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The characters and events portrayed in this book are fictitious. Any resemblance to people and circumstances is probably totally coincidental.



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## **Chapter 1**

### **A Few Good Men.**

CAPTAIN Lance Carpenter yelled at Private Beth, "Throw your grenade!"

They were pinned down by the Nazi machine gun nest and he realized too late that they should have dug a deeper trench.

Beth looked at him, expressionless, waiting for more explicit orders. The Captain looked at the grenade in his hand, pointedly looked at the Private, then threw his grenade using the overhand official John Wayne pitch he'd seen in the movies.

That did the trick. Beth followed suit with a mighty heave, lobbing her dangerous missile about ten feet into no-man's land. Sergeant Grinner laughed at her effort and got a blank look from her in return.

"Fix bayonets," the captain commanded, "We're going over the top."

They fastened pretend bayonets on their wooden rifles as he blew the whistle that signaled "Charge!"

They were a fearless squad. They slashed bravely at the tall milkweeds blocking their advance towards enemy lines. White sap oozed thick and pale from the leafy death that marked their forward progress.

"Get down! Get down! There are too many of them," Lance yelled.

Dropping to their bellies they crawled back to the shelter of their lines. "What'll we do now," Sergeant Grinner asked, breathless.

Captain Lance rolled to retrieve a scrap of paper from his worn jeans pocket and wrote on it quickly with a chewed pencil stub.

"Private Beth," he ordered, "I need you to undertake a very dangerous mission. We need reinforcements. Take this dispatch to KennyBenny. Be careful! Watch for cars crossing the street and keep low. There's an enemy sniper in the Anderson's apple tree."

If there was one military maneuver that Private Beth excelled at, it was delivering official dispatches. She didn't say much. She hardly ever cracked a smile, or cried. Her expressions were in her eyes—big and round under the oversized WWI doughboy helmet. Lance's mother said Beth's eyes didn't look very Japanese, though she did think she made a very cute little soldier.

But Lance's mother didn't know how battle-tested Beth was. She was a good marcher—stayed in line, stood straight, and held her rifle on the proper shoulder. Today, with the unit pinned down in the dirt with the hot sun beating down on them, Lance could have used a hundred like her.

"It's just you and me now, Sarge. We've got to hold this position until help arrives."

Grinner scootched down and sighted his weapon over the edge of the trench. "Gotcha, Captain. If one of those dirty Heinies shows so much as an eyeball I'll blow him to kingdom come." He licked his finger and wet his front sight just like Sergeant York would have done.

Even though Pearl Harbor was just last winter they always fought those dirty Nazis instead of the dirty Nips. Since Lance's squad was recruited from the Hatsumoto family next door it seemed like the best thing to do.

They were still pinned down when Private Beth returned. She came running, bent low to avoid enemy fire, her steel helmet bobbing on her head.

"They can't come." she said.

"That's no way to report, private. You're supposed to salute and say it, like 'Sir, they can't come.' "

Being the faithful and true soldier that she was, Beth saluted and repeated her message. "Sir, they can't come."

"Why not?"

"Sir, because their mother said so, Sir"

KennyBenny, the unavailable reinforcements, were actually a twosome. They lived across the alley at the end of the block on the corner. For practical reasons the neighborhood considered Kenneth and Benjamin, the Anderson twins, one entity. Since they were always together, and a matched set, they became KennyBenny. It was very convenient when they were dressed alike and impossible to tell apart anyway. They were eloquent and imaginative and it was like watching a balloon ascend to hear one of their quixotic narratives, delivered in stereo, with each twin building on the other's exaggerations.

If they happened to see a robin feeding worms to some hatchlings on the way to school, by recess time the story would become California condors and rattle snakes. And when they finished their story you could say, ". . . and then what happened?", and off they'd soar to more elaborate heights of fantasy.

Captain Lance assessed the situation. "We can't hold this position without help. We'll make an orderly retreat back across the street."

"I'm fursty," Beth announced.

Sergeant Grinner offered her a drink from the canteen hanging on his web belt.

Beth pinned him with a big-eyed stare. "Yuk! Not that. I'm fursty for cold water."

"Okay, okay ... we'll march. Line up!" Lance ordered. "Hut, two three four, hut two three four." The brave squad trooped back to Railroad Street and around the corner to the Hatsumoto garden. They were surprised to see Grinner and Beth's father in a heated argument.

Lance had never seen Mr. Hatsumoto so violently mad. He repeatedly shoved another Japanese man out of his garden, pushing him in the chest and screaming in his face. Grinner stared wide-eyed and startled at his dad's uncharacteristic behavior. Lance had never heard his dad say a cross word to Grinner or his sisters. He was always smiling and friendly although he didn't know much English. To see him now, mad enough to get physical, was like watching a stranger.

The other man retreated and snarled something back at him as he stumbled away—something in Japanese that was obviously a threat.

Lance looked at Grinner. He was kind of pale. "Jeez . . . what's going on? What did they say?"

Grinner just shrugged and looked embarrassed. Beth ran into the house.

"Did you understand any of it?" Lance persisted.

"Nuh uh." He hung his head and ran into his back door, apparently ashamed of the scene. His dad looked over, still scowling, but forced a smile and a nod before following Grinner in.

Mrs. Carpenter was watching from behind their bathroom window. She made a face at Lance, her mouth frozen in a 'what's happening?' expression. Lance responded with a mystified shrug and went around to their back door. She was there, all concerned.

"What in the world was that all about, Lance?"

"I dunno. Grinner's dad was sure mad about something. They jabbered Jap talk so I don't know what they were saying."

"I was just shocked to see Mr. Hatsumoto so upset. I've never seen him angry ... ever."

## **Chapter 2**

### **Killing Time.**

IT WAS the summer of 1942 and Lance Carpenter was now a sixth grader. With no school, Lance was enjoying the freedom of staying in bed. The bright sunshine of that June morning splashed through the window promising another joyous day of adventure. His mother called from the bottom of the stairs, "Lancey, I'm leaving for work. Grinner's waiting in the yard."

He went to the window and saw Grinner lolling around the woodshed.

"Hey ... what's up?"

Grinner lifted up a syrup pail and a hammer. "I got nails."

"Great. I'll be right down." Lance pulled on his pants and did a staccato run down the narrow stairway. He grabbed a slice of toast left on the kitchen table and burst out the back door, ready to launch their new project.

"Did you draw up plans?" Grinner asked.

"Naw ... I gottem in my head. We'll use some leather hinges for the door. I want to make the window like those narrow ones in old castles. We'll put a trap door on the roof for an escape hatch."

Grinner was contemplative, trying to visualize the proposed club house.

"We're gonna need more boards," he observed.

"Yeah. I think we've got enough two-by-fours, but we'll definitely have to scrounge up boards."

"Maybe that scrap pile behind old Mr. Hansen's?"

"Good idea," Lance agreed through a mouthful of toast. "He'll never miss 'em."

"Well you better start by getting your shoes on."

It took two days of sawing and hammering to build the clubhouse. KennyBenny joined the construction crew and they all worked feverishly, propelled by the joy of creation.

When it was finished Lance's dad smiled and told them they'd done a good job. "Where'd you boys get the old boards?"

"They were some thrown away by old man Hansen," Lance explained.

"I didn't think Hansen ever threw anything away—judging from his junk yard," his dad said.

Lance's mother was not pleased. "That looks like an outhouse," she declared.

Lance painted a skull and crossbones on the door and the words:

PRIVATE  
KEEP OUT

The following morning promised another hot, cloudless day. In the new clubhouse Lance and Grinner were planning a new mission.

"We should go on a Commando raid," Lance suggested.

"Where to?"

"I'm thinkin' we could make a surprise attack on that Nazi fortress on the other side of the vidock."

"I didn't know there was one there."

"You've seen it a hundred times," Lance insisted, "that gray building. You know the one."

"Oh yeah." Grinner was on track. "We can hit it with grenades and then beat it out of there before they retaliate."

They took a break to go into the kitchen for a drink of water. Mr. Carpenter was there making his specialty, potato soup. Lance's dad liked to tease his son's friends. He smiled at Grinner and asked, "Well, hello. How are things at the laundry?" Grinner was onto him. He just clammed up and did his inscrutable oriental thing.

Lance's dad knew none of the Jap kids got along with the Chinese kid at the laundry. They were enemies even before Pearl Harbor. Grinner didn't respond so he dropped it and went back to stirring the soup with a satisfied smirk.

Lance filled his canteen at the sink.

"What's your army up to today?" his dad asked.

"We gonna make a Commando raid on an enemy fortress."

"Well, that sounds like an important mission. You know an army travels on its stomach. You Commandos better have some of my utterly delicious potato soup before you launch the attack."

The soup was delicious and they slurped it down quickly, anxious to get on with their war.

Back outside, Captain Lance assembled his forces. "You go get Beth," he ordered, "and I'll get KennyBenny. We'll rendezvous in the rideaway at thirteen hundred hours."

"When's that?" Grinner asked.

"Soon as you get there. Tell Beth she has to wear her helmet."

They had advanced quietly through the brush and tall grass until the enemy fortress was in sight. They were on the perimeter and hunkered down. Lance sent Grinner to the east side of the viaduct, the overpass over the railroad tracks.

"Go establish our position on the other side of the vidock and give us a bird signal when you're in place. Then I'll bring the rest of the squad up."

"Should I start shooting?"

"No! We don't want to alert the sentries. You're just the point man, so wait for the rest of the squad to close up." The rest of the squad was little Beth in her old olive-drab doughboy helmet and KennyBenny—all equipped with grenades, web belts, canteens and wooden rifles.

Sergeant Grinner moved out, staying low and taking advantage of the cover offered by the brush of the Great Northern Right-of-Way.

The "rideaway" as they knew it was an area of about five acres between the "vidock" on the east, the roundhouse on the west, the railroad tracks on the north, and their neighborhood on the south. It served many purposes. It could be Sherwood Forest, Treasure Island, Bataan, the Khyber Pass, or just no man's land for an afternoon of trench warfare. The railroad never messed with it so it stayed in a wild state of trees, brush and tall grass.

Pretty soon they heard Grinner's bird imitation. Lance motioned the squad forward and they crept into position to storm the fortress. It wasn't much of a fortress except in their imaginations. It was actually a long, low gray barracks-like building that was cheap housing for Japanese track workers with no families. Capt. Lance's plan was to heave some grenades and run like hell. In preparation for the attack they had fashioned their grenades out of clay mud balls so they were well armed. Beth jumped the gun by throwing her grenade with the straight over-arm swing Lance had shown her. Fortunately, she couldn't throw it more than about six feet. It was a dud and the imaginary explosion didn't alert the defenses.

"Wait," Lance hissed, "wait for my command. When I blow the whistle, we'll all lob our grenades and then retreat to the other side of the vidock on the double."

He had their attention. All eyes were on him, waiting orders. He slowly raised the whistle hanging around his neck to his mouth, milking the situation for all the possible drama.

Lance, a veteran commander of the Whitefish railway field wars, had learned that operations never go as planned. A good Captain has to be prepared for the unexpected. Rain can melt your grenades on the way to the war. When moms want to, they can yell so loud that you know it'll be a paddle for you if you don't get home quick! But right then, with the whistle to his lips, the most unexpected thing happened.

Two men came crashing out the side door screaming at each other in Japanese. The smaller stocky man knocked the other one to the ground and his glasses went flying. Lance recognized him as the same man Mr. Hatsumoto had argued with the week before.

A couple of frightened faces appeared in the doorway. The stocky man pulled a revolver from somewhere and the fallen man started crabbing backwards when he saw the weapon.

*BANG! BANG! BANG!* Three loud shots echoed from the only real gun on the battle field. The man on the ground quit moving.

Lance fought his first inclination to start running. His squad was in a perilous circumstance and he had to keep a cool head. He put his finger to his lips to signal quiet and they retreated stealthily to the other side of the viaduct.

"Wow . he killed him!" Lance was trembling inside.

"Bang, bang," Beth said, pointing her wooden rifle in the direction of the killing. She was still role-playing, not realizing what they'd seen was real.

"We gotta go tell somebody." Grinner was wild-eyed and fidgety.

"See ya later," KennyBenny said in stereo. "We're getting out of here!" And they took off for home.

Grinner, Beth and Lance were right behind them.

Then they heard someone crashing through the brush between them and the tracks. "Down!" Lance hissed. They crouched down as the stocky killer ran past, heading toward the tracks. He was still carrying the gun in his hand and he looked right at them but kept on running. They were frozen with fear for a few seconds. Then they took off, all charged with adrenaline, in the opposite direction. Grinner and Lance pulled little Beth between them. Her feet were off the ground half the time. Leaving the woods, they all ran down Railroad Street like the Hounds of Hell were in pursuit. Lance yelled at the twins who were ahead of them.

#### Illustration:

Looking to see if they'd been followed

"Go to the clubhouse. We've got to have a debriefing!"

They piled into the clubhouse and

barred the door. Lance climbed up and stuck his head through the roof hatch to see if they'd been followed.

The killer was nowhere in sight.

"Do you see him? Do you see him?" Grinner wanted to know.

"Nope. He's probably over in the yards looking for a boxcar to hide in." Lance answered as he dropped back down.

Everybody was chattering at once.

"Hold it! We've got to use our heads. He seen us and he may want to come for us if he thinks we saw the murder."

"Yeah," KennyBenny offered. "We could be witnesses at his murder trial."

That possibility stunned them into silence. Lance's mind was whirling with portentous scenarios.

"We should go tell the cops," KennyBenny One said.

"Yeah. We'd get our names in the paper. We'd be heroes!" KennyBenny Two chimed in.

"Oh, great plan," Lance snorted sarcastically. "I don't think so. Then that killer would know exactly who fingered him. "

"I know something," Grinner confided quietly. "That man he killed. He's the one my dad argued with. He's a tax collector for the Japanese government."

"Did your dad tell you that?" Lance asked.

