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*A David Drake*

*Novel for Teenagers*

Two teenagers -  
in love with the  
same girl - struggle  
together to escape  
from the deep, dark  
cave that could become  
their tomb.

# DISASTER AT DISAPPEARING CREEK

Another Family Friendly Book from The Family of Man Press

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# **DISASTER AT DISAPPEARING CREEK**

(revised edition)

**A novel for middle-teenagers**

By  
**David Drake**

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**Family of Man Press**

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## **CHAPTER ONE**

### **Not a Good Way to Begin the Day**

Unlike most of his fifteen-year-old friends, Randy was a morning person. He treasured those first fifteen minutes every day when he perched on the wide, wooden, window seat in his room, knees up to his chin, and watched the world come to life. In the winter, he enjoyed watching the moon dissolve into the western horizon and the stars dim back across the sky as the light of day began to disburse the darkness. In the summer, he enjoyed sharing the first rays of sun with the birds as their bright warmth encouraged the robins and sparrows to shrug their shoulders and ruffle their feathers.

Early morning was his time – his special time alone with the world outside, and his thoughts and plans for the day inside. He loved those moments between sleep and wakefulness. It was as though he were being born all over again; it was the time when the comfort of dreams gave way to the challenges and possibilities of his real world. That day there would be more challenges than he could have ever imagined.

Each morning he awakened to Fred the weather man on KRMG as he delivered the day's outlook through Randy's clock radio. It had become the basis for his preparation – long pants, short pants, coat, jacket, hoodie, Tee, or bare chest; rain gear, ear flaps, ball cap, boots, tennies, or bare feet. He had come to depend on Fred at Five, first thing every morning.

That June morning, however, things were not like the young man had expected them to be and certainly not like they should have been. Randy panicked at what he heard.

"Bartonville received three and a half inches of rain in just under four hours last evening and the upper section of Little Sugar Creek is rapidly surpassing flood stage."

Bartonville was more than fifty miles north, but Randy was well aware of the danger such an event posed to his special summer hide-a-way in the valley beside the creek. He quickly slipped into his cutoffs and tennies, liberated a pop tart – make that two – from the box beside the toaster, and set out at a rapid trot across the fields toward Sugar Creek. Although no rain had fallen there in Springfield during the night, the tall grass was wet with dew and the air was still quite chilly, making Randy wish he had taken the time to put on a shirt.

He figured that the cresting water from upstream would be there within the hour and he needed to save what he could from his campsite before it arrived. He didn't even stop to spit for good luck into the Bottomless Pit, as it was called, when he ran past the familiar, fenced off, jagged hole atop the limestone bluff. He smiled to himself thinking that may have been the first time in history that a Springfield kid hadn't dutifully stopped and made a wish before continuing on down the steep path toward the creek.

At that particular spot, Sugar creek lay at the bottom of a deep gorge. It was usually a lazy little creek with fish, turtles, and otters, and an occasional duck. Randy had set up a permanent camp on the gently sloping bank between the creek and the west bluff. During the summer, he spent twelve to sixteen hours a day down there, usually alone. He often slept there at night when he was satisfied that his mother would be okay at home without him. Randy loved his special spot and it seemed to have become a never-ending endeavor to spur its evolution into his perfect place.

Randy was new to Springfield and was still pretty much a loner. That was partly because he was new, partly because he wasn't really into the whole social scene – something that seemed way too important to the locals as far as he was concerned – and partly because he typically enjoyed his own company more than that of most other people. He knew many of the kids by sight and some called him by name, but none had become what he would consider friends.

At the creek, he had built a lean-to and set an open-air

fire circle made of small rocks. There was an endless supply of drift wood floating downstream, which he used to keep a fire burning. The fire took the edge off the cool morning air down there where the sun seldom shone until noon and the wisp of smoke discouraged the mosquitoes and flies from pestering him. He had carved a hole in the bluff that kept things cool – fruit, water, things like that. A sizable, old, army foot locker in the lean-to held a variety of other necessities of life – tools, rope, plastic tarps, matches, a blanket, a change of clothes, a swimming suit, several knives, fishing supplies, a first aid kit, cans of beans and chili and soups and other assorted goodies. Randy referred to it as his survival kit.

The raft was Randy's pride and joy. Made from two dozen four-inch-thick logs that he had cut and fit together by himself, the raft was twelve feet long and six feet wide. It was fitted with long slender poles to use as pushers. A fifty-pound rock, cradled in a strong net carefully tied to a ten-foot rope, served as an anchor. He could travel upstream nearly a mile before coming to the impassable rapids and downstream to the rock bluff some hundred yards to the south. At the base of that bluff, the creek disappeared and presumably became a subterranean river – therefore the name, Disappearing Creek. He thought of it as a mini-box canyon with a drain of unknown nature, downstream, at the blind end.

The stream was no more than four feet deep and fifteen feet wide there as it flowed through the gorge, which, itself, was less than thirty-five feet wide. The steep limestone walls rose fifty feet from the creek up to the level pastures above. A series of paths, rock steps and primitive ladders provided access up and down the eastern bluff.

The opening to the Bottomless Pit, which he had passed on the hill above minutes earlier, was an irregularly shaped opening about five feet in diameter that rose from the underground stream to the surface. When the wind blew across its opening at exactly the right angle, it produced an eerie, wailing sound. The story was that on Halloween night in 1914, a young man on his way to meet his girlfriend, stumbled into the pit and fell to his death and that it was really his spirit that did the wailing to warn his fiancé to keep a safe distance. No one was certain how the spitting into it and wishing for

good luck began, but generations of young folks had carried on the tradition. It was one of those odd things in life; nobody believed it brought good luck and yet everybody did it.

Randy understood that when the swelling water from upstream was forced into the narrow gorge at his campsite, it would become a wall of water ten or fifteen feet high and would sweep away everything in its path. He was a careful boy, far more so, perhaps, than the average fifteen-year-old. He had prepared for just such an emergency by building a hoist with rope and a huge wicker basket with which he could lift his things to the safety of the ridge above.

His most precious possessions down there were the toothpick bridges he had built. Using toothpicks and glue, he had fashioned a dozen intricate, miniature, bridges resembling railroad trestles and old steel framework, single lane, bridges. He had researched each one so it was an actual scale model of a real bridge. Randy hoped to be a civil engineer eventually, so he took great pride in learning exactly how to plan and construct such structures. Several of them were so strong he could stand on them. They always took first place in the hobby shows at County Fairs.

That morning, he quickly, but carefully, loaded them into the basket and hauled them up to the ridge. Then, securing the rope to a stake, he climbed back up the path to the top of the ridge and unloaded them. He made his way back down to the creek to see what other things he could salvage before the flood was upon him. Time was running out. He thought he could already hear the faint sound of the approaching water wall.

In terms of monetary value, there was nothing much to be lost. Randy and his mom were poor and lived in an area of town referred to as the wrong side of the tracks by most of the other kids. That really didn't bother Randy since he enjoyed making his own things, actually preferring that to buying them. He could entertain himself far more enjoyably doing things like that than if he had frequented movies or hung out with the crowd at Barney's – a local cafe and bowling alley popular with a lot of the kids in Springfield. He did get lonely sometimes and wished for a friend or two, but in that particular small town, friendship followed family lines. Since Randy was new

to the area, friendships had been hard to come by.

He had recently met a girl he really liked. Joanne was also fifteen and, like Randy, would be a sophomore the following year. Although she had always lived in Springfield, she seemed different from the others – less snobbish, friendlier, more willing to just accept someone for who he was, rather than who his family was.

The night before, Randy had gone to meet Joanne at the schoolyard and they had talked for a long time. He had no money for a real date, as he put it, but, clearly, Joanne had not minded. They had a wonderful evening just talking and swinging and even taking a few turns on the merry-go-round. There had been periods of wild laughter and times of serious contemplation.

Joanne had told him she thought he was really nice looking and that he had a great personality and that she enjoyed being around him. What more could a guy want? A good night kiss, perhaps. Yes! A kiss on the lips that lingered far longer than the kind that was just meant to say thanks for the nice evening.

Randy was still on cloud nine when he got home. He thought about that wonderful time late into the night as he lay on his bed, looking out the window, watching the darkening clouds swirling about the moon. He replayed the conversation over and over and wondered if it might have been better if he would have said certain things in different ways. For a moment before sliding off to sleep, he wondered how Kurt, the boy Joanne had been seeing, would take this sudden turn of events. Before he knew it, the morning sun had awakened him and the radio had broken the bad news.

So, that morning there had not been much time to enjoy the memories of the night before or to plan his next move with Joanne. Back on floor of the gorge, Randy hurried to attend to the raft. He loosened the lines as much as he could, thinking that longer ones would allow it to better give with the onslaught of the rising water. He checked his watch. There were perhaps fifteen minutes left. He looked around to see what other final steps he needed to take. He figured the log and tarp lean-to would be wiped out and there was not much he could do about that. After the water subsided he would

retrieve the logs from which it was made. It could be easily rebuilt. He had been thinking of redesigning it, anyway. The footlocker was way too heavy to hoist to safety.

He took one last quick look around the area and then turned and started back up the path to find a safe vantage point from which he could watch the events unfold. He figured they would be both fascinating and somewhat sad. Quite unexpectedly, he met a less than friendly looking Kurt Watson storming down the path toward him. Kurt was from a snobbish, wealthy family who believed it was their sacred privilege to run the town of Springfield, or so it seemed to Randy. He was tall and strong and would be the school's starting quarterback in the fall. Although Randy was not a wimp by any measure, Kurt was, without a doubt, both bigger and stronger and more practiced at knocking other guy's heads around. He had the reputation of being a hothead and was known to be less than gentle when he got mad and he certainly didn't look happy at that moment!

Kurt met Randy about half way down the path and pushed him with a firm hand to the chest.

"Hey! Cut it out." Randy said. "What's the big idea?"

"The big idea is that you tried to butt in on my girlfriend last night. That's the big idea, Reynolds!"

"So? She wanted to be with me. I didn't force her to be there, you know!"

Kurt shoved him again, harder that time using both hands. Randy lost his footing and slid backward several yards.

"I want you to leave her alone. Joanne is my girl."

"I didn't see your sign on her," Randy countered, wishing he hadn't uttered those words from the very nanosecond they had slipped through his lips.

Kurt kept shoving Randy until they were finally back down on the creek bank. He backed Randy up against the bluff and began slapping his face. Randy tried throwing a few unsuccessful punches but soon realized the hopelessness of that approach.

Suddenly, he heard the heightened roar from upstream. It was a good deal louder than before signaling that it was no more than a few minutes away. Randy's panic grew.

"Kurt, this whole gorge is going to be filled with water in about two minutes and if we don't get out of here it will take us with it!"

"Sure, it will, and there's also a Tooth Fairy and a Easter Bunny," Kurt said, continuing to strike out at Randy. "We haven't had rain for over a week. Who you trying to kid, Geek?"

Realizing that facts and logic were not the way to go, Randy resorted to trying to make evasive maneuvers hoping to free himself so he could head on up the path. As Randy continued to dodge blows, Kurt landed a solid blow with his knuckles to the limestone wall behind Randy's head. That only infuriated him more. Bobbing around the best he could, Randy continued to try to explain.

"Just listen. Don't you hear that roar from upstream?"

By then Randy was screaming.

"That's just the wailing of the Bottomless Pit, Geek. You can't get out of this that easy."

"Let's at least continue this up on the bluff, then, OK?" Randy suggested.

"No way, wrong-side Geek. I'm real happy right here. Prepare to take a bath in your own blood."

He began landing major blows to Randy's stomach and chest and in no time Randy doubled over and fell to the ground. After receiving a few kicks to the ribs and head, Randy passed out. Just as Kurt reared back his foot to deliver one more, well aimed kick to his stomach, the suddenly growing noise grabbed his attention and he looked up. There, not a hundred feet away was a wall of water at least twelve feet high, rapidly bearing down on them. Kurt started to run for the path but it was too late. The roar became deafening. The water was upon them and the two boys, the lean-to and the raft were all swept away in the wild, churning stream. Randy, being unconscious, was spared the terror but could do nothing to try to save himself. Kurt screamed and fought the water, fully believing those were his last few moments of life.

By any measure, it seemed impossible that anything could survive that terrifying torrent of swirling water as it dashed against the bluff downstream and rapidly rose to fill the gorge in a boiling, raging, surge.

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## **CHAPTER TWO**

### **Darkness**

Just exactly what occurred during the following few minutes – hours, perhaps – would never be fully known. At some point Randy became aware of himself again and struggled to open his eyes. There was noise – loud, echoing, ear splitting noise. Things were dark and cold and hard. He felt around. He was laying spread eagle on his back on a wet, slippery, rock surface. Far above him, he could just make out a pinpoint of light. At first, he figured it for a star in the night sky. It was blurred. He couldn't be sure what it might be. He had never known such darkness – a thoroughgoing black emptiness, better described it.

As he came to be able to better focus his eyes, he realized he was at the bottom of a very deep, steep-sided cave. The only light arrived as a narrow band from a small hole in the ceiling – the pinpoint of light he had first seen. He struggled to sit up. Pain shot through his chest and back. Although he had never experienced a broken rib, he had no doubt that was just how broken ribs would feel. He looked around. There was just enough light to make out a few landmarks there on the floor of the cave. A stream was rushing by, occupying a good half of the floor space in the cave and making a terrible roar as it swirled and struggled against the far wall. The walls were solid rock – limestone he figured. The cave was, perhaps, thirty feet square at the base and probably sixty feet or more up to the hole in the roof. Height was difficult to judge there in the darkness. The cave appeared to be funnel

As his eyes adjusted to the darkness, he saw that he had lost both of his shoes. His cut-offs were torn to shreds. He was bleeding from his arms and face and chest and legs – well, you name it and it was cut or scratched or gaping and bleeding. Presently he heard what at first sounded like the wind wailing or perhaps a growl. Just what he needed – a big brown bear for a companion down there at the bottom of the world? Presently, he realized it was more like a moan. More than a little frightened, he squinted into the dark corners of the cave trying to make out what might be shaped – wider at the base and gradually becoming narrower toward the top. There. He didn't want to draw attention to himself. Eventually, he came to believe it had just been his imagination because after several, long, frightening minutes he heard nothing more.

Unable to stand, he scooted, feet first, toward the stream to bathe his wounds and wash the hard-caked blood from his skin. About half way there, his feet pushed up against something. It wasn't solid enough to be a rock or log. It seemed soft, actually. He momentarily imagined a huge block of Jello, that being better than the alternative – a bear, a big brown bear, a big brown hungry bear. He worked to turn so he could examine whatever it was with his hands. It was a body. A human body. It was Kurt, sprawled out there unconscious, bleeding from his nose and ears and barely breathing. His T-shirt had been ripped off and he too, was severely cut and scratched.

Randy managed to drag Kurt nearer to the stream and with his cupped hands, scooped water onto their wounds. He was exhausted, frightened and cold, and in such pain that he wanted to scream. Perhaps not such a bad idea, he thought. Perhaps the hole up there came out near people. He screamed until he was hoarse. None of it stirred Kurt. When he could scream no longer, he put his face in his hands and cried quietly to himself.

Randy wasn't used to crying. Back when his father had been alive, he had disapproved of boys crying, so Randy learned to just keep a stiff upper lip instead. But that day he sobbed and sobbed, partly from exhaustion, partly from fear, and partly, perhaps, from years and years of not crying. He lay down to rest.

When at last Randy awoke, he had no idea how long he had been asleep. The light was far brighter, however, as if the sun were directly overhead – noon perhaps, he thought to himself. He was able to give Kurt a once over, noting how uncomfortable his head looked laying there on the rocks. He scooted toward Kurt's feet, removed one sneaker and then scooted back to where he could place the shoe under the boy's head to provide at least a little cushioning from the cold, hard, damp rock surface.

He knew he must stand if he were to explore the area and begin finding out just what their options were. It took some doing, but presently he was up on both feet – not completely erect due to the pain in his chest, but enough so he could walk. With one arm cradling his ribs and his other hand stretched out in front of him to make first contact with any unseen objects, he walked a straight line hoping to find a wall. Nine paces later he was upon it. He leaned against its damp surface to rest and catch his breath. He then set off at what he believed was a ninety-degree angle to find the next wall.

It took him through the circle of light emanating from the ceiling. He stopped and looked himself over more closely. He wished he hadn't.

"What a mess," he thought out loud.

He noticed his watch. It was still running, just like it had been advertised to do even after having been submerged and battered. It was 1:12 p.m. He looked up and was blinded by the light. He continued his exploration. The wall proved to be only a few steps away. Another ninety-degree turn and he soon located the third wall. He felt his way along it until he found himself at the edge of the stream. Having constructed a mental map of the solid floor portion of the cave, he turned his attention to the still raging stream in front of him.

The water entered from under the wall on the far-right side, as he stood facing it. It exited the same way, to the far left. As his head began to clear, things began to make sense. It had to be the underground river, which probably meant that the hole in the ceiling was the opening to the Bottomless Pit up on top of the bluff. A log jam, of sorts, had formed on the surface above where the stream disappeared back under the

wall. In the semi-darkness, it was difficult to make it all out, but he thought it was probably what was left of his busted raft, dock and lean-to. He gave out a sad and pain-filled sigh. He spotted the footlocker, which made it seem like an old friend had accompanied him. Oddly, he thought that buoyed up his spirits a bit. The water was rushing along at far too rapid and forceful a rate for Randy to enter the water so he just watched it bobbing there among the logs. Like him, it was not going anywhere. That seemed to be the one reality in his life at that moment.

He turned and walked back over to where Kurt lay. He sat down beside him and lifted his head up into his lap. That would surely be more comfortable. The spot of light on the floor had crept closer to them. They must be east of the hole, Randy surmised. As the sun moved west, the patch of light would slide east. In the added light, Randy could tell that both Kurt and he had gashes deep enough to need stitches. He chuckled to himself as he envisioned seventy-year old Doc. Rainey scampering down a rope from the ceiling, black bag in hand, to tend to their needs.

That noise from his laughter seemed to rouse Kurt a bit. Not knowing just what he should do, Randy gently slapped Kurt's face in an effort to bring him around. That's what they did in the movies. Kurt moaned and grimaced as his eyes fluttered open. He just lay there looking up into Randy's face, not saying a word. Then his expression suggested extreme pain, and his eyes turned up and back into his head and he passed out. He was again unconscious.

Randy figured Kurt must be hurt more seriously than he appeared. He gently placed his head back on the makeshift pillow, and began a more thorough examination. His arms seemed ok. His neck and head moved without any problem. His left leg was fine. His right leg...

"My gosh!" Randy said out loud.

The bone in his lower leg had been broken and was protruding right through the skin. It looked to be a clean break – straight across, rather than splintered. He took that as a good sign.

"No wonder he passed out," Randy said, again out loud.

It had been a number of years since Randy had earned his scouting merit badge in first aid, and he had never actually set a broken bone before, but he knew he had no choice but to try – check that, to do it. He fished several of the smaller poles from the water to use as a splint. He ripped Kurt's pant leg all the way up from the bottom to the belt and then around the leg until it was completely torn free. Randy hadn't realized how tough denim really was until then. He tore the material into strips to use as binding.

Then the worst part: to set the leg. The bone had to be pulled down away from Kurt's body so it could slip back into place. Randy positioned his own legs against Kurt's body and, with a short "God help me," he began pulling on the leg. He was surprised at how little pressure it actually took.

Presently it looked like a real leg again. He didn't know how to determine if it were in exactly the right position, but as he felt it, it appeared to have slipped back into the proper spot. He could feel no irregularity, no bulge. He went ahead and bound the splints along each side of the lower leg and covered the deep gash, which had been cut by the bone, with the remaining piece of denim. Not very sanitary, he thought, but it was the best he could do under the circumstances and it should ease Kurt's pain considerably.

Randy was exhausted and he lay down to rest and to think. He almost smiled as he looked over at Kurt and realized that there he was, trapped all alone, sixty feet underground with the person who had just recently become his all time, worst enemy.

"Well, this time I can out run him, at least," he said to himself with another half-smile.

Of course, there was no place to run.

It was several hours later when Kurt roused again. That time he remained awake and cried out in pain. Randy moved immediately to his side and took his hand and rubbed his forehead, saying:

"It's going to be okay, Kurt. We've had an accident but things are under control now."

Of course, that last part was news to Randy, too, but it seemed the thing to say.

"What in the ... What's happened to me?" Kurt said at

last.

"The flood hit us and somehow sucked us into the underground river. I believe we are in a small cave underneath the Bottomless Pit opening."

"What!" Kurt said, still not making good sense of it all.

Randy continued to rub his head and squeeze his hand, hoping that kind of contact would somehow be reassuring.

"My leg! My leg!" Kurt said at last. "It hurts something terrible!"

"You busted it up good. I have set it and it's in the best splint I could make. I think it will do fine until we get some help."

They remained silent for some time, sorting through their thoughts.

Kurt squinted up at Randy.

"Randy, that's you, right?"

"Yes, Kurt. This is Randy. I'm ok."

"Tell it all to me one more time. My head is all foggy."

Randy again outlined their situation and Kurt nodded that he understood what was going on. He looked around. Kurt lifted his hand to reach out and touch Randy. It rubbed against his ribs and Randy groaned in pain.

"So, you're fine, are you?" Kurt said.

"Well, I'm fine from the flood. I think the busted ribs I owe to you from before."

They were silent again.

Then Kurt spoke: "I guess Geek ribs just can't take it, can they?"

"I guess not. Sort of like Watson legs, I suppose."

The barest hint of a smile crossed each boy's face.

"How do we get out of here?" Kurt asked.

"Best I can figure, we have to fly out," Randy answered.

"Not very encouraging, you know."

"Ya, I know. It's not very encouraging at all." Randy conceded.

"You scared?" Kurt asked.

"Of course, I'm scared. What do you think?"

"I'm surprised to hear you say that, Geek."

"Surprised? Surprised, why?"

"You never ever seem scared of anything," Kurt said.  
"You didn't even look scared while I was pounding the tar out of you awhile back."

"Well, regardless, I am plenty scared now."

"I'm really tired, Geek. I have to sleep a while."

With that Kurt closed his eyes and fell fast asleep.

Randy rubbed his own arms and legs trying to heat them up a bit. He realized he was shivering, and why not. He was sitting there sopping wet, in the cold, wearing next to nothing. This wouldn't do. He knew he had to get to the footlocker. He struggled to his feet again, feeling light headed as he stood.

Once his head cleared, he made his way in the general direction of the logjam. At the edge of the river, he could see from the debris pattern that the water had receded a little. He figured that must be a signal that the creek level had already crested. Perhaps, once it got back down to its normal level, they would be able to swim out under the walls. It was impossible to know just how far a swim that would be, though – ten feet, ten meters, ten miles? Reality allowed, neither one was in any condition to attempt that kind of an underwater activity anyway.

The now familiar spot of light had become long and narrow, and was lighting the general area where the logs were piling up. Randy spotted several thinner poles and made some feeble attempts to reach them. He couldn't. He slipped down into the water to see how deep it might be. He couldn't reach the bottom. He grabbed onto a large log and, kicking the best he could, began making his way out toward the foot locker. His ribs hurt something terrible. The current was much swifter than he anticipated and he had great difficulty maintaining his hold on the log. It began to roll and he lost it entirely. He grabbed again and regained a precarious hold.

Although it was the worst of all possible times to discover this, he suddenly realized he never should have entered the water. Between the undertow and the swirling eddies, he couldn't maneuver himself to where he needed to go. He was swept along with the current until, SMACK! He hit the logjam, pinching his knuckles in the process. He saw the footlocker wedged there above his head. He reached up for it

and screamed out in pain. He hadn't tried that move before. He wouldn't try it again. The undertow was so strong it felt as though it was reaching up and grabbing his legs, trying to suck them under the wall.

Somehow, he managed to mount a big log and he sat there straddling it for some time, catching his breath and figuring his next move. The locker should float. It was watertight. The question in Randy's mind, though, was whether all the heavy tools and cans inside would sink it. It was doing them no good stranded out there anyway, so he might as well give it a try.

He managed to kick at it until it rolled off the logs and fell into the water. Randy's heart sank and he saw it sink beneath the surface. In an instant, however, it bobbed right back up and floated there. Randy slowly and carefully slid off the log, letting forth another unexpected scream of pain. He took hold of the chest in such a way that he could push it ahead of him through the water. He kicked as best he could, but made little headway against the current. He turned over on his back and, pushing against the locker with his head and shoulders, he kicked and paddled and screamed some more.

