

A photograph of a ghost town street scene. In the foreground, there is a wooden hand pump with a metal handle and a spout, set within a wooden trough. The background shows several weathered wooden buildings, including a two-story structure with a balcony. The street is unpaved and dusty. The sky is clear and blue. The text "Ghost Town Gold" is overlaid in large, bold, red letters.

Ghost Town Gold

**David Drake
Tom Gnagey**

Fun and Adventure for ages 10 thru 15

GHOST TOWN GOLD:

Three Lives Converge

Adventure story for 10 to 14 year olds

Tom Gnagey
David Drake

Family of Man Press

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CHAPTER ONE: The Three of Them

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Meet Adam Morgan

Adam Morgan was twelve – most days he felt much older than that. Four years before he had lost his mother – his only parent – in a house fire. That night, he had been camping alone in the gently rolling hills of northwest Arkansas where he lived in a very small town many miles from a city. His elderly grandmother on his mother’s side had taken him in – well, that is not fully accurate. Adam had no other relatives so the folks there in *Lonely Hollow* just assumed that was where he’d go after the tragedy – the old lady really had no say so in the arrangement. That following morning the minister showed up on her front porch with the boy, tipped his hat to her and left.

Adam liked to go to church and hear the stories the Reverend would tell. It was where he went after he heard about the fire and his mother. He and his tears curled up on a pew and slept. Adam wasn’t all that fond of school. Truth be told, the school wasn’t all that fond of Adam, either. He and the principal had an arrangement; after a three-day absence, the man would come looking for him and take him back to school; that was apparently the law. The first day back, Adam generally did his assignments in his classroom. By noon the second day he had usually been sent to the office for the afternoon. (He liked to sing and dance on his desk! For some

reason his teacher was unable to appreciate his talent.) Regardless of any of that, at the end of the school year he scored at the top of his class on the final tests.

In his office, the principal had a shelf of books for Adam to read. He preferred it there reading about things he felt were important – pirates, the old west, and the how-to books: How to Fish, How to Hunt, How to Camp, How to Fix Things Around the House, even, How to Repair Shoes and Belts. He also liked adventure stories and recently didn't even mind if there were girls in them. By the third day, Adam just showed up at the office first thing in the morning and spent the day. It wasn't that Adam was dumb, in fact quite the opposite. He just believed the school had little to offer him that he couldn't learn better on his own. No one who really knew him would disagree.

Adam had a wonderful smile and a good attitude about most things. He was not as worrier, believing things would work out just fine. The folks in his little town liked him and provided things for him that his grandmother couldn't: clothes, sweets, school supplies – most things, actually. She lived her life and he lived his. Sometimes they spoke. Once in a while she would bake things – a cake, a pie, cinnamon rolls – and would leave them out on the kitchen table for him. There was usually milk. Adam really had no need for money.

One warm, April morning – the third day of his current three-day vacation from school – the mailman approached the porch where Adam was contemplating the beauty in the cracks in the ceiling paint from where he lay in the swing. The mailman spoke:

“A letter addressed to Master Adam Morgan. It looks official – from a Lawyer way out in Colorado – Denver.”

Adam sat up. The man stepped up onto the porch and reached it to him across a tall, potted plant.

“Thanks, Jimmy. How's the family?”

“Everybody's doin' just fine. Your grandma okay?”

“I suppose.”

Jimmy left across the lawn, whistling and sorting through the letters as he went.

Adam was far more interested in the cracks than in a letter so he promptly folded it and stuffed it into his rear jeans

pocket. He figured it could be read anytime, but the cracks in the ceiling seemed to be widening and shedding flakes of paint. *That* was simply fascinating to him.

The next morning, he met the principal at the edge of the school ground.

“Thought I’d make it easy for you today. You expend a lot of energy in my behalf. It’s the least I can do.”

The principal put his arm around the boy’s shoulders and they crossed the playground toward the building. Adam enjoyed physical contact like that. There had never been many hugs and kisses in his young life – even before grandma’s house.

“Looks like a letter in your hip pocket,” the principal said.

“It is. From some lawyer out in Colorado.”

“Important?”

“I have no idea. Haven’t opened it yet.”

Although the principal wasn’t surprised, he offered information and a suggestion.

“Mail from Lawyers is usually important. You might find it best to see what it is.”

Adam stopped on the spot and unfolded the envelope. The man stopped beside him. The boy figured the stationery would have been considered fancy – yellowish-brown and very heavy, textured paper. For some reason, he smelled it and shrugged. He took his time opening it. It contained several sheets – the same color and texture as the envelope. The first paragraph caught his interest.

Dear Master Morgan.

In the matter of land claim number 1854-1,456: Adam Morgan is hereby notified that it is established that you are one of three legal heirs to this land claim, filed May, 1, 1854, by one Clay Markey, who has been found to be your great, great, great, great grandfather on your mother’s side. You must appear in my office in person by noon on May first, this year, to claim your share of the land as yours,

and must then reside on it for one year to establish ownership. The land encompasses the whole of the ghost town known as Clay Flats on Little Green Creek between the towns of Rico and Coal Bank. Markey founded it during the so-called Pikes Peak Gold Rush of 1854. Your failure to execute this claim will result in your portion being forfeited and turned back to the State of Colorado, parks division.

*Sincerely,
Ambrose T Rutherford, LLD.*

The second sheet listed the legal terms that would locate the land on a map, and phone numbers and such with which to contact the law office. The third listed the other two owners with whom, presumably, Adam shared that great, great, great, great grandfather, Clay Markey – a man Adam had never heard of. It would make them his relatives – if pretty distant. They were: Mateo Moreno from California and Colborn Madsen from Kansas. He figured the Moreno guy had some Latino blood in his veins. He wasn't sure about the name Colborn – Scandinavian, maybe. He wondered how old they were. The letter gave no indication.

He looked up at the principal.

“Just family stuff. I'll take care of it later. May I start out with you in the office today? I'd like to do some research in the atlas.”

The principal understood that whether he *let* him or not, he'd be in the office by 8:31 – school took up at 8:30. Getting on his teacher's nerves in such a short period of time usually involved him dancing on his desk with his pants down around his ankles.

Between the atlas and Google, Adam kept busy that day. Before he left that afternoon, he had located 'his' town in southwest Colorado and mapped out a route to get him to Denver. He had read about hobos that hopped freight cars on trains and figured that was his best bet – having no money as was the case. He had plenty of time to travel the 850 miles.

He figured if the trains averaged 60 miles an hour that would only be a 15-hour ride. Still, he figured it would be good to be the first of the three to arrive – in case there was to be a choice of beds or some such thing.

That evening he found a small suitcase in the attic. He packed a wool blanket, his rubber boots and winter coat, the only two, clean changes of clothes he owned, and the book the principal had given him for Christmas - *The Adventures of Henry Thoreau: A Young Man's Unlikely Path to Walden Pond* by Michael Sims. It was about a man who chose to live alone in the wilderness next to a wonderful little body of water. Adam had already read it twice.

He thought about taking the family Bible, but figured there would be Bibles everywhere so why lug the extra weight. He also had copies of the scriptures from several of the world's other major religions, but libraries would have them. He sometimes wondered how god managed to keep track of, and take care of, all the religions human beings had thought up.

He knew of a short-line railroad that mostly carried logs from central Arkansas up to someplace in southern Missouri and figured that would be a good place to start his journey. Its rails ran no more than three miles west of *Lonely Hollow*. He didn't have any special feelings about leaving his grandmother's place. She and his mother had not spoken for more years than he had been alive. He had never been told why. Since the fire, he thought of himself as being alone in the world. The chance at finding new relatives, sent ripples of excitement through him.

He wrote a short note to his grandmother and left it on the kitchen table. "*I'm leaving. Don't worry. I'll be fine. Have a good life – what's left of it for you.*" He signed it, "*Adam Morgan,*" as if she might not know who just plain old Adam was. In many ways, Adam (*Adam Morgan*, that is) was a strange young human being. That was fine with him. He never intended to try and be like anybody except himself.

He finished the peanut butter pie she had left out for him and ten minutes later was some ways west of town toting the suitcase. It was going on five in the afternoon. He loved to walk. Well before six that evening, he had a spot arranged

close to the tracks near the top of a long hill. He figured that with all the weight from the log cars behind it, the engine would have slowed down considerably by that point so he would have an easier time climbing aboard. He had run his belt through the handle on the suitcase so his hands would be free to grab and pull and lift him up off the ground and onto one of the cars. Adam tended to be well-prepared.

Within the hour, he heard the whistle south of him. He stood up and watched for the train to come into sight at the bottom of the hill. Why it sounded its whistle so often he couldn't understand. Perhaps to warn off the deer and raccoons. That was what he would have done if he had been the engineer.

He had been right – it slowed to a crawl by the time it hit the crest of the hill. Adam had waited out of sight as the engine passed, then waited as it started around the curve before he moved close to the track. He knew that once up on the flat of the hill top it would pick up speed so he had to move quickly. He did. He grabbed the short metal ladder at the front of a flatbed car, pulled himself up until his feet were solidly on the lowest rung and then lifted himself onto the bed of the car. There was a good five feet of open space left in front of the tall pile of logs. They were chained in place and didn't move even as the car swayed back and forth a bit as it navigated the curve.

He found a more or less comfortable spot with his back against the ends of logs and settled in for the first leg of his grand adventure.

* * *

Meet Mateo Moreno

(Pronounced Mah-tā-o Mor-ā-no)

Mateo Moreno was thirteen – most days he felt much older than that. Eighteen months before he had lost his mother in an automobile accident. He had never known his father, but had been told the man was Native American. During the first month after the tragedy he found himself in foster care. He hated foster care. His mother had just one rule for Mateo, 'Don't come home during the day unless you're

bleeding' and there often was blood – they lived in a tough, dangerous part of the city. By comparison with the sort of freedom he had always known, foster care was a drag – an unbearable drag – rules, curfews, chores – no thanks. The third day in placement he ran away. He apparently wasn't very good at running away because by the fifth day he found himself in a second foster home – fewer children and all boys. Mateo stuck around for two days to get a feel for how it would be there. It earned a big fat thumbs down. It wasn't that the parents weren't nice enough people, but they acted like – well, parents. That would just not work.

He planned much better for his second run away attempt. It really wasn't just an *attempt* because it succeeded. Mateo remained on his own for something over seventeen months. He lived under the name, Matt Reno, cleverly arranged from his own name, he thought. When pressed, he would admit it was a nick name.

He was supposed to receive a government check of some kind because he was a dependent child. He changed his mailing address with the state office and received things in care of general delivery, at *Lucern Valley*, a tiny town in southern California. He had traveled south from *Hesperia* where he had lived with his mother and had been in foster homes. Being a very clever young man he had also added a father's name to the general delivery arrangement, Mateo Moreno. That way his checks would appear to arrive to the father not the son. He had state ID as Mateo and in such a small town and with such a gift at charming people he regularly checked for mail under both names. He figured having a father involved that way would make it seem legitimate for him to arrive alone for the inquiries and pickups. His story was they were living out in the desert to the east – that his father made jewelry. After showing his ID the first time he was never asked for it again; an advantage of a small town and a trustworthy face.

The checks came monthly. He didn't know if the foster care department knew about them or not. They probably did. When they didn't arrive at his last foster home he hoped they would write it off to confusion involving his three changes of addresses in such a short time. He knew at some point he'd

need to move on and start over if he were to remain hidden. They were \$222.00 each. He could easily live on that so tried to save some back each month while he took time to plan his next big move.

Mateo spoke both Spanish and English like natives. It had been Spanish in his home and neighborhood and English in school his entire life. He did well in school and missed it – he hadn't attended since the accident. There was a resort hotel not far from town and he often spent time there translating for both English and Spanish speakers. They tipped well. There were often girls there. Mateo came with good looks, a good physique, and charm. That was a winning trio where girls his age were concerned. At the pool, he would take off his shirt, put on his smile and turn on his charm.

He lived in a long-abandoned prospectors shack between the town and Motel. By most people's standards it didn't amount to anything, but to Mateo it served his purposes well. He had dragged a mattress to it from a dumpster in town. The door closed tightly and kept out the little critters. He found a sheet of Plexiglas and covered the window so it let light in and kept bugs and birds out. He did just fine there. He showered at the motel pool facility. He had his eye out for a cabinet and some sort of comfortable chair. Those things would take up most of the remaining space inside his 'castle'.

It wasn't to be his permanent home. He just needed time to make plans. To make the *proper* plans he figured he needed to take as much time as it took.

One day at the post office the clerk's face brightened as the boy appeared.

"Got a letter for Mateo Moreno. From a lawyer, up in Denver. You and your dad aren't going 'big city' on us now are you?"

Mateo laughed it off with a smile and received it as casually as if it were an ad for a carwash special on Saturday. He slipped it into his rear pocket – which was about all he was wearing – low slung cutoffs and no shirt or shoes there in the heat.

The post office clerk had more to say.

"I've been meaning to remember to tell you, Matt. A couple of weeks back a man was inquiring about you. He had

your name mixed up with your dad's – thinking the boy was named Mateo. He showed a private detective badge. I didn't correct him or give him any personal information like where you live or things like that. He just wanted to make sure he had the correct mailing address."

"I'm sure you did just fine. Thanks."

He walked west out of town at his usual pace, becoming more and more upset about the detective. He hoped he worked for the lawyer and really was there just to get the mailing address. It seemed unlikely. He waited until he reached his shack to open the envelope. Inside, the cool felt good. There were trees on both the east and west. He was sure he didn't know the lawyer. He hoped it wasn't some legal papers about the way he was using the government checks. They were made out to him and he did qualify for them so he couldn't see what the problem might be. Colorado wouldn't be involved in that.

First things, first. It was noon. He was hungry. He scrounged through his food box – chips, a PayDay candy bar, and warm Mountain Dew. The candy bar was always sticky in the heat, but that just allowed him to lick his fingers clean and enjoy it for that much longer. He could manage on that until he got to the motel later where he'd pick up a couple of hotdogs and some ice-cream. Often, he was treated to such things by the girls. Being a handsome Latino/Indian lad had many advantages.

He took out the envelope and tore it open carefully making sure he didn't damage the return address. Inside he found three sheets.

Dear Master Moreno:

In the matter of land claim number 1854-1,456. Mateo Moreno is hereby notified that it is established that you are one of three legal heirs to this land claim, filed May, 1, 1854, by one Clay Markey, who has been found to be your great, great, great, great grandfather on your mother's side. You must appear in my office in person by noon on May first, this year, to claim your share of the land

as yours and must then reside on it for one year to establish ownership. The land encompasses the whole of the town known as Clay Flats on Little Green Creek between the towns of Rico and Coal Bank. Markey founded it during the so-called Pikes Peak Gold Rush of 1854. Your failure to execute this claim will result in forfeiting the land and your portion will be turned back to the State of Colorado, parks division.

*Sincerely,
Ambrose T Rutherford, LLD.*

The second sheet listed the legal terms that would locate the land on a map, and phone numbers and such with which to contact the law office. The third listed the other two owners, all of whom, presumably, shared his great, great, great, great grandfather, Clay Markey – a man Mateo had never heard of. It would make them all relatives – if pretty distant. They were: Adam Morgan from Arkansas and Colborn Madsen from Kansas. He figured he was the only one of the lot with Latino or Native American blood in his veins. He wasn't sure about the name Colborn – Scandinavian, maybe. Morgan – sounded very American, maybe of English ancestry. He wondered how old they were. The letter gave no indication.

He held it open while he thought.

'Gold couldn't be all bad. I've heard that down through history gold has turned friends against friends. I have no idea if those other two can be trusted. I suppose my best bet is to get there as soon as I can. I've had success hitchhiking before. That's how I'll begin anyway. I have some money. No idea how much a bus would cost. I can find out.'

He refolded the sheets and returned them to the envelope, which he returned to his pocket. If he were going to be on the road, he had to do something about clothes. The church in town had what they called a 'Clothes Cellar' where they offered used things to wear at rock bottom prices – free if you had no money. That is where he would begin.

He finished his snacks, closed up his place and left on

the trot back to town. An hour later he had two outfits he thought would be great for traveling. One pair of shoes, two pair of socks, a pair of jeans and a pair of cargo pants. He went with three shirts because of the sweating thing – one, tight fitting white T-shirt, one hoodie for cooler weather as he got into Colorado, and one button down the front, mostly just because he liked the blue, orange and tan colors. There were three suitcases from which to pick. He selected the smallest, which he was certain would be big enough. That all came to \$9.58. He added a wallet for another dollar and felt fully decked out. He had not included underwear because he hated underwear and anyway, nobody would ever know.

He'd walk State Route 18 west to Interstate 15, which he'd follow north and west through Nevada, the tip of Arizona, and through Utah into Colorado. His last geography class was actually paying off. What was it called? 'Practical Geography of the Southwestern United States'. There were probably other things he had learned that would be useful as well. Good old knowledge. You just never knew when it might come along and save the day. He missed being in school. The route he had in mind was mostly along heavy traffic highways so he felt confident he wouldn't want for rides.

He would start that night after the sun went down so he wouldn't be walking into it. It would be cooler. Suddenly he was looking forward to his adventure. He had never been outside of southern California.

He stood close to the road and held up his thumb.

* * *

Meet Colborn Madsen

Colborn Madsen was fourteen – most days he felt much older than that. He had lived with Mary and Mac since he had been a baby. They were not relatives. They were not family friends. They were not his adoptive parents. They had a small farm in eastern Kansas. Late one night fourteen years before and well after they had gone to bed, there was a knock at their door. Mac went to see about it. He opened the door. On the bottom step was a basket covered in a blue blanket. In it was a boy baby. With him was an envelope. There was a

note explaining the mother was seriously ill and unable to care for the baby. She had been told that Mary and Mac were upstanding people with no children after ten years of marriage. She pleaded with them to see that her son found a good home. His birth certificate was included – Colborn Madsen. He had been born in Topeka and was seven days old. No mention was made of his father and that space on the certificate merely had a line drawn through it. The mother was listed as Ann Madsen.

Mary and Mac loved the boy from the moment they uncovered him there on their kitchen table. They had raised him well. He liked the farm and was a good worker with many helpful ideas that made Mac's farm the most productive in the county. He was tall and muscular for his age. He was inventive, good with his hands, and had an insatiable appetite for reading. He made excellent grades and, as a freshman, that year, was a starting running back on the football team – it was a very small school.

From an early age his name had been shortened to Cole. Although he never complained about being an only child he had always wished for brothers. It seemed that he and Mac, who he called, Dad, were each other's best friends. He figured that wasn't the way things were supposed to be. Still, he was never heard to complain about it. He knew about the circumstances of his birth and the conditions surrounding his unofficial membership in the family. Living so far from town he seldom had friends come out to the farm. On Friday nights during football season he was allowed to stay overnight in town with his best friend from school.

On an October night, after the sixth game of the season, Cole stayed in town. It had been a very good evening. They won the game big, and afterward he and his friend double dated at the dance in the gym. He got his first real kiss in the shadows while he walked her home.

From the boy's bedroom window on the second floor they noticed a red glow out to the east. The short version of the story was that ten farms burned in a fast-moving prairie fire. Cole's was one of them. Mary and Mac perished. He was alone.

His friend's parents insisted that he stay with them at

least until the end of the semester. That would give them time to work something out. It dragged on toward the end of the second semester. Cole knew he was a burden on the family. He got a job and insisted on contributing to their finances.

Early in March Cole received a letter from a lawyer in Colorado. The first paragraph caught his interest.

Dear Master Madsen:

In the matter of land claim number 1854-1,456. Colborn Madsen is hereby notified that it is established that you are one of three legal heirs to this land claim, filed May, 1, 1854, by one Clay Markey, who has been found to be your great, great, great, great grandfather on your mother's side. You must appear in my office in person by noon on May First, this year, to claim your share of the land as yours and must then reside on it for one year to establish ownership. The land encompasses the whole of the ghost town known as Clay Flats on Little Green Creek between Rico and Coal Bank. Markey founded it during the so-called Pikes Peak Gold Rush of 1854. Your failure to execute this claim will result in forfeiting the land and your portion will be turned back to the State of Colorado, parks division.

Sincerely,

Ambrose T Rutherford, LLD.

The second sheet listed the legal terms that would locate the land on a map, and phone numbers and such with which to contact the law office. The third listed the other two owners, all three of them, presumably, shared a great, great, great, great grandfather, Clay Markey – a man Cole had never heard of. It would make them all relatives – if pretty distant. They were: Mateo Moreno from California and Adam Morgan from Arkansas. He figured the Moreno guy had some Latino blood in his veins. He wasn't sure about the name Morgan –

English, maybe. He wondered how old they were. The letter gave no indication.

Cole's plan came together in one brilliant convergence of thoughts. He would gain permission from the school to finish his work early. He would make his way to Colorado, if only for the summer. He would have to wait and see how things worked out. The trip would be about eight hundred miles across most of Kansas and half way across Colorado. He would need to get there rapidly with the May first deadline fast approaching. He had some money, but he thought he should save that for food. Perhaps hitchhiking would be the answer.

His friend's parents were not convinced his idea was a good one, but they had no authority to keep him from it and no money to advance him for bus fare. He finished his work, received a copy of his transcript to carry with him to his next school, and said goodbye to the several good friends he had made since moving to town. It was more difficult than he had expected. Close friends were new to him and he was unaware of how strong a bond he had built with several of them. He promised to write. All teens said that. Few teens wrote. They all understood. There would be a new life with new allegiances.

He packed a duffle bag his friend's father provided – large, strong, weather proof. It was exactly the kind of going away gift he needed. He said his goodbyes the night before and was out of the house at sunup on April 20th.

As he held up his thumb to the traffic for the first time, it hit him: he stood at the point where the past was behind him and future was ahead of him. For the first time, he felt uneasy – frightened even. He had never really been on his own. How stupid had he been to think he could make it all by himself!

The third vehicle stopped. A grain truck – empty – on its way to Salina to pick up a load. He was welcomed to ride in the back. Something about the familiarity of the truck, the smell of gasoline and grain, calmed his nerves. He relaxed, leaned back against his new bag and was soon asleep.

CHAPTER TWO Three Adventures Begin

Adam and the Hobo

The railroad car in front of the flatbed car Adam boarded was an enclosed box car. He had noticed its doors were open, signaling, he figured, that it was empty. As storm clouds began forming just to the west, he figured he would be better off inside. He detached himself from his suitcase and went exploring.

The box car had a ladder on the back. He climbed it and looked over the top. It was as he had thought it would be – there was a hatch – a little door – on top. He crawled to it across the top to make sure it could be opened. It could. He returned for his suitcase and dropped it inside ahead of him. He worked himself so he was hanging down from the top and dropped the eight feet to the floor. The landing was not entirely comfortable. It was dark. The door was only partly open. There was no way to shut the hatch from the floor so he moved to the front where he would be safe from rain if it came. He took a seat on the floor with his back against the wall and his legs spread out in front of him. He listened to sounds of the train and felt the regular rhythm of the wheels against the tracks. Adam loved new experiences. That one seemed fine in all ways. In some ways, it was like a lullaby.

Just as he was feeling very good about his trip to that point, he heard a voice out of the darkness from the other end of the boxcar.

“Good evening, son.”

Adam pulled his knees up and wrapped his arms around them as if trying to provide some protection against the person to whom that voice belonged. It hadn't been scary or harsh. It had just been unexpected. He figured he was more startled than frightened although he'd keep his answer tentative until things worked on a bit.

"Good evening to you, too, sir," he managed.

"Please don't be frightened," the voice said. "I'm as gentle as a cat."

Adam's experiences with cats hadn't been all that good. They didn't seem to like baths no matter what temperature water he used. Still, he kept a good thought about it.

"I'm a kid."

"I noticed. I'm not. Name's Jacob."

"I figured – that you were not a kid – from your deep voice. Quite pretty, actually. I'm Adam. You a hobo?"

"Some would call me that. I prefer to think of myself as an intrepid rider of the rails."

"I don't know the word, 'intrepid'."

"It means fearless, bold, heroic."

The voice had been quite dramatic.

"A good word. Doubt if I'm an intrepid anything. I'm just twelve. You can probably tell since my voice is changing."

"Hadn't noticed. You're apparently moving on – the suitcase and all."

"You saw that, huh? I have an appointment in Colorado early in May – a new living arrangement. I guess I'm getting a head start."

"Relatives?" the voice asked.

"Could say that. Sort of arranged some time ago by a great grandfather."

Adam thought his response had been hilarious, but of course he couldn't share any of that.

"Glad you have a safe place to head for."

"How about you, Sir. Got a place you're heading for?"

"Where ever the turning wheels take me."

"That can't be true, sir."

"Oh!"

"No, because they have taken you to this very spot and you're making no move to stay here."

"I see. A philosopher."

"That's a kind way of putting it. My principal, back home, called me a pain in the behind, and by 'behind' he meant . . .

"I get the idea."

"Since I sort of have you here as a captive listener, may I ask you a question, Sir?"

"Of course. I may choose not to answer."

"That seems fair. First, is it safe to ride the rails this way?"

"Yes and no."

"A little more would help."

At that moment, there was flash of lightning and a clap of thunder, brighter and louder than any Adam had ever heard. He figured *that* was closer to frightening than just being startled. It shook the boxcar. The train immediately slowed down. It would have been nice if the deep voice had said something reassuring, but it didn't.

"What's going on do you think?" Adam asked.

For the first time, he saw the body that belonged to the voice. It was standing at the open door looking out, up ahead.

"Not good, son. Looks like the engine has been hit by lightning and separated from the cars. We just came up a steep hill. Probably means we are about to roll back down."

"Shall we jump off?"

By that time, Adam was by the man's side. He saw that the track ran along the top of a tall, rocky, man-made hill. To jump would mean certain injury. The man reached out and put his hands on Adam's shoulders. He marched him back to the front.

"We will be safer up here. If the train goes off the track, that back end will take the brunt of any impact that happens. I suggest we lay flat, face down, with our hands protecting our heads."

They soon took that position in the middle of the car, a yard or so from the front wall. Adam could feel the train picking up speed. The sound of the wheels rose to a higher pitch the faster they turned. Soon the car was swaying back and forth wildly. Another bolt of lightning hit the roof and tore off a section of the back wall and part of the roof that was

attached to it.

Trying to brighten his own spirits, Adam said, "Pardon me while I pee my pants."

"Be patient and I'll probably join you."

It was good for an unexpected chuckle.

The wind roared through the car and curtains of heavy rain poured in from the open top and the doors. The man reached out and pulled Adam close, sheltering him as much as he could.

That's when it happened. The car began to tilt – just a bit at first but then more and more. It must have gone over all the way because some time later when Adam opened his eyes he found himself laying on the grass part way up a slope some twenty yards from the tracks. Railroad cars were strewn, smashed into bits, all along the track. He looked around for the man with the voice. He was nowhere to be seen.