"No. He doesn't know enough English and I don't understand enough Japanese. My sister Mary can talk to him and he told her that guy was an agent that had always forced the Japanese families to pay money that he sent to Japan. But none

of the families will pay it now that they are in the war. He was probably at the track house trying to make those workers pay up."

Lance thought about that for a minute. "Then he was probably a spy, too ... not just a tax collector. Shooting him was probably a patriotic act. Maybe we should just keep our mouths shut and leave well enough alone."

"We could make it classified intelligence and keep the paperwork hidden here in the clubhouse," KennyBenny suggested.

"What paperwork?" Grinner asked.

"KennyBenny's right," Lance agreed. "We need to write up a secret report. This is important stuff and needs to be on file."

"We've got a file?" Grinner wondered.

"Sure," Lance said. "An official one. We just haven't started it yet."

## Chapter 3

### Monster on the Loose.

THE NEXT day the town was buzzing about the murder. The boys had made a pact and each signed Lance's official paperwork, pledging to keep their role in the incident top secret. Lance was finishing his scrambled eggs when Grinner banged on the kitchen screen door. "Hurry up, you're on my side!"

"For what?"

"It's me and you against KennyBenny for shinny stick!"

They beat the tin can up and down Railroad Street until they worked up a sweat. Lance called it quits. "I'm tired of this. Let's do something else."

KennyBenny laughed at him. "You wanna quit 'cuz we're beating you."

"It's just dumb—whacking a can back and forth..."

They stood around undecided, waiting for Lance to broach a new plan. An old truck came around the corner and honked them aside.

Old man Hansen drove his rig to the end of the block and set up to saw cordwood. The boys walked down to watch. He had a new helper. For a couple years while Mr. Carpenter was unemployed he had worked for old Hansen. They'd take his old Jewett flatbed truck into the woods and cut firewood; then, at the home of the buyer, they'd convert the truck into a sawing monster and cut the logs into short pieces that would fit a cook stove or heater.

Old man Hansen was stingy, mean and dirty. The neighborhood kids called him old man Hansen because he was skinny and stooped and leathery faced with hollow cheeks, plus he always stank like the Smokehouse Bar when you got near him. He probably wasn't even middle-aged. He seemed to live on Corby's whiskey and Campbell soups, judging from his garbage, and he always looked like his stringy frame had just emerged from solitary confinement.

He was spitting tobacco juice and snarling at his new helper, John Delman, a gawky high school kid.

"When I get the wheel jacked off the ground, you crawl down there and put that chunk of wood under the frame."

He cranked on the jack handle until the back wheel was a few inches off the ground. The kid crawled under and put the block in place.

"Now, get your butt out of there and we'll do the other side." He lowered the jack until the axle rested on the block and they repeated the process. With the back wheels off the ground and the engine running in reverse gear, the truck became the power source for the big four-foot circular saw blade. It was the monster machine that drew the boys' interest. It was noisy with a high-pitched whine and threw chips and sawdust around as it chewed swiftly through the logs. The right back wheel had a pulley thing welded to it. A belt was placed over that and over another one on the side of the flat bed where the blade was mounted. Old man Hansen got the belt hitched on.

"Get me that adjustable crescent out of the toolbox," he ordered the kid.

Lance could tell by the blank look on the kid's face he didn't know what that was. But he went and brought back a wrench.

"Hellfire, Delman, don'tchoo know the difference between a crescent and a monkey wrench?" He spit a stream of tobacco juice, jerked the monkey wrench away from the kid, and went to the toolbox himself.

"Stupid, damn iggorunt useless sonsabitches..." he was still muttering as he pulled the bed pulley until the belt was taut. Then he tightened the bolts.

"Okay, bring the blade here ... and don't goddamn well cut yourself on it!" He got the blade bolted on and started the truck. "Get back from that blade, kid." he yelled and then put the gears in reverse. The whining monster started up and the potential danger of that spinning saw had the boys holding their breath. It was very like the one that had threatened the life of Pauline in one of the "Perils of Pauline" episodes.

Old man Hansen came to the back and they started to pull a log into position for cutting. Pulling on that log was all it took to get the old truck vibrating unexpectedly. The left block fell over and the spinning wheel dug into the ground. Old man Hansen gave his helper a reeling push onto the street and leaped after him as the other side hit the ground. The truck took off in reverse charging backwards, crashing and sawing its way through a nice white picket fence, taking out a platform with some garbage cans that went flying and finally stopping against the side of the neighbor's house where it sawed it's way into the siding until the blade bound up and killed the engine.

It was a great show. A real-life slapstick comedy routine worthy of Buster Keaton, with old man Hansen and John Delman running after it screaming and yelling like the Keystone Kops.

"Old man Hansen's gonna get his comeuppance now," Lance told Grinner. "He's gonna have to pay for all that damage. That'll kill him."

Grinner agreed. "Yeah, he won't be able to buy whiskey or plug tobacco for a month."

"Look at him. He's having a fit! I sure wouldn't want to be in that kid's shoes."

Pretty soon the neighbor lady was in the middle of it. They were all yelling at each other and making a helluva fuss. The high school kid looked like he was

about to bawl, but Lance and Grinner were falling down in hysterics. It tickled them to see old man Hansen in trouble. He hated kids.

He lived in a squalid little shack in the hollow behind the Lindell Hotel where he hoarded junk in his yard along with his garbage. It was hard to distinguish his prized salvage from the garbage. KennyBenny and Lance discovered the difference, when they liberated a couple wheels from a broken baby carriage for their cannon. They were certain it was part of his garbage and not his precious junk. But he told KennyBenny's dad that he suspected the twins had stolen them. He threatened police action if he ever proved it.

## **Chapter 4**

### **The River Rats.**

LANCE and Grinner walked down the riverbank to see what Carl Dunne and some kids from Carl's neighborhood west of the river were doing.

"You guys building a raft?" Lance asked.

"We're gonna have a war with the Lakeside Gang," Elwood Cole piped up. He and Gerbel were pounding spikes, fixing boards across a couple of logs. Ronny, Donny and Mickey were scrounging up old boards and dragging them through the brush to the makeshift shipyard. Marlee, the only girl, was shadowing Ronny.

"Yep. First ship in our navy. You wanna join our gang?" The invitation was extended by Carl. "We're the River Rats."

"I didn't know you had a gang," Lance replied.

"Everything this side of the foot bridge is our territory," Carl explained. "We're at war with the Bork Brothers who think they own the river south of the footbridge, as well as with the Lakeside Gang."

"When we get the raft done we're gonna go over to the skating pond and cut cattails for spears," Elwood announced.

Elwood was the shortest kid in Lance's class, and the dirtiest. Not in the way of a sleazy mind set, but just an affinity for dirt, grime, mud, and any substance that could cling or cake to a boy. His clothes read like a menu. You could tell he had mustard two days ago and orange marmalade this morning. Having the last name, Cole, didn't help his cause. The gang tried to come up with some kind of "coal" nickname to brand him. Unfortunately, being dirty was his only memorable quality. Otherwise he was bland, quiet, unobtrusive and pretty much invisible. He hung out with Carl and his buddies but never really participated or contributed much to their ingenious schemes.

Lance's mother said Elwood's mother was a lazy housekeeper and that his dad was always drunk. Even so, they lived in a better house and in a more respectable neighborhood than the Carpenters. Lance had trouble equating those assets with his mother's opinion.

Carl Dunne was loosely in charge of the raft project. His plan wasn't too complicated—nail the boards to the logs. He was a year older than anyone else but

had flunked the fourth grade. Not because he wasn't smart, he was just too busy planning his next exploit to do school work. He was not only tall, but he had big feet that wouldn't stop growing. His mother bemoaned the inevitable new shoes that replaced those hardly worn. His dad, an avid hunter, told him he would take him elk hunting when Carl's shoes were the same size as his. It looked like he had about a year to go.

Somewhere in his young years Carl had lost an eye. He wore a glass eye, perfect for irritating his teacher. He would take it out and roll it like a marble up his slanted desk, then let it roll back down, getting a tittering reaction from the girls around him.

His masterstroke, his tour de force, came on the last day of school that spring. He removed his eye, spit on his fingers and wet the empty socket. He turned around to get the attention of the shy little girl, Eileen, who sat behind him. She was writing, head down, absorbed in her work. Carl tapped on her desk and when she looked up he held his nose and blew a bubble out of his empty eye. Eileen screamed and went white.

Even with her back turned, the teacher, Mrs. Heidel, knew exactly who was behind it. She was a short, plump lady of Teutonic extraction with a fierce temperament.

"Carl Dunne! You put that eye back in your head and stand up!" she ordered. Then she strode down the aisle, reached up and grabbed Carl by one ear, and marched him to the corner. He spent the last two hours of the school year there, giggling quietly to himself.

Now, under Carl's direction, the last board was nailed down on the raft. The boys shoved and pried until they had it floating in the river. Carl held a rope to keep it from floating off with the current. Gerbel was the first to jump on. The raft tilted and water sluiced over the boards.

"Whoa!" Gerbel caught his balance. "How we gonna make it go, Carl? Poles or Paddles?"

While Carl thought about the propulsion, Mickey got aboard. The raft, already awash, immediately sank under their weight, leaving both boys up to their knees in ugly river water.

"You guys get off," Carl ordered. "I wanna try it." Not ready to admit failure, he picked up a length of board for a paddle and gingerly took their place, being careful not to tilt it. The water came up over his shoes but he pushed off and started paddling. But the raft kept sinking and before he had gone ten yards it slid sideways out from under him and he had to splash his way back to shore fully clothed.

Lance and Grinner never really committed to joining the River Rats but after the raft incident they went along to the skating pond and helped cut cattail spears. After that it was assumed, both by them and the others, that they were part of the gang.

Every gang needs foot soldiers—vanilla grunts that go blindly where they are led with a constant unshakable mien and solid devotion to duty. The River Rats had two—Donny Gardner and Ronny Toler. They filled those requirements nicely. They were, in a word, bland. Together, they had about the personality of a faithful spaniel. They were friendly, courteous, not lazy, not talkative, and overall

amazingly dull. They came from solid families in solid family homes and their fathers had worked on the Great Northern straight through the depression years so they probably never had a hungry day or had to wear hand-me-down clothes or worn-out shoes. Their destiny was plain to predict. They would be solid citizens with successful careers following a C average high school experience and a C average college education.

Donny never thought things through. He never anticipated the possible consequences of his rash decisions. This mental deficiency frequently landed him in unexpected trouble. He was not destined to be a chess player.

Ronny was steadfast and methodical. He had one advantage over Donny. He had a girlfriend, although he didn't seem aware of it. Marlee McTavish had latched on to him as a potter attacks a mound of wet clay on the wheel. She was on a mission to correct Ronny's deficiencies and she trailed him throughout the day, checking and making adjustments. Ronny didn't seem to mind at all.

She didn't bother the rest of the gang. She just tagged along to give Ronny advice and keep him from bad influences.

She was cute enough. Lance liked her looks, and her pigtails were always neatly tied with little velvet ribbons. Her folks were from British Columbia and liked to make sure every one knew how Scotch they were. Marlee always wore a plaid skirt as family advertising. She was partnered with Lance by their fifth grade dance teacher, but they proved incompatible. She wanted to lead but she had no rhythm: Lance wanted to lead and he was on the beat. So they made an awkward couple. She took a fancy to Lance and wanted to adjust him but discovered he wasn't adjustable. At first he was flattered by her interest. But he didn't respond with any enthusiasm—if at all—to her attempts to make him more perfect. As her pursuit went on her enchantment wavered with each rejection. Finally, discouraged, she moved on to Ronny.

She probably never considered Ronny an eligible catch for her marital future. To her, he was a project. And Ronny didn't consider her in any romantic way. He just didn't mind her following everywhere he went. To him she was just an attachment, something extra like suspender buttons on pants with belt loops.

Lance had his own secret crush in the fifth grade. Her name was Charity—Charity Albright. She sat across the room and he would hold his book in a way that he could take a secret look at her. To Lance she was an untouchable object to be worshipped from afar. Once he dreamed that he was a Canadian Mountie and had rescued her and was taking her to safety through deep snow in his dogsled. But Charity didn't seem to know he existed.

Lance had a special bond with another member of the gang through their mutual fascination with World War One fighter planes and the French Foreign Legion. Mickey Maguire was a black-haired wiry kid with a pug nose and boundless energy. He had a natural polite charm that made old ladies beam at him.

Lance was good at drawing planes, cars, tanks, and ships—anything mechanical. Inspired by a library book about the Lafayette Escadrille, he drew plans for Spads and Fokkers like those available in the kits. The two boys had finished several of these. They would place the balsa strips and glue them together

to make the frameworks for fuselage and wings. Colored tissue paper made the skins. They were not meant to fly; they were only about six inches long and wouldn't even glide. But they could zoom them around and pepper each other with verbal machine guns.

They also had a small army of hand-drawn Legionnaires with a French name and rank penciled on the back. These were garrisoned in a cardboard Fort Zinderneuf like in the novel, *Beau Geste*.

Mickey's dad, who worked at the bank, admired their creative efforts. He could be depended on to finance another tube of airplane glue or some more balsa wood.

Gerbel was the innovator of the gang. To the kids he was Gerbel, but his real name was Gerald Bellows. Gerbel had a creative mechanical way of solving situations and his inventive mind was always active. There was an enigmatic twinkle in his eyes, a harbinger of mischief. He was the "Tom Swift" of the gang. He was also the best at practical jokes and hair-brained schemes. On those dog days of summer when they played out all the obvious possibilities for amusement, Gerbel would fill in the void with a plan that sounded reasonable, sensible and possible. Gerbel's dad ran a service station so he always had access to some tool they needed. He stoically took the heat when one came up missing.

## Chapter 5

### Power of the Press.

IT'S A UNIVERSAL truth that the politician who controls the media holds the power. Lance wasn't privy to that knowledge as a sixth-grader, but it proved out in microcosm. Donny had made a homemade mimeograph. It consisted of a mixture of gelatin and stuff set up in a cookie sheet that he learned how to do in cub scouts. To use it, you wrote on special paper with special ink and laid that on the surface. After that a few sheets of regular paper could be pressed on it to make copies.