In a few minutes, he was alongside the rock ledge that formed the edge of the waterway. There was hardly any current at that point. Then it hit him. He knew he could never lift the trunk out of the water. What had he been thinking? There was no way he could do that. His heart sank again. Tears began to flow again. He was certain he was going to pass out from the worsening pain. He laid out flat on the water on his back and with the most momentous effort of his entire life, he rolled himself screaming up onto the gently sloping rock ledge. On his stomach, he reached out with his right hand and grabbed hold of the nearest rope handle on the chest. With that, he too slipped into unconsciousness.

## **CHAPTER THREE**

When Randy awoke, the spot of light had all but disappeared. He found his right hand still tightly gripping the rope handle. His arm ached from the prolonged tension. He worked to clear his head and glanced over at Kurt who still lay sleeping or unconscious or at least not awake. If I could just open the top, I could remove the contents one thing at a time, Randy thought to himself. The padlock was in place but the key, which he usually wore around his neck on a string had vanished somewhere below the surface of the flooded stream.

Randy picked up a large stone hoping he could break the padlock. Unfortunately, it too, lived up to its indestructible guarantee. One last bash and, although the padlock remained intact, the hasp broke loose from the old trunk. With more than a little effort, Randy finally managed to push open the lid. Inside, the contents had remained dry. That was the first good news of the day.

Slowly and carefully, Randy reached in and removed each item – several coils of rope that lay across the top, the first aid kit, a bottle of matches, cans of food, knives, a saw, a hammer, a roll and a half of duct tape, three cans of assorted nails and screws, three balls of twine, three plastic tarps, a blanket, a pair of jeans, a sweat shirt, a T-shirt, two dozen candles, potato chips, trash sacks, a canteen, a pair of air mattresses, and an old, metal, army helmet.

His survival kit was about to pay off in a way he could have never imagined. He remembered he had come close to just hanging all of his equipment up on nails in his lean-to, thinking how much handier that would be for him there at the

campsites. An encounter with an inquisitive, light fingered, possum had convinced him to keep them stowed away.

"Thank you, Mr. Possum," he thought to himself. "Life lessons often come from the most unlikely sources."

Once emptied, the trunk tipped up and out of the water with less effort than he had anticipated. Randy immediately replaced many of the items back inside it to keep them dry. He removed what was left of his clothes and pulled on the nice dry jeans and struggled into the sweatshirt. He couldn't remember ever before having experienced that nice warm feeling that came from donning a simple pair of pants. He took the blanket over and covered Kurt, who awoke at his touch.

"Morning, sleepy head," Randy said.

"No kidding! Is it morning?" Kurt asked, wiping his eyes.

"Not really. You've been asleep about four hours. I took a little unintentional nap myself, a bit ago."

"Where did you get the blanket and your clothes? Has help arrived up there all ready?"

Kurt raised his head and strained to look toward the ceiling.

"Afraid not," Randy said pointing to the trunk. "I had this stuff stored in that foot locker and it got washed away and then trapped in here along with us. I just fished it out a few minutes ago. Can you sit up? What kind of shape do you think you're in?"

"Well, I guess it's about time to find out, isn't it? Give me a hand and let's get me sitting up."

Randy could see the pain in his face as Kurt tried to maneuver himself into position. Finally, he was sitting. Tears of pain trickled down his cheek. Both boys ignored them.

"What a pair we make, huh, Geek?"

They smiled at one another and then began to laugh, nervously. Randy soon discovered that laughing was far too painful and figured it may have been his good fortune to be trapped there with a generally humorless guy. He doubled over and coughed, which felt even worse.

"Your ribs really are banged up aren't they?"

"Afraid so," Randy said, easing himself down onto his back – knees up, which seemed to ease the pain.

Kurt moved closer to him.

"I had a broken rib two years ago. Let me feel your chest. I think I may be able to tell for sure."

It took no more than thirty seconds for him to confirm their fears.

"Well, that's not the worst news, really," Kurt said. "The worst news is that they just keep hurting worse and worse for the next week or so."

"Thanks for nothing," Randy said.

"Well, I thought you should know the truth," Kurt explained.

"Yeah, that's right, I guess. Thanks for that."

"So, what all do you have in your magic chest over there?" Kurt asked, "And how did you get it out of the water and up onto the ledge?"

Randy explained the process and Kurt appeared to be impressed.

"There's some food if you're hungry," Randy went on.

"No. Not now."

"There are some tools, rope, matches – things like that," Randy continued.

"I suppose we should try to dry out some of this wood so we could have a fire then, shouldn't we?" Kurt suggested.

"I suppose we should. I imagine the branches up against the wall back there will be the driest to begin with. They have probably been in here for some time."

He was right. Randy struggled to sit up and then finally stand. He gathered the wood and they soon had a small fire going. It did little to light the place but the warmth felt good. As Randy watched the small wisp of smoke rise toward the hole in the ceiling he got an idea.

He walked over and looked up, studying what he could see of the walls there in the darkness.

"We just might be able to build some kind of ladder with all these logs. How far do you judge it is up to the opening?"

"It's thirty yards. Same distance as a pass over the middle," Kurt came back, immediately.

"That's a bit more than I estimated. So, about ninety feet, then. I doubt if we have enough logs to build a safe ladder that long. Even if we did, we wouldn't have enough

rope to bind it all together."

"Well, we have to try something," Kurt replied.

Randy's forehead furrowed and then cleared a moment later.

"I think I may just have it, Kurt."

He scanned the walls again.

"Yes, I think we could do it!"

"What? What! You just going to keep it to yourself," Kurt said impatiently as Randy furthered pondered the situation.

"We'll build some bridges!"

Kurt made the 'T' sign with his hands.

"Time out, Geek. We don't need to ford the stream. We need to get up to the ceiling of this gosh awful place."

"I know. I know. Here's the plan. See that ledge up about fifteen feet or so?"

"Yeah. Runs around the cave like a belt or something. Not very wide. So, what?"

"First, we build a ladder that will get us up there, then we can build a bridge across from side to side – about twenty feet wide right there, wouldn't you say?"

"Yeah. A little less, I'd say. But how will that help us?"

"Once that first bridge is finished, we pull the remaining logs and the ladder up on top of it. Then we go up the ladder to that next outcropping about fifteen feet above that. See it there?"

Kurt nodded, clearly becoming more seriously interested.

"And then we just build another bridge across at that point."

"And what are we going to use for logs up there? Won't it take most of what we have to build the first one? And besides, we don't know how to build a bridge."

"I've been building toothpick bridges since I was seven," Randy reminded Kurt.

"But this is for real, not toothpicks," Kurt said in disgust.

"The principles are the same. I can do it. I know I can."

"So, just for sake of argument, let's say you can. We still have the problem of too few logs."

"I don't think so, Kurt. We have more than enough for

the first one. Once we get one stringer across up at that second level, we will dismantle the lower bridge, raise all the logs up to where we need them and use them to complete the second one. We just do that over and over until we reach the top. Because of the cave's shape, each one will be considerably shorter than the one before it."

Kurt grew silent and surveyed the walls with more care than before. He turned to the array of logs bobbing around out in the stream.

"It just might work, Geek. It just might work. But if it collapses and kills me, I'm going to murder you."

Randy wasn't sure that had been intended to be humorous, so he fought back his initial inclination to grin. It was at that moment the two looked at each other and recognized the condition of their broken bodies.

"With your ribs and my leg, there's no way we can wrestle all those logs from level to level. Besides, it will take too long. Somebody will be here and find us soon anyway. I say we just wait it out."

"Did you tell anyone you were coming to the creek today?" Randy asked.

"Well, no," Kurt answered immediately realizing what he meant. "Did you?"

"Nope."

"I think we may have a problem here, then," Kurt said, a tone of desperation showing in his voice for the first time. "We're never going to get out of here!"

"Are you telling me you never played in a game when you were hurt," Randy asked.

"Of course! I'm not saying that. Lots of times. Once, when I had that bad rib I taped it up and played a full game."

He stopped and looked directly into Randy's eyes for the first time since they had been trapped.

"You just might be okay, Geek. You got me there, you know. This is probably the biggest game we've either played in."

"It just may be the biggest game we'll ever play in," Randy added continuing the sports metaphor that was not a natural one for him.

Kurt nodded and sighed deeply.

"First things first," Kurt said at last.

"What's that?"

"If you're going to be fit to work around here, we have to get your chest bound up. What do we have that we could use? Something like tape or gauze."

"We have some plastic tarps we could cut into strips, I guess. There should be a small roll of tape in the first aid kit and lots of duct tape."

Kurt tried to stand for the first time. It was then they realized the poles Randy had used to make the splints, were way too long. Randy got the saw from the chest and carefully cut them off even with the bottom of Kurt's foot. Every stroke shot bolts of pain through his chest. His tears, which typically would have been the treasured target of ridicule by Kurt, were ignored by both of them. Eventually he finished.

Randy helped Kurt stand, and he hobbled about.

"Still a lot of pain, Geek, but I can make it work."

"We'll make you a crutch first thing in the morning if you need it. It's too late and too dark now."

"I still need to tape you up. Let's see what we have here."

He pawed through the contents of the trunk.

"This duct tape should be just the ticket."

"You'll have to help me out of my sweat shirt. I suddenly can't raise my arms anymore," Randy said. "I think I pulled something getting into it."

Soon the sweatshirt was off and the binding had begun. Kurt continued talking.

"It's really going to hurt. Don't tell anybody this, okay, but even I had to cry when Doc. bound me up the first time".

"Let's get it over with, then," Randy said.

Kurt was right. The pain was excruciating. Randy wished he would faint dead away like Kurt had done when he set his leg. Kurt had also been right about the crying - add screaming.

At last it was finished. Randy's chest looked like the Tin Woodsman's from the Wizard of Oz.

"I don't know if it feels better just because you stopped torturing me, or if being taped up this way really helps. Either way, it does feel a whole lot better now. Thanks, Doc."

They exchanged a smile.

The cave had grown ominously dark there in the flickering flames of the small fire. They could no longer see the hole in the ceiling. The musty odor seemed to be accented there in the darkness. The air seemed to grow heavy. It was eerie. It was frightening. They managed to gather more sticks and lay them out near the fire to dry. Randy broke out the two air mattresses and Kurt blew them up. Randy also tossed the fresh T-shirt to Kurt who slipped it on without comment. They placed the air mattresses side by side so they could share the one blanket. Although the fire was too small to heat the cave, the radiant heat it provided helped a great deal.

As they were about to drift off to sleep, Kurt turned his head toward Randy.

"If you EVER tell ANYBODY that me and you slept under the same blanket, I'll kill you, Geek. I mean it. I'll kill you."

Randy smiled to himself there in the darkness and they were both soon asleep.

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## CHAPTER FOUR

Neither boy was sure who first heard the other one groaning, but it was to such a chorus that they awoke the following morning. They were each a throbbing mass of hurt, and not just in the vicinity of their individual broken bones. It became obvious that the beating they took in the stream had done a pretty good number on them all over.

It was a little past eight by Randy's watch when he finally sat up. That was probably the latest he had slept in since the day he was born. It was a struggle for him just to draw a full breath. How in the world would they ever carry out their plan from the night before?

They shared a can of cold chili for breakfast. Neither one complained. As they ate they realized there was actually very little food available. Twelve cans of various things and a bag of potato chips. Randy suggested they should probably rely on fish from the stream while they were still on the ground floor and save the canned food for after they were on their way up. There were hooks and twine in the locker. He baited his hook with a chunk of meat from the chili. In less than five minutes he had caught a nice sized bass. He made a stringer and left it in the water for lunch.

The first piece of business was to collect the logs from the stream and bring them onto dry land. By that morning, the stream had receded another five feet back down the ledge, and the current had calmed remarkably from raging white water to more gentle ripples. The noise level had also quieted from the day before. They discussed who should go into the water.

"It should probably be me," Kurt said. "If your tape gets wet it will all come off and we probably need to save what's left for other things. My leg should be okay since the stream seems to be running pretty slow now."

They agreed. Kurt removed his shirt and shoes and Randy helped him slide into the water.

"It really feels pretty good, in here. It's nice and cool on my leg. The pressure on it feels great, actually."

He moved out into the stream and managed to get around very well. Like a penguin, Randy thought but chose not to share that with his . . . what was he? His associate or colleague, he supposed. Certainly, not a friend. Randy was impressed with what a powerful swimmer he was. He was more than just a loud mouthed, sun tanned, jock after all.

"Watch out for an undertow. It was treacherous yesterday," Randy called to him, as an afterthought

"Hardly feel any at all so far," Kurt answered. "The biggest problem is the darkness. It's like reading by braille out here."

He soon had the first log in position to roll out of the water onto the ledge. Kurt had to do most of the lifting from below. Once out, Randy rolled it toward the back wall using his bare feet. Then the second and third, and soon a pile of ten had been salvaged.

"Better take a break, Kurt," Randy suggested.

"Yeah, not a bad idea."

Kurt remained in the water along the edge resting his folded arms out on the rock ledge.

"So, you ever been stranded ninety feet below the surface before?" Randy asked, not really knowing what kind of response to expect. The two of them, though in the same class, really didn't know one another. They traveled in very different circles. The only answer he received was a clearly unimpressed growl and, "Geek humor, I suppose."

"Where do you imagine they will try to look for us?" Kurt said at last, becoming more civil in his conversation.

"Mom may look down at the creek at my old campsite. She knows I'm always there." Randy said.

"I hope so," replied Kurt. "At least they'll be in the general vicinity, then. I'm always at the practice field or at one

of my usual haunts there in town. Nobody will have a clue where to start looking for me if I'm not there."

"Maybe Joanne will put one and one together and figure out the two of us might have been together," Randy suggested.

He could see that mentioning Joanne's name probably had not been a brilliant way to begin the day. Kurt shook his head, turned, and swam back out for more logs.

It took the rest of the morning to collect them all. Randy had more or less sorted them according to thickness and length as he rolled them around up on the ledge. The soles of his feet were sore. He should have worn Kurt's shoes, but neither of them had thought of it. Kurt managed to get out by himself. They sat close to the fire and rested while Kurt let the warmed air dry him off. Their morning's achievement would have been a strenuous activity for them if they had been in good physical condition let alone for guys in their condition.

Randy cleaned and filleted the fish and soon had it skewered on a water soaked stick he arranged over the fire.

"So, you've been building these geeky bridges out of toothpicks for a long time, huh?" Kurt said.

"Yeah, for a long time," Randy said somewhat abruptly, being sick to death of all the "geeky" comments Kurt continued to spew. He figured confronting him about it wouldn't help matters between them so he remained silent.

Remaining oblivious to Randy's thoughts, Kurt continued.

"What else do you do for fun?"

Randy could hardly believe he had actually asked a civilized question.

"In nice weather, I spend most of my time down at the campsite. I build stuff and swim and take my raft out and fish. Mostly outdoor stuff like that," he said. "How about you?"

"Sports mostly, I guess, and girls. I like cars. Soon as I get my license next year Dad's going to get me one."

"Pretty nice. What kind you want?"

"I haven't made up my mind yet. Something with a big back seat for making out."

There was a period of silence, then Randy asked,

"You've dated a lot of girls, I take it?"

"Dozens and dozens. How about you?"

"I'm not much into dating yet, I guess. Too expensive for one thing. All the really nice girls seem to be taken, for another."

"You're not queer, are you?" Kurt asked in all seriousness.

"Queer? You mean gay? Oh, no. I didn't mean anything like that. I really do like girls. I think about them all the time in fact. I just don't seem to ever get to do anything about it. Like I said, it's pretty expensive for me."

"You don't have a Dad, I hear," Kurt said.

"He was killed in a car accident when I was ten.

"Sorry. Me and my old man don't get on well anyway. We never do anything together. Did you do stuff with yours?"

"Not a whole lot. He was a traveling salesman. He wasn't home much. We didn't seem to have much in common. He was the real macho type."

"So, what's wrong with macho?" Kurt said, a bit defensively

"Oh, nothing's really wrong with it I guess. I just never was what you could call macho. I have always been thin and only moderately muscled, I guess you could say. He was built more like you. Our chemistry just didn't match up very well, I guess. Didn't make for compatible interests."

The fish was ready. Kurt looked around as if expecting to find a plate, fork and such. Randy chuckled. He picked up his half and went after it like corn on the cob. Kurt followed suit but clearly felt uncomfortable with the messy process. That somehow made Randy feel momentarily superior. He had been eating like a cave man ever since he began frequenting the creek.

More silence as they made quick work of the meal. Clearly, next time, they would need more than one fish.

By then, Kurt had pretty well dried off.

"What's next, bridge builder?" Kurt said.

Randy helped him put on his shoes. He stood up while he pulled on his shirt.

"Ah! Nice and warm. Thanks for moving it close to the fire."

Randy nodded, surprised that Kurt had taken notice and even more that he had been thoughtful enough to mention it.

"Our first step is to fashion a ladder tall enough to get us up to that ledge. We can cut the thin timbers into pieces about a foot long and nail them cross-wise onto two of the longest, medium thick logs. It should resemble a triangle for stability – wider at the bottom than at the top."

That process took an hour. Randy soon found he was not of much use with either the saw or the hammer. Kurt did most of the work. On the sandy surface of the rock, Randy etched out the design for first bridge span. He explained it to Kurt. The next step was to place the ladder and begin hauling the logs up to the ledge. Randy went up first with a coil of clothesline rope and a knife. Kurt stood each log up against the ladder and then placing both hands underneath, he pushed them on up ahead of him, one slow and careful rung at a time. His good leg tired in a hurry. They both rested often.

Randy bound the logs together and Kurt helped him lower them into place across the cave. By one o'clock, they had the first span of supporting logs in place. Kurt looked it over.

"That won't support our weight, you know."

"I know. That's why next we are going to add the inverted 'V' shaped supports on top. They will make it strong enough for the whole football team to stand on."

The boys were both worn out. They returned to the cave floor. While they tried to recoup some strength, Randy showed Kurt how to fix a line and hook and bait it with entrails he had saved from the first catch. Kurt was clearly repulsed by the process but tried not to show it. They each made a good-sized catch. Kurt reacted like a little kid bringing in his first fish. Upon only a moment's reflection, Randy figured it probably had been his first fish. He was pleased to see he still had a little boy inside him who could become excited over such things.

They saved the fish on the stringer for later. It was two o'clock by the time they finished.

The next step was to build two low triangle supports on

top of the beam and then one more full width beam to be secured on top of them. That one would be made from thinner logs since it wasn't needed for strength, just stability. By five o'clock, that trestle-like structure was complete. Randy walked across it with complete confidence, not hesitating for a second. Kurt followed a little more cautiously.

"I must say I'm impressed," Kurt said at last, after bouncing up and down easily on the structure. "You really do seem to know what you're doing."

"Well, thank you, Sir," Randy said attempting to bow humorously and immediately wincing in pain instead.

They made their way back down to rest. Kurt took the initiative to build up the fire.

Since he hadn't been beaten senseless the first time he brought up her name, Randy decided to try again.

"So how long have you and Joanne been going out?"

Kurt was obviously surprised by the question.

"Just last school year, really. Not even steady then, I guess. Why?"

"I was just curious," Randy answered. "I thought I had seen you with other girls from time to time. I honestly didn't know you felt she was your girlfriend."

"I suppose she really isn't. I'm just used to having whatever I want, I guess," Kurt said, somewhat surprised at what he heard himself saying. "I just never liked outsiders dating our girls."

"How long does a new kid have to remain an outsider here in Springfield," Randy asked.

"Forever, I suppose," Kurt said.

"That's sure the way it seems," Randy agreed.

"Why don't you ever join into anything, Randy? I never see you at the dances or the games or even at Barney's. Once school is over for the day you just seem to disappear."

"Most of that costs money for one thing and Mom just can't afford to give me an allowance. No one ever asked me to join in either, I guess. I figured I wasn't wanted."

"Well, you probably aren't wanted, really," Kurt said.

Again, there was silence.

Half an hour later they were back at work getting supplies in place for the following day. Kurt hauled the last

logs up the ladder and Randy fashioned them into sections of straight supporting girders. They worked until past seven o'clock before stopping for the day. The first level was complete and they had a good start on the next day's work when they would do it all again, up some fifteen feet higher. That would put them nearly thirty feet off the ground – about sixty feet from the top.

With darkness overtaking the cave, they built up the fire even more. Driftwood continued to arrive in the stream from under the north wall. They gathered it and laid it out to dry. It seemed fire wood would not be a problem. Kurt wondered when real food might also make its way under the wall and into the cave.

It was more fish for supper that night. They could already tell, meals would become strictly for nourishment and not for their dining pleasure.

"Next time you pack up a survival box, Geek, don't forget salt, pepper and lemon," Kurt said, half-way complaining, half-way kidding. "A steak or two might also be a good idea!"

"You want to gut the fish?" Randy asked, allowing the imp inside him to surface for a moment.

"You seem to enjoy it so much just go ahead. There are so few pleasures for you in here."

The fish were soon sizzling over the fire.

It seemed to be Kurt's turn to cross-examine Randy.

"So, not many girls in your life yet, huh?"

"Afraid not."

"You've kissed girls, haven't you?"

"Well, yes, but not often. I'd like to do it a lot more often though."

He chuckled somewhat nervously. It was an unfamiliar topic of conversation.

"Did you kiss Joanne the other night?"

That was not the question Randy needed to be answering honestly, sealed up underground with her easy to anger boyfriend the way he was. If Randy was anything, however, he was hopelessly honest.

"You might as well know. Yes, I kissed her and yes I liked it and yes I'd really like to do it again."

"You do have guts, Geek. I'll give you that."

Neither boy could think of a next thing to say so they sat quietly awaiting their meal. Randy poked at the fire. Kurt added some thicker pieces of wood, getting it ready to burn through the night.

At last, Kurt spoke.

"She's a great kisser, isn't she?"

Shocked again, Randy offered the first response that came to mind.

"I'll say she is!"

It had been filled with his honest emotion – too, filled, he feared.

It had been humorous to Kurt who chuckled. Randy joined in, perhaps more out of nervousness than anything else. In another moment, they were both laughing out loud. Randy held his ribs, but somehow, the pain seemed worth it that time.

They ate and continued making small talk for longer than either of them had thought would be likely

"We'd better hit the sack, I guess. Looks like a really long haul for us tomorrow," Kurt said.

They arranged their mattresses and cover and were both immediately asleep.

## **CHAPTER FIVE**

Randy had been awake and fishing a good hour before Kurt woke up. There were five new fish on the stringer and two freshly stick-fried, bass filling the area with an inviting aroma. Kurt looked around to see what had been going on while he slept in.

"Hey, Geek, you should have woke me up. I can pull my part of the load, you know."

"You had to do all the really tiring work yesterday, so I just figured you needed more rest."

That explanation seemed to be satisfactory. They moved to the fire and enjoyed breakfast. They were famished.

"I smell like a locker room," Kurt said a last. I'm going to go for a swim and wash off before we get to work."

"Yeah, I noticed I'm no rose myself," Randy added. "I suppose I could just sit along the ledge and splash water up on the few square centimeters of me that aren't wrapped in tape."

"I'd say go for it, then," Kurt said as he made himself ready and slid himself into the water. It seemed colder than he had remembered from the day before. As the boys bathed, they talked.

"What does your Dad do for a living, Kurt?"

"He's vice president of the bank. My Grandfather owns it. It'll be Dad's when Grampa croaks."

"Then I suppose you'll be into banking, too, huh?" Randy asked.

"Probably. It's been in the family for three generations already. It doesn't seem like much fun, really, though. Dad's

always griping about customers and employees and the market. Nothing ever seems to go right to hear him tell it."

"Too bad. That probably does make him a little testy, doesn't it?"

"Yeah, maybe that's it," Kurt said moving a little closer as if the conversation might even be in some way meaningful. "Dad and my brother Billy are really closer than me and Dad . Billy likes that coat and tie routine, I guess. They talk money and stocks and stuff all the time. Dinner table conversation seldom includes sports or me."

"Or girls?" Randy added, again with an impish gleam in his eye.

Kurt splashed him before thinking about the tape.

"Hey, I'm sorry about that. I just wasn't thinking."

"I don't think anything is damaged. Forget it."

Randy soon returned to the topic of the conversation.

"Anyway, can you talk to your Dad about girls and things like that?"

"You mean about sex?"

"Yeah, I guess that's what I mean," Randy said, looking away a bit embarrassed.

"No. He gave me a book when I was twelve and said if I had any other questions I should go talk with Doc Rainey about it. I figure at Doc's age, he's probably forgot everything he ever know about sex."

They chuckled and smiled. Randy really wanted to pursue the topic, but he didn't. His sex talk with his mother hadn't been very useful, and he wasn't too sure what he should believe from all the stuff he heard the other guys saying.