A man, woman and three youngsters came running up to him.

"You poor dear," she said sitting down and cradling his head in her lap. Johnny get water. Peter tear your shirt into strips. This boy's head and chest have been badly injured."

"I'll go look for others," the man said.

Adam figured they were members of a family. Probably one that lived close by and had heard the wreck.

"There is a man who was with me," Adam said.

The man nodded and moved off to search among the wreckage.

Adam had the headache of all headaches. He found himself squinting because the least bit of light hurt his eyes. When he tried to sit up he found his left leg was badly hurt.

"My left leg, ma'am."

She felt it.

"Peter. Cut a slit up the leg of his jeans with your knife. I think it is broken."

Her 'think' was right. And not just a little break – a bone-sticking-through-the-skin kind of break. Adam managed a look. Between the sight of it and the pain involved in moving his body, he fainted. That was a good thing. He was able to avoid the terrible pain involved when the father and oldest boy pulled the sections of the bone into place and put it in a splint.

The mother had cleaned and bandaged the wound as she had done with a half dozen others on his head and chest.

When he came to, he was in the back of a straw filled wagon and was being taken back to the family's farmhouse. Their name was Jones and they lived just north into Missouri where they farmed several hundred acres. They had brought his suitcase along and a wallet.

"Not mine," Adam said taking the wallet anyway as it was offered by the father.

He opened it. The identification card just had the name Jacob printed on the line for the name. The rest was blank. It had belonged to the hobo. There were two one hundred dollar bills in it.

"How did you get this and did you find the man – the hobo?"

"He was kneeling at your side when we spied you from fifty yards down the tracks," the father said. "When he saw us coming, he took out his wallet and laid it on your stomach. He had already rolled a blanket and placed it under your head. It was like once he saw you would be taken care of he left – into the dark of the woods."

"Do I need to see a doctor?"

"I was a medic in the Marine Corps. I'm quite sure you are well splinted and ready to heal back good as new. It'll take a month in the splint and then another month of gentle activity. In a few days when the swelling goes down I'll fix you up with a plaster walking cast."

"A few days. I got to be on my way. I have to be in Colorado by May first."

"Traveling alone, in boxcars, across country, at twelve?" the mother asked.

"Oh, I was just riding the train as a lark. At Springfield, I've a paid-up connection on a bus."

Nobody believed him and he understood that. They also understood that one way or another, once he got that walking cast, he'd be long gone.

* * *

Mateo and a Detour into the Desert

Route 18 going west from *Lucerne Valley* had very little traffic. Fifteen minutes into his walk a car pulled off the narrow road and rolled down a window.

"Where are you off to," a grandmotherly woman asked as she looked him over.

"Eventually to Colorado. Any miles on west toward Interstate 14 will be appreciated."

"How old are you son?"

He flashed his wonderful grin.

"How old do I look?" he said playfully.

"Sixteen?"

"You are very good, ma'am."

He figured older was probably better since he was clearly out on his own.

"I'm on my way over to Victorville to see my son," she said. "The Interstate skirts it to the west. My son's a policeman over there."

They understood each other – the boy wasn't 16 and she had no policeman son. Still, she opened the door.

"Put your suitcase in the back seat and then sit up here where we can talk. I hate driving all by myself. Oh, in the box back there – day old donuts if you're hungry."

"Thank you – the ride and the donuts."

They were back on the road in minutes. She drove fifty, well under the speed limit. At least he figured she'd get him there safely. He put away five donuts. That seemed to please her. She kept up a stream of chatter. Mateo nodded and added a, 'Really!' and an, "Interesting!" every so often. He was sure she would tell friends he had been a very good conversationalist. He smiled.

"I need to stop at the convenience store just ahead. My grandchildren wouldn't forgive me if I failed to bring Strawberry Twizzlers. As far as they're concerned that's what makes me 'grandma'."

She pulled in and stopped.

Mateo chuckled at the name of the place: *Come Spend it Here!* He figured it was probably the most honest name for such a place he had ever known. Anyway, it was the only such place within many miles.

"I'll just be a minute. Come in if you want. I'll get you a

drink – soft, you understand.”

“I’m find, ma’am. I’ll just stay out here and stretch my legs.”

She entered. There was black SUV also parked there – the only other vehicle. Interestingly, Mateo thought, the engine was running, but nobody seemed to be in it. Somebody was in a big hurry. More grandchildren to attend to, perhaps. He smiled at the idea. Even more interesting, however, was the twirling red light coming up the highway from the west, the direction they were heading. It slowed as it neared the access road.

At that moment three men, backed out of the glass doors and onto the parking lot. They had guns and wore ski masks. Mateo began backing up.

“Oh, oh!” he said out loud.

One of them had hold of his driver/grandmother with a gun pointed at her head. He found himself in the deep shadow of the overhang on the building. The men were facing the other way, heading toward the SUV. Without much thought, he saw his opening and rushed up behind the man holding onto the woman and pulled her away, pushing her back toward the door. It opened as she stumbled toward it and inside.

The man turned and grabbed Mateo – evidently a fair trade. He felt the muzzle against his temple. It flashed through his mind: ‘I hope they need a hostage to take along more than this guy wants to blow my brains out.’

Fortunately, that was true. The man stuffed him into the back seat ahead of him and slid in beside him – the gun in his ribs. The vehicle sped off back east, the way he and the woman had just come. The police had arrived and slid to a stop thirty yards to the south at the edge of the parking lot. They had exited their vehicle with guns drawn. No shots were fired.

No words were spoken immediately inside the SUV. By the time the police sensed what was going on the SUV had a long head start. Mateo figured the store keeper had managed to trip some silent alarm, which explained the sudden approach of the police.

The SUV soon turned off the road and proceeded

northeast across the desert. The driver turned on the forward-facing spotlights on the front bumper and turned off the car lights giving virtually no way to spot them from the rear. Twenty minutes later they came upon the parked trailer of a big rig – just the trailer – sitting not far from a narrow north/south road. The driver stopped behind it and honked. The rear door, hinged at the bottom, folded down and became a ramp. The driver drove up and inside. A fourth man was waiting there. The door raised behind them. Lights came on inside the trailer. The men got out of the SUV. One dragged Mateo with him. There was duct tape; the first piece across his mouth. Soon his wrists were secured behind him and his ankles were bound together. The man tied one end of a rope around Mateo's waist and the other to the bumper of the SUV. The men turned off the lights and left through a door on the side near the front.

Mateo knew the next sounds. Four motorcycles came to life and as he listened they took off in four slightly different directions. He listened for a few more moments hoping to hear a siren. He didn't.

First, he needed to free himself. He worked himself into position so, on his knees and backing up to the bumper, he could locate the knot that held him there. His roper had been very careless – or stupid. Since their overall plan seemed to have been a good one, he'd go with careless. With his fingers, more or less free, he worked on the knot and sometime later was free to move around inside. He managed himself to his feet and hopped to where he believed the light switch was. He felt the wall with his nose and cheeks. Nothing! Maybe it was lower on the wall. He bent down and felt around for a few more moments. There it was. Using his chin, he eventually managed to flick it and the light came on.

Once, in a late night black and white movie, he had learned that when tying hands behind the back, always make sure not only the wrists are secured, but also just below the elbow so the person can't slip his body through his arms and manage his hands into a position in front of him. His guy hadn't seen that movie – no tape near the elbows. Mateo soon had his hands slipped over his butt, and had pulled his legs through them. His hands were in front of him. Sitting on

the floor he drew his knees up toward his chest and unwound the tape around his ankles. That still hadn't freed his hands at his wrists.

The bad guys knew very little about boys who roamed the desert – they always carried a knife. Mateo's was in a leather sheath secured inside his right sock. It was within easy reach. With some clever maneuvering of his hands and fingers he was soon free. He was ready to leave. Two things came to mind. First, he needed to let the police know he had escaped and was safe. Second, he had to make sure they didn't just pass up the trailer. He scratched a message into the inside wood panels on the north side of the trailer. Then he opened the rear door, light still on, and ran north into the darkness.

He knew if he kept moving west he would come to county road 247 that would take him north to meet the interstate at Barstow. That might be as far as twenty miles. He wouldn't get there 'til daybreak. He decided to move parallel to the road, but not on it and not approach any traffic for a ride. He needed to stay hidden. It was why he hadn't stayed at the trailer waiting for the police. Police would have way too many questions – and the answers to all of them would point him back toward foster care. During his life as a city boy, he and the police had not been on what could be called friendly terms – a few fights, a few robberies, a few other things.

He was thirsty. He approached a friendly looking cactus and cut a chunk off. He could suck the liquid out of it until he found water.

* * *

Cole the Hero of the Day

The trip to Salina would be about 150 miles – nearly three hours. They stopped in Emporia and the driver and the man with him bought Cole breakfast. By nature, Cole was active and short on patience. While the men dawdled over a third cup of coffee, he thought he would go out of his mind trying to act calm and laid back. Forty-five minutes after they had stopped they were back on the road. Make the trip *four* hours. They traveled mostly county roads that crisscrossed

that area of the state in generally straight north/south and east/west directions. The rider offered to trade places with Cole, but he figured up front there would be too many opportunities for questions and he'd rather keep them to a minimum. He knew he looked older than fourteen, but not that much older. He used the excuse of needing to make up on missed sleep.

When he awoke, the truck was stopping at the granary with huge grain bins – round, thirty feet in diameter and sixty feet tall. Many of those he could see further to the west were twice that size. The driver was there to take back a load of oats. He bagged it and sold it to ranchers for their horses.

“Ever been up on top of one them silos, young man?”

“Never have. I’ve heard you can see fifty miles in all directions from up there. How many are there, here, a dozen maybe. That’s a whole lot of grain.”

“Thousands of tons when they’re full. Getting toward empty this time of year. Getting them cleaned out for the new crop. You could probably get a job here cleaning if you need to make a little money. Pay’s good. Work’s terrible.”

“I think I’ll just be moving on. Thanks for the ride and breakfast. You’ve been very kind.”

They shook hands, he shouldered his bag and started along the street walking west. He was heading for Interstate 70 that would take him clear into Denver.

He hitched his shoulder to position the duffle bag more comfortably and picked up his pace.

He heard an explosion behind him. He turned to see a ball of fire rolling two hundred feet into the air. One of the huge silos had exploded. The roof had blown off and the strong metal sides directed the flames high up into the air. During cleaning, tiny particles from the grain were stirred up and filled the air. Any flame or spark from a tool would set them aflame.

‘What if somebody was inside cleaning?’ he thought to himself.

A boy, eight maybe, ran out of his house to, also, investigate.

“Hey kid,” Cole said. “Will you keep my duffle bag for me? It need to go back there and see if I can help.”

“Sure. Be on the front porch. Be careful. I hear when one blows others are likely to blow, too.”

Cole ran back to the scene. The truck he had ridden in was on fire. It had apparently just been filled. There were half a dozen trucks on fire; a few had been blown to pieces. He ran to ‘his’ truck and opened the driver’s side door. The driver was still inside. Cole pulled him out, put his arm under his arms and partly walked and partly dragged him to safety some thirty yards away. The man was burned and unconscious.

After he laid the man down on the parking lot he began bringing other victims back to that same spot. Soon he was directing others to do the same. The EMT’s arrived along with three fire trucks. An EMT saw what he was doing.

“Nice work, bring as many to this area as you can. It will be our triage (diagnosis, care planning) center.”

Cole spread the word. There were dozens who had been wounded. He looked up. On the roof of a silo beside the one that had blown, was a man clinging to the edge of an open hatch or door. He could see that his clothing had been burned away. With little thought he ran to the silo and began climbing the ladder to the top. Once there, he elbow-and-belly-crawled his way up to the man. He was terribly burned and screaming. If he passed out he would let go and fall to his death.

Cole removed his belt and slipped it under the man’s belt then around the handle to the hatch and buckled it. If he fainted or let go, it should hold him. Cole let go of him. It held his weight. Holding on with one hand Cole removed his large, red, farmers’ handkerchief from his back pocket and began waving it, calling for help as he did. By then the area was loud with the noises of vehicles, sirens and people shouting. One of the firemen saw him and directed the ladder truck toward him. The ladder was soon extended and two firefighters climbed to take charge and get the man to safety. Cole followed them down. He had never been on a firetruck before and for just a moment stopped to let himself enjoy it.

Once back on the ground, the police line moved him further back for fear of another explosion. It had been a point well taken because moments later the silo, which he had just climbed, exploded as a second ball of fire. That time,

however, people had been moved away to safety. Cole went to the EMT that seemed to be in charge. Maybe he was a doctor.

“I’ve had first aid and volunteered in the burn unit at the hospital so if I can be of help just point me at it.

“Can you set IV’s?”

“Seen it done often. Perhaps if I’d watch you once.”

The man nodded. Cole watched. He could have done it without that, but wanted to make sure. Before mid-afternoon he had attended to a dozen of the wounded, cleaning cuts and abrasions and wrapping them in gauze to keep them sterile until they could be transported to the local hospital. There was a constant parade of ambulances in and out.

The head EMT approached him.

“I need this ambulance driver to help us here. Drive it back to the hospital for us. It’s carrying two patients.”

Cole figured it couldn’t be much different from driving the truck on the farm. The back door slammed shut. He put it in gear and followed the one in front of him. He pushed buttons until the siren and lights came on. It was only a three-block drive. He let the hospital attendants unload the patient and then returned the ambulance to the granary.

It had occurred to him that he hadn’t seen much activity on the far side of the grounds, behind the silos. He circled the area at a trot and found just what he had feared. A small building had mostly collapsed. He saw one person under the rubble. He needed a pry bar. He found a long 4 X 4 post and forced it under the section of wood and metal wall. He rolled a barrel in place to use as a fulcrum and soon had the debris lifted high enough for the man to pull himself to safety using just his arms. He clearly had two broken legs. Cole carefully pulled him further away.

“Jack’s in there,” the man said.

“Okay. You have a phone?”

The man nodded and went for his pocket.

“Call 911 and direct some help over here to this side. Just where is Jack? Do you have any idea?”

“Other side. There. Close to the first silo that blew. That part of the fire has been put out.”

“Cole worked his way around the rubble. The burning

grain smelled terrible. The back wall was standing, but was wobbling back and forth. He heard a voice calling out and worked his way toward it. The man was buried under a pile of bricks that had once been a firewall that divided the building. Brick by brick, Cole uncovered the man. More fortunate than the first man, number two only had one broken leg. At the bottom of the pile, there was a sheet of corrugated metal lying right against his legs. Cole lifted it and urged the man to crawl to safety. He held the heavy sheet until he was free.

He let the metal drop. He suddenly realized he was exhausted. He paused to take several deep breaths. He shouldn't have done that. The back wall collapsed in on top of him knocking him to the ground and rendering him unconscious. He was trapped for several minutes before a group arrived in response to the phone call. His shirt was in tatters. There was a deep gash, which ran the length of his upper left arm. That arm was broken.

When he awoke, he found himself in a bed in the emergency room. His arm was wrapped in gauze and a nurse was washing his face and chest.

"Well, our young hero is finally back among the living."

Cole had no idea what she was talking about, but took up what seemed to be a more pressing issue.

"My left arm seems to be damaged."

The nurse explained as she dried him with a soft towel.

Cole sighed the sigh of all sighs.

"Sliced? Broken? That can't be. I can't afford this. I must leave."

"Dr. Wilson says the expense is on the hospital. According to him you were a one-man emergency staff out there today. He said you had the triage organized even before he and the EMTs arrived and that you transported patients, saved people from burring rooftops, and freed them from fallen rubble. I just imagine there's a commendation in this for you from the mayor."

"Oh no. That mustn't happen. You have to help me on this. I have to be on my way. I have people to meet that are depending on me."

She became serious and thoughtful.

"Well, the gash in your arm has been stitched and

bandaged – nine internal stitches by the way. They will be absorbed after several weeks. Eighteen exterior stitches that will need to be removed, but that will have to wait until after you get out of the cast for your broken arm. Doctor has prescribed a penicillin-like med to handle any infection that may develop.”

“You’re saying I’m a disaster area. But there is *not* a cast.”

“Doctor is on his way. He wanted you to be conscious while he did that.”

After the plaster cast was added to the gauze and band aids, and salve, the doctor insisted that he remain at least overnight. Reluctantly, Cole agreed. He recognized that he was exhausted and badly beaten up. In the least it would apparently be a free bed for the night.

The nurse returned with juice and three pills. The pointed to them in her palm.

“For pain, infection, and pain, in that order,” she said with her wonderful smile. “Are you up to having a visitor?”

‘A visitor,’ Cole wondered. ‘Who would that be? Hope it’s not the mayor!’

“Sure, I suppose. Who?”

She pulled back the curtain and there stood the boy with his duffle bag.

“I told you I’d take care of it for you. I’m sorry you got hurt. Everybody says you’re the hero. Will you sign the bill of my ball cap?”

“Of course, I guess.”

Cole remained fully puzzled at those sorts of comments. The boy handed over his hat and a marker.

“What’s your name, kid?”

“Tommy.”

Cole signed the bill: “To Tommy, my good friend and helper. Cole”

No eight-year-old Tommy had ever managed such a grin before. He turned to leave.

“Hey wait, Tommy. We need to shake hands, don’t you think.”

The grin continued. The shake went more or less well.

He disappeared through the curtains to a volley of

questions from several boys who had apparently accompanied him, but had not been allowed in.

“Did he really sign it? Did you get to touch him? Did he look awful?”

There were others, but Cole was immediately asleep.

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CHAPTER THREE

The Adventures Continue.

* * *

Adam Nabs a Bad Guy

A week later found Adam heading west from Springfield, Missouri to Kansas City on a greyhound bus. The family had taken him to Springfield, which was less than an hour's ride from their farm. He had tried to give them one of the two, hundred-dollar bills the hobo had left him, but they wouldn't take it. He used some of it purchase the bus ticket. The mother had packed him a big lunch for his trip.

The cast the father had made worked well. He added a curved piece of copper tubing across the bottom of his foot and way up into the plaster on each side, so he could walk with it. That way his weight was supported by the cast and his hip, not his leg bones. It made him lopsided – his left leg with the tube was nearly three inches longer than his right.

Out of Kansas City he took a passenger train to Denver. He even had a little money left. He felt rich. To obtain the least expensive ticket Adam was riding what was called the 'local' run. It stopped in every town that had a depot. The faster rides that went directly from one big city to another were called express and cost far more. They were three or four times faster, of course. It was fine with Adam. Even though it was taking a good deal longer than he had first figured he still had plenty of time. He enjoyed watching the new passengers' board and others leave. At the first stop after his journey began that morning, a large, gruff appearing man entered Adam's car. There was a boy with him – a little

younger than him he figured. The man kept his hands on the boy's shoulders and guided him ahead of him.

As they approached Adam down the aisle between the rows of seats, the boy stared at him. He blinked his eyes in an odd way. Adam hoped he didn't have some terrible eye or facial disorder. The man and boy sat in the seats directly across from him. Adam and his cast needed both seats if he were to sit comfortably. The boy took the window seat and the man the aisle. Adam turned a bit so he could watch the boy. He offered him a smile. The boy remained sober face. He furrowed his brow and continued blinking.

The more Adam watched him the more it seemed the blinks were not just random, but were systematic – had a pattern. Adam blinked a few times. The hint of a smile appeared on the boy's face and perhaps, even a slight nod. Clearly the boy did not feel free to express himself openly. Adam went for it.

“Hi. I'm Adam. On my way to Denver – to see my Great Grandfather.”

The boy made no response. The man turned to Adam.

“The boy's deaf and dumb. Leave him alone.”

[Deaf and dumb is a crude term meaning a person can neither hear nor speak]

Adam knew the deaf part was not true. He had seen the boy react to sounds outside his window. Why would the man lie about it? He figured he'd see if he would lie about other things.

“Does he read lips, sir?”

“No.”

The answer was gruff and forceful. Adam knew the man was lying. No deaf boy that old would not have some lip-reading skill, even if he had to learn it by himself. Something was definitely wrong.

The boy's blinking slowed down considerably and became more deliberate as if to make something easier. Perhaps some sort of signal? Adam figured his imagination was running wild. The inside of the windows had fogged up it being warmer and more humid in the car than outside that early in the morning. The boy reached up and made two marks on the window – a small ball and two short lines. The

man reached over and returned his hand to his lap.

Adam organized his thoughts.

'Blink, blink, blink and a ball and lines. What could that mean?'

It was a way-out idea, but then many of Adam's best ideas had begun as waaaaay out ideas. Perhaps all those hours in the principal's office were about to pay off. At one point the principal suggested Adam learn the Morse code. It was the system the first telegraphs used to send messages with a series of dots and dashes – short and long clicks – each set representing a letter.

He turned back to the boy and watched. With his own eyes, Adam blinked the code for, 'Ready to receive message'. The boy beamed, but covered his mouth with his hands to hide it. Adam sent one more word – 'slowly'.

The boy nodded ever so slightly. He began sending his message.

'MAN ABDUCTED ME. HAS GUN. WILL HURT MOM IF I TRY TO ESCAPE.'

Adam responded: 'GOT IT. RELAX. WHERE IS GUN.'

'LEFT INSIDE COAT POCKET'

Adam started to stand up. The boy appeared to scratch his face, but really had lifted one finger as if to say he had more to say. Adam made it appear he had just been changing positions in his seat and eased himself back down. He watched. The blinking began again.

'HE CAN SEND MESSAGE ON PHONE TO HURT MOM – ONE BUTTON'

'GOT IT.'

Adam had been making other observations. He had noticed the boy was wearing very expensive clothes and had an expensive looking wrist watch. His shoes were fancy leather boots with designs tinted in color. The boy's family had money. Ransom was often the reason for an abduction. At that point, he *did* get to his feet. He turned to the boy.

"I'm going to go look for a can of pop. Want to come along?"

The man responded.

"The boy is sick. He must stay here with me."

Adam shrugged as naturally as he could and

awkwardly made his way down the aisle and into the car ahead – the dining car.

He approached the conductor who was passing through.

“We have an emergency on the train. There is a boy in the car just behind this one who is being abducted by a man. He used his blinking eyes to send me a message in Morse Code.”

“No time for pranks, son. Please return to your seat.”

“It is not a prank. Please call the authorities.”

“Do I need to take you to your parents and tell them what you’re trying to pull?”

That would definitely not be a good thing considering there were no parents and he figured it could only lead to problems. In his experience, grown-ups just had a way about them that always led to trouble for him. He turned and made his way back to his seat. As he approached the boy he blinked: ‘NO HELP YET BUT DON’T WORRY’.

The boy frowned. Adam smiled hoping to provide some reassurance. The boy slumped back into his seat. Adam thought some more – hoping for another outstanding idea. It came, of course. Adam didn’t know where they came from, but when he needed one it always arrived – usually, just in time. He figured this was one of those ‘just in times’.

Adam took his seat with his legs still out in the aisle, his cast very close to the man. He blinked his plan.

‘ON THE BLINK OF THREE WE WILL GRAB HIS HEAD AND BASH IT HARD DOWN AGAINST MY CAST.’

The boy nodded. His face turned white. He took several deep breaths.

‘BLINK ONE. BLINK TWO. BLINK THREE.’

The boy lunged at the man tipping him out of his seat toward Adam. As they quickly moved the man’s head down toward the cast, Adam raised his leg with the muscles in his hip.

Crack!

Pow!

Ugh!

The man fell to the floor in the aisle. Adam immediately reached inside the man’s coat and pulled out the hand gun.

He stood.

“Help us folks. The man abducted the boy and is holding him for ransom.”

One of the passengers immediately pulled the cord along the top of the windows. It was the way to signal trouble on a train. Within seconds the conductor and a second man entered the car – the conductor from the front and the other from the rear. The second man turned out to be a railroad detective who always rode the train. He put the man in handcuffs as he listened to the boy’s account of what had been going on. A call was placed according to the boy’s directions. It was to his home. A policeman answered and confirmed the boy’s story.

“Keep the man’s hands away from his phone,” Adam said. “The boy says it will signal an accomplice to harm his mother.”

The man roused back into consciousness. Faced with the reality of his situation, he admitted there was no accomplice. The boy’s mother came on the phone and they arranged to put him on another train, back to Kansas City where they would pick him up.

“It was all Adam’s doing,” the boy said.

“It was the kid’s fast thinking about blinking the Morse Code to me,” Adam said.

“Regardless, I’m sorry I dismissed you as a prankster when you came to me,” the conductor said.

“There will be a sizeable reward for you,” the boy said. “My parents are loaded.”

“I have a policy of never taking rewards. How about seeing that it goes to a children’s hospital somewhere, okay?”

The boy removed his watch and slipped it on Adam’s wrist. It seemed important to the boy so Adam accepted it with a nod.

“Okay. Sure. A hospital. I’ll see to it. Let’s at least exchange phone numbers.”

The boy had a card with his name, address and phone number printed on it. Adam thought that was quite strange. Adam happily provided the number of his principal’s office back home. He figured it was the closest to any number he felt comfortable giving out.

* * *

Deputy Mateo?

Mateo worked himself through several rides – a salesman, a retired couple, a trucker. All of that got him out of California, across the southeast corner of Nevada and just into Utah near Zion National Park – about 250 miles. Very few miles for a twelve-hour day. The old couple fed him fried chicken and cake and he had slept for several hours in the truck, but found he was still quite tired. He began looking for a place to put up for the night. There were a number of small towns right off the interstate – still on #15 heading mostly north. About half way up the state he would take #80 east to Denver where he was to meet with the lawyer.

The trucker had a two-day layover in one of the little towns, so Mateo was on his own. There were a number of little parks in among woods and hills. It had grown surprisingly chilly as twilight set in. He put on his hoodie over the T-shirt he had been wearing. It helped some. As he walked north along the Interstate he came to a sign – Red Rock Campground two miles. The arrow pointed down a gravel road to his right. He followed it and very soon came upon an abandoned looking house and barn.

He approached the barn. The door was unlocked. It had a loft. He climbed the ladder and poked his head up into the large, open area. It was growing dark, but he could make out that it contained loose hay at one end. Down below he had seen saddles and horse blankets. He left his suitcase in the loft and went down to get two blankets. He figured it would make a comfortable place to sleep and soon had a very comfortable ‘nest’ built in the corner furthest from the ladder – one blanket over a pile of hay with one blanket left to use as a cover if it got colder. He had packed what food he had left back at his shack and found enough to make a meal. He was ready for sleep.

Noises and voices from down stairs awoke him at midnight. They were loud. They were men – about four he figured. He could see light through the cracks in the floor. He

moved quietly and found a knot hole which gave him a fairly good view of the rear half of that area below. He listened.

“Easiest robbery we ever pulled off.”

“Small town banks should be outlawed. No real security at all.”

The men laughed.

“How much did we get?”

“Let’s count it.”

