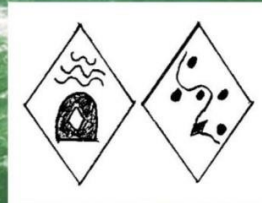


The Mystery of the Duke's Diamonds

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

By
David Drake



BOOK THREE:
In The Orvie Mystery Series

The Mystery of The Duke's Diamonds

Book Three in the Orvie Mystery Series.

It is best to have read books one* and two
before reading this one.**

By

David Drake

Family of Man Press

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Book 1: The Boy Who Could see into the Past
Book 2: The Mystery of the Disappearing Pine Trees
Book 3: The Mystery of the Duke's Diamonds
Book 4: The Mystery of the Ghost Ship of Windsor Island
Book 5: The mystery of the Treasure on Doubloon Island
Book 6: The Mystery of Gallagher's Ghost

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BACKGROUND

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, had spent the following month of June with twin boys in a Minnesota forest saving their father's pine trees. Here, he is moving on west to North Dakota.

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CHAPTER ONE: The Secret of the Ancestors

Orvie had walked from place to place all his life – the eleven years before he turned twelve and the almost 113 years since he became a forever twelve-year-old. He loved to walk. Many years before, he had hiked the highlands and mountains of central and western North Dakota and had vowed to return to enjoy their beauty and the challenges they posed in climbing them. There were numerous streams, several large lakes, and the mighty Missouri River, which fed and then ran south east out of the long, narrow Lake Sakakawea. The state held some of the most beautiful scenery in the country, he thought.

In mid-June, he left the Carter family in northwestern Minnesota and, after a brief visit to the place he had been raised as a child, he headed west across the state line. His destination was just the freedom to enjoy life and nature. It took him southwest across relatively flat plains and slow flowing streams. From time to time he would hitch a ride with a cross country semi or catch an open boxcar on a freight train and ride until he woke up from his nap.

Ten days into his journey, he found himself in McLean County, near the middle of the state. Sizeable mountains had begun to turn up from the plains several days before, but for some reason his vision continued to focus on those in the distance. Eventually he discovered they lay just west of that big lake with the Native American name. The Missouri River cut its way through them as it fought its way toward the Mississippi.

He had walked a leisurely pace along the eastern bank heading south for two days – with stops to eat and sleep it amounted to about forty miles. He had walked through periodic showers during the days just after entering the state, but by the time he reached the river the air was less humid, the ground was dry and he had experienced no rainfall.

Orvie had stopped for lunch. He built a small fire on the bank enclosed by a circle of a half dozen rocks. There were lots of rocks and lots of dry driftwood along the shore. He soon had a nice little cooking fire. He set cans of pork and beans and corned beef hash close to it and waited, turning the cans occasionally so the food would heat relatively evenly. Presently, he could smell the familiar aroma. He loved to smell the mix of the wood smoke and the cooking food.

As he was finishing up the last of the pork and beans – he always ate them last because they were sweet like dessert, he thought – he heard a quiet voice from behind him. He turned his head to look.

“Hey, kid.”

“Hey, kid yourself,” Orvie said in return.

Sitting perhaps ten yards behind and slightly to his left was a boy about his age. Orvie had no way of knowing how long he had been there. He hoped he wasn’t hungry because he would have gladly shared what he had.

Orvie turned his body more completely so he was facing the young stranger.

“I’m Orvie.”

“What kind of a name is, Orvie?”

“Short for Orville – not one I seemed to ever really take to.”

The boy nodded. Clearly it was not worth pursuing.

“My names, Nat, short for Nathan.”

“Great tan, Nat,” Orvie said having learned decades before that relationships seemed to get off to better beginnings if something positive was immediately thrown the way of the other person.

“The tan’s built in – Part Indian – Sioux – Lakota Sioux to be specific.”

(Sioux is pronounced, ‘Sue’)

“Cool! I’m pretty just much a plain old vanilla white guy,

I guess. Sort of an English, German, Norwegian mix from what I'm told."

"Sounds like something they'd announce at a dog show," Nat said with the first grin he'd allowed between them. "Got family around here?"

Orvie wondered if that was really close to the first question everybody asked everybody or if he was the only one who got it. He tried to go with an honest response.

"On my own, mostly. Visited here some years back and wanted to come and see it again."

"Pretty young to be on your own."

"It's something I usually don't talk about."

"That's cool. Guys need their private stuff, that's what Kaka always says."

"And Kaka would be . . . ?"

"That's grandfather in the Lakota Sioux language. He speaks it – does mostly okay in English, too."

"Sounds like you and your grandfather – Kaka – are pretty close."

"The closest. If it wasn't for him I'd be out on my own like you seem to be. That's a pretty scary thought to me. I've just turned twelve."

"I as well."

"I as well? That's pretty high class talkin'. You a English teacher in disguise?"

"I guess you could say using words is like a hobby of mine. Please don't let it bother you."

"First, he says, 'cool' and then turns right around and says, 'I as well'. Some strange combination of stuff goin' on in that head of yours."

"You figured me out in the first two minutes. I'm generally known to have lots of really strange 'stuff' going on in my head. It often sets me off as being a bit of an oddball."

"Join the club."

"Not sure I understand," Orvie said.

"I got no mom or dad. Kaka's my only family, and kids – the few I ever get to see – make fun of him because he's old and weak and to them I suppose is strange looking. What's thought about him rubs off on me."

"Sorry."

Nat looked Orvie directly in his eyes.

"I think you mean that. Thanks. Nobody's ever said that to me."

"You're welcome and I'm sorry about that as well."

A long moment of silence followed. Presently, Orvie broke it.

"You live around here, I take it."

Nat nodded, apparently not willing to give up anything more. Orvie would drop it. One of those private things people were allowed according to Kaka.

"So, you swim in the river?"

"Really strong undertow. Swimming's not a good idea. Before you realize you're drowning you'll be swept all the way down to Bismarck. I know a great place, though. Captain's Cove. It's like a little lake with a narrow inlet from the river. I can show you."

"Let me burry these two cans, put out what's left of my fire, and I'd really like that. The sun's feeling extra hot this noon. I imagine it's what, getting close to eighty degrees?"

"Wouldn't doubt it. We've been havin' an unusually hot summer so far. Maybe ten degrees above what it usually is."

Orvie nodded and went about his business. He used cans of water from the river to douse the remaining embers. Then, while he buried his trash, Nat got up and made sure the fire was out and the ashes were spread.

"Thanks. You an outdoorsman, too, I see."

"Love it outdoors. Mostly just two seasons here in the river valley – terrible winters and wonderful summers."

"Lots of snow, you mean?"

"Snow, blizzards, avalanches, winds that howl for days at a time; below freezing temperatures go on for months. Winter around here is really winter."

"Sounds like it. But you like that?"

"Probably like is too strong a word. I put up with it and have learned how to handle it. Summer's my favorite time. Winter's really hard on my Kaka. I'm sure I'd enjoy it more if that wasn't the case."

Orvie slipped into his backpack and shouldered his bag. They moved off along the river headed back upstream – the direction from which he had come. They talked as they

walked.

“You indicated he was ill – your Kaka.”

“He’s had a heart condition since he was a kid. The past few years it’s got real bad. He needs an operation, but we can’t afford it.”

“Sorry about that, also. At least you seem to be pretty healthy.”

“Healthy as a shoonka wahkan*,” Nat said grinning.

“I’m going to take a stab at that and say shoonka wahkan means horse in the Sioux language.”

“You’ll have to excuse the way I mix up the two languages. I grew up hearing Kaka’s version of language and that’s just how it came out.”

“I think that’s great! What fun!”

“Me, too, but me and you are in the minority on that, I can tell you for sure.”

“I had a wise old man once tell me: ‘If you can fix something in life and you want to, fix it; if you can’t find a way to do that, live with it and don’t fret about it’.”

“Pretty good advice, I’d say,” Nat said nodding thoughtfully.

The two were rapidly growing to like each other. Of course, most everybody who met Orvie liked him, and he liked most everybody he met. He felt sad for the boy and his circumstances, but wouldn’t dwell on it. He had ‘felt’ nothing but the truth from the kid up to that point.

“That’s an interesting pendant you’re wearing around your neck,” Orvie said.

“Kaka gave it to me on my twelfth birthday. His father had given it to him – that would be my great-grandfather.”

“Interesting markings on it.”

Nat nodded as if that was again getting too close to his private stuff.

They came to a narrow stream that ran east from the river. It was shallow and no more than ten feet wide. Orvie had removed his shoes and waded it earlier, on his way south. They turned right and followed it east through an area overgrown with underbrush and guarded overhead by tall trees. From the river and shore it was undetectable. After thirty-yards, it widened into a very small lake or very large

pond – take your pick. Orvie estimated it to be about the size of two football fields set side by side – 100 yards wide and probably a little longer than that. Its shore was irregular, following the generally steep rocky sides. It may have been a volcanic formation, which formed a small basin, apparently ideal for holding water.

About halfway to the far end he could see a narrow, relatively flat shore area that gently sloped back into the base of a tall, jagged, low mountain. It was part of the formation that encircled the cove, as Nat called it – Captain’s Cove.

“What a beautiful spot,” Orvie said, coming to an abrupt halt to take in the view. The greens of the various kinds of trees and bushes were set off by the browns and tans and grays of the mountain on which they grew.

“The river water is cold. The water here in the cove is a lot warmer. It just sits here in one place and lets the sun do its thing. The floor of the lake is black – basalt, I’ve been told. That absorbs and holds the heat from the sun’s rays.”

He bent down and ran his hand through the water looking up as if to suggest Orvie do the same to verify his contention. Orvie complied. It was considerably warmer – perfect swimming temperature for him.

“So, here?” Orvie asked, meaning, ‘Is this where we swim?’ ”.

Nat pointed to the sandy shored area off to their right that Orvie had noticed earlier. They walked the narrow rock ledge that formed the shoreline. A few minutes later they were within easy viewing distance of the area. There was a building, a hut, a house, a shack – Orvie didn’t know how to best describe it – sitting toward the rear of the area that sloped up gently toward the mountain behind.

Nat pointed at it.

“Where Kaka and I live. Always lived there.”

“What a great view you’ve always had, then.”

Nat nodded, offering another smile.

Orvie began getting the ‘feeling’ that the boy had a great sadness associated with his grandfather – a fear, even. He would be patient and let their relationship grow, hoping those things would eventually come out. Perhaps he would be able to help in some way.

Once at the sandy area that held his home, Nat shed his shirt and shoes and waded into the water. Orvie followed. The beach extended its gentle slope out into the cove. They were soon afloat in the water. They swam some, but mostly just treaded water facing each other and continued getting acquainted. The story of his family flowed easily and was fascinating. Nat hoped his new friend would not look back on the conversation and think he had revealed more than he should have. After all, Orvie was a near stranger with a mysterious personal story.

His great grandfather, who had been born in Missouri at about the same time Orvie had been born in Minnesota, had been a specialized kind of tour guide. He arranged to take wealthy foreign visitors or newcomers here in the United States to places of interest to them. His last assignment had been to escort a German Duke, Ewald Rothstein, from where he had docked in New York City to his destination in Arizona where he had purchased a ranch. The man was wealthy beyond imagination.

He said that he wanted to make a personally challenging northern passage across the country and then turn south once they neared the west coast. It seemed that the Duke had some family, financial, and legal problems back in Germany – the reasons he was moving to the United States – so he sold all his property and possessions, and emptied his bank accounts. He used those millions of dollars to purchase diamonds, which he had brought with him – a convenient way to transport wealth from one country to another back in those days. Five million dollars' worth of high quality diamonds really didn't take up much room. The story, as it had been passed down, was that he was carrying only 500 diamonds that averaged a worth of \$10,000 each. You can get a whole lot of diamond into a fairly small sack.

He had a heart attack as they walked the Missouri River south of Lake Sakakawea. He gave the gems to Nat's great grandfather making him promise he would never let them get back into the possession of his family from Germany.

Back in Germany, his greedy, and, also, very wealthy niece and only living relative, sent a private detective – a thug – to retrieve the jewels. His great grandfather hid them, only

ever taking the one he had earned for planning and outfitting the trip. From time to time agents from his niece returned to hassle him about the treasure. Each ensuing (later) instance seemed worse than the one before. Following the last of those confrontations (conflicts), the old man disappeared and was never heard from again.

Before his disappearance, however, he ordered a specially designed pendant made, and gave it to his son (that would be, Kaka) saying the symbols on it would guide him to the diamonds. He cautioned him not to decipher it until after he was certain the niece had passed on. Only then would it be safe for him to go looking for the treasure.

Nat's grandfather had kept to that admonition (caution). He had tried to decode the secret message after the niece's death, but had never been successful. He passed it on to Nat in the hope that someday he would be able to figure it out. Nat confided that he had never taken it off since the moment his Kaka had placed it around his neck.

There was one other bad guy – Nat's uncle, his mother's brother – who somehow got wind of the possibility there might be some sort of treasure and was determined to get his hands on it. Nat and Kaka hadn't heard from him or about him in several years.

It immediately became a double-edged sword for Orvie. On the one hand, he was extremely sorry for the sad circumstances in which Nat and his grandfather found themselves. On the other hand, Orvie had just found himself a brand-new mystery to solve and it was one that held out the prospect of offering him all of the big three elements he loved; Excitement, Adventure and Danger. What twelve-year-old boy wouldn't love that!

* The Sioux word for horse is actually spelled sunka wakan but is pronounced like it appears in the text above. It seems easier for the reader to see the Sioux words like they sound.

CHAPTER TWO: Getting Acquainted

Once out of the water and sun dried, Nat invited Orvie to meet his grandfather, Kaka. The old man was sitting on the porch. He had been watching them. As they approached, Orvie could see it looked to be a very small three room house with unpainted upright clapboard siding and a corrugated, metal roof. A large rock chimney along the right side as they faced it suggested a large fireplace inside – perhaps the only heat for those long, frigid winters Nat had described. A sizeable amount of firewood was stacked against the house.

On the right end of the porch, which spanned the entire 12-foot front of the building, stood a metal barrel sitting atop a set of sturdy wooden legs, perhaps four feet high. Orvie would ask about that later if it weren't explained first.

"Kaka, this is my new friend, Orvie, short for Orville – a name he's not really taken with."

Remaining sitting the old man offered up his hand for a shake. Orvie mounted the low porch and shook.

"I'm Kaka, but I guess you know that."

"Yes, Nat filled me in – some."

"My name is George Jackson. You can call me George if you want to."

"If it's permitted, I'd like to call you Kaka. I have no grandfather and I think it would be pretty cool to sort of rent Nat's."

"It is certainly permitted. I guess you prefer . . . Orvie, is it?"

"Yes, sir."

“Leave off the, sir, please. It makes me feel like an old man and as you can plainly see, I’m not.”

He smiled a wonderful, full out, cheek puffing smile. Like with his grandson, Orvie felt nothing but honesty. He was impressed by the man’s English, since Nat had led him to believe it was not all that good. Perhaps it had been some form of humor – a delayed prank, maybe. It was another thing to look into later.

“I understand you are not well,” Orvie said. “I’m very sorry about that.”

“Oh, I’m all quite fine. It’s my heart that’s ailing.”

He offered another great smile. Orvie returned it. Orvie liked his attitude. He liked the old man.

“Time for my nap,” Kaka announced as he struggled to his feet.

Orvie made a move to assist him, but Nat reached out, taking hold of his arm and preventing it. It was still another thing to ask about. Kaka went inside. Orvie moved to examine the barrel arrangement. Nat felt he needed to provide an explanation about his earlier action.

“Kaka is a proud Sioux man. Until he understands there is absolutely no way he can do something, he remains determined to do it by himself. That’s why I pulled you back. A hundred times a day I want to do things for him, but I know my offer would just be humiliating (degrading) to him.”

“I understand. I admire him for that, and you for allowing it. It shows both great compassion and patience on your part.”

Nat nodded clearly uneasy about the compliment. He was ready to move on.

“I see you’re interested in our contraption there on the wooden stand.”

“Yes. It baffles me.”

“It is part of our drinking water system. The barrel is filled with sand. There are one inch holes on each end – padded so the sand remains inside. It is fixed so it can easily be rotated – top to bottom like a bingo cage. I get water from the lake and pour it in the top through a funnel. It runs through the sand and is filtered – purified. There is a funnel at the bottom and the water flows into a pipe to a storage container

under the kitchen. We have a pump at the sink that draws it up for us to use. Every several days I rotate the barrel 180 degrees – top to bottom, set it so the bottom opening is aimed out at the beach, and pour three gallons of water through it. That cleans the sand out – washing the crud that’s been caught in the upper portion of the sand. Once the water runs clean, I turn it back to its regular position, place the barrel back over the funnel, fill it, and we’re good for another few days. The area beneath the house is sand some fifteen feet deep here. It stays about 60 degrees year-round under the house. So in the summer we have water that seems cool and in the winter water that seems warm – and believe me anything that’s sixty degrees around here in the winter IS warm.”

“Ingenious. Kaka build that?”

“Yup. It’s a takeoff on an old Sioux trick using gourds. He’s just improved on it. Want a drink, by the way?”

“Yes. That would be really good. But I don’t want to disturb your grandfather.”

“Bedroom is in the back, kitchen in the middle, sittin’ room up front. Just have one bed. He says he likes me sleepin’ beside him. Gives him a sense of security. I really don’t mind. I’d do anything for him.”

Orvie sensed every syllable of what he had said was the truth. They got the drinks. It was definitely cool and clear and had a wonderful, fresh taste. They went back outside and sat on the porch, their bare feet and toes playing in the sand.

“May I see the pendant up close,” Orvie asked.

“I suppose. Kaka says to be careful about who I let do that, but in my whole life I’ve never known an Orvie I couldn’t trust.”

It was worth a chuckle between them. Nat scooted close and held it up – not removing the leather strap from around his neck

Orvie looked it over. There were symbols or marks on both sides. [The pendant may be seen on the book cover. The reader may want to draw a sketch of it since it will be referred to again and again.]

“You two have any ideas?” he asked as he turned it from back to front and back again.

“Lot’s, but no idea how to put them together to make sense of it. At the bottom of the front – the part I wear as the front at least – there is that drawing that looks like a horseshoe open side down. There’s a line across the bottom connecting the lines from the arc. It’s like all colored in except for that diamond shape in the center.”

“It’s basically shaped like an igloo with a diamond shaped front door,” Orvie said extending the description.

Nat nodded thoughtfully and continued.

“Right above it, are three wavy lines. Kaka says that is often used to symbolize rising heat – like to indicate a dry, hot, arid spot on a Sioux map.”

“Might represent waves in water, also, I suppose,” Orvie added.

“We’ve thought of that, too.”

“Or, maybe just the number or amount, three.”

Nat shrugged.

He turned it over.

“On the back is a line having two gentle curves in it as it crosses the pendant from top left to lower right. There are three dots along the top side of the line and three underneath. They’re spread out and aren’t directly across from each other, and they alternate in an uneven sort of way.”

“You two have any idea about that?”

“Seven holes, maybe. A dividing line between two areas. Nothing comes to us. Kaka did have six brothers – with him it would make seven like the seven dots.”

It was Orvie’s turn to shrug.

“Can you tell me more about your Uncle?”

“Not a whole lot, really. Mom died giving birth to me and I’ve been with Kaka ever since. My dad was killed in a war. My uncle, Creighton is his name, called Cray for short, apparently made sounds like he and his wife wanted to take me in when I was a baby but his wife left him and nothing ever came of that. I think it’s for the best. Cray really isn’t a very nice man. I’ve heard him threaten Kaka over the – as he called it – buried treasure.”

“What does Cray do for a living?”

“Don’t really know. I know he went to college, but don’t know what he studied. I get the idea he’s worked at a lot of

different jobs.”

“Like?”

