CHAPTER SIX: Puzzle Pieces

That night after dinner the boys retreated upstairs and together they made a 'to do' list.

1. Orvie needed to examine a plot recently cut by the twins' dad and his crew.
2. Orvie wanted to explore the bluff at the end of the lake for a water exit.
3. They needed to search for a nearby place where the thieves could be storing their equipment. Orvie was fairly certain they wouldn't remove it and then bring it back each time.
4. They needed to research what 'quiet sawing' techniques and equipment might be available.
5. They needed to try and figure a schedule the thieves might be using.

There would surely be other things to add later. They decided to accomplish the first two things on the list the following day. If time permitted they'd work on number three as well.

"We need to figure out what part of this acreage your dad and his crews never visit if there is such a place," Orvie said. "If there is, I'll bet it will be where the equipment is stashed."

Ted got out the map and they studied it together. The extreme northwest corner was an extension of the meadow Orvie had been walking when he met the twins. The crews had no reason to be up there where there were no trees. There was a low outcropping of rock that lay about a half mile into the property from the northwest corner on a diagonal line toward the southeast corner. The twins said it was about the size of a football field and no more than twenty feet tall at its highest point. It was said to be generally flat and the top surface was strewn with large bumps across it – they varied from a foot in diameter to five feet and were solidly attached to the stone surface from which they protruded. Terry produced several pictures he had taken so Orvie could better visualize the area.

"It's a rare geological formation for these parts," Ted explained. "Very few outcroppings up here. Mostly just flat terrain with very deep soil."

"How far is it from the road to the north?" Orvie asked.

"Less than half a mile, don't you think?" Ted said asking the question to Terry.

"About. Yeah. Maybe less. Our acreage is four miles wide – west to east – and two deep – north to south. Eight square miles in all. That's a county road up there that runs across the northern boundary of our land. Not really used much. We take it east into town when we go to shop. Barely wide enough to pass a car in the other lane. Blacktop if that's of any importance."

"It's one the sheriff's department patrols regularly?" Orvie asked more than stated.

"Several times a day. I suppose at night, too," Ted said.

"I'd like to explore that big chunk of rock. Add it to our list."

6. Explore Ripple Ridge

“How do your folks feel about you guys camping out all night?”

“They began allowing it since we turned twelve. Haven’t done it a lot. I guess we’re soft and prefer our beds,” Ted said.

“Mom calls us a half dozen times during the night when we’re out like that.”

“Doesn’t sound like either you or she get much sleep,” Orvie said understanding about the mothers-of-twelve-year-old-boys-always-worry-about-them thing. He figured Ted and Terry didn’t really understand that yet.”

“It was eight o’clock. Terry spoke to his brother.

“You know, if we’d do schoolwork ‘til ten tonight, we’d have all day tomorrow free to work on our list.”

“An excellent idea. How many of those excellent ideas in your life does that make for you now – let’s see, counting that one I’d say, ONE!”

A short, but vigorous tussle ensued (followed) – on the bed, on the floor, into the hall, back into the room. A few minutes into it Orvie had a comment.

“Moonlight’s burning, guys. How do you really want to spend the next two hours?”

They lay back immediately and nodded.

“Let me check it out with mom,” Terry said, got to his feet, and left.

He returned a few minutes later. She said to have Orvie take our temperatures, but that she could live with the plan.”

There were smiles all around.

Their study ‘desk’ was an eight foot long table. They worked side by side.

“Come and sit between us, Orvie,” Ted said. “It’s algebra and history in this assignment. Figure you can probably help since we’ve never known anybody who knew more stuff about more stuff than you know about stuff.”

Orvie smiled. It had sounded more like something he’d expect from Terry.

“Yell if you get stuck. Three smelly twelve year olds sitting close together is not my idea of a lovely evening. Ok if I hit the shower while you two get started?”

“Sure,” they answered as one.

Terry leaned his head down and smelled his armpit, mounting a disgusted look on his face.

“Turning twelve sure put a stop to being able to tell mom we’d showered when we really hadn’t. It took us a while to figure it out. Stinking is not one of the benefits of growing up, I can tell you that for sure.”

“Yeah,” Ted agreed. “Dad talked to us about it. He said we had a choice to make; go through life smelling like his crew or begin taking thorough daily soap and water showers. Having spent a lot of time with the men, we got the message loud and clear.”

Orvie left for the shower. The twins got to work. Ten o’clock arrived before they realized it.

“How much you get done?” Terry asked.

“A page of problems and twenty pages in history. You?”

“A page and a half of problems and fifteen pages of history. About equal, I’d say.”

“It always is. What did you expect?”

Terry shrugged. They arranged their work in their folders for their mother and pushed and shoved their way into the shower.

* * *

They were off and running in the direction of the crew’s current work site by seven thirty the next morning.

The twins waved to their dad from some distance away as they approached the plot. It was extremely noisy. Most of the men wore protective ear guards. Their dad pointed to their heads.

“That means we need to get hard hats out of dad’s truck,” Ted explained.

That soon done, they approached Mr. Carter.

“Orvie wanted to see how things were done,” Terry said, needing to speak in a loud voice.

It was close enough to the truth to keep their consciences clear.

“Stay out of the way and look to your heart’s content. Always have to be heads up in a work site.”

Orvie went directly to a recently cut stump at the far edge of the plot. He ran his hand across its top surface. His brow furrowed. The twins noticed.

“Something wrong?” Terry asked.

“Feel the surface. Look at the surface. Do you see how it’s different from what we saw at the thieves’ site?”

“Not really,” Ted said.

Terry took out his phone and pulled up a picture he had taken of one of those stumps.

“I think I can see,” he said. “Where this one dad cut is really smooth, the one at the tree rustler’s plot was really rough. I don’t understand.”

“Neither do I, for sure. Get your dad over here when he has time.”

“Dad always has time for us,” Terry said.

Ted walked to him and brought him back.

“Orvie’s got a question. Might as well get used to that. He always has questions.”

“What’s up?” Mr. Carter asked.

“The surface of this stump is really smooth. We saw some of the stumps left by the thieves and noticed they were really rough.”

Terry lifted his phone high so he could see. Orvie continued.

“I was just wondering what might make theirs so rough and uneven.”

“Good question. Good observation. I must admit I have missed that. Well, let’s see. That tends to happen when a saw is running slow for some reason. Like when the person handling the saw is trying to force it through the wood or the spark plug’s bad. Those things slow it down and the saw tends to gouge the surface. Truthfully, I’ve never seen such a rough, uneven cut. I’m not

sure how to answer your question as fully as you'd like, I'm sure."

"That's plenty. I'm just unbelievably nose-y. Everybody back home says so. One more thing, though. What kind of a surface would an old two man crosscut leave?"

"Not as smooth as these here, but certainly not that rough. It would depend a lot on how expert the men were who were handling the saw."

"Thanks. Really appreciate your time."

"*No problem, as my son's say.*"

Mr. Carter ruffled his sons' hair and returned to his crew.

Terry grinned. Ted combed his hair.

Suddenly they heard one of the workman call out, "*Omaha*". Everything stopped as a tree fell crashing to the ground. It made an unbelievably loud noise that hurt the ears and shook the ground.

"What's with *Omaha*?" Orvie asked.

"It's what Payton Manning, the quarterback, calls out before the center hikes the ball. Apparently nobody outside the team knows what it means, but that doesn't stop Larry from using it. All the trunk guys use it now. It just means heads up another tree is biting the dust."

"So, seen what you wanted to see here?" Ted asked.

"I think so. How close are we to Ripple whatever?"

"Ripple Ridge," Terry said completing the name. "I'd say no more than a thirty minute hike. It's through a really old and thick section of the forest so there will be a lot of undergrowth. Maybe more like forty minutes."

"Ok if we do that next, then?"

"Sure," Terry said. "We've really never done what you'd call give it a close inspection. Played on it as kids a few times. Really not a whole lot of fun. Got some pictures."

"It solid?" Orvie asked.

"Not sure what you mean," Ted said.

"Any indication it may contain caves?"

The twins looked at each other, shrugged, and shook their heads before Ted answered.

"No idea. We didn't find any if that's really your question. It's basically limestone so it could have, I suppose."

"You're thinking the bad guys' equipment might be stored inside it up there?" Terry asked.

"It has to be somewhere."

Ted took the lead. Orvie noticed that was usually the case. They arrived at 8:30 exactly.

"Made good time," Ted said. "There she is."

It stood alone in the meadow – the forest surrounding the area on the east and south. A single huge old oak tree stood close to the side closest to them. It was certainly out of place there in the center of the famous northwestern Minnesota pine range.

Orvie moved toward it and then began circling to the right. The others followed. Orvie would touch the side and they would touch the side. Orvie would stand back and look it over and they would stand back and look it over. The boys had exaggerated its size. Orvie figured maybe half a football field in size. The ground around it for another twenty five yards in all directions was strewn with rocks varying in size from gravel to four foot boulders. No vehicle was going to be able to work its way around and through all that.

The walk around took fifteen minutes. Orvie signaled he wanted to climb it and investigate the top. They showed him a fairly easy place to make the climb. It was a series of steps – whether natural or man-made was difficult to tell. They had been weathering for many decades. It was, as they had suggested, about twenty feet tall – nothing you'd want to fall off of, for sure. After a short time their exploration seemed to have discovered nothing useful.

"How about taking some pictures from up here of the area around it?" Orvie asked.

They both pulled out phones and began the task eventually combining to a dozen shots at various angles. As they were about to begin the descent to the ground, backtracking the way they had climbed up, a man approach on horseback from the north.

"Down, guys," Orvie said.

He crouched low and moved toward the north end, then bellied down at a spot from which they could watch the man – watch him right up to the front of the Ridge if he kept riding.

"You guys know him?" Orvie whispered.

"Never seen him before," Ted whispered back.

"Know the horse – distinctive dappling (large spots)?"

"Don't recall. We really don't see many horses ridden by local folks," Terry said. Let me get a picture."

"Pretty far off for a picture."

"This phone has the latest in photographic magic. You'll be surprised when you see what I got."

Presently a second horseman approached from the meadow land to the west. He pulled to a halt next to the man just below them. They both carried rifles in cases strapped to their saddles. The boys could hear them speaking.

"Tonight's not gonna be any good. Tomorrow neither. The followin' night looks like a winner. Eleven o'clock. 'F' block, I mean 'G' block. Whole crew."

"The last package delivered ok?"

"Right on schedule. Trimmed out at 5,000 board feet, close to the others."

It was hard to tell which man, if either, was in charge. The man on the spotted horse was older. His mount stood several hands taller than the second. Orvie would guess he was the boss. Both of them could have come right out of a western movie – the first to arrive having graying hair and wearing a leather vest and a red bandana around his neck; the other, unshaven for weeks, sported a handlebar mustache and wore a cowboy hat, chaps and spurs.

As soon as the conversation was over the first man turned and left. The second remained for a few minutes lighting a cigar that didn't seem to take to being lit.

As Ted moved to back up, his hand dislodged a small stone and it tumbled over the side nearly hitting the man. The man looked at the stone on the ground. He turned in his saddle and looked up. The boys had moved back out of view. He tossed the cigar and dismounted, removing the rifle from its case. He walked to the east and around the corner as if heading to the steps the boys had used.

"If he comes up here we could be in trouble, you know," Ted said.

"Maybe," Orvie offered. "We have no real idea what they were talking about, but just in case we need to take cover. Those large boulder-like formations back on the southeast corner. We'll each crouch down behind one of them. Be concocting a good excuse for being up here just in case he finds us."

They moved swiftly and located three suitably large boulders. The problem was they dared not peek out to see what he was doing. They would have to rely on what they could hear of his movements.

Presently they heard the hard leather soles and heels of his boots slapping against the rock as he topped the edge. The noise stopped. Orvie envisioned him pausing to look around. Then the slapping began. Spurs rattled quietly as he walked. He first moved away up toward the front, perhaps going to look over the area from which the rock fell, Orvie imagined. A few moments later he started walking toward where they were hiding. The crisp sound of his boots meeting the rock surface became louder and louder. He was getting closer and closer. He stopped occasionally, again, Orvie figured to look around.

As the sounds grew louder, Orvie decided he would show himself to protect the others. He had a story in mind about how he had been hiking along the road to the north, had seen the rock against the horizon to the south and came to investigate. He would take responsibility for dislodging the stone that fell close to the man. Since there was a 9,999 to one chance the man couldn't really do him any permanent harm, he felt he was the logical one to confront the man.

Just as he tensed the calves in his legs to push himself up into a standing position a squirrel jumped from the oak tree onto the top of the structure and scurried toward the north end. The man chuckled and they immediately heard him walking back to the access point. The noise was soon gone.