After just a few minutes they turned their attention back to their construction project. By then, the procedure was familiar, and both went to work at their respective jobs. Again, they were both sore from end to end, but gradually limbered up as they got back into the swing of things. The next bridge would only be about two thirds as long as the first, since the walls narrowed rapidly toward the hole in the surface above. That one had to be built at an angle because there weren't ledges directly across from one another as had been the case down below. It turned into a very tricky engineering task for

Randy.

By noon, the first stringer and one triangle support section were in place. The boys were ready to stop and rest. They had tied the coil of larger rope to the top trestle and let it drop to the floor. They used it to haul smaller timbers and supplies up to where they were needed. Kurt was so strong in the arms and chest that he slipped down the rope hand over hand. It was really easier for him than using his bum leg on the ladder. Randy took the slow but sure route – one step at a time. Since the same ladder had to be used at both levels, Kurt lowered it so Randy could use it.

More fish for lunch. It seemed that conversation was becoming more of a focus at meal times than the food. Little by little, the boys were learning about each other. It still wasn't comfortable but was certainly more than just tolerable.

"Your Mom works at the Variety store, I see," Kurt said.

"Yeah, she puts in pretty long hours. She works six days a week now."

"Sounds like a lot of good overtime pay, to me," Kurt said.

"Not really. She's an assistant manager and on a salary. She just has to work till everything gets done."

"Bummer!"

"Yeah. In the winter – especially around the holidays – I don't see much of her, I'm afraid."

"You two get along?" Kurt asked

"Oh, yeah! Mom is great. When she has time, we play cards or Monopoly. She can talk about anything – well almost anything."

"That must be nice," Kurt said, glancing at Randy as he spoke. They seldom looked each other in the eyes when they talked.

"Yeah, it really is. I'm lucky that way, I guess."

"No brothers or sisters?" Kurt asked.

"I had a little brother but he was killed in the same car accident as Dad."

"Wow. That must have been awful."

"It was. I don't think Mom ever got over it. She probably never will."

"How old was your brother?"

"He was nine – just a year younger than me. We had been really good friends considering we were brothers."

"I bet you miss him, then, don't you?"

There was a fully unexpected hint of compassion in his voice.

"I try not to think about him. I'd rather just change the subject now, okay," Randy said, turning his head and blinking back the tears.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to make you feel bad. Really, I didn't," Kurt said, not knowing exactly what he should say in a situation like that.

Randy nodded, his head still turned. Kurt busied himself by cleaning up the fish bones and poking at the fire. Soon it was back to work.

The second triangle support was finished within an hour. Because of the scraps of wood they had to work with, that bridge wasn't going to be nearly as sturdy as the one below it, but it should hold until they reached the third level. With that finished, they had used up almost all of the logs and timbers.

"Looks like our next project will be to take the lower span apart and cart the logs up to the top," Randy said with a sigh. "I think our rapid progress is about to slow to a snail's pace."

He was correct. It was far more difficult to disassemble the heavy beams and trestles than they had imagined. Randy dropped one whole beam section to the floor of the cave where it splintered into several pieces. What if it had hit Kurt, Randy thought, feeling a rush of fear. Their dependence on one another came into sharp focus for him.

They fashioned an addition to the ladder so it would reach up to the second level. It was not nearly as stable as the first section so great care was necessary.

Up above that point, the walls had very few outcroppings substantial enough to support the trestles. From the floor, they had not been able to determine the nature of the sides toward the top. Things began to look bleak.

"It looks to me like we'll need to carve out a spot in the wall to support the next beam," Randy called down to Kurt. "Can you come up here and take a look?"

Kurt was soon there and they felt around on the wall, seeing if they could find a soft spot or a crack on which to begin chiseling. With a claw hammer and a foot-long piece of half-inch iron re-rod from the locker, Kurt began the slow process of carving out the next support hole. It had no sharp edge so took like what seemed an eternity to make any progress.

A tiny piece of rock split off and hit Kurt in the eye. Randy examined the injury. It had cut the white part of the eye and there was blood covering the eyeball. Using the end of Kurt's T-shirt, Randy dabbed at the edges of his eyes to absorb the blood and make sure the rock fragment was no longer in there.

"I'm pretty sure the rock has been washed away by the blood and tears," he said at last. "Maybe we should call a halt for today. It's close to five anyway."

"No, I'm okay. Don't ever say a little sliver put Kurt Watson out of commission."

Kurt went back to work, squinting both eyes to protect against further problems. By seven O'clock, Randy declared that the opening Kurt had dug was deep enough. Then the same thing had to be done on the opposite wall. By then Kurt was ready to pack it in for the night. They made their way back down to the floor not an easy task since they were missing that first trestle they had just dismantled.

Looking back up at the structure Randy spoke.

"You know, the ladder won't reach the ground once we remove that next trestle. You can probably go up and down the rope for a while yet but with these ribs, there's no way I can do that."

"Well then, I can come down and fish and do what we need done down here and you we'll have to fix a place for you stay up there," Kurt said.

"Since we stopped pretty early tonight," Randy said, "Let's dry some fish just in case we run out of food up there."

"Dry fish? I don't get it," Kurt said.

"Like fish jerky."

"Yuck!"

"It may come down to yuck or starve."

Kurt made a face and nodded.

Randy soon showed Kurt how it was done and they kept the fire going well past ten in order to finish a dozen, thinly sliced fish. Randy cut a section of the plastic tarp and carefully wrapped them as airtight as possible, sealing them in with some of the remaining precious tape.

Randy noticed Kurt was rubbing his broken leg.

"Got a problem there?"

"It really hurts tonight, for some reason."

Randy took a closer look. It felt hot around the wound. He removed the denim bandage and saw a fiery infection brewing inside the gash.

"It's really infected, Kurt. We have to do something about it."

"Like what?"

"I'm not sure. Squeeze out the pus for one thing, I guess, and then we need to kill the germs in there somehow."

Randy went to work on the wound. It hurt Kurt something ferocious. He winced and cried out more than once. Randy remained quiet and kept working, thinking the sooner he got it cleaned out the better. Kurt understood and didn't say a word

Randy scooped up water using the metal army hat and washed out the area. He repeated it several times.

There was one small bottle of iodine left in the first aid kit. They had been saving it in case some other cuts or abrasions befell them. The time had come to use it.

"This is going to hurt like sin, Kurt, but I don't know any other way to treat it."

Kurt just nodded his head. Randy felt suddenly squeamish in his stomach, but there could be none of that. He opened the iodine and prepared to pour it into the wound.

"Go ahead and yell like hell, Kurt. There's nobody going to hear you but me and you know by now that's no problem."

Kurt nodded, hoping he would not have to give in to the pain and cry out. That wish didn't last long. It was a scream that deafened them both. And it went on and on and on. Randy put his arms around Kurt and held him close and tight. Kurt allowed it – something of a surprise to both of them.

Then it was over. It still stung, but the worst was

behind them. They realized they were still holding one another, and each one moved away as if suddenly uncomfortable. They didn't speak of it. Randy washed out the bandage in the stream. He boiled some water in the metal combat hat and tried to sterilize the well-soiled blue bandage. Once it cooled, he reapplied it over the wound. He helped Kurt onto his mattress and covered him up. Kurt was asleep within a few minutes. It had taken half of the iodine. It suddenly became a precious commodity.

Randy sat down by the stream and just thought, late into the night – worried, really. What if the infection got worse? What if they couldn't find or make places in the walls to support the beams at the upper levels? What if he or Kurt fell and was seriously hurt or killed? What about the anguish his Mom and Kurt's parents must be feeling at that very moment? What if they never got out?

Sleep didn't come easily that night, but by morning, he realized he had, in fact, somehow managed to get some.

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## **CHAPTER SIX**

Kurt awoke to find Randy examining his leg.

"It's not every guy in town I'd let play with my leg that way, you know," Kurt said with a smile.

"And good morning to you, as well."

Randy sat up and uncovered Kurt's wound.

"It really does look a lot better this morning. Feel it. It's not hot or anything. I think we have that infection on the run."

Randy re-tied the bandage in place as Kurt spoke.

"It does look better. Great! I'm starved. I'll have six eggs over easy, four pancakes and patty sausages."

Randy thought that was coming very close to humor for Kurt, and didn't completely understand it.

"Afraid you'll have to settle for two fish, over hard."

"That was going to be my second choice."

It was the earliest in the day they had ever smiled at one another. They both felt comfortable about it.

They ate. Kurt spoke.

"Well, what's first today Gee ... Randy?"

They exchanged an awkward glance. Randy smiled and nodded at Kurt as if to say thanks for checking that. Kurt rushed on as if wanting to put it behind him.

"We'll need to build you a spot and stow some of the stuff up there permanently today, I suppose, if you won't be coming down anymore."

"I've been thinking about that, too. We can sort it out at noon. I thought maybe we could pull the foot locker up there and use it for our storage chest. That way we can keep everything together."

"Good idea."

They went through their morning bathing ritual, although they both realized the results were far from those a good shower with warm water and soap would bring. Kurt's face had darkened a bit with a light growth of whiskers.

"I guess you must shave, huh?" Randy asked.

Kurt felt his chin and cheeks.

"Yeah, about once a week or before a date is all. You?"

"No. Oh, my upper lip a few times. I hate it when it gets dark up there."

"Dad says you blonde kids don't have to worry as soon about shaving as those of us with black hair," Kurt tried to explain.

"No big deal to me, one way or the other," Randy said.

"Me either, actually. Joanne hates it when I need a shave. I find that most girls do, actually."

"I guess I wouldn't know about such things. Wish I did, but guess I don't." Randy said with a half grin.

The climb to the top seemed harder that morning. Randy wondered if it was the fish diet or that his ribs were getting worse on the inside. He didn't pause over it long. Kurt went to work chiseling. Randy continued dismantling the lower trestle. They worked separately for several hours.

"Come up here and take a look at this hole, will you, Randy," Kurt called out at last.

Randy made his way up to the top level, thinking to himself that they were finally almost half way to the surface. It seemed warmer up there. There was certainly a whole lot more light, which made it much easier to work. The hole looked fine to Randy. Together they carefully fitted the first log across. That time it took just one, solid log and it spanned the distance perfectly. Well, Kurt had to force it into place on the far side, but that just made it all the more solid. Kurt secured the drop rope to the new, higher beam. It still reached the floor with plenty to spare.

"Are we about half way now, would you say, Randy?"

"I was just thinking that myself. Yeah, I think about half way."

They sat, straddling the log and rested.

"I thought by now there would have been kids up at the opening spitting on us, didn't you?" Kurt said.

"Yeah, I thought so, too. Maybe after the flood and after us two being missing the parents are keeping tight rein on the little kids."

"I suppose that could be," Kurt said. "You know, you really figure things out pretty good, for a ...."

"Yeah, sometimes us geeks luck out that way," Randy said, interrupting.

Somehow, the whole 'Geek' idea wasn't as offensive anymore. He almost missed it – not really, but almost!

Kurt tried to ignore it as a non-event.

"It really gets narrow from here on, doesn't it?" Kurt observed, looking up.

"Yeah, it's a lot narrower than it looked from down below. Maybe we can leave one beam across at each level below. I doubt if we'll need them all up above. That way both of us can still get down at night."

"I can't imagine really wanting to get down," Kurt said with a smile.

"Me either, but you know what I mean.

"Yeah, I know. It sounds like a good idea."

They were soon back at work. They pulled the ladder up and Kurt moved up another fifteen feet and began making a new set of holes. His shoulders ached, and he had to stop and rest every few minutes. The process was, indeed, slowing to a snail's pace.

At one o'clock, they broke for lunch. It took a full ten minutes just for Randy to get down, having to move the ladder three times. Kurt stayed to help, then slid down the rope. Randy inched his way down and they set to catching their lunch.

As they fished, they talked.

"What's it like to have a grown-up brother like Billy?" Randy asked.

"Okay, I guess. We don't fight much anymore. He's three years older. He just goes his own way and I go mine."

"Can you talk to him about girls?"

"You mean about s-e-x?" Kurt said in an exaggerated whisper. "What's this hang up you have about saying the

word, sex?"

"I guess I just never had anyone to talk about it with before and, I don't know, it's kind of embarrassing, I guess."

"We used to talk a lot about girls and dating and stuff like that. We really don't talk about anything anymore. In some ways I kind of miss that I guess."

"Would he stick up for you if you in a scrape of some kind?" Randy asked, pushing the brother to brother thing a bit further.

"Depends. At home, with Mom and Dad, he'll never ever stand up for me. He gets a kick out of it when I get myself in trouble. Outside of the house, yes. He'd be right there for me, I'm sure."

"Is that how you feel about it with him, too?"

"I suppose. Yeah, pretty much. He never gets into trouble at home anymore, but, yeah, if he got into something with the other guys or something like that, I'd be there for him. Sure!"

"That must be a great feeling." Randy said, some excitement in his voice.

"I never really thought about it, but I suppose it is pretty nice at that."

There was a long pause in the conversation, then Kurt went on.

"Can you tell me about your brother, yet. I mean not if you don't feel right about it."

"His name was Ryan. We were a lot alike. We both liked to be outdoors. He could almost keep up with me at everything. He'd have probably been a better athlete than me. He was built more like Dad. We fought some. I know I really hurt him sometimes. I wish I hadn't now, but what's done is done, as Mom says."

"You two share a room?"

"A room! We shared a single bed in the corner of the living room!"

"I can't imagine that. It must have been awfully cramped."

"Not if you're used to it. Sometimes at night I still wake up and reach out, trying to find him. That's always sad, especially at night. You know how things seem sadder at

night?"

"Ya. I wonder why that is. It's really true. I guess it must partly be because you're all alone then."

"I was never really scared when Ryan was there in bed with me at night."

"You mean you are now?" Kurt said, prying further than he ever thought he would.

"Sure sometimes. Don't tell me you're never scared, Kurt Watson."

Kurt was quiet. He shrugged his shoulders unwilling to admit such a thing. Kurt didn't like admitting such things even to himself.

With three fish caught, cleaned, fried and eaten, it was back up the ladder. Work went even slower that afternoon. They boys remained quiet, each one playing with his own thoughts and questions and memories. It was a mellow time for them both.

By six thirty, Randy had the lower trestle taken apart, all but for the one beam they had decided to leave in place. Kurt had finished one new hole and was about a third of the way finished with the second.

Kurt noticed it first.

"It's raining outside. Can you feel it?" he called to Randy who was still down below.

"Really, I hadn't noticed."

Randy looked up and some rain fell on his face.

"Better stow the tools in the footlocker so they don't rust," Randy called up to Kurt.

With that done and sheets of rain making its way through the opening, the boys called it a day and made their way down to the floor of the cave.

"We sure didn't get far today, did we," Randy said, disgust in his tone.

"No, but what we did get done was good work," Kurt said.

They looked at one another and chuckled. The tables were turned – Randy, the pessimist, and Kurt, the optimist. What could possibly happen next!

"Let's treat ourselves to the potato chips tonight, what do you say, Kurt?"

"I thought they were going to be for a special occasion."

"It seems to me this is a special occasion."

"Oh, and what's that?" Kurt asked.

It is the first 'Geek-free' day of our adventure together.

At first, only Randy was smiling. Then Kurt shrugged and broke into an ear-to-ear grin.

"You know I really am sorry about that. I was an awful jerk before. I don't know why. There's really no excuse. I don't know what else to say. I'm sorry."

"If I hadn't already known that, do you think I would have been brave enough to bring it up? Here, you can have the honor of opening the chips."

They laughed out loud. They felt close. They felt safe there together. It felt nice and yet very strange.

After a long silence Randy could tell Kurt had something on his mind.

"What?" he asked.

Kurt was clearly uncomfortable.

"Oh, I was thinking earlier, up there pounding away at the wall, somewhere along the line here we seem to have become friends, and I have no idea when that was."

"Yeah, I know, but does it really matter when?"

"I suppose not, but this really complicates my life, you know."

"No, how does it complicate your life?"

Both boys were being quite serious.

"My friends, I mean my other friends and I spend a lot of time running down guys like, well, like you. It's like the glue that binds us together."

"A guy like what?"

"Outsiders. Kids who weren't born and raised here. Wrong-siders, okay? It doesn't make much sense now, sitting here with you at the bottom of this God forsaken hole."

"I don't know what to say to that, Kurt."

"I'm not asking you to say anything. I'm just thinking out loud, I guess. But if – when – we get out of all this, you and I are going to be a special kind of friend and I won't ever be able to explain that to the other guys."

"Maybe you won't need to. Why should they have to know? I mean, we could just go our separate ways once we

get out, you know. That wouldn't have to be such big deal, would it?"

"You know you don't really believe that."

"Well, no, not really, but if that's what it would take so you could keep your real friends then I'll bet we could work it out."

Kurt grew silent. Randy sensed his uneasiness and moved away, stacking things out of reach of the continuing downpour from up above. The stream was slowly rising, and rills of rain water were forming on the rock floor, draining away toward the stream. It would be a wet night – a thoughtful, wet night.

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## CHAPTER SEVEN

It was during the wee hours of the morning. The boys woke up with a start to a loud crackling, crashing noise.

"Thunder and lightning?" Kurt said, a question in his voice.

"Sounded a lot nearer than that to me," Randy answered.

They got up and walked carefully in the direction from which the noise seemed to have come. They moved ever so cautiously. Randy had been right. It had been nearer than thunder or lightening. At least one of their trestles had apparently been washed loose from its supporting ledge and had crashed to the floor. There in the darkness they couldn't see the details, but feeling around they knew it was a disaster. The rain had stopped by that time but the stream continued to rise. It wasn't as high as when they first arrived, but it was rising.

They moved things back away from the edge of the stream and tried to keep as dry themselves as possible. Since there was nothing else they could really do until daybreak, they built up the fire and gave sleep another try.

Surprisingly, they both were soon asleep again. Between their meager diet, the hard work and the mental exhaustion, they slept hard and deep.

As usual, Randy was awake first. Unlike usual, he immediately roused Kurt. The disaster from the night before was every bit as bad as it had seemed there in the dark. The middle trestle had fallen, breaking into what seemed like a

billion pieces. The rope still hung from the top beams. That was at least one thing for which to be thankful.

The beams left in place from the other trestles appeared to still be secure. The ladder had been smashed to pieces. The footlocker had fallen and lay broken to bits on the floor. The tools lay in puddles of water, and most of the canned food had apparently rolled into the stream.

"Good thing we had the potato chips last night," Randy quipped with a sigh.

They both felt sick to their stomachs but knew they must eat to keep up their strength. They ate while they surveyed the situation and made plans. The ladder could be repaired. Randy set about doing that. Kurt dived to see if he could rescue any of the canned food. He found four cans. Then they set about dismantling the fallen section to see just what they might be able to salvage and reuse.

Kurt could climb the rope to the top beam if that became necessary. From there he could perhaps pull up some of the larger logs that had fallen. They gave it a try. The largest logs were too heavy but after much effort and creative rigging, they managed to raise four of the medium sized variety. It was already noon. The stream just kept inching toward the center of the ledge. A sizable eddy began swirling as it had that first day.\

"Must have been a damn buster of a rain last night," Randy commented. "The water is so muddy we'll never be able to drink it the way it is."

He scooped out a helmet full and set it aside so the mud would settle to the bottom. He figured he could boil it and make it fairly safe to drink. They really had no choice. He was surprised they hadn't already gotten sick from drinking the water from the stream. Maybe he should have been boiling it all along. Maybe that's why he was feeling so weak. There seemed to be lots of 'maybes' running through his head that morning.

Randy tied the top of the ladder to Kurt's rope and Kurt helped him lift it into a standing position. He climbed up, carrying a hammer, a coil of rope and a can of nails, all in a sack fashioned from a section of plastic tarp. Kurt had been right. Broken ribs really did get worse before they got better.

He wouldn't complain though. He could tell that just made Kurt feel bad. Not that he shouldn't feel bad, but it wasn't a productive move just then.

Kurt slid down the rope to meet him on the bottom beam.

"Now what, Captain?" Kurt asked.

"Captain? Finally, the respect I deserve," Randy said, with as much of a grin as he could muster through the pain and disappointment.

"Yeah. Since I gave up the G-word, I've been searching for a substitute."

"My name is Randy. You could try that, you know."

"Oh sure, that's okay for every day, but it's not comfortable right now. It's like way too formal for friends like us, now. I guess I'm blabbering. I'm embarrassed even. It's a dumb thing. Just forget it, okay."

"No, I won't. I think it's great what you're saying. Neither one of us will probably have this same kind of friendship with anyone else ever again in our whole life. It is special. That's nothing to be embarrassed about."

They sat there, straddling the log, four feet apart facing one another, and resting. No one spoke for a long time.

"How do you suppose it will be between us after we get out?" Randy asked in a very soft, thoughtful voice.

"You're reading my mind, Captain. I thought about it a lot last night, and about what you said we could do."

"Yeah, me too. I really meant it that we could go our own ways, you know. I wouldn't like it, but you know we could."

"Well, I guess we'll cross that bridge – so to speak – when we come to it." Kurt said uneasily. "Now, Cap, what you going to call me?"

"If you wouldn't mind, I think I'd like to call you, 'Brother K.'

"Brother K," Kurt repeated. "Has a nice ring to it. Pretty long."

"Could shorten it to, Bro-K, I guess."

"So be it, then, Cap and Bro-K."

They sighed in unison, looked around at the big repair job before them, and set to work. By nightfall, they were still a

full day behind where they had been the same time the day before. It had been an exhausting day for both of them.

When they reached the ground, the water had receded to about where it had been before the rain.

"I don't care what it does to my tape, I just have to get into the water and clean myself off," Randy said.

At that, they both went for a swim. For Randy, it was more a bob than a swim but it served its purpose. The exhaustion faded after a while and they played together like ten-year olds. It had been such a good time neither wanted to get out. When they felt too tired to move anymore, they just stood in the chin deep water along the edge and talked.

"What do you like most about all of your old friends?" Randy asked.

"They are just comfortable, I guess. I can't remember a time without them. We just started out together and we've been there ever since. I guess that's not much to have in common, is it?"

"Oh, I think that must be great. I've moved every couple of years, so can't imagine how it must be to have known a friend all of your life. Not many secrets, I'll bet."

Kurt smiled.

"None at all, until now."

"I'm sorry about this," Randy said for lack of any other thought at that moment.

"Nothing for you to be sorry about, Cap. This whole mess is my fault, you know."

He was right about that, but Randy couldn't seem to let him take the entire blame.

"Well, if I hadn't been messing around with your girl, I guess, well, you know, there wouldn't have been any reason in the first place."

They shared shrugs.

"How do the ribs feel today?" Kurt asked, only halfway to change the subject.

"Truth?"

"Truth!" Kurt confirmed.

"They hurt like H E double toothpicks."

"Maybe I should look at them again, or something," Kurt said trying to find some way to be helpful.

"If the tape comes off after all this, you can take another look. I'm really tired, now. Can you lift me out of here?"

They fell into their regular evening routine: fishing, cleaning, cooking, and eating. They spent most of the rest of the evening in silence, staring into the fire, each boy buried deep in his own thoughts. The fish tasted like bland, plain fish. The water tasted like stale, boiled water. The air was heavy and moist and musty smelling. The walls stood there like those of a prison. Nothing in their surroundings seemed pleasant or comfortable or hopeful.

Later, Kurt was the first to break the silence as they lay there on their mattresses

"Ever wonder how it would be to be married?

"Sometimes, I guess. Are you talking sex or relationship, here?"

"Relationship. I suppose my Mom and Dad get along okay, but they never do stuff together. They hardly ever even talk in the evening. Dad reads the paper and Mom watches TV. It seems to me marriage should be a whole lot more than that."

Randy nodded in the darkness.

"Yeah, it sure should. I mean it's supposed to be two people who love each other so much that they want to spend the rest of their lives together, right?"

Kurt nodded.

"Do you think your Mom and Dad were happy together?" he asked.

"I'm pretty sure they were. They kissed and hugged a lot right out in the open. They laughed a lot. We all did back then. I never heard them fight. I know they disagreed about things but not really fights. I think they really loved each other a lot. Mom always beams when she speaks about him."

"I hope that's how it will be for me and my wife. That's just how I hope it will be," Kurt said.

"How do you suppose you know when you've found that one special person?" Randy asked.

"I have absolutely no idea and I guess that bothers me, sometimes. I tell myself I'm just fifteen – barely, in fact – and I have three or maybe even five or six years before I have to find her. But I worry I won't know how it should feel, you

know?"

"Yeah, I know. But then I never knew before this week how it felt to have a best friend, and when that happened I knew it right away," Randy added, smiling in the dark.

Kurt lay quietly.