They spread a blanket on the wooden floor and dumped the contents of four large, canvas bags. It was all bills.

“Which of you idiots bothered with *ones*? I said just twenties and larger.”

No one admitted to it, but it let Mateo know who the boss was. ‘What is it about me that seems to attract thieves?’ he wondered.

The boss had more to say as they continued counting.

“Entering the bank after hours made it all easier. Sam you handled the security system beautifully. With our ski masks the cameras won’t help at all. We made sure we let our U-haul truck be seen at that gas station on the corner. No one could suspect we had horses in the back. When they find the truck at the bottom of a canyon on the other side of town, they’ll assume we took off east instead of west like we did when we doubled back on the horses. Willy will be here with a big rig at eight in the morning. Everything goes with us: horses, saddles, blankets, and of course the five of us and the money. We wait until mid-morning to leave here. By then the cops will have been on the case for ten hours. We’ll head right on up the Interstate and blend in with all the other trucks. At Springville, we will split up and go our separate ways, meeting next month as planned.”

The one who had taken over the counting had a figure.

“Looks like right at \$400,000. Not bad; \$100,000 each.”

“We need to get some shut eye. Break out the sleeping bags.”

“It would be softer sleeping up in the loft, one of them said.”

Not good news for Mateo. Again, moving quietly, he went back to the place he had fixed for himself. He needed to

hide. He spread out the second blanket right next to the one had been sleeping on and covered it with a foot of loose hay. He laid down on his back in his spot and then pulled the hay covered blanket over him. If he had planned it accurately he should be hidden. He could still hear the conversation down below.

“What’s that?”

“Shh! Looks like bits of hay coming down through the cracks in the floor above us. Somebody may be up there.”

“Probably just caused by the wind; it always picks up at night here in the valley.”

“Jake. You go take a look anyway.”

That had been the leader speaking.

Although Mateo couldn’t know, Jake drew a hand gun out from under his belt as he began the climb. Mateo lay on his back with his arms at his sides bent upward at the elbows. That way the blanket and hay was up slightly off his body so the movement of his chest as he breathed could not be detected.

Jake climbed the ladder and stood on the floor near the opening. He swept across the area with the beam from his flashlight. He sneezed.

“Allergies!” he said and began the climb back down to the ground floor.

“Allergy central, up there, boss. Nothing but a loft full of hay.”

Five minutes later Mateo heard snoring. He moved the blanket away from his face. It was good to breath fresh air. He also felt fortunate that he had no allergies. He had a decision to make. Should he just remain where he was until after they left – that would certainly be the safest plan – or should he try to leave and find the police?

During his life, Mateo had not been on best of terms with cops. Many days if he had wanted to eat he had to steal food or money to buy it. He did try never to steal from the same place twice or from people who clearly needed it more than he did. That seemed to ease his conscience about it – it was often steal or starve. His decision had seemed simple. With him on the run from the foster care department he certainly didn’t want to put himself in any sort of suspicious

light with the authorities.

Earlier, he had seen the tall haystack in front of the barn. It gave him an idea – or ten. He folded one the blankets in thirds and then rolled it up, securing it with his belt. With that and his suitcase he moved toward the large open window at the front of the loft. There was enough moonlight so he could make things out at least in a general way. The haystack was close to the barn – the top maybe only eight feet away from the window.

The plan was to toss his suitcase and blanket at the side of the haystack so they would slide to the ground without making noise. He would follow in the same general manner. First, went the blanket roll. Perfect! Next, the suitcase. Nearly perfect – it tumbled a bit on its way, but made only minimal noise. The wind that had picked up, just like the man had predicted, produced enough quiet background noise to cover the sounds. It was time for Mateo to make the leap.

He had a plan. He crouched at the edge of the window and pushed off, twisting himself in the air so his back landed on the hay. He slid down to the ground like he was using a playground slide. Aside from the fear he might not make it to the hay and fall twelve feet to the ground, and then be captured by the bad guys, sold to Chinese slave traders, and die an old man in some isolated rice paddy in Chink-Chou province, it had been fun. Well, mostly fun. In the process, he had twisted his head severely, which really meant he had twisted his neck. He hoped it would pass. It hurt.

Mateo collected his belongings and moved them to the north side of a small shed – the side away from the barn. It was time for phase two of his plan. The shed door was not locked. He rummaged through the things he found inside. There were several items that showed some potential to be of assistance. That completed the idea for a part two of phase two.

He put matches he found there, into his pocket (part one) opened the can of white paint and found the most pliable of the several used brushes. He walked to the front barn door where he came upon part three of phase one. There was a twelve-foot-long two by four, the purpose for which was to be placed across the large, double doors and slipped into a metal

bracket on each side to keep the door from being opened from the inside. He lifted it and slid it into place. With the brush and paint he scrawled a message across the front of the barn: BANK ROBBERS INSIDE.

He realized he was working phase two backwards, but that was just how it came together. One after another he lit six matches and one after another he tossed them various places around the hay stack. Slowly, the fire engulfed it and soon a blaze that could be seen for miles was sending white smoke billowing high into the air. As far as he could tell the men were still asleep inside. He picked up his things and began walking back along the gravel road toward the Interstate. He'd settle for what sleep he had been able to get in the loft. As he neared the gas station just off #15 he saw what he hoped he would see. A police car leading two firetrucks sped along the access road and turned east onto the Red Rock Campground road. As they passed he gave them a thumbs up. That would be as close as anybody would ever get to know who the hero of that night had been.

"This new life of mine is crazy. I've helped the cops more in these past two days than I have in all of my past thirteen years. I might as well be a deputy."

He smiled. Even *that* hurt his neck. He began to worry about it. He could tell that it was rapidly becoming worse. He found a bench behind the gas station, wrapped up in his blanket and was soon asleep.

* * *

Cole Gets a Break

Cole was released from the hospital mid-morning the following day. He charmed the nurse into three breakfast trays hoping that would last him all day. He had ruined one of his sets of clothes so managed himself into another. To accommodate the cast the nurse had to cut up one sleeve – cuff to shoulder. She taped it in place so it wouldn't flop. He felt lopsided with so much weight on his left side. He was stiff all over, but figured he'd walk that off in short order. It was like waking up on Saturday mornings after a football game. He walked west.

It was the longest tractor trailer (semi) Cole had ever

seen. It was parked at a gas station that sat at the edge of Salina. Always interested in anything mechanical, he walked it all the way around, studying the grill and the undercarriage. He didn't even know *eighteen* wheelers existed.

"Like what ya see?" came a friendly voice.

As he rounded the front, Cole turned into a tall, lanky, older man with a broad smile and a cowboy hat.

"I'm Slim – *really*, it's what my mammy named me."

"I'm Cole, not really what my mammy named me – short for Colborn.

"You, hitchin' the way it looks."

"Yes, sir. On my way to Denver to stay with relatives."

"Hmm? I'm only allowed to carry relatives, *grandson*."

At first Cole was not sure what he meant. Then it hit him.

"Ah, yes, grand . . . pa!"

"I was sure my *grandson* would be bright and quick on the pick-up. Bad break in that arm?"

"Had a little run-in with a collapsing, burning building."

"It seems to have won," the man said chuckling at his own little joke.

"It did that for sure."

"Hurts, I assume."

"Got a week's worth of pain pills. I hear they're addictive if misused so I plan on going slow with them."

"Wise as well as bright and quick on the pickup."

"I can see I must have inherited that from my newly found *grandpa*."

Slim offered a warm smile, helped him up into the cab and slipped the duffle bag in behind the seat. Cole pulled the door closed.

"Looks like a palace in here. You sleep in the sleeper behind the cab?"

"A couple times a week. If you're tired, we can fix you up back there."

"This is fine. Fancy."

"Cost me all seven of my kids and twelve of my grandkids."

Cole understood he was trying to make a joke. He had several questions hoping they would keep the man from

asking any of him.

“May I ask where you’re going?”

“Denver and points north.”

“May I also ask what you’re carrying?”

“Air conditioners – nearly a thousand back there.”

“Expensive load.”

“Don’t even want to know what it’s worth. Manufacturer paid the insurance.”

“I have very little money. You need to know that upfront.”

“Since when do grandpas take money from grandsons?”

“You are very kind.”

“Just don’t spread that around to other truckers, okay? Got my reputation as a mean old man to keep up.”

He winked at Cole.

“It’s safe with me, gramps. I never had a grandfather – well not one to know and spend time with.”

“Sorry.”

“Not having had one I suppose I couldn’t miss having one.”

“Then we need to make the most of the next day or so.”

“How far is it?”

“Three hundred and seventy-five miles as the crow flies. A hundred miles into Colorado I need to drop south and make deliveries at Pueblo and Colorado Springs. That will add another hundred and fifty. We’ll overnight in Pueblo. A nice truck stop there with bunks and showers and the biggest cinnamon rolls for breakfast you’ve ever seen.”

“That sounds expensive. I can’t let you spend your money on me like that.”

“I stop there so often I get frequent flyer miles. Stop worrying about money. Just think of it as a way I can make up for all those Christmas gifts I wasn’t able to get my grandson on his past, what, about 14 Christmases?”

“That would be it. Most people think I’m older.”

“I can see why – your height and build. Your face still has soft features. They’ll square off soon.”

“You are very observant.”

The seat was comfortable. Cole was soon asleep and woke up when the trucked stopped at noon. Every time he

awakened it was like discovering all over again that his left arm was in serious trouble. That time he was also much stiffer than he had been before.

“Where are we?”

“Just into Colorado.”

Slim insisted on steaks and baked potatoes for both of them. By one o'clock, Slim's thermos of coffee was filled, two Mountain Dews were in the cold box for Cole, and they were back on the road. Conversation came easily between them.

Just north of Colorado Springs Slim turned off onto the narrower and less used highway number 105. He explained that way they would miss the heavy traffic routes in and around the city. It was a direct route to the warehouse, which was his destination. At one point route 34 entered their road at an odd angle, down a fairly steep hill from the northeast – their left. That would turn out not to be a good thing that day.

A semi came off the hill at a high rate of speed – as if its brakes had failed. Slim applied his brakes and they slid for a good long distance, weaving back and forth across the blacktop. A third semi had been traveling north toward them. The truck from the hill hit that one in the center of the trailer. As bad as that was, the damaged trailer rolled over and over, through a fence and into a bank of propane storage tanks.

The explosion shook their cab to the point it loosened the hood and it opened wide like the mouth of a hungry baby robin. Even inside the truck they could feel the intense heat. The doors were jammed and wouldn't open.

Cars piled up behind Slim's truck as well as behind the other two. Several, burst into flame.

“We going up in flame, too?” Cole asked clearly frightened.

“We're not leaking fuel. We should be fine. It's one advantage of driving a tank like this. We do need to get out, however. Let me get crosswise on my seat and see if I can kick my door open. You take my cell phone and call 911. Intersection of 105 and 34 north east of the city.”

Cole made the call and described the situation in detail even suggesting foam trucks due to the large amount of fuel running down roads near flaming cars and propane tanks.

It took Slim many tries, but eventually his door flew

open. He turned around and, with his knees on his seat, he began pulling Cole toward him. There was a low console between the two seats, which made that difficult – the thirty-pound plaster cast didn't help either.

At one point their faces came within several inches of each other. Cole couldn't resist.

"We really must stop meeting this way – people will talk."

Slim chuckled and momentarily loosened his grip on Cole. Moments later they were both outside. Slim shut the door to protect the interior from any flames that might flare up. They hurried toward the rear of the truck. Both had the same thoughts – help the people in the cars behind them.

"I count seven cars," Cole said. "Why don't I start up here? You go on back further."

Slim understood. The first car had only one occupant – a teen age girl. Cole managed the door open. Unfastened her seat belt and dragged her from the car, hoisting her onto his right shoulder. He laid her in the grass ten yards west of the road. She was unconscious. At least she was safe.

He went back to the second car. It presented more of a problem. A woman, not belted in, was collapsed against the steering wheel and her head had smashed against the windshield. He heard crying from the back seat. A baby was strapped into a car seat.

"Save the baby first," he said out loud. "That's what every parent would want."

It had no rear doors. Because of the way the cars had smashed into one another, he had to crawl over the hood to get to the other side. That was painful, but he made it. At that moment, another tank exploded behind him. He opened the door, pulled the seat forward, lowered the back and moved inside, having to undo the straps on the child's seat with one hand. It took some time, all the while the baby screamed. The buckles were finally free. The child was in a one-piece outfit. He picked it up by grabbing the back of the suit up near the shoulders like a mother cat carrying a kitten. He carefully pulled the child forward and through the door. He hurried with it to where he had laid the first victim. By then she was conscious.

“Been a bad wreck. Your head is badly injured. Here is a baby. Can you hold it on the ground beside your while I go back for its mother?”

“Yes. Of course.”

Cole ran back to the car. Flames had begun leaping up against the driver’s side. He went in through the passenger door, which he had left open. She was covered in blood. He figured there were broken ribs. Since she was unconscious he made no real effort to be careful. He understood that car could burst into flames at any minute. Worse yet, it could explode. He dragged her across the seat and then across the blacktop to the grass, laying her down beside the girl and baby.

Emergency vehicles were arriving, but stopped at the rear of the pile up. Cole called out.

“Slim. Need EMTs up here.”

He heard Slim relay the message. A few moments later an ambulance took to the grass and made its way in Cole’s direction. He waved his arms over his head. The vehicle flashed its lights. Cole took that to mean they saw him and the victims. He left to go back to the next car.

It had slid under the rear end of a box truck and the male driver and the woman passenger were pinned by the dashboard that had dislodged and slid over their laps. The man was unconscious. The woman screamed in pain.

“I’m having a baby. We were on the way to the hospital. Please help us.”

Several things ran through Cole’s mind. The man was having great difficulty breathing because the dashboard and steering wheel had collapsed his chest. The woman was pinned, but could breath. He crossed the trunk to the other side, opened the door and worked the lever at the floor that allowed the driver’s seat to slide back. It moved a good six inches, enough to relieve the pressure on the man’s chest and allowed him to breathe normally. He returned to the other side smiling as he was hit in the face with a stream of foam from a fire truck. He moved the woman’s seat back. There was more room on that side – no steering wheel to interfere. Cole scooted the woman to the very edge of the seat, turning her so her back was toward him. He reached around her with his

arm and hand under hers. Being as careful as he could, and worrying less about car fires and explosions once the fire fighters had arrived, he took his time pulling her to his little band of rescued people.

“I’m in labor,” the woman said.

“Do whatever you know to do,” Cole said. “I must get your husband to safety.”

It was one of those no best answer decisions – help with the birth or save the baby’s father.

He found the steering column had snapped and he could remove it making the necessary room to free the man. He was working from the passenger side of the seat. Using the same technique, he had with the woman, he soon had him on the grass beside the others – unconscious but breathing naturally.

“So, where are you in the new baby process?” he asked the woman.

* * *

Twenty minutes later, Cole and Slim found each other again.

“You really look terrible, grandson.”

“Can’t look worse than you, grandpa.”

Two hours after the accident Slim had been able to drive his truck a few miles south to a truck stop. They had taken a room in a nearby motel and were showered and changed after another half hour.

“From what the folks who you rescued say, you were quite the hero.”

“I just have to stop doing that. Pretty sure I broke an ankle or bones in my foot when a teetering car fell on it.”

“Let me take a look. . . . Yes, I’d say you broke an ankle. Let me call a cab and well get you the emergency room.”

“It’ll be okay ‘til morning. The emergency room needs to be taking care of people who are really hurt.”

There was knock on their door. It was an EMT.

“The new mother insisted I find you and thank you. Appears you did a first-class job bringing that little guy into the world. I have to ask. How does a kid your age know how to

do that?”

“I’m a farm boy. Helped birth hundreds of calves and sheep. Little people arrive in the same way. Mother’s doing well, is she?”

“Fine. The father is in intensive care, but more as a precaution. He will be fine, also.”

Slim came forward.

“I hate to break up this love fest between you two medical practitioners, but this lad has a broken foot. Since you’re here, suppose you could take a look.”

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CHAPTER FOUR ARRIVALS IN COLORADO

* * *

Adam

Adam was the first to arrive. He had never imagined cities were as large as they were. When he got to Springfield he was amazed at its size. When he got to even larger, Kansas City, he was more amazed. As the train neared Denver, he saw the gigantic, purple, snow covered, mountains out the window to his right and then, soon, the jagged Denver skyline. Adam had always enjoyed beautiful things and he ranked that view as just about the most beautiful thing he had ever seen. For just a moment he wished his principal could be there seeing it with him.

Once off the train at the station, he hobbled to an official looking window with a pretty lady sitting behind it. Seeing him she slid open the glass.

“I’m new here,” he began. “I just came in on the train from Kansas City. I have a phone number I’m supposed to call when I get here – well, when I got here, at this point I suppose. Where can I find a telephone to use? I have a little money if there is a charge.”

“See the door to your right. I will buzz you inside and you can use a phone in here.”

He hoped that being buzzed inside wouldn’t hurt. He soon figured it out – he heard the buzz and saw the door pop open.

“Are you traveling alone,” the lady asked as she pointed

to the telephone and pressed one of the white buttons across the bottom.

“Won’t be, just as soon as I make this call.”

He figured that should be a full and satisfying answer to her question.

Adam completed the call to the lawyer’s office. The woman who answered seemed very pleasant. She connected him with a man named Jason who told him to stay where he was and a car of some kind would be sent for him. He hung up.

“I am to stay here until a car comes for me. Jason says I will recognize it because it will be a white limo. Back in Arkansas we mostly had Fords and Chevys. Don’t rightly think I ever seen a Limo.”

She smiled.

“You may have a seat over there. I’ll keep watch out the window for you.

“Very kind of you. Thanks.”

“I see you had an accident – broken leg?”

“Yup. Just one bone – a leg’s got three, you know. Seems it could have been three times worse.”

She smiled.

“There is soda in the little fridge there. Help yourself.”

Adam assumed she meant *pop* in the *refrigerator*. Apparently, they talked differently in big cities – limo, soda, fridge. He hoped he could keep track of it all.

At just about the same moment as he finished his Coke the lady spoke to him again.

“Your Limo’s here, young man. I’ll buzz you out.”

Adam smiled. He needed to add that to his growing list of city words. Adam approached her first, hand out.

“I’m Adam by the way. Back home it’s the first thing we share with somebody new. I guess that’s different here in the city.”

“It was rude of me. I’m Alice. I should have introduced myself. Good to meet you, Adam. I hope that leg heals in a hurry and is just as good as new.”

Now, that was more like it, he thought. Maybe he would have to take the lead in making introductions there among the wide streets and tall buildings.

Outside there was only one white car to be seen. It was unusually long so he assumed it was picking up lots of people. That would be good, to have people to talk with. The driver got out, circled the car, and opened the rear door. He was old and fat with white hair showing out from under a hat with a shiny black bill. He was dressed in black – a part time funeral director Adam figured. Those were the only men back home that wore black suits. The man took Adam's bag and assisted him inside. Much to his surprise he was the only passenger. It looked like a fancy hotel room instead the inside of a car – he'd seen pictures of such rooms in books and magazines in the principal's office. The driver closed the door and took his seat up front. His voice came over a loudspeaker in the wall beside Adam.

"Master Morgan. I am Christopher. I will have you at your destination in about a half hour. There are snacks in the compartment to your left. Ice cream in the small fridge in front of it. If you have other needs just let me know. Press the button by the speaker to talk to me."

Ice cream always sounded good. He looked over the choices and settled for vanilla on a stick covered in frozen chocolate. They called them Eskimo Pies back home. The ones in Denver came in plain white wrappers so he had no idea what to call them. He spoke back into the speaker.

"Thanks. Very considerate. I'd almost think you knew you were going to pick up a kid."

"You're welcome. If my driving jostles that broken leg let me know and I will slow down."

Adam was fascinated by the sights of the city. After a while the limo pulled up next to the curb and stopped. There was a tall man in a suit waiting on the really wide sidewalk in front of a really, really tall office building. He flashed a nice smile as he approached the car and opened the door.

"Adam, I assume," he said.

He saw the cast.

"Wasn't aware you had a damaged gitalong."

Adam smiled.

"I imagine I'm the only boy in the state that understood that," Adam said offering his own smile. "Gitalong – leg. You from Arkansas?"

“I must admit I am not, but I’ve done some research.”

“Well done, I’d say.”

Adam extended his hand before leaving the back seat.

They shook.

“I’m Jason, by that way. Sometimes here in the city we skip over that, I’m afraid.”

“Already encountered that social glitch.”

“You sound like an old man – social glitch?”

“The not telling your name thing. It was a requirement in my social group back home. You know the word glitch, don’t you?”

“Yes. Bug or problem. I see. Yes, a social glitch. Quite clever, actually.”

“Shall I call for a wheel chair,” he asked.

“Only if *you’re* felling weak or ill, Sir.”

They shared another smile. The elevator was as big as the whole Boys’ Restroom back at school. He watched the numbers light and go dim as they rose to and then passed each floor. It stopped at eleven. They were soon in the law office and Jason – that time avoiding the social glitch – introduced Adam around. An older man with gray hair and a well-trimmed moustache entered the reception room and motioned Adam and Jason inside. He offered his hand. Perhaps things just got friendlier the higher up they went.

“I am Ambrose T. Rutherford and please call me Tom – I can’t imagine what my parents were thinking to name a boy Ambrose, can you?”

First, Adam looked up at Jason.

“See. That’s the way it’s done – glitchless!”

He turned to the older man and reached out, connecting for a shake. The man frowned a bit, looking across at Jason – not having understood Adam’s remark.

“Jason comes equipped with a ‘social glitch meter’, sir. You just passed with flying colors.”

“You are the first of the boys to arrive. I must say I expected you would be accompanied by an adult.”

Adam had figured it would be a question. He was prepared. Adam was usually prepared.

“I’m pretty much alone in the world. I’m eager to meet the others.”

“Fine. We have several days before the deadline. I haven’t heard from any of the others, but then I didn’t hear from you either.”

“I guess we didn’t think a response was necessary. You told us where to come and by when. I expect the others figured like I did.”

“Between now and then you will be put up in a nearby hotel. Jason will be in charge and eventually get you down to *Clay Flats*.”

There was that phrase Adam hated more than any other – *in charge*. Why could grown-ups not see that he could handle being in charge of himself without any adult interference? He decided it was probably not the moment to have that conversation so he just smiled and nodded. He figured from what he’d seen so far that there would be a lot of smiling and nodding before it all got settled.

“I will see you and the other’s here in my office at noon on May first. In the meantime, enjoy the city. Jason will show you around. He has a packet of information you will need to look over between now and then. There are pictures of the little town, maps, a description of its history and what is left there today. It also lists the stipulations that you must agree to in order to claim ownership.”

Back out in the waiting room Jason had several things to say.

“We will get you settled into your room at the hotel. Then we will find a place for you to get something to eat. I will, also, be staying there in another room; Mr. Rutherford had me reserve four next to each other on the same floor. Do you need to see a doctor about the leg? The hotel has a fine one.”

“Good to know, but I’m doing fine. A genuine, Marine Medic set my leg during a terrific wind, rain and lightning storm and then did the cast for me back in their cabin where his wife and sons assisted. And he wouldn’t take anything for doing it. That was probably good since it cost me all but twenty bucks of what I had to get here. A hobo gave me the money while I was unconscious after a train wreck. I’ll probably never see him again. A fine man.”

“You understand that I *didn’t* understand any part of that, Adam,” Jason said.

“I’ll go over it in more detail later, then. You seem like a bright young man. You’ll see it’s all quite simple, really. I’ll even begin back as far as my last day in the principal’s office – I was often there because my teacher got upset when I’d removed my pants in order to get comfortable while standing on my desk. I’ll be glad to field questions after the presentation.”

They both smiled. Jason shook his head and chuckled. He wondered what he’d gotten himself into with Master Adam Morgan, inventor of the glitch meter and teller of most confusing tales. He certainly wasn’t turning out to be the simple-minded hillbilly he had been told to expect.

* * *

Mateo Arrives

Mateo awoke when the sun rose high enough in the eastern sky to move beyond the shadow of the building and bathe his face with light and warmth. He began stretching himself back to life. He stopped abruptly. The pain in his neck and shoulders was excruciating. He wasn’t sure he could sit up. He rolled his legs off the bench forcing his torso into a more or less upright position.

His experience with doctors had all taken place in free clinics. He stood and walked to the front of the gas station. Only the mechanic seemed to be on duty.

“Morning, sir. I’m wondering if there is a free medical clinic in this town. I seem to have wrenched my neck and find it is quite painful this morning.”

“In the basement of the Methodist church – two blocks east and one north. Sorry. You really look like you’re in pain. Opens at nine, I think. It gets busy. There may be a line already.”

“Thanks. Two east and one north.”

They were the three most pain-filled blocks he had ever walked. There were just two people ahead of him – an old man with a terrible cough and a mother with a fairly new crying baby. He arrived just as the door was opened. He assumed it was a nurse that greeted them.

As it turned out, she was the doctor.

As it turned out she was the entire staff.

As it turned out the clinic was one room with a screen in one corner to give some privacy in the treatment area.

The first two patients were handled quickly. She offered Mateo her hand and a wonderful smile.

“Looks like you got a double whammy – the ankle a few days ago, and don’t tell me. Let me guess. Either a quick twist or a fall on your head or neck.”

“Let’s go for both and say you win the cigar.”

She flashed a quick smile as she indicated for him to move behind the screen.

“The ankle doing okay?”

“As far as I can tell, yes. Some pain but I expected that.”

“Hurt the neck at the same time?” she asked patting the table for him to sit.

“No. Neck happened about midnight last night. I sort of dove into a hay stack out of a barn loft.”

“Sort of dove. Always wanted to see a ‘sort of dive’. Let me see what’s going on.”

She felt his neck and down his spine.

“The technical term is you ‘dinged your back bone’. In laymen’s terms, you have cracked a vertebra at the base of your neck. It will heal. Just don’t move or jostle it and that, of course, means you don’t inhale or exhale, stand or sit, lie down or roll over.”

Mateo frowned, clearly puzzled.

“I have a warped sense of humor, Mateo. It’s a doctor’s thing, I suppose. You do have a cracked vertebra. We do need to find a way to immobilize it. That will involve a neck brace. The clinic board requires patients pay something for material they need to take with them.”

Mateo dug into his front pocket and pulled out his change. He took out his wallet.

“Looks like have a total of nine dollars and sixty-seven cents, Ma’am.”

“How fortunate. The brace is on special today for sixty-seven cents.”

He frowned knowing that couldn’t be.

“Special?”

“Yes, I call it the, ‘neck brace for handsome young Latino males special’.”

“You know I don’t believe you.”

“You know I don’t expect you to. Now hand over that sixty-seven cents before I throw you out.”

They chuckled together. Mateo shrugged. The doctor shrugged back.