He could have been playing possum, of course – just waiting up there to see if anyone showed himself. Again, Orvie decided he should be the one. He stood and walked around the boulder not knowing what to expect. The man was gone. He moved to where the others were hiding and gave them the all clear. His finger to his lips, singled for them to remain quiet. They moved together toward the north end. Before they arrived they heard the man galloping off back to the west. They looked. There he was.

Three boys began breathing again!

Three boys began believing they would live to see another day.

They moved back down the steps and felt much better once back on the

ground. At least down there they had a fighting chance on the run.

Terry stooped over and picked up something.

“What ya find?” Ted asked.

“A spur star right here on the bottom step. It wasn’t here when he went up was it?”

The others agreed that it hadn’t been there.

Upon examination it had distinctive markings – letters, perhaps initials, since they didn’t spell anything. They looked to have been stamped on as if to personalize it.

“Don’t lose it. It may tie us to the man,” Orvie cautioned.

“I’m not the one to have it if losing it is a concern,” Terry said.

“He’s right,” Ted agreed. “That boy has been known to lose his under pants while he remained fully dressed. You keep it, Orvie.”

Terry handed it over. Orvie wrapped it in a rag he always carried – not really a hanky – and slipped it back into his rear pocket.

“I think we’ve seen enough of this place for our first visit,” Orvie said. “Let’s make tracks back to your house and pick up the diving gear.”

“I heard him say ‘first visit,’” Terry teased. “Did you hear him say ‘first visit’?”

“I did and that definitely implies at least a ‘second’ visit in the future.”

“I’m not at all sure I want to return to the spot we almost met our untimely death,” Terry continued.

“Guys. We have a mystery to solve here. You in or not?”

“Of course we’re in,” Ted said. “It’s our property that’s at stake here. If anybody should quit, it’s you. Those guys looked really mean.”

“We don’t know they are the thieves. We don’t know they are mean. For all we know they were talking about a square dance party that was being put off until tomorrow night.”

“Yeah, sure,” Terry said. “Nice try, but none of us really believes that. If it weren’t for that misplaced squirrel we all might be vulture food by now.”

“All the creatures have to eat,” Orvie said with a grin.

There was, however, no grin inside him. He was suddenly quite sure they were onto the thieves. And, they chose to meet at the Ridge. Why there if it weren’t somehow important in their operation. He was surer than ever that there was a way inside that big hunk of rock and he was determined to find it.

If Ripple Ridge was the northwestern corner piece of the puzzle then he was certain the bluff at the lake was the southeastern corner piece.

CHAPTER SEVEN: Rocks, Rocks, and More Rocks

Orvie was quiet on the walk-and-jog back to the house. He had received some uncomfortable feelings from the two men as they spoke together. When the second one spoke about nights, Orvie sensed he was seeing pictures of clear nights and a bright moon. The last night he mentioned brought with it a dark, cloud burdened sky. Those were only vague impressions and truly didn't seem to represent any kind of false sort of representation. Sometimes he received those kinds of feelings.

The main, revealing feeling came when the older man reeled off the number of board feet. He stated 5,000 but was thinking 6,000. For some reason he was deceiving the younger man. Whatever it meant, it was clear the older man couldn't be trusted.

When he stumbled over which block would be involved, whatever a block was, he first said 'F' and then immediately changed it to 'G'. It wasn't a lie, just a mistake, but mistakes showed up for Orvie just like out and out lies. During that split second during the correction, he sensed the man was picturing an image of the Carter's property – some combination of a map and an aerial view. He could not pin point a location, however. He wondered the meaning of the term, 'Block'.

When they slowed to a walk, Terry had a comment he directed at Orvie.

"You've been pretty quiet since we left the Ridge."

"Just thinking about the mystery, I guess. Sorry. Didn't mean to seem unfriendly."

"Not what I meant. Anyway, we're about one more, short jog from the house."

"Or," Orvie said, "one very short dash to the finish line."

He took off as fast as he could, navigating the underbrush with relative ease. The others were right behind. Had he not had that split second head start the three of them would have ended up in a dead heat. They collapsed on the back lawn a few yards from the kitchen door. They lay there on their backs panting for some time. Fortunately, grinning didn't interfere with panting.

"Scuba gear, I guess is next on our list, right?" Ted said/asked.

The others ignored the question and stood up, ready to go after the gear.

The boy's mother called through the screen door.

"I had a lunch packed for you, but you left before I could tell you."

"Very thoughtful," Orvie said.

"Yeah. What he said," Terry added with a sheepish grin.

It seemed quite humorous to all three of them. Mrs. Carter patiently waited for them to return to their senses.

Ted moved toward her, as he addressed the other boys.

"Go get the gear and I'll get the food."

They went their separate ways and Ted soon caught up with them in the big, weather tight barn where lots of equipment was stored. There was a small

cart with a bicycle wheel on each side. Terry explained.

“Dad made it for us to carry the scuba gear to the lake. The large wheels allow it to roll over sticks and rocks like they weren’t even there.”

“Very clever,” Orvie said.

“You’ll find our dad is extremely clever.”

Orvie could tell they were very proud of him. It was a close, loving family that kept few secrets from each other. They valued honesty and helpfulness. It was much like a frontier family in those ways.

Although the cart slowed them to a walk, forty five minutes later they were at the lake.

“So, now that we’re here, what are we doing?” Terry asked.

Orvie pointed to the place where the stream entered the lake.

“That’s a lot of water running into the lake every minute. If there weren’t some way for it to get out, the lake level would rise and it would grow huge. There has to be an outlet and that’s what we’re here to discover. You guys haven’t ever found any indication of an outlet, I assume.”

“Not until you did that stick-boat thing yesterday,” Ted say. “We could see what you meant. The water was gently moving toward the bluff.”

“So, let’s start at the bluff.”

They sorted out the equipment into two piles – there were only two sets. It was decided that it would be Orvie and Terry underwater and Ted on the shore. Ted was more reluctant to engage possible danger than Terry who seemed to all quite recklessly live for it.

“I told you, Terry,” Ted said as the boys were finishing cinching the equipment in place.”

Orvie looked puzzled. Ted explained.

“We had like a bet that you’d know how to use the scuba gear. I won.”

“Well, I didn’t exactly bet *against* you, Orvie. Ted just said, ‘I’ll bet you that Orvie knows how to scuba dive’. It really didn’t give me a chance to select a side in the matter.”

A smile seemed all that was needed in response.

A few minutes later they were in the water and had tested all systems in the shallows. Convinced their equipment was working perfectly, they swam to the bluff. Ted followed along the shore. He removed his tennies in preparation for a situation in which he might need to enter the water quickly. Ted always thought ahead.

“Let’s dive straight lines up and down examining every inch of this bluff,” Orvie suggested. “We can do a few together first ‘til we get the hang of it.”

Terry nodded. They began the first dive at the far side. They discovered that at the bottom the bluff made an abrupt curve away from the side and eased into the mostly solid rock bottom of the lake. They continued dive after dive searching the rock surface of the bluff with hands and eyes.

A half hour later they had finished. They had found nothing. It was disappointing, but Orvie would not concede defeat on the matter. Terry got out to

rest. Orvie treaded water in close to the bluff where the surface of the water lapped up against it allowing a pleasing, gentle sound. As he approached the far western edge – right as he faced the bluff – he heard gurgling. It had been masked by the sounds of the gentle ripples working against the rock surface. He approached it, able to hear it, but not locate it. He touched the rock wall. He pushed and pulled, tugging against any rock that would allow his fingers a hold behind it.

That's when it happened. He felt a strong rush of water moving against the wall. He discovered it was essentially a rock lip that protruded a foot or so out in front of the other rock. The surface of the bluff was extremely irregular there on the west side so they hadn't noticed it by just looking at it. The lip turned out to be some fifteen feet long – horizontal with the surface of the lake. A vast amount of water was flowing over the lip and disappearing into the bluff. The way the rock was carved out it provided a natural basin a foot or so deep behind the lip which kept the surface of the water calm and the flow from appearing to rush toward the exit. It became a gentle, virtually unnoticeable drain for the lake. Being at surface level, the lake never varied in depth. The water flowed in from the stream, filled the lake, and as it rose with the added water, the excess spilled over the lip and drained away. But to where did it drain? And how did any of that help solve the mystery?

He moved back several yards, treading water and just looking the area over. He was amazed at how the opening was fully invisible from even that close. There was no appearance of a rush of water to give it up.

He moved back a bit further where he submerged just below the surface to see what the formation looked like there.

As he pulled extra hard on what appeared to be a discolored section of the lip, a portion of the rock folded down into the lake. At first he thought he had torn off a section of rock, but it hung there. He moved back to it and soon discovered why. There was a large iron hinge with screws drilled into the stone surfaces. Hanging down in that position, it revealed a generally square opening some three feet in each dimension. Once open, the water entered it at such force he knew he must get no closer or risk being sucked inside.

He tried to close it. The door – for lack of a better term – was too heavy. He motioned to the twins and explained what he had found and the problem he was experiencing. Terry stood ready to reenter the water.

“Take off your tank. This will probably require both of you.”

Ted was into the water immediately and Terry soon followed. Orvie explained the problem and they positioned themselves so each had a good grip on the bottom of the door. Actually, of course, it would be the top, once they got it closed. They struggled, working their legs overtime to support them and the weight of the stone slab. Eventually they closed it and returned to the shore to rest.

“What's it all about?” Terry asked.

“All I have is speculation, but I'd be willing to bet a whole lot on my theory,”

Orvie began. "Clearly, the face of the bluff has been meddled with. The rock door has been chiseled out and hinged. Notice the dimensions of the 'flap' and tell me, could a log the size of those the thieves have been cutting fit through that?"

They gave it some serious thought before agreeing that it could. None of the thieves' stumps they had seen had been over three feet in diameter. Ted tried to put the rest of it together.

"They cut and trim the trees, drag them one at a time here to the lake by a front and back team of horses, and, you're thinking, somehow slip the logs through that opening they've made, allowing them to fall into the center of the earth."

"I'm with you right up to the center of the earth thing," Orvie said. "My theory is they continue on and end up in some river in China."

It was again worth a good chuckle. He continued.

"Seriously, there is bound to be an exit stream for the water that flows into and behind the bluff. We just need to find it."

"Find an underground river – is that what you're suggesting?" Terry said.

"Stream. And underground *stream*," Ted corrected.

"Same problem. How do you find an underground stream of water and how can that be a reasonable part of the bad guy's plan. Go to all that trouble and then just lose them underground?"

"You've just made my point," Orvie said.

"And what's that?"

"There has to be a surface outlet somewhere for the logs to pop up and be retrieved."

"Which means a hike south," I take it," Ted said.

They stowed their gear on the cart, covered it with grass to hide it and began walking south just below the low hill that stretched south from the back of the bluff. It gradually became a lower and lower formation the further they walked. A mile or so from the lake, the top of the hill came close to the surface of the flat plain to the south. There it was. The opening to a cave, perhaps six feet high and a dozen wide. A whitewater stream flowed out of it with some force filling the entire width of the opening. The hill spread another dozen feet on each side.

"We need to eventually do two things," Orvie began. "We need to see if we can make our way back upstream, underground, toward the lake and we need to keep following the stream from here on south to find the spot where the logs are removed from it."

"Let me just get this straight," Ted said. "You want us to risk our lives navigating a roaring underground river upstream, fighting the current the whole way, in the dark and then, later, walk out in the open right into the waiting arms of the bad guys who are stationed downstream to catch the stolen logs."

"To catch the logs *and* us," Terry added his hands to his throat.

"I think you have a very accurate grasp of my plan."

“Cool. I’m in,” Terry said with great enthusiasm.

Ted raised his eyebrows. He’d be in on it, too, but displaying a good deal less eagerness than his brother.

“I take it we’re no longer on your property,” Orvie said, really asking.

“Right. Our southern border is about a hundred yards south of the lake. This is one huge meadow down here - an open range. Lots of livestock are brought in to graze here during the summer.”

“Anybody else starved?” Terry asked.

It had come ‘out of the blue’ as is sometimes said.

“Hadn’t thought about it, but yes, actually, starved describes it perfectly,” Orvie said.

Ted pointed to a small stand of pine trees and they walked in its direction. The sun was directly overhead. They found shade just inside the outer ring of trees and sat on the soft bed of pine needles. It could have made a good riddle, Orvie thought: ‘When is a bed of needles soft and comfortable?’ He didn’t mention it.

They were soon busy devouring sandwiches, chips, lemonade, and banana pound cake. It had been a busy, but fruitful morning. Orvie figured he knew the basics of the operation. He had to account for the silent saws, find the equipment, determine the rustling schedule, something about areas referred to as Block ‘F’ and ‘G’, find where the logs were removed from the stream and catch the bad guys in the act. Aside from that, he had it all wrapped up.