“He worked in the produce department of a grocery store and as an auto mechanic, and a bank teller, and a truck driver. Kaka probably knows more.”

“That tells us that he’s probably not using the college training he received. I have to wonder why. Did he graduate, do you know?”

“No. Kaka probably does.”

“I’d rather not get your grandfather involved in this yet. No reason to either get his hopes up or make him worry about you – us, now, I suppose. That seem reasonable to you.”

“I guess. I’ve never been one to keep any secrets from him, though.”

“But, you understand the things I’m getting at?”

“Sure. I’ll go along. I didn’t mean that. Just hope I don’t let it slip out. I’m thinking it’ll be hard to overcome twelve years living one way and start living another.”

“I understand that. By the way do you know where Cray is now – where he lives or whatever?”

“No idea. Last time I saw him was up in Rocky Point – a little settlement about four miles upstream from here. That must have been six months ago.”

“You go there often?”

“Once a month to withdraw Kaka’s social security money from his bank account. There’s a bank outpost in the general store along with a post office and Western Union desk. It’s like one stop shopping.”

“Do you think he lives there?”

“I doubt it. Can’t be over a dozen houses. Besides the general store, there’s a place to eat – it’s a woman’s dining room – and an outdoors store that sells hiking, fishing and camping gear and does repairs on things like saddles. Not really many outsiders come along. Some river rafters and kayakers. Some riders.”

“Riders?”

“Horseback riders – following the river. Few outsiders during the winter. River’s the only access during cold weather and often the ice prevents that.”

Orvie nodded. Nat had an additional thought.

“One more thing about uncle Cray – I get the idea he’s been in and out of jail a couple of times. No idea what that’s about.”

“What Cray said about buried treasure presents an interesting possibility,” Orvie said. “Maybe those seven dots represent seven places the diamonds were buried – like some of them in each place so if part of the treasure was found the rest would still be safe.”

“I guess we hadn’t thought of that. But where?”

“That curvy line seems to be the key to that. Have to get you and Kaka thinking some more about that. The pendant is really heavy for its size.”

“Made of iron. The etching was done by a Sioux craftsman.”

“He had a good reputation, did he?”

“For his work, you mean?”

“Yes. The best the Tribe had to offer at the time.”

“Then the malformed dot – second from the end below the line – was undoubtedly made that way intentionally.”

“I suppose so. Yes. Hadn’t thought about that. If you’re asking if he’d have made an error, that’s extremely unlikely.”

“I have a magnifying glass in my back pack. Let me get it so we can take a good look at that mark.”

They were soon looking it over.

“Well, one thing’s for sure,” Nat began, “it’s not a circular dot like the others. It’s a diamond!”

“That may change our approach. I’d think the diamond would be a serious tie-in to the place they were hidden, wouldn’t you?”

“Makes sense,” Nat agreed.

“Then, if the other dots are not holes what could they be?”

They sat there in silence for some time.

They talked on into the afternoon. Kaka awoke from his nap and emerged from the house with a sack in hand.

“Why don’t you boys build a fire out here? Got hotdogs and sliced potatoes to fry. Have a few hotdog buns left. When they’re gone, it’s finger food time.”

“Sounds great to me,” Orvie said, “but I didn’t come to

visit with the idea of being fed. I have food in my backpack.”

“You wouldn’t be refusing an offer of Sioux hospitality, now would you? In the old days that would have been enough of insult to send you to the Happy Hunting Grounds – and, by the way, Native Americans never really used that phrase. I think it developed in the early days of Hollywood.”

He smiled. Orvie nodded.

“My intention was not to offend you. I hope you understand that.”

“Just an old man messing with your head, son. I’ll sit here on the porch and snoopervise while you youngsters whip up a feast for us.”

There was a permanent fire circle enclosed with rocks eight to ten inches high around a shallow pit in the sand. As they built a fire and placed the potato slices in the large iron skillet, Orvie whispered to Nat.

“Should he be eating hotdogs and fried foods with a heart condition?”

“Of course, not, but Kaka will eat what Kaka will eat – that’s a direct quote from him. And, it does mean, discussion over!”

“I see. Good for him, I suppose. You eat lots of fish, I suppose, being right here on the river.”

“Most every day. I usually fish early. Kaka likes fish fillets for breakfast. You like fish?”

“Sure do. Been a part of my regular diet for about 125 years.”

They chuckled together because to Nat it seemed ridiculous and because to Orvie it brought back a rush of wonderful memories about his early years on his lake with his family.

Orvie noticed a reflection coming from something on the wooded slope of the low mountain to the south of the beach. It could have been the sun just meeting some crystalline formation in the rock. It could have been the shiny barrel of a rifle. Things just might suddenly be getting very interesting.

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CHAPTER THREE:

Orvie kept watch on the mountainside. The glint from whatever it had been stopped. He relaxed and they enjoyed the meal together. The potatoes had been fried in a mixture of sugar and lard – something Orvie had never before tasted. They were wonderful!

“Best fried potatoes I’ve ever had,” Orvie said.

Kaka explained.

“The ancient recipe calls for honey, but we haven’t harvested any yet this summer. You two need to scout the area for a good bee tree. Great on biscuits in the morning. It’s a natural preventative for allergies, also.”

“We’ll leave the fire smoldering ‘til dark,” Nat said. “The wood smoke discourages the mosquitos that come out like a squadron of fighter jets at dusk.”

“Want to go looking for a bee tree?” Orvie asked.

Nat looked at his grandfather as if for permission. The old man nodded.

“Find one and you can harvest it tomorrow. It may be too early in the season for a really fresh tree.”

Orvie directed the search toward the area on the mountainside where he’d seen the reflections. Unexplained things like that gnawed at him until he had an answer. They talked as they climbed. It presented an easily climbable, fairly gentle slope up from the sand beach.

“What did he mean by fresh tree?”

“The bees make honey all summer long and then survive by eating it all winter while they don’t come outside. In spring, only the year-old honey is there. By mid-summer lots

of new honey has been made – fresh honey. He likes that better. Tends to be lighter in color and he thinks it has a better taste. I can't tell the difference."

Orvie got serious.

"While we were eating, I saw a reflection up here. It seemed to come and go a half dozen times or more over the course of a half hour. You have any natural explanation for it?"

"Natural meaning . . . ?"

"I don't even know. I was thinking a quartz outcropping maybe that changing sun angles might suddenly have reflected into my eyes."

"No quartz up here."

"So, I see, now that we're up here."

"Probably no honey either," Nat said. "The best is usually out back of our place."

"Why did you let me lead us up here, then?"

"I figured you had some reason for wanting to come up here and I guess I was right."

"I guess you were. Wasn't aware I was that transparent."

They exchanged a smile.

"We're getting close to the spot," Orvie said. "That large dead tree."

They moved on another ten yards.

"Right about here, I'd say," he said looking around.

"Ground or tree?"

"I couldn't be sure. Here's something interesting, though. He pointed to the ground."

Nat moved in to get a good look.

"Gum wrappers – shiny foil gum wrappers. Lots of them. That's odd."

"Odd, meaning they aren't yours and you have no idea how they may have been deposited up here?"

"Yes. Very much like that."

"I count eight wrappers. Think about how that many would come to be here."

Nat immediately had ideas.

"I see two possibilities right off. Either there were eight gum chewers standing right here or there was one who stayed

here long enough to go through eight sticks.”

“I vote for the second option,” Orvie said. “That would mean the person –assuming it wasn’t a gum chewing squirrel – was up here for quite some time.”

“Why up here?”

“Only one thing to look at from up here and that’s down on your place. I’d say you were the focus of his attention.”

“Or you. You sure you aren’t being followed? I have this fantasy about you that you are a rich kid who thinks he’s out on his own, but really a bunch of bodyguards are following you in secret to protect you in case you get in trouble.”

“You need to write stories. I’d read one like that.”

Orvie offered his wonderful grin

“So, you are indicating that it really comes back to Kaka and me.”

“That’s the size of it. You got a girlfriend who’d be up here stalking you?”

“I wish! No girls around here.”

Orvie gathered up the wrappers – inner foil and outer paper – and put them in his pocket. He held up one outer wrapper.

“Teaberry gum. I haven’t seen that for years. Used to love it. That brand mean anything to you.”

“Nothing, I’m afraid.”

“We need to find a sneaky way to see if your grandfather makes a connection. I think I have an idea.”

They looked on for a bee tree for another hour. Nat instructed Orvie in what to look for. Of course, Orvie couldn’t let on that he’d been searching out bee trees since before Nat’s grandfather had been born. He liked to let other people feel important so things like that worked out fine.

They were back on the beach in time to watch the sun set behind the high mountains across the river to the west. Being deep in a valley, sunset came early, just as sunrise came late.

Kaka had left the porch and was tending the fire out on the sand when the boys walked up.

“No bee tree today, Kaka,” Nat said. “Thought we’d check out some new possibilities up on the south slope. Like usual, nothing.”

Orvie dropped a gum wrapper near Kaka's feet and stooped down to pick it up.

"Is that Teaberry gum, son?" the old gentleman asked.

"Yes, it is. Hard to find these days. Found it in Devil's Lake on my way southwest from northern Minnesota."

"Only one other person I ever knew who was hooked on Teaberry – Nat's Uncle Cray. He was a chain-chewer. When one piece would lose its flavor, out it would come and in would go another. He used to buy them by the box of 48 packs."

"An uncle? Your son?"

"Oh no. Nat's mother's brother. I seldom speak badly about others, but he's a terrible human being. I never could understand how he and Margie came from the same set of parents. She was the dearest, sweetest person on the face of the earth. Fortunately, Nat, here, is representing her very well. He's a good boy."

Nat looked at the ground, clearly embarrassed by the way his grandfather was going on. It all did seem to fit with what Orvie had been feeling, however.

"Sorry that . . . Cray, is it . . . turned out so badly. Must have been a big disappointment to his family."

"Always in trouble, that one. Always looking for the easy buck. Went to prison for beating his wife and putting her in the hospital. After that she finally had the good sense to leave him. They wanted to take my Natty here, but I'd have fought them for him if it had come to that."

Nat beamed clearly pleased that he had been and still was that important to his grandfather. Everybody needs to feel important.

"Cray live around here?" Orvie asked hoping he wasn't pushing too hard for information that really should have been of no interest to him – from the old man's point of view."

"No idea where he is. Just as well. The only time the world's really safe is when he's behind bars."

It was more than a little clear that Kaka truly disliked Nat's uncle. Orvie hoped his interest had not been too obvious, but with the man clearly back in the picture he figured he needed all the information about him that he could collect.

The old man looked up at the sky. I go to sleep with the

sun and get up with the sun. Going to retire now. You guys have a good evening.”

He looked at Nat.

“I’ll be fine tonight if you two want to sleep outside. You know where the sleeping bags are.”

He leaned down and planted a lingering kiss on his grandson’s forehead. Nat stood and returned the gesture with no hesitation. Orvie thought that was wonderful. Most guys his age would be hesitant to do that in front of friend. What a shame. Love is never something to hide. If others don’t understand it is truly their loss.

The boys opted to make it an under-the-stars night. Nat began collecting more wood and building up the fire. Orvie unrolled the sleeping bags – he always carried his own.

“We have marshmallows. You like to roast marshmallows?” Nat asked.

“Love them. Again, I don’t want to be reducing the supplies you and your grandfather are counting on for yourselves.”

“Kaka says if you never offer more than you can spare, you’ll never go hungry. I think that’s a loose translation of a Sioux saying.”

Nat went inside to locate the goodies while Orvie chose a couple great roasting sticks and whittled a point on each of them.

While they roasted the tasty white lumps, they talked.

“That was something how you got Kaka to tell you all that stuff about Cray without ever letting him know why.”

“One of my talents left over from back when I was a fortune teller in a carnival side show.”

Nat threw him a puzzled look.

“I tend to say dumb things like that. An attempt at humor that often turns out to just be confusing. Sorry.”

“I’ll get used to it. Don’t stop. Next time I’ll catch on and give you a giggle or something.”

Orvie had enjoyed his ‘fortune teller’ days back in the early 1900s and was sorry he couldn’t share more stories about it.

“So,” Nat began, “you think we’ll be able to figure out this pendant in time to find the diamonds and get Kaka his

operation?”

“That’s asking a question I can’t answer, you know.”

Nat nodded and looked into the fire.

“One thing did come to mind, though,” Orvie continued. “That igloo shaped thing is shaped very much like the beach here where your house is. Would you agree?”

Nat took hold of the pendant, turned it around so he could see if face on and began nodding.

“Yes. It really is. We hadn’t made that connection. You think that means it’s buried right here under the sand in our front yard?”

“Just pointing out stuff as it comes to mind. Do you know how old your grandfather was when his father gave it to him?”

“He was still a young man – maybe in his late 20’s or early thirties. It was long before I entered his life, I’m sure of that.”

“May I ask how old he is?”

“Sixty-eight.”

“Gee! That’s really not very old in this day and age. So you came to live with him when he was . . . fifty six?”

“Right.”

“Was he living here then?”

“Yup. He came here on his fiftieth birthday. Grandma had just died and he decided to start a new life. He took six months to build our house all by himself. He could only work at it a few minutes at a time because of his heart. He’s really proud of that accomplishment – like something he never thought he’d be able to do.”

“He must have had some way to support himself other than selling sand to the Indians.”

Nat laughed out loud at the unexpected turn in Orvie’s phrase.

“It involves another family secret.”

“I’m not here to pry. If it’s a secret, you keep it to yourself. I’m not into taking on responsibility for knowing things like that.”

Nat continued to stare into the fire. Orvie’s imagination raced. Perhaps Kaka had been a mobster and robbed banks and still had the FBI looking for him. Maybe he was a secret

agent and spies from foreign lands were trying to track him down and drag him back to their countries to make him give up secrets. Maybe he was . . . With Orvie, his imagination could go on like that for days at a time. It was often how he occupied his time while walking from place to place.

One really bad guy in the mystery was more than enough. He wondered just how far Cray was willing to go in order to get the diamonds. Would he be willing to harm Kaka? Would he consider kidnapping Nat in order to force some secret he thought Kaka knew about the location? He certainly seemed capable of such things. Orvie would stick close to Nat and Kaka for a while. That, of course put him in the same sort of danger as his two new friends.

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CHAPTER FOUR: Plans!

Come to find out, the big secret didn't amount to much. Nat immediately spilled the beans.

"Kaka is sort of a writer."

"How can somebody sort of be a writer?"

"He doesn't write books or long stories. He calls them fillers. Newspapers often don't have enough material to fill up columns and so they use material that's written just for that purpose – fillers – very, very short articles I guess you could say that will fill out the column to the bottom of the page. He makes five dollars for every one the company buys from him – it sells them to the papers. He makes a quarter every time one is printed. He usually turns out a half dozen a day. Each one can be printed in dozens of papers over the years."

Orvie had to wonder what there was about that, that would make it into some sort of big secret. That didn't make sense – unless it was a payment under the table, tax related thing or perhaps he didn't want people to know he had a second income – that he kept cash at his place.

"It's not a lot of money, but living out here we don't need hardly any money – the food staples and a few clothes, some household items – soap and stuff. Our way of life is really pretty inexpensive. And, oh, my books."

"Books?"

"Kaka teaches me here. No good school within forty miles in any direction. I think you would call it nontraditional education. One week we may be learning about the history of steel production in Pennsylvania and the next reading a

biography of General Jeb Stewart, the Confederate soldier. In math – my favorite subject – I’m starting calculus – pretty advanced for a twelve-year-old.”

“I’d say,” Orvie said, clearly impressed. “I didn’t start calculus until I was 27.”

Nat giggled just the way he said he would when he caught onto one of Orvie’s absurd stories. (Come to think of it, he may have actually been 29.)

Orvie steered them back on topic.

“If neither your great grandfather nor your grandfather owned this property at the time the diamonds were hidden, then the chances they are here is pretty slim – whether the outline of the igloo resembles this place or not, what do you say?”

“I suppose so. It’s a something, someplace, though.”

Orvie smiled: “A something, someplace. Now that’s hard to dispute, I can tell you that.”

It was worth smiles.

“As I understand it,” Orvie went on, “this area of North Dakota was not even your great grandfather’s home territory at the time.”

“That’s right. Both Kaka and my dad were born in Missouri. But he was someplace near here at the time of the . . . whatever you’d call it, happened – when the diamonds got given to him and he hid them. They moved up here soon after that. Kaka now believes that was so they would be close to them.”

“Just where did they live when they came to North Dakota?”

“Down in Bismarck. It’s fifty or so miles south of here. A city. My great grandfather continued to guide tours, but Kaka says he was never gone for more than two weeks at a time. He wanted to stay close to the family, I guess.”

“Any chance you have a fairly detailed map of this area?”

“We have a fifty-page atlas that’s just about North Dakota. Kaka jokes that it can show you where every prairie dog hole is – and whether it’s currently occupied or not.”

“In the morning, I’d like to study that and get familiar with things around here. Do you know exactly where the Duke

met his demise (died)?”

“No, but I’m quite sure Kaka does. One more thing about the atlas. Kaka and I play a game. He’ll name something and I’ll have to find it on a map. He times me. We’ve been playing that every night since I was old enough to point at a page – well, that may be a bit of an exaggeration. Since eight or so years old, at least. If I do say so myself – and it seems that I am – I know this state, and especially the area within a hundred miles of home here, better than anybody in the world. It’s a skill that doesn’t pay particularly well, but I’ll be rich if it ever should.”

Gradually, Nat’s sense of humor was emerging. Orvie liked that. Down through the years he had seen that folks with a good sense of humor almost always had the best – the happiest – lives.

They put a couple sizable slabs of wood on the fire – all night burners, Nat called them – and slipped into their sleeping bags. The night air had become quite chilly, quite fast.

For some reason Orvie slept lightly that night. He noticed the two times when Nat went inside – to check on Kaka, he assumed. At one point, he also noticed a strange, large, shadowy figure walking toward them. He was pretty sure it was a man – too small for a bear and too large for a dog or goat. The man first looked down at Orvie who hoped he had closed his eyes in time to appear asleep. The man was carrying a flashlight and its beam crossed Orvie’s face. A fairly dumb thing to have done if he were trying to remain unnoticed.

The beam then turned to Nat, but rather than his face it focused on the zipper on the sleeping bag. The man reached down and slowly, quietly, unzipped it down some two feet on the side. He carefully peeled it back and reached out toward the pendant.

It was one of those now-or-never moments that Orvie seemed to have all too often. He had been unzipping his bag from the inside while the man was paying attention to Nat. He reached out for and into his shoulder bag. It still contained the bear repellent – pepper spray – from his time at the Carter’s pine forest. In an instant, he was on his feet screaming at the top of his lungs to draw the man’s attention.

The moment he turned toward Orvie he got a lingering blast of spray dead center in the face and one side of his head as he turned away in pain. The man screamed and ran off into the darkness.

Nat, of course, had awakened and was sitting up trying to make sense out of Orvie's strange behavior – screaming, dancing around, waving a can in the air. Perhaps a Medicine Man in disguise?

"What the?" Nat said, getting to his feet and backing up a bit from where Orvie was standing, suddenly calm, cool, and collected. Nat had turned on his flashlight.

Orvie filled him in on what had taken place.

"A man, and I'm betting on uncle Cray, crept out of the darkness, unzipped your sleeping bag and was reaching to take your pendant – he didn't get it did he?"

Nat reached for his chest, panic momentarily showing on his face.

"No. It's still right here. What makes you think it was Cray?"

"Tell me, Natty, what would make me think it was anybody else?"

"I see what you mean. I guess that was a close one, then."

"I'll say. Fortunately, I had some bear repellent in my shoulder bag and I blasted him in his face."

"I got some news for you, Orvie. That's not bear repellent you have there – he walked closer looking at the can in the beam of his light – it's Autumn Tan spray paint."

Orvie lifted the can so he could read the label.