“I’ll bet my shrug was a whole lot less painful than yours, son.”

“I just imagine you would win that bet.”

“While I step into the medical supply room – that’s the cabinet over there – will you remove your shirt?”

“It even hurts when I smile, doctor. I doubt if I’ll be able to climb out of this by myself.”

“Yes. I should have anticipated that. Wait just a second and I’ll help.”

She returned with the brace – covered in white fabric, stiff, and two inches thick. Each side of the bottom was curved to fit over his shoulders. It was one of those, ‘one size fits all’ contraptions.

“I’m going to wrap your neck in gauze first. It’s only purpose it to keep the brace from rubbing your neck raw. I’ll send the rest of the roll along with you. Every day you should remove the brace, wash the neck gently with anti-bacterial soap – she held up a green plastic squeeze bottle – wrap on new gauze and replace the brace.”

“And how much for the gauze and soap?”

“This is your lucky day. Another special. With every brace comes free soap and gauze.”

“You are very kind. I have no way of repaying you. I’m sorry I’m not cleaned up. I’ve been on the road for several days and haven’t had a chance.”

“Your spic and span compared to most I see. On the road you say?”

“Yes. Going to see my great grandfather just south of Denver.”

“How nice. An old man, I assume.”

“Oh yes. Older than you can possibly imagine.”

She didn’t understand but didn’t ask.

Mateo thought it was very funny.

She showed him how to position the brace and how tightly to pull the Velcro straps.

“Wear it for at least three weeks. Then, you really need to see another doctor to make sure it’s healing properly. For as long as they last you can take four of these pain pills every day – one at a time. I am assuming you don’t have a problem with drugs.”

“Oh, no ma’am, ‘er doctor. Seen way too many kids die terrible deaths in the gutter from misusing them.”

She winced, administered a gentle hug and opened the door for him. With the new supplies in the suitcase he lifted it with one hand and put the blanket under the other arm. He was ready to hit the road again and headed back toward the highway. The brace helped quite a bit.

He walked a mile or so along the road coming to a small roadside park – one picnic table and a trash barrel. There was shade from several trees. He had purchased two bottles of water at the gas station earlier and sat to drink and rest. He wasn’t sure he could continue walking, the pain was so bad. He took his first pill and noted the time.

“Maybe I need to just stay here and camp out for several days. That would still give me time to finish the trip.”

He smiled when he realized he’d been speaking his thoughts out loud. He looked up and down the road.

“Maybe if I wait here a carload of girls will come by in a convertible and insist I ride with them. As long as I’m talking to myself it might as well be something with a little kick to it.”

He heard the unmistakable dull roar of motorcycles in the distance. He looked south. There was a long line of motorcycles a half mile or so away. From where he was they looked like a long, narrow shadow moving up the road. His first reaction was to look for a place to hide. His experiences with groups of cyclists had never been good. Southern California was home to a number of gangs. Mostly what he knew about them was to leave them alone.

They rode past him. He counted twenty-two – big, expensive, and loud. He was just beginning to relax when one of the stragglers turned around and headed back to where he was. His was a three-wheeler with a sidecar. It pulled to a stop just off the road beside him.

“Como esta!” (Hello!) the motorcycle guy said. “And I sure hope you speak English because I just shot most of the Spanish I know.”

“Como esta, and I do speak English. Not even sure which was my first language if you can believe that.”

“Looks like you’re out here sittin’ on a bench in the middle of nowhere all by yourself, kid?”

“I noticed that myself.”

Mateo immediately knew that had been the wrong response. He should have said he was waiting for his father or somebody who would be along any minute. Several of the others circled back to see what was happening. They headed their bikes in toward him, trapping him between them and the table.

“That’s not good,” another said. “No telling what might happen to a kid alone out here.”

“I’ll be fine. Sort of banged up you can see. Waiting for a car full of beautiful girls to come along and nurse me back to health.”

He flashed his smile from face to face hoping to receive something friendly in return. There were smiles. That seemed like a good beginning.

“Where you headed?” the first one asked. He seemed to be the youngest of the lot.

“Denver.”

“Big city. Could be dangerous. Been there before?” the second man asked. “You have money?”

“No. Have people expecting me, though.”

Suddenly things didn’t seem to be going all that well. He would try to keep a friendly conversation.

“Does your group have a name?”

“*Bikers for Jerry’s Kids* – kids with muscular dystrophy.”

Mateo’s fright suddenly turned to confusion.

“Come again.”

The first one offered the explanation.

“We’re headed to Denver ourselves, to help collect contributions for the Muscular Dystrophy Association. My little brother has the disease.”

“I’m sorry for him – for your family.”

“Ride with us. Got room in my sidecar. Balances best

when it's carrying a passenger. I got it so my brother could ride with me."

Mateo thought for just a moment. He supposed if they hadn't already beaten him silly and robbed him out there in the middle of nowhere, they probably wouldn't do it in Denver.

"Okay. Thanks. I will appreciate the lift. I need to call ahead to let people know I am getting close, but I don't have a phone."

The man who had spoken earlier offered his.

Mateo made the call first. It was obvious he would have great difficulty getting into the side car so two of the men lifted him up and placed him all quite gently on the seat. With his blanket and suitcase secured in place behind him, they were soon on the road.

* * *

When they got near the address, Mateo made a final call. Jason had asked him to do that the first time they spoke, so he could meet him down on the sidewalk. It was quite a procession – 22 men in leather jackets, scraggly full beards and black helmets, stopping traffic in front of the big building in the high rent district. Again, they helped him out, wished him luck, and were on their way in an ear busting din of Harley Davison noise.

Jason made a call while Mateo waved his new friends on their way.

Jason wondered what he was getting into – a thirteen-year-old member of a motor cycle gang? *That* had not been on the boy's information sheet.

"You are injured," Jason said.

"A little neck thing and little ankle thing. Doc and doc both say I will live. It would really be good to find a place to lay down and be comforted by a half dozen beautiful girls."

"I can arrange the room and bed. You're on your own for the girls."

"At this point I'll take it. Any of the other's here?"

"One. His name is Adam."

"How old?"

"Twelve, I believe."

"Really? I figured the others would all be old men. This

may not be so bad after all.”

Jason accompanied him to his room.

“You rest. Call me when you’re ready to eat. There’s a nice restaurant here in the hotel.”

“Got no money for such things as this.”

“Your expenses are all being paid from the trust fund.”

“Trust fund?”

“It is part of the deal. Mr. Rutherford will explain later. Just don’t worry about the expenses.”

Jason got him settled into his room. He called to let Mr. Rutherford know Mateo had arrived and about his physical condition.

“Mr. Rutherford wants to know if you needed to see a doctor.”

“Maybe later. My docs fixed me up pretty good. We’ll just have to wait and see.”

“Well, okay then. You rest now. My room is just down the hall – 808. Phone number is on the pad on your nightstand.

As Jason opened the door to leave there was a boy with his leg in a cast stopped in the hall, looking inside. Jason waved the boy to the door and made the introductions.

“Mateo Moreno, meet your very distant cousin, Jason Morgan.”

“You’re a mess,” Mateo said looking him over.”

“So are you, friend.”

“And to think you’re almost brothers,” Jason said smiling.

“The *broken brothers* the way it looks,” Adam said not really joking.

He moved into the room and offered his hand.

“I figured the others would all be a lot older than me,” he said.

“Me too. Broken and *mistaken* brothers the way it seems, then,” Mateo said.

It had been as good beginning.

* * *

Cole Arrives

With his foot set and put in a plaster cast, it became clear Cole would need crutches. The EMTs gave them the name and address of a medical supply store. It would be open at eight the following morning. They left. ‘Grandpa’ went to pick up food next door. When he returned, he found Cole sitting on the edge of the bed laughing.

“What?”

“I began changing my pants – I have one pair left – and guess what, I can’t get these old ones off over the new cast; it is too large. How about a little help slitting the pant leg for me?”

“That really is funny. Before or after food. Got Mexican – tacos, tortillas, burritos, refried beans, that red rice stuff, drinks, and cinnamon twirls for dessert.”

“I could go for food.”

They ate.

They slit pants.

They removed pants only to find he couldn’t put on the others – same problem – the cast. There was more laughter. Just how the two of them could be that stupid as to not foresee that, neither could figure.

“There’s a 24-hour general store down the street. I’ll go see what I can find for you. I imagine either shorts with baggy legs or sweat pants. Let me find something that will make you decent for public display and then in the morning we’ll go to a real store and get you fixed up.”

“Sounds fine.”

Cole found it difficult to get comfortable in bed that night. Once asleep, however, he didn’t awaken until almost nine. He couldn’t remember a time in his life he had slept in that late. ‘Grandpa’ was gone. He had left a note. “Be Back. Donuts on the counter in the bathroom.”

“Why there,” he wondered out loud.

Cole had no idea, but was willing to stow away a half dozen before the man returned. That happened at about nine thirty.

“Where you been if it’s any of my business?”

“Got you fixed up with a ride. My truck has under

carriage problems. I'll be stuck here a couple more days. I believe you said you needed to be in Denver by noon on the first. That gives you only thirty-six hours."

He tossed a sack on the bed beside Cole and stood a pair of crutches against the wall beside the door.

"I also found these for you," he said pointing to the sack. "Like cargo pants, but they zip up the sides from the bottom of the legs to the knees. I'm pretty sure they'll fit over your cast."

Cole removed them from the sack.

"Three pair?" he said as if a question.

"A guy needs more than one pair of pants. Wasn't sure of your color preference so I got tan, blue and black."

"I can't get over your generosity. I'm not practiced in accepting things from people."

"I'll take that as a full and complete thank you."

"I'll need help. We discovered last night I'm helpless when it comes to getting into pants."

He was soon decent for public display, as the man had said.

Cole hoped that the old man he was about to team up with in Denver would be as helpful. The closer that meeting came the more nervous he was about it.

"Ride, you said?"

"Yeah. A guy I know. Drives a supply truck for a construction company. They have crews working several places between here and Denver. He delivers to them two or three times a week. Today he starts north again. He'll get you there with half a day to spare."

"Sounds great. When do we leave?"

"Now. He's waiting. I'll carry your stuff if you can manage to carry yourself. If the crutches don't fit, you can adjust them later. You're a really good kid. Stay that way. I slipped my card into one of the pair of pants. Let me know how things turn out."

They shook hands and stowed his things behind the seat in the new vehicle. The truck was about the size of the largest move-yourself U-hall.

"Mort this it Cole. Don't let anything bad happen to him. I'm counting on him to take care of me in my old age."

They waved and Mort pulled out onto the access road that led north onto the interstate.

Mort was a talker so Cole mostly just did the nod and smile thing. He learned Mort had four deliveries to make – equipment and supplies for the work crews. Apparently, they did maintenance for bridges and viaducts and such. The first two deliveries went without a hitch. Cole remained inside the cab at both stops. After drop off number two they stopped for a late lunch.

“You’ll love *Sally’s Place* – Lumberjack stew, butter milk biscuits, and seven kinds of pie, mix and match.”

Cole didn’t understand about the pies, but Mort left little time for questions. He had been right about the stew and biscuits; they were delicious. He soon understood about the pies. They were cut into slender slices. For the price of dessert, you got to choose four slices – all one flavor or up to four varieties. Cole had chocolate, raspberry, lemon and rhubarb. Later his stomach would question if it had been a good combination.

The third delivery also went without a hitch.

“Just settle in now. The final stop is just a half hour south of Denver. Wire, rope, guard rail, posts, ground cover plants. Mostly light stuff. Good time for a nap if you need one. I’ll probably take one myself.”

It had been Mort’s attempt at humor. Still, Cole thought he would feel better staying awake.

Eventually they turned off the main road onto a gravel road, which was in fairly poor repair.

“Doing work on two county operated bridges just up the mountain there ahead of us. I hate this road. County spreads fresh gravel that’s always loose. Ought to just let it pack hard. Much safer. They own a quarry so I guess they like playing in it. My crew’s working up on the higher one first.”

“Meaning to get there we have to cross the lower one that hasn’t yet been fixed?” Cole asked.

“Fills ya with great confidence, doesn’t it?”

Mort chuckled as if it were quite funny.

About half way up the mountain they rounded a curve. Mort tromped on the brakes and the truck slid to a halt on the loose gravel – as per his previous warning. The truck stopped

no more than ten feet from the bridge – that is from where it apparently should have been.

Mort got out. Cole followed a minute or so later.

“What’s up, Mort?”

“Must have collapsed early this morning after the crew got to the upper work site.”

Cole moved close to look down into the ravine below. The bridge had only spanned a gap some ten yards wide. He could see the remnants some forty feet below. Cole held up his hand and put his finger to his lips signaling silence. He cocked his head as if listening.

“They both heard it.”

“Somebody calling out down there,” Cole said.

“I’ll make my way down the slope and take a look,” Mort said. “You call 911 with my phone.”

Cole had no better idea so he made the call and explained the situation. He also mentioned there was a crew with equipment working just on up the mountain and offered the company name.

As he hung up he heard Mort scream. He made his way to the edge and looked over. The man had lost his footing and rolled on down to the floor of the ravine where he was sprawled out motionless. Cole called out. Mort didn’t respond. Cole did, however, hear someone else.

“Help us. Me and my friend were biking across the bridge when it fell in.”

“Wave to me or something. I can’t see you,” Cole shouted back.

“We’re trapped under pieces of the bridge. Jerry’s unconscious. I was, but woke up. We’re both bleeding. Looks like Jerry’s arm is busted.”

“How old are you?”

“Twelve. We’ll be in big trouble when we get home. Not supposed to travel this road.”

Cole figured they were already in big trouble, but apparently, that didn’t compare with what the boy figured was awaiting them at the hands of their parents.

“Hold on. I have help on the way.”

“Jerry needs help now. His leg is bleeding really bad.”

“Okay. Just hold on. I’ll take care of things.”

Sure! He'd take care of things. One entire side of his body couldn't function and it hurt his neck just to blink his eyes. He went to the rear of the truck and opened the doors. There was a pull-out ramp. With that in place he was able to get up inside. He looked over what was available. He tossed several coils of rope onto the road behind the truck. He stuffed a role of twine down the front of his pants. There were blankets used to lay over fresh cement so the sun wouldn't dry it too fast. There were two dollies – the kind used to move barrels or boxes or refrigerators. He pushed all those things out the back and worked himself down the ramp.

He only had a general idea of what he was going to do. After several trips to the edge of the ravine, he had managed to get all the equipment there. He folded the five, quilted, blankets in half and then into one big roll – like a round bale of hay – and tied it together with two lengths of twine. He rolled it to the edge and pushed it over, hoping it would stay upright and roll on down to the bottom where he would need it.

He tied three coils of rope together which gave him about a 150-foot length. He ran one end around behind a tree trunk and attached one end to the handle of the dolly. He held onto the other end and moved the dolly to the edge. He laid down on it, and tied himself to it. Holding the free end of the rope he eased the dolly over the edge letting himself down a little at a time. Shortly into the process he decided it had been a really stupid thing to have done. There was no turning back at that point.

He came to Mort and stopped. He was unconscious, but still breathing well and had no major bleeding. He would hold. He continued down toward the floor of the valley. He called out.

“Hey! Jerry's friend. I'm coming. Call out so I can find you.”

“Over here. I'm Deon. What took you so long? Jerry's lips have turned blue.”

Cole stopped just a few feet from the boys, well within view of Deon.

“My god, man, what happened to you?” Deon said seeing Cole for the first time.

“Never mind. Let me get untied here so I can get a look

at Jerry.”

A few minutes later he had a verdict.

“I’m going to put a tourniquet around his leg above the injury. It will stop the bleeding.”

In a few minutes, he accomplished that with several strands of twine. Then he moved to Deon and began moving the chunks of concrete and lengths of wooden beams that had pinned him to the ground. The boy sat up and scooted back several feet.

“Anything broken on you?” Cole asked.

He checked.

“Don’t think so. My wrists are both sprained and my index finger on my right hand is out of place.”

He held it up for Cole to see.

“Okay. Let’s take care of that first. Did it myself once playing football. With your other hand hold the damaged one tightly against your chest – bad finger pointing up toward your face. Now look up to where the bridge used to be.”

“What?”

“Do it!”

He did it without further questions.

Cole took a firm grip on the dislocated finger, pulled on it hard, and it sprung back into place.

“Ouch!”

He looked back at his hand and wiggled the fingers.

“Thanks. Feels good as new. That was great. Now what?”

“Can you help get the junk off Jerry?”

“Yeah. Bad wrists. It’ll take some time.”

“Go for it. We need to free him and arrange him so his head is lower than his feet so he won’t go into shock.”

“How do you know all this stuff?”

“A farm boy. Just everyday stuff for a farm boy.”

It seemed to satisfy Deon and they soon had Jerry freed and properly positioned.

“You seem to be able to walk okay,” Cole said. “See that big roll of blankets over there. Can you bring it to us, here?”

Several minutes later they were untying it.

“Double one and we’ll put it under Jerry. Than double

another one and put it beside him. You lay down just like he is. Can't have you passing out on me, too."

Cole then put one blanket over each of them and dragged another with him to his hastily arranged elevator. He tied one rope around his waist and the dolly and pulled himself back up the slope using his good foot as a brake when he needed to reposition his hand on the rope. It was very slow going. He got to Mort and tied off the pull rope. He checked for broken bones. Remarkably none seemed any worse for wear. He covered him. His head was already pointed downhill.

A few minutes later he heard the sirens. A half hour later they were all up on top in the grass beside the road. Mort and the two boys left in ambulances. A state trooper talked with Cole attempting to praise him for his quick thinking and what he had done.

"Thanks, but there is no time for that. I have to be at the reading of a will by noon at this address in Denver. Think I can make it?"

"We'll give it our best shot."

He helped him into his patrol car, lit up the emergency light, turned on the siren and all but popped a wheelie getting them off and running. He made a call requesting several things – all designated by number codes that Cole didn't understand.

Once back on the interstate they were joined by four motorcycle policemen. They hit and maintained ninety miles an hour for the next twenty minutes. They entered the city where they were met by two waiting city police cars. Although they had to slow down considerably they sped along the streets, at a pretty good clip, eventually stopping in front of an office building. Cole checked the street number. It was the right one. He checked his watch. Twenty minutes late. His heart sank. There was an EMT ambulance waiting with a wheel chair. He took a seat and was soon inside, in an elevator and then at the door of the law office of Ambrose T. Rutherford. He turned the knob, pushed the door open and entered. He looked around the waiting room. There were two other kids there – one with his leg in a cast and one with his neck in a brace and his foot in a cast.

“Looks like the ER in here,” he said clearly not understanding.

Adam spoke.

This is Mateo. I’m Adam; we’re the *Broken Brother Twins*. Assuming you are Colborn, I guess that needs to be changed to the *Broken Brother Triplets*.

“I don’t understand anything about this, you know,” Cole said, clearly puzzled. “Is it all over? I know I’m late.”

“About thirty minutes ago, Mateo and I convinced Lawyer Rutherford to hold this meeting on California time, since that’s where Mateo, here, is from. So, we figure you’re actually thirty minutes early. Probably plenty of time for us to run a relay race out in the hall.”

“From the way we look, it’ll take us forty minutes just get out into the hall. You guys look awful.”

“We guys,” Mateo said. “Have you looked at yourself in a mirror lately?”

CHAPTER FIVE

Getting Down to Business

Jason announced to Mr. Rutherford that the boys were ready and ushered them into the office. Jason thumped his way inside. Mateo walked with nimble, uncertain motions. Cole was on crutches, still handling them in an awkward fashion. They looked like an accident that had just happened. Mr. R had been told, but was not prepared for what he saw.

“You look like an ad for the Red Cross.”

The boys supposed it contained some element of humor so offered weak smiles. They assumed Mr. R had never suffered through a broken bone. They found seats that were more or less comfortable. Each of them hoped they wouldn't have to hold those positions for long. Adam and Mateo had studied their packets the night before. Considering Cole had not had time to do that, Mr. R. went over the material – he might have done that anyway. They would learn Mr. R. was a very careful and always well prepared man.

“As you understand, you three have the same great, great, great, great grandfather – one Clay Markey. In 1854 he and his two partners struck gold in southwestern Colorado and later named their little town *Clay Flats*. They became rich. Only Clay eventually had children. He set his sons and sons-in-law up in businesses and they thrived not needing his wealth.

In all truth, Clay was a strange man – superstitious and given to consulting psychics – called seers back then. On one occasion, he strung a rope across a fifty-foot-wide gorge – 200 feet deep – and walked from one side to the other because he

had a dream he was supposed to do that. On another occasion, he reportedly dived off a fifty-foot cliff, head first, into a raging river that was no more than ten feet deep. And again, once he invited the best Native American bow marksmen in the area to each shoot five arrows in his direction while he stood against a wooden backstop. The one who came the closest to him without hitting him won a sack of gold. So far as we know there was no penalty for a marksman who might hit him. The old boy probably never even considered that was a possibility – he believed he was indestructible. I'm sure in the end he couldn't believe he had died.”

That drew chuckles from the boy.

“Well, I guess you understand what I mean. All those things were somehow related to his belief that he would be able to return from the dead once every ten years to check in on his relatives and reward or punish them, depending on how well he thought they were living their lives.

“Once, while watching the night sky, four shooting stars – we now know they are meteors – moving side by side, from the far east to the far west, passed across the sky. The lore at that time was that shooting stars eventually disappeared because they entered the future through some mysterious window low in the sky. He took it as a sign that the universe wanted him to look into his future, four generations and make sure it was well cared for. He figured that must mean that bad things were to happen to them so they'd need his assistance.

“He set it all up with the only lawyer in the area at the time – my great, great, great, grandfather. For some reason – that has been lost to the ages – he stipulated that the inheritance was to be divided equally among his male relatives who, on May first of this year were between the ages of ten and fifteen. Now it has fallen to me to present his great, great, great, great grandchildren with what he set aside for them. Unbelievably, after all those generations, you three are the only relatives within that age span who survive.

One of the stipulations is that you live in *Clay Flats* for one full year, ‘surviving by your own wits with no adult supervision or meddling’. Another is that you each will receive from this day forth the sum of one hundred dollars every

month – remember a hundred dollars was all many men earned in an entire year back then. The main surprise in all this is that he claims he has stashed a vast stockpile of wealth somewhere in the town. It is yours, but you must prove your worth by finding it.

“When are we to arrive there?” Cole asked. “We all currently seem to have medical conditions that require periodic attention.”

“We believe that Jason has found a solution that will not violate the old man’s intentions. Jason.”

“I believe that medical attention for preexisting conditions would not have been considered supervision or meddling by Mr. Markey. Several of our colleagues agree so we feel free to offer periodic check-ups and such related to those things. Remember, there were no doctors within three hundred miles of *Clay Flats* at the time so it would not have been one of his considerations.”

“What about food?” Adam asked.

“Again, we have thought it through and believe he would approve of a weekly delivery of supplies, but you will need to order them and pay for them out of your stipend of \$100 a month. They will arrive by mule team and wagon on the first Monday of every month. After the first one you will need to place your own orders with the driver. Your stipends will arrive in the same way the first Monday of every month. It will be in silver dollars.”

“I’m a pretty good shot,” Cole said. “I can keep us in game.”

“I’ve always wanted to learn how to fish”, Adam said. “If there’s a nearby creek I can keep us in fish.”

“And I seem to have no helpful survival skills to offer at all,” Mateo said, unless I’m needed to steal things or charm pretty girls out of a few kisses.”

Everybody smiled. Mr. Rutherford commented.

“From the way you’ve handled yourself during the past ten days I’d say you’ll be able to contribute a good deal to the success of your motley crew.”

“I don’t know the word, ‘motley’, Sir,” Adam said.

“Varied, dissimilar, strange assortment – sometimes used to mean untidy or scruffy.”

“Seems to fit us, for sure,” Cole said offering a smile that indicated some degree of pride in wearing that label.

“I like our old grandpa guy,” Adam said. “I’m quite sure anybody who really knows me would say that I’m just plumb full of his offbeat genes.”

“Again, when do we leave?” Mateo asked.

“This is Saturday. We have arranged for you to have complete physical exams this afternoon. Assuming you pass, you will be dropped off ten miles north of *Clay Flats* with a team of mules and a wagon of supplies, about noon tomorrow.”

Adam and Mateo looked at Cole. Mateo voiced their question.’

“Can a one-armed farm boy handle a team and wagon?”

You just watch me, city dudes! I’m eager to get there,” Cole said.

“Me, too,” Adam agreed.

“I suppose you klutzes will need somebody to watch out for you so I guess I’m in,” Mateo added.

The three of them studied each other for the first time. Each one suddenly felt possessed by a very special bond – one that old Clay Markey had set in motion over a hundred and fifty years before. It was a new feeling – real family. It was a wonderful feeling – to be able to prove their worth. It was also a scary feeling – surviving on their own many miles from civilization.

* * *

The doctor’s final assessment of the boys: “Three of the healthiest young men, who are broken beyond belief, that I have ever examined.”

They feasted on steaks for dinner and then spent the evening getting to know each other back in Mateo’s room. Their stories were sad, but they each had found many bright, highlights to hold onto. Adam, as it came out, thought of his principal as the closest man he’d ever had to a father and remembered their times together as wonderful father and son-like experiences. Mateo, remembered several older men who had also given him valuable guidance – and then there was

Maria, but he didn't go into specific details about her. Cole had always been sad – often depressed, even – about never really knowing anything about his biological parents. He felt lucky to have been a part of a kind and gentle family that had taught him the value of work and play, and right and wrong.

As time would pass, they understood they would feel comfortable sharing the more personal – perhaps frightening – parts of their lives. For the time being they felt they had a very good start. It dawned on them they really were family of a kind – cousins, even if barely.

“So,” Adam said at one point, “Instead of being Broken Brothers I guess we are Crippled Cousins.”

“Later on, when we have our super hero costumes made, we can have a large, ‘CC’, on the chest,” Mateo said.

The others were pleased to hear it from him. Of the three of them, he was the one that seemed to have the least developed sense of humor. They felt sad that had been his lot in life. They would most certainly work to change that. They chuckled.

“What will our super powers be?” Mateo asked enjoying the nonsense he had started.

“I will be a crack shot with a rifle,” Cole said.

“I'm the best in my county with a sling shot,” Adam said.

“I was pretty good with bow and arrows the month I spent at Boys Club Summer Camp when I was ten.”

He clearly felt comfortable sharing more about it.

“The juvenile judge gave me a choice – 30 days at camp or 60 in Juvenile Hall. Can't even remember what it was all about. Can you believe that, being in trouble so often you can't even remember why you had to go before a judge?”

“It adds to our texture,” Cole said.

“I don't get it,” Adam said, really asking.

The other boys would learn that when he didn't understand something Adam would keep after it until knew everything about it.

Cole was happy to explain.