From long experience Orvie understood that the closer he got to the end of a mystery, the more dangerous things became. Terry had summarized a few of them very well. He still had to establish that the stream they had just found really was flowing from the lake. It could have just been bubbling to the surface from a spring a few yards back into the cave. He figured that should be a private investigation because it could well be life threatening and he was not about to expose the twins to that kind of danger. He would come back that very night and explore it on his own.

CHAPTER EIGHT: Making Tracks

After lunch they walked south along the stream. Terry tested the water with his hand.

"The water in this stream is quite a bit cooler than the water in the lake was today."

Perhaps it wasn't from the lake after all. Still, Orvie provided what he believed was a reasonable comment.

"A mile underground, running in and around cool rocks might account for that," Orvie offered as an explanation. "What's the constant temperature of the earth down twenty or so feet – in the mid fifty's Fahrenheit, I think."

The twins nodded, not really having any idea about such things, of course.

"We need to be looking for signs of a truck or of marks indicating logs have been dragged from the stream. Can you guys pull up a map of the roads in this area on your phones?"

The twins went to work each wanting to find it first. In fact, they said, "Got it," at the same moment. As it turned out it was two different maps, but that proved to be useful.

"Look for a road that might be lightly traveled a bit further south of here."

"This is northwestern Minnesota, Orvie. *All* the roads are lightly traveled."

"Interesting point. One in favor of the bad guys, I'm thinking."

They each pointed out several that fit the description – of being in the area. It didn't seem to lead to anything useful.

"What do you know about saw mills down here?"

"I'll Google it," Terry said.

"I'll Bing it," Ted said.

There were several in the area. Two specialized in lathe work – basically making telephone poles out of relatively thin logs. Only one cut them into boards. There was also a pulp center that ground unusable trees and branches into pulp to be used in things like particle board and insulation. That paid very little. Orvie doubted if the thieves would go to all that trouble for a really slim payday.

"Make note of that one," Orvie said. "Not sure how we may be able to use it, but info is info and you never know."

They walked on for half an hour. Terry pointed ahead of them on downstream.

"Something. Looks like it's something that spans the creek. Low. A bridge, maybe."

They picked up their pace to a trot and were soon there.

"A log dam?" Ted asked a major question in his tone.

"Strangest dam I've ever seen," Terry added.

There were three ten inch logs placed to span the creek, one directly

above the other. There were ten or so inches left open between them.”

“Seems that water flows under them and between them and a little even flows over the top one,” Terry said describing what all three were seeing.

“A creative log stopper if I ever saw one,” Orvie said, then explained.

“Their placement allows the water to flow on downstream with only minimal interference. Any small debris in the creek flows right on past. It doesn’t back up at all like it would behind a normal, solid dam. But, along comes a two or three foot wide log and it would bump up against the top two logs and stop.”

“I’d call that ingenious,” Ted said.

“Great word, Ted,” Terry said. “Remember that one for Jack.”

Orvie smiled at their sincere back and forth over such things. And he was certain it *would* be remembered for Jack.

It was then they first saw another important feature of the set-up. There were a half dozen twelve foot long smaller diameter logs laid side by side on the opposite bank. They sloped down into the creek. (Or, up from the creek if you were one of the fish looking it over!)

“Like a ramp,” Terry said. “I think I get it. They wait for a log to arrive and somehow pull it out of the water by sliding it up the log ramp.”

“Most likely a winch winding a chain they attach to the near end of the log,” Ted suggested.

“You’re undoubtedly right about that, Orvie agreed. “So, we should find truck tire impressions in the ground over there.”

The twins nodded.

“Looks like it’s time to walk another log,” Orvie said already at the oddly constructed ‘dam’ by the time he finished his suggestion.

“It’ll be slippery so I wouldn’t risk bare feet.”

He was easily and quickly across it, as were the other two.

They found exactly what Orvie had suspected. Many, many, overlapping tire tracks. He knelt down and examined them.

“I’d say it’s the same truck most every time. Here and here and here. Look. See the gouge in the tread. Same tire everywhere.”

“This kid is good!” Terry said to his brother.

“Yeah he is. Lends authority to our belief that he’s really an old man in a kid’s skin.”

It had provided a humorous moment.

Orvie tried to bring them back to the real world.

“Weight? What does one of these logs weigh?”

The twins looked at each other. Ted spoke first.

“There’s something called the 16/16 law about that. A sixteen inch diameter freshly cut pine log sixteen feet long weighs about 1016 pounds. Does that help?”

“Probably. Put your math hats on.”

The twins immediately brought up the calculators on their phones. Orvie wondered what had happened to actually using one’s brain to make calculations.

He didn't pursue it with them, but set the problem for them. So, logs like the ones being stolen average a 24 inch diameter down its length, which is approximately equal to, say, two sixteen inch logs in board feet and say they are 64 feet tall or long – that's four times the 16 feet in the 'law'. So, two of those wide times four long equals somewhere close to the equivalent of eight of those 16 by 16s in the law. So, $8 \times 1016 =$ something over 8,000 pounds or four tons. I'd think that much weight would leave a pretty good imprint in the ground."

"But, Ted pointed out, "that weight is spread out over eight wheels under the very rear of the log and four up front at the back of the cab, so that weight gets spread out among twelve tires.

"Good point. So, divide 8,000 pounds by twelve and what do you get, nearly seven hundred pounds each. I imagine the foot prints of a seven hundred pound man would be pretty clear in most any soil."

"And your point is?" Terry asked.

"I was thinking maybe we could track the truck tire treads to where it eventually enters a road."

"Wouldn't it have just been easier to go look and see if there were really tracks to follow?" Terry asked.

"Probably, but my brain loves a good math problem."

"And," Ted pointed out to his brother, "that brain of his came up with answers before we could, using our calculators."

"OK. I will revise my previous description of the lad to: 'That lends authority to our belief that he's really an old man *genus* in a kid's skin'."

More laughter. Orvie refrained from commenting.

They moved in the general direction the truck would have traveled and immediately found a clear and obvious trail of tire tracks to follow.

"Lots of trips in and out of here I'd say," Ted said pointing back and forth across the path of flattened, dead grass and tread prints ahead of them.

"Sure looks like that," Orvie added.

They followed it nearly a half mile in a mostly straight line to a gravel road. Ted located it on his map – a county map. It turned out to be a township road – typically poorly maintained and almost never patrolled by law enforcement. It met all the requirements that Orvie knew the escape route would need to have.

"That's probably about it for down here," Orvie said turning around.

It would be after four by the time they got home.

They left their still wet tennies on the back porch to dry.

"Great lunch, Mrs. Carter," Orvie called as they made their way through the kitchen.

"Yeah! What he said," Terry repeated.

It was worth chuckles all the way up the stairs.

Back in the twin's room, Orvie got out the first map Ted had showed him of their acreage.

"May I draw some lines on it?"

"Let me scan and print a copy on dad's humongous scanner and printer

down in his office,” Ted said. “You can mark up that copy anyway you want to.”

He was soon back. They laid the copy out on the study table.

“Yardstick?” Orvie asked.

Terry produced one from the closet.

“Pencil?”

Ted took one from the desk drawer and offered it to him.

It reminded the twins of a surgeon asking his nurse for scalpels and such.

“This property is four miles wide, right?”

The twins nodded. Orvie divided the page into four columns across the top and drew lines to the bottom.

“And two miles from top to bottom here on this map, right?”

Again they nodded.

He drew one line across the center of the map.

“What’s it all about?” Terry asked.

“Remember what the older guy at Ripple Ridge said about ‘G’ *block* and ‘F’ *block*?”

Again they nodded.

“I’ve been wondering if maybe they divided your land up into sections – the blocks he referred to. The way the property is set up, one square mile plots would seem like a handy approach.”

“So, eight blocks,” Terry said having no idea where Orvie was going with it.

“Now, what if they named each one with letters in alphabetical order? The names would be ‘A’, ‘B’, ‘C’, and ‘D’ left to right across the top row.”

“And ‘E’, ‘F’, ‘G’, ‘H’ across the bottom,” Ted said continuing Orvie’s concept. “Our house is here in ‘E’. The lake is in ‘H’.”

“That puts ‘G’ a mile west of the lake and a mile east of the house,” Ted said.

“I’m thinking the trees between here and there would muffle a whole lot of sound. What do you guys think?”

The twins agreed with nods and leaned in close to examine the map in more detail.

“Do you have any idea where your crews will be working Thursday night – that’s the night the men at Ripple Ridge seemed to settle on,” Orvie said.

“No, but Gus will know,” Terry said.

“And Gus is?”

“The crew cook. He serves breakfast and dinner in the quarters, but he takes the noon meal to them out in the forest. He’ll have the schedule. Gus never answers his phone – a line phone between here and all the other buildings – so we’ll need to go find him.”

Without any discussion the decision was apparently made and they were down the stairs and across the compound on the trot.

Terry handled the conversation with the elderly gentleman.

“Hey. Gus. Where will the crew’s be cutting on Thursday?”

“Why, you want to know?”

It wasn't what Terry had expected. He was at a loss for a story.

Orvie offered his hand to the man.

"Hi. I'm Orvie. Here for a short visit. The guys here offered to take me camping before I left and Thursday's the only day left for us. We didn't want to plan to be camping where the crews were cutting."

"I see. Nice to meet you by the way. Don't get many visitors out here. Let me check the schedule. They'll be in block 'B'."

The three boys looked at each other. Why would he refer to it in the same way the bad guys referred to it?

He saw their puzzled faces.

"It's how I keep track of them. See, I have it all marked out on my map here. Excuse the spaghetti sauce and gravy stains. It's mostly readable."

"What a clever system you have there. I can see how it makes life easier for you," Orvie said. "Sounds like you've used it for a long time."

"Ever since I come, five years ago."

"Thanks for the info," Terry finally managed and they left.

Once out of ear shot of Gus, Orvie had a question – well several.

"How does your dad refer to various places on the property?"

"Each section has a name, like The Upper Meadow, The Lake, the Grounds – meaning around the house and buildings – Hangman's Tree, Dutch's Revenge – names like that from the old days. They're not neat, even blocks like you and Gus arranged – more the shapes of puzzle pieces I guess."

"What do you know about any family Gus may have?"

"Not really very much," Ted said. "When he first came he talked some about his mother down in the Grand Rapids area. Seemed liked they were pretty close. Haven't heard about her for a while."

"But," Terry added, to Ted, not to Orvie, "we spent a lot more time with him back when we were little kids – not so much the past two years."

Ted nodded. Neither made any attempt to share the information directly with Orvie. The more general conversation moved on.

"Still have two and a half hours 'til dinner," Ted said. "What do want to do?"

"I've been thinking that I'd like to camp out by myself tonight. Your nice soft bed has been great, but I've become used to sleeping out under the stars. You won't mind if I take a rain check on dinner and meet you back here early in the morning will you?"

The boys looked at each other clearly disappointed, but shrugged and nodded.

"Sure. That'll be fine. We'll miss you, but we can understand," Terry said.

Ted said: "That will give us a chance to get ahead on our homework for tomorrow like we did last night. Then we'll have the whole day again. I'm beginning to really like that."

Orvie gathered his gear, made his explanation to Mrs. Carter, and walked west toward the 'Polar Bear' cold Cutter's Creek and the meadow.

Several things were on his mind. The boys had not understood the first

thing about why he'd give up a perfectly good bed for the hard ground, even though they claimed they did. Ted even seemed a bit suspicious.

His plan for the night involved circling back south so he could explore the cave where the underground stream emerged. He happened to have a self-generating flashlight he'd been given by a friend from his previous stop and figured that would come in handy.

He was also concerned about Gus. First, his initial, abrupt response when Thursday was brought up. From the twins' reaction it was clearly somehow out of character for him. Second, he had lied about the map. He had not had it for all of the five years he had worked there. At most, he had it six months. Orvie had sensed other interesting images that had been mixed in with his reaction. The map was in some way connected to horses and one of those horses was being ridden by an unshaven cowboy with a handle bar moustache!

CHAPTER NINE: Way Too Many Close Calls!

Orvie walked south along the creek backtracking the way he had arrived in the area originally. At the point where he estimated he had gone about a mile he removed his shoes and waded back across the creek. It WAS cold. The twins had been correct about that.

Shoes on again, he walked east believing he would come upon the low hill, which he believed contained the underground stream. It would be at least a three mile trek. The meadow rapidly became pine forest which slowed him down a bit. At what he figured was about 6:30 the trees began to thin out and within fifteen minutes he had made contact with the meadow south of the lake. He set his backpack on the ground and took a seat up against the base of a stray tree. He removed a can of pork and beans from his bag, opened it and began enjoying supper – that would have been called *dinner* at the Carters’.