"Well, what do you know? I painted the man into submission. A few weeks ago, I did that to the end of a log and later it helped identify it and send some bad guys to jail."

"I'm getting the idea you just go from one dangerous situation into another."

"Sometimes it may seem that way. Well, okay, often, maybe."

"Thanks for sure. I better go check on Kaka."

"Yeah. I figured he'd have been awakened by the ruckus I put up out here."

"The house is made of 4 X 4s laid up solid like logs."

One inch clapboard on top of that inside and out. Great insulation and great sound proofing. The windows are quadruple-paned to keep out the winter cold and winds. He wouldn't have been able to hear a thing."

"I noticed you checked on him a couple of times earlier."

"I worry about him, Orvie. He's all I have in the whole world. It's terribly scary to think about losing him."

"You go check on him then. I'll build the fire up a bit. What time is it by the way?"

"Four thirty, give or take a few."

He left for the house. Orvie decided they would be safer inside the house so he dragged the sleeping bags to the porch awaiting Nat's return, which was almost immediately.

"I was thinking the same thing," he said seeing the sleeping bags.

They took them inside and spread them out side by side on what remained of the sitting room floor after space was taken up by a sofa, desk and large chair. It was a wooden floor covered by a thick round, braded rug which added to their comfort there.

Nat secured the door with a 2 X 4 that slid into metal brackets on each side of the frame. It certainly provided more protection from bad guys than a key lock.

They slid into their bags and lay quietly for some time. Presently, Orvie whispered, "You awake, Nat?"

"Yup. Can't seem to convince my eyelids to shut. You?"

"Me what?"

"Awake!"

"Let's see, now, would I be talking to you if I weren't awake?"

"Oh, yeah."

It provided a lengthy chuckle session.

Nat turned serious.

"If that was Cray, and I guess we've pretty well established it was, he's not going to stop until he gets what he wants or dies trying."

"Then we'll give it to him."

"What? Give him my pendant. I don't think so!"

“No. No. What we’ll give him will be a fake duplicate. Do you think he has any idea it’s made out of iron?”

“I can’t imagine how he’d know that, why?”

“We need to find some soft metal – aluminum or copper or brass – so we can fix up a duplicate.”

“But won’t a duplicate give him the same information this one would?”

“Let me rephrase it. We will give him a fake-uplicate.”

“Ah! Make it look like this but with different symbols on it.”

“Right. I’m pretty handy with a pad and pencil when it comes to drawing,” Orvie said. “I think with a little practice I can create something that will be pretty convincing. (And those two years as an apprentice silver smith during that year he was a seventeen-year-old twelve-year-old just might come in handy as well!)

“I know where we can get a small sheet of copper – fairly thick,” Nat said.

“Really. Copper’s pretty expensive.”

“Not when it’s free.”

“Well, I suppose it would be hard to argue with that logic. More!”

“There’s a miner’s shack I know of that has – or at least had – several copper plates on the roof – like to fix leaks. It hasn’t been used since I’ve known about it – probably since I was nine. It’s in an out of the way place nobody ever goes anymore.”

“Great! Can we go see about it in the morning?”

“I’m sure it will be alright with Kaka – if he’s feeling okay. I always ask him permission before I leave.”

“I’ve noticed.”

“It’s not really that I need it, but if I ask if he’s feeling okay he’ll always say yes – can’t admit anything’s wrong – that Sioux thing I’m thinking. But when I ask permission to leave, if he’s feeling bad he will opt to tell me he’d rather I’d stay around – he needs company. We both know what’s going on, but for some reason he’s more comfortable with it that way.”

“Okay then. Providing he doesn’t opt for company, we’ll get on that first thing in the morning – which, I realize it already is. I assume you have tools, nails, things like that.”

“A very complete set. Most any kind of hand tool anybody could want. He accumulated many of them back when he built this place. They’re in a couple of boxes under the bed. I also have some of my own. What will we need?”

“A very sharp cutting edge – preferably more like a knife than a saw – to get the general shape cut out of the metal sheet. Then a file to smooth the edges. Something to put a hole in the top for the neck thong to slip through. Then, something like an awl or sharply pointed nail to do the actual engraving.”

“Got all that a half dozen times over. It sounds like you’ve done this sort of thing before.”

“Does it? My, my!”

Orvie figured a friend would take that to mean, ‘private territory, leave it alone’. Nat took it to mean, ‘not going to talk about it so I’ll just shut up’. It worked just fine for both of them.”

They both felt much better after their talk.

“Maybe we can get a little more sleep now,” Orvie said.

“Not if you don’t stop blabbing,” Nat said giggling.

Orvie smiled into the darkness. This was a really great kid and he would be a good friend, even if only for a short time. He had had so many hundreds of short term friends during his life that he learned to enjoy every one of them for however many hours they would have together, and he treasured each one.

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CHAPTER FIVE: Trickery!

The first thing they heard come seven o'clock the next morning was: "I declare. What's the world coming to when TWO young bucks sleep in 'til after the sun's up?"

Nat rolled over and wiped his eyes looking up into his favorite face in the universe.

"Morning, Kaka. I guess we talked way too late last night. We decided to come inside because some animal was roaming around out there."

"Your grandson is an Olympic class talker, I'll give him that," Orvie said, also coaxing his eyes open.

The old man nodded and ruffled his boy's hair before turning to more pressing business.

"There were still embers from your fire last night so I built it up a bit and can have flapjacks and bacon sizzling in five minutes. Got three skillets heating as we talk. Get washed up and we'll get on with the day. I really feel good this morning.

Over breakfast Orvie coaxed several stories about the old days from the old man who seemed delighted to have a new audience for several of his classics. They felt authentic in every way. 'How refreshing,' he thought; an honest story teller.

Eventually, Nat brought up their plan for the morning.

"Thought I'd show Orvie around the area this morning, if that's okay. By sticking to the river trail, he missed most of the really good stuff back up north of here."

The old man nodded, saying:

“Thought I’d fish a while this morning.”

“Orvie and I will take your porch chair down to the lake before we leave.”

The old man nodded. It had actually been the reason for his mentioning the fishing.

“I want you to take the rifle with you if you’re going to be that far from the house, Kaka. Like I said, there was some sort of animal around the area last night. Wouldn’t feel right leaving you hear unprotected way out by the lake.”

Orvie immediately saw a problem with Nat’s story; the only pints in the sand there were people prints. Perhaps the old man wouldn’t notice. Orvie wouldn’t bet a free penny on that, however.

With Kaka situated and the rifle leaning against his chair, the boys headed north. A claw hammer and chisel had been added to Orvie’s backpack. There was water in canteens and a couple of cheese sandwiches ‘just in case’, as Kaka said as he handed them to the boys. The old man never offered a, ‘be careful’. He just assumed his grandson knew how to take care of himself. It doesn’t mean he didn’t worry when the boy was away – all parent-types always worry about twelve-year-old boys.

The river was low, so the shore was relatively wide – twelve to fifteen feet wide in many places – at which point it veered upward at a relatively steep slope. They walked for nearly an hour. Nat pointed to an area ahead to the right where the slope gentled a great deal. Once there, they headed east (right). Some hundred yards into the walk they turned north again and entered a small wooded area that melted into the mountainside to its east and north. Just inside the outer perimeter of the trees stood the cabin Nat had spoken about the night before.

It was very small with upright siding. There were wide cracks between the well weathered boards. The roof had once been covered with tar paper. That had mostly rotted or been blow away over the years. Two plates of copper – each one nearly a foot square – were still nailed in place. The roof sloped to within five feet of the ground in back so it took very little effort for the two of them to manage themselves up on top.

Orvie handled the hammer and Nat the chisel – using it like a pry bar. Within two minutes’ plate number one had been removed. The second went faster. They had learned the method while practicing on the first. With a bit of polishing they would be able to bring either surface to a brilliant shine.

They arranged the plates inside and along one side of Orvie’s backpack taking up hardly any room at all. They were a quarter of an inch thick but heavier than one might think. The boys jumped to the ground, peeked inside through the long-broken single window and began the return trip.

“So, the river gets a lot higher, does it?” Orvie asked.

Nat pointed to a spot on along the side bank that was nearly as high as his hair line.

“That’s what they call the 100-year flood level – only about once every hundred years does it get that high – but it’s usually a good two feet higher than it is now. There wasn’t as much snow as usual last winter so the melt that usually kicks in by now isn’t producing nearly as much water.”

“So, all that beach in front of your place gets a lot narrower I assume at normal water level.”

“Comes in about fifteen feet. As you noticed the slope is not really as gentle as it looks when you’re approaching it.”

Orvie nodded. He had noticed that.

They approached the Cove about two and half hours after they had left. Kaka was still sitting, manning his fishing pole. Nat ran to him. Orvie lagged back to give them any private greeting time they might need.

“You fellas weren’t gone long. See what you went to see?”

“Yes,’ Orvie said nodding. “There’s lots to see up there in a couple of hours.”

“Took him up to the old miner’s shack. Showed him the various water lines along the river. Guys just like to talk, you know.”

The old man felt no need to answer.

“I’m ready to go back to the house now. Got a stringer full of fish. You two get them gutted and we’ll have a feast for lunch.”

The boys followed with the chair, the rifle and the fish – a dozen, not large, but enough for the feast Kaka had

predicted.

They took care of the fish first, ran a pot of cold water at the sink, and placed the fish into it.”

“That’ll keep them plenty cool ‘til it’s time for them to hit the flames,” Nat explained.

They had placed the leftovers from the fish preparation near the southern tree line just beyond the beach. The vultures were already enjoying what they seemed to think was a wonderful snack. Orvie was sure one of them winked at him as if to say, ‘thanks’. That was not something he would share with his friend.

“Where can we work on the copper without having to explain too much to your grandfather?”

“I got a great place out back.”

“All I’ve seen out back is the outhouse. Not an ideal work setting, I’d say.”

Nat smiled.

“Farther back. Up the mountain side about twenty yards. In a huge oak. A tree house I’ve been working on since I was seven.”

“Must be well built if it’s survived the winter storms you describe.”

Nat grinned, clearly appreciative that his planning and craftsmanship had been recognized. He was coming to understand that Orvie was good about that – making comments that built him up and made him feel good. It was one of the things that made him such a comfortable friend.

“We’ll be back in time to fry the fish, Kaka,” Nat said to his grandfather who was rocking on the porch, reading a book. Be in the tree house. Ring the bell if you need anything.”

Orvie had noticed the bell. It hung to one side of the front porch ceiling. A section of sturdy twine ran through all three rooms a foot or so from the eight foot ceilings. He imagined that was designed to give Kaka easy access from anywhere in the house if he required Natty’s assistance.

The tree house turned out to be quite a structure. The main section was ten feet long and six front to back. There was a second section attached slightly above the larger one. It was where he kept many of his books and often did his studying. The entire structure was weatherproofed with layer

after layer of tarpaper. The roof, like that of the house, was corrugated metal. The main section had glass windows on two sides. The smaller part had a large window across the front. Orvie was quite sure that he could have happily made it his own personal residence.

They were soon both sitting inside the main section. Nat had gathered the tools Orvie had requested from his own tool box he kept there in the tree house.

The first piece he cut was ill-shapen, but he had learned several helpful things about what not to do the next time. Orvie always looked upon those sorts of errors as wonderful experiences because they taught him something important. His second attempt was perfect – a perfectly shaped diamond nearly three inches long and a bit more than one across.

He handed it to Nat for his examination and approval.

“Looks great.”

He held it close to his own pendant.

“Just about exactly the same size.”

“You good with a file?” Orvie asked.

“I’d say so. Want me to smooth out the edges.”

“Go for it!”

They talked as he careful and skillfully worked at the task of smoothing and slightly rounding the edges.

“What do you know about the Duke and his family, much?”

“Lot’s actually. I have a book about the family line. Problem is it’s written in German.”

“May I see it?”

“Sure. It’s upstairs. There.”

He pointed to a crawl through hole half way up the wall. It gave access to the ‘upstairs’ as Nat had referred to it.

“It’s a massive book with a dark green binding. It has several pages of the family tree drawn out. That, at least, I can make sense of. Huge print.”

Orvie located it easily. It bore a publication date three years prior to the death of the Duke – the last in a very long line of Dukes in his family. Orvie could read German, but usually didn’t give up that piece of information. During 125 years of life, he had been able to learn a very large number of

things – way more than even the brightest twelve-year-old could have. So, to reveal too many of them to any one person would certainly raise suspicion.

He skimmed the Table of Contents and quickly read the sections that seemed useful. The Duke came from a family that had an unsavory (unpleasant) reputation back many generations. From time to time the residents of the Dukedom revolted against the family's wicked rule, but had always been defeated. The niece, who had four daughters, was only five years younger than the Duke, and had every bit as bad a reputation. Through high taxes, the accumulation of vast wealth from previous generations, and a generally greedy approach to life, the Duke had become extremely wealthy for his day. The amount that he had cashed in for the diamonds was just a small part of the family wealth.

It didn't reveal anything that would probably help in solving the mystery, but one never knew. Orvie believed a bit of extra knowledge was never a bad thing.

"Take a look at this," Nat said handing the copper diamond up through the opening to Orvie.

"Looks great. Fantastic job! Now we need to decide what sort of symbols to put on it."

"I was thinking the outline of a bird for one thing," Nat said. "If the wavy lines on mine have anything to do with water, then a bird is sort of the opposite."

"Okay, then. A bird. How about a square beneath it?"

"A square with a letter inside – two maybe, so it looks like initials."

"What fun! Any ideas what letters?"

"How about 'GW' for George Washington?"

"That's great. The 'G' may be a little hard to make but I'll practice on some of the spare copper until I learn how to do it. Let's say that's the front. How about two things for the other side?"

"Instead of a wavy line how about a straight line?" Nat suggested.

"And instead of making it diagonal, how about straight across the widest point?"

"That's good, and how about two of them instead of one?"

“This is great fun. We should go into business.”

“Yes,” Orvie agreed sarcastically. “There is such a demand for twelve year olds who can create fake pendants to fool unsavory Uncles.”

Nat recognized the absurdity in his previous statement with raised eyebrows.

“We need at least one more thing,” Orvie said. “What are those letters girls put at the bottom of notes?”

“You mean XOXOXO. I think they mean love and kisses.”

“It could be our final sarcastic remark to the man,” Orvie said grinning.

“Let’s do it.”

Orvie made a few trial-runs for each symbol before he began working on the piece of copper they had so carefully prepared for the pendant. He was very careful and one by one they came to life. It was finished by noon. They looked it over.

“Just about perfect, I’d say,” Nat said, nodding his approval. “So how do we get it to him?”

“We wait for him to come to it. We know the man is watching you – the wrappers and the attempt last night. We’ll set a trap. It means you’ll have to replace the real thing with the fake and I know you said you’ve never taken it off.”

“I can do that if it will get him out of our hair. What you thinking?”

“While Kaka is taking his nap after lunch, we’ll strip down to our cutoffs and lay out on the sand on our backs pretending to go to sleep in the sun – like working on our tans. We can make ourselves comfortable over close to the spot we know he was yesterday up on the hill/mountain/whatever.”

“How will he get it off me without ‘waking’ me up? He’d have to lift my head.”

“I just imagine he’s smart enough to cut the leather thong and slip it off.”

“You insinuating I’m not smart enough to have figured that out?”

“Apparently, yes. What is, is,” Orvie answered with a grin.

They left the tree house and soon had the fish

simmering in the frying pans out front. Kaka seemed to enjoy watching the two boys having such a good time together. They made toast by skewering slices of bread on the marshmallow sticks and passing them through the flames.

Kaka furnished lemon slices to squeeze over the fish and they settled in for the feast he had promised.

CHAPTER SIX: Things Begin Falling into Place

After lunch, the boys cleaned things up and Nat got Kaka settled in for his nap.

“We need another leather thong that it’ll be okay to have cut,” Orvie said as they returned to the porch.

Nat soon produced one from a drawer in the desk. He threaded it through the hole in the new pendant and, with obvious reluctance removed his, and replaced it with the fake. He pocketed the original.

They went through the stretch and yawn routine out on the porch, hoping Cray was watching. Orvie pointed to the spot they had previously picked out. They left their shirts and tennis on the porch and were soon in position on their backs on the sand. They chatted nonsense for a few minutes and then closed their eyes pretending to fall asleep. Orvie managed a quiet snore, which made Nat smile. He immediately wiped it off his face and they waited.

Years before, Orvie had mastered the art of making it appear his eyes were closed when, in fact, a slit remained through which he could make out the essence of what was happening around him. The trick was to keep them from quivering.

The arrangement was that when Orvie sensed the man’s presence he would offer a quiet, whispered, ‘tut tut’ sound as a warning to Nat. It was a series of sounds he could make without moving his lips.

They waited some more.

Their breathing became slow and regular – an essential

part of the masquerade, which they had practiced.

When Nat heard the signal he momentarily tensed, but sensed it and relaxed immediately. Orvie was lying closest to the edge of the sand so he could stand guard – ‘lay guard’, actually! Cray would have to walk around him to get to the pendant on Nat’s chest.

There may have been a slight miscalculation in the plan, Orvie thought as he watched the man approach. He was carrying a huge knife in the style of a Bowie Knife of olden days. What if Cray intended to slit their throats as they lay there? THAT hadn’t been part of the plan. Orvie turned his head slightly as if a normal part of the sleeping process so he could follow the man’s movements to his right. If he seemed to make any threatening gesture toward Nat, he would jump into action. (Where’s that spray paint when a guy needed it?)

Actually, the plan went off just as Orvie had suggested it would. Cray knelt beside Nat and gently lifted the pendant. He held the thong between his fingers and severed it without so much as the slightest jerk to the boy’s neck. Cray stood and immediately left into the bushes and trees from which he had entered the area.

The boys, according to their plan, remained quiet until the count of two hundred after Orvie had given the all clear signal – a second set of ‘tut tuts’.

“Okay, yet?” Nat eventually asked in a whisper. It had been a good choice of words sine they required no lip movement.

“I’d say everything is fine,” Orvie whispered. “Probably best if one of us wakes up first in case he’s still watching. Let’s make that you. Wake up and walk down toward the lake. In a minute, I’ll stretch myself awake and join you. Don’t put your pendant back on. I’d forgotten about that possible problem. Go!”

During that whispered conversation, Orvie had used his skill as a ventriloquist which he had acquired while assisting a performer at the World’s Fair in St. Louis back in 1904. It was amazing how frequently that had come in handy down through the years. To him it was an essential skill that all twelve-year-old boys needed to acquire.

Since they were at the lake and dressed for a dip they

swam for half an hour. Then, Orvie wanted to look at the atlas Nat had told him about. They sat on the front porch. Nat pointed out the local maps he thought might help Orvie learn the area most quickly. They studied them together for some time, Orvie pointing and asking questions and Nat filling him in on whatever it was. The boy did know everything about the maps.

An hour later Orvie felt he had a good general grasp of the lay of the land and was fairly certain he could navigate it if he had to without Nat by his side. The topic turned to the wearing of the pendant.

"I understand what you meant when you said I couldn't wear it for a while," Nat said, "and that's okay. The problem will be explaining to Kaka why I'm not wearing it without getting him involved in the . . . what? The investigation I suppose."

"Wear it when you're around him, I guess. I doubt if Cray will be back for some time," Orvie said.

It was agreed.

"Anybody else you can think of that might have any idea where the diamonds have been stashed?" Orvie asked.

"Kaka says, no. His father had an assistant that always went with him on the tours, but there's no reason to think great grandfather would have been so trusting as to have let anybody know. He only wanted his son, my Kaka, to have the information."

"And even then, he protected the information by coding it onto the pendant," Orvie said. "I just have to think your great grandfather had to believe your grandfather would recognize the markings."

Kaka said something like that once, but he really has no idea.

"Will he talk about it – where the diamonds may be?"