This new technology fit right into Lance's latest idea, an idea inspired by *The Three Musketeers* movie. Lance drew up a map of an island kingdom and separated it into principedoms, dukedoms, earldoms and so on. Each had a different color and different name. Lance showed it to Carl.

Carl puzzled over it. "What's it supposed to be?"

"It's an island Kingdom and these different areas are like the property of the lords. For example, if you owned this area, Candleshire, which costs a dime, you would be the Earl of Candleshire."

"How about this big purple one?"

"That's Hogsbligh. That would cost a quarter and you'd be the Duke of Hogsbligh. Then I'd write your name, Carl, Duke of Hogsbligh, on that area."

"Well I don't wanna be no Earl. I'll be the Duke."

He fell for the scam, fished out a quarter, and Lance dubbed him officially Duke with all the rights and privileges thereof.

Word got out and the next day Lance sold two more units. That's when the press got involved. Lance realized that he could draw the map on a master sheet and have Donny run off about five copies before the print got too faint. By distributing those he could enhance the value of these medieval properties. Donny wasn't too enthusiastic until Lance made him editor of the new publication, *The Kingdom Gazette*. He didn't know what an editor did so Lance explained that the editor was the pressman and the paperboy.

"You'll be the paper's Production Chief and Distribution Manager," Lance told him, and that got him suitably excited about his importance.

When the first edition hit the streets, property values soared. Lance made 85 cents, added three new owner's titles to the map and they all felt like they had received their money's worth when they saw their names in print the next day. Sales went well again and Lance only had a few territories left to sell so he could jack up the price. That resulted in \$1.50—a princely sum, indeed, for the national treasury. His cohorts in the River Rats had all invested in land and title.

He generously gave Donny ten cents for his work.

It was Lance's newspaper and kingdom scam that made him leader of the River Rats. His buddy victims didn't want to admit they'd been dumb enough to let their vanity clog their brains—dumb enough to pay hard cash for an imaginary nobility and a colored outline on a piece of notepaper. They substituted a streak of admiration for Lance's cleverness. So, without having to get into any fistfights or other rites of male domination, Lance became the *de facto* leader of the ad hoc gang.

## Chapter 6

### Armed but Dangerous.

"GOSH, Lance, you're pretty much out of map places to sell. What are you going to do next?" Donny wanted to know.

"Every kingdom needs an armory. I'm going to buy a pistol for national defense." Lance had come to the place where politicians start blowing money on military stuff.

"I've got a cap pistol," Donny volunteered.

"Whoa, Betsy ... I'm talking real here! Billy Talldog has a .22 he wants to sell for three dollars."

"You got three dollars?" Donny's eyes widened.

"No, but I've got over two. I'll see if he'll deal."

"Where did Billy get it?"

"He probably stole it. My dad says that half-breed kid is the biggest thief in town. But it's really nifty—nickel-plated and pearl handles and all. You know that snub-nosed .38 that Bulldog Drummond uses? Well, this one is like it, only a lot smaller."

Lance went looking for Billy and found him hanging around the Second Street Bridge. He was a big kid and older. He never went to school and was pretty anti-social. He was the local Huckleberry Finn with all the vices and none of the virtues. Lance didn't know where he lived because he acted like a bully, so he mostly just avoided him.

"Hi, Billy, didja still wanna sell that gun?"

He took his time answering—finishing rolling a cigarette and lighting it. "Yeah. You got the money?"

"I've got \$2.50. How about that?"

"You shittin' me," he scoffed. He turned his attention to look down at the oily river water flowing under the bridge and puffed on his cigarette. The smoke sort of masked the sewage smell from below.

Lance knew he was playing him so he played back. "Okay," he said blithely, "I'll be seein' ya," and turned and started walking.

"Well you could give me a minute to think about it," Billy called after him. "Maybe we can work out a deal. Have you got something to throw in to boot?"

Lance turned back. Now he was in control. "Tell you what. I'll give you the \$2.50 now and pay you the other fifty cents in a couple weeks."

"How do I know I'll ever see it?"

"I'll write out an IOU so there'll be an official record that you could take to court and sue me if I don't come through."

Billy knew about the power of courts, having been hauled before the municipal judge a couple times. He flipped his cigarette into the river and pulled the pistol out of his pocket. "Okay, Lance. Guess that'll do." He held out the gun then pulled it back when Lance reached for it. "Not so fast. Money and IOU first."

After the exchange he unexpectedly reached into his pocket and gave up a handful of .22 shorts. "Don't use longs or long-rifle bullets in that thing. It's for shorts only," he warned.

"Thanks, Billy. I'll remember that." Lance took off running up Miles Avenue and ran into Grinner at the end of the block.

"Follow me, I got something to show you," Lance confided. Grinner trotted along with him until they were safely inside his woodshed. Lance pulled out the revolver and Grinner was suitably impressed.

"Holy crap. Neato. Where'ja get it?"

"Bought it from Billy Talldog with the money I made from my map."

"How come the barrel's so short?"

"It's a snub-nose like the one Bulldog Drummond uses. Only his is a .38 caliber and this is a .22," Lance explained.

"We need to see if it works. Let's take it somewhere where we can shoot it."

Lance liked that idea, so they took off down the road to the roundhouse and crossed the railroad bridge to a dump ground on the other side of the river. The pistol worked all right. They shot at cans and bottles but couldn't seem to hit any of them. Grinner learned to stand a little behind when Lance shot because it seemed the cylinder didn't line up perfectly with the barrel and a little piece of lead was shaved off the slug which flew sideways out of the gun. He found that out when one hit him in the cheek. It didn't cut the skin or anything but it did sting.

"I don't think that thing shoots straight," Grinner said, "Let's stand this sheet of tin up and see where the bullet goes." They propped up a rusty section of galvanized siding making a target six feet high by four feet wide. Then, from a distance of about four feet Lance fired the gun at the center of the sheet.

Grinner examined the sheet for a bullet hole. "Holy crap, you didn't even hit it!"

So much for national defense—it was a lesson in the danger of buying obsolete arms from a more powerful nation.

The pathetic little pistol was pretty, however. Its silvery finish and pearl-like butt plates would be right at home in a lady's purse. And a lady could use it to scare mice away. The little two-inch barrel guaranteed she'd never hit one or have to cope with a bloody corpse on the floor. If the lady shot an attacker she would have to press it against him to have any chance of hitting him and the .22 short would probably just make him mad enough to do something more violent than robbery.

When the boys got back from the dump, Lance's mother called him from the kitchen door. "Lancey, come here, I need you to run to the store."

Lance bumped against Grinner and transferred the little pistol so his mother couldn't see it.

"Okay, mom ... coming."

She gave him a silver dollar. "I need you to pick up about three onions. We're having liver and onions for supper and I didn't realize we're out."

Lance pocketed the coin.

"Now don't lose that. I want all the change back except you can have a nickel of it for a treat."

Lance used the nickel to buy a pack of Blackjack gum. As he left the store he was unwrapping that and balancing the bag of onions in the crook of his arm when he bumped into Charity Albright entering the store.

When he looked up he was stunned by a bazooka shot from Cupid. There she was—the one girl in his class that could make his heart flip-flop.

An onion rolled out of the bag and hit the sidewalk. They both bent down to retrieve it and knocked heads.

"Ooh, ouch... Oh I'm sorry, Lance. I wasn't watching where I was going."

For a moment Lance was tongue-tied. Then he held out the gum package. "Do you want a ... would you like a stick of gum?"

"Oh, no thanks." She made a wry face. "I really don't care for Blackjack. Thank you, but I prefer Doublemint."

Lance mentally cursed himself for buying the wrong brand.

Charity giggled at his discomfiture. "You better get your onion before it rolls into the gutter," she said.

He retrieved the onion and when he looked back she had gone into the store. It was the first time he'd ever had a conversation with her. In school he had made shy eye contact a few times, but she sat across the room and she lived on the other side of town. Their brief encounter filled him with a tingling anticipation. Maybe next time I can find something smart to say, he thought as he bounced home on cloud nine.

## Chapter 7

### The Hatsumotos.

ONE MORNING there was a knock on the back door as they were eating breakfast. It was Mr. Hatsumoto. With a little bow he offered Lance's mother a couple of rainbow trout.

"Oh my, thank you, thank you," she exclaimed.

"Yes... yes."

"We will really enjoy these. Thank you very much."

"Yes...yes," he said, smiling and backing away.

"Is Mr. Hatsumoto actually an American?" Lance wondered aloud after he was gone.

"Of course he is. The Hatsumotos are more American than some of the trashy folks around here."

Mr. Hatsumoto was a wonderful neighbor. He could raise vegetables better than anyone else in the block and he liked to share them around. He would be up at dawn in the summer and head down to the river with his fishing gear. He had an aluminum boat with an outboard docked there which he took up the river to the lake to troll. He seemed to have the secret of speed and bait down to a science because he usually came back with some fish. After he came back from fishing, if a neighbor happened to be outside, he'd give them a fish or two. Then he'd leave for work, walking down the road carrying his lunch box, to the Great Northern roundhouse.

He never said much. He could understand English enough to get by. but he wasn't confident speaking it. He never said much to his kids, either. His wife had died when Beth was born and Grinner's two older sisters, Yoko and Mariko, ran the household. Yoko was in her twenties and very quiet. Mariko, who preferred to be called Mary, was very popular and outgoing. She was a cheerleader and all the high school boys adored her. Lance thought she was very beautiful.

Several Japanese families had settled in Whitefish when the Great Northern railroad was being built around Whitefish Lake. Some built homes along the Whitefish River, a pretty winding stream that led eventually to Flathead Lake. After the railroad roundhouse and power plant were built the river turned into a conduit for Great Northern waste and city sewage. There wasn't much left of its pristine charm.

It was an awkward time for the several Japanese families in Whitefish. Pearl Harbor, the previous December, had everyone edgy. No one knew from one day to the next if they might see Jap bombers coming over Lion Mountain. But everyone liked the Whitefish Japanese. They had contributed so much to the town and no one voiced any doubts as to their loyalty as Americans. Grinner's older brother had already enlisted in the army along with a boy from the Sakahara family and Lance's older brother.

The Japanese in Whitefish had endeared themselves to the community in the early years of the century by financing the most wonderful Fourth of July celebration anyone could hope for. They had spent a great deal of money on fireworks, paper lanterns for the streets and other bunting and decorations. They had even imported Sumo wrestlers to perform on a flat car down at the depot. The Chinese, who ran the Whitefish Laundry, were a different story. They were fodder for ethnic jokes and were only tolerated.

## Chapter 8

### Original Sin.

THE PREVIOUS three years had been hard on the Carpenter family. Lance's dad could not find a job. They subsisted on what he and Lance's older brother made doing part-time odd jobs, cutting cordwood and haying. His mother, an adept seamstress, worked one or two mornings a week at the Penneys store doing alterations. After Pearl Harbor, many of the local men quit their jobs on the Great Northern to enlist. Mr. Carpenter got on as a bookkeeper for a track gang. It took him away from home during the week, leaving Lance and his mother to carry on.

Lance's mother had a streak of gray in her hair that he was pretty sure was his doing. She was entertaining a group of church ladies—a committee charged with the planning for a fundraiser. The ladies were all sitting around, decked out in various fruited and flowered hats, cups and saucers in lacy-gloved hands, sipping tea from her fine china teacup collection.

Lance was about four at the time.

Oblivious to the serious nature of the meeting, he busted in with good news and eager to share it. "Guess what! We've been playing a new game!"

His mother gave him an irritated "not now" look. However, what he had to tell wouldn't wait.

There was one feared and dreaded four-letter word, so potent, that even from the mouth of a four-year-old it could shock a church committee's gabbling gossip to complete silence.

"I learned a new game from Nancy," he announced. "She showed us boys her peepee and we showed her our weenies. It's called Fook!"

The collective gasp lowered the barometric pressure in the room. A ripple of consternation circled the silent room. The lilac-scented atmosphere froze. Time hung suspended until his mother's teacup slid off her saucer and broke on the floor. Little Lance was happy to see that they were all as excited about the new game as he was.

"Nancy showed us," he pushed on innocently. "Did you know that girls don't have weenies, Mom?"

It had to be a hair-graying traumatic moment for his mother. Added to the mortification of dealing with the forbidden word in front of the church ladies was the loss of her most beloved teacup. It was the very thin and delicate one that

showed a geisha face embedded in the porcelain bottom when you held it up to the light. The ladies came out of suspended animation, rolling their eyes and trying to look disinterested.

"That's a very naughty game," she scolded, "and that Nancy is a naughty girl. Just stay away from her from now on. Go on upstairs and find something else to do... Scoot!" She clapped her hands to emphasize there were no choices available.

Lance didn't understand how just looking at something was naughty. A little bewildered, he trooped up the stairs as ordered. He left the ladies mumbling and tittering to the music of tinkling cups and saucers.

"Imagine," his mother snorted, "a third-grade girl telling a little four-year-old something like that. She's a sassy one and quite a bundle of trouble for her folks."

But the trauma wasn't over. Little Lance came halfway down the stairs waving a condom.

"Mom, can I play with this balloon I found under daddy's pillow?"

His mother's eyes popped with horror. "Lancelot!" she almost screamed it. "Put that back and stay in your room!"

There was a long moment. No one made eye contact with the hostess who was blushing with embarrassment.

Mrs. Dexter, head of the committee, maintained her official cool, pursing her lips on a long face of disapproval. Mrs. Branton's eyes darted wildly right and left while she tried to determine the expected response. The others tittered and held gloved fingers over mouths to hide their amusement. Mrs. Kitteridge, however, who inhabited a higher social strata in her own mind, betrayed nothing on her countenance deemed improper for the countess she should have been. Then she cleared her throat. "We'd better postpone this until another day," she suggested. They gave each other knowing glances, then adjusted their flowery hats and lacy gloves and excused themselves.