By the time he finished it was just beginning to get dark. His legs were rested and he moved on south along the rise that he figured contained the stream from the lake. The evening air had become cool. He opted to stay in his cutoffs rather than breaking out jeans because he had no idea how much of the way back through the tunnel toward the bluff at the lake he might be spending in the water.

Terry had been right; the water was much cooler than that in the lake. Not really uncomfortable, but much cooler. He sucked it in and began wading the creek into the tunnel. His flashlight cast a bright broad beam. When it dimmed he would shake it up and down and the batteries would immediately be recharged.

He continued wading the waist deep water for about fifty yards. At that point the cave widened considerably with a rock ledge along the side to his left. He mounted it and shivered. The ledge continued for as far as he could see ahead. At that point he opted to change out of his wet cutoffs and into warmer, dry jeans. The air in the cave was quite chilly. He secured the wet garment to the rear of his backpack and continued. The ledge varied in width from just a few feet to ten or twelve feet. There were short, dried branches and some debris on it, suggesting that at some point the water level had risen at least several feet. During heavy rain storms, he figured.

Because of the ledge he made far better time than he thought he would. In less than an hour he came upon a wide, deep looking pool. At its back side ahead of him was a waterfall of sorts – where the water flowed across the stone lip in the lake and back there into the underground stream. That proved to him that the stream was indeed the overflow from the lake. That had been the sole reason for the trip.

The south (near) edge of the pool gradually narrowed forming the stream. All quite unexpectedly, in a wide sweep of his flashlight beam, he found that one of the huge pine logs, which had been sent through the hinged opening, was

caught up on the opposite bank, blocking the stream.

“I imagine that must be the last log they sent through that trap door arrangement on the other side of this bluff. Maybe it was too long. It’s freshly cut and, no new logs could float out of the pool and enter the stream as long it sits there. I wonder if I should try to dislodge it and send it on its way or leave it there?”

He chuckled to himself at the thought of him actually lifting an 8,000 pound log and redirecting it into the stream. He’d leave it, want to or not. He was sure it would cause a problem for the operation. He was sure the bad guys understood that the last log had not floated on downstream to their log-stopper dam. He was sure that meant they would be coming in to rectify (fix) the situation. Clearly, he had not planned his exploration of the cave for the safest time.

That was soon to be proved to him in the worst of all possible ways.

He turned and began the return hike back down the tunnel. He had made his way, perhaps a quarter of the length, when he stopped in his tracks. What was he hearing? Men’s voices – *loud*, men’s voices. He couldn’t tell how many, but was sure it was a whole lot more than he wanted in his life at that moment. They had to be the men coming to find the missing log. That should keep their gaze directed down at the stream.

Some twenty yards back he had passed a rock shelf that was up eight or so feet above the ledge. He returned as quietly, but as quickly as he could. The men’s lights were suddenly visible although still only tiny dots a good distance down stream.

He tossed up his backpack and bag and soon managed himself up beside them on the shelf. It turned out to be nearly three feet wide and ten feet long. The roof was high up there near the lake. There appeared to be one more, narrower rock shelf three feet above him. He’d be happy to stay where he was. He moved his gear tightly against the wall, and then did the same for himself. He flattened out on his stomach hoping that would minimize any profile that might be visible from the ledge below. He figured – well, hoped – they would have no reason to be looking up.

They came closer. Presently, their flashlights lit the area. Should he risk a peek to see how many adversaries (enemies) there were? This was Orvie. Of course he would! He counted seven. He had only allowed a two second look, but he believed the man with the mustache was leading them. It was always difficult to make out the details of what was directly behind a beam of light.

In another thirty seconds they would be directly below him. He began taking slow, short, shallow breaths through his mouth – nose breathing tended to be more easily heard. Something dropped on him from the shelf above. He knew immediately what it was. A long, narrow, slimy, body, slithered across his back and bare arms. Without thinking he raised his elbows to get rid of it. It fell over the side onto the men below.

A shot rang out. My how he hoped it hadn’t been aimed at him. There was

a second shot. One man chided (kidded) another about being such a poor shot that it took him two in order to get a Timber Rattler. That was followed by a good deal of laughter as they moved on in search of the wedged log.

Orvie knew about Timber Rattlers – their venom was deadly. He had to wonder; if there had been one up there above him, might there not be more? Rattlesnakes tended to live in large groups, especially when in caves.

‘I hope that one’s mommy doesn’t decide to come looking for him,’ he thought to himself. He also wondered if the sound or reverberation (echo) from the shots might have disturbed any of those remaining up above him.

The next important question: should he leave once they made their way up to the pool? He had no idea how long it would take them to release the log. They had been carrying pry bars and ropes so Orvie assumed the problem had happened before, and they had a system in place to deal with it. What, however, if there were more men on their way to help? If he were to leave, he might meet them and he had no assurance he could find another suitable hiding place. He decided to stay put.

Presently, he heard them groaning and cursing. He heard the sound of metal against stone. He heard one of them urging the others on – the moustache, he assumed.

Ten minutes passed. Fifteen. Twenty. At about twenty-five a roar went up from the men. Apparently the log had been freed back into the stream. There was no reason to rise up and look to see if it floated by because it was pitch dark. He remained still, fighting off visions of a dozen slithering snakes deciding to go exploring their new neighbor one floor below. He hoped they weren’t particularly fond of boy flesh.

That fantasy ended when he heard the men making their way back in his direction. There was talk of beer and whiskey and women – apparently promised rewards for their successful mission. Again he only allowed the shallowest of breaths through his widely opened mouth.

They stopped directly beneath him. (Oh, joy!) He saw flashes of light flare up. What could be going on? It soon became clear. Cigar smoke curled up and hung there above him. Perhaps the boss had broken them out to celebrate a job well done.

Orvie hated cigar smoke and was afraid it would lead him to choke or cough or sneeze. With no place to go, it just became thicker and more foul smelling. He swallowed repeatedly hoping that would trick his system into not sneezing or coughing.

They began moving on. It happened – the slightest, hand-muffled, sneeze. The men grew silent. Presently one spoke.

“That’s where the snakes are up there. Probably hiss’n’ at our smoke.”

There were sounds of agreement and they moved on. Orvie began breathing again. He allowed one hand to move to his nose and pinch it the way one does when trying to convince a sneeze not to materialize. It worked. Still he waited until he no longer heard the voices.

He dropped his gear to the ledge below and then let himself down. Actually, the air was very little better down there. He slid into the backpack and slung the bag strap over his shoulder. With a huge sigh, he cautiously began moving toward the mouth of the cave.

He was very glad he had left the twins behind. It suddenly became clear to him that there was going to be very little time for sleep. It was going on 9:30 and he still had the trek back to 'Block E' close to the boy's house. It was what it was. He made the switch out of his jeans and waded his way to the cave opening, jeans and bag on the top of his head. He dried off, slipped back into his jeans and was on his way. Although dark, with a breeze, the outside air was considerably warmer than he'd been experiencing inside the cave.

It was midnight on the dot when he sat his gear down in a small clearing among the trees a hundred yards from the house and about that from the meadow. He allowed himself to momentarily consider entering the house and sleeping the night away in an actual bed, but that soon passed. He needed to keep to his story for several reasons.

He smiled when he opened his bag and found a can of pepper spray – his new friends were looking after him. It did make him think more specifically about safety precautions, however. Wild animals tended to stay away from fire and the night air had suddenly grown cool.

He collected a dozen, eight inch rocks and formed them into a fire circle. There were plenty of small, dry branches littering the area. He soon had a small fire going. It felt good. His bones had chilled inside the cave. He arranged his cutoffs and shoes on sticks – stuck into the ground – to dry, curled up in his blanket and was immediately asleep.

At some point he was awakened by an odd sound – something walking back and forth in the grass well out into the darkness. Had the men somehow found out about him and tracked him to his campsite? Was it a breeze rustling the tall grass? Maybe Matilda and her fawns. At the moment the cloud moved out and revealed the moon above, he figured he would have traded for any one of those other possibilities.

There, pacing back and forth, no more than twenty yards to the south was the biggest black bear he had ever seen. There was a gentle breeze from the south. It brought with it the unmistakable stench (stink) of a bear. Of all the animals Orvie had encountered in his 125 years, bears smelled the worst – no contest. He lay still as he tried to formulate a plan of action – or inaction. His carrying bag was within easy reach just beyond his head so the spray was one possibility. He hated the thought of harming the animal if that were not necessary. Slowly he tuned his head and surveyed the fire. It had died down considerably. The pile of kindling was out of reach.

Dozens of possible moves flitted in and out of his mind – climb a tree (not realistic for reasons leaned earlier) or outrun the animal, were the two that topped his list. He remembered that Black Bears had been timed at more than thirty five miles per hour. The fastest man on earth could only manage thirty.

Running wasn't an option. As long as the bear seemed content to maintain its distance Orvie decided not to make any major move.

He did slowly extend his right arm to his bag and eased the zipper open. To actually reach inside would mean he'd have to scoot his whole body forward by a good foot. He decided to just remain in that position, ready to react if the situation came to call for it. He felt his breathing increase. He felt his heart rate increasing. So much for a few hours of restful sleep.

"Presently the bear stopped pacing, turned, and positioned itself straight on toward Orvie. It raised its head, but made no sound – perhaps sniffing the air. With the breeze to its back it probably wasn't able to smell Orvie, although he was clearly within sight. Orvie hoped the jean-clad, back side of a twelve year old didn't compute for him.

The bear began to move forward. Orvie tensed; every muscle in his body was ready to spring into action. It came closer and closer, stopping for a moment now and then to sniff the air. It was within ten feet when it veered to the west and walked on by picking up speed and lumbering off into the darkness.

"Orvie checked himself over: pulse, yes; breathing, yes; dry pants, yes. He was good, but doubted if he'd be able to sleep another wink that night. He built up the fire – a LOT – and went back to his blanket.

He must have gone back to sleep because sometime later he awoke to the birds' morning wake up call. Had it been a dream? Probably not, since he found himself clutching the can of pepper spray to his chest like a child clutching its favorite nighty-night teddy bear.

CHAPTER TEN: When is a Wall of Stone, not a Wall of Stone?

While Orvie was finishing stirring the ashes from his fire to make sure there were no remaining embers that could come to life in the morning breeze, he heard a familiar duet of voices.

“Hey, Orvie!”

He turned and looked, meeting the twins’ raised hands with his own. They jogged toward him.

“Saw the smoke earlier. We figured it was from your fire. Have a good night?”

That had all spilled out of Terry.

“Great. Good to be out under the stars again. Thanks for understanding.”

“Mom’s got the pancakes on the griddle so we need to hurry – it’s why we came looking for you,” Ted announced.

He shouldered Orvie’s backpack and Terry took the bag.

“What service, guys. You spoil me.”

“Just missed you.”

“You missed me during the night while we all would have been sound asleep?” he asked trying to make a joke of it. It made him wonder if he was letting them become too dependent on him for friendship. He had seen it happen before.”

Their mother greeted him with an unexpected hug. He was happy to return it. The boys watched and beamed. Orvie figured he needed to be careful or some night while he slept and without his permission or participation they’d sneak in a judge and adopt him.

“Made your favorite breakfast,” she said. “It just happens to also be my boys’ favorite as well.”

“So, what did you do? Go anywhere? Have a good time? You smell like a campfire,” Terry went on.

“Now, son, let Orvie have his privacy. Maybe he doesn’t want to share his alone time.”

“It’s ok, Mrs. Carter. Well, let’s see, I wrestled a Timber Rattlesnake, was almost attacked by a band of huge, cigar smoking, smelly, rascallions (bad guys), and had a near death standoff with a five hundred pound Black Bear.”

It was another time when the truth was unbelievable.

“Ok, so you can keep it private. Sorry if we were snooping where we shouldn’t have been. We’ve never had any private stuff between us so I suppose we don’t understand about that,” Terry said.

“*No problem*, as I’m led to believe your father’s sons have been known to say.”

“It may take a computer to unravel that sentence,” Ted said.

“Don’t repeat it to Jack or he’ll make us diagram it.”

Orvie insisted that they do the morning dishes. Once that was finished they

retreated to the boys' room upstairs.

"So, what's on the agenda for today?" Ted asked.

"First, do you know the dates the thefts have occurred?"

"Sure do," Terry said. "Ted keeps track of details like that on his calendar."

"I got it all right here," Ted confirmed.

"Now, do you have weather reports for those same days – nights, actually?"

"Can get them. That kind of stuff is available on our weather app," Ted said.

"We need to correlate the condition of the night skies with the days of the thefts."

"Give us two minutes."

Terry pulled up the app. Ted read off the dates. The information was definitive – each theft occurred on nights when the sky was overcast enough to block out the moon.