"He will with me. He doesn't know I told you about it. I can tell he trusts you. If we can figure a way to let it slip that you know then maybe that would make it a legitimate topic for discussion."

Orvie nodded.

"I'm just itching to ask him some questions. In the past, I've often found that a new set of eyes discloses things that

others have missed. Many times, it's just the way the same old questions are asked."

"I think you may be our last hope about it. I'm just going to come out and state it to him. We're always honest with each other. The pendant, your help, the whole thing. I'll do it right after he wakes up, which should be right about now."

Nat had been right. His grandfather soon walked out the door onto the porch. Orvie made up an excuse to leave for a few minutes so the other two could have their private conversation. When he returned, the old man opened the conversation.

"Well, I understand you know about our big secret that seems to really want to remain a big secret. Nat believes you may be able to help us. I'm open to that. Most certainly nothing else we've tried has helped."

"Great. Can we talk now?"

"No."

Orvie was confused and it showed across his face. The old man walked to his rocking chair and took a seat.

"Now, we can talk."

Nat grinned. He had suspected what was going on. Orvie matched his grin and shook his head, ready to offer his own opening statement.

"Well, for starters, I'm sure you've thought about the symbols on the pendant a thousand times. I'd like to just try some ways of thinking about them that may not have come you before."

Kaka raised his hand off the arm of the rocker indicating Orvie had his permission to go ahead.

"Did the concept of a diamond have any meaning between you and your father back before all this came up?"

"Baseball diamond. I played in high school. An average shortstop, but I had great fun. Then, my father told a story about being bitten by a diamond backed Rattlesnake as a boy. Survived by some sort of miracle according to him. There was a musical group I liked and he hated when I was a youngster called The Diamonds. Can't think of anything else we shared that way. Oh, sure, there is one other thing. When I was real little – four or five I'd say – he once brought me a little painted

turtle home from one of his too frequent trips away. Back then it was common at carnivals for there to be vendors selling small turtles with their shells painted in various designs or with names on them. The one he brought me had a white diamond painted on a red background. I loved that little guy. Unlike most of those that died soon after they were sold, mine lived for quite a number of years. It probably doubled in size. I had a big metal tub in the back yard filled with water and a few large rocks for him to climb up on. I spent many an hour watching him sitting under water at the bottom of the tub marveling at how he could hold his breath that long.”

It had clearly been a wonderful memory that apparently hadn’t surfaced for him in many years. Whether it would turn out to be anything more than that was still to be determined.

“What about wave or wavy lines or three wavy lines or just the number three? Wavy could even be the wrong word. Maybe curly or something else.”

“Nothing comes to mind. Waves like in the lake? He and I used to go camping every summer and we’d swim and dive for rocks and fish. That was in a stream. Oh, there’s a possibility – Diamond Fishing line. Only kind he would use. I probably even have a partial reel of it in my stuff somewhere. Happy times, fishing together. If nothing else, you’re helping an old man relive some fine memories.”

“What about that symbol at the bottom of the front – it looks sort of like a blackened-in igloo? I’m not sure what else it might represent, but surely something.”

“I’ve called it a cave, a tunnel, a tent, a mine – none of those things ring any bells. It even makes me think of a thumb nail.”

“All of a sudden it makes me think of the rear view of a turtle with a diamond on its back,” Nat said.

“I must say I never thought of that. Hmmm! Interesting. My Diamond’s back was low and not high. A high back like that would be more the form of a terrapin – the meadow dwelling relative of the water turtle.”

“How about the curvy line on the other side?” Orvie asked. “I’ve wondered if it might represent a boundary of some kind separating two areas or territories somewhere. It could be like a battle line with the dots representing soldier

encampments. That's way out, I know, but were brainstorming, here."

"Or," Nat offered, "a trail with some things indicated along both sides of it – like trees, maybe."

"I've wondered that, too, son, but a trail? Where? My father and I walked hundreds of trails together."

"I would think that it would have been one that had some very special significance to you and your father if that narrows it down. Maybe a place you often camped?"

"We never camped the same spot two summers in a row. He wanted to provide wide experiences for me. They often weren't even in the same state from year to year."

"Ever up in this area?"

"Well, yes, once when I was about Natty's age, in fact. It's when I fell in love with this part of the country. It was a sad trip in a way because my turtle died. I buried him up here. It was another reason the area meant so much to me, I suppose."

"You remember the spot you buried it?" Orvie asked.

"Goodness no. That was fifty some years ago. Somewhere near our camp site. That's about all I can tell you."

"Tell us about the campsite – in the mountains, along the river, on a plain?"

"Well, I think I can describe the campsite. It had its back to a very steep, low, mountain – perhaps more like a high, rocky hill. There was a generally even area that sloped down toward the river, but that slope went on for two or three miles before it met the river. There was a stream that ambled across the area from the mountain almost all the way down to the river before it made a sharp turn to the east. It was fairly wide – twenty or more feet in most places. In one place, it flowed through a rock outcropping and narrowed considerably, cutting deep into the limestone. It ran more rapidly in that spot making a swirling, rapids. That was probably only twenty yards long and six or eight feet wide on the surface. It churned itself around a fairly severe series of curves within that space. My father pointed out how the running water had carved its path by eating away the irregular deposit of the softer limestone that was contained within the much harder stone

that surrounded it. I remember him warning me to stay out of the water there because it would be filled with hidden dangers – jagged rock outcroppings and such. I did as he said.

“Oh, now I remember. That’s where I buried my turtle. I got a large chunk of limestone and laid it on top for a grave marker. I chiseled a big diamond on it – his name was Diamond in case I didn’t mention that. Bless my risibles! I wonder where that memory’s been resting all these years.”

He became very serious and looked back and forth between the two boys who had, by that time taken seats on the porch floor cross legged near his rocker.

“Memories are the lingering, eternal, gifts from experiences long past. Hold on to them for as long as you possibly can. They will be among the most treasured parts of having lived an interesting life.”

Orvie understood completely. Nat, not so much, but he’d remember what the wise old man had said and someday he would understand.

“Do you think you can locate that campsite on a map?” Orvie asked.

“Perhaps with Natty’s help. He knows things about this area that not even the men who made the maps knew. How do we begin?”

“It would help if you knew the name of the stream or the area where you camped.”

The old man shook his head straining to think – to recall.

“Nothing comes for me. That line of thinking is probably dead out of the starting gate.”

“Do you remember a town’s name – maybe one where you traded or passed through?”

“I think there were two – one may have begun with a ‘W’.”

“What’s the general location?” Nat asked.

“Well, north of Bismarck for sure. South of Lake Sakakawea. Best guess would be about half way in between.”

(The reader may want to take a look at a map of North Dakota. Follow the Missouri River to locate Bismarck and Lake Sakakawea north of it.)

“That’s good. East or west side of the river?”

“That’s not the right choice.”

“What do you mean? Aren’t those the only choices? The Missouri River runs from the northwest down toward the south east. What other choices are there?”

“We were on the north side. We would sit and watch the sun set in the west, but that was not looking out across the river. The river flowed in front of us – west to east. We were definitely north of it. From where we were, up high there, we could just make out parts of the river through the trees to the south. It was directly south of us.”

“Okay. I know the place,” Nat said.

He opened the atlas to a new map and soon had his finger pointing to the spot that had to be the area of the campsite. It was the only place south of all the lakes to the north where the river did run almost directly west to east for a few miles – ten miles, maybe.

“Could the town have been Washburn?” Nat asked.

“That’s it. Washburn. Dad and I had a joke about ‘how could anybody ever burn a wash’.”

“How far from Washburn was the campsite do you figure?”

“About four hour’s hike straight east. At least that’s my best guess. It was a long time ago.”

“Let me get to the map that shows that area in detail. Here. Several creeks in that area. Look here, Orvie.”

The boys examined the area for some time.

“I think we have a winner,” Orvie said pointing to one of the creeks. “Look at the course it flows – between here and here – almost identical to the curved line on the back of the pendant.”

Orvie removed his magnifying glass from his backpack. Nat stood and placed the atlas on his grandfather’s lap. Orvie offered the glass. Nat pointed and traced the stream.

“I’d bet on it, boys. You are super sleuths.”

“Let Kaka look at the line on your pendant through the magnifying glass.”

That was arranged and Orvie spoke.

“Look at the second dot from the bottom.”

“I see. It really isn’t a dot, is it? More like a . . . diamond. Well, I’ll be! That could mean two things, of course,

he said looking up and back and forth between the boys. “It could reveal where the diamonds are hidden. Or it could merely show where my turtle was buried.”

“I say we should bet on the diamonds,” Orvie said, “after all, that’s what this pendant is supposed to be about.”

“If that’s the location map on the back, then we still have to figure out what the symbols are trying to tell us on the front,” Nat said.

“That probably won’t become obvious until we’re up there on site,” Orvie said. “That can’t be more than ten or fifteen miles from here, can it?”

“About that. Not a bad hike.”

Kaka had some additional information.

“There are two historical sites up there. The Fort Mandan Center and the Lewis and Clark Center. Full of fantastic information for history buffs. I’ve been there several times – all back before Natty came to live with me. I suppose the decision has been made that you will go explore it.”

“Sure seems that way to me,” Nat said.

Orvie nodded his agreement.

“In the morning, be okay, Kaka?” Nat asked.

“Could I keep you away short of tying you to trees?”

The boys grinned.

Orvie figured the really dangerous part of things was just beginning.

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CHAPTER SEVEN: A Giant Step Forward

It would need to be a stay-overnight trek – probably a stay-over-several-nights trek. Nat was clearly uneasy about leaving his Kaka at home alone, but realized he had to make the trip. They laid in supplies and food and outfitted Nat's backpack as well as Orvie's. They strapped the two sleeping bags below them and would be ready to leave early the next morning.

Nat checked to make sure Kaka had plenty of his medicine. He had them tote a supply of kindling close to the stone, fire circle to make it as effortless as possible for the old gentleman to cook. They filled the water tank. It was about all they could do to prepare things for Kaka.

"I think it would be best if you planned for us to be gone five days, Kaka," Orvie said. "That way if it takes more than a couple you won't have to be worried."

"What? Me worry about my precious twelve-year-old, only grandson traipsing off into the dangerous unknown with another twelve-year-old we hardly know and may suspect is a runaway from a juvenile detention center in some crime ravaged city. No. Nothing here for me to worry about."

The boys shared his smile, but got the message loud and clear – BE CAREFUL!

They stepped off the porch at seven the following morning. There had been lingering hugs inside. Orvie was pleased to have been included.

For virtual strangers, Nat and Orvie never seemed to lack for conversation. They talked about their natural

surroundings and how the forces of nature might have created them. They shared their personal interests – Orvie’s, history and psychology, and Nat’s math and geography. They wondered together about the universe and the history of the planet. They shared things they knew about the people who had inhabited that area hundreds of years before the Europeans had come upon the area themselves. [Like the explorers, Lewis and Clark, if the reader is interested.]

Orvie learned that the Lakota Sioux, the bloodline that Nat shared with his grandfather and great grandmother, believed that all things possessed life or spirit. Because of that all their nouns in some way indicated life – animate rather than inanimate. A tree, a rock, the sand, the sun, a flower all contained some element of being alive. Everything in nature was therefore precious and to be respected and cared for.

Nat learned things about the mid-western states where Orvie had spent the majority of his 125 years. Orvie related stories – never presenting them as his own – of life on the fancy big river boats, of riding the luxury trains of old, of harvesting wheat and corn by hand, and of the vicious tornadoes that regularly visited that area during the spring and early summer.

At noon, they stopped and made peanut butter sandwiches and drank the milk they had brought in a large thermos. As they slipped back into their gear and got on their way again they each enjoyed a large apple.

The river ran a generally quiet course in that area. It was wide and clear and lazy. It had its source in the Rocky Mountains of Western Montana and flowed for over 2,300 miles to join the Mississippi just north of St. Louis Missouri. They agreed it would be a grand adventure to canoe the entire length, however long it might take.

By three o’clock they were headed west following the river and were rapidly approaching the area where the stream – creek – for which they were searching should be entering the river. On one map, it had been named Shining Waters, probably a translation into English from one of the Native American languages. On another it had been labeled Deception Creek. Nat had no idea how that may have come about.

They came upon a creek. They came upon a sign near the creek. They came upon a conundrum (mysterious problem). The sign read, Shinning Creek. They looked at each other puzzled.

“Some combination of the two names?” Orvie offered as a question.

“I suppose the only way to find out if it’s our creek is to follow it for a way,” Orvie suggested.

They turned north.

They followed the stream almost straight north for nearly a mile. Then it turned west and paralleled the river for nearly a quarter of a mile before it took an irregular curve and resumed its northerly path, which it maintained for half a mile. It then curved west for a half mile and made an easy curve back toward the north.

“You seen enough?” Orvie asked.

“This would seem to be it, alright. I suppose we could verify that if we could figure out what the dots on the pendant represented.”

“Those could have been tress long since cut down or structures that are no longer there, deteriorated or swept away by heavy rains,” Orvie said.

“That makes sense. There was some panning for gold in this area during the gold rush days – back in the 1840s before the California lodes were discovered. They could have been miners’ cabins or shacks.”

“Wish we’d thought of that possibility before we left your grandfather.”

They had been making their way along the north-east side of the stream.

“So, you think we’re two miles from the river yet?” Orvie asked stopping and turning to look back down the long wide gentle slope they had just climbed.”

“Hard to tell the way we’ve been meandering around. Really, it seems quite a bit farther to me. It might be that my Kaka didn’t remember that accurately. It’s difficult to see the river from here.”

“Trees and forests grow taller in fifty years,” Orvie said. “They may hide the view that he had as a boy.”

“He said he buried his turtle at their campsite, right?”

Nat said, clearly about to present an idea.

“That’s how I heard it.”

“If the diamond on the pendant represents the position of their camp, that would be way south of where we are now. We’ve followed the stream on the pendant clear to the top of the line.”

“It’s as if much of that line was just to show a big stretch of the creek to confirm the geography of it all,” Orvie said, thinking Nat’s suggestion through just a bit further.

Nat pulled the pendant out of his pocket and the two of them studied it. Orvie spoke first, pointing.

“Assuming this gentle bend in the river where we’re standing is the curve at the very top of the line on the pendant, then something should be right about there – the dot-something, I mean.”

They walked ten yards North West along the creek. The grass was tall. There were a few isolated bushes here and there. They split up and examined the ground more closely.

“May have something here,” Nat said.

Orvie moved to join him. Nat drew back some grass with his foot.

“Could be a rock foundation.”

They followed it finding a small rectangle of rocks roughly ten feet by eight feet in dimensions. As they walked the area around it, they found evidence of wood that was in the final stage of rotting into the ground.

“Sure could have been a structure of some kind,” Orvie said. “Let’s retrace our steps. If the dots do represent shacks, there should be two more on this side – one at that sharp curve just south of us and another one some distance east from that strangely shaped curve at the bottom of the north/south section.”

They began retracing their steps.

“There should also be something on the other side of the stream about half way to the curve,” Nat pointed out.

They walked on, their eyes peeled on the area on the opposite bank.

“That could be it,” Nat said pointing.

“Let’s work this side as long as we’re over here,” Orvie said. “Then we can cross and work our way back up stream

over there.”

Nat nodded and they picked up their speed, suddenly excited that they might finally be getting close to finding something solid about the mystery.

“Here’s what we’re looking for,” Orvie said.

They had seen it at the same time. It was similar in shape except it appeared to have been a solid rock floor.

“This was a fancy shack, I guess” Orvie joked.

“The miner probably had a wife who demanded it,” Nat came back.

They had a good laugh.

Eventually they also found a third rock foundation right where the map suggested it would be.

“The most convincing thing about this stretch of stream is that narrow passage through the stone outcropping,” Orvie said. “That’s not indicated as anything special on the map.”

“It’s where the diamond shaped dot is,” Nat pointed out. Great grandfather must have thought that would be a sufficient clue.”

It required no response and Orvie gave none. The creek was deep there – six to ten feet. They removed their backpacks, shirts and shoes leaving them there and had to swim across. Actually, it felt good; the day had turned warm and the sun was bright as it lowered in the western sky. They walked north toward the outcropping and the rock encased stretch of rapidly running water.

“Well, what do you know?” Nat said falling to his knees beside a large chunk of well weathered limestone.

Orvie joined him and they brushed away years of crud that had covered the surface. Presently, Nat’s fingers found the indentation they were hoping to find. They followed it with a stick, cleaning it out.

“That’s a diamond shape if I ever saw a diamond shape,” Orvie said.

“Can you imagine we’re touching the very rock that Kaka set here over fifty years ago?” Nat said clearly moved by the moment.

It was like a magical rope or string that suddenly tied him to that moment so long before. Orvie allowed him time to be a part of it.

“Do you think my great grandfather came back here, dug up this rock and buried the diamonds beneath it?”

“It is certainly a possibility,” Orvie said. “I have a foxhole spade in my backpack.”

Nat thought for just a moment and then nodded with some determination.

“Let’s do it! We’ll need to get our backpacks and gear over here. How we going to do that and keep them dry? The last shallow crossing was a mile downstream.”

“Got it covered. I’ll swim back across. I’ll tie the rope I carry to that little tree and throw it over to you.”

“You’re going to throw a tree over to me?” Nat said, grinning.

“No, doofus! The end of the rope. First, I’ll tie it up fairly high over there. Then, I’ll string it through the straps on the backpacks and my bag. You’ll pull it taut (straight and tight) holding your end lower – your end of the rope, that is. I’ll let the gear slide over to you – down the rope – one thing at a time. That sound okay?”

“Excellent. Let’s get at it.”

“It’ll be getting pretty chilly soon. Once the sun is down the temp drops fast. You’ll need to get out of your wet cutoffs and we’ll both need to get into our jeans and hoodies.”

The plan was set. The plan was executed. Soon the gear was with them on the south west side, Orvie was dry, and they were both dressed for the cooler temperatures.

“We’ll need a long, strong, pry bar of some kind and a large rock for a fulcrum (support),” Orvie said as he began looking around.

“I spotted a long straight branch over there while you were enjoying your swim,” Nat said. “I’ll get it while you round up a rock that’ll work for a fulcrum.”

The materials were gathered. The chunk of limestone was nearly two feet long and one wide. It would be heavy. Orvie dug a narrow borrow under it just far enough to allow the branch to fit in place. They both needed to apply their weight at the far end of the branch in order to move the stone. They reset the end under the stone three times before they finally had it set far enough aside to examine the ground beneath it.

Orvie handed the spade to Nat, thinking that if they

were going to find the diamonds, he should be the one. He dug for some time. Within less than a foot they ran across what could have been the remains of a turtle shell. Nat lifted it out and set it aside.

“We’ll put it back when we’re done.”

Orvie nodded.

Nat dug down another foot. Aside from a few rocks, he uncovered nothing of interest. He handed the spade back to Orvie with a question.

“How deep shall we go?”

“Let’s try for one more foot. I’m thinking nothing else was buried here.”

“Why you say that?”

“Look at sides of the hole. There are layers of soil – lighter and darker layers. They are continuous across the area we are digging up. I’m thinking that means the soil has never been disturbed down there beneath where you found the shell.”

Nat nodded.

“Let’s do that one more foot if you can reach it. Your arms are just a little longer than mine.”

Orvie got down on his belly and went to work. It became a slow and awkward process. At last he moved up onto his knees and wiped his forehead with the back of his filthy hand.

“Enough?” he asked thinking it should really be Nat’s decision.

“Yeah. A dead-end I think. I guess that puts us back to square one, huh?”

“Well, if we were to say there were going to be 100 squares in all, then I’d have to say we’ve already come about 90 of them,” Orvie said giving both his honest appraisal and wanting to offer some hope for Nat.

“So?” Nat said sitting back on the ground. “Any ideas?”

“Oh, I always have ideas.”

“Any worthwhile ideas?” Nat amended his question with a grin.