Randy thought, perhaps, a further explanation was in order. He didn't want Kurt to misunderstand what he meant.

"I don't mean you have to think of me as your best friend, too. I know you already have your best friends. But I've just never had this kind of thing before. It makes me happy on the inside. I smile about it sometimes while I'm up there working. I look over at you and I say to myself, he's my friend. I guess when you've always had so many friends, you don't even have to think about it anymore do you?"

"I never had to before all this."

Kurt turned onto his side facing Randy and raised up on his elbow, hand supporting his head.

"It's like I never really had to make friends with all the others. They were just there. Like an arm or a leg, you know. It's like you're the first guy I ever really made friends with. Does that make any sense?"

"Yeah, it's just what I got done saying to you."

"It is, isn't it. Well, I'll be."

Kurt lay back down.

"You seem to have made friends with a lot of different girls, though, right?" Randy said, pushing for whatever more information he might be able to learn about that side of life.

"Girls are mostly different than that. I mean girls are what you get close to so you can kiss them and stuff. It's not the same thing at all, really."

"You mean you don't even think of Joanne as a good friend – just someone to kiss and stuff?"

"Yeah. That's really awful isn't it! What a jerk! Maybe you better call me Brother J."

More silence. They heard each other sigh deeply. Presently, Kurt continued.

"I never talked about stuff like this with anybody before. Did you know that?"

"Not for sure. I sort of suspected though, I guess. I never did either, not with a friend – Mom sometimes, but not

with a friend."

"It's nice, isn't it?" Kurt said barely above a whisper.

"It's better than nice," Randy replied, happy that it was dark and no one could see his tears.

"Well, a big day again tomorrow. We'd better some sleep. Good night, Cappy."

"Good night, Bro. Thanks for talking and stuff."

"Yeah, sure."

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## CHAPTER EIGHT

The boys had awakened early and were hard at work by seven o'clock. They felt good about things. Randy had wondered if Kurt would seem embarrassed or standoffish after the talk in the dark the night before, but he wasn't; not in the least. In fact, Kurt brought it up first as they were struggling to position a new beam.

"I just can't get it out of my head, what a good talk we had last night."

"It was great. I been thinking about it, too."

The boys would sneak peeks at one another from time to time as if looking at this new best friend for the first time. It would have been comical, if it hadn't been so satisfying, so meaningful.

The work went along at a rapid pace that morning. By noon, they were back to where they had been before the disaster, as they had come to call it. They chattered like old acquaintances who hadn't seen one another for years. It felt comfortable. In the deeper recesses of their minds, each was still privately concerned about afterward. For the time being, however, it was great

Although the spans were becoming narrower, it was more and more difficult to chip out holes in the cave wall to support the beams. It was as if the rocks were harder nearer the surface. Randy wished he had gone for the geology merit badge instead of botany. He gave the chiseling process a try, but it only caused excruciating pain. Poor Bro, he thought. His arm will turn to hamburger before this is over.

At lunch, they decided to break out the can of pork and

beans. It was like heaven itself, they thought. Something, anything, other than just fish. They finger-licked the can clean.

"It's amazing how you just get so you take things for granted, you know," Kurt said. "Like pork and beans, you mean?"

"Yeah, like pork and beans and other stuff; like sunlight, and pure water, and clean clothes.

"And soap and showers," Randy added.

"Yeah, and soap and a shower and friends, and the freedom to move around and to go places and see people."

"And girls?" Randy added as a question.

"I doubt if I've gone this long without a kiss since I began seventh grade," Kurt said.

"Well don't look at me," Randy said, grinning widely and moving away before Kurt could clobber him with something.

"From a girl, bonehead. A kiss from a girl."

He threw the empty bean can at Randy who, much to his own surprise, caught it and took out after him.

Soon the chase was over – or should it be called the hobble and groan – and they returned to sitting by the fire.

"I can't imagine having kissed all those girls like you have. It must be something to just know you're so popular that whenever you want to kiss a girl all you need to do is go find one and she'll kiss you."

Randy just shook his head, as if in disbelief, although he knew it was true.

"Truth! Cappy, how many girls have you kissed?"

"Is that in my whole life?"

"Let's say since eighth grade."

"Does this include my mother?"

"Not that kind of kiss you jerk. Quit stalling. You know what I mean."

"Okay. You'll laugh, but okay. Two."

"Two. Well that's one more than I had predicted. Good going! Who was the other one?"

"The first one was Amy Waterson. She was just here about three months at the beginning of last school year. We got to be really good friends. She lived next door in the Carson place. Do you remember her?"

"Sort of. I know who you mean. She was pretty, actually."

"I thought so, and she was really nice. We talked a lot. When she left, it was like losing a friend, sort of. I think it's harder to just be friends with a girl for some reason."

"Kissing is the reason, my friend! Kissing!" Kurt said. "I mean, let's face it, how many girls do you just pass the time of day with, without thinking about how it would be to kiss them?"

"About one in ten thousand, I suppose." Randy said laughing a bit nervously.

"So, tell me," Kurt continued, "Was this Amy a good kisser?"

"She said she had never kissed a boy before and I since I was new at it too, it's hard to say – good or bad. I really liked it though. I know that. We probably kissed about a dozen different times."

"About a dozen?" Kurt said

"Okay, it was exactly thirteen, if you count the first time when I slid off her lips."

Kurt laid on his back and roared with laughter. Randy began chuckling, and then found himself laughing almost as loudly.

"You slipped off her lips."

Kurt struggled to get it out.

"How could you slip off a girl's lips?"

"I was trying to miss her nose with my nose and my lips just ended up on her chin instead."

Kurt roared all over again. He laughed till the tears rolled down his cheeks. Randy enjoyed it all immensely.

"Well, we got better. We got better. Practice makes perfect, you know."

All the laughing had hurt Randy's chest more than he would ever admit, but every twinge had been worth it. The rest of the day saw the next level completed and one hole started up another ten feet.

"Forty feet to go," Kurt estimated at one point. It seemed close. It seemed far. But, for the first time it seemed possible – likely, even.

Randy seemed to need more help than usual getting down, that evening. Kurt was concerned.

"I think I need to look at those ribs, tape or no tape," Kurt said.

"I think you're right, Bro. The ones on the left side have been hurting a lot the past two days."

"Why didn't you say something?"

"Oh, you know."

He did and that was that

"Tearing off the tape won't be a picnic, you know," Kurt said.

"I know. Finally, something good comes from not having much hair on my chest yet."

"Much, I didn't see a single hair when I taped you up," Kurt said, hoping to lighten the occasion.

In truth, he had paid no attention to it.

"Standing or sitting," Randy asked.

"Standing. It would be too awkward for me to work on you trying to sit or kneel with this leg."

"Okay, then. Go for it!"

It wasn't a pleasant experience. It hurt his skin. It hurt his bruised flesh. It hurt his ribs. It just really, really hurt. At last, the tape was off. His chest and back were raw, partly from removing the tape, and partly from the way it had rubbed against his skin those past several days.

Kurt began feeling around. He was much more gentle, that time, than the first time. They both realized that. Kurt couldn't find anything new or out of the ordinary. It still hurt everywhere it had the first time. No ribs were trying to poke their way through the skin, however. That was what Kurt had privately feared.

"I don't know what to say about them," Kurt said after a few minutes. "I think they are in better shape than I thought they'd be. That's probably good news."

"I'd say so."

"I think the taping really helped, you."

Randy quickly recognized now how much better he had felt all bandaged up. Kurt had carefully saved the tape so they could try to reuse it. First, however, Randy was determined to take a swim and clean up where the tape had been. Kurt assisted him and soon he was in the water chin deep.

"Gee, this really does feel good. It's so cool on my

skin. Do you think we could wait to re-tape it till morning so I could do this once more then?"

"I suppose so, if you promise to stay still as a statue tonight," Kurt said.

"Well, I had planned a game of flag football for later, but I'll give that up if you insist."

They managed a smile at each other. Randy seemed to enjoy the humor in it more than Kurt, who was obviously quite concerned. After a half hour, Kurt helped him out and insisted he lay right down on his mattress. Kurt covered him with the blanket. Randy was immediately sound-asleep. Kurt stayed up a while longer readying the fire for the night. Since the disaster, there were some larger logs available that burned a long time.

Kurt slipped into Randy's sweatshirt for protection against the cool night air. He doubled the blanket over Randy and then just sat thinking for a long time. He thought about how badly he had misjudged Randy, back before he really knew him. He wondered why – how – Springfield had developed this caste system making it the old-time residents, versus the newcomers. He wondered how someone as smart as he was, could have just gone along with something like that without ever questioning it. He felt ashamed and embarrassed and downright stupid.

Kurt wondered if all of those things about Springfield would ever change. He wondered about where his own loyalties lay. Were they with his old friends who all of sudden seemed so shallow and ignorant, or with his new friend? Could it ever be with both?

Kurt felt terrible that he had beaten up this boy he had now come to like so well. He remembered that while he was actually landing the blows, it had seemed as if Randy really weren't a person at all. He was just an object from the wrong side of the tracks: not a living, breathing, hurting, human being. Kurt wondered how he had come to think that way. He had always thought of Springfield as such a nice, friendly town, filled with such nice, friendly people.

How could he keep his own son or sons from falling into that same trap? He would! Of that, he was certain. Randy groaned and Kurt jumped. It was a bewildering conversation

he had just had with himself. He would try to have it again later, but that time with Randy. He respected Randy. Perhaps he also pitied him a bit – no father, being so poor, so few friends, having lost his little brother who seemed to have been his best friend. He knew Randy wouldn't stand for pity. But just for that moment, Kurt felt pity.

## **CHAPTER NINE**

When Kurt's eyes finally opened the next morning, he saw Randy, sitting there looking at him, cross-legged, wrapped up in his blanket, seeming the part of a stoic Indian in an old black and white western movie.

"About time, I'd say," Randy smiled.

"What time is it?" Kurt asked.

"A little after eight. It's no big deal. I was just kidding you. I slept in myself."

"Til what, five-o-five?" Kurt kidded.

He sat up and stretched. He saw that Randy had somehow already managed to catch two good sized fish and had them cooking over the fire. He started to yell at him for not staying quiet, but Randy interrupted before he could open his mouth.

"I did it all stiff as a statue, just like I promised. Scout's honor."

"You want to eat first or get into the water?" Kurt asked.

"I vote for the H2O. Then we can dry off while we eat. There's a lot of work to get done today."

They enjoyed the water for about fifteen minutes. Kurt swam several laps back and forth between the inflow and the outflow. Randy mostly just bobbed close to the ledge.

"It still feel good on your chest and all today?" Kurt asked.

"It sure does. Wish I could just stay in here all day."

Kurt wanted to suggest that he do just that, but knew Randy would never buy it, so he remained quiet. Breakfast didn't take long. Randy pulled on his jeans and then stood up

ready for the re-taping of his chest.

"Let's get it over with, Bro," he said bravely.

It didn't take long since that time Kurt knew what he was doing. He synched him up tight and then used some of the remaining new tape to secure it all in place. He hoped the old tape would hold – it appeared to have lots of skin stuck to it.

"There you are Cappy. Good as new."

It hadn't hurt as much as Randy had remembered. Perhaps he was just getting used to the pain. Perhaps he was just getting numb. In either case, it was good news he thought. Kurt helped him into his sweatshirt. That endeavor had not become any easier.

They got their things together and made their way up the ladder. Kurt followed close behind Randy instead on going up the rope as had become his routine.

I guess I should call him my overprotective Mommy instead of Brother, Randy thought, keeping it to himself.

"By the way, Bro, how's your leg doing this morning. I was so into my own problems down there, I forgot about it I'm afraid. Sorry."

"It feels better every day. I think you worked some magic on it the other night."

They reached the third level and Randy stopped. He would begin the dismantling job there. Kurt climbed on up to the top level and began banging away on the rock. By eleven Randy had things ready for Kurt's help and by noon they had most of the timbers hoisted up to the top and temporarily stowed there. They had worked hard and were tired and hungry. Randy thought it looked like a long hard trip down to the ground, but he took a deep breath – well, as deep as he was able to take – and began the trip.

Kurt was down well ahead of him and had already caught one fish.

"Would you prefer fish or fish this noon, Sir?" he asked with a grin as Randy arrived.

"I'd prefer a slice of ham and some of Mom's potato salad and a tall glass of lemonade, but I'll settle for fish, I guess. No, make that the fish, instead."

The boys continued to make the best of a trying and

tiring situation. Before long two more fish joined the first one and lunch was soon ready. When they finished, they lay back and looked up at their work.

"Can you believe that we really built all that?" Kurt said, a sound of real pride in his voice.

"Yeah, not bad for a geeky bridge builder and a hobbled quarterback," Randy agreed.

"I know you're just kidding when you use that G-word, Cappy, but it sort of hurts my feelings or embarrasses me – or something."

"Hey, I'm sorry. I didn't mean anything like that by it. I guess by trying to take some of the sting out of it for me I was unintentionally adding some sting to it for you."

"I know. Let's just bury that word down here in the bottomless pit, okay?"

"Sounds great to me. No funeral, I presume," Randy said.

They managed a brief, mutual smile. An outside observer would have seen two young men sitting there, replacing the two boys who had appeared there so abruptly less than a week before. He would have probably missed the most important changes, however – the new bond between the two, the deeper understanding that was developing, and the mutual appreciation and respect growing between them. None of that was lost on the young men, however. They thought about it much of their waking hours and to some extent even dreamed about it at night.

Up the ladder they went again and spent another full afternoon wrestling the big logs into position and forcing them into place. The last few sections were so short that no additional superstructure was needed – a single log filled the bill. It began to look more like a giant ladder talking shape up there.

By twilight, they were well within thirty feet of the top. Another fifteen feet or so and they could use the ladder for their final escape. That thought cheered them up as they made the decent to the floor for another night.

They built a bigger fire. It seemed colder for some reason to Randy. He sat close and reached out as if to mainline the heat into his body directly through the palms of

his hands. The boys caught, and ate, four fish. It had been a hunger making day.

"I wonder how our folks are taking all of this?" Randy asked.

"Gee, you know we've been so busy here, I haven't really given it much thought since that first night. I'm sure they must be frantic. I miss them you know. That surprises me some."

"Mom probably thinks I was swept away in the flood. Poor Mom. I'd never have intentionally caused her such grief a second time."

"I tell you, it's not your fault. When will you get that through your thick skull? Of course, you'd never have done it to her. She knows that. If anybody should have the guilts it's..."

"Stop that kind of talk, yourself, Bro," Randy interrupted. "The thing is, here we are and in another two days we should be free of this place, and then they'll all know we're safe and fine. All we can do now is just keep plugging away. That's all we can do, so shut up on the guilt trip stuff. Okay!"

Kurt shrugged and made with a deliberate nod.

"Yeah, I know you're right."

With that he quickly looked away.

"New topic, then," Randy said, trying to brighten up what was left of the evening. "Let's design our ideal ladies. One we'd each want to marry."

Kurt seemed eager to pursue a new topic.

"I always used to think she'd have to be a blazing beauty," h said, starting the conversation. "Now, I'm not sure. I suppose you could learn to enjoy kissing someone who was less than that if you really loved her."

"Looks wouldn't be on the top half of my list, I don't think." Randy said. "I mean it would be great if the girl I fell in love with happened to be beautiful, but I don't think that would be anywhere near the top for me. Anyway, I know I'm pretty plain looking so I'd probably not have much of a chance at a beautiful woman."

"Joanne seems attracted to you and she has to be one of the prettiest girls in Springfield," Kurt said.

"She is gorgeous, but honestly, I went to meet her the other night mainly because she just always treats me so nice. She speaks to me at school and, let's face it, hardly anyone else does that. She waves across the street when she sees me down town. Sometimes she sits at the same table I do for lunch. We have talked sometimes there. She is just so nice. I didn't expect I'd ever get to kiss her that night. I really didn't."

"But you hoped you would, now, be honest, you hoped, didn't you," Kurt teased.

"Well of course, I hoped, I just didn't plan on it. I didn't get my hopes up you might say. And the kiss was great, I don't mean it wasn't, but the talking earlier in the evening was the most important part. I don't know. Talking and kissing are so different. It's like comparing apples and oranges as they say."

"Don't talk about real food. Please!" Kurt teased some more.

"You are sure being understanding about this thing with Joanne and me. I mean a week ago you tried to kill me over it and now ..."

"Captain, the guy I tried to kill, as you put it, wasn't you. He was some unknown blur from across the tracks, who didn't count for anything in my World. I really believed that crap! I can't believe it, but I did."

"I think we got off the topic of the evening," Randy said, not knowing how to respond to what Kurt was trying to say.

"No, I want you to talk to me about this, Randy. Somehow, you are able to just like everybody. I need to know how you got that way. What did your folks do differently from what mine did? I want my sons to grow up and be like you. I really need to know. Don't shut it off."

Randy was flabbergasted. He didn't have a clue as to what to say. He just watched the shadows cast by the leaping flames flickering about Kurt's face. They sat and looked at one another for several minutes. Finally, Randy felt he needed to say something.

"I'm not sure how to answer you. I'm more flattered by what you have said than I can ever tell you, but I really don't know you or your folks well enough to make any comparisons with my situation."

"Well just tell me about how your folks raised you then."

Randy nodded. He felt comfortable doing that.

"Let me tell you about my Mom, first. She was the daughter of a schoolteacher and grew up in a small town. She wanted to become a teacher in the worst way. When she was ten her parents died in a fire. An aunt raised her. Not a very nice aunt, the way I piece things together. Mom met Dad when she was seventeen and he was twenty. They got married right away – well almost right away. I was born six months after their wedding.

"Mom was determined, I think, to help me be a good person so people would think twice about putting me down just because I was... well, conceived out of wedlock were her words. Most people had other words for it. Mom always loved everybody and whenever someone needed help she was always right there to offer it. She always loved to be with me and do things with me and for me. I just always knew I was never, ever, a burden on her and that no child had ever been more welcomed into a family than I had been. I never doubted it for a minute, Kurt.

"My life has been wonderful. We've always been poor. Dad wasn't much of a salesman, I guess. But being poor never meant anything bad or degrading to me. I could still be a nice guy. I could still learn at school. I could still be a great son. Poor had nothing to do with any of those really important things. She always had time for me – well, not so much now, but when she has time, it's still always available to me if I want it or need it.

Kurt sat silently, looking ever so sober – sad even. He thought for a long, long time. When he finally spoke, it was only partly in jest.

"Do you suppose your Mom would marry me?"

Randy chuckled and held his ribs. Kurt chuckled and frowned at his friend's pain. They smiled across the fire at each other.

"I doubt if she's ready to remarry, but give it a try if you want to, Dad."

"I've been so busy judging a girl's looks and kissing skills, that I haven't spent much time getting to know about the important stuff, I guess," Kurt said.

"Well, let's not knock the kissing part," Randy said. "I imagine it took a lot of kissing to get the two of us into the World."

"I don't want to burst your bubble, Cappy, but it ain't kissin' that makes a kid."

Randy looked away and nodded, embarrassed that he was embarrassed.

"Do you want to marry someone like your own Mom?" Kurt asked.

"In some ways, I guess. I never thought about it in those words before. It sounds kind of sick when you ask the question right out like that."

"If you said yes to the question, do you want to marry your Mom, then that would be sick. But to marry someone like your Mom, I don't think that's sick at all. I think that's quite a complement for her. I can hardly wait to meet her and really get to know her."

Randy gulped. He hadn't been sure that once that whole ordeal was over, Kurt would ever really want to be seen with him.

"If you really mean that, we have some more serious talking to do about what happens after we leave here, Kurt. From what you just said it sounds like you think we can somehow go on being friends. I'm happy to hear that. I really am, but do you know how hard that is going to be?"

"I probably don't know, really," Kurt said. "But I guess I'll soon find out, won't I."

Randy slipped into silence. As much as he really liked Kurt, or perhaps because he really liked Kurt, he wasn't sure a continuing friendship was going to be a good plan.

"Are you as tired as I am, Cappy? I think it's time for beddy-bye."

"Yeah, I'm ready." Randy paused and then continued. "This has been quite a talk, you know."

"I think we talk pretty good for a couple of strangers, don't you?" Kurt said, breaking a grin.

They may not have fully realized it then, but the two of them still did have a great deal to learn about one another. Randy wondered if they would like what they would find.

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## CHAPTER TEN

The next morning Randy was awakened by the sounds of rock scraping against rock and the plopping of water like when cannon balling off the high dive at the lake. His ribs hurt something awful but he managed to sit up supporting himself with his elbows behind him. Much to his surprise, Kurt was already awake and engaged in a strange activity. He was pushing large rocks across the floor to the stream and dropping them in, one on top of another.

"Trying to fill up the creek, Bro? I doubt if it will work," Randy said, making light of his own confusion.

"No, nothing that ambitious," Kurt replied as he shoved another one over the ledge and leaned down to wash the dirt from his hands. "I got this idea that since you like to be in the water, but you can't because it's so deep you'd get your tape all wet, that I'd build you a platform to stand on. That's what the rocks are all about. Now all I have to do is get in and stack them up."

"Hey, pretty nice. I don't know what to say."

"Fine, then, you just keep quiet and get us a couple of fish for breakfast. I'll get into the water and arrange these rocks."

He was soon into the water. Each boy went about his own activity for the next twenty minutes. By then, Randy had four fish cleaned and cooking and Kurt was standing in the water huffing and puffing from all his diving and lifting. He stood up on top of the new platform. The water was just up to his waist.

"Belly button high," Kurt announced holding his arms

out to his sides. "Just right! Come on in and try it out."

Kurt gently helped Randy slip off the ledge into the water. It was, indeed, just the right height

"This is super!" Randy said making figure eights with his hands in the water to each side.

He leaned over a bit and splashed his face and then washed off his arms.

"I feel like a real human being, again. This is just great. I don't know how to thank you. I hadn't even thought about something like this."

"How about that," Kurt said. "Brother K. thinking of how to build something before it occurred to the Captain of Bridgework."

They continued to enjoy the water for another five minutes and then got out and had breakfast.

"How is your shoulder after all that hammering?" Randy asked, noticing some hesitation as he reached for his second piece of fish.

"It's always pretty stiff in the morning, but it limbers up. After all this exercise, I should be able to pass eighty yards next season. You know Cap, I was thinking. Why don't you come out for football? You're strong and built like a wide receiver. I bet you'd enjoy it!"

"After all this time together, and you still really think I'd enjoy beating my head against a bunch of onrushing giants and getting bashed in my midsection every time I went up to catch a pass? You still have a bit more to learn, Bro. Quite a bit more to learn."

"Yeah, I guess I do know that. I was just thinking how great it would be to have you at practice and all. We'll find some other ways to be together."

Above and beyond all of Kurt's good intentions, Randy wondered if they really would find ways to be together.

They made the climb to the top. Within the first hour the sky outside darkened. They heard thunder and saw lightning flashes in the sky outside. The rain began pouring in through the hole in the ceiling. They tried to go on working but their footing was slippery and they were immediately soaking wet.

"I think we better quit before one of us falls," Randy

suggested at last.

"Yeah, I agree."

With extra care, they made their way back down to the floor. They were both disappointed and made no effort to hide it.

"I think we better move our gear over under the ledge on the west wall," Randy suggested.

"Which way's west?" Kurt asked.

"Over here, jerk!"

They soon had a new campsite set up under the shelter of the overhang. The rain didn't bother them there and it was on slightly higher ground in case the stream rose again. Kurt moved and re-stacked the larger pieces of wood they had saved for fires. Randy built a new fire. They hung their soaking wet clothes off the ledge so the heat from the fire would dry them. The cold rain made the air chilly. As the fire grew, it felt good. Its heat warmed and reflected off the wall behind them. Very soon their new place seemed quite cozy.

"We should have been up here all along," Kurt said. "It's high and dry and warm and seems safe, somehow."

"I guess we were too focused on our escape plan and not on the comforts of the here and now."

The rain continued. The water in the steam began to rise. The thunder banged and seemed to roll on forever. Soon it was so dark outside that their only light was from the fire and occasional lightning bolt.

"I hate thunder," Kurt said. "I've always been scared of it. As a little kid, I'd go hide under my bed during storms."

"You scared right now?" Randy asked clearly concerned.

"Oh, not really scared, not way down here. It's just like all those old feelings come back at times like this. It just makes me kind of edgy, I guess."

"Fears are hard to get over. I'm afraid of heights, myself," Randy admitted.

"Heights? Then how do you manage to climb way up there every day and work?" Kurt asked with both disbelief and concern in his voice.

"It has to be done. There is no choice, so I just do it."

"But how? I mean if you're really scared, how do you

just do it and how come I didn't feel it or something? How did you keep it hidden?"