“I read somewhere that small groups made up of very different sorts of people – *the texture* – were most successful when faced with challenges.”

“I'd say we're up to just about any challenge then,”

Mateo said in all seriousness.

“I’ve always been a loner,” Adam said, “so this becoming part of a texture may be hard – at first anyway. Most kids seem really stupid to me. Nobody I’d want to commit my valuable time to. My principal said I had really high scores on intelligence tests. I didn’t mean that to be bragging. You’ll learn I tend to just say what’s on my mind – often without thinking. It will never be because I’m trying to hurt anybody’s feelings or make myself seem better than you. It’s always caused problems with teachers – I found mine were not really open to my kind of suggestions.”

“While we’re listing things, we have problems with,” Mateo began, “I’ve always had trouble telling the truth. I want to work on it – with you guys at least. You’ll have to confront me when you think I’m lying. I promise not to lay a hand on you when you do.”

“Maybe something more about your tendency to lay hands on people,” Adam asked, again really a question.

“I knew an older guy once when I was little who was tough and feared – king of the block. He told me that if punches were going to be thrown, I should always throw the first one – hard and true. In the part of the city where I grew up it seemed to work well. Like I said, I’m really going to try and change. You two seem to like to talk things out. I’ll need help learning how to do that.”

“Well unlike you two, I guess,” Cole said, “I am perfect!”

They all laughed. He went on, quite seriously.

“I’ve always been insecure like I indicated. You two are the first actual, genuine, real, totally verifiable, family I’ve ever had. It’ll take me a while to believe it – to learn what it really means – to feel secure about it.”

“More and more that ‘motley’ thing seems to apply to us,” Adam said flashing a smile and squaring his shoulders as if to take possession of the term.

“Perhaps we will need to become the MCC instead,” Mateo said. “The Motley Crippled Cousins.”

“We’re going to get along just fine, you know,” Cole said.

“I think your right,” came Mateo’s thoughtful response.

Adam began nodding his head.

"I agree. But, understand, it's hard for me to believe that there really are kids in the world I might learn to like."

* * *

Early the following morning Jason entered Cole's room wearing a very worried look.

"What the . . .?" he said stopping in the doorway. "I went to wake the rest of the guys and they were missing from their rooms."

"Yeah," Cole said. "We thought we'd give it a trial run – all being together 24/7. So far it seems to be working fine."

"Of course, we've been asleep through eight of those twelve hours so the verdict may still be out," Adam said stretching himself back to life.

"You guys beat all. Anyway, it's time to get dressed, pack your possessions, and go down for breakfast."

"Afraid I'll be wearing all my possessions," Cole said. "Left everything back in a truck, near a ravine . . . A story for later."

"You all have four sets of clothes coming to you as part of your stake from the trust fund. We're scheduled in the clothing store at ten – breakfast in an hour, shopping at ten and on your way to *Clay Flats* at eleven."

"How will we get there?" Adam asked.

"Mr. Rutherford's helicopter."

"Helicopter. I wonder what old grand pappy would think if he knew about that?" Mateo asked.

"Who knows," Jason said. "He just may know. According to his belief, it's time for him to come back and check on his relatives this week."

The boys looked startled.

"You're kidding, right, Jason," Adam said.

"Yeah, you don't believe that tale do you," Cole added.

"The idea of a ghost, watching over his grandkids in a ghost town sounds pretty cool to me, guys."

That had been Adam, of course.

Nothing more was said.

None of them had been in a helicopter. In fact, none of them had ever flown in anything before. They chattered on incessantly the entire journey clearly enjoying every second.

By the time they set down on a rock slab near a creek, they were all horse.

Adam had the joke.

“Why did the stranded man scream for three hours straight?”

There were no takers.

“So, he could get a little horse and ride to freedom.”

The others groaned.

They each found they were reluctant to say good-bye to Jason as the chopper prepared to take off. The mules and loaded wagon were waiting. They were told to just keep to the trail south, and they'd come upon *Clay Flats* by sundown. The helicopter – with Jason – left in a swirl of dust.

They approached the wagon. They stopped. They broke out in laughter. There was no way any one of them could board it without help – casts and braces such as they were.

“Let's see what's in the supplies,” Mateo said straining to look up over the low side and into the wagon. “Problem solved. A step ladder in here. You two climb it up to the seat up front. Then I'll move the ladder and climb into the back. Then, I should be able to pull in the ladder. Cole, can you handle the reins with just one working arm?”

“I'll manage. Mules are very gentle beasts. When they're cooperative they need virtually no guidance. They're smarter than horses by a long way.”

To everybody's surprise, including Mateo, the plan worked. With a gentle swish of the reins, the mules set their own pace down the easy slope along the trail that followed the creek to their right. The brake was next to the right side of the seat so it became Adam's chore to use it when the wagon started to roll too fast. His right side was still able to function quite well.

The conversation was mostly one of those, ‘I wonder this’, and ‘I wonder that’ kind, mostly centered on *Clay Flats*. There were recently taken photos in their packets. There looked to be only a few buildings – maybe six – along one side of a wide dirt street. There seemed to be a hand pump that fed a watering tank out front. They could see both cactus and some sort of trees that wore leaves in the summer. The tallest

building – two stories – was a hotel according to the sign at the top. Why such a remote town would have a hotel they couldn't figure. Adam suggested it might have just been where the men lived with maybe an extra room or so for travelers – like supply wagon drivers and such.

Adam realized it was another of those meaningless conversations because in a few hours they would see what was there so speculating about it served no purpose.

After three hours, Cole stopped to let the animals drink from the creek. The boys chugged water from their canteens. Adam knew things about canteens.

"It is a little understood fact, these days, why the best canteens are covered in canvas. And why is that, you ask. Pay attention and you will soon know."

The other boys chuckled. Adam continued.

"The canvas should stay wet. As the water evaporates it cools the metal body of the canteen. That, in turn, keeps the water inside cool. It would even be technically possible for water to become cooler as that process works. Also, and this is odd, since evaporation cools the water and since evaporation is more rapid in the sun than in the shade, water should stay cooler if the canteen is set in the sun instead of the shade. That's just theoretical, of course. My advice, in this heat, is to keep them in the shade."

"And can we expect these kinds of information sharing discourses frequently?" Mateo asked trying to maintain a sober face.

"Until you require me to stop, yes. I figure I will be learning important things from you older guys about life and such so it only seems fair for me to share things that I know."

"I'd say that seems fair, don't you think, Mateo?" Cole said trying to turn and look at the third member of their little tribe riding behind them."

"Until it gets monotonous or irks me."

Then it was Adam who turned to see if he could tell if he really meant it. The broad smile from the 'hands on' boy was reassuring.

At almost exactly six o'clock they turned a curve and there it was – *Clay Flats* looking ever so much like it did in the pictures. Cole stopped the team so they could take it all in.

“Notice how well the wood seems to be preserved,” Adam said. “That’s due to the generally dry air in these parts. One thing I don’t understand, though – make that two. Why is there fresh water dripping off the mouth of the pump and what is somebody else’s canteen doing hanging on the pump handle?”

“I wonder if grandfather ghosts drink water,” Adam asked looking around.

“A visitor of some kind?” Cole asked.

“Unwanted visitor, I’m thinking,” Mateo added.

CHAPTER SIX: Settling In

“What do we do about the visitor?” Mateo asked.

“I suggest we go about our business and get settled in,” Cole said. “We have quite a bit to learn here at the beginning.”

“I’m with Cole,” Adam said. “It seems that whoever it was, left when he saw us coming. I suppose if he was out to harm us that would have been an ideal time to do it – catch us off guard.”

They all nodded. Cole urged the team to move closer to the front of the hotel. Mateo worked the ladder and soon Cole and Adam were off the seat and on the ground.

“I’ve been looking over the supplies somebody packed for us,” Mateo said. “Seems pretty complete, really. There are bedrolls, and blankets, a huge first aid kit, all kinds of tools, a dozen kerosene lanterns, tanks of kerosene, a crate of candles, a small box of books – I haven’t looked to see what they are – a crate of apples and oranges, a dozen coils of rope of several thicknesses, cans of nails and screws and nuts and bolts, a huge saw, long and short axes, a dozen metal buckets, one large metal tub, two bolts of canvas, reels of wire, a crate filled with boxes of matches, lengths of chains, padlocks, four bales of hay, a sack of oats, a barrel marked flower and a keg marked salt, and a keg marked tar, two rifles, lots of ammunition, and more.”

“I think we should get all that inside first thing,” Adam suggested.

The others agreed. Cole tied the mules to a tree that

grew in front of the hotel.

“Let’s take a look at our physical skills and limitations,” Mateo suggested and continued. “Cole and I are each minus the use of one foot. Cole also has a broken arm. Adam has a broken leg. None of us looks to be much good from the waist down and I’m stiff from the shoulders up. Among the three of us we barely have one guy, here.”

“But, we have three fantastic brains,” Adam reminded them. “We will figure it all out. Let’s agree right here at the beginning that we will do our best to make this adventure lots of fun rather than seeing it as a chore.”

Again, they all nodded and broke smiles.

Cole spoke.

“Right now, we need Matt to stay in the wagon to hand things out and the two of us on the ground to move them inside.”

Adam, had it worked out:

“I think with my walking cast, I’m the best one to move around so Matt in wagon, hands things to Cole who puts them on the wooden walk and I take them inside.”

He looked up at Mateo.

“You okay being called, Matt - Matt-eo?”

“Sure. Better than what kids called me at school.”

“May we ask?” Cole asked.

“I’ll tell you, but first I will need your word as members of the Motley Crippled Cousins that you’ll never call me it.”

Both boys raised their right hands and promised – all quite humorously.

“Mateo became ‘mashedpotato’.”

“I can see why you hated it. I can see why the kids enjoyed it. I hope someday you can, too.”

That had been Adam’s sage take on it. Adam got back to what he had been saying prior to the history/philosophy lessons.

“Agreed on who does what?”

“About as efficient as we’re going to be for a while,” Mateo – that is, Matt – said. “Let’s get at it before the sun goes down.”

They worked steadily for nearly an hour and a half. By the time they were finished, Adam had filled one side of the

front room down stairs. It was like a living room with several ancient looking chairs, a sofa, and table. They might be able to be repaired and used. Cole unhitched the mules and tied them near the pump and trough so they could get water. He asked Matt if he would pull some of the straw from the bale Adam had left on the porch and put it out for the Mules to eat. Adam strung one length of chain around and through all four wagon wheels and padlocked the ends together.

“Why!” Matt asked. “I mean I’ve learned by now that you will have a good reason; I just don’t understand.”

“I figure if there are people around who for some reason want to discourage us from being here or harm us, they might try to drive off with the wagon. This way the wagon can’t be moved – the wheels can’t turn and can’t be removed from the wagon.”

“Ingenious,” Matt said. “That’s one for our ‘brain’ from Arkansas.”

“We need to make sure the water from the pump is pure enough to drink,” Cole said. “We have enough left in our canteens for overnight.”

“The mules have been drinking it and they seem to be okay,” Matt said.

“Farm animals can eat and drink things that will poison humans,” Cole said. “We can either just assume the folks who set this up for us knew it was safe or we can set out to test it and make sure.”

“Test it?” Matt asked.

“One of us drinks a little. If he doesn’t get sick, we’ll know it’s okay. I don’t know of any other way open to us.”

Using his crutches, Cole moved to the pump and began pumping.

“Let’s just take a look at it as it comes out. See if it’s clear – free of grit.”

A large stream of sparkling, clear, water flowed easily. He bent down, cupped his right hand in front of the pump’s spout and drank it.

“There, we’ll know by morning. We’ll have one fewer thing to be concerned about.”

“We could have drawn straws or something,” Matt said sounding and looking upset.

Adam shrugged his shoulders as if to say, 'His decision. He'll have to put up with whatever happens'.

"Let's get kerosene in some of these lanterns," Adam suggested, hobbling back into the hotel.

The others joined him. There was a funnel in the toolbox. They used it to fill six of them. Adam lit one and played with the little wheel on the side to learn how to adjust the flame for brightness.

"Never used one of these before," he said. "Seen them in TV movies. Seem pretty simple. How about we make our way around this floor and see what all we have down here?"

The others followed him. The main room – in front – was as wide as the building across the front. The front door had small panes of glass. There was one window on each side of it opening out onto the front porch – which was really just the wooden sidewalk. The first floor extended back twice as far as the upper story, to within twenty yards of the steep hill that rose up behind the row of buildings. The kitchen was in that rear section. There were cabinets, a closet and a solid table with four, handmade, chairs. There was a back door made of heavy wooden planks and two windows like those out front. There were two small buildings out back. The smaller of the two was clearly the outhouse. The larger was a shed. They would explore it the next day.

"Hey, look," Mateo said. "This cupboard is filled with canned food."

"Anybody know how to cook?" Cole asked.

As if in a classroom both Matt and Adam raised their hands. They all saw that as humorous.

"And here are tin plates, cups and pans."

It was rapidly becoming dark. Beyond the road and stream to the west there was a good-sized hill that blocked the sun a bit early.

"So, what's for supper – that's our word for dinner back in Arkansas?"

"I guess look at what we have here that will be easy this evening. Stew, spam, boiled potatoes, green beans. No bread."

"That will all need heating," Adam said. "Suppose that cast-iron stove in the corner works?"

"I'm quite sure it does," Cole said. "Not much can go wrong if the flu's in good shape.

"How can you be so sure?" Matt asked.

Cole pointed to an open wooden box beside it.

"Fresh kindling somebody cut for us to use. Unless one of you knows how to fire it up we'll need to explore it a bit. The black metal chimney pipe going up from it and out the side wall looks to be new and solidly in place."

"Down here's where the fire's made. Bring some kindling and a match, Adam."

Within the half hour they had washed off the table and chairs and were enjoying their first supper together in their new home.

"Hear that sound?" Matt asked, acting startled. "Coming from out back. Never heard anything like it. Should we look?"

Nobody waited for an answer. They stood and went to windows and stared out into the darkness.

"There in the shadow, down low," Matt continued. "Something moving along the ground toward the back door. Maybe you should get a rifle, Cole."

Cole smiled although the others didn't see.

"I believe I've seen that ferocious enemy before," Cole said trying to sound dramatic.

"What?" the others said together, clearly upset.

"Are you sure you want to know?"

"Yes!"

"Yes!"

"We're being invaded by a militia of dreaded . . . chickens. Looks like maybe as many as a dozen. They'll keep us in fresh eggs."

"Or, Sunday dinner," Adam said.

"Think about it, Adam. One meal or eggs every morning for breakfast?"

"Good point. I'll have to get used to living with finite resources."

"What?" Matt asked.

"I think the professor is speaking *Adameeze* again," Cole joked.

"*Finite*. It means limited – once it's gone, it's gone."

"Why didn't you just say, limited?" Matt asked.

"If I had, you wouldn't have had the opportunity to grow your vocabulary. You are welcome!"

"I get your point. I should thank you."

"That reminds me," Adam said. "There is a box of books. Really heavy. I wonder what's in it. Let me go bring it in here. I can see we are going to need to have one lantern to stay and one to carry with us when we leave a room at night."

They were soon sorting through them.

"A set of tenth grade text books for you Cole. A set of 9th grade for you, Matt and a seven-volume set of encyclopedias. I imagine those are for me and I also imagine whoever arranged this was in contact with my principal. He knew I'd never go for plain old eighth grade text books."

"I'm not sure I'm ready for ninth grade work yet," Matt said. "I haven't spent much time in school since sixth grade."

"How about if Adam and I determine what levels you're on and help get you up to speed. I have the idea with Adam as a teacher your learning experience will like nothing you've ever experienced before."

Adam had a gleam in his eye.

"So tell me, Matt, what's your position on reading while standing on a table with your pants off?"

A good deal of laughter followed. It was partly from Adam's comment, but more as a release of the tension and anxiety that had built up over the past several days and had been searching for an outlet.

With darkness, they spread their new bed rolls and lay down for the night. None of them thought they would be able to sleep – aches and pains and the new surroundings.

Apparently, pure exhaustion trumped aches, pains and new surroundings. They slept the clock around.

Matt immediately went to see if the mules and wagon were still there. He had a suspicious side. They were. Cole went in search of places the chickens had left their eggs. Adam fired up the stove and made ready to put breakfast together.

Fifteen minutes later:

"Mules and wagon still here. I spread more hay. You'll need to show me about the oats."

"Found lots of eggs. Those old biddies were each

setting on a small collection. Got two dozen.

“Got the cook stove fired up. Bring on the eggs. Wasn’t there a couple of hams in that wagon?”

“Bottom shelf, far right,” Cole said.

“I brought in some oranges from the crate on the porch,” Matt said.

They had soon assembled a very good first breakfast in their new surroundings. Adam liked his eggs over easy. Cole liked his sunny side up. Matt was strictly a scrambled guy. It soon became clear that they each needed to fix their own. Cole cut his orange into four sections and ate them as if they were slices of watermelon. Adam made a small circular incision around the top and then patiently loosened the peel so it all stayed in one piece as he removed it. Matt cut just the peel through to the inside – four slits top to bottom – then peeled down each of the four quarters, leaving an intact, naked orange.

“I guess we’re beginning to learn things about each other,” Adam said. “How do you two feel about finding out that you make breakfast all wrong?”

It was worth extended chuckles around the table.

They would soon begin to learn that preparing eggs and oranges would be the most minor of their differences.

Cole had that very thing on his mind that morning. Since Adam had brought it up with his little joke, he went ahead and had his say.

“You know, as we’ve said, we really are three very different sorts of guys. I’m not saying that’s bad, but it’s something we are each going to have to learn to live with.”

“Like what?” Adam asked.

“Well, I’ve been raised with rules and I was expected to live by them. For the most part I did. From the way it sounds, Matt, you spend a large part of your life breaking rules. And Adam, you seem to have just made your own rules. Can you see how that might cause some problems among us?”

“You saying we need to make a list of rules?” Matt said, his tone suggesting he certainly was not in favor of that.

“No – not necessarily. But we do need to know what we can expect from each other – for one thing that we can be sure we can depend on each other. When we have

disagreements – and I can't imagine we won't disagree – we have to have some way of solving them – peacefully, so nobody freaks out over it. For example, I'd like us to agree not fight with each other. I mean physically. I'd like to see us be able to talk things out and come to agreements and compromises – give and take – everybody understanding that everything can't always be their way. Do you see what I'm getting at?"

Both of the other boys nodded. Matt had a suggestion – the last one of the three the other two thought would have a comment about cooperating and not fighting.

"I told you how I was forced to go to summer camp once. I loved it, but of course never admitted that until this very minute. Groups of four of us shared a tent where we slept and spent free time. They had a thing there that every night before each tent – each group was called a tent and had a name – mine was '*Stuff It*' – anyway, each night before we turned in for the night we had a tent pow-wow. It was a time when if you had a beef with anybody you could bring it up – get it out in the open, and work to fix it or at least understand about it. That worked pretty well."

"Sounds interesting," Cole said. "You suggesting we try that?"

"I'm just relating about the first time I learned there were ways of dealing with stuff other than fighting."

"I, for one, like it." Adam said. "A pow wow. It's even fun to say. Pow wow. Pow wow, pow wow!"

"Let's think about it today and decide tonight," Cole said.

"So, what do we do today?" Adam asked.

"I suggest we explore what we have here – the upstairs here in the hotel and then all the other buildings," Matt said. "I don't understand why three men needed all these buildings."

"Climbing the outside steps to the second floor isn't going to be easy for Matt and me with bum feet and all. How about if Adam goes up, looks around, and makes a report to us?"

It had been from Cole looking at Matt.

"Makes sense. You okay with it?" Matt asked turning toward Adam.

“Hey. With you or without you I’m planning to go have a look. No time like the present, I suppose. I need to bring in a bucket of water from the pump first so we – meaning you two – can do up the dishes while I’m gone. I hate having dirty dishes around.”

The steps Cole spoke of were on the right side of the building – outside –as one faced it. It started from the plank sidewalk in front and went up to a small landing at the rear of the second floor. It really wasn’t an easy climb for Adam, broken leg and all. He spent no more than five minutes’ upstairs. His report, however, took no more than five seconds. He delivered it on the walk out front.

“Nothing much up there.”

“Surely there’s something up there,” Matt said probing for something more.

“One bed frame with rope strung back and forth across it for the mattress, I guess. A dresser and mirror. Two windows on the front like down here. They slide open – up from the bottom. That’s the only way to get out onto the second-floor porch. I went out. Nice view. A smaller window in back, too.”

“Only one bed?” Matt asked.

“Only one. An oddly shaped room. On the rear right as you face front is like a closet that sticks out into it three feet – five feet wide and takes up half the length of that side wall. The dresser is in that little alcove up front on the right – it’s also about five feet front to back. It has an extra wide door. The door from the stairway is in the back on the left, again looking toward the front. Opens in.”

He walked into the front room. He others followed.

“See this closet here. It’s right under the one upstairs.

He tried the door, turning the knob and pulling. The knob turned, but the door wouldn’t open.

“A little help here, guys.”

Even with the three of them it would not open.

“Look around the edges,” Coles said. “I don’t think it’s really a door. It’s just the wooden wall with a door frame, hinges and a knob to make it look like a door.”

“Did you try the door upstairs?” Matt asked.

“No. Never lived with a closet before so I guess I

wasn't interested. I better go back up and take a look."

He called down from upstairs.

"The door opens all right and you'll never guess in a million years what's inside it."

They tried to guess, of course.

Matt: "Chests filled with gold?"

Cole: "Grampa's skeleton?"

CHAPTER SEVEN

The Exploration Continues

“You’ll have to see it to believe it,” Adam called down to the others. “Bring lanterns.”

Five minutes later all three were standing in front of the open closet door on the second floor.

“Well, I’ll be,” Cole said.

“Never would have guessed it,” Matt said.

It was an elevator of sorts – ropes and weights and pulley wheels up on top.

“Why do you suppose?” Cole asked.

“Where does it go if we can’t open the door down below,” Matt asked.

“The ropes look safe, some of them are still lightly coated in grease – suppose that helped preserve them,” Adam said. “Let’s get in and see where it takes us.”

“I suggest just one. It is really hard to know how much weight it will hold.”

“I’m the lightest,” Adam said.

“And the nosiest,” Matt said with a smile.

“I prefer *inquisitive* to *nosey*,” Adam came back putting on a smug look.

“Let’s light a lantern. How does this thing work?”

Cole was turning out to be the most mechanically inclined. He stepped onto the elevator. It had a floor, a back wall, and a ceiling, but was open on the other three sides. Four by four inch posts connected the top to the bottom.

“This is the ‘pull’ rope,” Cole began. “See here tied to the other end draped down from the big wheel is a sand bag –

a counterweight to make it easier to move this thing. Pull up on the rope over here and the elevator goes down. Pull down on it and it will come back up.”

“Got it,” Adam said. “Pretty much what I figured. I’ll call up to you to let you know what’s happening.”

With that, Cole stepped off and Adam on. Adam began pulling up on the rope. The contraption began lowering into the shaft. Soon, all but the top of its roof or ceiling was visible to the boys from up above.

“Still going,” came Adam’s first report – not really necessary because the boys could see that.

Adam was intentionally moving slowly and being uncharacteristically careful for a boy his age.

The rope stopped moving – the boys saw it. Matt called down into the shaft.

“What?”

“Stopped. Hit bottom I guess. I figure I’m well underground at this point. Looks like I’m in a cave, maybe. I’m going to step out of this thing and look around. You may not be able to hear me for a while.”

He had been correct. Silence. It lasted a good five minutes. Finally, Adam called up to them.

“A tunnel – like a long, narrow cave. I walked into it maybe thirty yards. Goes back toward the mountain behind the buildings. Looks to be natural – not dug by men. Rock top bottom and sides.”

“If you were back thirty yards you were under that mountain, Adam.”

“Yeah. What I figured. Back about ten yards from the shaft opening, there’s like a trap door in the ceiling of the tunnel – wood planking about four feet square. I’m thinking that’s just before the tunnel goes under the mountain.”

“That could be where the root cellar is,” Cole said.

“What’s a root cellar?” Matt asked.

“A hole dug into the ground and roofed over with an arch of stones. Stays really cool because it’s mostly underground. Keeps vegetables and fruit fresh well into the winter. They are covered in several feet of dirt planted in grass to hold it in place. Back in Kansas we called them ‘Scared Holes’. They were where we went to keep safe from

tornados.”

“Funny name,” Matt said.

“You’d not think so if you were down there while a twirling cone of dirty wind was tearing your barn right off its foundation.”

“I suppose not. I just hadn’t ever thought about such a thing.”

“What’s the connection you think?” Adam called up to them.

“Maybe another entrance into the tunnel. How wide and tall is the tunnel?”

“Varies between three and five feet wide. A little wider at that spot. Keeps to about six feet high as far as I went. The floor’s more gently curved than flat.”

“Suppose that could be a gold mine?” Matt called.

“That’s what I’m hoping,” Adam said.

“See any gold?” Matt asked.

“Not sure what to look for. Doubt it. Like I said this isn’t man made like a mine would be. Maybe on back into the mountain.”

“So, what do we do?” Cole said. “I don’t like the idea of you going alone down there, Adam.”

“Me either,” Matt said. “You get along pretty well with your crutches, Cole. How about you go with him?”

“It’s what I was thinking, too. You be okay up here alone?”

“I’ve been alone most of my life. I just imagine I can make it another half hour or so.”

“You want a lantern to take with you?” Matt asked.

“Not sure how I’d carry it. How about hanging one in the elevator car so I can see on the way down.”

Cole called down to Adam.

“We’re going to bring the elevator car back up and I’m coming down to join you so we can see where the tunnel goes, Okay?”

“Fine. I have no problem being 30 feet underground all by myself with no way to escape. Being jackets.”

The boys knew he was kidding – well, probably not about the jackets. They soon had the car up in the closet.

Matt lit a lantern and hung it on what most certainly was

a lantern hook inside the car. Cole entered with the jackets and set one crutch aside as he began pulling on the rope.

“It’s chilly down here, Adam.”

“Perhaps that’s why I requested jackets.”

“Oh, yes. Here.”

Cole looked around.

“So here at the bottom the area is larger like a mostly round place ten or twelve feet wide. Then it narrows into the tunnel you told us about.”

Adam nodded, not thinking more words were necessary on that topic.

“Who leads?” Adam asked. “Only room for single file.”

“You lead and hold the lantern so I can see the floor, too.”

They began the walk. Cole soon figured how to use the crutches on the curved, damp, floor.

“This is where that trap door things is,” Adam said stopping and pointing up.”

“Looks like maybe there was a rope hanging down once – see the little hole. I’m betting that whole thing opens down – maybe with a folding ladder or a rope ladder. We can check that out later. Let’s keep going.”

“They walked on for a few more minutes.”

“This is as far as I got before. It starts to slope up into the mountain.”