"Apparently the bad guys prefer to work in the dark," Terry said voicing the logical conclusion.

"Seems so. Why?" Orvie asked.

"So they won't be seen?" Ted offered as a question, thinking Orvie might be moving along some other direction.

"That's the most likely possibility, but seen *where*? In the forest at night where there is nobody to see them? In fact, it means they have to provide some sort of artificial light in the area they're working. Doesn't make sense, does it?"

The twins understood the answer was obvious so neither offered a comment.

Orvie continued to think out loud.

"If it doesn't need to be dark at the site of the cutting, that leaves either the time before the cutting or the time after. How does that help us?"

"With no moonlight the roads would be dark so their trucks or vehicles couldn't be easily seen," Ted said.

"That's what I've been thinking. But which? The coming or the leaving?"

"Or both," Terry added.

The others nodded as they went back to thinking in the silent mode for a few minutes.

"Think about this," Orvie began. "If, as I still suspect, they are using Ripple Ridge to store their equipment, there would really be no coming – they would already have their stuff here."

"That leaves the going, I guess," Terry said.

"The log truck that uses that township gravel road to the far south," Ted said just to make sure they were all on the same page.

"Right," Orvie said confirming it.

"What's along that road?" Orvie asked.

"Like?" It was a question from Terry.

"Like businesses, houses, teepees, monsters that live in lagoons – I'm not

sure what it might be.”

While Orvie and Terry had been wasting words at each other, Ted brought up a map that had the local property noted on it. There were no business. A few houses. Several barns. A riding stable. Nothing really of note or out of the ordinary for the area.

“I guess we’ll come back to that,” Orvie said. “Let’s look at the pictures of Ripple Ridge you guys took the other day.”

They pulled them up on their phones and showed Orvie how to scroll among them.

“Can we print some of these?”

“Sure, Sure,” they said almost at the same moment.

“Which ones?” Ted asked.

Orvie went through them and pointed out four that for some reason interested him. They were soon printed in high resolution color. They laid them out on the table. Orvie studied them. The twins studied them.

Presently, Orvie rearranged three of them and pushed the fourth to the side. They were of the north end of the big block of rock. There was one shot of the middle section and two that were mostly of the two edges of the front. He folded those two and laid them on either side of the center picture giving a more or less continuous view of the entire front.

“Tell me what you see – think about the quality of the pictures.”

They studied them for some time. Terry spoke first.

“The two on the outside seem more – what? – drab or blurry or less distinct in color. The one in the middle is *more* distinct – like the variations in coloring are clearer than in the others.”

“I never really saw all the colors before,” Ted said. “All I saw was brown rock but look at it up close – there are browns, tans, reddish browns, yellowish tans, little flecks of almost white or gray.”

“I think we have a part of our mystery solved,” Orvie said.

“We do?” the twins said/asked at once.”

“We need to get back up there and the sooner the better – before the bad guys start gathering for the night raid on your trees.”

“Sounds serious,” Terry said.

“Sounds dangerous,” Ted said.

“I just imagine you’re both correct.”

Terry took a moment to send a text message.

“What you doing?” Ted asked. “We’re in a hurry!”

“Asking mom to make us a lunch to take along.”

Now THAT Orvie really couldn’t understand. She was just down one flight of stairs and ten feet from the hall. He supposed that some things about him would just always remain old fashioned.

They put together some supplies in a backpack. Terry offered to carry it for the first leg of the hike. By the time they arrived in the kitchen a lunch was ready. There was just enough room left in the backpack – almost as if it had been

planned.

They were out the door to Mrs. Carter's, "Be careful, now." The twins raised their hands, clearly their response to her admonition (caution), which meant, of course, "We're *always* careful". (Let's see, since when has any twelve year old boy *really* been careful when the other choice held the possibility of fun and excitement?)

"So, why you think the color thing?" Terry asked

"Was that a question?" Ted asked.

"You know what I meant."

Orvie smiled and offered his take on it.

"My bet is the center section is fake and has been carefully painted to look as much like the rest of the outside as possible."

"Fake rock?" Terry asked.

"Plaster or cement contoured to take the same surface shape as the rest of it. Like you see in zoos."

"And how does that help us?" Terry continued.

"It could like be hiding a door or opening or something," Ted said.

"Why would you want a door into a huge chunk of solid rock?" Terry asked.

"You wouldn't, of course," Orvie said. "If there's a door it means there's something inside – a cave most likely."

"If there had been a cave opening there, wouldn't dad know about it? I mean, he grew up roaming all over this place?"

"That bothered me at first, too," Orvie said. "But maybe there was just a crack that went unnoticed. Somebody found it, looked inside, and found the cave. Then they cut away an opening large enough for a door and put up the fake front."

"An awful lot of maybe, if, and flat out conjecture (guesswork) there, Orvie," Ted said.

"You're certainly right about that."

When they arrived they set to examining the middle section of the front. It was just as Orvie had predicted – fake, very, very good fake. If you didn't know exactly what you were looking for you'd miss it. The problem remained about the door. Where was it?"

"Remember the old movies about haunted houses and castles? They always had secret passages, and the doors to them would open when something was turned or pushed or pulled. Let's get started turning, pushing and pulling anything that looks like it might be turnable, pushable, or pullable."

"Are those really words?" Terry asked.

"Probably not," Orvie said with a grin. "Perhaps we should call them 'Meaning Filled Alphabetic Sequences', instead of words."

"Oh, yes, the old MFAS's," Terry said attempting a joke. It must have been one since the other two responded as if it had been hilarious.

They continued exploring the surface for the better part of a half hour. They found nothing. Orvie stepped back some ten yards and walked back and

forth examining the surface from a distance at various angles.

“Got something,” he said with some excitement in his tone.

“What?” the twins asked together.

They followed him to a spot right at the left edge of the cement work – four feet off the ground.

“See these two shiny spots.”

“Yeah.”

“Yeah.”

He took out his pocket knife.

“You going to cut through the cement and make your own door,” Terry asked, letting his silliness suggest his puzzlement.

“If I’m right it won’t be necessary.”

He placed the blade of his knife so it spanned both shiny spots. A ten foot wide section of the fake wall folded out from the bottom and raised up like a garage door.

“Electrical contacts. Must be battery operated,” Orvie explained.

They stood there staring into the darkness.

“Lights on, please, gentlemen,” Orvie said.

As one they flicked them on and lit the area – at least the front of the area.

“A cave for sure,” Ted said.

“A huge cave,” Terry added.

“A huge cave filled with very interesting items, wouldn’t you say?”

Then twins agreed with nods. They moved in a few yards.

“Our first piece of business is to find out how to open and close that door from in here. Search the sides for a switch of some kind.”

“Like that one?” Terry asked immediately, pointing.

He reached out to flip it. Orvie grabbed his arm to stop him.

“Sorry, pal, but I think we need you two back outside. If it closes the door when I flip it from in here, I’ll then flip it the other way to make sure it opens for us. No reason for all of us to get trapped in here if that’s not how it works.”

“So how long do we wait before we call in the National Guard,” Ted asked.

It had sounded more like something Terry would have said.

“Give me thirty seconds, ok?”

“I don’t see why you get the fun of risking being buried alive in here forever,” Terry said. (Now THAT did sound like Terry!)

The twins moved outside. Orvie flipped the switch. The door closed slowly. He waited a few seconds after it stopped moving and flipped the switch in the other direction. It opened. They had it figured out.

The twins went inside and they closed the door behind them.

There are lights hanging here and there, but I don’t see any way to turn them on,” Ted said.

“Probably a generator in here somewhere,” Terry said.

Good thinking, Terry!” Orvie said.

That comment lit a mental light bulb above Orvie’s head – like they happen

on the pages of comic books. He kept the thought to himself, however.

They made their way into the cave. There was a large box truck. It was empty. They found long, heavy chains they were sure were the ones used to span the tops of the trees. They found harnesses and other paraphernalia (equipment) so horses could be used to do the things they had already figured out were being done. There was no doubt about it; they had found the equipment storage area right where Orvie had predicted it would be.

Something he had *not* predicted was that once they were inside exploring the area, the front door would slowly begin to open and two men carrying rifles would make ready to enter. Talk about no place to hide! What could the boys do?

CHAPTER ELEVEN: More Clues. More Danger!

Orvie nudged the boys on toward the rear of the cave. They had no idea how far back it went, but Orvie doubted if the bad guys needed to use all of it. They had already doused their flashlights. Orvie whispered.

“Ted, hold on to the back of my belt. Terry the same to Ted.”

The arrangement was completed and Orvie moved them off toward the north side – the nearest long side. They were soon there and proceeded to feel their way on toward the back. It set an irregular path. As far as they could tell there was nothing stored back there. They moved on for some time before coming to what seemed to be the rear wall.

Orvie eased the others into a sitting position along the long wall. If they were going to be safe anywhere it would be back there out of sight in the dark.

Suddenly the sound of a motor began way to the front and that forward area became lit. A generator. The sound then stopped, but the lights continued. It was confusing. They needed a generator to keep the bulbs lit and yet they remained lit with apparently no generator.

The lighted area occupied no more than the first ten yards of the area. The boys were a good twenty yard away from that area. The cave was apparently about thirty yards long. Orvie figured that meant the walls – except for the front – were perhaps another ten yards thick all the way around.

Orvie began stringing together a series of random thoughts that had been floating in and out of his head for several days. He whispered to his friends.

“A mobile generator contained in a soundproof box or some such thing. It operates the lights at the sights where they are cutting trees. I’ll also bet it powers some sort of electrical saws. They would be less powerful than regular chain saws and run slower. That could account for the rougher surface on the stumps they leave behind.”

Ted spoke:

“Did you see the cabinet to the left of the front door as we came in?”

The other two indicated they had not.

“That could be where those saws are kept. It’s four feet deep and has five or six doors the size of house doors on it.”

“They can’t drive that big box truck through the forest,” Terry said. “How do they transport everything?”

It had been a good question. Orvie thought he had it figured out, but he would wait to fill in the others after it was safer to talk.

The two men talked together and moved from place to place up front. The boys couldn’t make out what they were saying, partly because they were pretty far away and partly because they spoke in low voices. They were too far away to for them to see their faces.

After about half an hour had passed the motor noise could be heard again for a very short time, then it stopped and the lights went out. The front door

opened, the men left, and the door closed. The boys moved cautiously back toward the front of the cave, flashlight on.

“You guys search the cabinet,” Orvie said. “I’m going to find that generator.”

Orvie approached a long narrow trailer-like structure no more than four feet wide and six high. It had four large wheels – two front and two back – and a double tongue with enough room between them to fit a horse and long enough to span the lengths of two horses single file up front. He opened the door on the side. It was the generator, just as he had suspected. The walls were insulated with soundproofing material and the air exhaust and inlet were both baffled so the noise from inside did not leave the container. There was a large fuel tank built into the front of the wagon and sat over the front wheels, which kept that weight off the horses. There was a bank of reels with electrical wires wound onto them. Apparently they plugged into the saws and the wire reeled out as far as necessary for the saws to function.

He closed the door and joined the twins. Now, if the saws just turned out to actually be electric. If not, he was back to square one.

“Lookie what we got here,” Terry said. “A dozen of the strangest chainsaws you’ve ever seen with an electrical plug on the back of each one. There are two oversized saws that can easily span a three foot tree trunk.”

Ted continued more thoughtfully: “The chain is really thin – narrow – only a third the normal size – to reduce friction and therefore reduce the power requirements, I’m thinking.”

“So,” Orvie said trying to put it all together, “small saws and really long electrical cords to trim the branches and two humongous ones to saw through the base of the trunk. They are all powered by the generator in that sound insulated wagon over there. It is clearly designed to be horse drawn. The question is, where are the horses? You can’t just bring a dozen or so horses in here in the back of a truck and unload them without raising suspicion. The country road is only a block north of here. If it happened regularly, somebody would have seen that and told your father.”

Nobody had any useful ideas.

“I’d suggest we get out of here guys,” Orvie said.

“I second that,” Ted said.

“I third it or whatever,” Terry added.

They approached the door and stopped.

“What if the men are still hanging around out front?” Ted asked.

“You’re complicating our lives,” Orvie said not really kidding.

“Or,” Ted came back, “Saving them!”

It had been a point well taken.

“Don’t you suppose they’d have built a peep hole into the door?” Terry asked.

“Excellent thought,” Orvie said. “It’s dark in here and light out there. Douse the flashlights and let’s see if we can’t find a spot of light somewhere on or

around the sides of this door.”

It didn't take long. Terry found it. It contained a 180 degree lens that allowed the viewer to see the entire area in front of the door.

“All clear,” he announced.

Three minutes later the door had been opened, the boys had exited, and the door had been reclosed.