"My, my! So many questions from my little Bro this morning."

"I really didn't mean to pry. But what you said amazed me. I never would have guessed."

Randy tried to explain.

"When you've always been the outsider, like I have, I guess you learn to keep all of your feelings to yourself until you figure out which ones will be okay to show. I suppose I've become an expert at that kind of thing."

"Yeah. A feeling is one thing, but covering up a fear, that's another thing," Kurt said continuing to be amazed.

"I'm scared about most everything, Bro. I guess I'm just so used to being scared, that I developed a system or something – like a multipurpose mask."

"What do you mean you're scared about everything? You never seem scared about anything!"

"Like I said, you learn how to put up a front, I guess. It's scary to have to move into a new town every few years and try to learn how to get along with a bunch of new kids. The schoolwork is scary, too, because they never seem to teach exactly the same things in any two schools and you never know if you'll know enough to keep up. It's scary to think about what would happen to me if anything ever happened to Mom – there being just the two of us. Not so much now, but it sure used to be."

"I see what you mean, I guess. Well, not really, but I think I get the idea. That must have been a rough way to live."

"Don't you ever get scared before a game or before a test or before a date?" Randy asked.

"Before a game? Not really scared. Nervous, I guess, but not really scared. And what do you mean before a date? There's nothing scary about a date."

"That first time I kissed Amy," Randy began, "Well, just when I first realized she wanted it to happen, too, I got so scared I thought I would wet my pants. I mean I really wanted to kiss her, but I was really scared about it. Haven't you ever been that way around girls?"

"I guess not." Kurt thought for a moment. "No, girls

never scared me at all. They tick me off sometimes when they won't put out, but they don't scare me."

Randy chose to bypass the full explanation of, put out, for the time being.

"Boy, that must be great," Randy said shaking his head.

"Were you scared when you kissed Joanne?" Kurt asked.

"I was so astonished that she was actually going to kiss me that I guess I didn't have time to be scared. Like I said, I wasn't even dreaming that could happen."

They sat in silence, watching the flashing of lightening through the hole in the roof above. Kurt moved uneasily when the thunder sounded. He smiled sheepishly each time he jumped.

"Were you scared when you realized we were trapped in here?" Randy asked.

"I was scared when it finally hit me what had happened. Yeah, I was really scared. I couldn't figure out why you weren't."

"Who wasn't scared? I was terrified! I tend to be claustrophobic so I never liked caves either!"

Randy looked up at Kurt. Kurt smiled and then chuckled. Randy did, too. Soon they were both laughing out loud. The absurdity of Randy, the freely acknowledged leader of their team, being afraid of both heights and caves seemed hilarious – sad, but hilarious.

"I'll deny this whole conversation if you ever tell anybody about it, you know," Kurt said only partly kidding.

Randy looked over at him quite seriously.

"Brothers don't tell, Kurt. Never any need to worry about that from me."

Kurt looked back and nodded, knowingly.

"I've never known anybody like you, Randy."

"Is that good or bad?" Randy said allowing just the crack of a smile, but offering it as a serious question.

"Oh, I meant it good," Kurt said. "Most of my friends would take great pleasure in spreading this stuff about me all over if they found out about it. I'd do it to them, too. It's just the way we are."

"I'm sorry it's that way among you guys. Doesn't sound

real friendly to me, but then I'm new at this friend thing," Randy said, more than implying he truly didn't understand. "I'd just never tell anything that would embarrass or humiliate someone else. That just wouldn't seem right to me. How could that possibly make the world a better place to live in?"

"That's what I meant when I said I've never known anybody like you before."

"I guess I don't understand what friends are for, then," Randy said.

"Just to hang with, I guess, and to tell lies to about what you do on your dates, and stuff like that."

"Oh! I guess I haven't missed out on as much as I thought," Randy said with just the slightest hint of a grin.

Kurt tried an explanation one more time.

"It really is great to always know there are guys around to be with whenever I want to hang out. That's the best part of my friends, I guess," Kurt said. "They're just always there for me."

"So, you never have to be lonely, you mean."

"Yeah. That's it exactly. So, you never have to be lonely. That's it exactly!"

"That part must be really great. I suppose I can see why you put up with all the other stuff, then."

"You've really never had a close friend before, have you, Randy?"

"Well, Amy was a close friend for as long as it lasted. Those were some of the best months of my life, really. Other than that, no, not since my brother died. He was always like my very best friend."

"I'll bet you really miss him then, don't you?" Kurt said.

"I sure do. Sometimes at my campsite by the creek, I pretend he is still there and I talk to him about things I need to figure out. Sometimes I just remember things with him. I suppose that seems sick, doesn't it?"

"No. I think I can understand how it must be to be so alone. I don't see how you stood it. I just have to have people around me all the time."

"I've noticed that about you. I always wondered how one guy could be so popular. I'm still not sure, I guess. Everywhere you go, there are always kids hanging all over

you."

"It's just that Watson thing," Kurt tried to explain.

"The Watson thing?" Randy repeated as a question.

"Yeah, in Springfield I guess the Watsons have just always run things and as each new generation of Watsons comes along, everybody just makes way for them so they can do the same thing all over again. It's not really anything about me, you see. I'm just popular because I'm the current Watson kid. It used to be Billy. Before him, it was my Dad. It's just my turn."

"Springfield is hard to figure out. I guess I'll never really understand," Randy said with a sigh.

"Don't give up trying to figure us out. We're really not such bad people. Probably our worst trait has been that we don't treat outsiders very well, but I think we can change that, after all, I'm the next generation of Watsons. I can make things like that happen in Springfield."

"No offense, Bro, but it's been that way an awfully long time. You may be the Watson, but you are just one person."

"Well, I'm one person, and you're one person, and Joanne is one person. See, that's three of us already."

"Sure, and that only leaves two thousand six hundred and forty-seven to go."

"Two thousand six hundred and forty-six – I forgot your Mom," Kurt added smiling.

The boys sat quietly. Kurt put another log on the fire. The storm continued to rage up above keeping it cold and damp and dark, and yet, sitting close together there, the boys both felt warm and comfortable and safe. The future suddenly seemed to hold wonderful new possibilities for both Kurt and Randy.

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## CHAPTER ELEVEN

Suddenly, out of the darkness, came a noise. It was not the noise of the swirling stream. It was not the noise of the storm up above. It was a new noise. It was as if alive, moving here and there!

"Hear that?" Kurt whispered fully unnecessarily.

"Yeah. What do you suppose?" Randy whispered back.

"I don't know it's too dark to see."

If there had only been a little more light, it might not have seemed so eerie – so scary. They strained their eyes into the darkness – as if that were really possible.

"What do you suppose we should do?" Kurt asked, picking up a club-sized stick.

"Just sit quiet. Maybe it's a bat or a bird. If we don't scare it off, it'll probably show itself." Randy whispered.

"I think I'd just as soon scare it off, if you don't mind," Kurt came back quietly.

"Shhhh," Randy said.

Then, out of the shadows and into the distant rim of the circle of light from their fire, they saw it. At first only a little head about six inches off the floor. It stopped to look around, its eyes catching the light from the fire and shooting it back at the boys. Then a long slender, water soaked, furry body emerged from the shadows.

"It's only an otter," Randy whispered with some relief. "The creek is full of them. They are always coming around my camp to watch me. He must have been washed in under the wall. I'll bet he's surprised.

Kurt was relieved as well. He was far more uneasy around wild creatures than Randy. He hadn't had much experience with them, something Randy had already privately decided he needed to change about his new friend. Soon the otter inched its way toward the boys, circling the fire as if both curious and afraid.

"Just sit real still and he'll probably come up and sit in your lap," Randy said, having to fight back his impish urge to laugh.

"No way my friend!" and Kurt stood up and stepped back readying his club. The otter scampered away for the moment. Randy broke into laughter.

"If you weren't an invalid," Kurt said, "I'd rap you alongside the head with this stick."

Then he, too, began to chuckle.

"Well, now what shall we do to kill time?" Randy asked. "As long the rain continues we sure can't go back up to work. The stream's too high to swim in. I guess we could take a nap."

"Not with that beast lose in here," Kurt said. "I may never sleep again!"

"Just stay in close to the fire. He's afraid of fire. You'll be fine. He's basically harmless to humans. He might bite if he thought he was cornered but mostly otters are just curious and hungry. They eat a lot."

"I'd rather have him cooking over the fire, than out there being curious, I think," Kurt said.

"That's an idea," Randy said. "Real food for a change. But I couldn't bring myself to kill an otter. They're sort of like my friends."

"Well lucky for us, I don't consider them my friends. I'll happily bash his little head in for some variety in our diet."

Kurt picked up a sizable stone and headed out into the darkness. Randy heard several attempts at bashing the stone against the floor and just smiled. He knew Kurt would never be able to harm so much as a hair on its frisky little body. Randy curled up, ready to try for a nap. As Kurt was ranting and raving at the evasive little animal out in the darkness, the otter crept out of the shadows and approached Randy. Soon it was nuzzling him all over with its inquisitive little nose.

Randy just lay there enjoying the encounter. He heard Kurt approaching so he closed his eyes and pretended to be asleep.

"What the?" he heard Kurt say.

Randy couldn't control himself any longer and broke into laughter again. The otter scampered a safe distance away and turned to watch. Randy held out his hand and the animal cautiously approached again.

"How could you ever harm such a cute little creature like, Otto?" Randy asked.

Kurt stood there, hands on hips, staring down at him – them.

"Otto, is it? Now you've gone and named the rodent, Otto?"

"Yeah, Otto the otter. It just seemed to go together," Randy said, mocking him with a put-on grin.

"Well, it would be hard to eat someone you knew on a first name basis, I guess," Kurt said, sitting down close to the fire to warm up or to remain safe from Otto, whichever came first.

Randy began talking to Otto.

"This is your Uncle Kurt, Otto. Sometimes he goes off the deep end, but once you get to know him, you'll like him as much as I do. Why not just go over and make friends? Shake paws or something."

Again, Randy's laughter spooked the otter into seeking safety in the shadows. Laughing hurt his ribs so much, but he decided even that was better than not laughing at all. Otto sat and watched them.

"He really is sort of cute in a rodent-like way, I guess," Kurt finally admitted. "I guess you can keep him young man, but he is your responsibility," he added, shaking a finger in a motherly fashion.

"Haven't you ever had a pet, Kurt?"

"No, Mom's allergic to animal hair. I had a gold fish when I was real little but he didn't turn out to be all that great of a companion. I used to want a dog that looked like Rin Tin Tin. How about you, Cappy? You've probably had dozens of pets, huh?"

"Sort of. I could only have the kind that could take care

of feeding themselves because we couldn't afford to buy food for them. I inherited a cat one place we lived. She was a good mouser and took care of herself. Sometimes I'd sneak her some of my milk from breakfast. I think Mom knew I was doing it but she never said anything."

"What else?"

"I think of the otters as my pets, now. There is a mother possum that comes around a lot. She'll eat anything I leave out. I guess I just mostly have always enjoyed the wild creatures. In Farnham, I had some pigeons I thought of as pets. They got real tame around me. I named one, Major. When it laid an egg, I changed that to Majorette. I guess my pets were mostly female. I think they make the best pets. I guess I've got to have the girl pets and you've got to pet the girls."

Randy laughed out loud at what he figured had been a very humorous phrase.

Kurt nodded his acknowledgment and went on.

"Seems that way. I wouldn't give up the girls, but I'll bet pets are nice too."

"Probably another case of apples and oranges," Randy said with a grin.

"You know, something?" Kurt asked.

"What?"

"It just occurred to me. All the times I've seen you around school and town, I've never seen you smile til down here. You have a great smile, you know."

"Thanks. No, I guess I didn't know that. I try not to think about my looks. There really hasn't been much to smile about here in Springfield."

"I suppose not." Kurt replied. "But that was then. From now on we'll have lots to smile about."

"I hope so," Randy said, some reservation still in his voice; lots of disbelief in his heart.

"You don't sound convinced, Cappy."

"You just can't seem to get it through your head. Just because you and I survived this hell hole together for a week or whatever it'll be and have become close with each other through it all, doesn't mean anybody else in town has any reason to begin liking me, or even including me. Don't you

see, that? This whole thing is just between you and me."

"If you're my friend they'll be your friends. It's just that easy," Kurt said. "Remember, I'm the Watson kid."

"You still don't seem to understand. How can I put this? I really value what you and I have developed between us these last days. It is one of the best things that's ever happened to me in my whole life. But tell me, how did you come to start liking me?"

"Well, I didn't at first. I guess that's no secret."

"None at all," Randy said clutching his ribs and grinning.

"I had no choice in here but to get to know you. I found out you were an all right guy. No, even more than that, I found out you are the best."

"See, that's how it has to be when you get to be real friends like us. You have to learn about each other from personal experience and grow to appreciate each other so you want to be with each other. That won't happen between me and the other guys just because you let me tag along with you. Don't you see that? I don't want shirt tail friends. I want my own real friends."

"I guess I see what you're saying, but when they get to know you like I have, they'll like you, too."

"How are they going to get to know me like you have? I don't plan to allow myself to get beat to a pulp, nearly drowned and cooped up in a cavern, every time I want to make a new friend."

There was no smile that time. Not even the slightest hint of a grin. Randy was totally serious. \

Kurt fell silent. He looked at Randy for a long moment and then moved his gaze to the fire. Once that he had quieted down, Otto inched closer to Kurt. The sound of the storm was dying out and there had been no lightning for some time. They would soon be able to get back to work. Kurt's mind was filled with many new questions and very few answers. This friendship thing was going to be more difficult than he had thought. One thing was sure. Kurt was not about to let anything – old or new – come between him and Randy.

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## CHAPTER TWELVE

It was noon by the time the storm had stopped. The boys had lunch and were up on the beams again by 12:15. Kurt was chiseling and Randy was lashing a support beam.

"Kurt, stop a minute," Randy yelled waving his hands to get his attention.

"What's up?"

"Listen! Do you hear something outside?"

It was a dog barking. The sound seemed to be getting closer.

"Whistle for the dog. See if you can get it to come over to the hole."

Kurt whistled till his pucker gave out. He was shaking his head in defeat when up above him, the dog looked over the edge.

"Good boy. Good boy!" Randy called.

"So now what do we do?" asked Kurt. "That ain't Lassie or Rin Tin Tin. He's not going to go bring his master back to us."

"Just talk to him and be friendly and maybe he'll hang around and attract attention."

The boys began a monologue of all the dumb things that anyone in the entire history of mankind had ever said to a dog; they even invented a few new ones.

"That's a beautiful collar you're wearing today," Kurt said at one point.

"I can hardly smell your doggy breath. You must have chewed your milk bone like a good dog this morning," added Randy.

It went on and on.

Soon the dog turned and left. Randy tried whistling but being down so much further than Kurt, he felt sure it couldn't be heard outside.

"He left. Now what?" Kurt asked.

"Well, maybe he will actually bring someone back with him."

It had been a half-hearted, maybe.

"Yeah, and pigs can fly."

The boys were disappointed. More disappointed than either could believe. If it had only been a kid.

"We may still rot down here, you know!" Kurt said, as he went back to hammering on the stone, more slowly and less deliberately than before.

"I guess we shouldn't get so excited about a dumb dog, huh?" Randy added, mostly to himself, since Kurt couldn't hear over the noise he was making.

The dog hadn't returned by dusk, so the boys climbed down. They felt more tired than usual. The stream was back to normal size – still pretty muddy, but they didn't care. They needed a swim and they took it. As Randy stood in the water on his perch, as he had started calling it, he fished for their supper. Otto joined them and put on quite a show – in and out of the water, nuzzling each of the boys from time to time, and generally showing off his superior aquatic and fishing skills. By the time the swim was over, the boys were feeling better. One just had to chuckle at Otto. In the water, he was a certified clown. It began to really be nice having him around. He fished and ate his fill several times a day.

Kurt built up the fire and Randy cleaned the fish. It had warmed up a bit, but the temperature never really varied much that far underground. Randy figured the sun warmed water in the stream actually helped heat up the cave, and keep it half-way pleasant.

They ate. Otto was no longer content to just sit and watch from a distance. He was constantly under foot and in and out of their laps, through their crossed legs and up their shirts. He seemed especially fond of Kurt. That pleased Randy. Kurt wasn't so sure how he felt about it.

"Otto likes you."

"I guess. Can't see why. I haven't been very friendly toward him."

"I think it may be because your aroma is a lot like his. He thinks you're just a bigger version of him."

It was worth a chuckle. Under other circumstances it would have been worth an all-out, rolling over and over, pounding on each other, tussle.

"Do you think the dog will come back?" Kurt asked at last.

"I don't know. Not much he can do by himself anyway, I guess. Maybe it was just a stray so nobody would pay any attention to him anyway."

"Now don't you go getting down in the dumps, Cap. Otto here and I count on you to keep our spirits up."

Randy shrugged. Kurt changed the subject.

"I wonder why the kids haven't been by, yet. I know all the parents threaten them about coming here because it's so dangerous, but that never really stopped anybody before. Besides the fence up there is always kept in good shape."

"If it's in good shape, I wonder how the dog got so close. Something must have happened to it during the storm," Randy said, thinking out loud.

"That's all we need now!" Kurt said.

"What's all we need now?"

"To have some kid fall in and go splat all over the floor."

"Kurt! Sometimes you have such gross thoughts?"

"Well, it could happen, you know."

"We'll just keep a closer watch out up there, okay, then we can tell them to stand back when – if –they ever arrive."

There was a long silence. Kurt played with Otto. He tried to teach him to fetch a stick he'd throw a few yards away. Randy watched. It gave him an idea.

"Maybe we should carve a message on a stick and you could throw it out through the hole," Randy said, with some newly found enthusiasm in his voice. "Then whoever comes along will know where to look for us."\\

"Not bad, Cappy. From up above I can easily throw one that far. Let's do it!"

"What shall we say on it?" Randy asked.

"How about, 'S O S – trapped in bottomless pit'," Kurt

suggested.

"Find us a nice straight stick two or three feet long. I'll get started carving on it right now," Randy said. "Make sure it's one you feel comfortable throwing – right weight, length and all."

"I'm not sure what to look for. Stick throwing is not one of my best sports. Maybe longer and straight like a javelin would really be better."

"Whatever you'd be most comfortable with," Randy agreed.

Kurt soon had selected a six-foot branch. It was the straightest one he could find there in the dark. Randy trimmed it clean of sprigs and began carving. They sat and talked.

"You want kids after you get married?" Randy asked.

"Well, I sure don't want them before I'm married," Kurt said, thinking it was a clever thing to say. Then he remembered Randy's birth history and he felt bad.

"Hey, Randy, I didn't mean anything by that. I feel terrible I said it."

"No problem Bro. I understand, and you know for sure I don't want to help get a kid started before I'm married."

"I always thought two kids would be a nice family," Kurt said after a pause in the conversation. "A boy and a girl. No a girl first and then a boy."

"Why in that order?"

"When they're little, boys need someone to look after them more than girls do, I think," Kurt explained. "They tend to just do stuff without thinking it through. Having a big sister would help take care of that."

"So, you think us males are helpless, huh?" Randy asked, intentionally provoking a discussion.

"Not later on, but yeah, sort of when we are little. Don't you think that's so?"

"I never thought about it before, I guess. I was just always the big brother so I had no choice but to do the helping when Ryan came along."

"How did you feel about getting a new little brother?"

"Mom says that I thought it was great. That's probably because Mom set me up that way. I was really too small to know about it when he was born, but later on I only remember

I thought it was great to have a little brother."

"Didn't you ever fight?"

"Oh, of course we did. Not over big stuff. Just stuff like whose turn it was to swing or to take out the garbage – stuff like that."

"Me and my older sister fight all the time. We may even hate each other," Kurt said.

"I doubt that. She's what, about five years older than you?"

"Yeah. It was a great day in my life when she left for college. I got her room."

"College. Boy how lucky she is to get to go to college," Randy said as he held up the stick to take a look at his handy work. "I'd give about anything to get to go to college. Where are you planning to go?"

"I don't know. Probably the family school. Dad has a way of twisting arms when it comes to that."\\

"You'll study banking, then, is that you're plan?" Randy asked.

"I suppose so. I'm not sure it's my plan, but it seems to be the plan. I thought you wanted to be an engineer, Cappy. That takes college, doesn't it?

"Yeah. That's funny," Kurt said.

"What's funny about not getting to go to college?" Randy asked, stopping work and looking directly at Kurt waiting for an answer.

"Oh, not that. It's funny that I hate the idea of going to college and I'll have to, while you love the idea and can't. That's really not fair, you know!"

"When you're poor, you soon stop thinking in terms of what is and isn't fair," Randy said, getting back to work on the carving.

"How so?"

"Well, you see all the ads on TV for things you know you can never have and that doesn't seem fair. You want nice clothes or new sneakers and know you can't have them and that doesn't seem fair. College. Girls. Things like that. There's no reason to pout or get all mad about it because that doesn't change a thing. So you just push all that stuff into the back of your head and try to ignore it."

"I really never thought about that. I'm sorry, I guess. I don't know what to say."

"Hey, it's not your problem, Bro. You didn't make me poor. Just be thankful for what you have. I think that's great for you!"

"I guess I don't think about that much. At least I didn't used to."

"I didn't mean to lay a bummer on you, Bro. Let's change the subject. I'd rather talk about girls anyway."

"What kind of girls?" Kurt asked.

"I prefer the female variety! What do you mean, what kind?" Randy asked.

"I meant like girls for friends or girls for kissing?"\

"Why Brother K. You surprise me. I didn't think you believed in girls for friends."

"I didn't, two weeks ago, at this time. See what a bad influence you've been on me."

"It's more fun to think about girls for kissing. What are your requirements, Bro?"

"I don't know. I guess they have to be above average in the looks department and willing."

"How do you know they are going to be willing?"

"It's the way they look at you when you first come on to them. Some move a bit closer – those are the ones who are willing – and some move away – just slightly, you know."

"And they aren't going to go in for the kissing, right?" Randy added wanting to make sure he understood

"Right. Although, even those girls will usually let you kiss them good night. They just don't go in for non-stop kissing like out in the woods or someplace private."

"Non-stop kissing?" Randy said. "Tell me about that!"

"You know, like parking but without a car. You find a private place and just kiss away the evening."

"I can't imagine how wonderful that must be!" Randy said, putting down the carving and looking at Kurt in anticipation of more. "And so how is it, really, this non-stop kissing?"

"It's great. I don't know what else to tell you."

"How long does it last – a non-stop kiss?"

"Depends. Maybe only two or three minutes, maybe a

half hour."

"A half hour!"

Randy stood up and walked around a bit. He stretched and just shook his head.

"You are really something else, you know. What I wouldn't give for just one, five-minute kiss. I guess I have a lot to learn about girls, don't I?"

"I have an idea you'll do just fine when the opportunity presents itself," Kurt said.

"I figure maybe you can give me some pointers, just in case."

"If you'll help me understand about how a girl can just be a guy's friend. Deal?"

"Deal."

The boys looked at one another and smiled. It was more than just a glance. It was a special look between friends who were coming to understand each other – who were coming to change each other – who were each realizing for the first time what it really meant to be and have a very best friend.

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## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

The following morning Randy was cleaning up the carving on the javelin when Kurt awoke. He had the breakfast cooking and it smelled particularly inviting for some reason. Kurt sat up and stretched. He rubbed his broken leg as if it were troubling him.

"Got a problem down there?" Randy asked.

"It just always aches first thing in the morning. It'll be fine once I get up and around."

"Take a look at the javelin," Randy said, handing it to Kurt.

"Impressive! Nice work, Cappy!"

"There wasn't room for the word bottomless, so I just put, pit. I figured anyone finding it beside the opening up there would know which pit. Then I added our initials – KW & RR."

"Yeah. Great!"

Kurt made a few practice moves with the stick.

"Curved even just slightly like this is, it won't be real easy to aim. It'll probably take several tries."

"We seem to have whatever time it will take," Randy said with a smile.

Since their discussions the day before, Randy had begun taking notice each time he found himself smiling. To know he was smiling made him feel so good all over that he found himself smiling just because he was smiling.

"This may sound dumb to say, Bro, but these past two or three days, I've been as happy or maybe even happier than I can ever remember being."

"You're right. It sounds dumb. But I think I know what

you mean," Kurt said. "I've never known anybody in this sort of a way before. I don't know what the right words are, but I guess you know what I mean."

"Yeah, I sure do. I don't know the words either."

"Time for a swim?" Kurt asked really suggesting it.

"Absolutely. Last one in is a – well, probably a Randy at the rate I move."