About that same age, Lance's dad told him once he was adopted. He said the Chinks at the Whitefish Laundry had one too many babies, so they bought him from them for two dollars.

"Oh, yeah," Lance bristled. Lance had proof he was teasing. "How come I don't look Chinese or have slanty eyes?"

"That's easy to explain, Lance. Once we got you off that rice diet and got you going on meat and potatoes you turned white."

Lance was mortified and went blubbering to his mother.

"Don't pay any attention to anything that man tells you," she said. "He'd rather tease you than tell you anything useful. Of course you're our little boy." And she proceeded to fill in Lance's ancestry.

Lance liked his name, Lancelot Deauville Carpenter, because he was called Lance, except when his folks were mad at him and used the extended version. Lance's mother told him that his middle name, Deauville, was because she had royal blood from that line of aristocrats in France where Lance's father's forbearers were once named Charpentier. Lance's grandfather changed that to Carpenter for some reason, or maybe it was just the result of some clerk's misspelling at Ellis Island. It didn't matter. He was just an American kid named Lance Carpenter, who hated it when his mother called him "Lancey" or "Lancelot" in front of his buddies.

## Chapter 9

### Banky Hanky Panky.

THE MANAGER of the First State Bank, Martin Baswell, admired his image in the mirror. He saw a tall handsome man, confident, clean-shaven, and immaculately suited for his role as bank manager. He checked his teeth for any left over lunch particles and popped a couple of Sen Sens in his mouth. Exiting the bank's restroom he walked behind Miss Albright's chair and lightly passed one finger across her back. He didn't look at her, but he knew she was looking down at her work with a pleased expression.

A few yards beyond her desk he turned as though just remembering something. "Oh Miss Albright. Would you be so kind as to bring the Peak Garden file to my office? No hurry. Thank you."

Patricia Albright, Charity's older sister, was in her second year of employment by the bank. She had just turned twenty, maturing into a very pretty and shapely blonde young lady. She dressed demurely, but her attractive figure turned men's heads. She still didn't seem comfortable walking in high heels. As she crossed the bank with the file she seemed in danger of falling forward. She knocked lightly on the frosted door window which advertised, 'Martin Baswell, Manager', in gold leaf.

He opened the door and beckoned her in. He shut the door and their charade was over. He pulled her to one side away from the door window and wrapped his arms around her. They locked in a passionate kiss, while his hands explored the wonders of her shapely curves.

Martin was still a local legend more than a decade after his stunning career as a brilliant student and athlete in high school. He went on to the university to become the first string quarterback and led the team to many victories. Those years as a football star had left a trail of broken hearts in his wake. He discarded the girls who fell for him after he found they were too easy, or not easy enough. He knew there was a better one, or at least a different one, for most women were easily snared by Martin Baswell's charms.

When he came back to Whitefish with his BA in business administration, the Summa Cum Laude on his degree landed him a job at the bank. The manager and principal investor in the bank, Mr. Southwick, was impressed by the efficient way he improved the bookkeeping and records systems to conform to Federal Reserve guidelines. Southwick was burned out. He hoped to turn the operation over to someone else so he could take his wife to Florida and escape the winter. They played golf together and Martin was a frequent dinner guest.

Everything was moving in the right direction for Martin, but it was moving too slow. He was ambitious and confident he could run the bank much better than the old man. He saw the Southwick daughter, Chloe, as the key. She was in her thirties and attractive, yet had no boy friends. She thought of herself as being of a better class than the local swains. Martin intrigued her; she succumbed to his

charm and fell in love. They had a fancy wedding and he soon cinched the bank manager job.

When he hired Miss Albright he passed up several highly qualified applicants who weren't as pretty. Her wide-eyed stare, seemingly clueless, was her chosen persona. She definitely wasn't the dumb blonde that she seemed to be, but she found the expression useful for manipulating the egos of her male bosses.

One day she overheard a real estate agent named Radford and the manager, Baswell, discussing a mortgage. There was an inference of monkey business in the gist and tone of their conversation and it seemed as if they were in collusion in some sort of scheme. Before being sent out of the room she heard enough to pique her curiosity.

She couldn't shake the suspicion that something was wrong and a few days later she asked Mr. Maguire for his help with some loan papers.

"I don't understand why these don't add up," she said. "Could you look at them for me?"

Maguire smiled, charmed by her innocent and bewildered look. "Sure. Glad to help." He glanced through the papers and the smile became a frown. He drummed his pencil on his desk as he scanned through them, becoming more nervous as he went along. When he handed them back to her he was visibly shaken.

"These ... ah ... you'd better put these back where you found them and, please, do not concern yourself with them."

"But I..."

He shoved them at her. "Just replace them, Miss Albright."

Startled by his gruff manner, she took the loan papers and left.

## **Chapter 10**

### **A Plot is Bubbling.**

SINCE HIS dad thought a nickel a year was an adequate allowance, Lance looked for a better paying job from old Mr. Gretsky who was retired and lived in the old schoolhouse on the riverside below Miles Avenue. He was a widower, but when his wife was alive they had renovated the bottom floor classrooms into living quarters.

Lance knocked on his door and waited. It took a while before the old man opened up. He peered at Lance, his pale blue watery eyes squinting through steel-framed spectacles. His bushy gray eyebrows hadn't been trimmed since his wife died.

"Yes, what is it?" he asked. His chin trembled a bit and jiggled his jowls which hung down either side of his mouth like small bewhiskered saddlebags.

"My name's Lance and I live near here. I wondered if you needed any chores done?"

The old man looked him over for a few moments before answering. "Come back tomorrow and you can chop some wood." With that he shut the door.

It became a regular job. Lance chopped wood for him twice a week during the winter, filling his kitchen wood box and renewing the pile by his living room heater. But with the warm weather of summer, he needed only to chop kindling and cook stove wood once a week.

Gretsky was loath to move his big belly from his old easy chair for anything but food or the bathroom. He read throughout the daylight hours and liked to expound in a sonorous voice to anyone in range on various political and labor union issues of the day. He punctuated his orations with one finger, pecking at the passage in the newspaper that riled him. Lance listened courteously but didn't understand or care much about world problems. Sometimes Gretsky railed on about the Nazis, but more frequently he cursed the Reds and predicted no good would come of sending Lend-Lease stuff to Russia.

"Let those goddamn Nazis and Commies kill each other off," was his favorite litany. "It'll save the rest of the world the trouble."

Gretsky paid him enough to go to the Orpheum Theater twice a week. Admission was only 23 cents on weeknights and 10 cents for the weekend matinees. Lance always stayed through both showings of a film to get his money's worth, unless it was, as he put it, some syrupy romantic bunch of gush.

The Whitefish fire house had a siren on the roof that went off every night at ten o'clock. Kids under sixteen were supposed to be off the streets by that time. Lance would flit home after the siren to find his mother still up. She would listen with an amused half-smile while he recounted all the exciting sword fights of Errol Flynn or the way John Wayne picked up that 50-caliber machine gun in his arms and took a last stand against the charging Japs.

There were the remains of an old dock on the river below the schoolhouse. Along side of it, just below the surface, an old waterlogged wooden rowboat lay half buried by sludge on the river bottom. To Lance it spelled adventure. He could salvage it and maybe add a mast and a sail—the possibilities were exciting.

Illustration:

An old water logged rowboat was half buried  
by sludge on the river bottom

He decided to ask Mr. Gretsky if he could have it.

The door was open to the cool breeze and through the screen door Lance could hear that Mr. Gretsky had company. He quietly entered the entrance, a former school cloakroom, and waited until he wouldn't interrupt the conversation. They were talking about the banker, Martin Baswell.

"I think the bastard is setting me up. He and that slimeball real estate agent Radnor are in cahoots." The speaker was irate. "I gave Radnor a loan—\$40,000—with diamond jewelry as collateral, which he used to buy a property that Baswell had foreclosed. It was that island property on the lake with the nice big house. Baswell refused to give the original owner an extension to meet his back mortgage payments. But then he sold it to Radnor for a ridiculous cheap price with nothing down." Lance recognized the voice as that of Mickey Maguire's father. "Radnor turned it over to a buyer from Helena in a couple months for \$96,000. You know who—that former governor."

There were a few moments before Gretskey answered. "Well, it sounds legal if not ethical. What about the loan? Does it get paid back at a proper interest rate?"

"Oh, hey ... there you go! That's where it gets interesting and where I'm suckered into the mess. I approved the loan because Radnor put up his mother-in-law's diamond jewelry for collateral. That has since disappeared. I'm sure Baswell gave it back to him."

"How is that your problem?"

"When the bank examiners start auditing, the paper trail might lead to me. The loan was paid back with a bogus check that Baswell will circulate through transit account pages to fool the regulators. At some point it has to surface."

Mr. Gretskey grunted some concern but made no comment.

"There's more!" Maguire was bitter. "They've pulled the same scam twice since then. I'm the one who has the responsibility for transit checks but Baswell slips them by me. Easy enough for him—but I'll be the fall guy!"

Mr. Gretskey's response was slow and measured. "Why don't you blow the whistle on him?"

"Not enough proof; I'd just lose my job. If the bank examiners figure it out I'm afraid they'll think I'm in on it. "

"All right. We need to record this and file it away for extenuating evidence, just in case. I'll get a paper and pen and you can write all this down with all the details. We'll get it notarized and I'll keep it in my safety deposit box in case it's ever needed."

Lance decided it wasn't a good time to ask about the boat. He slipped out the door and went home.

## **Chapter 11**

### **Gunsmiths.**

THE RIVER Rats pooled their fireworks on the Fourth of July. They blew up anthills, tin cans, and anything else that would burst or fly. Carl had a bag of cherry bombs that he offered to share, but Lance and Grinner turned him down.

Their pirate pistol project of the previous summer had made them leery of cherry bombs. It had been a failure and too close to a disaster to tell anyone. They had sawed an eight-inch length of tubing from an old brass-plated bedpost for the barrel of their pistol. They should have picked a piece of galvanized water pipe, but as inspired gunsmiths they opted for the richer, shinier material. They used a coping saw to make the handle and stock. Their design was ingenious, they thought. They mounted the barrel so that the breach was against the wood of the handle. The barrel was held to the stock with two bands of tin nailed at the bottom. But a design flaw became apparent the first time they fired it.

The breach-loading design worked fine. They slid the barrel forward, placed a cherry bomb into the barrel and slid the barrel back against the wood with the

fuse sticking out of the crack between. Then they put a marble down the tube for a musket ball.

Since they weren't totally confident in their creation, they decided against performing a fancy test scenario like a quick draw or swinging from the ratlines in a pitched battle. Instead Grinner held the gun at arm's length with his head turned away and his eyes closed while Lance lit the fuse and ducked behind him. They both knew the power of a cherry bomb was scary that close by.

The flaw in their design was the seam that ran the length of the bedpost barrel. It was a tube bent into a cylinder from a flat piece of metal. The cherry bomb blew the seam wide open and sent pieces of wood in all directions. Grinner was left with only the butt in his hand, deafened by the blast. He stood stunned—his hand, still at arm's length in a ring of smoke, was slightly blackened. With only a stinging in his hand for injuries, and in spite of flying splinters, they miraculously survived the explosion.

They never did find the marble.

But Grinner and Lance had advanced to a higher level of woodworking and mechanical dexterity since then. With age came more sophisticated engineering skills. When Lance's brother left for the Navy he gave him his single-shot Remington .22 rifle. He had taken him out target shooting with it and they had knocked off a lot of cans and bottles at the dump. It was a rolling block design with two hammers. He showed it to Grinner.

"There's no bolt," Grinner observed.

"It's a Remington rolling-block. Better than bolt action."

Grinner looked skeptical. "It looks old fashioned. Probably came over on the Mayflower."

"I suppose you've got a better one," Lance challenged. He was miffed by Grinner's evaluation.

"I don't mean it's not neat. I just never seen one like it and I don't know how it can work without a bolt."

"Come on. I'll show you." They headed for the Right-of-Way. Out of sight in the woods Lance gave him a loading lesson. "You pull back both hammers. Put the shell in the barrel. Let down the hammer with the firing pin in it, that's the rolling block, and leave the back hammer in the cocked position. Now it's ready to shoot." He aimed at a stump and fired.

"Hey, all right ... can I try it?"

"Sure." Lance handed him the rifle and another shell.

He pulled back the two hammers. "Hey ... the empty's still in here. How do I eject it?"

"Well, that's supposed to eject when you pull back the hammers," Lance replied, "but it's kinda worn and doesn't always work." He took out his pocketknife and flipped the empty out.

"Do you always have to do that?"

"No. Mostly it works okay."

Grinner put in the fresh shell and carefully let down the rolling block hammer. He took aim at the stump, pulled the trigger. CLICK ... nothing happened. "Did I do something wrong?"

"No, just re-cock it and try again."

On the second try it fired and he knocked a few slivers off the stump. He looked at the rifle with a mixture of admiration and doubt. Lance jumped in quick with an explanation. "The firing pin is worn like the ejector. It's a pretty old gun. It belonged to my grampa."

He pulled back the hammers and this time the empty flipped out. "Maybe we can fix it."

Grinner's "we" usually meant "you with my help". Anyway, it was all that was needed to get Lance thinking. "You know what? We ought to get Gerbel to look at it. He knows a lot about messing with this kind of stuff."

They tracked down Gerbel to his back yard where he was washing the family dog.

"I gotta finish this before I can leave," he told them. "I made my mom mad."

"What didja do?" Grinner asked.

"I set off a cherry bomb under the back steps just as she was taking laundry out to the line. She got pretty mad because the laundry went flying out of the basket when she jumped. It got kinda dirty on the ground."

They waited and watched and explained the problems with the rifle to him. By the time he hosed the soap off the dog they had him excited about the possibilities and they all went back to Lance's garage.

"You can see that the firing pin is just a loose steel rod in the rolling block," Gerbel expounded as he examined the rifle. "All we need to do is take it apart so that we can remove the rolling block and make another firing pin to replace it."