“Never know that unless one of them works, will we?”

“I’d never thought of it that way.”

They took their time replacing the shell, refilling the hole

and resetting the stone. Then they sat back and watched and listened to the water churn as it passed through the narrow rock passage in front of them. Dusk was taking over the world. They needed to make camp, start a fire, and fix something to eat.

While they walked the area gathering wood, Orvie had things to wonder about out loud.

“Okay, so, with what we have learned up here, have any of the other clues taken on any new meaning – the wavy lines or the igloo-like thing?”

They built a fire circle from the abundant rocks and assembled the kindling into the makings of what should soon become a grand fire. It was as if they had been camping together for years. They had matches, but both preferred the fun of making sparks from stone and steel. They soon had a perfect fire underway.

They broke out two cans of pork and beans. Orvie liked his cold. Nat liked his heated so he sat it close to the fire, turning it every so often. There were biscuits and a small jar of jelly. It seemed like a feast. They talked (of course) as they ate.

“Suppose there are bear up here?” Orvie asked.

“Some, I’m sure. And wolves.”

“That’s reassuring,” Orvie said looking out into the darkness.

At that moment, a pack of wolves set up a howl from somewhere on the mountain to the north. The boys scooted closer to the fire.

CHAPTER EIGHT: More Bad Guys?

“You don’t seem to be concerned about the wild beasts,” Orvie said more fascinated by his friend than frightened for himself.

“Never been eaten alive yet!”

“I think I’m smart enough to see that.”

“We’ll make a second fire over there and put our sleeping bags in between them. There’ll be a raging stream on our east and fire to the north and south. No self-respecting beast would ever approach us. Anyway, this time of year there’s plenty of small game to keep their tummies filled.”

Finished with their main course they decided to build that second fire. Once it was blazing they returned to the first and enjoyed the biscuits and jelly for dessert. Orvie understood that Kaka had included just six biscuits apiece to last the trip, but they suddenly felt like biscuits and jelly and they were all gone within the hour.

“I have been thinking about those marks we’ve been referring to as wavy lines,” Orvie said. “Sitting here listening to that rushing water I’m wondering if maybe they represent current or rapids or cascades instead. Like rapid water instead of quiet water – wavy rather than straight.”

“Interesting, but we just dug at the only diamond reference anywhere near the rapid current.”

“I know. Just looking for some new perspective.”

“Speaking of a new perspective,” Nat said. “Look behind you about fifteen feet. Up some five feet. There are two eyes reflecting the light from the flames back at us.”

Orvie turned slowly immediately seeing that what Nat had described was not the prank he had initially thought it might be – there were two eyes – wide and narrow and pointed at both ends. Thinking through the various possibilities, only one of them at that height seemed legitimate. He reached for his bag and found the pepper spray.

“If it’s a bear,” Nat began, apparently having come to the same conclusion as Orvie, we want to stand close to each other and wave our arms and scream at the top of our lungs. Only superior size and noise level ever impresses a bear. But, we don’t make a move ‘til he does.”

Orvie took out his flashlight and shook it several times to charge it. He aimed at the eyes and flipped it on, soon having the amazingly fearsome creature in its beam.

Nat broke into laughter. Orvie soon joined him. There, sitting on a rise – a rock dome they had forgotten about – was a raccoon just waiting to lick the insides of their bean cans clean. Nat tossed them in its direction and Orvie highlighted them in the beam of his flashlight. It moved quickly, not seeming to be afraid of them or the fire in the least. It worked over the cans and then set them aside sniffing the air in the boys’ direction as if to ask if they had anything else to offer. Nothing coming in his direction, he turned and lumbered off into the darkness.

The boys had a good laugh – partly because it had been humorous, and partly because of the adrenalin rush that always follows near death expectations!

Somewhat humorously, Nat tossed another sizeable chunk of wood onto the fire to the north. Actually, it seemed like a good idea so one was added to the south fire as well.

“How about we sleep on it all,” Orvie suggested. “Maybe by morning something will have come to mind.”

They unrolled the sleeping bags and had soon cozied themselves inside.

“Seems like an ideal setting to tell ghost stories,” Orvie said smiling into the dark, thinking it might be twelve-year-old fun to make his friend just a bit uneasy.

Nat had a comeback.

“With a thousand Sioux spirits already roaming these

mountains, I doubt if your stories could really compete with the real things.”

“That has to be the best retort (comeback) in the entire history of retorts,” Orvie said chuckling. “You win!”

“Of course, I win, I’m Sioux.”

They drifted off wearing smiles.

* * *

The early morning chill burned off quickly once the sun topped the mountain to the east. It was the sun on his face that had awakened Orvie. He had the fires built back up before Nat crawled out.

“Ever fry eggs and bacon on a rock?” Nat asked.

“Can’t say that I have. Is that what’s on the menu for this morning?”

“It’ll take a while, but it’s the best bacon and eggs on the planet – wood smoke flavor with the bacon flame cooked when the grease catches fire around it.”

“I’m game. How can I help?”

“Need two flat, thin stones with a foot or so of surface. Scrub them in the creek unless you like dirt in your eggs.”

“I know where some are down on the bank. Saw them when we got out of the creek yesterday.”

Nat rearranged the fire so it burned lower. Then, set several foot-high rocks into it, which would become supports for the flat stones. With the stones in place, Nat suggested a swim while the flat stones warmed up to frying temperatures. They were soon into their cutoffs and then into the water.

The area just above the turbulent (churning) water in the rock formation made a first-class swimming hole – deep and wide and long. They took precautions not to stray too close to the white water in the rocky area thinking it just might suck them in. Cuts, bruises, and scrapes were not on their agenda that morning.

“I’d sure like to know how deep the water has cut the channel there in the rock outcropping,” Orvie said.

“Kaka indicated it was a good deal deeper than the rest of the creek. Not sure how he knows that.”

“We may have to investigate it later.”

It was a good, if short swim. The heat from the fires felt good as they climbed out and prepared to fix breakfast.

Soon, the bacon was spread onto the larger of the two flat stones. They were very hot and it immediately began sizzling.

“We’ll wait ‘til it’s mostly done before starting the eggs. Scrambled or over easy. No good way to do sunny side up. Stones are too hot.”

“I’ll have mine like yours. Not particular. Mine come out burned, fried omelets no matter how I plan them.”

While Nat fussed over the bacon like an old lady, Orvie visited the dome of rock where their nocturnal (night time) visitor and made his presence known to them the night before. Dome was an appropriate description. It stood five feet high and spread to a circular ten feet in width where it surfaced out of the soil. It had the same reddish tint as the nearby outcropping through which the water churned. He returned to where Nat was tending things.

Ten minutes later they were scarfing down one of the best breakfasts Orvie could remember in recent years. A biscuit would have been good, but that possibility went with their sweet teeth the night before.

They talked as they ate.

“If, as you suggested, those wavy lines indicate this rapid water, we still don’t have a good clue about how it is important.”

“In some way, we have to tie it into that igloo thing. I have to stop calling it an igloo because that surly just keeps us from seeing it for what it’s supposed to be,” Orvie said.

“Yeah. You could build an igloo up here in the winter, but it sure wouldn’t last through the summer heat. We need to brainstorm about things that are rounded on the top and flat on the bottom.”

“Like half an egg, half a melon, half a skull – things like that, you mean?”

“And the young escapee from the detention center focuses on cutting living things in half. Where’s Kaka and his rifle when I need him?”

“It was worth a prolonged chuckle.”

Three men appeared down the slope some two hundred yards away. Nat quickly had his binoculars out and trained on them. They were definitely too well dressed for

hikers. He handed the glasses to Orvie.

“Get out another tin plate and smear it with the residue from our plates,”

Orvie said.

He laid down the binoculars, removed his blanket from his backpack and arranged it rumpled on the ground between the sleeping bags.

“It’s to make it seem like there is a third person with us – an adult, we can imply, if it seems to be useful. I’ve learned the possibility of an adult around always adds a measure of protection – provided they don’t turn out to be Sunday School teachers and we didn’t need any of it in the first place.”

“You seem to know more about these things than I do,” Nat said. “How do we handle this?”

“Play it by ear.”

“That’s really no help whatsoever, you understand.”

“Once we’re sure they’ve seen us we’ll wave to them – making friendly. We’ll watch their reactions for some indication of what they’re doing here.”

They moved up the slope showing little interest in anything, but talking among themselves. As they got closer they looked to be in their thirties and forties. One of them walked with a cane or walking stick. He had no noticeable limp so Orvie assumed it was for show.

Eventually, the men saw the boys and stopped, again talking with each other. Clearly the boys were the topic of the conversation. When they again looked up the slope, Orvie waved. Nat followed his lead and they both put on smiles. By that time they were no more than twenty yards away.

Orvie called out.

“Hey! Hi!”

None of the men offered anything in return, but they did continue walking toward them. When they got close enough for regular voice conversation, Orvie began.

“Didn’t expect to see such well-dressed gents up this way. It is a beautiful morning for a walk, though, isn’t it?”

The one with the walking stick – black ebony with a gold tip around the bottom and the hand hold around the top – stepped forward. Orvie figured that marked him as the leader. He took note of the family crest sitting there on the upper gold

section of the cane. He waited for them to make their next move.

The man looked around the boy's campsite and pointed to the three plates and sleeping arrangements.

"Somebody else with you?" he asked, his thick German accent unhidden.

"My dad. A logger. He's brought us here for a week of sun, water, fishing and hunting. He's out looking for a couple of rabbits so we can get a stew going for lunch. He may bring back enough so we could invite you to stay and eat with us if you'd like."

"No. Just looking over the property. We understand it is for sale and are seeking a place to build a new resort hotel."

"This would sure make a great spot, alright," Orvie said. "We know the area here pretty well. Camp it for a week every summer. It's all the time Dad can spare from his chainsaws and tree climbing."

The men looked at each other. Orvie had sensed several things. He knew for sure they weren't looking to buy the property or that there was anything like a hotel in their plans. Those had clearly come across as lies. He'd try for some additional information.

"You're from around here then?"

Again, it was Cane Man that responded.

"Yes. Bismarck is our headquarters."

It had been a lie. Their headquarters may have started with 'B' but it felt more like Berlin than Bismarck to Orvie.

"If you have kids I'll tell you this is a wonderful spot for fathers and sons to get to know each other. I'd recommend at least three or four days."

"Yes. That might be a very good idea. Thank you for the suggestion. You're going to be here how much longer – we wouldn't want to intrude on your time with your father?"

"Only four days left. Always over way too soon."

"We'll leave you alone," Cane Man said. "Sorry if we bothered you."

As they turned to leave one of the other men removed a pocket watch on a gold chain from his vest pocket and looked at it, then at the sky, returning it to its pocket.

Orvie felt several more things. There were no sons.

He was not sorry they had intruded – only sorry that whatever they were up to had to be put off for three days. None of the others had said anything that the boys could hear so they had no idea if they spoke with an accent as well.

Once they had moved down the slope far enough to be out of ear shot Nat began an emotional tirade (outburst).

“How do you know what to do like that? How do you know what to say, like that? I was scared spittleless. You had me convinced that our Dad was really going come out from the woods at any moment with three rabbits slung over his shoulder and a shotgun under his arm. I mean how?”

“I’ll fill you in later, but did you see what I saw when that one man took out his pocket watch?”

“That he looked up to catch the position of the sun. Figure that shows he has at least some outdoor skills.”

“That’s a good observation. I guess I missed the full significance of it because I was looking at what else was dangling from his watch chain.”

“What? I missed that.”

“I only got a second to look at it, but I’d bet big that it was the fake pendant we made and Cray stole from you.”

“How does that make any sense?”

“Only one way I can think of. They took it from him.”

“Why? How? When? Where?”

“I can’t be sure, but I figure they are definitely players in all this. One or all of them could have been trailing Cray and just happened to see him steal it. They figured if it was important enough for him to steal it was important enough for them to have. In that case, if it was one of them, he may have recognized us just now.”

“Or Uncle Cray could be in on it with them. He certainly hasn’t been getting anywhere on his own.”

Orvie hitched his head indicating Nat should follow him. He took a seat on the ground, back against the red rock dome. Nat joined him.

“Time to recap what we know,” Orvie said. “Let’s do it together.”

“Before dear old dad gets back you mean?” Nat said spreading a huge grin.

“Like I said, about that later. We got much bigger

things to deal with right now.”

Nat nodded, becoming immediately serious and tried to begin.

“Things like the Duke giving my great grandfather five million dollars’ worth of diamonds just before he died of a heart attack and making it plain he didn’t want his family to get any part of them?”

“I’ve been thinking the Duke’s death was where it all began, too, but now I’m wondering if it really goes back to the family thing in Germany,” Orvie said.

“To the niece?”

“Yes, and perhaps to some of her offspring – Cane Man I’m thinking traces his lineage (family tree) back to her.”

“Not Watch Man and Baldy, too?”

“Baldy? I didn’t see a bald guy,” Orvie said puzzled.

“When he took off his cap – the one with a bill front and back – to wipe the sweat off his forehead, I saw his hair move – it’s a toupee – a wig. I guess his scalp was sweaty and that make it slippery.”

“Good observing my friend, and good monikers (nicknames) you’ve come up with for them, but let’s move on to what we know and believe. Your uncle Cray has been trying to find the diamonds – that were never intended for him – for a long time. The pendant your great grandfather gave to Kaka should hold the key to finding the diamonds. To buy us some time we sent Cray on a wild goose chase with the fake pendant. We are very sure we have located the geographic spot Kaka’s father intended to indicate on the pendant. The diamonds were not in the obvious place – under the rock marked with a diamond. Now, three overdressed guys in suits, at least one with a German accent and a family crest on his walking stick, show up right here at the spot that has to be hiding the diamonds. One of those guys seems to have the fake pendant from Cray.”

“I guess that pretty well summarizes what we know,” Nat said.

“But, it doesn’t tell us how they found this spot.”

“Maybe they followed us,” Nat said, suggesting the simplest answer.”

Orvie grew quiet. If they had followed them and

believed they had followed them to the spot where the diamonds were hidden, they really had no reason to keep the boys around – they'd served their purpose. In fact, they had every reason to get them out of the way, permanently! And, the sooner the better!

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CHAPTER NINE: Field Trip

Although the idea of them being followed contained several flaws – including the question about why the men seemed surprised to find them up there at their camp site – Orvie was taking their role as bad guys seriously.

“I think we need to take a field trip,” Orvie announced as he cleaned up the plates in the stream.”

“Where to?”

“Someplace where we can gain access to Google or Bing.”

“Washburn has what they call an internet café – three computers two of which are connected to the internet and the other to a printer. Part of the general store.”

“That can’t be more than ten miles, can it?”

“Eight or ten – half a day’s walk or less. Why the internet?”

“Did you see that crest on the cane?”

“I knew it was there. Can’t say I paid any attention to it beyond that.”

“Two gold lions standing on their hind legs on each side of a blue shield with a red ‘R’ on it. There was some saying on a scroll across the bottom. I couldn’t make out what it said, but my impression was that it was written in German.”

“Like a connection to the Duke?”

“Like a connection to the Duke whose last name began with ‘R’ – “Rothstein. You up for a little walk?”

“Of course. Full packs?”

“Hmm? Really don’t want the bad guys to think we’ve

broken camp and left because we need to come back here and find those diamonds before they overrun the place. How about we leave sleeping bags, blankets, and cooking ware here – up top on that dome so the animals don't meddle with it?"

"Sounds good and you still owe me an explanation about lots of stuff, you remember."

"I remember. Let's get trackin'. We need to be back here before nightfall."

"This is one of those times when cell phones would really come in handy. Kaka says we can't afford them. I'd feel safer about him if we were connected to the outside world."

"I understand. Never had one myself. Used a few but never had one."

"It's about eight, now," Nat said. "That should put us in Washburn before noon."

Is there any way off this meadow besides going straight down this slope into what is very likely the prying eyes of our enemy?"

"Sure. We could take two days and climb that mountain behind us."

"I guess we'll risk being seen, then."

It took considerably less time to go down the slope than it had to climb it the day before. They stayed in the shadows, close to the wooded area along the North edge (their right as they descended the hill). They figured it might help them escape notice.

Blackburn was northeast – mostly east. The land was generally level. They decided to stay away from roads for the obvious reason of not being easily tailed by their three new adversaries (enemies).

They walked and talked and jogged a bit from time to time. The temperature had climbed into the mid-seventies. By the time they had the little town in sight, they had grown hungry so found a shady spot in a grove of trees to take a lunch break. Again, it would be peanut butter sandwiches. Nat had brought some dry juice mix, which they stirred into their water. It wasn't half bad. It was a four slice apiece sort of hunger they had. The bread was going fast. They would pick up more in town.

After lunch they soon found themselves walking the main street of the little town. The population sign read 1,401. Orvie wondered which one was the '1'. It produced several chuckles as they passed people and he'd poke Nat with his elbow and ask if he thought 'he' or 'she' was the '1'.

They easily located the general store. There were few people either on the streets or in the store. The computers were available. The sign suggested they could be used for a half hour free with any purchase of five dollars or more. Orvie approached the clerk.

"We'll be buying a loaf of bread, a dozen hotdogs, six bottles of water and a half gallon of milk. Will that qualify us to use the internet?"

The clerk was an amply built woman in her sixties. She wore more makeup than seemed reasonable to either of the boys, but her smile was wonderful and her cheerful attitude made her immediately attractive.

"I'd have let two such fine looking lads use it without spending a penny."

Orvie turned to Nat.

"Notice how she refrained from telling us that until after I had committed us to some purchases?"

"I did, but she has an honest face, a great personality, and she winked at me, so I think we should let it pass."

"Keep it up, gentlemen, and I'll be paying you to use the internet."

"I'll get your supplies ready and set them in the cooler until you're ready to leave."

"Nat clearly knew very little about the use of a computer. He motioned Orvie into the chair.

In less than a minute they were pursuing (looking through) a web page dealing with European family crests. In less than two minutes, Nat pointed to one.

"Like that?" he asked.

"Yes, like that."

There were several versions of the Rothstein Crest. It had apparently gone through a series of revisions down through the years. Any one of them could have been the one on the cane. They all held the same motto on the scroll at the bottom – Lineale für immer.

“The family motto means, Rulers for Ever,” Orvie said.

“Like I said, you got questions to answer for me.”

“Like I said, later.”

They smiled. They paid for their supplies. They left.

“There are usually girls hanging around the clothing store,” Nat said just letting it drop.”

“I’m always up for ogling (staring at) members of the fairer sex,” Orvie said with what Nat thought was an extraordinarily broad grin.

Once outside, Nat pointed and they moved west. There were three girls looking in the window. Two were about their age – one older. The boys just stood there making like they were looking into the other window that displayed guy stuff. One of the girls spoke.

“You guys new around here?”

They each waited for the other one to answer first. Neither did, so Orvie spoke up.

“Just passing through. Camping south of here.”

He held up the bag of groceries.

“Came into town for supplies.”

“You must be brave staying out there all alone.”

“That’s us, two brave dudes.”

It hadn’t been great conversation on Orvie’s part and he knew it.

The older girl, acting very much like an overly protective older sister, spoke.

“It’s been nice meeting you boys. We really have to be on our way.”

So much for ogling the fairer sex.

The girls left. The boys left. In many ways girls were still a mystery. Nice to look at but a bit awkward to be around. Watching the older guys they understood the awkwardness was somehow bound to pass in the near future.

They began retracing their steps, eager to get back to camp. They would be walking into the sun all afternoon and immediately shed their shirts. They each privately thought it would have been nice if the girls had been watching.

Orvie attempted the big explanation Nat kept bugging him about. It mostly revolved around how he had been on his own for a good number of years and had been fortunate to

have a lot of interesting and educational experiences. He admitted that in recent years he had been involved in several fascinating mysteries that he had helped solve. Those experiences had provided him with many of the skills that seemed so unusual to Nat. He indicated that the German Language had always fascinated him – his grandparents had been German. All in all, Nat bought the explanation – most of it true.