They began the walk back south. Something was bothering Orvie.

“You said Gus doesn't answer his phone. Do you know why?”

He got a pair of shrugs.

“I'm sure I saw a cell phone partly covered by a towel on a counter in his kitchen.”

“Gus? A cell phone? I doubt it,” Ted said.

“Yeah,” Terry chimed in. “He doesn't have anybody to call and he can always use our land line to call anywhere – he knows that.”

“Are you up to something that is probably fully illegal, but may solve a major part of our mystery?”

They looked at each other. Ted answered.

“I guess if it won't hurt anybody.”

“I assume you guys could examine a cell phone and figure out what numbers had been received and called on it, right?”

“Sure. *No problem* . . . as our father might relate that his sons say often,” Terry said messing it up, but that just made it all the more humorous.

Ted turned to his brother.

“We do say that a lot, don't we?”

“I guess, but that's no problem is it?”

Orvie chuckled. The twins didn't catch the phrase in there.

“I guess not, but maybe we're in a rut.”

“Think so? That bad?”

“Maybe not, just thinking we could try something else for a while.”

Orvie interrupted.

“If you two old women are done with your tea and gossip klatch (conversation), we have work to finish.”

Again, two shrugs and grins.

“Shoot,” Terry said. “What you got stewing in that head of yours?”

“I want us to get a look at who Gus has been talking with on that phone and when – assuming there really is phone.”

“Gus?” Terry said. “He's an old sweetheart. Surely you don't suspect him of masterminding all this, do you?”

“What I'm suggesting can clear him just as easily as accuse him.”

“I guess we're ok with that, huh?”

“I guess. What's your plan?”

“You two know his routine. Select a time you think you have a chance of borrowing his phone for however long it will take and do it.”

“He takes a nap mid-morning and mid-afternoon. If we pick up the pace we

can probably catch him asleep right now,” Terry said.

They took off on a fast trot. Ted lead and Orvie brought up the rear. As they approached the house Orvie had one last thing to say.

“I stink like my campfire and that big old Black Bear from last night. Ok if I shower while you two play detective?”

“Sure.” Ted said.

Presently the boys moved off toward Gus’s quarters and Orvie headed to the house. The shower felt good and he lingered a bit longer than usual. He dried off and began searching for his cutoffs. They weren’t where he’d left them. He opened his backpack. All his clothes were gone. A practical joke, he wondered.

On his bed he found a large bath towel. There was a note pinned to it.

‘Doing a load of the boy’s clothes. Thought yours were probably due for the suds as well. Wrap up in the towel if you want to. Have you dry duds in a half hour.’

“I could get used to this life,” he said out loud as he wrapped the huge towel twice around his waist.

He sat in the boy’s recliner and began reading some more in the history book he had started several nights before.

The boys’ clattering up the stairs signaled that quiet time was about to come to an abrupt halt.

The boys stopped at the door and looked in. Terry turned to Ted.

“Hey. Sexy guy in our room. Close your eyes.”

Nothing about it was really funny and yet the three of them went into convulsions over it. Orvie soon brought them back to the problem at hand.

Ted started the explanation.

“We found the cell phone – we imagine right where you saw it on the counter. We got all his calls back four months on our phones. They were all really short – lasted only five to seven seconds. What could you say in that short a time? They were all incoming, by the way – none of them were ones that Gus placed.”

“You can just transfer them from phone to phone like that?”

“No, we took pictures of each page. There were only sixteen calls in all – just two pages – two screens.”

“You won’t believe what we found – not in a billion years will you believe what we found,” Terry said with complete confidence.”

Orvie took a stab at the answer:

“There was just one number that called him sixteen times and it had the same area code as yours.”

“Or, maybe you *will* believe exactly what we found. Want to tell us the number?”

“Sorry. Don’t have that, but I’ll bet I can give you the location of the guy that number belongs to.”

“How? We can’t even do that on the computer without paying for the

service.”

“All we need to do is call that number and see if the person at the other end gives up who he is or what business it might be. There may be a safer way. Calling him would allow him to find you. Where’s that map you had up of the property along the township road to the south?”

Ted went to their computer and with only a few key clicks had it up on the screen.

“Is there a name on that riding stable?”

“Let’s see. Harvey’s Riding Academy.”

“Ok, now look up *Harvey’s Riding Academy* on the internet. See if it has a website.”

Again it was accomplished in a wink.

“Here it is,” Ted announced.

“Does it give the phone number?”

“It gives a whole lot more than that,” Ted said. “Come take a look at this!”

The primary phone number was not the one on Gus’s phone, but the holiday number and emergency number was! It listed the name of the owner as Harvey Haskins. The best part popped up as Ted scrolled further down the page. There, big as life was a photograph of the owner – it was the older man they had seen at Ripple Ridge the first time they visited there.

“My hunch is that every one of the calls to Gus’s phone from that number was made a day or two before each tree theft.”

Ted matched the dates on the phone with the dates of the thefts as he had them recorded on his calendar.

“Again, it’s just like you figured. Each one was made during the morning, one day before.”

“What does that mean?”

“It means that for some reason as yet unknown to us, Gus is tipping off the thieves about where your dad and his crew will be working on the days they plan to take out trees – the moonless, super dark, nights. They clearly want to be far away from your crew. I’m thinking they may bring in their equipment in the late afternoon when the crews are finishing up. Here would be significant noise so they couldn’t hear the movement of the thieves through the forest. Also, that way they would be ready when darkness arrives.

“We’re getting close. I’d like to get to get a look at the horses in that stable,” Orvie said.

“Let’s go,” Terry said. “What we looking for?”

“We’ll know when we find it.”

They started down stairs. At the bottom the boys’ mother entered the hall. She looked at Orvie.

“May I suggest you at least put on some pants before you go outside?”

It had been directed at Orvie – Orvie standing there wearing only a towel.

“Your laundry is ready. Just needs to be taken upstairs.”

Ted picked up the basket.

Orvie thanked her for doing the wash and five minutes later the three were again making their way down the stairs – everybody fully presentable that time.

“Be back late for lunch. We’ll call you, mom.” Ted said as the three of them left through the back door.

CHAPTER TWELVE: Loose Ends

“Lot’s still to do today, guys,” Orvie said. “Need to set a fairly fast pace, here.”

They were immediately into a fast trot, single file, with Ted in the lead. They opted to go straight south through the forest rather than going way west to the meadow and then south. It was a rougher route, but the twins assured Orvie that it would be considerably faster.

They had been correct. Ten minutes shy of an hour they came upon the township road. They slowed to a walk and headed east toward the stable. As they walked they hatched a plan. The twins would engage the person in charge in a conversation about the possibility of taking riding lessons. With that person occupied, Orvie would look around the facility.

A sheriff’s car approached them and slowed, coming to a stop next to them. The deputy rolled down the window. The twins approached, eagerly.

“Hey, Dave. What you doing out this way?”

“My wife and I bought the Johnson place back about a mile. I live out here now.”

“Welcome to our neighborhood,” Terry said.

“May I ask the same of you? What you doing clear down here?”

Ted handled it.

“Heading for the Riding Academy. Going to see what they have to offer.”

“You two kids ride like pros. I doubt if they can teach you anything.”

Terry jumped in, hoping to remodel the story to make it seem more plausible (reasonable).

“It’s really for our new friend here, Orvie. He’s staying with us for a while.”

“Welcome to the neighborhood, as seems to be the way to greet a newcomer out here,” Dave said offering a somewhat awkward shake through the window.

“Thanks. It’s beautiful country.”

“Where you from?”

“My family moves around a lot. Dad works construction. Several states south. Up here on part of my summer vacation. I seldom get to spend much time with Ted and Terry.”

It was mostly true and none of it would hurt anybody. It seemed to satisfy Dave. Orvie turned to Ted.

“I’m thinking it would be a good idea to have a deputy’s cell number. Never can be too safe, you know.”

Terry handled it very well.

“A tenderfoot,” he said smiling at Dave. “Still a little skittish about being so far from services.”

Dave smiled and handed over a business card.

“That reminds me,” he said, turning back to the twins. “Any more leads on

the tree rustlers, as your father calls them?”

“Ted turned to Terry who turned to Orvie, who spoke.

“Actually, I overheard their father saying something about being very close to catching them – at least I think that’s what he said. Not sure what that really means.”

“We’ll crank up our level of preparedness, then, in case we’re needed. Of course, I figure no gang of bad guys could stand a chance up against that bunch of grizzly bears you’re dad has on his payroll.”

They all chuckled, said goodbye and the deputy drove off.

Orvie sensed nothing but good and honest feelings from the man.

“How did we do?” Terry asked.

“Fantastic!”

“It was a good move to get Dave’s private cell number – especially now that he’s living so close to us,” Ted said.

They continued on to the stable.

With the plan in motion, the twins went ahead and entered the office. Orvie moved to the rear where there were two barns – one was huge – probably one hundred feet square. He assumed it was an indoor riding arena, considering the snow would make riding outside nearly impossible six or seven months a year. He entered the smaller of the two. It was the stable.

He didn’t see anyone inside. There was a tack room (reins, saddles, etc.) near the front. He let himself in. The lights were on. He figured that was probably *not* a good sign. Somebody might be coming right back. Still, he made a quick round of the gear that was hanging there and sitting on the wide shelves around the outside walls. It seemed legitimate. Most of the saddles seemed way oversized for typical riding horses. That fit into his emerging theory.

He peeked out into the stable area where the horses stood patiently in stall after stall. Still he saw no one, so he entered the large area. As he passed the stalls most of the animals greeted him with a whinny or snort or the nodding of a head. Since Orvie didn’t speak horse, he remained silent hoping they didn’t think he was being impolite. In all, there were two dozen horses. Six were typical riding breeds. The rest were Clydesdales – huge, strong, workhorses with hoofs the diameter of Frisbees. Some beer company used them in their TV commercials. Those oversized saddles just might fit them pretty well. But training new riders on Clydesdales? It made no sense. Something else, however, made perfect sense.

He turned to leave the building. There, blocking his way, was a man all decked out in cowboy gear. Quick-thinking Orvie didn’t miss a beat.

“Hey! You Harvey? I been trying to find you.”

“No. I’m Joe. What you want?”

“I’ve been thinking of taking riding lessons and thought I’d come and check out the place. You sure have lots of really big horses here.”

“What’s your point?”

“No point. Just an observation. I’m afraid I know next to nothing about

horses.”

“You need to go to the office up by the road. Frank can answer any questions you have and sign you up if you decide to take lessons.”

“Ok. Thanks. That small building up front?”

“Right.”

Orvie turned and walked toward the door taking strides that were probably a bit longer than normal. Up to that point in the conversation he had been downright lucky. Almost to safety at the door, the man called after him.

“Hey, kid!”

Orvie didn’t know whether to turn and face him or run for his life. For some reason he turned. The man walked toward him.

“You dropped your handkerchief or whatever this rag is.”

Orvie moved to meet him and managed to mount a grin even though wondered about what turn things might take if he discovered the distinctive spur star till wrapped in it.

“Thanks. Sorry for littering.”

They met. He accepted the rag, turned and left with no further problem.

‘Did I really say, sorry for littering? How dumb, dumb, dumb,’ he thought to himself.

He walked toward the office. It didn’t have a back door so he went around to the front. The twins were coming out. Orvie hitched his head and they moved on out to the road.

“So, smooth sailing, I guess?” Terry asked.

“If being stopped and questioned by a very mean looking dude and risking being trampled by a herd of horses only properly ridden by Knights wearing suits of armor, then, yes, smooth sailing.”

The twins were confused of course and although Orvie thought it had been quite humorous he chose not to explain.

“We just got another big piece of the puzzle. I doubt if this is really a riding academy.”

“We got the same idea,” Ted said. “The guy in there said all the classes were full until January. He didn’t have any brochures or anything for us to take with us. He wouldn’t even put our names on a waiting list.”

“Makes sense. The horses in the stable are Clydesdales.”

“Work horses?” Terry said clearly confused.

“Ah! Work horses!” Ted said suddenly understanding.

“Not only that, they have saddles in there that are plenty big enough to be used to ride them,” Orvie said.

Terry remained puzzled. As they broke into a trot, Ted explained what he understood.

“The bad guys ride into our forest on work horses. Once there, the saddles come off and they are hitched up to do stuff like pull that generator wagon, lower the trees after they’re cut and drag them to the lake.”

“Right,” Orvie added. “That way, no horses need to be transported in

trucks. I imagine they always ride separately using different routes. They may meet up behind Ripple Ridge and then move to the 'block' they will be cutting that night. All that probably takes place close to dark like we figured. On moonless nights they aren't likely to be seen out here on this road. And, the truck that hauls away the trees that they catch at the log stopper dam also uses this road."