“I see. A gentle slope. Looks like it may curve to the right up there a way.”

They walked on. Cole had been right – it did curve and just beyond the curve was a large ‘room’, fifteen feet across and at least that high. There was a pool in the center that looked go be six or eight feet deep. They moved around it to their right. The tunnel leveled off.

“This is different, Cole. I’d say man made. Look. Straight walls and floor. Seems to be a softer sort of rock. Those are probably pick marks. I think it’s called sedimentary rock.”

“It’s a mine for sure,” Cole said. “Look at the irregular width. It’s as if when they’d find something worth digging for they dug back into the wall following it, and then stopped when it ran out and continued on straight ahead.”

“Makes sense. Seen enough or shall we follow it to the end?”

“Let’s go at least a little further,” Cole said, “as long as we’ve made this much effort.”

They walked on. It was much easier for Cole on the flat floor.

“I’ve been wondering,” Adam said. “Where did they remove the dirt and the ore from – surely not up in the closet?”

“Maybe out the root cellar. Remember, gold isn’t deposited in big chunks – just little nuggets. They could have carried *it* out in small sacks I imagine.”

“The whole elevator thing puzzles me,” Adam said. “Why an elevator from a second floor into the mine? Just doesn’t make sense.”

“Seems like we’ll have lots of time to figure it out.”

After another thirty yards they came to the end – a solid, blank wall.

“The miners ran into this wall of granite. No way through that except dynamite,” Cole said.

“Oh, oh!” Adam said pointing to the floor.

“What? Oh, I see. A cigarette butt and not left over from the old days. Look, it’s a filter tip.”

Adam picked it up.

“Looks very new to me. The ash is dry and flips off really easy and look back inside the paper, the tobacco is still bright looking. Really recent, I’d say.”

“It means somebody else knows about this place,” Cole said

“Maybe the same person who was messing with the pump just before we arrived.”

“Yeah. Maybe. Probably, even. I suppose ghosts of grandfathers don’t smoke, do they? We need to get back upstairs and talk this all over with Matt. He seems to know all about surviving in dangerous situations.”

Fifteen minutes later they were back upstairs and had explained to Matt what they had found.

“So, they chose this spot for the town after discovering the natural shaft and tunnel down below,” Matt said.

“And,” Adam continued, “they apparently built this building right here to cover that natural entrance and give

them easy access. There had to be an opening here. Like a natural well – I think they are called *vents* in caves – and they built the elevator once they had explored down below.”

It all made sense. It did nothing, however, to satisfy them about the unknown intruder – or intruders. Matt had the next suggestion.

“I think we need to explore the whole town so we know what we really have here – and don’t have. I still have to wonder why all these buildings.”

“I’ve been thinking about that, Cole said. “There is only one bed here. We are told there were three men working the mine. Maybe each of them had a separate building – like their own home.”

“One way to find out, I guess,” Adam said. “Like Matt said, we need to do some exploring.”

They spent the rest of the morning going through the buildings one by one. Two of them had beds giving some credibility to Matt’s idea about individual places. They were all only one story. They all had both front and back doors. The buildings had been built so they touched one another.

Behind the row of buildings was a grassy area. There wasn’t much grass in that area of Colorado – mostly sand and hard packed clay. It was where the chickens stayed.

“The ground back here is moist,” Cole said stooping down to feel it and get a handful of grass.

“Over there at the base of the mountain,” Adam said, “looks almost swampy.”

“Probably a spring that produces very little water – just enough to keep this area moist. From the way the cave looks, this area is underlain by thick layers of rock.”

To the east (their right, as the boys looked at the area with the row of buildings at their backs) behind the last building was an area enclosed with a split rail fence. That building had double doors in the back and had clearly served as a barn, even though from the front it looked like a shop or store.

“We need to bring the mules in there so they can move around and munch fresh grass. I’m betting back by the mountain there is a depression cut into the soil that fills with water for the animals.”

It had been Cole. Adam went to look.

“Just like you said. It has some rocks in it now – probably broke loose up above and rolled into it. About six feet long, two wide and maybe eighteen inches deep. It’s full of water. We need to clean it out, I guess.”

“That was high class thinking, Cole,” Matt said clearly impressed. “You really think like a mule. Wait! That didn’t come out right.”

“Oh, I think it did. When you keep animals you really do need to learn how they think. I’ll take it as a compliment. Anyway, they’ll be a lot happier back here, with fresh grass and freedom to move around.”

They moved the mules and then found themselves sitting on the porch in front of the hotel.

“You didn’t get sick from the well water, did you?” Adam said turning to Cole.

“No. I guess I didn’t. That’s good to know. I’m thinking it taps into the creek water instead of a well. Hard to dig through the rock layers we’ve run across. Speaking of water, there was that wooden bathtub in miner number three’s quarters. I’m thinking if we bring it out close to the pump, fill it and let the sun warm the water, we can all get a bath. We stink, in case nobody else has noticed.”

“There was soap in the supplies we brought,” Adam said. “I didn’t find any towels, though.”

“I guess we air dry. That shouldn’t take more than a minute in this hot sun,” Cole said.

“You do realize that with all these casts we’re wearing, none of us can get into a tub of water, Adam said.

They began chuckling. Of course, they hadn’t realized it. They’d find a way. For the time being, that tub could just serve as their water heater.

“I’m feeling the need for more of a plan than we have,” Cole said. “I know I’ve become more used to rules and routine than you two. It’s one of the things we’ll have to work out among us.”

“We can do that,” Matt said, smiling. “You make up some rules, and Adam and I will watch you follow them.”

They all chuckled.

It had been offered as a joke, but Cole had to wonder

just how much of a joke it really had been. Matt was right of course. He could establish rules for himself and follow them. Those were the best kind of rules.

“How about something like this,” Adam said. “When something comes up that shows we need a rule, then let’s discuss what it should be.”

“That makes sense to me,” Matt said. “Not at all a bad idea – *unnneeded* rules are the worst kind.”

“I think *unfair* rules are the worst kind,” Adam said.

“I vote we agree there are two kinds of worst rules – unneeded and unfair,” Matt said.

There were nods all around.

“Our first vote, guys,” Adam noted. “I think that went well.”

They all smiled. It seemed their first rule had been established – decisions would be made by discussion and vote.

“The reason we’ve been given for being here is that it is necessary if we are to inherit this town,” Cole said. “What might be so important about this town that we should give up a year of our lives in order to get it?”

“I, for one, came in search of ghost town gold,” Matt said. “Your first search of the mine – well, tunnel at least – didn’t show us any.”

“I mostly came for a change of scenery,” Adam said. “Not much positive was happening in my life back home.”

“Well, you certainly did get a change of scenery, I’m betting,” Matt said.

Adam and Matt turned to Cole as if it were his turn. Apparently the second rule was going to be that everybody got a chance to speak his thoughts and opinions on matters of importance.

“I think I came partly to connect with family – blood family – you guys, and in some way with our grandpa guy. I also came to grow up and prove I could make it in the world away from home. Honestly, of course, I also wondered about some possible treasure or other inheritance.”

“Somebody said something about a plan earlier,” Adam said. “Wasn’t there something about that in the packets of information we were given?”

“You’re right,” Cole said, “If this town is to be ours, it will be important to find the survey markers, which mark its boundaries.”

“I don’t know what they are?” Matt said.

“Usually metal stakes driven down into the ground with marks etched into the top of them that designate the plot of land – in the case of this place probably the stake number or claim number,” Cole said. “When I was a little boy my father showed them to me at our farm. Ours were like four inch plates flat against the surface of the ground.”

“I remember a picture in a book,” Adam said. “It was a story about the old days. That stake was wood and stuck up a couple of feet. I don’t suppose wooden ones would have survived this long, though.”

“You know what would have survived this long,” Matt said. “Stone.”

“That’s a good thought,” Cole said. “But how in the world are we supposed to find four markers in among all the rock and sand out here? We don’t know how big the claim is – a square mile or just a block.”

“The first letter we received said what we got was a town,” Matt said. “This town, if by that it means the buildings, is not very big.”

“But, it would include the mine and that seems to be back inside the mountain. “I’m thinking that means the town and the mountain,” Adam said.

“And probably the stream that runs on the other side of the road or street here in front,” Matt added.

“Good thinking, guys. So, to include the mountain and the stream and the end of the street, such as it is, would put one corner of the property right over there somewhere,” Cole said pointing southwest.

“I’m ready to go look,” Adam said standing.

“Okay. Me, too,” Cole said, “but first we need to make a set of crutches for Matt.

“We brought some two by twos with us in the pre-packed wagon,” Adam said. “They’re in the hotel.”

We’ll need the small saw, the brace and bit (hand powered drill) and the box of screws and bolts,” Cole added.

An hour later Matt was fitted out with a set of crutches –

a cross piece on top to go under his arms, and five inch handles sticking out down at hand level. Within a few minutes, he handled them like an old pro.

“Okay. Thanks. This is great. I’m not used to be so helpless. It’s made me appreciate the plight of those who are.”

“Plight!” Adam said. “Sorry, but I didn’t expect that word to come out of your mouth.”

“Neither did I. Must have meant, difficulty.”

They laughed. It seemed rule three had something to do with not putting others down and not getting upset when it seemed somebody had done that.

Rule four would be stay safe and it was prompted by the shot fired in their direction at that moment from behind the large rocks across the creek. It left a slug in the wall behind their heads.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Black Butt

They hurried inside.

“Somebody’s trying to kill us, guys,” Matt said.

“I don’t think so,” Cole said. “They were no more than forty yards away from us. If they, or he, had been aiming at one of us we’d have been hit. My take is that whoever it is, is just trying to scare us.”

“Hope you’re right,” Adam said. “Why scare us?”

“Into leaving, I suppose,” Cole said.

“Again, why?” Adam asked.

“Something here they want for themselves,” I’m thinking,” Matt said. “Something valuable enough to shoot at us.”

“That’s my guess, too,” Cole said.

“If that’s true it means we still haven’t found what that is,” Matt said. “So, what do we do now?”

“You know what would be really funny,” Adam said.

The boys had already learned that when Adam said either ‘fun’ or ‘funny’ it usually included some element danger.

“I hesitate to ask what you think would be funny,” Cole said.

“Well, get this. If we are sure they aren’t aiming at us, we should each go outside wearing a target on our back – like suggesting they are such poor shots we feel the need to help them. That should get them pretty mad.”

Cole responded.

“I’m not sure it’s really a good idea to get guys who are willing to shoot at us, mad at us, Adam.”

“With the supplies that were packed in the wagon there is that emergency phone,” Adam said. “The instructions say to use it only in case of life threatening situations or we’ll lose our claim. I suppose if they aren’t aiming at us this situation doesn’t qualify.”

“It’s something to keep in mind,” Matt said. “Where is it by the way?”

“In the top drawer of the desk,” Cole said.

Cole was the organized one of the three. He liked having a place for everything and to keep everything in its place. Adam, on the other hand, would misplace his toes if they hadn’t been attached. Matt liked to have everything he needed within easy reach – especially things related to his safety. That first night he had slept close to the rifles and he never removed his knife from the sheath strapped to his lower leg.

“I suggest we follow our plan,” Cole said. “Find the survey stakes so we know the borders of our territory. “The shot could have just been a stray from a hunter.”

“And everybody who believes that raise their hand,” Matt said.

“I’m happy to listen to your suggestion, Matt,” Cole said.

Matt shrugged his shoulders and looked away.

“I’ll rephrase my suggestion. *I am* going to search for the stakes. Anybody who wants to come along is welcome. No problem for me if anybody chooses not to come along.”

“Who should we notify when you don’t come back?” Matt asked.

“If that was a serious question my information is in my back pack. If it was just being sarcastic I can’t see how that helps build the kind of relationship we need to have.”

Matt didn’t respond. Cole picked up a rifle and left through the front door. A few moments later Adam followed and caught up.

“I told Matt he should stay with the other rifle and protect the property. He surprised me. I thought of all of us he’s be the bravest.”

“I just imagine that back in the territory he knows best, the alleys and rooftops of big cities, he is just about the bravest there is. I think he’s being more cautious than he is

frightened. He may be smarter in that way than the two of us for all we know.”

“Kids back home used to think I was brave because of stuff I did,” Adam said. “It really wasn’t that I was brave; I just often let my curiosity about things override my good sense about keeping safe. I think that’s why I’m here with you right now. I really want to know the lay of the land. If there is something of value here that we haven’t found, then we need to know what territory is ours to explore – I mean like the boundary around whatever it is.”

“So, we’re headed southwest. I figure gramps would have included as much water in his claim as he could and that would take us across the creek that turns here from running south to running east. The curve in the creek may be the south west corner of our land. I noticed earlier that there were stepping stones laid across it, there.”

He pointed.

“We need to keep our casts dry,” he continued. “I’ll go first. I have crutches. The water is only a foot deep and the top surface of the flat stones are well above the water.”

He made his way across, easily keeping the cast dry.

“Let me toss my crutches back to you. They really helped.”

Adam took the suggestion – not something he was prone to do without discussion – and agreed on the other side it had helped. He handed them back.

Cole looked back north along the creek and trail that ran beside it.

“Assuming gramps wanted that road coming south along the creek to be part of his property, then we need to go west another twenty yards wouldn’t you say?”

“I like that about you Cole,” Adam said following along as they walked.

“That I share my crutches?” he asked with a smile.

Adam caught the humor and smiled himself.

“Well, that, yes. But I was referring to how you just automatically include the rest of us when you share an idea or suggestion. Like then, you added, ‘wouldn’t you say’, to the end as if my opinion was important. My principal back home used to do that. He was a good man.”

Cole didn't feel the need to respond. His father and mother had always included him in that way so it was just automatic for him. It had made him feel part of his family team from as far back as he could remember.

"Right about here, I'm thinking," Cole said. "How about we search this area?"

"How about we look at that frog sitting there on top of that metal plate in the ground," Adam asked with a grin as he pointed.

"The top of the stake, you think," Cole said bending down to pick up the frog.

"Never seen one like this before," he said.

"Frog or stake?" Adam asked.

He reached out to take the frog as Cole bent down to scrape away the sand that had settled onto the plate. The 'survey stake' was shaped like a large tack with a three-inch-wide, round top and a long, one inch thick pin that was driven into the ground.

"There's lettering struck into the plate," Cole said.

He leaned even closer and blew away the remaining dust and sand.

"Paper and pencil in my back pocket, Adam. Get them and take this down."

"Okay. . . . I'm ready."

"75 r-d-s N. 75 r-d-s E."

"R-d-s?" Adam asked.

"Rods, I imagine. A unit of measure popular back when gramps would have been here. It equals 16 and a half feet."

"So, 75 of them is close to 1,250 feet – about the length of four football fields. This is a sizeable chunk of land if it's that long on all four sides."

"That was computer-like calculating, Adam."

"I have no idea how I do that – just plug in some numbers and my brain spits out an answer. It's why I hated math – I didn't need to learn most of it so didn't do the homework."

"So, we walk four football fields north and we should come to the north-western survey stake," Cole said.

"I'm thinking that's about where the road comes down off that incline and levels out," Adam said. "Where you

watered he mules on our way here.”

“I think you’re right. Let’s go east, then, along the south side of the creek. We really haven’t been past the coral in that direction,” Cole said. “Let’s let Matt know what we’ve determined so far.”

They walked back to the hotel, keeping eyes on the rocks from which that shot had been fired.

“Did you find it?” Matt asked with far more enthusiasm than either of the others expected.

“We did,” Adam said. “And, figured out where the northwest corner probably is, too – bottom of the slope on the road we traveled. We’re heading over to find the south-east corner now. About the length of four football fields we think.”

“Something else for us to think about,” Matt said pointing south across the creek. “I’ve seen the top of a black hat bobbing up and down behind that pile of rocks. The shooter, I’m thinking. It’s like he’s been moving around back there. There, see, it!”

The boys turned just in time to see it disappear.

“So, what do we do?” Adam asked.

“Has he seemed to make any threatening moves?” Cole asked.

“Well, I’m thinking firing that shot was plenty threatening.”

“Besides that, I mean.”

“Hasn’t showed his face. No way of knowing what he’s up to.”

“Oh, yes there is,” Adam said and he hobbled his way toward the rocks.”

“Stupid move,” Matt called after him.

It had been less a warning and more a basis for saying, “I told you so,” later, in case anything bad happened to him. Rule Five seemed to be, ‘let the others do stupid things if they’re determined to do them’. That one probably needed to be looked at with an eye toward revising it.

Adam used the stepping stones again. At the rocks, he moved to his left around the east end of the pile. He spoke loud enough that the boys could hear him.

“Hey! Man with the rifle and black hat. I want to get to know you.”

He continued moving until he was out of sight. There was nothing but silence coming from his position.

A few minutes later he reappeared. He shrugged and saved comments until he reached them.

“All I saw was a butt in black pants heading into a stand of trees back there. Well, three butts altogether. There were two of these on the ground – from filtered cigarettes. Look familiar, I’d say.”

He held them out for the boys to see, then dropped them and cleaned his hands against the sides of his pants.

Cole nodded.

“What next?” Matt asked.

“Well, certainly not going after Butt Man,” Cole said. “I think he’s more a distraction than a threat. I suggest we continue over east and find that survey stake.”

There were nods all around and Cole and Adam walked the road, which became more of a narrow trail beyond the line of buildings. They were each silently counting paces having separately concluded in their damaged conditions a pace was only worth about two feet. At 600 paces Cole slowed and began searching the ground with his eyes. Adam moved to his right side, taking on that area as his own.

“Something there,” Adam said at last.

“That rock, you mean?”

“Yeah. About two feet square – looks to have been chiseled into that form – not natural – and then set in place. No rocks like it in the area.”

They moved closer.

“Your right about all those observations, Adam. I think it’s sandstone.”

They stopped for just a moment several feet away and then walked around it.

“Words chiseled into the south face of it,” Adam pointed out.

“On the west, it has the claim number – the one the lawyer put in the letter to us,” Adam said. “Guess that proves it’s ours, alright.”

“The rest of it is really strange,” Cole said. “Take a look.”

They pulled the tall grass away and used their fingers

to brush the accumulated dust and dirt out of the letters. Adam read the words out loud.

"The answer lies behind your images."

"It's like a clue – a way to answer a question," Cole said.

"What's the question?" Adam asked.

"If it was/is intended for us, it has to do with what is here for us, don't you think?"

"You're probably right. Let me copy it down and we'll take it back with us. Matt needs to be in on it right from the start."

When they arrived back at the hotel, Matt was laying on his back on the ground.

"Oh, no!" Adam said. "We shouldn't have left him alone. You think he's been shot?"

They hurried to his side.

"Hey, guys. What's up?" he said looking up into their faces.

"You scared us to death," Adam said, "just laying their all motionless. We thought Black Butt came and did you in."

"Nope. Just relieves the pain in my neck to be in this position. Sorry if I scared you. Haven't see 'ol BB since you chased him off into the woods."

"We found something interesting," Adam said. "We think it's like a clue to why we're here or what we're supposed to find."

Matt offered an idea of his own.

"I was just thinking that maybe there isn't anything here, but what we've already found, and the 'test' you could call it is just for us to work out a way to make a life together here for a year."

"That is interesting," Cole said. "Regardless of anything else, I'm susfre there will be a lot of truth in that. Read him what we found, Adam."

"The answer lies behind your images."

"The answer to what?" Matt asked.

"That's exactly what I asked," Adam said. "Cole thinks it's about why we're here, like he said."

"Since it doesn't make sense outright, just like it is, it must be like in a code so not just anybody would know what it

means,” Cole said.

Matt struggled to sit up. The others had already learned not to offer to help him. He seemed to take it as a put down. They left him alone. Adam couldn't resist at least saying something, however.

“I hope the day comes when you won't be so pigheaded about accepting help. It makes other people feel good to be able to help, you know. We never offer, because we're afraid you'll bite our heads off.”

“It's how I've always been – nobody was ever there to take care of me so I decided I'd do it myself. To take help is like admitting I can't do that. Not a lot of people I've been able to trust in my life. For the time being I guess we need to leave it at that . . . and, I thank you for letting it be.”

The others shrugged. Cole redirected them back to the clue.

“Can we assume we've figured out the question? If it doesn't pan out, we can take another look.”

Adam nodded. Matt would have, but his head, neck and shoulders didn't like playing that game.

“Sure. Okay,” he said. “What about the word ‘dwells’? Like lives or stays?”

“I'd think so,” Adam said. “If it's an answer, it's inanimate and therefore cannot be alive, so dwell is probably used figuratively.”

“The professor has spoken,” Matt said managing a smile. “I assume ‘inanimate’ means, ‘not alive’.”

“Yes. Sometimes I forget I'm not talking with my principal back home. He and I used to play big word games. He's really about the only person I talked with for the past few years. I think I miss him. That was not my plan.”

“What plan?” Cole asked.

“My plan to never miss anybody. Decided that the night my mom died. Missing somebody could only be sad and I don't allow ‘sad’ in my life.”

Neither of the others knew how to respond so they just let it hang.

“I guess we've agreed that ‘dwell’ means a place where some important thing will be found,” Cole said.

“Right!”

“Right!”

“And it seems that place is behind something, do you think?” Cole went on.

“Sounds like that, and the last part is supposed to tell us where that place is,” Matt said. “Behind your image.”

“No,” Adam said, “images – plural.”

“Images?” Matt said thinking out loud. “Like pictures?”

“That’s a fascinating part of it all – whose images? ‘Your images.’ Who is your?”

“Us, I’d think,” Cole said. “If it’s a clue for us then us or we would be the ones whose images it refers to.”

“I think I even followed that,” Adam said with a grin.

“Anybody got any pictures of themselves?” Matt asked.

“I have one on my Kansas State Identification card,” Cole said. “You guys got picture ID?”

“Everybody back home knew me,” Adam said. “I never needed ID.”

Matt smiled.

“I have one, but I’ve changed my name so often one ID card was never going to be helpful for me. That last few years I was mostly trying to hide who I was, not prove who I was.”

“Anyway,” Adam said, “it doesn’t sound like it could be behind several pictures if it’s just one thing old gramps left for us. There certainly isn’t any picture of the three of us together. And anyway, he had no idea who we’d be – all this time in the future.”

“Hmm.”

“Hmm.”

“Hmm.”

“So, it can’t be *our* pictures, Matt said. “Is there something else the term, ‘your images,’ could mean?”

“Like some image, we all share?” Cole asked. “What would that be?”

“Among the three of us we have three hundred silver dollars – they each have an image on them – I suppose we share them,” Adam said.

“Pretty hard to get behind the image on a silver dollar, Adam,” Matt said.

Adam nodded and shrugged.

“Our image could be our face. Behind our face is our

brain. Can anybody go anywhere with that?" Cole asked.

"I think we're getting off track," Adam said. "We need to stay simple – real concrete, solid, physical, I think."

"I suggest we let it percolate in our heads for a while," Cole said. "It must be time to eat, isn't it? I was going to catch some fish. Maybe for supper."

"Supper?" Matt asked.

"The evening meal."

"I always called that, *cena* in Spanish or *dinner*," Matt said.

"We always called it supper," Adam said.

"That's two suppers to one dinner," Cole said. "Let's see, how about we make up a new word?"

"I got it, Adam said – *Supner*, it combines *supper* and *dinner*. Like a conjunction without an apostrophe."

"Supner's fine with me," Cole said.

"I like it, in fact," Matt said. "It has a gentler sound than either of the others."

"You know what, guys," Cole said not stopping for an answer. "It seems to me we are making lots of decisions without even needing to vote. What's the word I'm looking for Professor?"

The boys turned toward Adam.

"*Consensus*. It means discuss something until the same answer seems obvious or reasonable to all parties. Not only have we been doing that pretty effectively, but we do it pretty fast. Maybe we do share something behind our faces."

Back in the kitchen, Adam cooked again. He seemed to be the most accomplished chef in the lot. The meal that noon just happened to be one of his own favorites: fried spam, fried potatoes and creamed corn."

"Is that a southern meal?" Matt asked.

"Not sure. I've just eaten what I've eaten all my life. Never considered it was some special sort of food – southern, northern, or whatever. Maybe we should each write a list of meals we like so everybody gets a chance at what they enjoy."

"Oh, I don't have any complaints," Matt said. "So far everything you've made has been really good."

"Speaking of being good – what sleeping arrangements are we going to make?" Adam asked.

“How can that question possibly be related in any way to being good?” Adam asked.

“*Good* sleeping arrangements.”

“What do you mean,” Matt said.

“Well, the three guys who lived together here a hundred and fifty years ago, seem to have each had a separate building – the three beds we found. Do we want to be separated like that?”

“I’m happy staying together, I guess,” Cole said.

“I got no problem with it ‘til one of you starts snoring,” Matt said agreeing in principle at least.

“Next question then,” Cole asked. “Do we bring the other two beds here to the hotel? I think we could fit all of them in the upstairs room.”

“Think we can move them – the condition we’re in?” Matt asked. “I’m not being much good to anybody with this neck of mine.”

“The other beds are on first floors and neither one is more than fifty feet from where we’re standing,” Cole said. “Surely we can find a way to get them this far.”

“I suggest we try them out first,” Adam said. “No reason to go to all that work only to find out the sleeping bags we already have are more comfortable.”

“Makes sense, Professor,” Matt said. “Why don’t you go upstairs and be our bed tryer-outer?”

“I can do that while you two do up the dishes.”

“Sounds reasonable,” Matt agreed. “Although it seems you are always finding excuses not to do the dishes.”

Adam left out the front door wearing a big smile. The boys heard him clip-clomping up the outside stairs. They also heard him call down to them in a loud voice.

“Get up here. Now! This bed is occupied!”

///

CHAPTER NINE

That Doggone Occupant!

Matt picked up a rifle and they made their ways up the stairs. They had no idea what to be prepared for.

“A dog?” Matt said sounding disappointed there would be no fight.

“A puppy!” Adam said as if correcting him.

“Where in the world. How?” Cole asked.

“So, while we’ve been preparing to come up and do battle with Black Butt, you’ve been up here with a pup on your lap stroking it?” Matt offered as a question – the hint of disapproval in his tone.

“It does seem that way. Sorry if I frightened you. Wasn’t my intention.”

“Okay, I guess,” Matt said standing his rifle up against a wall. “What’s his name?”

“I’m thinking he’s not going to tell us,” Adam said offering a smile.

“Oh. Yeah. I guess you can tell I’ve never had much experience with dogs – er, *puppies*.”

“He does deserve a name,” Cole said scratching it behind its ears.

The pup offered up a high pitched whine and investigated Cole with his tongue.

Cole spoke to Adam while looking at Matt.

“Matt here seems to be the expert at new names – he’s had so many. I think he should name the pup.”

Adam understood that Cole had a good reason, even if he didn’t immediately understand it.

“That sounds right to me,” he said trusting his new friend’s judgment.