They decided to wait to eat again until they were back at the campsite. They first checked the equipment. It was all there and unharmed right where they had stowed it. They returned things to the ground. Orvie started a fire.

“Hot dogs?” Nat asked.

“Sound’s good. Never in a hundred years have I gotten tired of hot dogs.”

He smiled to himself about the truth in the statement.

Nat smiled at the apparent absurdity in the statement.

Orvie had always known about hotdogs. He and they had been born at about the same time. As he recalled it had been a German immigrant named Charles Feltman who first put a small sausage in a bun in 1874 on Coney Island and he’s given credit for the invention. In lots of places they are still called Coney Dogs. What a hoot, he thought – a boy of German descent, eating a German invention while playing cat and mouse with a group of German bad guys. At least to him it seemed humorous.

At three apiece they would have enough for two meals. They roasted them on sticks over the fire. Then Nat took charge. He cut them long-ways just deep enough to lay them open. He inserted two slender strips of cheese into each one and put them on the stones still in place on the south fire ring. A minute later they were ready to be wrapped in a slice of bread, liberally bathed in catsup, and receive the ooohs and ahhhhs from both boys as they were enjoyed.

“While we were on the internet something hit me that may be important,” Orvie said.

“What’s that?”

“The literal translation of the name, ‘Rothstein’ – like the Duke – is ‘red rock’. Does that speak to you in any way?”

“I’ll say. You think that was partly why my great

grandfather chose this place to hide the diamonds?"

"Seems to fit in with everything else. It could certainly have at least influenced his decision to come back to this spot," Orvie said.

"Or, it might even tell us exactly where the diamonds are."

Nat stood up and put his hands on his hips surveying the big, rounded, red stone outcropping.

"You seeing something I'm not?" Orvie asked joining him.

"If I am, it's probably the first time. Think about it – what have we come to call that big reddish rock outcropping."

"The dome, you mean?"

"Take another look at my pendant."

He removed it from his pocket and held it out.

"Not an igloo, but a dome. Nat, you're a certified genius."

They looked back and forth between the pendant and the dome several more times.

"Now all we have to do is find the secret trapdoor, reach in, and remove the sack of diamond that have been patiently waiting there for you all these years," Orvie said pointing out that the full disclosure had still not really been made."

"Okay, so there's still some work for us to do. Since I found the location I think the rest should probably be up to you – keeping things equal between us and all."

It was worth a chuckle – a nervous chuckle – between them. Could it be that they were really standing that close to the treasure? It wasn't a game of horseshoes so 'close' really didn't count.

They walked around the dome. They thumped on the dome. They kicked the dome. Orvie boosted Nat up so he could examine the top of the dome.

"Nothing," Nat said as he jumped to the ground.

"Perhaps we just need to lift it up, and there they'll be," Orvie said attempting to inject a bit of humor into a fully disappointing situation.

They returned to sit beside the fire. The world was once again beginning to darken. They had told Kaka five

days. That meant one of the next two days needed to be THE day.

When they began untying their bed rolls Orvie stopped Nat in the middle of the process.

“Wait a minute. My bedroll isn’t tied like I always tie it. Is yours?”

No, actually it isn’t. I always wrap the chord around it twice and make a small bow. This has only been wrapped once and has a huge bow.’

“Mine’s the same way. Either that raccoon is much more talented than either of us suspected or we had two legged visitors while we were gone. Look through your stuff to see if anything’s missing.”

Five minutes later they had determined that nothing had been taken. They looked at each and as one said:

“Cane Man!”

“I think we need to forget about sleeping and keep at this thing,” Orvie suggested.

“I’m with you, but what, how, which?”

“Which? Orvie asked smiling, not understanding what it might refer to.

“Well, you always come up with many alternatives. I was just asking how we’d figure out which one of them to try.”

Another shared grin. Orvie begin speaking – thinking out loud.

“Well, one approach would be to dig a narrow trench around the Dome Rock – right up next to it – and examine the soil strata (layers) to see if it has previously been disturbed. If we find a spot like that, we keep digging. We find nothing on the dome itself that could be a hiding place. That pretty much just leaves underneath it.”

“I suppose you’re right. Let’s get at it.”

“One of us can dig and the other can fill it back in where we don’t find anything useful. We can trade off jobs every five minutes. That should keep us fresh enough to dig on for some time.”

“Orvie got his little spade from his backpack and took the first shift as digger. He stayed close against the rock and cut the trench only the width of the spade – about eight inches. He dug down a foot which was plenty far to determine

if the ground had been disturbed. Ninety minutes later they had dug their way around the entire perimeter of the big rock. The layers there were intact and quite distinct – dark loam, lighter clay, dark loam. Any disturbance would have been easily recognized.

They sat back, again disappointed.

“A dead end, you think?” Nat asked.

“Can’t be. We just haven’t characterized something in the right way yet. We need to try to rethink everything from some different perspective (angle).”

They sat quietly for some time.

“I think better on a full stomach,” Nat said.

“Me too.”

“Can or loaf?”

Orvie smiled.

“What we got left in cans?”

“Hash, hash, or hash.”

“How about we finish off those hotdogs.”

“All great minds think alike,” Nat said with a grin.

They didn’t mess with bread. They squeezed some catsup out into one of the empty cans they had saved, and once they were roasted, dipped them. Who but twelve-year-old boys!

They did continue thinking, however.

“If it’s not on the dome, or beside the dome, it has to be where?” Orvie asked.

“Underneath. But it can’t be. We checked the soil.”

They thought some more.

“Let me see the pendant again,” Orvie asked.

Nat handed it over.

“Here’s a perspective I haven’t heard either of us say yet. What is the dome below or under as it’s engraved there?”

“The waves or the current, or, underwater!”

Nat’s face lit up.

“Like there may be a way to get under the dome from underwater. Now who’s the genius?”

“It would seem there are two geniuses or would that be genieye?”

“Problem,” Orvie said. “The underneath of the dome is right next to the most raging and dangerous part of the water

as it goes through the outcropping. We need to brainstorm techniques (methods). How can two 85 pound kids fight that current long enough to get a good look at what's going on down there?"

Again, they sat quietly for some time. Finally, Orvie spoke as he took a pad of paper from his bag.

He began sketching. Nat moved in close beside him so he could watch. Orvie described what the lines meant.

"My drawing is going to be set just above – upstream from – the rapids – above the rocky outcropping – close to where we were swimming.

"The water flows between these two lines – the rock walls on either side. This strip is a log that we can lay across the channel just before the rapids begin. It's only about eight feet wide there. We stake the log in place on both banks so it can't move or roll side to side. We run a log straight down into the water from that log and attach it – probably bind it in place on the first log with rope. We run that all the way down and set it into the bottom to keep it from moving with the current and rolling the upper log.

"One of us gets into the water just downstream from the upright log – just above the rapids. He has a rope tied around his waist, and the other end wound around the upright log – leaving it loose, so the diver can give himself some slack if he needs it. That will hold the person there in the water so he isn't washed downstream by the force of the rushing water. Then he'll be able to look around underwater and see what's what."

"In theory, it looks good. But we'd need to cut and trim two trees for logs. That will take, what, an hour – hour and a half, maybe. The stakes will need to be pretty long in order to hold the top log in place against the push of the water on the vertical (up and down) log. It's going to be really hard to insert that upright log against the moving water and get it set straight down into the rocky bottom and make it stable."

"I think you have the whole plan pretty well laid out," Orvie said.

"I thought I was making a case for how impossible it would be," Nat explained.

"How does it feel to be soooo wrong?"

Grin met grin.

“Sleep or chop?” Nat asked not really needing an answer.

Without a further word, they each removed their axes from their backpacks.

Orvie secured his flashlight and they set out across the meadow toward the stand of trees. Ten minutes later the trees had been selected – slender and just tall enough. Fifteen minutes later two fifteen foot pines were lying on the ground. An hour later the branches had been trimmed off and all that remained were two logs, straight and ranging in thickness from something just under a foot at one end to about eight inches at the other. They should be ideal. They had no idea how deep the water was there in the rapids so hoped what they had would be long enough to do the job.

The logs were quite heavy. They couldn’t carry them. They tried to drag them, one boy on each side up front with the log under their arms. It worked, but took forever to cover any distance and was an exhausting process. They put the log down to rest and think.

“What if we tried rolling it,” Orvie suggested.

A few minutes later the position of the log had been changed and the boys leaned down to test the idea. It worked. They quickly learned that they needed to keep it moving because it took a whole lot more effort to get it re-started than to keep it going.

It was two o’clock in the morning by the time they had delivered both logs to spots just upstream from the Dome Rock.

“I’m beat,” Nat said.

“Me, too. Sleep ‘til six and then get at it again?”

Nat nodded.

They built up the fires and were both asleep the minute they finished zipping themselves into their sleeping bags.

Assuming no bears, wild cats, or black suited German Rothstein’s attacked them in their sleep, they would resume work in a few hours.

CHAPTER TEN: Building the 'Preliminaries'

Orvie had more practice in naturally waking up at a pre-specified time than Nat (about 113 more years of practice to be specific). His eyes popped open at six sharp. They really wanted to snap right back shut, but Orvie struggled out of his sleeping bag. He'd never in his life fallen back asleep once he was standing up. He shook Nat's shoulder

"Just ten more minutes, Kaka. Just ten."

"I doubt if Kaka can hear you."

Nat opened one eye.

"Oh, ya. Logs, death defying underwater acrobatics, bad guys. Why would you wake me up to face that stuff?"

"Oh, for about five hundred sparkly little stones."

"Oh, ya. Kaka's operation."

He unzipped, stretched and worked himself into full wakefulness. By the time he had his bedroll tied and set aside, Orvie had bacon sputtering in the iron skillet. Fifteen minutes later the eggs were plopped into the grease – over hard and more brown than white that morning. Nat made toast and broke out the jelly. They were soon finished and ready to get back to work. Well, those bedrolls did still look pretty good.

"So, genius number one," Nat began, "how do we get that first log to span the stream?"

"Been thinking about that, genius number whatever," he replied.

"You. Thinking? Big surprise, there. Productive thinking?" he asked.

“I think so. We tie one end of our rope around the log toward the thinnest end – that’s the end we’ll send across the stream. It will be lighter in weight. We’ll run the rope over that tree branch where it comes out of the trunk. We’ll use the stakes that we will cut from the branches we trimmed off the logs, and lay them down parallel to the edge of the stream and then roll the log onto them. They will act like a dozen wheels – rollers – underneath it. That way it should be very easy for one of us to move it. The other one will keep a grip on the loose end of the rope and keep the suspended end of the log straight – horizontal – as it gets pushed out across the gap. With some luck, we can get it to the other side. Once there we both push from this side and center the log over the water. The rollers then become stakes and we begin pounding them into the ground snug against the two ends of log to hold it in place.”

“Actually, that’s a good plan,” Orvie. “It does assume an 85-pound kid will be able to budge that log while it’s on those rollers. If he can, it’s ingenious. If not, it’s back to the drawing board – or yellow pad as it seems to be.”

They returned to the place where the branches were strewn about and began cutting the stakes.

“How long you think?” Orvie asked separating his hands to indicate ever increasing length.

“They’ll have to withstand a lot of pressure from the water where it enters the rapids so they’ll need to be set fairly deep. Maybe three feet into the ground?”

“Sounds about right to me. Then another foot in height to hold the log above ground. Four foot stakes then.”

They set to work with their axes. Between the branches left from the two trees there would be plenty of good straight stake candidates.

“How many?” Nat asked.

“The main force will be on the downstream side. I’d think four on that side at each end and maybe just two on the other side to help hold it in place.”

“So, times the two sides of the creek, that’s twelve in all,” Nat said, thinking out loud.

It seemed like hard work. Many of those larger branches had smaller branches shooting off them. First, they

marked each branch into four foot sections. Few of them would make more than two stakes and many only one. Then, they removed the little branch shoots from the areas they were going to use. Finally, they chopped them into the four foot stakes.

They realized it was important to trim off the smaller side shoots as close to the main branch as possible since the stakes first had to serve as rollers. They needed to be as round as possible.

It was nearly ten before they were finished. They stopped for a juice break – more orange powder added to water. It was refreshing. They rested for fifteen minutes before they returned to begin carrying the stakes across the meadow to the bank of the creek. That was finished in ten minutes – they could easily carry three or four at a time.

They cleaned the path on the ground where the log would rest, tossing aside all the rocks lying on the ground. Then, they positioned the stakes/rollers spacing them about ten inches apart spread back from the creek, They attached the rope to the far end of the log (the thinnest end), then strung it back across and once around the tree branch, and let the loose end lay limp on the ground until they were ready. Positioning themselves just downstream from the log they rolled it onto the stakes – at that point the rollers.

Orvie made a trial run at pushing the log from behind all by himself. He was somewhat astounded that it really was not all the difficult.

“Yea for the primitive rollers!”

The boys looked at each other.

“Ready to do this?” Orvie asked Nat.

“I suppose we will know the ‘ready’ part in a few minutes.”

Nat picked up the rope and braced his feet.

“Just let out on the rope gradually,” Orvie reminded him. “Just keep it taut so the nose of the log doesn’t dip down toward the water.”

“I’ll do my best.”

“Without further comment Orvie began to push. It had eight feet to move across thin air before it would make land on the other side of the gap.

Two feet. The rope remained taut. The nose remained up.

Four feet. The rope remained taut. The nose remained up.

Six feet. The rope remained taut. The nose remained up.

Just two feet to go.

“The rope is getting harder to control,” Nat said.

“The log is suddenly very heavy,” Orvie said.

Both conditions were likely due to the extreme exhaustion the boys were, by then, experiencing.

Then, there it was. The nose was across the gap resting on the ground.

Nat dropped the rope and joined Orvie to help push.

It lapped the other side by one foot.

It lapped the other side by two feet.

It lapped the other side by three feet.

They stopped and sat back against the log.

“One small miscalculation,” Orvie said chuckling.

“Three of our stakes are stuck under this end of the log. I’m not about to try and get them out. We’ll need to cut more.”

“Water?” Nat asked.

“Absolutely, water, my friend. Do you realize that crazy plan actually worked? I’m amazed.”

“You’re amazed? I only went along with the idea because you seemed so sure it would work.”

“Then, good for my false appearance of ‘sureness’.”

They chuckled. They drank. They just sat still for a long time rubbing sore muscles.

“I’ll go cut more stakes,” Nat said. “You can begin pounding the stakes we have into the ground. You do know that will work, right?”

“Absolutely! Provided there isn’t a layer of rock down a foot or so.”

“Now you point that out. We could have tried a trial stake before we went to all this work, you know.”

“But then we might have missed out on all the fun.”

They threw six stakes across the creek that landed near the end of the log.

Nat walked across the meadow with his axe.

Orvie walked across the log to the other side, his axe in his belt. He selected a sizeable stone with one flat side. It would become his hammer. He began working on the upstream side thinking he'd need some practice to learn how to best drive them into the ground and those didn't need to be as well seated as the ones on the downstream side.

He had been right. The first one needed to be restarted twice. As they entered the ground they tended to move out away from the log – not what was needed. Eventually he discovered that starting them at a slant with the top of the stakes leaning slightly back over the log took care of the problem. They remained slightly slanted, but stayed securely against the log.

By the time he began working on the second stake on the downstream side, Nat arrived with the new stakes. Orvie had a suggestion.

“The stakes are already slightly pointed from the way our axes cut them, but they go into the ground a lot easier when the point begins ten or so inches up from the end. I've re-pointed the last two I've worked with and it makes a huge difference.”

Nat got to work shaving the points higher and making them sharper. Orvie put the final stake in place across the creek and walked back across the log to where Nat was working.

He helped shape the last two. They traded off pounding on the stakes, and soon had the log well snugged into a stable position.

“This next part is going to be tricky,” Orvie said. “Positioning the vertical log. It may end up being a trial and error activity – try something, revise it, try the revised way, revise it – you get the idea.”

“I'm so glad you really had all this so well planned out ahead of time,” Nat said. “It's noon. I'm starved. That hash is sounding pretty good.”

“Toast?” Orvie asked taking the new loaf of bread from the grocery sack.

“Sure.”

“Hey. Lookie here! The clerk at the store slipped us two huge apples. How nice of her.”

“How nice for us,” Nat added.

They were each soon into a fire warmed can of hash, toast with jelly and an apple to munch for dessert.

They talked about the next phase of the operation.

“We need to estimate how deep the water is in the rapids,” Orvie said. “Something we should have done first, probably.”

“Tie a heavy stone to the end of our rope and drop it in ‘til it hits bottom,” Nat suggested. “Then measure the wet section of the rope and we’ll have a pretty good idea.”

“I was thinking about that, too. Have to be a really heavy stone to keep the rope straight against the force of the water.”

“How about that baby?” Nat said pointing.

“Okay. But, first we need to see if we can lift it fairly easily. Once it’s on bottom we still have to pull it back up so we can untie the rope from it. We don’t have any rope to waste.”

Nat nodded that he understood. With the apples finished, they moved to the rock. It turned out to be too heavy as Orvie had privately suspected.

“That one?” Nat said pointing again.

“One way to find out.”

They were able to lift it.

“Do you think we can really drag it back out by gripping onto a wet rope,” Nat asked.

“I doubt it. Let’s try a smaller one.”

Presently they found one that seemed ideal. It was heavy and flat. If they hitched it up properly only the narrow edge would be exposed to the current, greatly reducing the amount of water force against it.

They hitched it up and moved to the edge of the water just upstream from the log.

“Better tie that free end of the rope around the tree,” Orvie suggested. “We can’t afford to lose the rope if it gets pulled into the creek.”

That done, they carefully began lowering the stone. It worked just about as well as possible. The current did swing it a bit downstream, but not beyond the log up top.

“Okay. Now, pull the rope tight so it’s sticking straight

up from the stone weight. That will give us the best estimate of the true depth.”

Nat arranged the rope and Orvie cut a piece of twine from a ball he carried in his backpack and tied it around the rope at his best estimate of where the surface of the water was. With the swirling and churning it had to be an estimate. They pulled the rock back up to the surface and were pleased to see it wasn't as deep as they had figured it might be. No more than twelve feet.

“Got an idea,” Orvie said.

“You better because I got nothin’,” Nat said.

Orvie would demonstrate with his pencil representing the log they were about to stand on end against the one already in place – his finger. The twine would be the rope.

“We tie the rope to the end of the log that will eventually rest on the bottom, like this. We wind the other end around the trunk of our old friend the tree. To begin with we'll keep it taut. Then as we lower the end of the second log straight down into the water one of us will give the rope more and more slack until it touches bottom, then tie it securely to the tree trunk. We'll need to have a rope loop around the first log and make a figure eight to catch the second log so it can slip down into the water, but not be pushed away in the current.”

“I follow you so far. Looks like it should work. But, how do we make a hole down into the bottom and fit the log into it?”

“That will be a bit tricky,” Orvie admitted, “but I have an idea. You won't like it, but I have an idea.”

Nat offered no response. Orvie continued.

“I'll fasten myself to the rope that runs between the tree and the bottom of the log where it rests on the bottom of the creek, making it a loose knot that will let me slide it down the rope as I dive down to clear away the rocks to make the hole to sit the log in. Being fastened to the rope will keep me from being swept away downstream.”

“You're right. I don't like it. It's dangerous. It may even be stupid!”

“So, you're with me on the idea, then,” Orvie said through a grin.

“Do I have any alternative?”

“Probably not unless you have a better idea.”

“You’re sure the rope will be strong enough to keep the current from dashing you against the rock sides and the bottom.”

“If that was a question, my best guess is yes, it’s strong enough.”

“How reassuring!”

“So, what do I do up here while you’re drowning down there?”

“You guide the log down into the hole as I clear out a space.”