"It all fits," Terry said.

"So does one other thing," Orvie added. "One of the normal sized horses back there was the dapple we saw one of the men riding up at Ripple Ridge."

The twins nodded, suddenly sensing how really serious things were becoming.

"What's next?"

"We need to go have a chat with Gus."

"To accuse him?" Terry asked suddenly saddened at the prospect.

"No. To obtain the facts about his involvement. The sort of man you describe him to be is not the kind who would be in on this willingly."

"You mean you think he's being forced into it?" Ted asked.

"Don't you?"

The twins looked at each other and nodded.

"Who'll do the talking?" Ted asked.

"One or both of you guys. Is one of you closer to him than the other?"

"Terry, probably," Tim said.

Terry nodded.

As they turned to follow the meadow north, Orvie outlined his plan to his friends. He laid out the nature of the conversation Terry needed to have with the old man.

Terry called their mother. It seemed they would be home at noon after all.

They walked in the door at 11:58. Mrs. Carter looked at the clock.

"Close enough, I suppose, but you really need to try and be more punctual."

They smiled and gathered at the kitchen table. Tuna salad sandwiches, sliced tomatoes, fried scalloped potatoes, lemonade and a pint of fudge ripple ice cream apiece. The twins filled her in on Dave's new place and mentioned they had visited the riding academy. Lunch had been served on paper plates and drinks in cups so cleanup went fast.

Making no move toward going upstairs, they left through the back door.

"Gus will be out feeding the men until 1:30 or so," Terry said.

"Time for a quick swim if you want to," Ted added.

"Sounds good to me," Orvie agreed.

They swam until 1:45 – longer than planned, but between diving and dunking and splashing and nearly laughing themselves into drowning, it just seemed to take that long.

Orvie hung back as they approached Gus. Terry knew the drill.

"Gus. We got something really serious to talk with you about."

“Serious? What could kids have to talk about that’s serious?”

“For one thing about you being forced to cooperate with the tree thieves and for another what hold they have on you – what threats or whatever. We know you wouldn’t be cooperating otherwise.”

The old man sat down and wiped his hands on his well stained white apron.

“Am I fired?”

“That’s not our place to say. Help us catch the bad guys and I really doubt it. What’s going on? We want to help you.”

Gus sighed, nodded, and began his story.

“My mother is very old and very ill and has to be cared for in a nursing home. Somehow, Harvey found out about it and that I was in desperate need for money because of it and he approached me. He offered to pay all of her expenses for me. He said he often did things like that – something about a trust fund in his family that had to be used in such ways. I was overcome with gratefulness, as you can imagine.

“That was a year ago. He was good to his word. He even saw to it that mother was moved to the best facility in Grand Rapids. Then, about six months ago he approached me again and threatened to stop paying the bills unless I cooperated with him. He made it sound like the few trees they were going to take wouldn’t even be missed in such a big operation as you father’s. I didn’t know what else to do. I’m so sorry. It’s actually a relief to finally have it out in the open.”

Ted asked the crucial question:

“For the record, what did he force you to do?”

“He’d call me and ask where the crew would be working the following day. I always had it on my calendar to keep my noon deliveries straight. I’d tell him. The conversations were always short. He’d say, ‘tomorrow’. I’d look and say, ‘B’ or ‘F’ or whatever section on this chart he gave me.”

“Thanks, Gus. We’re on your side in this.”

“Thank you, boys. Like I said. It’s really a relief. Shall I pack my bags?”

“No way! We don’t know what dad will decide, but you’re like family and he’ll find a way to work things out like he does for family.”

Gus had one more thing to say.

“Harvey called me yesterday. That means tonight’s the night, you see.”

“We understand that. You need to keep all of this under your hat, you understand,” Terry added. “We can’t afford to let anybody know that we suspect Harvey or that we know about tonight’s planned activity.”

“Nobody’ll hear it from me, and thanks for coming to me like you did. You boys aren’t trying to do all this by yourselves, are you? Harvey is a very bad and ruthless man. The men who work for him break the legs of small children just for the fun of it.”

It had been an exaggeration, of course. Orvie understood. He’d come up against those kinds before. It just wasn’t quite time to get the adults involved yet

– at least he hoped it wasn't that time yet!

CHAPTER THIRTEEN: Final Preparations

From what they had learned from eavesdropping on the conversation between the two men on horseback during that first visit to Ripple Ridge, Moustache and the older one who turned out to be Harvey Haskins – the leader of the thieves – the boys knew it would be block ‘G’ they would be working that night. It lay between the twins’ house and the lake along the southern edge of the property.

“I suppose there is a plan for tonight,” Ted said to Orvie as they returned to the twins’ room after the conversation with Gus.

“Well, let’s just say I fully expect there to be a really great plan within, say, an hour and a half.”

“You don’t have squat, do you?” Terry said.

“What I have is three pretty good heads right here in this room. The only thing left is to put them to work.”

The twins took him at his word. Ted had the first question.

“Do we try to prevent the tree cutting, catch them in the act, or wait and follow the truck when it leaves the creek and see where the logs are taken?”

Orvie answered.

“Yes!”

The twins frowned at each other and then at Orvie.

“I think we need to do all three of those things. It will mean we have to split up. You guys ok with that.”

The twins looked at each other again. Terry spoke.

“We don’t very often do things without each other.”

“I guess that wasn’t my question,” Orvie said.

“Like split up how?” Ted asked.

“As I see it we have three crucial spots that need watching and the activities going on in each place authenticated (verified) – What they are doing in block ‘G’; that they do deliver the logs to the lake and send them through the flap we discovered in the bluff; and that they gather up the logs that float down stream and take them some place.”

The twins nodded, agreeing those were the major things that needed to be proved.

“I figured I’d take the truck assignment and one of you would take each of the others. Before we settle that, I have a question or two for you guys.”

The twins nodded.

“Number one, we need cameras or some way to substantiate the things that are taking place at each of those three sites. A time stamp or something like it verifying time and date and such seems essential. What you got?”

“Well,” Ted began, “our phones take videos and can be set to time and date stamp. We can even send all that back to our computer.”

“How good are the pictures at night? I assume the goings on in Block ‘G’

will be well lit. Probably not so at the lake and the creek.”

“Our phones will do fine at ‘G’,” Terry said. “Night vision cameras will be necessary for the other two locations.”

Orvie’s shoulders slumped and his brow furrowed thinking that presented an insurmountable obstacle.

Ted noticed.

“Hey, these are the Carter Twins over here, pally. We’re no run of the mill, ordinary sort of Twins. We have perfected the art of sad puppy dog eyes and huge pouting, lower lips. Pretty much whatever we want, we get - eventually.”

“And,” Terry went on, “just so happens that last year for Christmas we puppy dog eyed our parents out of an entire night vision set up – goggles, cameras and portable DVD recorders. That was one set for each of us, you understand.”

Orvie visibly perked up.

“I’ll need instruction.”

“We’ll see that you get it – algebra, biology or ancient history?”

“Clowns! The night vision stuff.”

That would come later. They still needed to settle the which-twin-where, controversy. After a great deal more conversation about it than Orvie thought was necessary, the two old women – that is, the twins – had their decision. Ted would handle ‘G’ and Terry the lake. They’d be ok with that.

“We need pictures that will incriminate – show what they are doing and when possible get good close-ups of as many of the men’s faces as we can. Will your phone do that?”

“Yup. No problem. You can get a great phone camera for a thousand dollars less than ours cost. That tell you how good our cameras are?”

Orvie shook his head. He couldn’t imagine anybody spending that much money on themselves when the world was full of children who had to go to sleep hungry ever night. But, he understood he was different from most folks in that belief.

“Ok. I assume the night vision stuff is of similar quality.”

“It is. A hundred times better than any kids our ages have any right to have.”

It almost sounded like he was making some impact on the boys’ values after all. That would be nice, he thought to himself.

“I’m thinking I should be up on top of the bluff at the lake,” Terry said. “From there I’ll have an unobstructed view of the west shore and directly down onto the lake above the trapdoor thingy.”

“Sounds right to me,” Orvie agreed.

“Not sure about my best position,” Ted said. “I’d like to be up a tree, but can’t see how to accomplish that – needing to be at the right place well ahead of knowing where they’ll be. Probably next best approach is just to quietly circle the perimeter and take shots of what I can get out of the dark.”

“I think you’re right,” Orvie said.

Terry nodded his agreement.

It was coming to look like Ted's assignment was going to be the most dangerous.

"I'm thinking I should be over on the east side of the creek where we know the truck will be," Orvie said. There's a stand of trees back about twenty yards. This night vision good from that far?"

"Our night vision stuff can get a clear image of the spot on the back of a tick from fifty yards in the dead of the blackest night on record," Terry said.

"That's impressive and there *are* so many ticks out there wanting for their spots to be memorialized through night vision photography."

"I was just *saying* . . ."

"I was just *kidding*. The photos will probably be what seal the deal. I figure that I'll somehow go with the truck when it takes out the first log. That will be early in the activity so I may have time to even get back and assist one of you – probably you, Ted, since you'll be so close to so many of the bad guys."

"It's at least an hour's jog from the log catcher back to the lake, then probably only ten or twenty more to where the bad guys will be, depending on what part of square mile 'G' they'll be working."

"Which reminds me," Ted said, "I'll need to be *where* when we start? My first job seems to be to find them."

"Probably up a very tall tree in the center of 'G'," Orvie suggested. "I'd think you could spot their lights the minute they turn them on. You'd be up close to a hundred feet high, right?"

"Right. Sounds like a good plan to me. You, Terry?"

"Yeah. Sounds good."

"Are you sure you and a set of spikes can really hold you that far up a tree for an hour or so?"

"Oh, yes. I've already logged several . . . minutes . . . in a similar position."

The twins chuckled. Orvie wasn't sure.

They spent a good hour instructing Orvie in the use of the night vision glasses, camera, recorder and learning how to transmit it back to the twins' computer. He practiced in Jack's room since it had no windows. In the end he felt confident and the Twins pronounced him more than capable of using the equipment. He couldn't imagine that in all the situations in which he had found himself that he had never learned about that technology. It was fine because if Orvie loved anything it was learning new things.

It was going on 3:30. They headed downstairs to talk with Mrs. Carter. The point of the discussion was to get permission to camp out overnight. It was easily obtained. She wanted to hear from them at six, nine and midnight – or when they turned in for the night, whichever came first. She doubted if that would come before midnight. Terry carried the two way radio.

"Want food to fix over a campfire – hotdogs, stick bread – or the ready to eat variety?"

It was the immediate consensus (agreement) that ready to eat would serves their purposes best. She prepared the food. The boys made ready upstairs. With clouds and wind predicted they opted for jeans, T-shirts, and a hoodie apiece carried as backup in each of their backpacks.

Ted's backpack included a pair of spikes, two climbing straps and binoculars. Terry's and Orvie's each had a night vision set up. Orvie had also requested a can of spray paint. He'd mark the log for identification once it was on the truck if that became a possibility. There was an assortment of colors to choose from in the workshop. He selected a light tan, thinking it would be a near match to the color of the log so would be less likely to be detected by the bad guys right off, but still be easily seen later.

When the lunch was ready, Ted went down and took it upstairs. They split it three ways, packing it into their backpacks. They opted for water bottles rather than a cooler of pop for obvious reasons.

They had fixed up Orvie with the spare cell phone they kept for Jack when he was there. Jack's personal phone was from a different service from theirs and typically had no bars at all when on their property. Orvie let them instruct him in its use even though it was one of the newfangled gadgets he *had* mastered – though seldom admitted to.

They set off for the lake. They had a little time to kill and doing it at the lake seemed reasonable. From there Ted could easily circle back to 'G'. Orvie could head south along the low hill that contained the underground stream. Terry would pretty much be right where he was going to stay.

They had left the house at four and arrived at the lake at four forty-five.

"Ted and I will need to cut out at about five, I suppose," Orvie said. "Want to be sure we are in place well ahead of any bad guy activity."

"How about checking in with each other by phone every so often, Ted – the worry wart in the group – asked?"

"Good idea," Orvie said. "I had thought of that earlier, too, but it slipped my mind."

"How about a one word text message every half hour – 'OK' or 'help'?" Ted continued.

They agreed and showed Orvie how to put their numbers on 'speed dial'. Terry suggested 'T' for Ted and 'T' for Terry. It was worth a few chuckles. They settled on 'D' for Ted – the third letter – and 'R' for Terry – the, well you see the pattern!

"I need to have Dave's number, too," Orvie said. "I figure once I find the destination of the logs – and it has to be fairly close so the truck can always get back and be ready to pick up the next one – I'll give him a ring and call in the cavalry; that make sense to you guys?"