Lance wasn't too cool with the idea of taking it apart. "Do you think we can do that without ruining it?"

"It comes apart easy. Just four screws on each side and we can see all the innards." He laid it on the workbench and went at it with a screwdriver. He was right. It was not hard to expose the workings consisting of the hammer, the rolling block and the trigger parts, along with some springs. He lifted out the rolling block, carefully maintaining the spring position so it wouldn't go flying and get lost. He held the block over his hand and the firing pin slid out into his palm.

"See. It just slides in there. Nothing fancy. If we can find a rod this same diameter we can cut it this length and make this little nubbin on the front end a scosh longer. That's what hits the rim of the shell to set it off."

"Oh," Lance had a revelation. "That's why they say 'rim-fire' on the box!" Gerbel gave him one of those "that doesn't deserve an answer" looks.

They started scrounging through old car parts—carburetors, brake shoes, and other oily pieces that had been replaced on the Carpenter's '33 Dodge Brothers Six. They didn't find anything promising until Lance picked up a padlock. It was just a cheap Gamble Store product—not meant to compete with a Master or Yale. "Look at this. I think it's the same size." He was referring to the U-shaped rod that sticks out the top.

The other two passed it between greasy hands and agreed. Gerbel slipped the end of the U-shaped rod into the rolling block and it was a perfect fit. They were elated. They were on the threshold of evolution, a voyage of anticipation into a new age of mechanics. They wasted no time in whacking the pot-metal case into pieces, freeing the part they needed. Gerbel carefully measured the long side of it to the length necessary and marked it with a three-cornered file. The mark served as a

starting point for the hack saw. They took vigorous turns at the saw until it was cut through, then Gerbel set to work filing with the piece in the vice.

"Let me have a turn," Grinner said.

"No. I gotta do this. You might mess it up."

"I'm a good filer."

"Yeah. You probably are. But this is critical. I have to get this exactly to spec." Gerbel explained.

"You've got some specs for that?" Lance asked.

"You know what I mean. It has to be perfect."

So they eagerly waited for his perfect replacement pin. They watched in silence as he filed for a bit, then held it up to the light coming through the dirty window above the bench. He repeated that process several times before he was satisfied. Then he put it in the rolling block and reassembled the rifle.

"Okay ... we're ready for the big test," he announced.

Grinner and Lance both had to examine his handiwork and found it did indeed look perfect, but Lance was still a little apprehensive. He was remembering their pirate pistol episode of the previous summer.

The three of them took off for the Right-of-Way and once again shot up the test stump. This time there were no misfires. The ejector was still iffy, but they could live with that.

## **Chapter 12**

### **What's for Dinner.**

AFTER July 4, and with all the fireworks used up, The River Rats were in an activity limbo. There were no pending battles to prepare for. The war with the Lakeside Gang never materialized. The pride of their navy, the raft, had floated off downstream and was probably captured by the Bork Brothers.

"Shall we go swimming?" Lance suggested.

"You wanna swim in that crap?" Mickey was looking at the brown patches of yuk floating by surrounded by the iridescent roundhouse oil.

"Are you kidding? I meant the lake."

Nobody responded. They had spent three long hot days at City Beach and were ready for something more adventurous.

Elwood broke the silence. "You know how to tell when a clock is mad?" They all groaned.

"We don't, and we don't wanta." Marlee said with a scornful look. She had totally mastered scornful looks and found them very useful for controlling boys.

Elwood ignored her and continued. "They get a ticked-off look on their face!" He scanned the group triumphantly, waiting for the laughs. As usual there were no laughs, only grunts of disgust and groans of rejection.

"Don't you ever get anything worthwhile out of 'Boys Life'?" Mickey asked.

"There's something neat in this one," Elwood answered, pulling a greasy copy of Boys Life magazine from his back pocket. "It shows a way for Boy Scouts to cook a sage hen or grouse."

"Have you noticed? We don't have any sage hens or grouses." Marlee used her sarcasm tool.

"Lemme see that," Lance said.

Elwood pawed through the pages with his dirty fingernails until he handed over the magazine, open to the projects page. Lance could tell instantly that this was, in fact, really neat. According to the directions you encased the bird in mud and put it into a campfire until it was cooked. Then all you had to do was pull the mud off and that would pull the feathers off with it.

Now the collective inventive minds of the River Rats started churning. They were in Ronny's back yard that ran all the way to the river. Above them, a fenced area imprisoned his folks' chickens. The confluence of plan and material was too much to ignore. So they rescued a chicken from bondage.

Marlee was all over Ronny about it. "Your mother is gonna kill you if she finds out about this!"

"Are you going to tell her?" Ronnie asked sullenly. She didn't answer. Gerbel gripped the chicken firmly by the head and whirled it around and around until the head came off. The headless body flapped and careened around the riverbank and headed for the water. Carl headed it off with a swift boot from his size elevens that sent it inshore into the brush where it finished quivering and expired.

Marlee was aghast. "We're leaving, Ronnie. Come on," she commanded.

Ronnie ignored her and picked up the carcass.

"Gerbel and I will get a fire going," Lance volunteered, "while you guys give it a coat of mud."

"Hold it with the mud," Ronnie stopped his committee. "I need to pull some feathers."

"I thought the baked mud was supposed to pull the feathers," Mickey offered.

"Yeah, but I need a few to scatter in the hen yard to make it look like a fox or dog got the chicken."

"Wow," Mickey approved. "That's smart thinking."

"You're going to be real sorry if your mother finds out about this," Marlee warned.

The project went ahead as planned. The fire was blazing with the mud-wrapped chicken in the middle of it.

Lance referred to the magazine again. "It says it takes a couple hours so we can do something else and come back later for dinner—yummy baked chicken." It was a delightful thought. So the meeting was adjourned and they went their separate ways agreeing to meet back at the dinner site in a couple hours.

Mickey and Lance went to Mickey's house. The Maguires lived in the biggest house on O'Brien Ave. His grandfather grunted at them from his rocking chair on the porch and opened one eye. He was in his 80's and had retired with a nice nest egg after a career as a construction engineer for the Great Northern.

"What sorta trouble are you little renegades stirring up today?" he asked. His voice was stern but there was a humorous twinkle in his eye.

"Oh, nuthin' much. It's too hot," Mickey answered.

"Well, enjoy the heat. Winter'll be back soon enough. You know things happen slowly but time flies swiftly when you're old. But things happen swiftly and time flies slowly when you're young."

"Yes, grampa." Mickey gave Lance an apologetic look and they went on in. The hallway to Mickey's room was decorated with framed pictures of the various Great Northern bridges and tunnels through the Rockies and Cascades.

After a couple hours of strenuous air combat with their Spads and Sopwith Camels they headed back to the river. Carl, Ronnie and Marlee were already there. Before long Gerbel and Elwood came busting down the hill through the brush. The fire had died down to a pile of black ashes with the blackened lump of the chicken in the center. Something wasn't right. It didn't exactly smell delicious. Carl snaked it out of the hot ashes and pulled a chunk of mud off. No feathers came with it but a very obnoxious smell did.

Carl dropped it and reeled back holding his nose. "Jeez . . . what the hell! That's putrid!"

Now the noxious gases spread and they all moved back.

Gerbel perceived the problem. "Didn't any of you guys take the guts out before you put the mud on?"

The mud committee all looked at each other searching for the stupid one to blame but they knew they were all guilty of gross oversight.

## **Chapter 13**

### **Was it Murder?**

THE NEXT day, July 9th, 1942, would never be forgotten by Lance. It was like another 'Day of Infamy'. He went to the Maguire house to show Mickey his plans for making a French Nieuport biplane. Mickey's older sister answered the door. Lance thought she was as beautiful as a princess of Camelot, but today her lightly freckled cheeks were stained with tears and her eyes were red.

"Mickey can't play today," she sobbed.

Lance didn't know what to say.

"Our dad's gone..." her voice broke. "...He's dead!" With a spurt of tears she turned away and quietly closed the door.

Lance didn't know what to think. He walked around the block and by the time he got to the Second Street Bridge the impact of the news hit him. He stood at the rail and looked at the river rolling past. The water was like time, he thought, it never goes backwards. People keep dying—first the Japanese guy and now Mr. Maguire. He swallowed a lump of sympathy for Mickey. He tried to think what he would feel if it were his dad. Somehow the smell of sewage rising from the polluted river seemed inappropriate. A few raindrops spattered around him and a cloudbank shadowed the concrete. He shambled home, morose and troubled.

The next day the story came out.

"Did you hear what happened to poor Mr. Maguire?" Lance's mother asked. Without waiting for a response, she continued. "He was found by a highway patrolman on the night before last. His car was parked on the Going to the Sun road in Glacier Park. His body was found way down on the rocks, hundreds of feet below the road."

"Did somebody kill him?"

"There was a suicide note in the car. They think he must have jumped."

Lance didn't know what to think. He went out to the clubhouse, barred the door, and sat on a five-gallon oilcan. Hunched over, with his chin in his hands, he tried to sort out the jumble of emotions that defied reason.

Mr. Maguire committing suicide didn't make any sense to him. Mickey told him just days ago that his dad bought a new tent and they were going to take a family fishing trip to Lake Mary Ronan. Why would he want to kill himself? Maybe Mickey would tell him.

He saw Mickey at the funeral but didn't have a chance to talk to him. He didn't feel comfortable going to their house, and for several days Mickey was not around.

Carl was quick with an opinion. "There's something real fishy about it," he said, "I don't think for one minute that he killed himself. My folks don't think so, either!"

Lance and Carl were in the Dunne's basement where Carl kept a collection of chemicals, test tubes, beakers, etc. It had started as a chemistry set—a Christmas present. But Carl had played "mad scientist" and augmented the components with various oxides and acids from the drug store.

Carl was playing Frankenstein wearing one of his mother's white aprons, and Lance was the assistant, Igor, walking hunched over with one shoulder held higher.

They were adding various things to some ferrous sulfide Carl bought at the drug store, hoping to make some rotten egg gas.

Carl always made Lance nervous when they walked through Garvey's Public Drug. Carl couldn't resist stealing some little thing—usually something totally useless to him like a styptic pencil or a tube of lipstick. His manner was so obvious that old man Garvey had to know what he was up to. What Carl didn't know was that a record was kept and his dad came in and paid it. Both men thought Carl would grow out of it and give up his thieving ways.

Carl's parents were very lenient and kept Carl on a loose leash. Perhaps they felt guilty or were somehow responsible for his one-eye handicap. Any of his buddies would have been punished for similar shenanigans.

Mr. Dunne was a World War I veteran and ramrod discipline was his nature. He proudly marched in the Veteran's Day Parade, still able to fit into his uniform. He barked the drill commands for presenting and ordering arms. He led by example, standing straight and slapping his Springfield .30-06 to make the bolt rattle.

But when it came to Carl he was a doting father. He had an Old Town canoe that he kept upside down and chained to a pine on the riverbank below their house. He and Carl frequently paddled up the river to the lake to fish on his days off from the railroad. They were a smooth team and the canoe fairly flew against

the current. But he also taught Carl to handle the canoe alone with a J-stroke of the paddle.

Lance had never been in a canoe and he was envious. "Carl ... do you think your dad would let us take the canoe out sometime?"

Carl wasn't listening. He was holding up a little brown bottle. "See this. Ya know what this is? This is sulfuric acid! This is really potent stuff. Cost me two dollars."

"Doesn't look like you got very much for that price. Where'd ya get the two dollars?"

"It was reward money."

"Reward for what?"

"For telling the Baxter's where to find their missing dock."

It took a moment for Lance to digest that. "You mean the dock you and Ronny cut loose and let float down the river yesterday?"

"Yep. We rescued it and split a five-dollar reward." Carl was very pleased with the success of his scam.

"Jeez, Carl," Lance scolded. "You got a lot of gall to take a reward for something you stole in the first place."

Carl was not concerned. He seldom noticed adverse reactions to his nefarious activities.

"Hey, watch this. This could be a breakthrough." He was carefully pouring sulfuric acid on a mixture of various powders.

"A breakthrough for what?"

"You know, like some kind of scientific progress. Whoa!!" He jumped back as the concoction started to bubble fiercely and throw up orange smoke. "Wow, look at that. It's heavier than air!"

The smoke was rolling off the workbench down to the floor. The two mad scientists grinned at each other, pleased with this breakthrough.

"I wonder if it's poisonous gas," Lance said.

"Maybe we shouldn't wait to find out." The orange smoke kept spreading across the basement and rising higher up their legs.

Lance abandoned his Igor persona and headed for the stairs. "C'mon. We gotta get out of here!"

Carl was right behind him.

When his dad came home his mother explained that the boys had created orange smoke in the basement and it might not be safe to go down there. He opened the basement door and saw the filmy orange haze below.

He studied the situation for a couple pregnant moments, then said, "You boys should find something to do outside on these nice summer days instead of playing down there."

"Yeah, I was wondering if I could use the canoe." Carl knew his dad wouldn't agree right away, but he had planted the idea.

## **Chapter 14**

### **Sex in the Boiler Room,**

LANCE'S neighborhood consisted mostly of small two-bedroom houses built at the time when the Great Northern was the end of the line during construction around Whitefish Lake. The exception was the row of four houses that bordered the Right-of-Way. They were larger with nicer porches and much bigger yards. They were intended for people like the Dorns and the Hesslers—bosses and engineers.

Mr. Dorn was a foreman at the roundhouse and probably could have moved from this poor neighborhood to a classier part of town. It was probably the short walk to work that kept him there. His wife was a thin, snooty woman who made sure none of the other women mistook her for one of them. She never left the house without being immaculately garbed in high heels, gloves, fancy hat and some sort of gauzy scarf, artfully arranged for effect.