“This is white water. I won’t be able to see down into it to watch your progress.”

“Maybe I can tap on the log with a stone and you’ll be able to feel the vibration.”

“Maybe, but how will that tell me what to do?”

“It won’t, of course. Got a plan ‘B’?”

“We just play that by ear, as somebody I know says at times like this.”

“I like it,” Orvie said. “I think we have our plan ‘B’.”

Nat raised his eyebrows.

“There is one aspect of this you need to be aware of, Orvie.”

“Only one?”

Nat ignored his attempt at humor.

“It will be lots harder and take lots more time getting back up to the surface than going down because the current will be coming at your face as you turn to come up along that slippery support rope.”

“Most astute (smart) young man. I will certainly have to put that into my calculations.

“I suppose you’ve dived to a depth of twelve feet before,” Nat asked.

“Oh, yes. Just last month in fact over in Minnesota. Went down fifteen feet many times.” (Of course, he failed to tell Nat that it had been in full scuba diving gear with air tanks.)

Orvie had always been able to hold his breath for a considerably longer time than most boys his age. He figured it would take many dives to complete the hole and set the log in

place, but he felt up to it.

They made the preparations. The log was maintaining its upright position exactly where they had placed it. After going through several designs for his safety belt – rope – they settled on one that was sturdy, but gave him a good deal of freedom for movement.

Finally, he was ready.

Nat would never be ready.

Orvie entered the water. It surged against him seeming to have every intention of sweeping him along with it through the twists and turn of the rapids.

He took a huge breath and submerged pulling himself along the rope toward the bottom. He figured the first dive would be merely for reconnaissance – looking the situation over so he could plan his moves. There was less turbulence down there, but the force of the water remained ferocious. He took a quick look around. There was plenty of light to see what he was doing. He surfaced before he needed to, thinking about Nat's cautions relating to that process. Nat had been correct. It had taken considerably longer coming up than going down.

He looked up at Nat who was standing on the log that spanned the creek, holding onto the vertical log.

"Doesn't look like it will be too hard. Several medium sized rocks right there. I will just move them to the side and we should soon have a stable hole a foot and a half deep."

"Great! Glad to see you again. By the way, where shall I send your belongings when you don't surface?"

"Always the joker. I think I can stay down a little longer this time."

He submerged. He was right. He was down for fifteen seconds, thirty seconds, forty-five seconds, sixty seconds, seventy-five seconds, ninety seconds. Nat began to panic.

At ninety-five, Orvie's head popped up out of the water. He gasped for a breath, smiling.

"Only a couple of more dives. It's going very well. You okay?"

"No! That was ninety-five seconds. I expected to see you floating belly up like a dead fish any second."

"I can do this. I can't tell not to worry, but I know I can

do this.”

Another large breath and under he went again. There was just one large rock left to move. It sat deep and was blocking the bottom of the hole. Orvie planted his knees on the bottom, reached down into the hole and tugged with all his might. It gave. He got his hands under it and pulled it out, setting it aside. He made his way back to the surface.

“Okay, I got the hole cleared out. This time I’ll try to pull the end of the log into it. The bottom will be moving up stream so when you feel it moving, pull back on the top, that will help send the bottom in the right direction. Remember, it will drop a foot or so, so hold tight. Don’t fall in. Ready?”

“Ready!”

Under Orvie went. At the bottom, he set his feet against two large rocks and wrapped his arms around the log. He pulled with his arms. He pushed with his legs. It began to move. Then, all of a sudden it began moving easily. Nat was doing his thing up top. It slipped into the hole making a perfect fit. One more dive to set a few rocks in place around the base and they would be finished – at least with that part of the ‘almost’ plan.

Five minutes later the boys were sitting beside the fire. Orvie was cold and shivering. Nat was also shivering, but not from cold. He had been scared silly the whole time and was much relieved to see his friend there across the fire from him alive and breathing.

All of that had just been the preliminaries (first steps). The main event still lay ahead. If there were a cave down there, Orvie had not seen it, but then he was purposefully upstream from the dome so he could search downstream on a tether (leash-like rope) from that upright log.

If Nat had been frightened by things up to that point, he’d probably break into tiny pieces when he heard what Orvie figured lay ahead!

CHAPTER ELEVEN: Into the Water

It was suddenly two o'clock, but they were pleased with all the work they had accomplished.

"Here's an off the wall question," Orvie said.

He had been thinking about finding and exploring the underwater cave – assuming as they were that it existed.

"I don't suppose you know of any bamboo growing this far north."

"You understand that really wasn't a question."

They smiled.

"Actually, I do know where there's some bamboo. There is a cold weather hardy variety that's been developed. It can thrive down in South Dakota, and if protected properly against the ice, it's been known to do well up here. I can show you some just a little west of here. Some rich dude just trying to show off, I think. You know the type: 'I have bamboo and you don't'."

Orvie nodded.

"Why? And I know I will probably regret asking."

"It's easy to hollow out bamboo canes. We can use them like breathing tubes for under water."

"WE? Breathing through a fishing pole. Not sure about that."

"Well, the invitation is open."

"It would be easier to buy a couple at the outdoor gear store we passed yesterday."

"That sounds like an improvement on my idea," Orvie said. "Lots of folks think bamboo is hollow all the way through,

but each cane has membranes across the open area at each node (bump). They are quite thin and easily removed. We'll need some wire - # 9 would be the best size."

"I can offer you a wide selection of fence wire as we pass it."

"We can make that work."

"Can we get to that store and back before sunset?"

"Easily."

They put most of their gear back on top of the dome and left on a jog. They found and purchased four, ten to twelve foot canes that averaged about one inch in diameter through their lengths.

By four o'clock they had 'rescued' a seven-foot piece of relatively thick wire from a fence and were back at their campsite. They immediately looked through their gear but found nothing out of the ordinary that time.

Orvie removed a short section from each end of the bamboo canes, exposing hollow sections nearly three quarters of an inch in diameter.

"That should be the perfect sized tube. It will keep a good supply of fresh air ready to be breathed in at any given moment. Much smaller and you'd have to suck too hard to fill your lungs."

He sharpened one end of the wire to a chisel edge – not a point. He bent the other end into a handle that he could use to easily twist the wire – and its chisel end – back and forth to gouge through the membranes inside the bamboo. It all took surprisingly little time.

While he was working on the bamboo, Nat put some slabs of salt pork on to cook. It seldom spoiled – all the salt acted as a preservative – but did tend to dry out some over time and that made it tough. He had caught theirs just in time. After an hour in the frying pan it should be delicious.

"Unless you need my help, I'm going to go find us some berries for dessert."

"Go," Orvie said. "Sounds great. I only have one pole left to fix."

With only six feet of wire to work with – after he had fashioned a handle at one end – he would go in as far from one end as he could and then finish it from the other. The

trimmed, finished poles were each about eight feet long. He thought some about how to connect them at an angle. He envisioned (imagined in pictures) hooking two of them together forming a right angle so when (if) they found the cave, part of the breathing tube would go straight down into the water and the other would veer off into the cave.

With his pocket knife he shaved down the smaller end of one piece and cut a hole on the larger end of a second piece. He worked carefully for some time needing them to fit together in such a way that the connection would be water tight and rather permanent – very difficult to separate.

By the time the berries arrived, Orvie had the big right angle completed. He would cut a plug to force into the open end of the piece into which the second piece had been secured so no water would enter.

“Looks like a giant boomerang,” Nat said kidding his friend.”

He sat down the berry sack and examined the connection.

“Ingenious. I supposed you learned how to do that on your expedition to Thailand a few years ago.”

Orvie smiled. Actually, it had been back in 1930 and the country’s name at that time was Siam. It was way too hot and humid and crawling with flying insects, slithering snakes, and bad men who wanted to sell him into slavery, so he stowed away on the first ship heading back to civilization. (The story of that adventure just might make a pretty good Orvie book. Hmm? Orvie and the Siamese Prince.)

They took their time and enjoyed the meat. Orvie fixed the berries with milk and sugar. A really nice treat.

“I know it’s getting dark, but I’d really like to at least try out the breathing tube today. We can do it on upstream where we swim – it’s not quite as deep, but the water’s a whole lot calmer. That way if it needs any modifying we can work on that by the light of campfires tonight.”

“One of your better ideas – actually trying something out first before betting your life on it.”

“It may not seem like it, but I really am a cautious person. I seldom risk putting myself in real danger.”

“I will have to take your word on that. Let’s get to it

before we lose light.”

Orvie was still in his cutoffs, but had donned a shirt and shoes for the trip to the store. Those were quickly removed. Together they picked up the breathing apparatus and began moving toward the creek. Orvie stopped them half way there.

“This thing is way too flimsy. It’ll break up as soon as any kind of current hits it. What we need is some sort of brace between the two canes.”

“Like to make a triangle – the most stable of all geometric figures,” Nat offered.

They lay the structure on the ground. One of the sections Orvie had cut off the end of the longest bamboo cane was nearly three feet in length. He got to that immediately and began thinking out loud.

“If we’d insert a wire running through it, we could secure the brace to the long poles with wire on both ends. That should make it very sturdy. It only has one node showing meaning there’s only one membrane inside to remove.”

“I was just thinking the same thing.”

Orvie grinned and spoke.

“It’s probably not fair to keep two such brilliant minds way out here away from civilization when brilliant minds seem to really be needed in our world these days.”

There were chuckles and knowing looks passed between them.

Ten minutes later the brace was securely wired in place and they were ready to launch the tube on its maiden voyage into the creek. It was amazingly stable.

Orvie would be the underwater breather. Nat would hold the device in place.

“Another mini-problem,” Orvie said as he was about to jump in. “If we don’t plug the submerged end some way – the breathing hole – water will fill it.”

Five minutes later an easily removable plug had been fashioned from a chunk of pine. Orvie practiced removing the plug and slipping the end of the tube into his mouth all in a one split second movement so no water could enter. Nat cut a foot-long section of twine attaching one end to the plug and one near the end of the tube. That way the plug would not be lost when it was removed from the end of the cane.

“Third time’s the charm, I hear,” Nat said.

Orvie jumped into the creek – it was deep right up to the near bank at that point. Nat lowered the device. Orvie located the end and submerged. Presently, Nat could hear air being sucked into the tube. ‘Can it be this thing is really going to work?’ he wondered.

Orvie stayed down for several minutes. Nat felt less anxious that time because he could see his friend through the water. Orvie surfaced.

“Works like a charm, Nat. Perfectly. Take it out. I’m on my way.”

On the bank, Orvie found the evening air more than a little chilly as the gentle breeze blew against his wet skin. He dried off with the one towel they had brought between them and changed into his jeans and a T-shirt. He sat close to the fire and had soon stopped shivering.

“Only one really major obstacle left,” he said. “We still need to determine that there actually is a cave down there.”

“A minor detail, I’m sure. Actually, I’m really impressed at your handiwork.”

“I’m just pleased it seems to be serviceable. If the cave, which we ARE going find first thing in the morning, only goes as far back as the dome, what we have for a breathing tube will be plenty long. If it goes quite a bit further back, we’ll need to hook up one or both of the other canes to extend it.”

“I’m guessing that whether it’s long or short, the diamonds will be stashed right under the dome – close to the opening,” Nat said. “I doubt if great grandfather had diving gear beyond maybe a mask and snorkel. Tanks would be heavy and cumbersome to bring all the way out here.”

“I hope you’re right. The less underwater work the better. Every motion is three times more difficult under water than on land – always pushing against the weight of the water instead of only air. Takes a whole lot more energy. I’ll tire very easily.”

“What do you suppose the diamonds will be in?” Nat said. “I’ve been envisioning them in a cloth sack with a draw string. That can’t be, of course. The cloth would have rotted away decades ago.”

“Well, the hiding was done in the 1950s, right.”

“Right!”

“Plastic was in use in a wide variety of ways by then. My guess is a plastic container of some kind. It virtually never deteriorates.”

“Or glass – like a large mouthed jar, maybe.”

“Might be, of course, but with glass and the rocks and the current I’d think the risk of it breaking would have been too high.”

“I agree. Plus, the metal lids they used on jars back then would have corroded away over time. A plastic container with a plastic lid is what I’m betting on. How big do you suppose it will be? How much will it weigh? Will you be able to carry it?”

“Those are good questions and I must admit I haven’t considered any of them. I’m going to say that a high-quality diamond worth \$10,000 will be less than half an inch square. How many of those sections are there in a square inch – eight?” Knowing that was correct he didn’t wait for verification from Nat. “If there are 500 of them that would take up how many square inches?”

“500 divided by eight. About 65 – a little less. Gee! They would fit into a 4 X 4 X 4-inch square.”

“I guess we can discount any problems about container size or weight,” Orvie said.

“Unless they are all mounted on rings or broaches or other kinds of jewelry,” Nat said.

“That’s a possibility, of course, but the Duke was traveling light – an overland trek from the east coast almost to the west coast. I’m thinking he believed he needed to stay out of sight – like somebody might have been after him.”

“That’s probably right. That part of it always seemed strange to me – that he didn’t just fly or drive or take a train as rich as he was supposed to be. The idea somebody was out to get him makes sense of it all – maybe the wicked niece who just may be the mother or grandmother of Cane Man.”

“Even though it makes sense that the diamonds will be close to the opening of the cave, I’m thinking to be prepared for a long trip into the cave might be a good thing. We still have some time this evening. How about we fix the last two cane poles so they can be fit together to make a longer

breathing tube if it's needed? Then, if we need them we won't have to waste time tomorrow. We need to make tracks back to your place as soon as we can."

"Okay. You seem to know how to do such things. What can I do?"

"Build up our anti-wild-beast fires for the night and get out the sleeping bags. We'll probably need a snack. I for one am famished already."

"They each went to work on their assignments. Nat finished first. Orvie realized each connection from cane pole to cane pole had to be a perfect fit – it could really be a matter of life and death if they were to fail. He worked on for some time. He opened up the larger end of one pole and shaved down the narrow end of the other so they would fit snugly into one another when twisted. Then, with the awl (sharp hole maker) on his pocket knife he made a very small hole through the two pieces where they were connected. A short section of the wire would just fit through the holes, keeping them secure together and leak free. Those connections wouldn't come loose and the wire really wouldn't slow down the flow of the air supply at all.

"What's this?" Orvie asked as he looked up, finally finished with his work.

"I sort of held back four biscuits for a special treat on a special occasion. I figure this was as good a time as any. By tomorrow at this time we'll hopefully have the diamonds and be on our way home."

"Aside from the fact that I can't tolerate biscuit holder backers, I do like the way you think, my man!"

"We could make cheese and bacon biscuits or we still have lots of jelly left."

"I'll opt for jelly on mine," Orvie said.

"I was leaning in that direction myself."

"Shall we warm them in the skillet?"

"Why not! All our hard work deserves a great reward."

Their hard work was very soon receiving that great reward.

They both slept well that night. The wild beasts – if there had been any – had respected their territory. Again, it was Orvie who was awake early. He scrambled their last six

eggs and added in what bits of salt pork were left. He made 'juice' and then, as he was putting the finishing touches on the toast, awoke his friend.

They were both excited at the prospects the day presented. It would be one of those win-or-go-home situations – like in tournament play.

The plan, remember, was for Orvie to be in the water and for Nat to handle the breathing tube when it was needed. Orvie had two plastic sacks stuffed into his rear pockets – it just seemed like good idea. Who knew what he might need down there. He also took his knife, leaving the long blade open, pointed toward the bottom of his front, right pocket. He hadn't made that known to his worry wart colleague. There could be nests of snakes. There could be man eating catfish (well, probably not!). There could be a party of three German bad guys in deep sea diving outfits down there just waiting for him. (As has been said, Orvie had a wild imagination!)

Orvie loved to play with absurd ideas. He was also usually well prepared for most any contingency (things that might come up).

Orvie secured one end of the rope around his waist. He would wind the rope around the vertical log they had so carefully set in place the day before. He would let out the rope a little at a time as he needed to move on downstream. The purpose of the rope, of course, was to keep him from being washed away by the tremendous force of the current there in the narrow rapids.

The rope was in place. Orvie sat on the log that spanned the creek, having positioned himself right next to the vertical log. Without any conversation about it, he slipped into the water, his body was immediately pushed down stream as far as the short length of rope would allow. The plan was that he would first dive and look the area over – the area just to the stream side of the red dome. The hope was he would discover the opening to a cave.

He made his first dive, struggling against the turbulent current. Presently, he surfaced for a breath. He submerged again, staying down a bit longer. The rock sides of the rapids were smooth, the result of a century or more of having the water pounding against them. He surfaced and let the rope

out another three feet. At that length, it would put him right beside the dome.

He stayed down for a length of time that was very uncomfortable for Nat. He surfaced wearing the broadest smile a twelve-year-old boy's face could possibly accommodate.

"Got an opening down here. Only about eighteen inches wide. I can easily get inside, though. Let's fit the breathing tube inside it first so it'll be ready if I need it."

The cane poles were so thin that the force of the water affected them only slightly. Orvie submerged and followed the poles deep into the water. The opening was some six feet beneath the surface. Orvie guided the horizontal pole in through the opening. Then he surfaced.

"Ready for my flashlight."

"It is waterproof, right?" Nat asked.

"We're about to put it to the test, I guess," Orvie said grinning.

He offered a thumbs-up and sank below the surface. Nat was more than a little uncomfortable, but he maintained his steady grip on the breathing tube. He waited to hear the air being sucked in. He waited some more.

"Use the tube, doofus?" he called out.

Ninety seconds passed and still no suction. What could have happened?

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CHAPTER TWELVE: Where's the Good Stuff?

At last he heard the sound Nat was waiting to hear. Orvie sucked in air, inhaling several times in a row, which told Nat he had finally exhausted the supply he had carried with him in his lungs. Orvie only breathed in through the tube. He emptied his lungs by bubbling air out into the water. If he had tried breathing both ways through the tube, the carbon dioxide built up in his lungs would have been exhaled into the tube, which would have prevented oxygen rich air from being able to enter from the world above and he would have soon suffocated on his own stale air.

The entrance to the cave had been, as Orvie had indicated, fairly small – wider than high. It was difficult to enter because the force of the water from upstream drove directly against it. Once inside he lit his flashlight and explored the cave with his eyes, all the time under water, of course. It was not what he had expected. The area was relatively small and appeared to be a downward extension of the dome up on the surface. In fact, shining his light up, he soon understood that the red stone dome above ground was hollow.

He moved high in the water and much to his surprise his head rose above the surface. There was a large area, six feet high, filled with the air that boiled out of the white water that battered against and through the opening. A great deal of pressure had built up there. The air that became trapped in the water as it flowed through the rapids was set free once it entered the cave. It bubbled to the surface and up into the dome. He could breathe. The air smelled like mold and moss

in a stagnant pool, but he could breathe it and it supplied sufficient oxygen to maintain him.

He knew he couldn't just stay there not using the tube or Nat would go crazy up above, so he left the cave and surfaced to explain the situation to his friend.

"Did you see the diamonds?" Nat asked.

"Haven't had time to really begin looking. Just wanted to give you a report so you wouldn't be worried."

"And I appreciate that. Tell you what, though, ever few minutes will you blow up through the tube so I'll know you're okay?"

"Sounds like a good plan."

He submerged again and was immediately inside the little cave with his head up into the air pocket.

"Where would you put a container full of diamonds to they stayed put in here?" he wondered to himself. 'There's a lot of turbulence from the water forced in through the opening. That water movement could easily shift a small container about. Hmmm?'

He began searching along the water line. There was a ledge to the right of the opening about a foot above the water level. There were several large, mostly square looking rocks sitting on it – one hanging over a few inches. He was gathering data so he moved on to other places. The sides of the cave that were under water were fairly smooth, though not as smooth as the stone sides of the creek just outside. The sides above the water line were more irregular – jagged even near the top or ceiling of the dome.