"Still pretty sore, too, Huh?" Kurt said as they shed some clothes to keep them dry.

Kurt helped Randy pull off his sweatshirt even though technically it wasn't supposed to get wet when he stood on the platform.

"Yeah, pretty sore, but I'll survive."

The water felt great. It had cleared up again and returned to its normal depth. Quite a few more sticks and a sizable log had been washed in during the storm. They would retrieve them later and use them for firewood. Otto was the only one who really felt like swimming. Kurt mostly just treaded water close to where Randy stood and they talked.

"There's something I have been wanting to ask you, Kurt."

"Kurt! My this sounds official . . . Randy."

"I guess it is."

"Then I guess I probably know what you're going to ask," Kurt said.

"Oh, really?"

"Yeah. You're going to ask me how I could have just stood there and beat you to a pulp last week."

"Well, yes. I was going to phrase it a bit more diplomatically, though."

"I've been thinking a lot about that. You know that I fight some, but I don't just go around beating on guys for pleasure."

"I know that. I guess that's part of the question. Why beat on me that day? Most guys would have yelled and threatened but not done what you did."

"You just can't understand how much we have been taught to dislike you kids who come from down over the tracks. We don't even think about you like you were human beings, you know. I guess when I found out you were beating

my time with Joanne, I felt my whole image in this town was going down the toilet. I mean, my girl preferred to be with a wrong-sider over me. That was the worst put down I could imagine. It had to be taken care of before it got spread all over town. It may have seemed to be just a little thing to you, but it was my whole reputation at stake – my whole life. I didn't even have to think what to do. I just knew I had to beat you senseless so you'd learn your lesson and so my friends would respect me for having done it."

Both boys remained quiet, not looking at each another. Otto swam between them and Kurt reached out and picked him up. The silence continued for some time, then Kurt spoke again.

"It seemed so right at the time. There didn't even seem to be any other possibilities. No doubt at all. I hated you so much that morning. I even wondered once, while I was pounding you to the ground, if I was going to kill you. I just can't ..."

His words trailed off into nothing and he turned his body away. His lips and chin did that thing they do before you cry. Randy didn't know what to say so he remained silent. He couldn't say something dumb like, 'hey, that's okay,' because it wasn't. Hating and violence were two things Randy couldn't tolerate under any circumstances. And face it, Kurt had broken his ribs, knocked him unconscious and left him there to die in the flood. It just wasn't okay, anyway you looked at it.

Kurt turned around and looked Randy straight in the eyes.

"I don't know what else to say. You already know how terrible I feel about it and more words can't change anything. I don't even ask you to forgive me, but then I know you've already done that. That's just the kind of kid you are. You just can't know how terrible and confusing and humiliating all of this is to me."

"No. I suppose I can't, really," Randy answered thoughtfully. "I appreciate that you explained things though. And of course, I forgive you. I just wish I could honestly tell you that I understand you."

"Hey, I don't even understand me. How could anyone else? When I figure it out, you'll be the first to know."

They ended their swim, ate their fish and dressed. Then back up the long climb toward the top. Kurt carried the javelin through a belt loop. When he reached the top he worked his way around to a spot that he thought had the best clearance for a shot at the hole. He aimed and let fly. It hit the rocks five feet from the top and fell to the floor.

"Bummer."

It was Kurt's full response.

"I think it's time for plan B," Randy said. "Why don't I go back down. I can tie it to the rope when it falls and you can pull it back up and try again."

"Sounds good. You need help getting down?"

"No, I can handle it," Randy answered.

While Randy slowly and cautiously made his way down the timbers and ladder, Kurt spent the time chiseling the next hole. The descent took Randy a good ten minutes. He secured the javelin to the rope.

"Ok Bro! It's all yours."

Kurt pulled the javelin up and tried again. He would try several dozen times in fact.

"I give up!" Kurt said at last, sitting down on a beam and shaking his head.

"Rubbish! A Watson never gives up." Randy yelled up to him.

"Who says?" Kurt yelled back.

"I do. I just happen to know one very well, and believe me, you can count on what I say!"

Kurt smiled to himself and looked back up at the opening. He changed his position slightly and pulled up the rope for the twenty fifth attempt.

"Twenty-five is our lucky number today," Randy called, and then added, "But who's counting?"

Kurt took the javelin in hand, closed his eyes and inhaled deeply. He opened his eyes and tossed it straight as an arrow. It creased the middle of the opening and kept right on sailing. Kurt screamed.

"I did it! I did it! It's outside, Randy. It's outside!"

Randy let out a whoop that scared Otto back into the water. The next five or so minutes were taken up with a joyous celebration. Kurt slid down the rope. He really wanted

to hug Randy but knew that would hurt, so he just reached out his hands and took Randy's in his. Randy, however, needed the hugging regardless of the pain and he put his arms around Kurt and squealed with joy one more time. He was so happy; no pain was too much at that moment.

When the celebration calmed down, the boys were quiet once again.

"I suppose we still need to keep trying to build our way out of here just in case, don't we," Kurt said.

"Yeah, I think we do."

They both looked toward the top and sighed at the thought of making still another wearying trek to the top. They worked rather quietly the rest of the morning, each one glancing up at the opening every so often just in case someone might be there. No one ever was.

Kurt's progress was very slow. That was partly because the stone was so hard and partly because his arm was so sore and tired. They broke early for lunch.

It seemed to take forever to catch any fish. Both boys were on edge and more than a bit testy. It had felt so great to be so happy earlier, and now, for some reason, everything seemed terribly depressing. They each felt the anger about their situation raging deep inside. Neither one understood what was happening to him.

"I really hate this place, you know?" Randy said after a while.

"Yeah, I know. I hate it, too. It's cold and dark and it stinks and it's like a prison."

"Worse than a prison, it's like solitary confinement in the hole, like in a World War II movie," Randy added.

"How could this be solitary confinement when there are two of us here," Kurt said, being uncharacteristically argumentative.

"Okay, so it's doubletary confinement then! Does that satisfy you Brother K - K standing for Kooky!"

"No. No, your dumb word games only make me mad, Cappy, standing for Captain of the Titanic."

The boys glared at each other.

"We wouldn't be in this mess if it weren't for you, you know, Brother Brawler."

"I should have finished you off when I had the chance, wrong-sider.

With that, Kurt stormed off in one direction and Randy in the other. Kurt sat down facing a wall. Randy stood with his back to the wall kicking it, over and over, with his heel. Otto stole their lunch. Neither boy noticed. Randy began gathering up the sticks that had come in with the high water and stacked them in a pile. Kurt turned around and saw what Randy was doing. He looked around and began doing the same thing.

A long time passed. Randy slowly made his way closer to where Kurt was, and he spoke.

"Do you suppose this is how newlyweds feel after their first fight

Kurt broke into a laugh and shook his head.

"Hey, I'm sorry, Cappy. I guess it all just finally got to me."

"I guess we were due. I was just thinking about all the tension we've been under and how well we've both really handled it," Randy said.

"I suppose so. Up to now, at least. This really has been awful, hasn't it."

"Awful and wonderful," Randy said.

"Yeah, awful and wonderful, you're right about that. You know, you're right a very large percent of the time, Randy."

Randy smiled and went back to collecting more branches. Kurt spied Otto finishing off their lunch. He quietly got out the line and hook and began fishing again. The atmosphere relaxed. Friendship had weathered a brief storm. Real friendships probably always do, Kurt thought.

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

The emotional roller coaster they had ridden during the morning had drained them, so they allowed themselves a nap after lunch. Kurt heard it first. Up above there were voices. Little kids voices. He roused Randy.

"Somebody's up there," he said.

He stood up and began yelling. Randy joined him. Then small stones and sticks began to rain down on them as the kids tossed things into the hole, just the way Randy and Kurt had often done themselves. Kurt climbed the rope to get closer, hoping he could perhaps make himself heard from further up in the cave. He yelled as he climbed. By the time he was up as far as he could go, the voices had stopped. He couldn't see anyone looking down from the opening. He continued yelling for a while longer in the hope they still might hear and come back. No one did. He sat down on a log exhausted, sad and angry.

Randy stood on the floor of the cave holding the worst part of the news there in his hand. How would he break it to Kurt? The kids had thrown the javelin back into the pit.

Finally, Kurt called down to Randy, still obviously upset.

"You coming up or what?"

"No. I need you down here."

Kurt didn't question it and in a few minutes, was down the rope. He started to speak but then saw what Randy had in his hands.

"Oh, no!"

Kurt sat down right where he was and leaned back on his arms. Randy walked over and stood close beside him.

Neither boy had anything worthwhile to say so they remained silent. Randy sat down also, chin on his knees. They listened to the silence. They heard each other breathing. They felt Otto nuzzling in between them. There it was, they thought, their whole World – silence, breathing, and Otto.

"Well, I suppose it could be worse," Randy said.

"How?"

"I'm not sure. I just suppose it could be," he answered.

"I've got to get that javelin back out there," Kurt said.

"Yeah. Short of climbing out it's still our best chance," Randy agreed.

So, back up the rope Kurt went. It only took six attempts, but there wasn't much of a celebration at the success. Randy tried, but that time it really seemed like just one more aspect of their work. They were glad it was out, but they wouldn't allow their hopes to get up that time. They wouldn't allow any more disappointments and hope allowed that possibility. Life became guardedly sober for the rest of the afternoon.

Just when it seemed lady luck had abandoned them, she seemed to smile again. A squirrel fell from up above and became a welcome main dish for supper. Kurt was sure Otto began treating him with less respect because of it, but it was like dining at the fanciest restaurant in the county as far as the two boys were concerned. Their spirits seemed to steadily improve from that time on.

"I was just thinking about today," Randy said.

"What about it?

"Well, we said some stuff to each other, you know, and I am really surprised at what I said to you. Embarrassed and ashamed, really. I thought I was over all that, but I guess somewhere inside I'm not."

"Me too. I guess some feelings die hard, don't they. I've been thinking that it's like the most important part of us really has changed, but it just hasn't had time to send that message around to all the other parts," Kurt said, being surprisingly philosophical for Kurt.

"Not bad. I think you have something there," Randy said. "I wonder how long it takes to get through to all the parts?"

"I don't know. I think our newlywed spat, as you dubbed it, probably hurried the process along though, don't you?"

"I sure hope so. I really hate to think there are parts of me that still feel those ways."

"I'm beginning to see how it's all going to be different out there, for us, Randy."

"How do you mean?"

"I mean when the guys start mouthing off about the wrong-siders, I can't join in anymore. I won't want to. I'll probably even tell them to knock it off. They'll think I've lost it. It will be different. When they see you and me walking down the hall together at school, or double dating, they'll know for sure that I've lost it."

"I think you may be taking things too fast, Kurt. Maybe we won't be doing all those things together, you know. I mean those guys have been your friends forever, and you can't just give them up for a wrong-sider like me. What if Mom and I move again pretty soon? Where would you be then? No me and no, them. I'm not sure how we're going to be able to work this out, but I think we need to just take it real slow."

"Even though I used to think life was really hard most of the time, it really used to be so simple," Kurt said.

"I guess this is all harder on you than on me," Randy said.

"You think?"

"Yeah. I mean I don't have anything to lose. I had no reputation of any account to begin with. I had no friends to give me up. I sure wasn't used to having girls to kiss all the time, so I wouldn't miss that like you would. I just don't have it to lose like you do."

"Well, I'm still a Watson. That pulls a lot of weight in Springfield. You'll see."

"I guess what I'm trying to say, is that I think you should think twice about losing all that you have, just to be my friend. You and I will know how it is between us. Maybe that will have to be enough."

"You mean we sneak off to be together? Sounds like an illicit romance of some kind."

"I think the acceptable term is tryst," Randy said

laughing.

The boys smiled. The boys thought. It grew darker and colder. Kurt put another log on the fire.

"Do you think your Mom will like me?" Kurt asked.

"I know she will. She never even has to know about the fight, you know."

"Yes, I think she does. I wouldn't feel right. You and she are such goshawful honest people, I couldn't become a part of that if I didn't try it your way, too."

"Well, still, she'll like you. She may not marry you, but she'll like you."

They chuckled, thinking back to their previous conversation about the ideal lady.

"What do you suppose a girl – I mean a really nice girl – wants in a guy?" Kurt asked, his memory having been jogged by Randy's remark.

"Joanne says she wants a guy who is strong but sensitive, and completely loyal" Randy said. "Somebody who will love her forever and ever just because she is her."

"She told you all that on just one date?" Kurt said totally bewildered.

"It's amazing what comes out of girl's mouths when your tongue isn't in the way," Randy said, his impish grin returning."

Kurt smiled, too, and took a playful swipe at him with a stick he was using to poke at the fire.

"So, do you see Joanne as your friend-girl or your kissing-girl?" Kurt asked.

"She is neither one to me. I've decided she was your girl first and I'll stay out of the picture. So, she's neither one to me."

"Of course, she is. Knock it off, will you? You know more about her after one night than I do after six months. She obviously likes you. That's okay. I'm not saying I won't try to make her like me better, but that's more like it should be. We both give it our best shot and see," Kurt said.

"Does all this stuff that you've said today surprise you as much as it does me and the rest of the civilized World?" Randy asked, in all sincerity.

Kurt smiled and then chuckled.

"Yeah, it does. But I like what I hear me saying. I think I really like the guy whose saying it better than I ever have before."

"I'm glad to hear that. I like him better too, by the way!" Randy added.

They both just sat and played among their own thoughts for a time.

"Back to girls," Kurt said, eventually. "Do you think most girls probably want the same things like Joanne said to you?"

"I imagine so. I mean, it's really about the same thing I'd want in a special girl. Joanne and I really didn't talk about the romantic side of her preferences. I mean, I don't know how she wants her guy to be that way. I take it she does enjoy kissing though. That's ten points for you, I suppose. I'm sure I'm probably a lousy kisser. She stopped after just one."

"Well, believe me, I'm not about to find out!" Kurt said getting to his feet, prepared to be chased down and beat on. He was, and it was a good time. They laughed, and they huffed and puffed, and they lay there on their backs looking up at their little World.

"Your ribs seem a whole lot better tonight," Kurt said after a while.

"All of a sudden, like you said, they really do feel a lot better."

"That's good. I'm glad."

They just lay there a while longer.

"Do you ever imagine having a girl down her with us?" Randy asked.

"Only about all of the time," Kurt said.

"I guess we should keep those fantasies private, huh?" Randy said, sitting up cross-legged.

"It's about all we do have that's private down here," Kurt agreed.

They were silent again but both broke into smiles.

"She must be pretty good to produce that face you got," Randy said chuckling.

"You'll never know just how good, Randy. You'll just never know how good!"

"It's not fair, you know." Randy said, still smiling, but at

Kurt rather than his own fantasy.

"What's not fair?"

"Well, you have so much more experience to base these fantasies on than I do. Yours are bound to be a lot better than mine. I think to make it really fair, the least a friend would do would be to share a few real-life experiences to give me something to go on here."

Kurt sat up.

"Okay, but are you sure you're really ready to hear about the big time?"

"I'm ready! I'm ready! I've been ready since I was twelve. Just get on with it!"

Kurt held forth for the next two hours. Randy didn't know how much of it was for real and how much was out and out lies, but it didn't matter. He knew guys talked about that sort of thing when they were together but he'd never been included before. It was like a rite of passage. Like he was finally a big boy – a young man – one of the guys. He giggled, he turned three shades of red, he felt very much like a man for the first time in his life.

It was time to sleep. They each laid awake far longer than usual that night. Kurt, searching his memories. Randy conjuring up brand new possibilities. The day, for all its ups and downs, had ended on a very friendly, happy note.

## **CHAPTER FIFTEEN**

The day began like all the rest. Randy was up first and had begun fishing. Otto was still sleeping on his back curled up against Kurt. Randy was thinking how nice it was that Kurt had acquired two new friends during this adventure.

Presently, Kurt awoke and, of course, Otto did, also. They both stretched and looked around. By then the fish had been caught and cleaned and the fire poked back to life.

"We really are still here, I guess," Kurt said.

"Your dreams had you somewhere else, did they?"

"You better believe it. I don't feel like I got a lick of sleep. It's all your fault, you know."

"Yeah, sure it is," Randy agreed.

Otto beat the boys into the water. Randy found he could take off his sweatshirt by himself for the first time. He even slipped into the water without help.

"Hey, this is almost like being a real person again," he remarked to Kurt, who was already playing a game of chase with Otto.

For some reason, Randy was eager to get to work, so he got out of the water first and finished cooking the fish.

"Soups on, so to speak," he called, and Kurt and Otto arrived in time to both shake water all over him.

"Cut it out you clowns!" But the clowns wouldn't cut it out of course, and soon Randy was as wet as if he were still in the water. It should have been fun, he thought, but for some reason, he was in a serious mood.

"More of the same up there today, I suppose," Kurt said clearly in a jovial mood, himself.

"I'm thinking if we can build a solid platform up about

eighty-five feet, we can put together a ladder that will take us the rest of the way," Randy answered.

"We must be at what, sixty or more now, aren't we?" Kurt said, thinking out loud.

"By noon we could be ready to start that platform, I think," Randy said.

"Hey, this is getting exciting! Almost within reach of the top!" Kurt said.

"Don't wet your pants yet. There's still a lot of work ahead," Randy said.

"Well, aren't we the grouch this morning," Kurt said, trying to kid Randy into a better frame of mind.

"I'll be fine. Really, I will. Let's just get to work."

Randy finished his fish quickly and started up the ladder. About the time he reached the top, Kurt caught up with him on the rope.

"So, what's first then, Randy?" Kurt asked.

"One more log across from the holes you've been working on. Then the platform."

An hour later, the log had been fitted into place. Randy laid out his idea for the platform and they made a sketch with the knife on a log. Once they both knew what needed to be done, they got started. The platform took a lot more cooperative effort between them than had the other work. They worked quite well together.

"If we had another month down here, I think we'd finally get the knack of this cooperation thing," Kurt said.

"Another month? Don't even think it out loud," Randy said.

"What's wrong. Aren't you going to miss old home sweet home?" Kurt asked, trying to make a joke.

"That's the whole problem, today, I guess," Randy said. "I am going to miss it. You and I will never just have each other this way again ever, you know."

Kurt grew silent. They worked without much more conversation. The platform didn't fit together as planned, and by noon they were back to square one.

"Okay, so it didn't work that way," Kurt said. "You're the guy with all the ideas. Just come up with another one."

"Well, actually, I do see what we can do to fix it, I think,

but it will mean starting over."

"So, we start over. One more day together. That can't be a bad thing, now can it?"

For the first time that morning, Randy actually smiled.]

"Now that's more like it. See, we'll work things out," Kurt said.

It was a strange role reversal and both of them noticed it.

They took time off for lunch. Randy soon caught some nice fish and lunch was under way.

"One thing I won't miss about this place, I guess is the diet," Randy said.

"That's for sure!" Kurt agreed. "You really are upset about leaving here, though, aren't you?"

"It's just dumb. I know it's just the dumbest and selfishest thing that could ever be," Randy said.

"Well, maybe not entirely. What you said before up there got me thinking about what we have here, too. You're right. We'll never have this again. But we just have to figure out a way to have something even better on the outside."

"Fat chance of that," Randy said.

"Look who's the pessimist, now!"

"I was wrong, you know, when I said you had the most to lose in all of this," Randy said.

"Oh. How's that?"

"Well, you've already known how it is to have lots of friends and girls, and I never have. If you lose all that, at least you have known how it was."

"And," Kurt said, urging Randy to continue.

"And, if we really don't stay friends on the outside, then I will have lost the only one I actually ever had."

"You just won't leave it alone that I'm going to leave you high and dry, will you?" Kurt said sounding more than a little disgusted. "If you trust me that little, then maybe we really don't have anything at all here. Maybe it's just that we are friends here because there is nobody else around. Do you really believe that crap?"

Randy remained silent. He looked directly at Kurt and a tear overflowed his eye and rolled down his cheek. He made no attempt to disguise it.

"This is just the biggest thing that ever happened to me, you see. I guess I am having trouble believing it all. I'm sorry, Kurt. It's not you I don't trust, it's just life I don't trust, I guess. Life hasn't exactly brought me fame and fortune, you know."

"I'll tell you what, Randy. Tonight, when we stop working, let's plan out our entire first week when we get out of this place. We'll say exactly what we are going to do together and even do a pinky swear on it."

"What in the World is a pinky swear?" Randy asked, seeming at least somewhat interested.

"Oh, that's what little kids do when they make a really important promise to each other. They hook their little fingers together and swear how it will be forever and ever."

"I guess it's not too late to learn about pinky swear. What you said might be fun. Okay then, after we quit for the day."

The work on the platform went very slowly, but it was working that time and that was encouraging. Kurt and Randy just talked business and kept at their job. By dusk, they were very tired and glad to stop working. Before they started back down Randy spoke.

"What if our plan about the first week doesn't work out?"

"Are you really going to ruin it all before we even have the fun of planning it?" Kurt asked, evading the actual question entirely. It wasn't that he had not also been thinking about that possibility, but he'd never admit it to the Blues Boy there beside him.

"Okay, then. Let's give it a whirl. You're right."

It had been so hot and sticky up above that they decided on a swim before supper. It felt good to get cleaned up and cooled off. They fished and talked as they dried off.

"So, Day One. What goes on?" Kurt said.

"Well, to begin with we both have to see a doctor," Randy said. "Everyone will insist on it and it only makes sense, you know."

"Okay, but that shouldn't take all day. We'll need to see our families, of course. I didn't know how much I'd miss them, I guess," Kurt said. "I'll probably end up crying when I see Mom. I'm hoping that will be in private."

"So, cry. We've done enough of that down here. You'll just be in practice," Randy said. "I can hardly wait to see my Mom. She must just be feeling terrible. Not knowing what happened, you know, must really be worse than actually knowing."

"It would be that way for me. I've thought a lot about it down here," Kurt said.

"That first day looks busy but let's promise we'll see each other before we go to bed that night, okay?"

"Okay. That sounds good. Where do we meet?

"How about if I come out to your place so I can meet your Mom?"

"Great. She'll bake a cake or something. That will be great!" Randy said more excitedly than he had thought he would get during that exercise.

"Then Day Two. By then I'll just have to do some kissing," Kurt said.

"Me too! I'll do some kissing, too. I get first dibs on Joanne, since she's the only girl I know who might possibly let me kiss her."

"Go for it Randy!" Kurt said clapping his hands together. "You come over to my place for lunch. I want you meet my Mom, too."

"Are you sure. I mean, really, are you sure she'll be okay about that?"

Randy acted very hesitant about the whole thing.

"Oh yeah. Mom is really great. Anybody I bring home is always fine with her. She grew up over in Rossville, so wrong-siders never met anything to her anyway. I hate to use that word to describe you, you know, but..."

"Hey, no problem. We both understand how we feel about that. It's okay. What shall we do in the afternoon?" Randy asked.

"Well, sometime I guess I have to see the other guys. The sooner I get that over with, the sooner I'll know how I really feel about things."

"Ok, the second afternoon you spend with your friends. That makes good sense."

"Let's meet that night at the park out by your place, say eight o'clock," Kurt suggested.

"Eight o'clock the second night it is. I think that afternoon I'll go back and look over the damage to my camp by the creek. Probably nothing at all left there, but I still think of it as my camp. Some of my toothpick bridges may have weathered the recent storm. I'll take a look."

"Day Three," Kurt said. "I'd like to come down and see your camp site with you. Maybe we could swim and talk like we do here."

"Okay, how about right after lunch. I'll be so far behind on my gardening by then that I'll need all morning just to pull weeds."

"If I'm not into anything else, I could come over and help," Kurt suggested. "I've never pulled weeds, but I bet I could learn."

"Let's just play that by ear. Whatever happens is fine, Okay?"

"Okay. How about Day Four then? Let's do something really special on day four," Kurt said.

"Like what?"

"I don't know. Let's just say now that on Day four we will spend all day together doing something really special. We can figure out what it will be later."

"It sounds too good to be true, you know, Kurt. Do you suppose we ...."

"Shut your face, Randy. You promised you'd go through with this," Kurt said, interrupting before he had a chance to ruin the momentum.

"Okay, something very special all of Day Number Four. I'll still have gardening I'll have to do early in the morning. But I'll be done by nine easy."

"You'll be done by seven easy because I'll meet you at your place at six and we can get it done together."

"You shouldn't have to do my jobs."

"Hey, I said I wanted it to be a special day. What's more special than helping out your best friend?"

"Best friend? Do you think you really mean that, Kurt? I mean, best friend!"

"It sort of surprised me when I heard that too, but sure, you're the best friend I've ever had. I mean we are friends in the very best way, right? That has to make us best friends."