Matt looked back and forth from Cole to Adam to the puppy. He sat down on the bed beside Adam. Somewhat humorously the animal moved himself from Adam’s lap into Matt’s and looked up into his face as if to say, “Okay. What’ll it be? I’m waiting”.

They all chuckled. Matt thought for only a moment then nodded and spoke.

“People generally have three names. Little fella, yours will be *Lost And Found*.”

“LAF,” Adam said. “We can call him Laf for short.”

The idea made all of them Laf – well – laugh.

The pup jumped off Matt’s lap and began sniffing the room from boy to boy and corner to corner.

“Looks like he’s going to let us keep him – the way he’s getting acquainted with things,” Cole said.

He continued his investigation for some time. The boys wondered together where he had come from. The outside door had been left cracked open so he could have climbed the stairs – although it would have been quite a struggle for such a tiny animal. At one point, he stopped in front of a mirror left there from the old days. It was set in a wooden frame and was sitting on the floor propped up against the wall near the closet. He began yipping at the image he saw. The boys thought it was humorous and just let it go on. He registered great surprise and puzzlement when he stuck out his tongue to lick the other pup and it met glass instead. There must have been an element of fright in it as well because he ran back across the room and jumped up into Matt’s lap.

“Guess that tells us who Laf favors,” Cole said smiling.

Cole recognized that Matt had never had much love in his life and hoped the pup might help him learn some things about it. Maybe the pup also recognized that. At any rate, from then on, Matt would clearly become Laf’s go-to guy.

Adam changed the topic.

“Here’s an idea, guys.”

Cole turned to Matt.

“And why are we not surprised that the professor might have an idea?”

They smiled at each other and chuckled.

“Seriously, guys. That *images* thing we’ve been confused about. What can show all of our images even if not all at once?”

“Now *you’re* talking in riddles,” Matt said.

“No, I’m talking about *one* riddle.”

He walked to the mirror and picked it up. He looked into it. He held it up in front of Cole and then Matt.

“Ingenious!” Cole said. “The mirror can contain all of our images even if we weren’t here way back when. The old man was pretty smart. It’s like a time machine – something that existed over a hundred years before we were born can still hold our present-day images.”

“Sharing some of his genes helps explain why the three of us are so smart,” Matt said.

It was not a statement the others would have expected from him, but they were glad he recognized the fact as it reflected on him.

“That phrase again, went, ‘*The answer dwells behind your images*’, right, Adam said. “So, behind the image would be the back of the mirror. One problem the back is blank – just a thin layer of wood.”

Adam and Cole examined the mirror. There was a high-pitched voice from behind them. They turned toward the bed. Matt was making it appear that Laf was speaking.

“Look between the back and the glass,” he continued, while doing his best not to move his lips.

‘*Matt* with an actual *sense of humor?*’ they each wondered?

Adam found a small screwdriver in the tool box and they had soon removed the little triangle shaped wedges that held the back piece and the glass in the frame. Cole laid the mirror on the dresser and then picked up just the frame. Adam picked up just the mirror.

“Well, looky there, gentlemen,” Adam said. “An envelope.”

It had been sealed, but over the years had dried out and come free.

Cole removed a sheet of paper and handed it to Adam.

“And the winner is . . .” Adam said unfolding the sheet.

“Another puzzle for us. Long. Written in rhyme just the way we’d expect a scruffy, old gold miner to write.”

The others laughed at the implied absurdity. It had become clear when the boys laughed or chuckled, Laf yipped right along. What an appropriate name they had found.

“Okay. Let’s hear it,” Matt said.

Adam cleared his throat and continued.

*“Goes up then down
But ne’er around.
Though tops the top
Stop’s not the stop.
Can’t have the gold
Til truth you hold
Behind the car
Not very far
Pull the slats
Four tries for that
If wrong you guessed
You’ll never rest.
To see it true
My hope for you.
To happy be
Not wealth you see.”*

“That was a mouthful,” Adam said as he handed the page to Cole. “It seems to be the important clue, don’t you think?”

The others agreed.

“Okay. Time to put things in priority,” Cole said.

“We need to work on the clue. We need to decide about the comfort of the beds. If we want to bring them here, we need to get on that before the sun goes down. If we’re having fish for ‘supner’ we need to wet a hook or two.”

“I’ve never fished,” Matt said.

“Well, that is something you will not be able to claim by the time we bed down tonight,” Cole said.

Matt grinned. He had a very nice smile. It made his face even more handsome. Adam had decided that Matt was the most handsome, that Cole had the most commanding

look, and that he was the cutest – well, he suddenly had to compete for that with the pup.

“You’re the best organizer, Cole,” Matt said. “You set the priorities.”

“Okay. Adam will test the bed with a bedroll spread out on it.”

Without thinking, Cole offered Matt a hand to stand. All three seemed surprised – and relieved – that he accepted it. Adam unrolled a bed roll and Cole helped him arrange it on the bed. Adam reclined on it; first on his back, then on his right side and then on his left. Finally, he lay on his stomach, his head turned to one side. He sat up and offered his conclusion.

“It’s better than the bed roll by itself. I suggest we move the beds.”

“Consensus, then?” Cole asked.

“Seems so,” Matt said.

“I’ve been thinking,” Cole said. “If we turn the beds on their sides we should be able to slide them from place to place pretty easily.”

“Let’s give it a try, then,” Adam said.

When Matt picked up his new crutches, Laf ran to a corner and whimpered.

“He’s been abused, I’d say,” Adam said. “Why don’t you stay here with him and help him get used to your crutches while Cole and I go work out a plan to get those bed frames moved.”

Matt didn’t offer any opposition to the idea. Cole and Adam left.

It took less than an hour to move both beds into the upstairs bedroom. It would have taken less time, but the boys found the problems they faced because of their physical impairments absolutely hilarious. Laughs were heard, cheeks were dampened, and Laf got stroked.

“Not much room left in here for soccer,” Adam said looking around once all three beds were lined up, heads against the wall with the outside door.

Cole flashed his smile immediately. Matt’s came a few seconds later. Seeing the humorous side of life was not easy for him, but it was coming.

“Okay, now on to the mirror clue,” Adam said.

He retrieved the sheet from the empty, top dresser drawer.

“We have this dresser with four drawers in it. Are we ever going to unpack our clothes and use it?”

“Guess we’ve been busy with other things,” Cole said. “A good activity for after dark tonight. Looks like one and a third drawers apiece.”

“I was thinking we could put a blanket in the bottom one, leave it open and let Laf use it for his bed,” Matt said.

“It reminds me,” Cole said, “we are soon going to have to work out a system for doing laundry.”

“I was thinking about that, too,” Matt said. “Adam’s good at cooking. I’m good at doing laundry – you get that way when you’re on your own. Cole can do the fishing and hunting. What do you think?”

“Sounds like a good starting place,” Cole said. “I’ll have time to help both of you – dishes, cleaning, I’m used to doing those things.”

“And Laf and his tongue can help with the dishes,” Adam said. “That reminds me we need to figure out what we’re going to feed him.”

“Dogs love table scraps,” Cole said.

“One problem with that, Cole, so far we haven’t had any table scraps. We’ve picked our plates clean like starving vultures.”

“We’ll handle that this evening,” Cole said.

They had taken seats beside each other on one of the beds – Adam, with the sheet of paper, sitting between the others. He pointed to the top of the clue and read the first two lines out loud.

“*Goes up then down, but ne’er around.* I’ve been thinking that might refer to the sun or moon, but neither of those seem to relate to anything else in the clue.”

Laf, perhaps sensing the attention had shifted from him to the paper, jumped to the floor from Matt’s lap and sniffed his way to the closet door.

“Laf may have just figured it out,” Matt said. “The elevator goes up and down, but never around. What do you think?”

“I think it’s a good starting place,” Cole said. “Let’s see how it plays out. Read the next part, Adam.”

“*Though tops the top. Stop’s not the stop.*”

“Okay. Let’s try to see that in relation to the elevator,” Cole said. “Top could mean up here in the closet. Clearly that’s the top of the shaft – I mean it can’t get any *topper* than that.”

Adam smiled at the odd word and offered an idea.

“We think of the elevator shaft as having a top – up here – and a bottom – where we get off at the tunnel down below. If we use the word ‘stop’ instead of bottom, what happens?”

“Well,” Matt began patting his lap for Laf to return. “In city elevators, every floor is a stop. Maybe it is saying that the ‘stop’ we’ve been thinking was the bottom, may just be the stop at one of several floors.”

“You mean like there might be a basement?” Adam asked.

“Yeah. Like that. Who knows at this point there might be several stops each leading to a different tunnel on a different level.”

“You think?” Adam asked.

“Think about it – Stops - not *the* stop. The word ‘the’ could mean, ‘the only’ – it’s not the only stop.”

“I guess to prove *that*, we need to travel down to ‘the’ stop and see if there is some way to go on below it,” Cole said. “The elevator certainly *did* stop there all by itself – with a jerk even like it hit bottom.”

“If Matt’s idea is correct, that has to be a false bottom of some kind,” Adam said.

“And it has to be removable,” Matt added while Laf stood up in his lap and licked his face. “Removable like something to take out or switch so it can continue on down.”

A strange noise, quiet screeching, came from inside the closet. It sounded like the elevator had begun moving all by itself. The long, ungreased, wheel was squealing.

As one, the three boys whispered, “Black Butt?”

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CHAPTER TEN

Another Clue

They stood and cautiously made their way across the room to the closet.

“Do we open it?”

“Let me get the rifle, first,” Matt said.

With the rifle in hand, Cole reached out and pulled the door open. The closet was empty – no elevator car. The ropes were not moving up and down, but they were quivering.

“The ropes!” Adam said. “They are shaking back and forth. I’m betting somebody just let themselves down from up here.”

“Let’s see if we can work the pull-rope and bring the car back up” Cole suggested.

It took Cole’s strong, long arm to manage it. Slowly the car rose back up to them. Laf entered it, sniffing, and began growling and showing his teeth as he backed up. Under other circumstances it might have looked humorous – the tiny animal apparently ready to take on an army if necessary.

“Somebody was in that car – somebody whose scent sets-off Laf,” Matt said. “I’m thinking it’s the person who mistreated him. I’m betting Laf escaped and made his way up here by himself.”

“And I’m thinking that person is Black Butt,” Adam said.

“So, do we go after him – the person?” Matt asked.

“Not sure what that would accomplish,” Cole said. “What would we do with him if we caught him? He was clearly here before we arrived, so already knows the lay of the land a lot better than we do.”

"There has to be another way into the mine," Adam said.

"The root cellar, maybe?" Matt said moving to the back window.

"That's right," Adam said, remembering. "That wooden panel in the roof of the tunnel."

They gathered near the window, staying back just a bit to avoid being seen. They were there for only a minute when the wide, slanted, wooden door to the root cellar eased open slowly and a man stepped out. He turned around and closed it.

"That's Black Butt for sure," Adam said.

They watched as he moved straight west (to their left) along the base of the mountain to the road where he turned north away from the town.

"So, are we to figure old BB was up here in our closet?" Matt asked finally putting down the rifle.

"I guess," Cole said. "But why?"

"Probably no way to know," Adam said. "Maybe he came to take Laf back. One thing, though, I'm thinking. He was in the elevator car in our closet the whole time we've been up here this afternoon. We didn't hear the car moving until just now. Can't know why he came, but we can assume he heard our conversation."

"Did we say anything he shouldn't have heard?" Matt asked.

"Don't know what it would have been," Cole said, "but then we don't really know what his interest is in all this."

"Seems clear to me his interest is in getting rid of us," Adam said. "That shot at us didn't really say, *Welcome to Clay Flats!*"

"So, we take a ride down the elevator, now?" Adam asked.

"It's already going on three," Cole said. "We'll be doing that in the dark down there whether its day or night. I think it's time I relieve the woods of a couple of its rabbits."

"Not sure I know how to fix rabbit," Adam said. "Are they any good?"

"They are wonderful. I've fried up lots of them."

So, what do we do while you're gone," Matt said.

“I think we need to understand I’m not our boss, guys,” Cole said. “Look around. See what still needs doing. I have full confidence in you to make good use of your time.”

“How long will you be?” Adam asked.

“However long it takes to scare up two nice big, floppy-eared specimens. I’ll use the rife that’s still downstairs.”

An hour later Cole had two good sized rabbits cleaned and ready for cooking. He placed them in a pan on the counter near the stove. Adam had unpacked the clothes out of the backpacks and boxes and put them away in the dresser – drawers alphabetically from top down – Adam’s, Cole’s, Matt’s. He also arranged a blanket into the bottom drawer for Laf, noting to himself that was not alphabetical. Matt had carved on the handles of his crutches so they were rounded and made comfortable grips. He also rounded off the cross pieces that fit under his arms. Laf had done his duty by sniffing each and every splinter Matt had dropped onto the floor.

By shortly after four they were back upstairs. Adam lit and hung one lantern inside the elevator car. He lit a second to carry. Cole managed a hammer, large screwdriver, and crowbar under his belt. They rode down one at a time, still not completely trusting the old ropes. Matt offered to go first with a lantern and the rife. Adam went second mostly because he didn’t want to be last and left alone upstairs. He took a coil of half inch rope. Cole followed.

“Cole, we think we have it figured out,” Adam said as Cole arrived. “We need to push the car back up a few feet so we can look things over underneath.”

That done, Matt held the lantern over the area so they could see.

“Like a wooden trapdoor,” Adam pointed out. “Hinged along the back to be pulled up. When the car travels below it the ropes hold the door open. When it comes back up it automatically closes.”

“Seems simple enough to work quite efficiently,” Cole said trying to lift the trap door.

It lifted with no trouble. The shaft did, indeed, continue below it. They could not see the bottom.

“That trapdoor is built as part of the wooden platform down here. I doubt unless you knew it was here that you’d

ever even see it – the way the car covers it. What do you two think?”

“Matt said the same thing before you got here. We were wondering if even Black Butt knows about it.”

“Interesting question – one we can’t answer, of course,” Cole said.

“I’d sure like to be able to see what’s down there before any of us goes down in the elevator,” Matt said.

It had been a wise point and the others nodded. Adam spoke.

“Here’s an idea. We tie a lantern to the end of this rope and let it down into the shaft so we can see what’s what.”

They were learning that one of the good things about consensus among people who trusted each other was that at moments like that, no discussion was necessary. The rope and lantern were arranged. Cole adjusted the wick for maximum light and they eased it over the edge.

“It’s a fifty-foot coil,” Adam said, “so we can estimate how far down the lantern goes.”

“This hole is clearly mostly a naturel vertical tunnel – like a well,” Cole said as they watched the lantern descend, lighting the darkness.”

Gramps undoubtedly positioned this building so the elevator could set right over the hole,” Adam said.

“That’s really something, you know,” Matt said.

“How smart gramps was?” Adam asked.

“Well that, of course,” Matt said. “But I meant here we are talking about our shared great, great, great, something grandfather who we never knew and who never knew us and yet we all share part of him in our genes. We are all partly him and in that way we are all part of each other. It’s the kind of thing I’ve never had any reason to think about, I guess.”

“It is fascinating,” Cole said.

“I wonder how many hundreds, maybe thousands, of people there are in our ancestries?”

It had been Adam. Cole attempted an answer.

“I read that if we just trace back 24 generations – about 30 years for every generation, which would be only about 700 years – the 1300s – we each have about 34 million ancestors – like 17 million couples having babies – and that really only

scratches the surface. Scientists say humans have been around for 200,000 years.”

“No wonder our DNA is unique to each of us – what a mix we each have,” Adam said. “No wonder we each have our own look.”

“As fascinating as this is, we are here to solve a practical problem,” Cole said as the lantern seemed to hit bottom.”

The others noticed.

“How far down there, Adam?”

“I’d say over forty feet. This is all that’s left of the rope.”

“Think that’s the absolute bottom or another false bottom?” Matt asked.

“Can’t say from up here, I suppose,” Cole said. “There does seem to be something different along the south wall way down there – that would be to the back of the car as we’ve been using it.”

“Maybe a tunnel running the opposite way from the one we’re in?” Adam asked.

“Maybe. Can’t tell. Maybe just a lighter colored rock formation,” Cole said.

“Okay. Who goes down?” Adam asked.

“I’m convinced these ropes will handle the weight of at least two of us,” Cole said. “I examined them on the way down this time and they remain perfect – didn’t see any stress or stretch points.”

“So, which two of us?”

“You two, I think,” Matt said. “With my neck problem, I’m still no good at bending and stuff.”

It made sense. They pulled the lantern up. It would stay with Matt. Cole pulled the car down so its floor was level with the tunnel. Adam got in first. Cole followed him. Matt kept the rifle.

“Let’s lower ourselves very slowly. We’ve not seen how well this car fits this section of the hole,” Adam suggested.

Cole nodded and they began their descent.

“Hard to tell when we’re getting close to the bottom,” Adam said.

“Let’s slow up a bit, then. Don’t want to damage the car.”

Presently they came to a gentle stop without any assistance from them.

“Like a spring or something underneath us,” Adam said.

“Yes. I guess we will have to wait and see.”

“The front of the car faces a solid rock wall,” Adam said turning around.

“What was that part of the clue about in back of the car?” Cole asked.

“*Behind the car, Not very far.*”

“We must be facing the back now, don’t you think?” Adam said.

“Seems that’s right. If so, we are staring at the ‘behind the car’ part of the clue, right?”

“Yup.” And, you were right about something being here. Another door, maybe. Planks running up and down forming a wall. Four feet wide and five tall. No hinges or handle. Hmm? Covered in something black – not tar – it’s not sticky.”

Cole reached out to touch it. Some came off on his fingertips.

“Looks like soot from a wood burning stove or fireplace.”

“My turn to remember something I read once,” Adam said. “Way back in history, soot – something about its creosote content – was forced into wood with heavy bristled brushes to preserve it so it didn’t rot in damp conditions. That could be what this is. Whatever odor it has is pretty well gone after all these years.”

“Interesting. Did you also read about opening doors with no handle or hinges?”

“Actually, I did. In a *Snow Twins* mystery. The boys found a place to exert pressure and it opened up – in that case slid back into the wall. Probably something else here since the walls are solid rock.”

They began pressing fingers, hands, and eventually shoulders and knees. Nothing happened. Adam became frustrated and kicked it – bottom right side.

“Well, looky there,” he said.

It was hinged on the inside and had been pulled open – some rope, pulley and sandbag arrangement Cole figured.

The kick had released a latch near the floor. The area they saw in front of them was perhaps eight feet deep and five wide. The walls, ceiling and top were stone. At the rear was a strange apparatus made of wood, shaped like a small two-foot square box, three feet high. On the top were a series of one inch holes that had been drilled through the top in four columns that ran from near the front to near the back. There were ten holes in each column. Beneath each row – down inside the box – was a wooden slat that extended fifteen inches out in front. The slats were made so they could be slipped forward and back under the holes. Through each hole could be seen a single letter. Apparently as the slats were slid in and out the letters moved from hole to hole. There seemed to be no order or similarity in the groups of letters from slat to slat. At the rear was a section of wood that stood up some three feet at a right angle to the top of the box. It had words and letters burned into it like from a wood burner or branding iron.

“Looks like another message,” Cole said. “I’ll read it. You follow along.”

*“How you got here must in order appear.
Five down, four across - will bring you cheer.
Take MY away from last of G x 4
About the slats you know - some fear.”*

“What does it tell us,” Cole asked not expecting an answer of course.

“For one thing, it tells us if any of us are poets we did NOT inherit that from grampa. His verse is terrible.”

Cole smiled. It was what he had been thinking.

“Look at that last line, Adam: *About the slats you know – some fear.* What do we know about the slats?”

“In the first long clue, it says: *Pull the slats, Four tries for that, If wrong you guessed, You’ll never rest.*”

“We’re not going to figure it out here, now. We need to make an exact copy of the ‘terrible’ verse and a detailed drawing of the table top.”

“I draw well,” Adam said. I brought paper. You hold the lantern.”

Adam took his time so the words and phrases were exact and the letters on the slats were perfect. He had Cole double check them. They left the little room and pulled the door closed, needing to use Cole's crowbar to pull it tightly into the locked position. They didn't want anybody else to get in there. Of course, without the first clue nobody really had a chance at solving it. He may not have been a very good poet, but he was a smart old bird – dividing the clues up in ways only his great grands would have reason to accumulate (gather) them.

"We're coming up, Matt," Adam called with some vigor.

"Thought you'd found a tunnel to China," came Matt's response.

"You don't suppose he believes that's possible, do you," Adam whispered to Cole.

"Actually, I think it was an attempt at being funny."

"Good for him, then. I've come to think Matt is very sad deep inside. We have to help him with that."

"I suggest we let his new little, *Lost And Found* give it a try first."

Adam understood and offered a smile and nod.

Cole began pulling on the rope and they moved back up to the tunnel.

"So, you find the treasure down there?"

"Maybe. Eventually. Another clue and a device that should take us to it," Adam said.

"You know I don't understand a single word of that."

"We'll explain upstairs," Cole said. "Frankly, neither of us, understand it all either. It will take all three brains."

They sent Matt up first and Cole and Adam followed.

When the two boys exited the closet, Matt was looking around the room.

"Can't find, Laf."

"Probably got tired of waiting and went out to play," Adam said. "I think our next project, here, is one where we're around the kitchen table down stairs, anyway."

They hobbled down the steps, having decided earlier that going *down* in a cast is more difficult than going *up*.

At the foot of the steps Matt looked around again. There was no sign of the puppy.

“He seems to be an explorer,” Cole said. “He’ll come back.”

They moved into the kitchen. If they hadn’t been able to think what they saw was humorous, they would have all been really upset. There on the counter beside the sink lay Laf, munching away on a nice big piece of rabbit.

“We did overlook feeding him,” Matt said. “We’ll say he’s eating my piece. I have a hankering for ham anyway.”

“I think it was WE who ignored him,” Adam said. “We’ll each right off some of ours and run in a slice of ham.”

“I’ve been wondering about eating rabbit ever since you brought it in. Not sure I can do that,” Matt said.

“You don’t have to,” Adam said. “Let me get it fried up, you see if you can take a taste. If you don’t like it we still have a ham and a half and eleven cans of Spam.”

Matt reached out to pet Laf.

“I wouldn’t touch him while he’s eating,” Cole said. “The wild nature that’s left in them tends to make them get pretty upset when anything approaches while they’re eating.”

“Thank you. Didn’t know that. I guess I must have some dog in me, too, then. You’ll learn not to pet *me* while I’m eating, either.”

There was the slightest moment of silence. The other boys really didn’t know but what he might have been serious.”

He spread a grin and a round of laughs followed.

“You guys have to stop being afraid of laughing at things I say that you think are funny. If I meant it that way I’ll be pleased. If I didn’t I will have learned something important about making jokes. Nobody loses. Please, treat me like you treat each other.”

“I guess we didn’t realize we weren’t, Matt,” Cole said. “Sorry, really. From this moment forward you have our permission to kick our behinds if it seems we’re off base like that.”

“Sure, like I could possibly kick you in these casts. Tell you what, I’ll keep track and the day these things come off I will catch up.”

Laf yipped and turned around on the counter clearly telling Matt he was ready for some personal attention. Matt’s face lit up.

Cole showed Adam how to fry rabbit in oil, salt and pepper. Adam handled the ham, green beans and mashed potatoes – he assumed Cole knew how to make rabbit gravy. He did. It was clear that Adam and Matt didn't enjoy the meat as much as Cole, but they didn't really dislike it and figured they would soon come to accept it as part of their regular diet. Now, it might be another matter entirely, when Cole brought home possum or skunk!

CHAPTER ELEVEN

MY – G X 4 = the solution

They cleaned up the dishes and were soon ready to get back after the new clue. Returning to their seats at the table, Adam spread out the sheet that held the information from 'below stop'. He explained the device to Matt so they were all beginning on an even playing field.

"Well, for sure we don't want to move any of those slats until we know what we're doing," Matt said and then went on to support his statement. "*Pull the slats, Four tries for that, If wrong you guessed, You'll never rest.* That seems to mean we get four chances to try possible solutions and after that it's all over."

"That seems to set the ground rules, then," Cole said. "Let's see if we can make sense out of the new verse."

Adam read it out loud.

*"How you got here must in order appear.
Five down, four across - will bring you cheer.
Take MY away from last of G x 4
About the slats you know - some fear."*

"So, how did we get here?" Matt asked.

"Wagon?" Adam suggested.

"No way gramps could have known that, though, is there," Cole said.

"I agree," Matt said. "It really can't mean transportation because he was smart enough to know he couldn't predict that. What else could 'get here' mean."

“Well, there’s the birds and bees thing, I guess,” Adam said. “The way I understand it that hasn’t changed – in like 200,000 years.”

“What’s with the *‘in order’* part?” Matt asked.

“Keeping the generations before us in order maybe,” Adam said.

“I think we’re stuck there,” Cole said. “Let’s move on for the moment.”

“I think the ‘five down and four across’ thing is fairly clear,” Adam said. Look at the grid of holes on the device. It’s ten up and down columns of four rows each across. Count down five to that set of four across. The proper filling of those four holes from left to right is the most important part of all this.”

“I see,” Matt said. “When the slats are positioned correctly, whatever letters show in those four holes will be our clue.”

“Or, will probably just show us the treasure,” Cole added.

“Okay! Good,” Adam said. “The next part, ‘*Take MY away from last of G x 4*’. The x probably means *times* – multiply.”

“Let’s see,” Cole began. “G times 4 would be 4G in algebra. What G reference do we know about that is related to any of this?”

“Golorado?” Adam joked.

“Or, Genver,” Matt came back.

Smiles – no real laughter.

They sat in silence for some time. Laf turned in Matt’s lap from facing north to facing south. He went back to sleep.

“Boy, all I can think of is like the ‘G’ in Gramps, but we only have one of them. Oh, *no* we don’t! How many have we had including Grampa Clay Markey?”

“Well, five including each of our grandfathers – our parents’ fathers,” Matt said.

“Actually, there are two grandfathers in each generation – one for the father and one for the mother,” Cole said.

More silence since that seemed to go nowhere.

“How about this?” Matt offered. “There are four *Great* grandfathers that we share – great, great-great, great-great-great, and great-great-great-great – that last one being Clay

Markey.”

“Interesting,” Cole said. “So, ‘G4’, would be him – Clay Markey.”

Adam offered a question – of a sort.

“But what about, ‘take MY away from it’? *My* is used like an adjective – like *my shirt*. Does it refer to one of grampa’s possession or to one of ours?”

“If ‘*ours*’, it would have to be something he knew we would share at this point in the generations,” Cole added.

“We have to be off track,” Cole said. “If it refers to *us* it would be *ours* or *yours* instead of *my*.”

“Well, *MY* head is swirling, I can tell you that,” Matt said offering a smile.