With his hands, he searched the area as far up as he could reach just above the water line. He did the same just below the water – the part he could easily reach without submerging. He figured perhaps there would be a hole or major depression into which a small container could have been placed. He found no likely candidates for such a hiding place.

He began diving straight lines from the surface to the bottom all around the cave. Still nothing. He suddenly felt air bubbling up against him and couldn't figure how that was possible. He moved the beam of his flashlight toward it. He smiled. The air was coming out of the breathing tube. He had

become so focused on what he was doing that he had forgotten to send his 'all is well' message through the tube up to Nat. He immediately filled the tube with a lung full of air.

As he turned his attention back to the shelf he noticed that the great air pressure was hurting his ears – his ear drums. Evidently that air pressure was even higher than the pressure exerted by water. He might need to surface and rest them in normal air pressure. He wanted to explore that shelf a little more, first.

The only features of note were the two rocks sitting on it. They seemed out of place in color and composition. First, how could they have jumped up onto the ledge all by themselves? It was possible they had fallen from the jagged wall or ceiling above, but what were the odds they would have settled right there, wedged so closely together.

He tried to budge the one on the right – the larger of the two. Not so much as a centimeter. He tried the same with the smaller one, but with no better result. He needed a pry bar of some sort. One of the stakes, perhaps. They were several inches in diameter and plenty long for adequate leverage. In fact, two would be better than one. He could force one in between the rocks and then the other. Two levers should provide twice the push/pull power (he thought).

He got Nat's attention by blowing through the tube one more time. He took a deep breath from the trapped air and left the cave. He had given himself lots of slack on the safety line, and once outside into the rapids he was swept along the length of the rope – some fifteen feet. When he surfaced, he was just that far further downstream.

"Behind you," he called as he pulled himself along the rope, pulling it taut as he went.

Nat turned around on the log where he was sitting above the water. Orvie explained the situation in the cave. Nat selected two sturdy stakes and handed them down to Orvie. A problem immediate came to light. The stakes were so large they floated really well, making it impossible to carry them down through the water and into the cave.

Nat saw the problem and offered a solution.

"What we need to do is weight the stakes with a big rock so they will sink with you."

“Excellent. There are several short lengths of rope in my backpack – not as thick as what I’m using here, but it should be just right for what you need.”

A few minutes later the two stakes had been bound together along with a long, narrow chunk of limestone. Orvie tried it out. They sunk like a – well, like a rock.

“Perfect. Good thinking to have tied the rope in a bow. That will make it so much easier to undo down there.”

“Tell me more about the cave.”

Orvie took time to fill him in on all the details. He needed the time for his eardrums to recuperate anyway. Orvie hated that Nat was missing out on what he hoped was going to be the best part of their adventure. Nat loved that he got to stay up top. It seemed to be working well for both of them.

Presently, Orvie was ready to make the return dive. He had secured the stakes to the rope just in front of him so they wouldn’t be swept away before he could deposit them in the cave.

His dive worked as planned.

Back inside the cave he loosened the stakes from the rock and laid them up on the shelf. The stone slab sunk to the bottom. He began working the narrower of two in between the rocks, eventually using the second stake like a hammer of sorts to force it in farther. It worked so well the rock that was hanging over the lip of the shelf toppled off and settled to the bottom of the cave. It had brushed against Orvie’s chest on its way and left an angry looking open abrasion (scrape) down the center of his torso.

He ignored that and pulled himself up so he could see to the back of the shelf. It was too dark. He set his flashlight at the front of the shelf and repeated the two arm pull up move. How he wished Nat was there beside him. There, snuggled back against the wall of the cave, weighted in place by a medium sized, flat, stone was a short, squat, plastic jar. Whether it had yellowed with age or had been yellow from the start he couldn’t tell. At any rate, the color made it impossible to see inside.

He reached for the plastic bags in his rear pocket and doubled them. Carefully, Orvie pulled the container toward the front edge of the shelf and soon had it safely inside the

plastic grocery sacks. He tied them closed, using the handles for the purpose. He slipped his arm through the loops left from the ends of the handles to keep the precious package secure and turned making ready to surface.

At that moment, there came four sudden rushes of bubbles out of the breathing tube. Again the peg covering the hole had been blown out and hung there by the string. It was clearly a signal from Nat. But what could it have meant? He decided there would be no need for a signal unless there was danger up above – the bear? No, such a vigorous warning most likely referred to Cane Man and his accomplices.

Orvie returned the package to the shelf and weighted it in place. He lengthened his safety rope to its full extent. That should allow him to surface about thirty feet past the log that spanned the creek. He hoped that would allow him to keep out of sight if the bad guys happened to be there and were looking into the water.

Moments later he found himself almost exactly where he figured he'd be. He took the precaution of surfacing right up against the sheer bank and kept low, only his nose, ears and eyes above the water. He saw Nat sitting on the log facing him, downstream, holding a cane pole as if fishing. Problem. There should have been no line on the end because it wasn't a fishing pole. But there was line – perhaps string from his twine ball. In fact, it wasn't the breathing tube cane that he was holding, but one of the extra poles. The top of the breathing tube was bobbing in the water along the bank below him, conveniently out of sight as long as the 'L' section didn't become dislodged from the cave opening. Clearly, Nat had seen the bag guys coming and had made hasty preparations in case of the worse. There were words being spoken between Nat and Cane Man.

“Catching anything?” the man asked, impatiently.

“A shut out, I'm afraid. A big old catfish lives down there and I've been hot on his trail for two days.”

“What's with the log arrangement?” Cane Man asked pointing back and forth between the two of them.

“Hard to see what's happening with your line from up on the bank – the water pushes it back to the near side. Out here on the log I can follow things better.”

“Let’s cut the crap, kid. We know you’re the old man’s grandson and we’re pretty sure you’re here to find the diamonds.”

“Old man? Grandson? Diamonds?”

He managed a wonderful, puzzled look – furrowed forehead, cocked head, lowered eyebrows.

“Where’s the other kid?”

“He decided to float on down the creek a piece. Was riding a log the last time I saw him. He’s a born daredevil. I’m not so much. More cautious.”

“You’re lying.”

He turned to the other men.

“Tear the place apart. If they aren’t looking it means they’ve already found them.”

He turned toward them as if to supervise.

Orvie submerged and, pulling himself along the line, battled his way back upstream to the cave. He entered. An idea had come to him as he listened to the conversation. It had been brought to mind by Nat’s ‘log’ comment.

With the thinner rope Nat had used, he re-wrapped the two stakes together, without the stone weight. With a loose end of that rope he secured the double bags containing the plastic jar so it all hung below the stakes. It was probably a long shot, but he had to get the diamonds out of the immediate area before they figured out the real purpose of the logs up top.

‘It’s now or never,’ he thought. Cautiously, he slid the stakes and their cargo through the cave opening, and it was immediately swept away in the current. The stakes would soon surface, but he was counting on one of two things: either, seeing a couple of sticks floating down the creek would not be cause for suspicion or, preferably, they would not be seen at all.

Orvie retraced the underwater route he had just previously followed, but untied himself from the rope. He pulled deep with his arms and hands to keep himself down underwater until the last molecule of oxygen had been absorbed from his lungs. Again, he surfaced against the steep eastern bank. He was well out of range of their camp site.

He scrambled out of the water and began making his way back to camp trying to appear relaxed and cool. He was, of course, sopping wet. When he got within sight of the gathering up ahead he waited until he had been seen. Then, he picked up his pace to a trot, soon arriving with a wave and a big smile.

“Hey guys. What’s up?”

Cane Man stepped toward him ignoring his greeting.

“Where you been?”

“Where I been?” he repeated making out like he was surprised at the question.

“I been riding a log down the creek. What a blast. Got as far as the sharp turn down there and lost my log. Next time I’ll tie myself to it. What you guys up to?”

“We know what you two are up to.”

Nat jumped in.

“They’re talking about old men and grand people and diamonds. I got no idea what it’s all about, do you?”

Orvie produced his own perplexed face, shaking his head.

“You two sit over there up against the red rock and don’t talk!”

They did as they had been told. It would at least buy them some time to think and perhaps buy them their lives.

The men continued to search. With knives, they cut the lining out of the boys’ hoodies. They sliced into the sleeping bags and scattered the padding around the area. They opened the remaining cans of hash and baked beans looking through their contents. They poured out the milk and looked into the container. They looked through the bottles of water.

“Nothin’ here, boss,” Pendant Guy said.

His English was definitely good old American English. Hired, local hands, Orvie surmised (figured).

In a huff, Cane Man, called off his men.

“You kids get out of here, right now. I don’t want to ever see your faces around here again.”

“Okay, but you’ll have to answer to our Dad when he finds out what you’ve done.”

“Don’t believe you have a father up here with you.”

He paused.

“We’ll be back in half an hour. If you aren’t gone by then you’ll be very, very, sorry.”

“You mean you’d harm us?” Orvie said baiting (teasing) the man as if naively surprised.

“I drown puppies and kittens. The two of you are no different to me.”

It seemed wise to just shut up. The men walked down the slope. At first the boys couldn’t understand why Cane Man had so abruptly changed his mind and had given them a half hour. It would have been more consistent with the behavior they’d been demonstrating if they had just run them off like the first command had indicated.

Nat voiced that identical question.

“Why’d they give us a half hour? They’ve ruined most of our stuff. No reason to even take the sleeping bags or food with us.”

“Not so with the food. At least some of it’ll keep ‘til we’re out of sight. I’m starved my friend.”

“How can you be so cool when they just threatened to drown us like unwanted kittens?”

“I said I was hungry, not cool. I think I understand what’s going on, though. You can bet that somehow, they – or somebody in Cane Man’s employ – are watching us right now. They think we have the diamonds so they’re sure we’ll retrieve them before we leave. At the bottom of the hill we’ll be frisked like nobody’s ever been frisked before.”

“Where is the container you found, by the way? Still in the cave?”

Orvie gave a quick explanation about the small raft he’d built out of the stakes and sent on its way.

“So, our diamonds are now playing with the fishies somewhere downstream?”

“You know that sharp turn about a half mile down the slope?”

“Yeah.”

“Remember how the sticks and leaves hang up in it while the water slows and flows on by?”

“Yeah. Oh, I see! You’re counting on them hanging up there as well. I sure hope you’re right. Even if we’ve lost them, though, that’s better than letting Cane Man get his

hands on them.”

“Let’s rescue whatever we can from here, fill our back packs and be on our way. Hoodies without a lining will be better than no hoodies at all come sundown.”

They spent ten minutes salvaging whatever they could. They looked around the camp before turning to leave.

“Oh, little buddy, don’t forget your walking stick.”

Orvie picked up one of the cane poles. With his axe, he chopped it to a length of six feet. He did the same with the other. Nat was mystified. They had never used walking sticks. That was for old men.

“Here, take your stick. I’ll explain on the way down the slope. Practice so it looks natural.”

Nat’s first take on it was that next to carrying their axes out in the open, the heavy poles might make pretty good weapons. He was content with that interpretation of Orvie’s odd and unexplained move.

Not quite a hundred yards down the slope Orvie stopped and laid out an unexpected and bizarre plan. I need you to put down your walking stick and run across the meadow toward the woods where we cut the trees. You got any fancy moves like cartwheels or ninja rolls?”

“By the dozen. What’s this all about?”

“Trust me. Put on a good show. Make it as absurd as you can. Keep it up until you see me right back here. Okay?”

“You got one absurd diversion coming up. I assume it is a diversion, right?”

“Absolutely.”

Nat did his thing. Cartwheels, rolls, elbow crawling, somersaults, running zig-zag patterns and more. It went on for more than five minutes, then Orvie reappeared. Nat joined him, puffing hard. They continued on their way down the hill, handling their walking sticks like they had used them all their lives.

They had gone no further than another fifty yards when Cane Man and his henchmen were upon them. Orvie’s first inclination was to smile and wink over at Nat. Nat shrugged and shook his head as if to ask, ‘what have I let the kid get me into this time?’

He kept his cane pole at the ready in case they were

threatened with physical harm.

“Halt!” Cane Man commanded in a very German accent. “Put down your backpacks and that bag and step back.”

The other two again went through them, again finding nothing.

“Remove your shoes and stockings.”

The boys sat on the ground and did as they had been asked – well, Orvie, who never wore sox did as much as he could to comply.

“Shirts!”

They removed them.

The men felt them inside and out, especially the hems around the sleeves, neck and bottom in which small objects might be hidden.

They went through the same process with their cutoffs. Again, there was nothing to be found. Cane Man was clearly outraged. He was certain he had been outsmarted by a pair of wet behind the ear twelve year olds. He considered taking them to creek anyway, but thought better of it.

Without being told it would be allowed, the boys dressed, stood, and made some first tentative steps on down the hill. They were allowed, so they picked up their pace a bit, maintaining the dignity of walking stick wielding old men.

At the bottom of the hill they turned toward home.

“The diamonds?” Nat asked.

“Sometimes things don’t work out the way folks hope they will,” Orvie answered.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN: Back Home

Orvie continued his answer:

“Sometimes things don’t work out the way the bad folks hope they will.”

His smile all but broke his cheeks. Although he didn’t understand, still Nat couldn’t help but smile as well.

“What? What?”

“Well, my young five-millionaire, we beat them!”

“We beat them? I don’t understand.”

Orvie lifted his walking stick and shook it up and down close to Nat’s ear. It clinked. Nat did the same with his own. It clinked.

“The diamonds are inside the cane poles?” he asked excitedly.

“Five hundred little beauties!”

“I can’t believe it.”

“Believe it. I didn’t have time to count them while I was pouring them in, of course, but I’m quite sure they are all there – or, here, I suppose would be a better way to put it.”

“Can we look at them?”

“They are yours to do with whatever you want, but I’m thinking it would be better if we’d make tracks out of here while we can. We’ll be walking well into the night as it is.”

Nat nodded and kissed his walking stick.

“This means Kaka can have his operation.”

That was truly the only thing of importance that Nat could see coming from the sudden wealth – taking care of the most important person in his life.

An hour later they stopped and reclaimed whatever food they felt they could safely eat. It was a surprisingly large amount. They wouldn't need to eat again until they arrived back at Nat and Kaka's place. Their excitement, thinking back on their adventure and the knowledge they had outsmarted the bad guys to rescue the diamonds, fueled their young bodies with adrenalin, which in turn seemed to require stretches of jogs, trots, and full out dashes.

Nat's home came into view in the moonlight several hours after sunset. Nat stopped. Orvie did the same. They stood there for some time looking over the area – the lake shore with water gently lapping up onto the beach; the sand, glistening in the full moon; the magnificent trees that provided the backdrop to the scene; and, of course the little house with the clapboard siding and the corrugated metal roof.

"I hope the money doesn't change things here. I love this place just like it is. It's all I've ever known. I think I'd be very uncomfortable living any other way."

"I have the feeling your Kaka is going to feel the very same way."

"Shall we wake him to tell him?" Nat said as they again began walking toward the house.

"If I were a betting man I'd wager he'll be at the front door to greet you the minute he hears your foot hit the front porch."

As it turned out Orvie would have lost that bet.

Half way up the beach to the house, words rang out across the darkened distance from a wonderfully familiar deep voice.

"Natty? Natty, that you, boy?"

Nat dropped his walking stick and shed his backpack, crossing the last twenty yards on the run. The two of them shared the bear hug of all bear hugs. Tears flowed freely – Orvie included.

Orvie picked up Nat's things and made his way slowly toward the house, wanting to give the others ample time for their private hellos and such.

Kaka soon returned to his chair and the boys, still far too excited to sit down stood and paced as Nat began.

"So, you did okay while I was gone, Kaka?"

“Yes and no.”

“Yes and no?” It was a question from Nat whose face suddenly became somber.

“Yes, in that things went fine – I ate, I fished, and I slept – well, some at least. No, in that I really missed knowing that you were never more than just a few steps away.”

“Me, too, with all of that. You’re feeling well?”

“Yes. Quite well. Better, I will admit, now that the two of you are back safely.”

It was the first time he had really acknowledged Orvie’s presence. He must have realized that because he reached out offering his hand. Orvie stepped in and happily accepted the shake.

“It’s great to see you again, sir, er . . . Kaka.”

They exchanged a smile over the garbled phrase.

“And the two of you got through your little trip all in one piece, I see.”

“Well except for Orvie’s slightly raw chest,” Nat said pulling up the front of his friend’s shirt.

“Oh, my. That needs my ointment. I won’t ask how you came by it.”

“I’m sure that when Nat begins his blow by blow recounting of our little trip it will be included.”

It made Orvie think. In terms of time and distance it had, indeed, been a little trip. In terms of the rewards it reaped, and the friendship it built, it was anything but little.

Almost ten minutes had passed – greeting, ointmenting, apples – before the topic of the diamonds even entered anybody’s head. Nat took the lead in that discussion.

He held up his walking stick.

“You’ll never in a gazillion years guess what this is all about.”

“I suppose then that my first guess – walking stick – would be wrong.”

“Not entirely – only about 500 to 1 wrong.”

He winked at Orvie and giggled nervously.

“I must say you have me baffled.”

Nat was in and out of the house without breaking the conversation. He returned with a large mixing bowl, which he sat on his grandfather’s lap. He held one end of his walking

stick out to Orvie who used his pocket knife to pry out the peg he had hastily cut and inserted down on the creek bank at the time he had rescued the you know whats (wouldn't want to spoil Nat's surprise for Kaka by just blurting it out here!).

Nat tipped the cane down so the contents would roll out into the bowl. It was the first time his grandfather and he had seen them.

They grew speechless – looking back and forth from the bowl to each other's faces. There were more tears.

Orvie opened the end of his stick and added that portion to those in the bowl. Together, they covered the bottom nearly four inches high.

At that point the unimaginable occurred. From inside the house, there in the doorway stood the figure of Cray!"

The boys' hearts began beating visibly in their chests. The man looked terrible. Nat suddenly understood why the ointment had been sitting on the counter, rather than up in the cupboard. Cray's face had been beaten raw, his ears were puffed up and his eyes swollen mostly shut.

Nat moved as if to protect Kaka. Orvie moved as if to protect Nat. Kaka spoke.

"Nat, you remember your uncle Creighton. It seems he met with some trouble from a group of men out to get their hands on the diamonds. He did his best to guard our secret, but in the end few men could have resisted the kind of coercion (pressure) that was inflicted on him."

Cray spoke with slurred speech through obvious pain.

"I had been close enough to you several times to learn about the hike you were planning. When I saw that the pendant I took from you was useless to me, I decided to follow you. The German dude had apparently followed me here to your grandfather's place and he and his men worked me over until I spilled the beans. I made it as far as your porch here and collapsed. Two days later I woke up on your sofa. George was taking care of me. Why he'd do that, I had no idea."

The feelings Orvie received as the man spoke suggested it had all been true.

Orvie brought a kitchen chair to the porch for Cray. The boys took seats on the porch floor, and Nat began relating

the tale of all tales. It took well over an hour. He was a fine story teller and kept everybody's interest – including Orvie.

Orvie went back and filled in a few details – the family crest on Cane Man's walking stick, the meaning of the Duke's last name – Rothstein – red stone – the description of the underwater cave and their life-threatening encounter that first night with the gigantic, ferocious, vicious . . . playful little raccoon with the shiny eyes.

That got a good laugh all around.

* * *

After a few days, Creighton moved along with several diamonds in his pocket. Orvie stayed on to see Kaka through his very successful surgery and recovery period, and to hear about at least some of the plans grandfather and grandson had for their sudden wealth. Among other things there would be Nat's eventual college education, a hospital wing devoted to caring for children who had been born with Kaka's heart problem, and even cell phones. Things that were not included? Moving away from their beach, store-bought honey, and most anything else that represented the unnecessary trappings (excessive frills) of civilization.

The Duke's Diamonds were at last in very able hands and would be put to good use for many, many years to come.

The end