"Okay. Never let it be said I kept my best friend from helping me do my chores!"

"Day Five. There will probably be more Watson family and other friends stuff, I'll need to do that day. You'll probably need to go back the doctor by then. They X-rayed me once a week for a month with my broken rib."

"Mom can't afford X-rays. I'll just have to grow back together without them. I think you're right though, by day five we'll both have things to catch up on. Can we at least meet at the park that night for a little while?"

"Same time at the park. That sounds good. We can catch each other up on what we've been doing," Kurt said.

"Day Six," Randy said. "You know, one of these days in here is going to be a Sunday, and Mom and I will be going to Church that day. We ought to plan out the Sunday and then we can just fit it into the schedule whenever it happens."

"Okay, let's pretend day six is Sunday," Kurt said. "Randy, his mother and Kurt go to church together in the morning!"

"But I've never even seen you at church. I didn't think you even went to church," Randy said.

"Hey, if it's not too late for you to learn how to pinky swear, it's not too late for me to start going to church."

"You can come home and eat Sunday dinner with us, then. My Mom is the World's best cook. I meant no offense against your Mom there, you know, I just meant..."

"I know what you just meant, and it'll be great to come and eat over at your place. What can I bring?"

"Nobody ever brings to the Reynolds' house. Just yourself."

"This probably sounds like a real dumb question, but what should I wear to church?"

"Most the guys our age wear a suit and tie – we're more formal than a lot of churches, I guess. I don't have a suit so I just wear my white shirt and tie."

"One white shirt and tie it is, then," Kurt said.

"Hey, no. I know you have a suit, probably several. If you have one you should wear it. It's like more respectful to dress up as much as you can," Randy said.

"Are you sure. I wouldn't feel bad in a shirt and tie

instead."

"I'd feel better if a Watson, looked like a Watson and a Reynolds looked like a Reynolds. Really, I would. I stopped feeling bad about clothes long ago."

"What do you do on Sunday afternoons, Randy?"

"Sometimes Mom and I do things together. We go for a walk in the woods or we read to each other out of some of our books. Once a month we go over and clean Mr. Patton's house for him or I'll do the lawn while Mom cooks up some things for him for the week."

"Mr. Patton from the haunted house on South Street?" Kurt asked.

"Yeah. He's been real sick and he must be in his nineties. He doesn't have anybody to do for him. So, Mom and I sort of adopted him, I guess."

"I've been awful to that old man, you know. I even broken his window once on Halloween."

"I know. And I fixed it back. See we have more in common than we even thought," Randy said, trying to make light of the incident.\

"I should go apologize to him, I suppose, shouldn't I?"

"Mom says no one but you can tell you if you should apologize for something. I wouldn't pretend to tell you what you should do about that, pal. You can decide that later on. Looks like we just have day seven left."

"You know what I really think I want to do on that last day of the first week?" Kurt said.

"I think I do, yes," Randy said.

"You, too?"

"Yeah. I think by then we'll need to come back and look down into the bottomless pit one last time and remember about it all. Sort of get it out of our systems," Randy said.

"That's just exactly what I was thinking."

"Let's meet early in the morning. Like we did that first morning of our adventure, as you call it," Randy suggested. "Well not just exactly like that first meeting."

They smiled. Kurt shook his head, still finding it hard to believe he had done that terrible thing. Randy nodded his head thinking it would be a great way to celebrate the new friendship.

"I guess that's the first week, then," Kurt said.

"Not so fast," Randy said. "You said I get to do my first pinky swear on this."

Giggling like ten-year olds, Kurt took Randy through the sacred Springfield Pinky Swear Ritual. After they were finished they just let their fingers hold on to one another for a long time. They sat silently. It had been a wonderful fantasy. They both had to wonder if that was really all it was – a fantasy. Time would tell.

///

## **CHAPTER SIXTEEN**

It was Randy's best night of sleep since the adventure began. His ribs hadn't kept him awake at all. He felt refreshed and ready to face the day. Kurt was in a great mood, too. Otto seemed to be his usual playful self. With the swim out of the way and breakfast over, the boys climbed to the top of the structure on which it seemed they had been working forever.

"What's going to happen to all of this after we get out?" Kurt asked at one point.

"All of what?" Randy asked.

"All of these bridges and trestles and beams and ladders. What's going to happen to it all?"

"I guess I haven't thought about it. I suppose it will just stay here."

"Will that be safe? What if some kids try to climb down and get hurt or something?" Kurt asked as they neared the top.

"I guess we'll have to do something about that. I'm not sure what. We have some time to think about it." Randy said.

They got right to work. Finishing the platform was particularly difficult because of the angles and the width and the sheer walls there near the very top of the cave. Another morning passed with little to show for the time spent. Neither boy seemed disheartened, however, as they descended for their noon break.

"It went slow, but I think we did some good work, don't you, Randy."

"Yeah. It's taking a lot more time than I expected, but you're right, that platform will stand for ever, and it'll be the steady base we need for the ladder to the top."

Otto seemed happy to see them.

"What will we do with Otto, when we leave?" Kurt asked.

"I don't know. Take him out with us and set him free down by the creek, I suppose. That's where he can survive the best," Randy said.

"I'll miss the little guy, you know."

They really were good friends – Kurt and Otto. Randy thought Otto brought out the uninhibited little boy in Kurt. He liked that side of him.

"You really should have had a pet, you know," Randy said.

"Why do you say that?"

"You're a natural with a pet. You make all the right moves."

"You really think so? I have come to love this little guy. My relationship with him reminds me a lot of our relationship – yours and mine, I mean."

"How's that?"

"I hated Otto, too, before I got to know him. I guess I was even a little afraid of both of you. You've both taught me good stuff about making hasty judgments."

Kurt threw a fish bone in Otto's direction. Otto rushed to pick it clean.

Randy addressed the animal.

"You hear that. We taught the town's biggest jock some good stuff."

Kurt smiled.

"You know," he said, suddenly solemn, "I may not be the town's biggest jock anymore after this broken leg."

"I know, Kurt. I've been worrying about that a lot. I just really didn't know how to make sure if I had your leg put back together right. I did everything I could think of to make sure, but what if I really messed it up?"

"I didn't mean you did anything wrong, Randy. I was just thinking about it as a regular broken bone. Sometimes they just never get strong enough again for sports."

"I know, but I ..."

"Will you just shut up about it," Kurt interrupted.  
"What's done is done. We'll live with whatever happens. I can do that."

There was a long pause. Then Kurt continued.

"I've have never been able to say that and mean it before I met you, you know."

"Really?"

"Yeah, really!"

"Well, I just hope it doesn't come to you having to quit sports. How is it feeling, really? You haven't been talking about it much."

"That's because it feels fine. A little sore in the morning, but it's fine I think."

"How about your ribs?"

"Better every day. I hardly even felt them during the night, last night. In no time at all I'll have forgotten all about them."

It was soon back up the long climb. It didn't take as long as before. They were both really feeling much better. Then, as if the evil spirits thought things were just going along too well, disaster struck again. The rope holding a log above Randy's head as he guided it into position, snapped and the log came crashing down on top of him.

"Randy!" Kurt shouted and he hustled down from his perch to get to his friend

Randy was unconscious. His right leg was bent back and Kurt knew at a glance, it had been broken. The log had grazed his head and then landed right on his chest. Kurt panicked. He stood up and looked around, not even knowing what he was searching for. He yelled for help over and over again. Randy didn't move. He was breathing, but he just lay there motionless

Kurt wondered if he should try to take him back down or if he should leave him where he was.

"Never move a trauma victim," buzzed though his head from something he had learned in health class.

A large gash on Randy's head was gushing blood.

"Apply even pressure to a sever bleeder."

Again, as if on cue, it spoke to him from out of his past.

Kurt removed his T-shirt and, rolling it up, he pushed it against the wound. While holding that in place he reached down and straightened Randy's leg. He felt up and down the leg the best he could. There was no bone showing, no bump, and nothing even felt out of place. Kurt knew he had heard it crack as Randy had fallen. A fracture, perhaps. To be safe he knew he would need to splint it. That would have to wait until the bleeding was stopped.

Kurt started talking to Randy. Something else about the value in talking to unconscious accident victims shot through his head.

"We've just had a little accident here, Randy, old man. I'm taking care of you now and it's all going to be all right."

Before long the bleeding had stopped. Kurt ripped the shirt and wound strips around Randy's head to protect it. He knew he needed water to wash out the gash and that he needed to get sticks for a splint and something to tie it on with.

"Rope," he said. "We have plenty of rope to tie on the splints."

Kurt continued to talk out loud.

"First, I have to make sure he can't fall off from up here. I'll tie him onto the platform."

He found the knife and the clothesline rope, and cut a long piece, which he looped around Randy's chest under the armpits and secured it to two beams on either side. Then he did the same kind of thing around his legs at the knees.

"There, that will keep him from rolling off until I can get back up here."

He then went hand over hand down the rope to the floor. He filled the canteen with fresh water, cut two branches for splints and grabbed the first aid kit. He made his way back up to the platform. He washed out the cut first.

"I'm back now Randy. I'm washing the junk out of a cut on your face. It's really not all that dirty. Lucky for that, huh? Then I'm going to take my turn at putting a splint on your leg. It's your right leg, too, Randy, but I'm not even sure if it's really broken. I heard this cracking sound as you twisted it, so I'm not taking any chances. I don't even know how to make a splint. I guess I can use my own for a model. Okay, I'm starting on the splinting now, Randy. You're going to be just

fine. I have everything under control."

For some reason, he lifted Randy's eyelid. It seemed the thing to do. His eyes were turned up and back into his head. That's how Randy said his had been when he passed out. Kurt had some trouble holding the sticks and tying them all at the same time, but eventually he managed to get it all synched up tight.

"Now what should I do? Let's see. The cut. The leg. I should cover him up so he won't go into shock."

Kurt wasn't sure if that piece of information had come from health class or Rescue 911, but it didn't matter.

"I have to go down and get the blanket, buddy, but I'll be right back. I have you tied on here so you can't fall. Don't worry about a thing. Kurt has it all under control, Okay?"

He slid down the rope and picked up the blanket. Otto was chattering at him from one of the air mattresses.

"An air mattress. Good idea, Otto. We'll put him on an air mattress."

Back Kurt climbed, not even aware of how terribly tired he was becoming. It seemed to take an enormous effort to maneuver the mattress underneath Randy and then re-secure the ropes holding him in place. Kurt covered him up, gently tucking the blanket around Randy's neck and shoulders and then under the mattress itself. He sat back to catch his breath. He wondered what time it was. He removed Randy's watch and slipped it over an extending pole so they could both use it. It was almost three p.m.

After a few minutes, Kurt had caught his breath and began to realize how tired he had become. He checked the cut one more time. It was not bleeding. Then he just sat back against a post and rested.

"What a mess," he said to himself. "Now what am I going to do?"

Presently it came to him that he should put some of the remaining iodine on Randy's wound before Randy regained consciousness. It would save him all that pain. That done, he sat back again. Randy groaned and turned his head. He remained unconscious.

Kurt felt desperate. He felt hopeless. He looked down at his helpless friend and became determined to do whatever

would be necessary to get them out of there.

He knew he would need to stay up there all night also so he could be close to Randy. That meant he needed to bring up his own supplies. He also needed to eat. That meant fishing and cooking and climbing up and down and, how in the World, could he ever get all that done?

"I'm going to leave you for just a little while now, Randy. You'll be just fine up here. I'll be back real soon."

It was down the rope again. Kurt's arms were drained of energy. He fished first and felt lucky that he caught three nice ones within just a few minutes. He stirred up the fire, cleaned the fish and put them on to cook. Then he gathered together the supplies he thought he might need, and wrapped them in a plastic tarp to make it easier to carry them. Suddenly it struck him.

"I'll just tie the climbing rope onto the tarp and I can pull it all up after I'm up there. That will save all kinds of energy and hassle. Where's my head been?"

That eased his mind, somewhat. He wondered if he should go up and check on Randy while the fish cooked. He decided to save his strength. He put several logs that were still fairly wet onto the fire. He wanted to keep the fire going all night and thought those would burn slowly. He could come down once or twice to check the fire if it seemed to be going out.

The fish were done and he ate two of them. The third he stuffed in his rear pocket for Randy. When Randy regained consciousness, he might be hungry. Then up the ladder, that time to save his energy. Soon he had the supplies hoisted up top and stowed on one corner of the platform. He stacked up some of the thinner, loose logs along one side of the platform, and tied them up, forming a three-foot high wall. Then he put one more, thicker log, along the opposite edge. Between the two, Kurt felt it would be safe for him to sleep there and not have to worry about rolling off, himself.

He looked at the watch.

"How did it get to be seven fifty-five?"

He checked out Randy one more time. Nothing seemed to have changed. Kurt was exhausted so he positioned his mattress and laid down to rest. He was

immediately asleep.

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## **CHAPTER SEVENTEEN**

Kurt was awakened in the middle of the night by thunder and lightning and rain pouring into the cave. Oddly, he was thankful for the lightning, since it provided his only light up there. He found the plastic tarp and began arranging it over posts and beams to provide them some protection. In a matter of minutes, he had a tent-like arrangement that was working very well.

"Just a little rain storm, Randy. I've got it all under control. We're going to be just fine now," Kurt said as he moved over to check on him.

Randy was still unconscious, which began to worry Kurt. Randy's forehead felt pretty warm. Using what was left of the T-shirt, Kurt wet it in the rain and began patting it around on Randy's face and arms.

"Fever, unconscious, not good signs," Kurt whispered to himself. "Not much more I can do now, though, and I will need all my strength tomorrow, so I'd better try to get some more sleep."

He tried to make room for his mattress under the tarp beside Randy's, but in the end, his feet remained out in the rain. Not even that, kept the exhausted young man from sleeping.

The bright sunlight woke him up at a little after six. The rain had stopped. He was still soaking wet, however. He felt Randy's forehead. It was still hot, but he didn't think any worse than the night before. He sopped up some water from a puddle on the mattress and applied it to Randy's head. At that Randy groaned but did not awaken. Kurt patted his cheek

hoping that might rouse him but it didn't. He felt for the fish still in his back pocket. It made a cold, tasteless snack, but it was something to tide him over until he could get himself organized for the new day.

"I need a plan, Randy. You're always the one with the plans. I'm not sure what to do."

He looked around.

"Looks like I actually did pretty well all by myself yesterday and last night," he said, verbally patting himself on the back. "I'd have never believed I had it in me."

He continued speaking out loud but it was strictly for his own benefit.

"Okay, now, we need a plan. Let's see. I'll need to eat and make sure the fire stays burning. I'll need to build that super ladder Randy was talking about that will reach from here on up to the opening. After I have the ladder in place, I'll have to think of a way to get Randy out of here if he doesn't come to."

It seemed like a big order, but for the first time in his life, Kurt really felt up to such a big order. There had always been the big games, but there he knew just what to do and how to do it. When there was a blueprint, Kurt could always do well. He was a Watson and he knew what Watsons did – what was expected of them – so he could do that. Those were the only two roles he had really ever had to play – athlete and Watson. Suddenly, that was different. He was in charge of himself and of another life. It all depended on his own skill and his own ingenuity. No big sister. No Mom or Dad. Not even a Randy. Looking down at Randy, he knew that somehow, he would find the way.

"Randy, I want you to listen to me, now. I'm going back down below for a little while. I need to eat and make some plans. I'll be back within a half-hour. You just rest easy. I have everything under control."

At that, Randy groaned and tossed his head a few times. Randy patted his face again, but still no real response. He cooled down the rag one more time and replaced it on Randy's forehead. He slid down the rope to the floor.

Again, he fished first. The fire had weathered the night in the form of glowing embers. Otto was curled up in its heat

at what he must have considered a safe distance. The two of them were happy to see each other. As if expecting a morning swim like usual, Otto was off and into the water.

"Not this morning, my friend. We have serious problems to handle here today."

Kurt walked over to the pile of remaining scrap branches and timbers. None were more than six feet long. How could he possibly fashion a twenty-five-foot ladder from that?

"I can use the ladder here at the bottom for part of it," he said out loud.

He surveyed that ladder. With the addition, they had made, it was still only twelve-feet high.

"Let's see. If I bind these little branches together I can use them like a central column and attach the steps to it, binding them each in the center with the clothesline rope."

He began laying them out end to end, overlapping them for strength. Soon he had another twelve-foot section laid out. He bound them together with some of the remaining duct tape and clothesline. Then, for the big test. He lifted it into a vertical position. It was a good three inches thick and actually quite solid.

"By golly, Kurt, not so bad, old man! Not so bad at all."

At that point, he realized that the hammer, nails and saw were all up on top.

"Well, that's probably only the first of many miscalculations on this project," he told himself.

He sat down at the edge of the stream and dangled his legs in the water as he ate his breakfast. He had again saved back one fillet for Randy, just in case. Otto enjoyed swimming in and out among Kurt's legs. It was good just to play for a few moments.

"This is going to be a big day, Otto. Our friend Randy got hurt yesterday, so now this whole thing is up to me and you, I guess. You take care of things down here and I'll take care of things up top."

He sat quietly finishing the last few bites of fish. The silence was broken by Randy's groan. Much louder than before and suggesting more pain, even fear, perhaps. Kurt sprang to his feet and went hand over hand up the rope to the

platform.

Randy's eyes were opening and closing rapidly – fluttering.

"Hey, Randy old man. It's Kurt. How you doing, pal. Randy, can you hear me, it's Kurt. We've had a little accident here and you got banged up. You're going to be fine. I'm okay. Otto sends his best wishes. I've got everything under control."

Kurt had said that last phrase so often during the last eighteen hours that he was actually beginning to believe it. He really wasn't frightened anymore. He was confident and determined that he could take care of things.

"Kurt?" Randy said faintly, struggling to control his eyelids and focus his eyes.

"Yeah, sure, this is Kurt, buddy. Who did you expect – Miss America."

"What's the deal here, Kurt?"

"Can you see me here above you, Randy?" Kurt asked leaning down within a foot of Randy's face. "Can you see me here?"

"Yeah, I see you. You look terrible."

"Well, I'm the best we have going around here just now. You got hurt in an accident. Do you understand that?"

"Yeah, I got hurt. Hurt how and how hurt?"

"A beam we were moving into place fell on you. It knocked you out, cut your face and may have broken your right leg," Kurt said as calmly as he could. "I'm sure it didn't help those ribs much either."

"Wow. So, where are we?"

"We are still up on the platform right where the accident happened. I have you tied on so you can't fall off. You're perfectly safe."

"I don't feel perfectly safe. I have the mother of all headaches. My neck hurts. My legs, my right leg really hurts Kurt."

Randy began feeling around with his left arm and hand. He found the mattress.

"What's this?"

"It's your air mattress. You didn't think I'd just let you rot there without being comfortable during the process, did

you?"

Randy managed a faint smile and looked back up at Kurt.

A weak, "Thanks," was all he could muster.

"Any time. It's not as if it's not my turn to take care of you, you know."

Randy tried to lift his head and screamed in pain.

"Oh, my chest! My ribs! My lungs! Help me, Kurt. Do something! They hurt so bad! Help me, please!"

"Listen to me, Randy. Listen to me! Be quiet and just listen to me now! You have to keep completely still. I guess the log hurt your neck and did re-injure your ribs. I was afraid of that. You took an awful blow. The log fell right on top of you and pinned you down. If it hadn't landed like that, with you under it, I'm certain you would have fallen all the way down to the floor. I looked you over before, but I couldn't tell anything. I guess now we know for sure."

"I guess we do!" Randy said, tears pouring from his eyes. "They really sting."

"What sting, Randy?"

"My tears. They sting my face. It must be cut."

"Yeah, it's cut up some. Here I'll wipe them away."

Kurt dabbed Randy's face again and felt his forehead. It was some hotter than before but he thought there was no reason to bother Randy with more bad news.

"There, how's that?" Kurt asked.

"Better, I guess. I've never hurt like this before, Kurt. I don't think I can stand it."

"If you could just go back to sleep, maybe that would help," Kurt said, grasping at straws for any sort of suggestion.

"Wait a minute. There should still be aspirin in the first aid kit?"

Kurt reached for the kit and opened it. Sure enough, a bottle more than half full. He took out two, then added one more for good measure.

"Here we go Randy – aspirin. I'm going to put them in your mouth one at a time and then give you some water from the canteen. Don't you try to move at all. I'll get the water down to your lips. Be careful now. The last thing you need to do is gag on the water."

Very carefully, Kurt placed the aspirin in Randy's mouth. He brought the canteen close against Randy's lips.

"Here comes the water now. It will just be a tiny trickle at a time till we can see how you handle it."

Although it was quite an effort that took some two minutes in all, Randy eventually swallowed the three aspirin and then asked for a little more water. He had been without water for nearly two days and was understandably thirsty.

"You gave me three."

"Hey fans, he can even count! Yeah! I figured for all the pain and maybe it would help you sleep."

"That was good. Probably should have been ten," Randy said, cringing in pain.

Kurt continued to wipe Randy's forehead and face with the wet rag.

"That feels good, Kurt," Randy said over and over, apparently deliriously at times."

Randy had found Kurt's hand and maintained a tight grip on it. When it finally relaxed, Kurt knew he had fallen asleep. He was glad he was away from his pain for a while and knew that he had to get back to work.

He gathered the nails, hammer, and saw, and made his way back down to the floor. He figured he should save the remaining tape in case he needed to use it on Randy. Within half an hour he had the steps cut from the last of the branches and nailed and bound into place. He stood his new contraption up against the wall and tried it out.

"Would you believe it, Otto, you and Uncle Kurt just built us a ladder. Now, we have to get it attached to Randy's ladder and then pull it all up to the top."

As he laid it back down it occurred to him that if he attached them together down there, it would weigh more than he could ever pull up to the top.

"Time for plan B, as Randy would say. I guess I could pull each section up separately and somehow lash them together up above. I could do it like big splints along the sides. I guess that's plan B then. I really have no other alternative."

Kurt dragged the new section over under the dangling rope and tied it on. Then, hand over hand he again climbed

the rope to the platform. He checked on Randy first.

"Sleeping like a baby," he said. "That's good. I hope he can stay asleep all day."

Then he began the task of pulling the new section of ladder up those eighty feet. He pulled it into a standing position down below, but found he could only lift it several feet and then it dropped back down to the floor. How was he ever going to be strong enough to get it all the way up to the platform?

He sat back against a post to think. Spying another post made him remember something he had once seen in a movie. In it, they had wrapped the rope around a post and after they had lifted something up a few feet, they snugged the rope tight around the post. Then they repeated that over and over – pulling and snugging, pulling and snugging. The snugging held it in place.

"I can do that!" Kurt told himself confidently."

And he could. It took the rest of the morning, but inch by inch, foot by foot, Kurt pulled the ladder extension up to the platform. Then, with a final effort, he managed to get it sitting up there on the platform, resting against the wall.

It was time for a rest. Randy was still asleep. Kurt bathed Randy's face as he sat there beside him resting. He checked the splint. He just sat for a few moments looking down at his friend's battered face.

"We've got it on the run now, Pard. We're going to be just fine."

Once rested, Kurt went back down the rope. He needed some lunch and a little more rest before tackling the old ladder. He got the fish cooking and talked with Otto.

"Otto, what's the matter. Come on over and see me. I haven't got to hold you much lately."

Otto made the effort but took one whiff of Kurt's armpit and scurried off into the stream – the far side of the stream!

"So, that's what's wrong. Well, I guess I do smell like a year-old sneaker, don't I. Okay just a short swim to clean up."

It felt good, the cool water and the clean body. He stayed in the stream a bit longer than he had planned. He was really bushed – more tired than he had let himself realize. Then, out and dressed, Kurt quickly finished his lunch and

began surveying the next step. It was the biggest one for him so far. Randy's ladder was easily twice as heavy, maybe three times as heavy, as that first section. Randy had to devise a whole new plan to raise that one. He just sat there, for what seemed a very long time, confronting his blank mind.

## **CHAPTER EIGHTEEN**

His train of thought was broken when he heard Randy calling. Up the rope he went, noticeably more slowly than before. Even so, Kurt was surprised at how much strength he still had when he needed it. The fish diet wasn't exactly a trainer's recommended menu.

"Hey, Randy. I was down below. It's okay I'm back. What can I do for you?"

"I just woke up and panicked. I guess I forgot for a minute there what had happened. Sorry to bother you like that."

"No bother at all. Glad to have you back among the living. Do you know how lonely it gets when you don't have anybody to talk to?"

"Well, actually, yes I do, but that's probably not the point. What are you doing about all this Kurt?"