She wasn't mean or anything. She just didn't socialize with her lower-class neighbors. Occasionally she would invite Lance's mother over to her porch to give her some hand-me-down clothes or some kitchen thing she was tired of. Their son, Marvin, who was a spoiled brat, had gone off to college, so Lance became the beneficiary of some of his stuff that she wanted to clear out. She gave him a spiked WWI German helmet that was like a gift from the gods to Lance. She added some web belts with cartridge cases and canteens—great additions to his armory. She also gave him a box full of pulp science fiction and fantasy magazines.

Her husband was often in the yard in the summer planting things. He had the yard totally landscaped with flowerbeds, lilac bushes and trees. It was a source of revenue for Lance. Mr. Dorn would call him over, hand him the hose and a dime and Lance would spend the next hour or so watering the whole tableau.

Sometimes fat Mrs. Hessler, the engineer's wife, who lived next door to the Dorns would hire Lance for yard work. As the wife of a well-paid engineer, she flaunted her obesity as though it were an award for being in the upper echelon of neighborhood society. She was probably as rich as Mrs. Dorn but she acted like they were poverty-struck. She would always put him off when it was time to get in her purse.

When Lance came home from Carl's house his head was full of the proposed canoe adventure. Mrs. Hessler called him from her doorway.

"Yooohooo, there! Would you like to... hmm... earn a dime? I need my lawn mowed today."

Before Lance could think of an excuse to avoid the job, she assumed his answer was yes. She waddled back through her door, calling over her shoulder, "The mower is in the... hmm... shed."

Lance knew that she would probably make a fuss with his mother if he didn't do it. He got out the mower and cut the grass, all the while trying to think of some kind of voodoo thing he could do to her. When he finished, he knocked on the door for his pay.

She opened the door and filled it from side to side. "Yes... hmm... did you... hmm... finish?"

"Sure. I need my dime now. I'm going to the matinee."

"Well... hmm... I'm a little short... hmm..." her vocal style required the insertion of a small aspirated "hmm" between all segments of a sentence. "Could you... hmm... come back on ... hmm... Tuesday?"

"No, ma'am, my mom told me to collect today. I don't want to disappoint her. She'll probably beat me if I don't get the money," Lance lied.

Mrs. Hessler's eyes seemed to go in and out of focus as her eyebrows did a small vertical dance in time with a series of snuffles. "Well, then... hmm... bother... hmm... let me look." She waddled to a sideboard and opened a purse. She took out a little coin purse, quite plump with coins, and with all the ceremony befitting the exchequer to the king, she produced a dime from the mix. She came back to the door and held out the coin, holding it from the edge as though it were somehow contaminated. "Here, then... hmm."

Lance pulled it from her fingers and made a quick retreat.

Mrs. Hessler was not very popular at the Carpenter house. Lance's mother wouldn't take sewing projects from her any more because she was fed up with the hassle of getting paid. She would show up to visit right before supper hoping to get an invitation to eat with the Carpenters. This got a little old after a few times.

Lance's mother finally told her, "You'll have to excuse us now. We're going to have supper." And she didn't offer to share it with her. Mrs. Hessler sort of stood around for a while as they sat down. There was no place set at the table for her. She wheezed and mumbled something about the food.

"You know the shooter... hmm... that murdered that... hmm... Jap spy has never been caught," she offered, but her attempt at a dialogue was ignored. "They... hmm... say he wasn't a Japanese man at all... hmm. They say he was Korean."

There was an awkward silence.

Then Lance's mother scolded him for not taking enough vegetables. She looked up as if surprised to see Mrs. Hessler was still there.

"You'll have to excuse us now. We're having our supper," she repeated with a straight face.

Mrs. Hessler finally got the message and waddled her bulk out the kitchen door. It pleased Mrs. Carpenter that her visits came much less often after that.

The police and the public weren't too concerned with catching the shooter. With GI's fighting and dying in the Pacific, the death of one probable spy didn't seem too important.

Lance's little neighborhood army was still spooked by the incident and loath to follow him into the Right-of-Way for maneuvers. Little Beth just deserted outright. She had discovered a little girl playmate across the street and dolls replaced her military accouterments.

Lance still played shinny stick and *Ollie, Ollie, oxen, all in free!* in the evenings with Grinner, Donny and KennyBenny. But the adventurous possibilities of the River Rats became his focus.

"You know that old boat down by the schoolhouse?" Lance asked Grinner.

"Yeah. What about it?"

"I think I'll ask Mr. Gretsky if I can have it. He'll never use it."

"Geez, Lance. It's probably so rotten it would fall apart if you tried to pull it up."

"Maybe." Lance kicked at the dirt, thinking. "He might want me to buy it."

"You wouldn't pay money for it, would you?"

"No. But I might chop him some free wood." He hesitated, and then became enthusiastic. "Come on. We'll go ask him!"

Mr. Gretsky hollered for them to come on in. He laid down his newspaper and listened to their request.

"I'd be glad to chop some wood for payment," Lance volunteered.

Gretsky laughed, a rolling sound that shook his belly. "No, you just take the damn thing. I haven't gone fishing since '32. But if you can get it to float and catch anything, you can bring me a nice trout."

"Oh, thanks, Mr. Gretsky. It's a deal!" The two boys ran out and slammed the screen door. Gretsky chuckled, thinking how it once was—to be a kid and full of energy.

Getting the boat up on shore was too much for the two of them. Lance recruited Carl, Gerbel and Donny to help. He asked KennyBenny but their folks wouldn't let the twins play around the river.

The salvage crew assembled and Lance empowered them. "This can be the flagship of the River Rats Navy," he said. "We can put a mast and sail on it."

"Yeah," Grinner chimed in. "And we can paint a skull and crossbones on the sail."

With this vision of future possibilities for encouragement, they dug the sludge out, wading around the hull. With that removed it showed signs of some buoyancy. They pulled and tugged and got it up on shore far enough to bail it out. After that, it was easy to beach it the rest of the way and turn it upside down.

The next day Lance met Carl at the bridge and they walked down the path along the river to check on the boat. "If it's dried out I've got some paint. A coat of paint on the bottom might fix any leaks," Lance offered.

Before Carl answered they passed a thicket of bushes and saw Billy Talldog sitting on a big rock. He was smoking a cigarette with the casual air of a big business mogul sitting in a fancy office.

"Hi, fellows. Whatcha up to?"

"Nuthin'. Just foolin' around," Lance answered cautiously. It was always smart to be on the defensive around Billy.

"You guys wanna see a movie with some naked women in it?"

"What are you talking about?" Carl was suspicious.

"It'll cost ya."

Lance looked at Carl. They made a silent agreement to question anything he might say.

"How much?" Lance asked.

"Ten cents apiece. Lots of bare titties."

"Okay. When and where?"

"Meet me at Central School at 8 o'clock tonight. Be sure to bring your dime."

"Okay. Maybe we will, and maybe we won't."

They walked on by and left him blowing smoke rings from his rock throne.

The boat didn't look too bad all dried out. Lance ran up the hill to his house for a pail and broom. Then they scrubbed for a couple hours, getting the dried slime and mud off with river water.

"I gotta go home," Carl said. "My mother prob'ly has supper ready."

"You can come eat at our house," Lance offered.

"Nah. I'd have to call her and you guys don't have a phone."

"Okay. Will I see you later at the school, or..."

Carl hesitated. "Maybe. I dunno. That Billy is so full of bull pucky; I hardly believe anything he says."

"Okay, then. See ya later."

They went their separate ways, but at eight o'clock they both showed up at the Central School. Billy was with a group of high school boys gathered in the back corner where the two wings of the school joined. They already had a window open to the shop classroom.

"You guys bring your money?" he called. They hurried forward, digging out their dimes.

There was an atmosphere of anticipation amongst the group. One of the older boys was carrying a film can and the conversation was about who left the window unlocked and about somebody from the VFW Club who had lent them the film.

"Let's get going before somebody comes along," the film carrier urged.

They all climbed through the shop window and Billy closed it behind them. Then the kid with the film led them out to the hall and down to the boiler room. One of the other big kids went the opposite way to return with a 16mm projector from the auditorium.

When everything was set up they flicked off the lone bulb. The boiler room was windowless and the projector threw a flickering square of light on the concrete wall. One problem was immediately evident—the picture was upside down.

There was a clamor to fix that. But it died quickly when a near naked woman popped up. She was clad only in panties. The whole group went sideways and heads tilted to accommodate the upside down view.

The woman was making sensuous and suggestive movements as she put on hose, then a bra, then a blouse, and then a skirt. When she got to her gloves all the inverted audience realized the film was running backwards. It ended with her fully dressed and the upside-down title, "Madam Bovary's Boudoir" flashed on.

"Somebody forgot to rewind it," explained the kid on the projector.

"Well it's rewound now," another offered. "Let's watch it right side up. My neck's got a crick in it."

Seeing it from the beginning was anticlimactic since they knew she wasn't going to take it all off. For Lance and Carl, not quite at puberty, it was more of a revelation than a titillation.

## **Chapter 15**

### **Cruise of the Derelict.**

THE NEXT day Lance and Grinner met Carl at the boat. It looked pretty fair all cleaned off and dried up.

“Let’s not bother about painting it,” Carl suggested. “Let’s just put it in the water and see if it leaks.”

They got it turned over and slid it down the bank into the river. It floated, but there was a little seepage trickling along the floorboards. Lance looked around for an old board they could use for a paddle.

Mr. Gretsky was watching from the window by his chair, amused by the boys' activities. He opened the window and hollered at them. “Hey, boys! The oars for that boat are in the woodshed. You can have those, too.”

“Oh, thanks a lot,” Lance answered. He retrieved the oars and they fitted them into the oarlocks.

“Let’s take it down past the bridge and keep it below my house,” Carl said. “I’ll row.”

Lance found a couple of rusty cans in some trash behind the woodshed. “We can use these for bailing.” He gave one to Grinner and they all got in and pushed off.

With the weight of all three, the seepage got serious. Carl rowed with all his might. His threshing strokes sent the scintillating patterns of the iridescent roundhouse oil slick whirling in psychedelic eddies.

At the Second Street Bridge Elwood leaned over the rail and hollered at them. “Where’d ya get the boat?”

“Old man Gretsky gave it to us,” Lance yelled back, “but it leaks real bad. You wanta get in and help bail?”

“Can’t.” He held up a dressed chicken. “Gotta trade this to Doc Shultz for a filling. I’ve been having a toothache.”

As they passed under the bridge the smell of the sewage outlet inspired Carl to sing out in his imitation of Wallace Beery’s Long John Silver.

“Aarghh! Bail, ye bilge rats, bail for yer worthless lives! If we be’a goin’ down here, yee’ll be swimmin’ in the slime pits of hell! Bail, ye scurvy scum! The monster kraken lies below just a’waitin’ to wrap you up and suck you down. Aarghh!”

Lance and Grinner bailed furiously as the water kept getting deeper over the floorboards. Tentacled monsters didn’t scare them but dead man’s fingers, the long slime covered seaweed that waved like prairie grass on the river bottom, was waiting to entangle them.

They made it to Carl’s place with the water over their ankles. They tugged the bow up on the grassy shore and flopped down exhausted.

## **Chapter 16**

### **Hard Questions.**

WHEN the sheriff walked into the Whitefish Police Station he caught the chief with his back to the door, reading the Sunday funnies. He quietly closed the

door and waited. Chief George "Gabby" Kohler was chuckling to himself and didn't look around until the sheriff cleared his throat.

"Oh, Hello T-Tom," he stuttered, "just reading the funny papers." Sheriff Tom Spencer always made him ill at ease. "What brings you up here?"

"This suicide. The Maguire guy. What can you tell me about it?"

"Well ... it's pretty cut and d-dried. There was a suicide note."

"Did you investigate the scene?"

"I sent Ox up there to check it out. He said it was a long way down t-to the rocks. The highway p-patrolman notified the coroner and he took care of everything." He shrank back in his chair under the wordless reproof in the sheriff's eyes.

Finally the sheriff said, "You sent Ox?"

"Well, yeah. I was p-pretty busy."

"So, what can you tell me about Maguire?"

"Well, he worked at the bank, sort of a c-cashier or officer or something. He was a nice enough fella ... church goin' ... family man."

"His wife called me. She strongly rejects the notion that it was a suicide. He was a catholic. She told me that suicide was against his beliefs. She said he was upset about some discrepancies at the bank and she suspects foul play."

The chief's eyes were rapidly cataloging parts of the ceiling. "Well, I wouldn't know about that. Anyway, it d-didn't happen in my jurisdiction. It's either a c-county thing or for the park rangers."

"Have you talked to the family?"

"Oh yeah. I was the one to apprise them of his death." He eagerly took credit for his positive role in notifying next-of-kin.

"You tell Ox to get in touch with me. I'm going to look into this further."

"Sure, T-Tom. Sure will do that."

The sheriff studied him for a moment, then abruptly left the office.

Gabby Kohler was the short arm of the law in Whitefish. He was a little dull-witted but he was strong for his age. He was in his fifties and paunchy, but still muscular. He was a one-man operation during the week. On weekends Clay "Ox" Meyers, a burly former high school lineman, served as a part-time officer. He helped with the winos from the Great Northern track gangs. Known as the gandy dancers, they spent their week's pay on muscatel or cheap whisky. It was Gabby's job to haul them up from the gutter in front of the Town Pump Bar or the Smokehouse Saloon and take them to the jail. During the week he hassled the teenagers who were still on the streets after the ten o'clock siren. But when it came to crime investigation, he was a clueless Dr. Watson with no Sherlock to help him.

Gabby got a chance to fire his pistol on graduation night that spring. But it almost cost him his job.

Some senior boys were celebrating at City Beach after curfew. Gabby shot into the trees a few times to scare them off.

Marvin Dorn was there in the new wool tweed double-breasted suit his mother had bought for graduation. When the boys went tearing away from their beer party, Marvin ripped his suit running through the brush. Then he stumbled and fell into a muddy drainage ditch heading across the railroad tracks. When he got

home his mother was horrified at his condition. He had to make up a pretty good account of the police chief's attempt on their lives.