They nodded. Since 'D' had already been used, they set him up as 'S' for sheriff (and yes, Terry suggested that since they couldn't use 'D' for Dave they should instead use 'D' for deputy).

They finally got to the really important task and broke out the sandwiches,

chips, and apples. It looked like it might be a long night. Even if that were not a good excuse, they were hungry – they were twelve year old boys, after all!

When they stood and slipped into their backpacks it seemed appropriate for hugs all around. The twins held theirs extra-long. At that moment Orvie first really recognized that being separated for their missions was truly a big deal for them.

Ted headed northwest. Orvie headed due south. Terry climbed the hill behind the bluff and bellied down up top. While the others weren't looking he had managed to put a few sticks of jerky in his backpack and munched his way through the next hour while the other two were making their ways to their own destinations.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN: It'll be a Miracle if They Come Out Alive!

Ted made his way to the center of the square mile that was known as Block 'G' to Haskin and Gus. He had soon selected the tallest tree in the area. The problem was it was only about seventy feet tall. The whole area was home to trees of about that same height. He wondered if he should move on to find a taller one or stay there.

He decided to climb it and find out just what kind of a view it would offer. He slipped on his spikes, adjusted his strap around the trunk and started his climb. It was more difficult at the bottom where the diameter was so large that he couldn't get a foot on each side of it. That changed when he reached about half way. He was soon within a few feet of the top. He wished he had worn his camouflage outfit, but the blue of his jeans and the dark green of his hoodie blended in surprisingly well with the dark trunk and pine needles. There was a cool breeze blowing up that high.

He set his spikes deeply into the wood. He had brought a second strap which he looped above a branch on the opposite side of the trunk and draped it down across his rear end, forming a very supportive seat. That way, his legs would not have to carry all his weight and they shouldn't tire so quickly. Just standing on a tree in spikes was a *very* tiring activity.

He surveyed the territory on all sides of him. Most of the trees in that section were of the shorter variety. He figured they had all been planted at about the same time many decades before – probably by his grandfather – and were only about three quarters fully grown.

"Good going, Gramps," he allowed himself to say out loud.

He decided to stay right there and began scanning the darkening area with his binoculars. Dusk was a difficult time of day in which to see things at a distance. He kept to his job. Before the hour was out, the cloudy sky above, the dark green of the trees and the blackness of the ground below, draped his world in inky darkness.

While the others weren't looking he had managed to put a few sticks of jerky in his backpack and munched his way through the next hour while the other two were settling in at their own destinations.

He kept scanning the 'Block' hoping to soon locate spots of light that might indicate the bad guys were either on the move or had selected a spot to work. He saw something. It was a light; it was moving along the ground through the forest. There was another and another. They were heading in his direction.

About the time he was ready to congratulate himself for having selected the perfect vantage point, the lights broke into the area just below him. They stopped. They looked up shining the beams of their powerful flashlights toward the tops of the trees. Ted moved slightly to his right so he was hidden behind the tree – the tree that was no thicker up there than Ted was wide from hip to hip. Off to the sides he could see the shifting beams of light and hear the men talking

in not so hushed voices. One pointed, first to a tall tree just south of him and then to another, also south, but 20 yards away from him.

Climbers mounted each of those trees carrying a rope which dangled to the ground below them. Powerful flashlights from below lit their ways for them. Once at the top they pulled the rope up toward them. It was attached to the end of a large chain. The climber furthest away secured the end of the chain to a huge spike he had driven into the tree and then wound the chain around the tree hooking it to the long section with a padlock. They were constructing the chain and pulley system, just the way Orvie had thought it would be.

In a short time it was in place on both trees, with a rope already draped through the pulley to the ground from each side of the wheel. The men made their ways to the ground.

Panic overtook Ted. What if they decided to cut the tree where he was?

Lights had been strung creating a semi-circle, closed at the north and open at the south. He figured the trees would be cut to fall south and be let down through the opening where no lights had been strung.

Presently, one climber was on his way up a tree only fifteen feet away from Ted. He had a very thick rope tied around his waist. About three quarters of the way to the top he tied it around the trunk. Once secured, he descended the tree. *That* had been a close call.

The largest of the electric saws turned out to have handles of a kind at each end of the four foot cutting mechanism. It took two men to control it. They went right to work on that tree. The saw produced a low whirring noise. Once it began cutting into the tree the noise became much louder, but dozens of times quieter than the gas powered models. It seemed to take forever for them to make the cut.

Ted looked around counting the available trees, knowing they always took six. There were eight in the area close enough to the pulley chain, not counting the ones holding that chain. His tree was one of the eight.

Despite his growing terror he began taking videos and sending them back to his computer. That allowed him to delete and free up space on the phone for more pictures. From up there it was difficult to get face shots. The team of huge horses that had pulled the generator trailer into place earlier was unhitched and repositioned just to the south of the trees with the pulley. The rope from the pulley was attached to their apparatus and they were moved south into the darkness until the rope – the one attached to the tree that was being cut – was taut (tight). They were ready to receive the weight of the first tree. It was then Ted noticed that the pulley was more than a pulley – it was a block and tackle. He examined it through his binoculars. It was an arrangement of two pulleys with the rope threaded back and forth through them in such a way that would make the load far lighter. That made sense figuring two horses would not be able to deal with the weight of the huge tree.

A half hour into the trunk sawing operation, the tree moved off its stump and swung toward the chain and pulley arrangement. Its freshly cut surface

dragged the ground. Slowly the team was backed up into the circle of light. That put slack into the rope and allowed the tree to be lowered to the ground relatively quietly through branches of the trees to the south.

Once on the ground a dozen men emerged from the darkness with saws and began trimming the branches close against the trunk. Another group dragged them out of the way back into the darkness of the forest.

The team was unhitched from the block and tackle line and a chain was secured around the top of the log – the narrowest part, which was by then facing south. Once the limbs had all been removed, the team of horses moved out, led by none other than Moustache Man himself.

By that time a second tree had been scaled and the rope from the block and tackle attached. The large saws were already working at its base. A second team of horses backed into place ready to accept the rope from the block and tackle.

Ted had to admit it was a very efficient arrangement. By the time the first fallen tree had been freed of its branches the second tree was nearly ready to fall.

Then, bad stuff began for Ted. One of the climbers walked to the base of the tree he was in. He looped his climbing strap around the tree, set his spikes, and began to climb.

* * *

Terry remained alert at his post by the lake, having put on his night vision goggles as soon it had become really dark. Eventually he saw the team of oversized horses approaching, dragging the log behind it right up to the edge of the shore. He engaged his night vision camera and began capturing the scene on the DVR.

The horses were actually prodded out into the water staying near the shore until the log had entered the lake behind them and began to float. They were unhitched from log. The man with the moustache stripped to his skivvies (underwear) and attached one end of a rope to the end of the log and the other around his waist. He entered the water and swam to the bluff where he opened the hinged door and apparently fed the end of the rope through another pulley system of some kind inside the opening, which the boys had not discovered. He swam back to the shore hooking the end of the rope to the team. He moved the team away from the bluff, thereby pulling the log across the water and into the opening.

Terry couldn't see just how that pulley system worked, but, however it was arranged, it certainly did its job perfectly. The log had soon slid through the opening taking the rope with it inside the hill. Apparently each time a new rope was needed. The man re-dressed and had soon disappeared back into the forest leading the team.

Terry had what should be a perfect video from start to finish. He figured his mission that night was probably the safest of the three. He worried about the others as he transmitted it back to the computer.

* * *

Orvie had been hidden in the small grove of trees for nearly an hour. Back at the house, while the others weren't looking, he had managed to put a few sticks of jerky in his backpack and had munched his way through that hour while the other two were settling in to their own destinations. (What gave with having to hide their jerky habit?)

Presently, the truck he was expecting pulled off the township road and made its way to the creek. Making a wide circle, it backed into place just short of the log ramp. The truck consisted of the cab up front and a trailer that had been tailor made for transporting just one huge log at a time. There was a power winch at the back of the cab on which a chain was wound. The driver's first task was to drag the end of that chain straight to the rear of the trailer and beyond it some 20 feet – enough to reach the creek and attach to the near end of the log.

The trailer and cab had the usual hitch arrangements seen on most semis where the two sections connected. Behind that were two heavy duty I-bars (iron girders) extended from the front of the trailer to the rear wheel assembly – four wheels on each side, strong enough to carry the weight of the heavy stump end of the log. A metal ramp pulled out of the rear end of the trailer. The log would slide on it as it was pulled up onto the truck.

No sooner had the truck been made ready than the log appeared in the slow moving creek and bumped – relatively gently – into the log catcher that spanned the water there. The driver used a sledge hammer to drive a huge spike into each side of the very front of the log – slightly below center, which was right at the water line as the log floated there.

The chain – which divided into a Y shaped end – was attached to those two spikes – one tail to each spike. The driver, using a remote control unit, stood back and started the winch. The process moved more swiftly than Orvie had expected, pulling the log out of the water, up the log ramp and into place on the trailer. He then slid the ramp back into the rear of the trailer – just under the I-Beams – and secured the log with several other chains attached at various places along the beams. The driver took his time walking to the front of the truck, lighting a cigarette, and eventually climbing up into the cab. Presently, the truck began moving very slowly back toward the road.

Orvie, who hadn't risked removing his back pack, crouched low and ran across the open ground to the rear of the truck – the camera still recording. He painted a quick 'Z' for Zorro on the end of the log, stuck the spray can down the front of his pants and hitched a ride on the end of the ramp which protruded just enough to make the perfect seat.

It was a short ride, right to the destination Orvie had suspected. The truck turned into the Riding Academy and stopped in front of the large garage door at the near end of the largest barn – the one he had characterized as the indoor riding arena. The door opened and the truck moved inside. The moment the truck stopped Orvie had jumped off and began taking new video, getting a 360 degree shot of the barn and the truck. He panned around to include the front

building, the Riding Academy sign, and a brief selfie. He pressed the button he had been told would magically send it to the Twins' computer. If he hadn't been misled, that would be his second transmission that night.

As the big door began to close, Orvie ducked underneath it and inside.

The lights came on.

Three things immediately became obvious to Orvie. First, it was not a riding arena. Second, dozens and dozens of pine logs were stacked pyramid style along the west wall spanning the building from end to end. Third, he was standing there confronting the wrong end of a shotgun held by Joe, the man he had run into in the stable. He was in big-time trouble! Make that B I G – T I M E trouble!!

* * *

Several developments had been going on simultaneously. Deputy Dave, the twins' father and most of his men arrived at the cutting site in BLOCK 'G' making short work of the roundup there. A few more located Moustache Man and Terry at the lake. Terry remained safe. The M Man, well, shall we just say not so much.

The confrontation at the 'Riding Arena' grew to include the driver who seemed to have no reluctance about using the shotgun on the boy. The two men had some conversation back and forth about it in low tones. The driver took the gun from Joe and aimed it at Orvie.

At that moment a half dozen Sheriff's Deputies stepped out of the shadows, weapons drawn. That part of the evening's activities was soon over, also.

* * *

An hour later, back at the Carter's house, the twins, their parents, Orvie, Dave and Gus gathered around the large, round, kitchen table.

Mr. Carter began the explanation:

"Around eleven this evening Gus knocked at our door. He was very worried about you boys because of things you had told him. He felt for your safety he had to tell us. Knowing that you guys – well, mostly Ted – keep records of your activities on your computer I decided I would be allowed a look – considering the seriousness of the circumstances. Soon after I turned it on I noticed several new, unopened files on the desktop. Unopened files flash on that computer.

"I opened the first one. It turned out to be a video from Ted's camera phone apparently taken from high in a pine tree. The video confirmed Gus's fears. The thieves were there working the trees right below Ted. I opened a second file. It was apparently a night vision video showing very odd things going on in and about the lake. As I took out my phone to call the Sheriff, a third popped up. It was also a night vision video taken way south not far from where the underground stream emerged from the hill. It showed a log, a truck – more odd things going on.

"I noticed Deputy Dave's card on the desk. Thinking he might know

something I called him and told him what I knew. He said to turn on my GPS and he would meet me at the site of the robbery. As I stood up to leave, still another file arrived. It was Orvie's. I knew it was from him because he included a very brief mug shot of himself – very smart by the way.

“I called Dave back and filled him in on the breaking story at the Riding Stable. I rang for my crew. I knew where Ted had to be. The trees in his video were Eastern White Pines. They had been planted by my father as an experiment – hoping a cross pollinated variety might better handle the heavy snow up here in northern Minnesota.

“I guess you all know the rest. Everybody's safe; Gus is a hero and due a substantial reward, which should continue to care for his mother for as long as she needs it; and my sons are grounded until they are forty-five.”

His smile said it was a joke. The set of his jaw made everybody wonder.

The End