“I think we can make that *OUR* heads,” Cole came back.

“Maybe *MY* is an abbreviation rather than the word – the possessive pronoun,” Matt said.

The boys turned toward Matt. Adam voiced their thought.

“You know *possessive pronouns*?”

“Hey! I know stuff, too.”

“Of course, you do. It was really rude of us. Sorry!” Cole said.

“Actually, I guess, it was a complement.”

“Now we are *really* confused,” Adam said.

“In school I figured out that if you let others know you knew things, then they started holding you responsible for knowing them – so, never liking responsibility for anything other than myself, I played dumb and was seldom hassled. So, thank you for recognizing my fine acting ability.”

“Then, you’re welcome, I guess,” Adam said. “Back to the *MY* or *M-Y* as an abbreviation – any ideas?”

They began throwing out possibilities:

“Many years.”

“Mighty yummy.”

“Marjory Yuma – a girl in school.” It had been Matt.

“Mostly yucky!”

“Yahtzee Master – no, that’s backwards.”

They went on for some time with no reasonable success although it did become quite funny at times (mosquito

yodelers!).

“Enough of that,” Cole said. “Sticking with Matt’s idea that it might be something other than the pronoun, my, and it doesn’t seem to be any obvious abbreviation, what else could it be?”

“It’s something that can be subtracted from GGGG,” Adam said trying to get their heads set in another direction.

“Maybe the letters ‘m’ and ‘y’ subtracted from the letters in great grandfather,” Matt said.

“I have seldom seen *great grandfather* spelled with an m and y, Matt,” Adam said smiling.

“But, wait! This may be a Eureka,” Cole began.

“What’s a Eureka,” Adam interrupted.

“It’s supposedly what miners said when they hit the precious metal they were looking for. Anyway, who was the GGGG from which we are to subtract ‘m’ and ‘y’?”

“Clay Markey,” Adam said.

“And, using the last name – the one that really relates to all of us – subtract the ‘m’ and ‘y’ and you get arke,” Matt said, his expression changing from happy to puzzled. “Thought I had something there.”

“Maybe you do,” Adam said. “It’s four letters – we need *four* letters in the board with holes – the puzzle board. Nothing says it has to really spell anything.”

“Let’s look at the drawing you made. Could we line up those letters across that row of holes? Are those letters available on the four slats?”

“Okay. Well, in the far-left slat there *is* an ‘A’. And in the second, there *is* an R. And the third has the K and the far right has the E. Do you suppose we really solved it?”

“Just one thing left then, Cole said. “*About the slats you know, some fear.* What do we know about the slats?”

“From the long clue,” Matt said. “Remember it says: *Pull the slats, Four tries for that, If wrong you guessed, You’ll never rest* – like once they’ve been pulled – arranged – tired – four times we don’t get any more shots at it – that outcome would be something to fear.”

“Okay, then,” Cole said. “Let’s put it all together.”

The others were surprised when Matt took that challenge.

“It seems simple. We carefully pull the slats so the letters, a,r,k,e, show, left to right in the row of holes that is down five rows from the top. Then . . . *Eureka*, I guess. Something happens to point us in some direction. If what we enter in the holes is wrong, I guess we’ve used up one of our four allotted tries.”

“I think you nailed it, Matt. Are we good or are we good!” Adam said propelling his fist into Matt’s shoulder.”

Matt tensed, scooted back, and raised his fist – all quite automatically.

“Whoa, there Trigger,” Adam said, his palms out in front of him as if for protection. “Guy to guy, four knuckles to a shoulder is like a show of affection.”

“I certainly did not know that. If it means the same thing when thrown at a guy’s jaw, then I’ve sent lots of guys to the ground while expressing my affection.”

The boys laughed until tears wet their cheeks.

[*Trigger*, by the way, was the horse ridden by western movie star, *Roy Rogers* during the 1930s, 1940s and 1950s. *Trigger* was known as ‘the smartest horse in movies’.]

“So, do we go to the slat board and find the treasure?” Adam said at last.

“I’ve been thinking we need to take a security measure first,” Matt said.

“Oh? What?” Cole asked.

“That root cellar. Can we lock it from the inside so Black Butt can’t come and go as he pleases?”

“I’m sure we can,” Cole said. “The ones we had in Kansas had locks on the inside of the doors to keep tornados from sucking them open. If this one doesn’t, I have an idea about how to do it. Let’s go take a look. I agree it would be good to know he couldn’t get to us through the elevator.”

“Shall we take supplies in case we need to build something?” Adam asked.

“Good idea,” Matt said. “Making that trip won’t be easy for any of us. What do we need and do we go in from the outside – across the back yard – or from the inside?”

“Inside, I’d say,” Cole answered. Have to come back that way, anyway, once the door is secured from the inside. We’ll need about eight four inch bolts with no groove for the

blade of a screwdriver on the head – on the top – a drill and drill bit the size of the bolts, and a wrench – probably the saw to cut a two by four to fit. They added a few other ‘just in case’ things.”

“All of that’s in the front room,” Adam said really not needing to have said it.

Ten minutes later they had the supplies upstairs and loaded onto the elevator.

“How about if I ride down with the stuff and you two follow after that?” Cole said.

The others nodded. They hung one lantern in the car and lit a second for Cole to use down in the tunnel. Adam and Matt took a third with them giving each boy a source of light. It was less than a five-minute walk to the trapdoor leading up into the cellar. They did, indeed, look like an ad for the Red Cross as they made their way through the darkness.

“Not sure how to pull it down now that we’re here,” Adam said. “Cole thinks that little hole in it used to have a rope hanging down.

“Got a nail with a wide head on it?” Matt asked.

“Several,” Adam said.

“Pound it in about half way to the very bottom of one of my crutches. Then slip the nail through that old rope hole, catch it with the head of the nail, and pull it down.”

“Very clever,” Cole said.

It did everything it was supposed to do. Cole then hammered the nail on into the crutch so it wouldn’t be in the way when Matt used it. Just as Cole had figured earlier, there was pull a down ladder attached to trapdoor. Presently, all three had helped each other up into the cellar. It was large fitting back into a natural depression in the mountain side.

“Like I was afraid,” Cole said, “no lock. The door is six feet tall and four wide and lies at an angle from the ground up to the top of the opening. We need to cut the two by four so it overlaps the concrete sides of the door opening, drill matching holes up through the two by four and the wooden door. We insert the bolts from the outside down through the door and the two by four. We add the nuts and washers to the ends of the bolts down here, tighten them, and we have a permanent seal.”

In the end, Adam had actually done most of the work, being the least handicapped of the three. A half hour later they were satisfied with their project and struggled down the ladder back into the tunnel. With the ladder folded up they used Matt's crutches to push the door up into place – it was held there by an old iron catch.

They started back to the elevator.

"I just had a thought," Adam said. "I sure hope BB wasn't down here already. If he was, we just locked him in. Without a wrench, he'd never get out of that Cellar door."

"I knew I should have brought a rifle," Matt said.

They picked up their pace a bit and were soon all safe and sound back up in their bedroom. Laf was waiting and jumped into Matt's arms before he was prepared. No matter, he dropped his crutches and made the catch.

"It got dark outside while we were gone," Adam said. "Gee, nine o'clock."

"In light of Adam's 'thought' about BB already being inside," Cole said, 'how about we put a removable bar across this closet door so BB couldn't come out this way, but so we can still easily get in?'"

It took another half hour, but they had the place secured before they were ready to turn in for the night. The door that led outside to the steps was solid, with hinges on the inside, and a heavy duty, interior, slide lock. All in all, they felt very safe. Still, Matt leaned a rifle against the wall at the head of his bed.

"This reminds me of that time I went to camp," Matt said, "Beds lined up like this."

"It sounds like that was a good time for you," Cole said.

"It was. What we're doing here really reminds me of it. I guess what I'm saying is this place comes with a built in good feeling. This is even better because at camp I had lots of bosses. As you may have gathered, bosses and I have never gotten along very well."

"I'm glad it's comfortable for you," Cole said. "I'm having a good feeling about it, also. It's like back when I was growing up in the country."

"I guess I've just always fit myself into wherever I ended up – except for classrooms," Adam said. "Classrooms and I

never got along very well. I remember in first grade the teacher hit me on my knuckles with a yard stick because my printing was sloppy. I grabbed it from her, broke it over my knee and put the sharp, broken edge up against her throat and marched her down to the principal's office. I explained what she had done. She admitted it. That's when I started getting to stay in the office whenever I felt the need."

"You really did that to a teacher?" Cole asked.

"Not proud of it as I look back on it, but I figured she had no right to do that to me when I was doing my best. How could she have possibly figured broken knuckles would improve my handwriting? Just plain stupid. I have better control of myself now. I find ways to get sent to the office before things reach the point where I have to resort to driving stakes into teachers' hearts."

"I think I did that, too, the last year I was living alone on the desert – learned more self-control, I mean," Matt said. "I could be by myself whenever I wanted to be and could be with people when I wanted to be. Had girls to spend time with whenever I wanted to be with them."

By then they had all crawled into their sleeping bags on the beds and put out the lantern. That night Laf slept up on the bottom of Matt's bed rather than in his special place – although he had claimed it as his own earlier.

"It's nice like this," Adam said. "Us, here, together, like this I mean. I've never had much practice in the getting along with friends, department. I have the idea that, you, Cole, always did well with friends."

"I did. Never really had any enemies and had several comfortable friends. I even lived with my best friend and his parents the last year and a half before I received our letter. I miss my parents a great deal."

"I guess I'm not ready to talk about that," Matt said. "Never knew my dad, and my mom really never wanted me. That's not the kind of life that builds good memories. What friends I had hung with me because they knew in a street fight I'd defend them – not because they really liked me."

"No pressure," Cole said, although he thought for not being ready to talk he had said a great deal. "I don't know if you two know that I never knew either of my biological

parents. The family I call mine just took me in out of the goodness of their hearts.”

“You have *their* last name?” Adam asked.

“No. I came in a basket with a diaper, a blanket, a note, and a birth certificate with my name on it. My parents never tried to change that. Sometimes I used to wonder if that was because they really didn’t want me. As I grew up in their care I came to understand that wasn’t the reason.”

“What was the reason,” Adam asked.

“I asked my dad that a few years ago, and he said it was because they respected my right to be myself and that included the right to have my own name. He said they would adopt me if that’s what I wanted. I decided things were fine the way we were. We couldn’t have loved each other any more if I had been adopted.”

“Wow. That’s some family,” Adam said.

“He’s right, some family. Sounds like a fairy tale,” Matt added.

They stopped talking and each made himself comfortable for their first night in their new beds. Cole heard them both sobbing quietly. It went on for some time. It hadn’t been his intention to make them sad, but more words would not help. His mother had told him that sometimes the best way to deal with sadness was just to cry it out. He would never let on he had heard. He was glad they had the talk. It was the first time he had heard himself talk about the really good things in his life – his family, his friends and, at that point, making a life with two new relatives – well, three counting Laf.”

He was soon asleep.

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CHAPTER TWELVE

All Good Things . . .

The following morning, Cole was up first, enjoying bright sun out front at the pump as he took a bar of soap to himself. He felt better. Adam arrived as he was finishing up and took the hint. Cole remembered that as a twelve-year-old he, too, had thought bathing was a useless activity. Eventually, Matt arrived and made the same effort – he called it ‘*destinkifying*’.

“I slept surprisingly well on my new bed,” Cole said, hoping it would generate responses.

“Me, too, Adam said. “Can’t really tell you if I was comfortable or not – I just slept. Yesterday was a busy day.”

“The bed was better than lots of sleeping places I’ve had,” Matt said not really praising it or complaining.

His response was honest and Cole thought that was how it should have been.

“Breakfast and then the slat board – that the plan for this morning?” Adam asked.

“Sounds fine to me,” Cole said.

Matt was really still stretching himself awake, but without thinking, he managed a nod.

“Hey, I moved my neck and it wasn’t half bad. Good for me!”

“Yeah. Good for you,” Adam said.

“Glad it’s making progress,” Cole added.

They all opted for new outfits and there was a good deal of laughter as they attempted to fit new duds over old casts. Cole was happy the new day had started with smiles.

With breakfast over and the dishes done up, they found themselves standing in front of the closet door. Cole and Matt lifted off the brace they had put in place the night before. Adam opened the door. The elevator car was right where it belonged. It had been one of those unspoken concerns each of them harbored – the thing about Black Butt maybe having been inside the tunnel.

“Remember, guys, if for some reason our first solution turns out to be incorrect, we still have three attempts left.”

It had been Cole trying to prepare them for something less than success. He understood it all involved some sort of mechanical devise that was triggered when the slats were all aligned properly. He hoped that down through the years nothing had broken or rotted or whatever, so it couldn't work. He didn't share that concern with the others.

Andy and Matt took the first ride – Matt with a rifle and Andy with the drawing and a lantern. Cole then met them at the tunnel level. They lifted the door that blocked access on down to the lower level and they repeated the process. Standing at the very bottom of the shaft they looked at each other for a long moment before Adam pushed the toe of his boot against the latch-release section of the wooden enclosure. It swung open back into the space that held the slat board.

“So, that's the gadget,” Matt said moving ahead several steps and holding the lantern high as he looked it over with great interest.

The other boys had long sensed there was something special for Matt about discovering new things. They stood back and let him take it all in.

“Your drawing was right on, Adam. Good job.”

A compliment from Matt? They were all growing in their own ways.

“So, who sets the slats?” Adam asked.

“How about we each do one?” Matt suggested.

“But there are four?” Adam reminded them.

Cole had the solution.

“Go according to age, youngest first – Adam, Matt, me, and then Matt can take Laf's turn.”

There were smiles and no objections. In his mind, Matt

had clearly, and willingly, taken on the role of Laf's guy.

"Do we have any idea what will happen when we set the slats in the correct pattern?" Matt asked.

"None whatsoever," Cole said. "Something obvious is bound to take place that we will see."

With the flair of a magician on stage, Adam slid the first slat into place stopping so the 'A' showed in the proper hole. He stepped aside and Matt stepped in. He moved the 'R' into the next hole. Cole did the same for the 'K' and finally Matt stepped up for the final move. He looked into the face of each of the others.

"My palms are sweating if you can believe that," he said, offering a faint smile.

He slid the slat slowly and carefully not wanting any mistake. They stood, watching and listening. The box shook ever so slightly. It popped out a few inches into the room from where it had been attached against the wall of stone behind it. They looked at each other again as if asking about the next, proper move. They didn't want to do anything wrong at that point. Cole took hold of the left side of the box – Matt the right. They walked it forward inch by inch. It was awkward for them in casts, but not really heavy. Adam squeezed past Matt so he could look behind.

"An opening, Guys. Four feet high, maybe two and a half wide. Looks like a natural opening right through the stone wall. Hand me a lantern."

The boys pulled the box forward another foot and then slid it against the left wall, making room to move along the right side of the area. Matt handed a lantern forward. Adam took it, ducked, and moved on through the opening.

"Get in here, guys, NOW! I have no words to describe it."

They moved inside, lanterns high.

"Wow!"

"Unbelievable!"

"There's another envelope on a stone pedestal – this one is leather and sealed with wax."

They had entered a cave that was some fifteen feet from side to side and front to back – more square than round, and perhaps twenty feet high. It was difficult to see up to the

top with the limited light they had. Tiny specks in the stone surfaces of the walls and floor reflected the light as if tiny stars in the night sky – not the well-known silver stars, but stars of shimmering, one hundred percent, pure gold.

A few feet inside the room, just on the far side of the pedestal, was a pit in the floor, round, six feet across and deeper than that. Above it a pipe extended through from the right wall to a spot directly above the center of the pit. Sand dripped from it into the pit – a few grains at a time, but in a steady, if tiny, stream. Clearly it had just been triggered – also, controlled by the slat board. On the floor on the far side of the pit were stacked dozens of burlap sacks, each about a foot wide and half again as long. Each was tied at the top with rope. They bulged with something inside. One lay on the floor in front, its top was open. Spilling from it out onto the floor were gold nuggets – from tiny to several inches in diameter.

“The treasure!” Adam said. “A fortune like we could never have dreamed about.”

“It seems that tending to that envelope is the first piece of business presented to us here,” Cole said, “the pedestal being right here in front of us.

Adam picked it up, blew it free of dust and handed it to Cole. He didn’t explain why.

“Your knife, Matt,” Cole said.

Matt understood and carefully slid the blade through the seal to free the flap. Cole pulled it back. Adam reached in and removed a single sheet of paper – thick parchment paper, oiled to preserve it through the years.

Cole quickly scanned it.

“More of a friendly sermon than a clue or puzzle,” he said. “Read it to us, Adam.”

They all chuckled as they watched Adam’s hands begin to tremble.

“You have lived this long so you are careful people. You have gotten this far in your quest, so you are smart people. The time has come to prove your patience. When the basin is filled with sand, level at the top, my gift is yours. I have no timeless test to prove your basic honesty and kindness, your compassionate bent and you’re dedication to a

life of helpfulness, and those are, of course, the true tests of a good man. Any man can possess riches; only the good man uses it wisely. Be wise, my grandchildren, and your lives will be remarkable."

"Wow!" Adam said.

"Gramps could say a lot in a few words," Cole said.

"We'll have to study this to be sure we understand it," Matt said.

"It seems we are not to touch the treasure – his gift as he put it – until the basin – as he called the big hole – is full."

"I wonder if something happens if we try to get around the basin to the treasure." Matt asked.

"He talked about being careful and smart – two traits he says we have now proved we possess," Adam said. "Whether anything would happen or not is probably not his point. He wants us to prove to ourselves that we possess patience. I for one need to learn that."

"It will take a long time to fill at its present rate," Cole said.

"Hey, we have a year minus two days," Matt said and then continued, "And we have absolutely no need for the gold as long as we are here."

"I'm wondering if we have any *need* for it at all," Cole said. "I think the old man was very wise. He has set the stage so we will have time to consider many things that guys our ages usually wouldn't. Pretty wise of him."

They lingered in there just getting used to it all and watching the drip, drip, drip of the sand. Finally, Cole turned and moved out through the opening. The others followed. They closed and secured the outer door at the rear of the elevator car. In a few minutes, they were back upstairs. Laf was waiting at the closet door. Matt leaned the rifle up against the wall beside his bed. He looked at Cole and spread a huge smile.

"You know, it's probably time you show me how to use that thing."

"The rifle? You've never shot a rifle?" Cole said returning the smile.

"Nope. Hard to believe I just admitted it. Even harder to

admit it felt good to ask for help from a friend.”

Back in Kansas it would have called for a hug, but Cole figured Matt was probably not ready to go that far yet.

“I keep wondering if we are friends or cousins,” Adam said for no apparent reason other than Adam wondered about such things.

“I’m thinking both,” Matt said.

Adam nodded thoughtfully.

“About the rifle lessons?” Matt said getting back to his concern.

“How about after lunch?”

“Sounds great. I mean I suppose I know how to pull a trigger.”

“Buy supner time you’ll know a whole lot more than that.”

“I hate guns,” Adam said, “but I’m thinking it might be good if I, also, knew the basics.”

“Whenever you’re ready,” Cole said.

“Let me think on it. And that makes me think, fish sounds good. Can we fish for lunch?”

The others nodded. Fish it would be.

“Will Laf like fish,” Matt asked.

“Most dogs do,” Cole said.

* * *

Over the next few months they settled into a routine that seemed to fit them well. With September, they got out the school books. Adam and Matt came to feel comfortable asking Cole for help. They used some of their monthly money to order more books through the monthly wagon delivery – dinosaurs and philosophy for Adam, motorcycles and mining for Matt, and physics and farming for Cole. They managed a few with pretty girls – they shared those.

Once a week they went down to the treasure cave – as they came to call it – and checked on the progress of the sand fill. By the end of September, it wasn’t quite a quarter full yet. It would have made sense to just check monthly but, as Adam had once suggested, it helped them grow their patience by dropping in more often. They never even considered moving around the basin to the stack of sacks.

They rode the mules for fun – sometimes races and sometimes doing tricks while standing on their backs – and, once they were able to shed their casts, they swam in the creek several times a day. In fact, during the summer they spent a good deal of time removing stones from the bottom of a thirty-foot section of the creek right in front of the hotel. Eventually, they had a depth of six feet of water. Ingeniously – Adam’s idea – they also made a channel in which most of the water flowed around the swimming hole. The mountain water was really cold and by letting it just sit there in the big basin they had cleaned out, the sun warmed it to a great swimming temperature. By late August it had become chilly – in and out of the water. In October, they had saved enough money to purchase three single bed mattresses. That felt like Heaven! And more blankets – winters were cold in South West Colorado.

In December, they fixed a Christmas tree with homemade ornaments and made each other presents – no store-bought gifts were allowed. Laf got a carved, wooden bowl from Cole and Adam, Adam received a foot-high Tyrannosaurus Rex that Matt carved out of a piece of pine, and Cole a Bow, quiver and arrows from Adam. Matt got a set of adjustable wooden stilts from Cole. There were other things. They all found they enjoyed carving so purchased a set of carving knives and chisels. The project of which they were most proud was a two foot by four foot ‘picture’ of Clay Flats carved out of local pine from a small tree they cut, and lumber they sawed, sanded and glued together to become their ‘canvas’.

Once it was finished they needed a place to hang it.

“It really needs to go over a fireplace,” Adam said.

“Okay, then,” Matt said, “Let’s build a fireplace on the west wall of the front room in the hotel.”

They read up on how to make and fire (harden) bricks out of clay and how to design a working fireplace. Three weeks they later had a really good source of heat in the hotel for the winter. They cut a register hole in the ceiling that heated the bed room up above. They never did separate into private bedrooms – it just never seemed necessary. For three boys who began their adventure as different as they were,

they managed to build a really fine life together – and really didn't have to change who they were in the process – Well, Adam did regularly attend to his school work, Matt had no need to steal or beat up those who seemed threatening to him, and Cole pretty much just remained good old Cole. They all came to understand that regardless of how their parents had acted toward them, they could rise above that and become whatever sort of person they wanted to become. All things considered, after that year they were the kind of young men any parent would be proud of – and even more important, they were the kind of young men they could each be proud of.

Early in March the sand basin was full and overflowing. Matt carved a wooden plug and hammered it into the end of the pipe. They moved around the basin and, for the first time, examined the sacks of gold. They had no way of knowing what it would be worth or what to do with it, and would leave its care up to Mr. Rutherford and his staff. They did enjoy shoving their hands into the sacks and feeling what was there. And, of course, they had to play the occasional game of catch with the largest of the nuggets.

The morning of May first arrived. They assumed they would be contacted by the lawyer – probably by Jason. Adam got out the cell phone in case that was how contact would be made.

They finished breakfast at eight. That was usually when they started studying. At eight ten, however, they heard a car horn out front. Looking out the front window they saw an SUV pulling a small U-Haul type trailer. They rushed outside and were at the vehicle before Jason was able to get out. Adam administered a bear hug. Cole administered a bear hug. Matt administered a bear hug – one that would have sent most bears high-tailing it for the woods to mend their broken ribs.

“You've grown,” he said looking them over.

“And you haven't,” Adam said smiling. “Have you eaten? Got baked possum if you're hungry.”

“Baked possum? Really?”

Jason made an awful face.

The boys broke smiles, suggesting it had been a joke.

By noon they had gathered what they wanted to take back to *civilization*, as Matt put it. Earlier, when Jason learned

about the treasure and its extent, he had called for an armored truck. It arrived at one, just after apples and ham sandwiches with the last of Adam's homemade bread. Jason had brought soft drinks. The boys opted for water. My how *that* surprised them!

As they pulled away to head back to Denver, three sets of eyes welled up with tears – only Adam's found his cheeks. Even Laf moaned a bit as he sat up and watched out the window as his familiar world disappeared behind them. Jason filled them in on several things they hadn't known.

"The man you referred to as Black Butt is Art Mansfield. He works for Mr. Rutherford. He and a man named Miller, were assigned to keep an eye on you from up on the mountain – in case an emergency occurred. Art apologizes for the shot fired in your direction – seems a puppy came out of nowhere and attacked his ankle – the shot was an accident. I assume that pup grew to be the beautiful animal that's with you today. Art figured boys needed a dog so he saw it got to you.

"One of us sure needed him," Matt said snuggling Laf into his side.

"Did you know the nature of the treasure?" Adam asked.

"We had no idea."

"You figure it's worth a couple of bucks?" Adam continued.

"A couple *million* bucks – maybe *ten*."

Adam, who was riding shotgun, turned and spoke to the boys in back.

"Ten million dollars! How in the world are we going to get rid of all that?"

The older boys broke into hysterical laughter.

Jason frowned, clearly puzzled. Cole explained.

"It is our intention to stay together through high school – maybe through college. We want to use the treasure to set up a trust fund that will pay each of us so much a month and an amount equal to that total to some organization that takes care of homeless kids. That, explains Adam's 'get rid' of reference. We've learned that the important things in life have nothing to do with money – happiness, health, friendships, being helpful to others are what make a wonderful life. We've had a really

great year – we agree our best ever – without TV, or phones, the internet, or electronic games. We never seem to run out of things to talk about and wonder about. Our individual ‘to do’ lists each run in to a dozen pages or more – Adam’s is always the longest. We figure he’ll end up being a professor someday.”

“What will become of *Clay Flats*?” Jason asked.

“We’ve talked about that,” Matt said. “We are going to turn it into a summer camp for kids. We’re not going to add anything fancy to what we had. It will be like a make-it-by-your-own-ingenuity experience. We hope to be able to come and act like counselors who don’t interfere. Then, every Christmas vacation the three of us are going to spend our time there, together. Maybe later we will be able to bring our families with us so our kids will be able to see where the three of us grew to become family. We hope that’s how it works out.”

“And, don’t forget, we’re putting some money away for our great, great, great, great grandchildren – some sort of an interest-bearing fund so it will grow quite large between now and then,” Adam added.

“My, you have been thinking, haven’t you?”

“For some reason, we seemed to have a little time for that this past year,” Adam said, grinning.

Cole spoke:

“A while back we got to feeling a little down when we realized that when we left the *Flats* there would be nobody who was really important in our lives to meet us – to be happy to see us. Then we realized we would always have each other and, with eight billion other people scurrying around the Earth’s surface, there just might be a few new friendships to make. For some time, Matt and I have been sure we wanted lots of them to be girls. Recently, even old Adam’s started to see the potential value in the gentler gender.”

“I have rented you a place to live until you get your bearings,” Jason said. “I think you’ll like it – three, big, private, bed rooms.”

The boys laughed.

“What?” Jason asked.

“It’s a private, *Clay Flats*’ thing, I guess,” Matt said.

They fell silent, each filled with remarkable memories, which none of them could have even imagined that May first, one year before.

The end.

[It might be interesting for you to write a story that tells about your hopes for the boys (and Laf) after they left Clay Flats.]