Mrs. Dorn called the mayor and kept ringing until he got out of bed and answered. She raised a big stink about the stupidity of the chief's actions. She insisted he be fired.

But Gabby survived the scandal and kept his job when the mayor heard cooler versions of the incident.

Since Mr. Maguire's death the River Rats had not seen Mickey. It was over a week after the funeral when Mickey caught up with them as they took a shortcut across the tracks to go swimming at the lake. There were some shy "Hi's" but not much else was said. Marlee walked up to him and gave him a silent hug. By the time they all splashed out to the floating dock the awkward period was over. Soon they were all cannonballing off the high board and laughing.

The day soured for Lance when he saw Charity Albright sitting next to a handsome older boy on a beach towel. She flicked him a quick glance that made him feel invisible and continued laughing and chatting with her Adonis look alike.

"What's the matter?" Gerbel asked. "You look like you sucked on a lemon."

"Nuthin'. I'm gonna head home. I'll see ya tomorrow."

Gerbel gave him a puzzled look but sensed there would be no explanation.

Charity showed up at the beach with her new boyfriend several more times, eroding Lance's fragile hopes of romance.

## **Chapter 17**

### **Expanding the Fleet.**

DERELICT boats apparently seem to multiply. The River Rats added two more to their navy. A summer storm released a small hydroplane racer hull from its place somewhere upstream.

"We can't keep it," Ronny advised. "We should find the owner."

Carl scoffed. "Look at the dumb thing. It's a piece of junk. It would fall apart if you put a motor on it."

"Listen to Ronny," Marlee declared, "we've got to take it back where it belongs."

"You're not part of the gang," Carl retorted. "We don't want your opinions."

Marlee slunk back pouting behind Ronny.

Carl looked at Lance. "Whadda you think?"

Lance tried to look wise and thoughtful. He examined the boat with the air of a marine surveyor vetting a millionaire's yacht.

"It's ours legally," he stated finally. "We are the rightful owners under the international law of salvage at sea."

"I never heard of that," Ronny said.

That got a scornful look from Lance that implied 'how dumb can you be'.

The third addition to the fleet was a home-built one-man kayak made of wood lath and canvas. It was contributed by some neighbor of Gerbel's. The wood strips were pretty rotten as well as the canvas. There was a major rip that opened the top from the cockpit almost to the bow. Both the added boats leaked less than the rowboat. With some bailing they proved usable. The River Rats were now in control of the river—if anyone really cared.

Increasing their fleet created a new problem. “How are we gonna decide who gets to use which boat?” Donny asked.

They all looked at each other for an answer.

“We need to elect a president,” Carl suggested.

“Yeah, and I suppose you wanna be it,” Donny pooh-poohed.

“No. I’m talking election. I think we should elect Lance as president.”

“If we’re going to conduct official River Rats business we need to do it right,” Lance intervened. “Let’s all go over to my place and have like a constitutional convention in my clubhouse.” He paused. “Only it’ll be OUR clubhouse.”

Nobody had a better plan so they went along with Lance and crowded into the little shack. It was a tight fit for the eight of them. They shut the door and made Marlee stay outside.

The atmosphere soon became hot and stuffy. “Jeez, Elwood...you smell bad.” Gerbel grimaced. “Open the door and let in some air.”

Lance pushed up the roof hatch and opened the door for ventilation.

Carl opened the discussion. “I’ve been thinking—we don’t need a president. Being the River Rats, we should do like the navy and have an admiral.”

Gerbel jumped in: “I like that idea. And we could have a commodore and a captain and a...”

Then the discourse got heated about how many officers should be elected and who should be what and what the various duties should be.

They finally decided Lance would be the commodore and Ronny would be the crow’s nest guy—sort of a lookout and communications officer.

Lance explained his position to him. “Your job will be to alert us, spread the word in case the Lakeside Gang should attack, for example.”

“Yeah,” Mickey added. “One if by land. Two if by river.” They went into gleeful fits over that. Marlee, listening outside the open door, was not happy with being left out.

“I’ll be the secretary,” she announced with conviction.

“You’re not part of this gang, so just shut up,” Carl retorted. Ronny blushed.

Lance tested his new authority with an announcement. “As long as she’s gonna follow us everywhere she might as well help him. Let’s make her Ronny’s Aide-de-Camp and the official secretary.”

They all muttered and agreed. The meeting was adjourned.

The last week of July was hot in Whitefish. The City Beach became the gang’s daily destination. A daily bath could have done wonders for Elwood but he had moved away. Elwood had never asked Lance or any of the other kids to play at his house. He was ashamed of the ongoing battle between his parents. He stayed away himself as much as he could manage, as did his dad. Mr. Cole worked at the Railway Express office. After work he went to the Pastime and joined the poker

game that was always in progress in the back. After a couple hours and several shots of Four Roses he would stagger home to face the stress of his home life.

His wife was devoid of affection and ever sharp with criticism. Nothing he could do pleased her, so he found the chaos of living with her easier to take by being drunk. Her goal of imposing perfection on him didn't extend to her own faults. While she would rail at him like a harridan, she, in turn, could ignore a sink full of dirty dishes, unmade beds, piles of dirty laundry and the stink of cat urine that was always present. She took better care of her seven cats than she did of her son or husband.

The daily poker ritual had slowly put Cole in debt. He made a decent wage for his job, but he was a poor poker player and got so far behind that he had to mortgage his house to pay off his IOU's. The property was left to him free and clear when his father died, but the cycle of losing and borrowing had reached the saturation point. Martin Baswell was happy to foreclose on the property for the benefit of his scheme with Radnor. All this happened behind Mrs. Cole's back. She was shocked and mad as hell when Sheriff Spencer brought a 30-day foreclosure and eviction notice to her door. She slammed the door in his face so he took the notice to the Railroad Express office.

Mr. Cole never went home that day. He hopped a westbound freight with nothing but the clothes on his back and was never heard from again. When her thirty days were up, Mrs. Cole took Elwood and used her Great Northern pass to travel to Libby on the Local. There she imposed herself on her sister's household.

## **Chapter 18**

### **Kickapoo Joy Juice.**

CARL and Lance examined the anatomy book Carl had snuck out of his house. It did not have the titillating pictures they were expecting. They leafed through it in the dim light inside the Dunne's garage.

"It's just a bunch of medical drawings," Lance complained.

"Yeah... but you can see some parts, even if all the guts kind of spoil it."

They soon realized the book had no redeeming pornographic qualities so Carl returned it.

Carl wanted to impress his dad with a chemical experiment that ended with something useful. Everything he and Lance had tried, up to then, had ended as a minor disaster. The orange smoke incident had made their laboratory off-limits by parental decree. They had to think outside of the box.

"My mom and dad drink wine," Carl said. "Maybe we could whip up some raisin jack."

"I know how to make Kickapoo Joy Juice," Lance volunteered.

"I don't think my folks would want any of that. But how do you make it? Lance had his attention.

"It's not real hard. You just put dandelion heads and raisins in a bottle of water with a lot of sugar in it. Then you add some yeast. When it's fermented, it's ready to drink."

"Where'd you learn that?"

"Billy Talldog was making it and I watched."

"If Billy Talldog was making it, it's probably poison."

"Yeah," Lance agreed, "but we could make some. Then we could flip a coin to see who takes the first drink. If it causes that person to fall to the floor writhing and screaming and puking with horrible violent belly cramps, then the other person wouldn't have to drink any of it."

Carl knew he was being facetious. He just snorted and started gathering supplies—a two-quart vinegar bottle from their back porch, then raisins, sugar and yeast from the kitchen. They gathered a couple handfuls of dandelion heads which they deduced would make it Kickapoo Joy Juice rather than just plain raisin jack. They corked it and set it up on a shelf in Carl's garage behind some oilcans and clutter.

"How long before it's ready?" Carl wanted to know.

"I don't know. We can just check it every couple days and see how it's doing."

That was a good idea, but they forgot to implement it. They got caught up in other endeavors. As the summer went on the winery was forgotten—a ticking bomb.

Carl's dad was throwing horseshoes with the neighbor—pitching with one hand and drinking Topper beer with the other. Carl waited for the neighbor's turn then got his dad's attention. "Dad, I was wondering if I could go camping with Lance. We want to go up the lake to Point of Pines and camp overnight."

"You don't intend going up the lake in one of those old boats, do you?"

"Well...I know you won't let us use the canoe." Carl pursed his lips and did his best not to look hopeful.

His dad pursed his lips and looked thoughtful. Apparently lip-pursing was a genetic trait. "Hmm ... Let you use the canoe..." He took a swig of Topper. "I'll have to think about that," And it was his turn to pitch a horseshoe.

Topper beer was the official grog of the River Rats when they met on the gun deck while engaged in piracy. Carl, their in-house clepto, had accumulated a stash of bottles one at a time over a few weeks and hid them in the bushes near the river in back of their house. None of the gang liked its taste. It was kind of bitter. But they passed a bottle around and chanted the 'Thirteen men on a dead man's chest, yo-ho-ho and a bottle of rum' song before setting out on a raiding party up-river. Ronny thought they should have an official River Rats drinking song. His brother had gone to Yale and they had their Whiffenpoof song, he pointed out. They bandied that idea about and came up with the Topper beer jingle as official. It was on the radio frequently and they all knew it as well as they knew the Super Suds jingle.

*Jug, mug or bottle  
Full of cheer  
What's the friendliest brew?*

*Why it's Topper Beer*

*Finest malt and selected hops  
For your favorite of flavor  
Toppers (doomty, doomty doomp)  
Topper's tops. Topper's tops.*

The ascending doomty, doomty, doomp, played by a tuba on the radio, was always belted out with great vigor and volume. By the end of the year the Topper brewery had gone out of business. Not enough customers could handle the bitter "favorite of flavor". But the jingle lingered on as the River Rats drinking anthem.

Carl was fidgeting, waiting for an answer.

"Use the canoe. Hmmm. I guess you're old enough to take good care of it. You will take good care of it, won't you?"

Carl's face lit up. "Oh, yes sir. I'll be super careful with it."

## **Chapter 19**

### **Midnight Banging.**

THE NEXT morning the canoe trip was late getting started. Lance had to wait while Carl's mother swept under their clawfoot tub. She was trying to roll Carl's eye out with the broom.

"Now you be careful," she admonished as she helped him put it back in his socket. "I don't want to hear about this ending up in the lake or lost in the woods. You understand me?"

Carl offered his sheepish assurances.

The trip up the lake was uneventful. It was a bright sunny day with a light breeze and the canoe skimmed along with Lance paddling in front and Carl in the back. Their camping gear was wrapped in a canvas tarp between the seats. They had blankets, a frying pan, a hatchet and some food. Carl had put in his fishing pole and Lance brought along his Remington .22.

They picked a spot by Hell Roaring Creek and hooked up the tarp between poplars for a shelter. Lance cleared a spot for a fire pit and made a circle of stones from the beach. Meanwhile Carl tried fishing for a while but had no luck. They hiked up the hill to check out an old trapper cabin. The door was hanging sideways from the bottom hinge and the roof shingles were half gone. Inside, shafts of sunlight striped the floor from the holes in the roof.

"Looks like somebody has been here," Lance observed. "Look... those cans by the bench aren't rusty and there's no dust on the bench."

"Somebody probably camped here recently." Carl concluded.

"Maybe that Korean guy that shot the Jap spy. Maybe he was hiding out here," Lance ventured.

After exploring the cabin they found amusement shooting the .22. They threw pieces of wood out onto the lake for target practice. Carl wasn't as good as Lance at hitting the targets but he redeemed himself when a tern circled above. It was a small moving target impossible to hit, but he took a shot at it anyway. They were both astonished when the bird fell to the lake.

"Wow, was that a good shot, or what?" Carl was excited.

"You mean a lucky shot, don't you?"

"Hey, you're just jealous. I led him just the right amount before I squeezed it off."

Lance sniffed. "Sure ya did. You're a regular Annie Oakley."

"C'mon!" Carl ran to the canoe. "Let's go get it. We'll cook it for supper."

On the lake it was hard to see the bird. The little patch of white in the water became confused with the sun's dappled reflections on the waves. They paddled to where it should have been but there was no sign of it—not even a feather.

"Too bad." Lance said. "We could have baked it in mud."

"Yep. We're really good at that." Carl laughed. "Okay...as long as we're out here I gotta show you something." He stood up on the seat and started rocking the canoe.

"Stop it! Whaddya think you're doing?" Lance couldn't believe it. "That's really stupid... yeeeoww!"

Over they went. The canoe, being cedar, floated, but was full of water. The two boys came up sputtering and hung onto it. Lance was mad. "Are you a moron? Why'd ya do that?"

"Don't get all huffy. I'm gonna teach you something about canoes. Something that's good to know if you ever get capsized in a storm."

Carl explained the way to reclaim the canoe. "We push the stern of the canoe down as far as we can, then we launch it upward. This dumps about half the water out—enough that we can climb back in and bail the rest."

He rescued Lance's paddle that was floating away. Then they carried out the drill and were able to climb over the stern and paddle back to shore.

"I guess the chef won't be able to serve that famous 'Bird in the Mud' special tonight." Lance said. "We'll have to open a can of pork and beans." They took off their wet clothes and laid them out on the rocks. Then they sat in the hot sun until their clothes were dry enough to put back on. Across the lake Lion Mountain was mirrored by the water. Occasionally a light wind shadow rippled the image into dancing sparkles of sunlight. A squirrel paused on a pine branch and seemed curious.

"You know what," Lance said, "I think we should have squirrel for supper since we can't have any of that delicious mud bird."

"Are you nuts? Eat a squirrel? Nobody eats squirrels."

"Daniel Boone and Davy Crockett ate them."

Carl screwed up his face in disgust. "It'd be like eating a rat."

"Have you ever eaten a rat?"

"Hell no!"

"Then how do you know how they taste?" Lance asked.

"I don't need to know, and I don't want to know."

Lance got up and got the rifle. "Well that's what's on the menu tonight." He loaded a shell and moved

around to get a good shot at the squirrel.