Kurt filled him in on everything that had transpired and how he had built the new section for the ladder and got it up to the platform. He pointed to it where it leaned against the wall. Randy could see it.

"Looks good. Had to manufacture a central post, I see. Very good thinking."

"Now, I'm trying to figure out how to get the original ladder you made up here. It's way too heavy for me even using that pull and snug system."

"Cut it into two or three sections," Randy suggested immediately.

"Sure! Why didn't I think of that? Then we can bind them together up here. Great idea, Randy! Glad you woke

up!"

"I don't think I am. How long have I been asleep?"

"Let's look at the watch. I borrowed it and put it up here where we could both see it. Looks like you've been zonked out about two hours. How's the pain?"

"The pain is fine. It's me that's in agony."

Kurt had to chuckle. Randy the comedian, even in agony.

"I think it's too soon for more aspirin, don't you?" Kurt stated, more than asking.

"No, believe me, I think it is exactly the right time for more aspirin," came Randy's frantic response.

"Well, old buddy, I think Uncle Kurt is going to over-rule you on this one. At least one more hour."

"You sound like a mother, you know," Randy said, offering no real argument. "Well, are you just going to sit here wasting time or are you going to get back to work?"

"I'm going to sit here for a few more minutes, and talk to my best friend. That's what I'm going to do, Randall Lee Reynolds."

"How did you know about Randall Lee? I never told you that!

"It's only one of many interesting things you said in your sleep recently."

"I talk in my sleep? Really?"

"Really. Better treat me right or I can blackmail you till your ninety-nine," Kurt said, leaning over Randy's face and smiling the broadest smile ever smiled.

"You jerk! You're not supposed to listen to what a guy says in his sleep. That's like invading a guy's privacy. It's like sacred, or something."

"You're right, Randall Lee, it was a terrible thing I did."

Randy managed a smile. He searched for Kurt's hand again.

"This is a pretty big mess now, isn't it, "Randy said.

"Pretty big, yes. But nowhere near impossible," Kurt answered.

"Is all this confidence for real or just to impress a beat and battered wrong-sider?"

"Amazing as it may seem, it's for real!"

"It sounds that way, Kurt. Good going! Now, how can I help?"

"Help? You can't even move. What do you mean, help?"

"Well, my brain still works. Let my brain keep helping at least."

"Okay, here's one for you to work on. I'll go down and cut that first ladder in half and begin bringing it up. You devise a safe and sturdy way to put all three sections together. Then, when you have that one solved, come up with a way to help me get you up that ladder and outside. Will that keep your brain satisfied for a while?"

"Yeah, I think so. By the way, my brain says I'm starved."

"Well I just happen to have the catch of the day waiting right here for you in my back pocket."

Kurt pulled out the fish.

"Let me pull it apart and feed it to you."

"I can feed myself, thank you. Just lay in here on my chest and I can do it. Really, I can. I'll be fine. You go do your work. Just be sure you're back in an hour with my aspirin. I've got you on the clock."

Kurt stayed long enough to make sure Randy could actually manage the fish. He could.

As Randy listened to Kurt sawing down below, he tried moving various parts of his body. Nothing much wanted to. He forced each leg to move and even bent his left one at the knee. Both arms worked. His head could move from side to side, but not without causing a lot of pain down his back and in his upper chest. He tried to examine his ribs, but those movements hurt too much. He was most certainly not going to be of much physical help from there on out.

Twenty minutes later, Kurt appeared again, huffing and puffing.

"Well, it's cut and the top section is tied to the rope. Let me catch my wind and I'll help it begin its long journey to the top. You still doing okay?"

"Quite honestly, old friend, I didn't ever mean to imply I was doing okay!"

Randy managed another smile.

"I'm some more comfortable now that I had the fish. Thanks for that. It was good of you to have thought about me, that way."

"It will soon be time to eat again," Kurt said. " I suppose I should fix supper before I begin pulling up this section or I'll have no rope to go up and down on. Now that the ladder is cut up, the rope is all we have."

"Sounds like a good plan. I'll be fine up here. Tell Otto, Hi. Have you checked the climbing rope for wear and tear where it's tied around the beam?"

"No, I suppose I should, Huh?"

"Well, my brain was just thinking that if one rope snapped – probably from just being worn out – maybe that one is getting worn also."

Kurt laid down on his stomach and leaned his arms over the edge of the platform to examine the rope where it encircled the log beam. It was even worse than he could have imagined. The rope was hanging there by only one of its three stands. He untied it, pulled it up higher, and retied it several feet lower down on the rope. Then he reported back to Randy.

"Your body may be a veggie right now pal, but I think that brain of yours just saved my life."

Kurt showed Randy the frayed end of the rope he had just cut off. Kurt's heart rate increased significantly as he thought about the near disaster.

"Any other little safety precautions emanating from that brain of yours, Randy?"

"Emanating! Good word. No. That seems to be about it for now. Go! Go! Work!"

Kurt, a little more carefully that time, swung himself over the edge of the platform and made his way down the rope.

Randy had more time to think. He couldn't bring himself to tell Kurt he had the reattachment of the ladder sections and his own escape plan figured out long before. He had time to think other thoughts.

The only other time in his life that he really felt that helpless (if you disregard that brief moment between being hit in the jaw by Kurt and lapsing into unconsciousness) was

when he learned his Father and Ryan had been killed. They were gone and there was absolutely nothing he could do about it. All that was left had been a total sense of helpless.

He knew his mother must have felt that way, too, but she just went on with things. She was always so strong. Knowing how strong she was had kept Randy from slipping into despair, himself, that past week as he worried about her reaction to not knowing what had happened to him. He loved her so much, yet there was nothing he could do to ease her current pain. The one thing that had kept him going was knowing that every day he was working himself back closer to the time when they would be reunited, and she would know he was safe and sound. Well, at least, she would know he was safe, even if it would be quite obvious he was not so sound.

Randy knew he had been injured very severely and it worried him. What if he couldn't ever be active outdoors again? What if he needed expensive medical treatment that his mother could not afford? What if he would come out of this an invalid and she would have to take care of him forever? What-if after what-if kept floating through his fuzzy mind.

Randy's depressing side trip was finally brought to a halt as Kurt reappeared beside him. Kurt felt Randy's forehead as he related how things had gone down below. He pulled out a warm fish for Randy and laid it on his chest.

"It really smells good, Kurt! Can you believe that? The odor of fish smells good to me. I must be out of my head."

"No, we aren't allowing you to go out of your head anymore. We need that head for a few more days," Kurt said. "You've been running a fever, Randy. I might as well tell you. It seems a little better now, but I think we still need to keep your forehead cool."

"Okay. I'm glad you told me. I can probably find a way to take charge of the cold compress brigade. Probably all that aspirin before helped take it down."

"Aspirin takes down temperatures?" Kurt repeated as if surprised.

"Sure. What do you take for temperatures?"

"I haven't been sick since Doc Rainey yanked out my tonsils when I was five. Guess I just never had a temperature to take down."

"Healthy as a horse and a body to match," Randy said.

"You know, you are pretty helpless there, Randall Lee. I wouldn't antagonize your keeper if I were you."

"Thanks for all this, you know, Kurt," Randy said, again searching out his friend's hand.

"You owe me nothing if you'll just promise me one thing," Kurt said.

"Sure, what's that?"

"That you won't spread it around that we sat up here holding hands!"

They smiled. Kurt squeezed Randy's hand ever so gently.

"I better get started on my big job. I'd like to get both sections up here before I quit tonight."

"Fine. Right after I get my aspirin," Randy said.

The aspirin went down more easily and more quickly that time, with the cobwebs cleared away.

By three o'clock, the first section was stowed on the platform. By seven, the second was also safely in place. By seven thirty, Kurt was back up on the platform with supper and Otto. Otto seemed happy to see Randy, but his ever-inquisitive nose, butting up against Randy's ribs was more than Randy could take. Kurt placed Otto on a nearby rock ledge which he happily explored.

"What's with the garbage bag?" Randy asked

"It has a gallon of water in it."

"Why?" Randy asked. "I'm not that thirsty."

"To give you a bath. You stink, my friend. I love you but you really do stink! And love only allows one to put up with so much in a case like this. I need to get it done before we lose light for the night. Anyway, I figured you didn't want to face the world out there tomorrow, stinking."

Randy really did feel much better after his sponge bath. It gave Kurt his first chance to really examine Randy. His left leg had sustained a long but shallow gash that Kurt hadn't found earlier, so he carefully washed it out. It needed stitches, but that seemed to be the story of both boy's lives, since beginning their adventure. He pushed it together and applied duct tape. It was the best he had for sutures.

"We're out of iodine, Randy. I used the last on that

gash on your face. We really need something for this one on your leg. I should have looked sooner, I guess. I just didn't see any blood or anything. I had no idea it was here. Should I boil some water or what?"

"Use the mouth wash from the foot locker."

"Mouthwash? You kept mouthwash in your survival kit? Who were you expecting to survive with, Miss July?

"Not a bad fantasy, but actually it's there for this very reason. It's mostly alcohol. Just pour it on. It'll kill all the little varmints that may have taken up residence in there."

"This is really going to hurt you, Randy," Kurt said, staring at the bottle.

"So, I'd rather hurt a lot now, than lose a leg later," Randy said, making a lot of sense as usual. "You went through it with the iodine. I'm not such a wimp myself, you know."

"I didn't mean that, but I could yell and holler and twist around. You don't dare move like that, Randy, and yelling involves deep breaths that you can't take."

"Believe me it hurts too much to even consider moving what I have left of this body. Now if you don't mind, I'd really rather get on with it, instead of sitting here having to think about how horrible it's going to be."

Kurt checked the ropes still holding Randy in place. Once satisfied with that, he was ready to begin.

"Okay! If you can yell, you really should yell," Kurt said. "I know it helped me."

Randy didn't need any prompting about yelling. It was probably heard way back in Springfield. After it was over and Kurt had wiped off Randy's face, Randy spoke.

"Actually, that was sort of okay."

"Okay? You screamed like a banshee!"

"Yeah, but it made all this other pain seem less important, you know?"

"Well, no I can't say I really do know, but I'll trust your word on it."

It wasn't long until they were asleep – Kurt, Randy and Otto. It had been another long and exhausting day, at least for the two young men.

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## CHAPTER NINETEEN

When Randy awoke, Kurt was already gone.

"Kurt really has taken charge of this thing," Randy said to himself, managing a smile.

Otto was gone also, so Randy just lay there. Presently he heard his friend's voice calling up from down below.

"You awake up there yet?"

Randy tried to call, but his chest hurt so, he wasn't able to make a loud enough sound. He waved his hand over the edge of the platform. Kurt saw it.

"I'll be up in about five minutes."

Randy acknowledged that with another wave of his arm. Soon Kurt was back up top bearing fish and a canteen of fresh water.

"Food or aspirin first?" Kurt asked.

"Silly boy!" Randy said. "You can have all the fish yourself for just one beautiful little aspirin."

"Here, have two," Kurt said, placing them in Randy's hand.

"Boy a guy doesn't get to be an invalid for long around here," Randy said playfully. Yesterday, you were ..."

"Yeah, yeah, but that was yesterday. Today is the BIG day, pal. The BIG day!"

At first, Randy wasn't sure what he meant. He looked puzzled.

"If we play our cards right, we'll be out of this hole well before sundown."

It hit Randy all of a sudden. He had been so wrapped up in all of his own problems, he hadn't been focusing on what

all their work had been about. What Kurt was saying, was probably true.

"You really think so, Kurt!"

"If we really shake our tails. Yeah, I really think so. Now, feed your brain. How do we put all this together?"

"I think our best bet it to put four splint pieces around each joint. I'd bind them in place as well as nailing them, if we have any nails left."

"We have twenty-five long ones left, and half a can of short ones," Kurt reported.

"I can see you've been planning ahead," Randy said.

"Not only that good buddy. Look what I have here at the end of the rope."

Kurt pulled up a bundle of twelve, four-foot sticks he had already cut to use as the splints.

"So, you needed MY brain, did you?" Randy said, realizing Kurt had been way ahead of him all along.

"Well, I thought you might come up with a better plan of some kind," Kurt explained, downplaying his solution.

"Who cares. Nice going, Kurt! Let's get to work!"

"And what part would you prefer to do today, Randall Lee?"

"It appears that it's my turn to supervise today."

"Great! You supervise. How do we do this now? There's no room to lay the sections down end to end to work on them."

"How about securing the bottom section to the platform with a rope so it can't slip or move on us and lean it against the cave wall. Then push the next one up the bottom section, just like you pushed all the big logs up here that we used for beams."

"One step at a time, you mean?" Kurt said.

"Yeah. I'd suggest that up here you tie a rope around your waist and secure it to the platform, just in case you slip or something. At best, it's going to be pretty precarious up there."

"Precarious! A good word."

He smiled at Randy.

"Actually, the rope is another good thought. You just keep that brain in gear. Don't hesitate to make suggestions,

now. I've never done this before, you know." Kurt said, obviously nervous – not scared, mind you – about the whole undertaking.

And rightly so! It was a very dangerous task he was about to begin. He would be working eighty to ninety feet above a solid rock floor. His ladder would be leaning up against slippery wet walls of sheer rock. He would be working from the same ladder he was building. It was right for Kurt to be nervous about the undertaking. He arranged the safety rope and secured it around his waist.

Kurt chose a spot that Randy could see from where he lay. The first section was made secure to the platform. The second section was slid up into place. Step by careful step, Kurt raised that middle section higher and higher until finally he could sit it on the top of the first. He had cut the two apart in a V shape so they slid together and interlocked. Excellent thinking, Randy thought, though he didn't distract his friend by mentioning it.

Kurt had bundled up four splints at the end of a rope and carefully pulled them up to where he stood. He had already started each nail in them. One at a time he nailed them into place. Then he bound them top to bottom with clothesline rope. It turned out to be a completely sturdy splice. Kurt carefully backed down the ladder to the platform

"Nice going, Kurt. Excellent work! Just excellent!" Randy said genuinely impressed and excited.

"Can I start breathing again?" Kurt said, only partly joking.

"Sit down and rest. That must have been exhausting."

It didn't take much urging. Kurt sat down heavily and looked at Randy.

"You know how scary that was? It was the scariest thing I've ever done in my whole life. And you know what else? This next part is going to be ten times scarier than that!"

"Just rest a while. You did great! It was like watching you play ball. Every move was just right. Nothing extra. Always just enough. You were great!" Randy said.

"Ah ha! So, you have watched me play, haven't you?"

"Well, I must admit, I snuck in a few times. I always figured I'd repay the ticket fee when I finally got some money.

Really I did."

"I thought you said you hated football."

"No. What I said was I hated the idea of playing football. I love watching the game."

"Maybe Springfield High just found its new equipment manager," Kurt said.

"Equipment manager? That sounds like a high-class name for jock strap laundry boy to me." Randy said.

"Well, there's that, too. But it might be a ticket to some more friends. It would surely be a ticket into all the games – home and away. It's a paying job – money for dates and new sneakers. Better at least think about it. I just might have some pull, if you need it."

Randy would think about it, but not until later on, after he saw if he were ever going to walk again and found out about other more immediately important things like that.

"Well," Kurt said after a short rest, "It's like you said about the mouthwash, friend, I'd rather get to it than just sit around worrying about it."

"Before you begin taking up that last section, how about tying two ropes around the middle of what you have built so far, and securing them back down here somewhere. That way it can't tip or give and cause you to fall," Randy suggested.

"That sounds like the greatest, 'How About,' I've ever heard," Kurt said.

That took ten minutes, but was more than worth the time. That completed, the new section was pushed up into position ready for the trip to the top – again, one careful step after another. Randy was amazed as he watched how gracefully and adeptly Kurt moved. It was just as he had described it. Every move had a purpose and neither too much nor too little in any direction. Kurt's sense of balance was nearly perfect.

Randy smiled to himself. "What some guys won't go through just so they can get back to kissing girls!"

As he reached the second section, Kurt wished he had tested it beforehand. Too late for that. Upward and onward! Kurt thought his arms would give out. They had never ever ached like this and he suddenly realized just much damage the hammering had done to his shoulder. His fingers were cut

and bleeding – he had hidden that from Randy before.

Finally, he saw the last three steps in front of him.

"Just three more, Kurt. I can do just three more," he told himself over and over. In fact, he was still uttering the phrase when he found himself at the top. One more shove and it would be in place. How could he muster one more shove, he wondered? Then he heard Randy cheering him on from down below and suddenly it seemed easy. Up and in. He rested with his forehead against the ladder, breathing heavily and wiping the blood from his hands onto his jeans.

The splinting and binding went every bit as easily as it had before. He wanted so much to climb those last fifteen steps to freedom right that very minute, but he didn't. He looked up to make sure it reached out into the sunlight. It did and by four feet. It was a feeling like he had never felt before. A feeling he had never even imagined possible before. Success! Triumph! Conquest! Mastery! It was all those things, but it was also something else he couldn't put his finger on just then. Something superbly wonderful, he knew. He just couldn't picture it clearly. Maybe it didn't even need to be named.

He made his way back down to the platform.

"There is sunshine up there Randy! Sunshine and fresh air! It's all up there waiting for us. Just like it used to be, Randy! We're really getting out of here!

Kurt stood there on the platform looking up into the sky. Tears rolled down his cheeks. He didn't know why, and he didn't even care.

"We did it old man! Kurt said. "We really did it! You and your toothpick bridges. Who'd have ever thought it?"

They rested. They smiled. They laughed nervously through their tears. Nearly two weeks of fear and anxiety and doubt, washing away down their dirty faces, leaving trails, not unlike the stream below that had become their good companion and source of life during that terrible and wonderful adventure. They held hands one final time (that is not, of course, to be passed on to Kurt's friends!).

"So, how do we get you out of here?"

"I've been thinking and maybe it's just best that you go on up and into town and get help. I'll be okay and you're so

tired. Maybe that would be the best plan."

"Nothing doing. We said we were getting out of this hole together, and that is what we are going to do."

Kurt left no wiggle room about that. Randy nodded. It had been decided. Randy advanced his plan. Kurt would make a backboard for Randy by binding the last few smaller poles together, side by side. Then he would bind Randy to the board and attach it to a section of the strong rope. Kurt would then go up on top with four of the ten foot poles and fix them, tepee like, spanning the opening. He would use the top 'X' it created as a track through which to run the rope and then pull Randy out.

The plan was in some ways risky. Randy might begin to twist or sway from side to side and hit the walls. He could use his hands and arms pretty well, however and the boys decided he could fend off any unfriendly walls or ladder parts that came his way.

Several hours later, Randy was tightly bound onto the backboard. Kurt stood him up and rested him against the wall. Blood flowed from his head and he became dizzy. He called a short time out until it cleared up.

"Now," Randy said, interrupting the process, "You need to go down and get Otto and take him out with you."

Kurt hesitated. He looked up at the opening. He looked at Randy. He nodded and made one final trip down the rope. In five minutes, he and Otto were back. He put Otto on the ladder, and he scampered to safety.

"Okay, then. Are you all ready, Randy?"

"Almost," came Randy's reply.

"Almost?" Kurt repeated as if asking for clarification.

"This is probably the dumbest request you will ever receive in your entire life, Kurt."

"I seem to get those frequently since I've met you, Randy," Kurt said with a big smile. "What's up this time?"

"I've decided that once we leave this place the chance that you will ever do this one thing again is about zero. But you might so long as we are still down here."

"What one thing is that, Randy?"

"I was wondering if you would you give me a big hug just one more time? See, I said it was ..."

Before Randy could finish the phrase, Kurt moved close, and the two boys – the two young men – held each other for a long time. It was a gentle hug. It was a tearful hug. It was a warm and sincere and wonderful hug between two best friends.

Kurt made his way up the ladder as Randy watched through his still, tear-blurred vision. Kurt raised his hands toward the sky and let out a shout that could be heard well into the next county. Slowly and carefully, Kurt hoisted his precious package up and out into the fresh air. It worked exactly as planned. On top, he untied Randy and slid him onto the fresh smelling green grass.

"Everything has a color," Randy said. "I had forgotten how everything has a color out here."

"Isn't this just the most beautiful sight you can imagine?" Kurt said. He lay down and rolled over and over in the grass, finally stopping on his back to look up into the blue sky, dotted here and there with pure white puffy clouds.

"There just aren't words are there, Kurt?" Randy said.

"There just aren't words, Randy," Kurt agreed.

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## **CHAPTER TWENTY**

A week had passed since that grand moment when Randy and Kurt first breathed the fresh air and smelled the green grass. The days since, had not followed the boy's master plan very precisely. Kurt spent one night in the hospital for tests and to get his walking cast put on. Randy had been there five days for those and other reasons. In addition to his broken leg, he also had four broken ribs, a concussion, and a severely strained back and neck that had needed more time to rest and to begin mending. They were told it was nothing that wouldn't heal like new again, given time and patience. Joanne had visited Randy every day – twice on some days – and she always gave him that special, more than required, kiss when she arrived, and again when she left. Randy was in love!

The doctors had been impressed with how well the legs had been set. Kurt would play ball again and Randy would enjoy all of his outdoor activities, time permitting. Being Springfield High's new equipment manager would take up a good deal of his time.

Kurt's family and Randy's mother were, of course, overjoyed at their boys' safe return. It was a week later and the hugging still hadn't stopped – when the two of them met and when they parted. Mrs. Reynolds was offered a job at the bank if she wanted it. She agreed to consider it.

When Randy checked out of the hospital, his Mom and Kurt and Joanne were all there to take him home. When his mother approached the desk to arrange payments on the bill, the lady informed her it had already been taken care of by

some friend who wished to remain anonymous. Randy looked at Kurt. Kurt winked. Nothing more would ever be said about it.

So, it finally reached that seventh day, and, according to their master plan, early morning found the boys sitting in the grass, beside the opening to the Bottomless Pit.

"It's been quite a week!" Kurt said.

"It's been quite a summer!" Randy added.

"That time down there," Kurt began, "It seems all fuzzy – like a dream or something."

"You, too? I was thinking about that last night. It's like I know it happened, but yet it seems so long ago, or something. Like an old black and white movie I once watched."

"Well, it must have really happened because here sit Kurt Watson and Randy Reynolds and no blows have been thrown," Kurt said smiling.

"Four broken ribs, two broken legs and gashes so big you could float yachts in them, and still the whole terrible two weeks down there were more than worth it, as it turned out." Randy said.

Kurt nodded.

"I know what you are saying."

The boys remained silent for some time staring into the foreboding black hole there in front of them.

"Somewhere down there I think we left the Captain and Brother K," Randy said.

"Yeah, I know. I guess we just needed them for a little while – sort of like a transition team somewhere between Maybe Friends and For Sure Best Friends.

Sometimes Kurt's insight utterly amazed Randy. He nodded in agreement and offered a quick smile.

Then Randy turned his head toward Kurt with that, I've-got-this-dumb thing-I-have-to-ask-you-look, by then more than a little familiar to Kurt.

"So, what is it? What's on your mind?" Kurt said, happy inside that he understood his friend so well.

"There's something I've been thinking about a lot – worrying about even, maybe. It's something you said to me that day I was laying there totally helpless and you said I smelled so bad you were going to give me a bath."

"Yeah. What about it?"

"Do you remember what you said to me?"

"Sure, I remember. I said something like, 'I love you, Pal, but even so, when you stink this much you're still going to have to get a bath.' "

"Do you think you really meant it?" Randy asked.

"You got the bath, didn't you?" Kurt said, grinning from ear-to-ear.

"You know what I mean

."Yeah, I know what you mean, and yes, I meant it when I said I loved you. I'm not sure I want that spread around to the guys in Springfield, you know, but then again, I guess, why not."

"I feel the same toward you, you know. I just never found a time or a way to tell you down there. Maybe I just wasn't as brave about it as you were."

"Hey, you told me in a hundred ways. Believe me, after we made it through that first week, there was no doubt in my mind how you felt."

"I'm glad for that," Randy said. Then, after a silent moment he continued. "I wonder how many different kinds of love there must be."

"I don't know," Kurt said. "I know I've really never felt this one before. I mean I've had lots of friends before, you know, but none I'd give my life for, like I would for you."

Randy nodded with complete understanding. They smiled and caught each other's gaze, holding it for a long, long moment. That was the last time the boys would speak together about their love for one another, but that in no way ever diminished it. As Randy had predicted, there would be few more private hugs between them – only the occasional public hug after winning a big game.

At that moment, they both suddenly understood all of that. Their love and those special hugs would be treasured forever. Although their eyes filled with tears, none were allowed to escape and trickle down a cheek. It was a great and wonderful new feeling deep inside each of them that day – a great and wonderful feeling that they each knew would remain with them throughout their lives, however far apart those lives might take them.