Carl called out, "Better run, little squirrel, there's a gun-totin' maniac loose in the woods."

Bang! The squirrel fell dead at Lance's feet. It was shot through the neck and its head was hanging half off. Lance took out his pocketknife and finished the beheading. Then he sat on a log and skinned and gutted it.

"There, now. Doesn't that look just like a piece of chicken or something?" He waved the slick purple and tan carcass at Carl.

"It looks a lot skinnier that it did with its fur. There's not enough meat there to bother with."

But Lance wasn't deterred. He got a fire going and made a spit with two forked branches. He impaled the carcass on a green branch across and over the fire. While he tended the spit, turning it frequently, Carl opened a can of beans and set the can in the embers. He had no intention of eating any part of the squirrel.

The meat slowly browned then started to char. "It smells pretty good," Lance commented. "I'll think I'll try a piece of it." He pulled a back leg off and looked at it for a while.

Carl challenged him. "Are you gonna eat it or just admire it?"

"Sure I'm gonna eat it."

"I think you're chicken."

Lance gave him a scornful look and bit into the leg. He tugged a sliver of stringy meat away from the bone. Carl watched with a big grin.

Lance cocked his head back and chewed with a look of gourmet satisfaction. He could have been the New York Times food critic savoring a chateaubriand at Sardi's.

But the meat was tough and Lance finally got tired of chewing it and spit it out.

"What's the matter? Carl snickered, "Too delicious to swallow?"

Lance spit a few more pieces out. "It would be a lot better if we had some salt." He tossed the remainder onto the fire. "I think I'll just have beans."

"I bet there's pack rats in that old cabin. Would you like to try a delicious pack rat filet for dessert?"

"It wasn't so bad," Lance insisted. "It just needed some salt or something."

A full moon and a cloudless night transformed the lake into a magical pool of silver serenity. The boys lay on their blankets and tried to pick out patterns in the stars. The creek gurgled and bubbled a dozen feet away. It seemed much louder at night.

"I wonder who that old shack belonged to." Carl said.

"There used to be an old trapper guy who lived up here. I can't remember his name. I heard my dad talk about him."

"Do you suppose there are any bears or mountain lions?"

"Nah. They'd smell our fire and hear all the noise we made and would steer clear of this place," Lance assured him. "But if we were camped on Lion Mountain we'd have to be on guard against the Great Blue Plume Puma."

"The what??"

“The Great Blue Plume Puma.”

“The Great Brue Pume Pluma! What’s a Great Blue... whatever you said?”

“Why do you think it’s call Lion Mountain? It’s because a special kind of mountain lion hangs out there—The Great Blue Plume Puma.”

Carl’s answer was a derisive snort.

Lance chuckled. “Would I lie about a scientific anomaly like that?” he asked.

“Huh... some scientific animal! You’re nuts.”

“Not animal... anomaly. An unusual specimen of cougar with a plume of blue fur on its forehead.”

Carl snorted again. “Like I would believe that!”

There was a long silence. Lance got up and got his rifle. He placed it alongside his blankets.

“Whatcha doin’?” Carl asked.

“Nuthin’...I’m going to sleep now. Good night.”

The music of the creek was Mother Nature’s lullaby. They were more asleep than awake when two horrendous BANGS in succession shocked them upright and wide-eyed.

“Holy crap! What was that?” Lance scabbled around looking for his rifle on the wrong side of his bedding.

“Jeez... Shhhh... be quiet,” Carl hissed. “It might be a bear.”

They sat frozen and listened. The creek’s night song was unchanged. They couldn’t hear any animal noises in the brush. Then from the lake came another slapping bang, not nearly as loud. They could see two beaver playing around on the moonlit surface.

“Oh, wow... beaver,” Carl went back to readjusting his body for the best compromise with the little rocks under the blanket. “They came down the creek.”

“Scared the crap out of me,” Lance admitted.

## **Chapter 20**

### **The Flagship.**

THE following day they found a blooming honeysuckle bush and spent some time sucking the sweetness out of the blossoms before they paddled down the lake to the river. It was always tricky to pilot through the rocks and submerged pilings at the mouth of the river. They were very careful not to collide with anything that could scar the canoe. Carl let Lance off by the old schoolhouse before continuing on downstream to his place. When Lance got home he smelled the fish frying before he opened the kitchen screen door.

“You’re just in time,” his mother said. “Grinner brought us some rainbows his father caught this morning. He wants you to come over after you eat supper.”

“Did he say why?”

“Oh... something about a boat. That’s all you boys think about is guns and boats.”

Lance was glad his mother was a good cook. He felt sorry for KennyBenny. Their mother couldn't boil water without scorching it. She didn't seem to enjoy being in the kitchen one bit. Lance usually found an excuse to head home when the twins invited him to stay for dinner.

He lit into the fish and the accompanying creamed peas and red potatoes.

"My, that camping works up quite an appetite, doesn't it?" His mother beamed.

"Umm... murma... dum..."

"You don't have to answer with a mouthful. And don't slouch over your food."

He cleaned off his plate, swiping the remaining white sauce with a slice of bread and went out the door stuffing that in his mouth.

"Tell Mr. Hatsumoto 'thank you' for the fish," his mother called after him. His answer was the slamming screen door.

Lance knocked on the Hatsumoto's back door and Mary answered. He was repelled by the weird smell of the Japanese food they had for supper. Mary gave him a warm smile. "Are you looking for Toshy?" Grinner's real name was Toshiro.

"Yeah. He wanted to see me."

"He's up in his room. Go on up."

Lance walked thru the living room to the stairs. Beth was there playing with paper dolls. Mr. Hatsumoto smiled and nodded to him from his easy chair. "My mother said to tell you 'Thank You' for the fish. They were really good."

Mr. Hatsumoto smiled and answered, "Yes, yes."

Grinner was sitting cross-legged on his bed. He looked up from reading a Superman comic book. "Oh, Hi, Lance. Guess what I found?"

"I'm guessing it's a boat."

"Yep. I went fishing with my dad this morning. You know that bay on the west side of the river mouth? We were fishing there. There's an old rowboat on the beach there that somebody abandoned."

"What makes you think it's abandoned?"

"Just the way the sand has piled around it. And in it. And the paint's all peeling."

"How far is it?"

"It wouldn't be that far if we cross the railroad bridge."

"Let's go check it out tomorrow."

It was impossible for kids to walk by the Great Northern power plant without looking up from the bottom of the smokestack. Lance and Grinner took a shortcut through the roundhouse area and paused for the ritual examination of the 150-foot structure.

"I think it must be the tallest smokestack in the world," Grinner said.

"Then you don't know much," Lance criticized. "The one in Anaconda is five times higher!"

Grinner tried to visualize an extension of that height into the sky. "You're exaggerating," he accused.

"You don't have to believe me. Just ask anybody."

They skirted the roundhouse. The hot sun was melting tar off the roof and it dripped into small puddles along their path. They waited at the railroad bridge until they were sure no trains were coming from either direction before hurrying

across it. Grinner led the way balancing on the rails or stepping across the spaces between the ties. Lance followed him down to the lakeshore and along the beach until they came to the bay.

The rowboat was chained with a padlock to a stump above high water mark. The chain and padlock were rusty and the stump was rotten. The boat had three inches of hard-packed sand in the bottom.

"We should have brought a hammer or a crowbar," Lance said after checking the lock.

"I think we can bust that padlock with a rock," Grinner suggested. He looked around and found a suitable one.

They took turns beating on the padlock. All they got for their efforts was rust dust. Lance was losing patience and he slammed the stump with the rock to release his frustration. A big chunk of the rotten wood fell away.

"We've been beating on the wrong thing," Lance hooted. They took turns knocking pieces off the stump until they could slip the chain off.

"We didn't think of bringing oars, either," Grinner noted. That led to a search for some boards for paddling. They found some boards. Then Lance brought up the lack of a bailing can.

"Let's get it into the water and see how bad it leaks," he suggested. They tugged it out of its sand cradle and drug it into the lake. To their amazement it didn't seem to leak at all. Encouraged, they shoved off and paddled for the mouth of the river. They got it down the river to the old dock by the schoolhouse without a problem.

Using their paddle boards they broke up the caked sand on the bottom and pitched the pieces overboard. But with the sand removed, water started replacing it.

Lance sighed. "Oh, crap. It was the sand that kept it from leaking."

"Another leaky boat for our navy," Grinner laughed. "We need a motto, like 'Join the River Rats and get your feet wet.'"

"Well, we'll fix this one right," Lance said. "I know how to keep it from leaking. Help me pull it up and turn it over."

The next day was a Sunday. Lance was secretive about his plans for the boat. When he met Grinner he was carrying a five-gallon galvanized bucket.

"What's the bucket for?"

"You'll see." Lance started walking toward the roundhouse.

"Where're we goin'?"

"You'll see."

Grinner decided to play along with the mystery. He followed Lance to the roundhouse, stopping to look up at the smokestack as they went by the powerhouse. Around the back of the roundhouse Lance started picking up the hardened puddles of tar and putting them in the bucket. Without asking, Grinner did the same.

When the bucket was half full Lance broke the silence. "Now do you see?"

"Sure. We're collecting tar."

"Yeah, but why?"

"You're gonna use it on the boat." Grinner said with a smug smile.

"And you're right. We're gonna fix that thing so it will never leak a drop!"

They carried the bucket back to the boat and built a bonfire nearby. While the tar was melting in the bucket, Lance went to his garage and brought back an old broom.

On the bridge, Ronny and Marlee were walking home from church. They saw the smoke and came down the river path to see what was going on.

“Hey, what’re you guys doing?” Ronny called when he saw it was Lance and Grinner.

“We’re fixing this boat so it don’t leak,” Lance answered.

“I suppose you stole another boat,” Marlee said sarcastically.

Lance bristled. “Not at all. We took in a fair fight. It was a Spanish treasure ship and we boarded it and got in a horrendous sword fight. All our crew was killed except Grinner and me. The last fifty Spaniards surrendered to us, but we made them walk the plank.”

Marlee rolled her eyes. “You stole it,” she said definitively. She tugged at Ronny’s sleeve and turned away. “Come on, Ronny. They’ll just get you in trouble.”

Ronny pulled away. “Not yet. I wanna watch.”

Lance dipped the old broom in the melted tar and started spreading it on the boat’s bottom. The smoke from the fire and the smell of the tar was making Marlee’s eyes water. “Since I’m your aide-de-camp I must advise you that if you get tar on your Sunday clothes, Ronny, your mother is going to be pretty mad,” Marlee warned.

Yeah... you’re right,” he admitted. “But, since I’m the crow’s nest guy I can alert the others about what’s going on.” They started back down the path.

“Yeah, that’s a good idea,” Grinner agreed. “Maybe somebody will want to help. See ya later.”

Lance and Grinner finished coating the bottom and went home for lunch. When they came back the tar was dry and Carl and Gerbel were there.

“It’s really keen. Where d’ja get it?” Gerbel asked when they approached.

“We liberated it,” Grinner said.

Carl laughed and bent down to examine the bow. “Yeah...I can see by the chain and padlock still attached that it was being held against its will.”

“Let’s put it in the river and see if it still leaks,” Grinner urged.

Lance objected. “No... let’s get some paint and paint it while it’s still upside down. We’ve got some old green paint my dad mixed up. My mother hates it. She’ll be glad to see it gone.”

“Why does she hate it?” Carl asked.

“He mixed different colors together to paint the house. My mother said it ended up baby-poop green. My brother said it was shit-brindle green. I’ll go get it.”

By supertime the boat was resplendent with new paint. It inspired Gerbel to comment, “If the real owner ever wanted it, he wouldn’t want it now with that color on it.”

They all got to giggling and coming up with more metaphoric names for the paint color. When they exhausted those possibilities they started thinking up funny names for the boat. “We could name it the ‘Green Turd’,” Gerbel suggested.

Grinner chimed in: “How about ‘The Sewer Clipper’ since it’ll have to float in the Whitefish River.”

“Yeah, it’s kinda camouflaged with that color,” Carl said. “We could invade the Bork Boys territory and they’d never see us amongst the other floating crap.”

“It’s gonna be called ‘The Green Dragon’,” Lance announced with a frown. “It’s the flagship of our fleet.” He had decided, and by his serious demeanor the others knew it was the final choice.

The next day the whole gang swarmed around it. They righted it, admired it and went to work. They scrounged up orange crate boards and built a little cuddy cabin at the bow. They cleaned up the inside and painted the whole boat the hideous green. Lance asked his mother for a square of black cloth for a flag. The best she could do was black with tiny white polkadots. He painted a skull and crossbones on it and they hung it from a broomstick nailed to the prow.

“Tomorrow, when the paint is dry, we launch!” he decreed.

“Can I break the champagne on the bow?” Marlee asked Lance.

“Sure. But you’ll have to bring your own champagne. Let’s meet here tomorrow after lunch. And Carl, bring the oars.”

The launching of the Green Dragon was conducted with a dignified ceremony. Marlee smashed a bottle of Seven Up against the chain that still hung from the bow ring and pronounced, “I name thee the Green Dragon. May you sail safely to the ends of the earth.”

They slid it into the river and were elated when it didn’t leak. It did leak. But compared to the other rowboat it didn’t.

## **Chapter 21**

### **Beaver Island.**

THE Green Dragon proved to be reliable and seaworthy. Lance started a ship’s log in a little notebook. He decided to make his entries in French. On the cover he wrote:

LE VERT DRAGON.

Lance Charpentier, Capitaine

He didn’t really know anything about French grammar or gender. He had a tiny French dictionary which he used for literal translation.

He showed the log to Grinner. He puzzled over it. “Is this a code?”

“No. It’s French.”

“How come?”

“It’ll keep unauthorized eyes from prying into it and finding out about our secret voyages.”

“Secret voyages?”

“Yeah, like when we go on commando raids or do pirate stuff.”

Grinner thought about that. “We should try to make another pirate pistol, only one that works this time.”

“We could make my Remington into a pirate pistol by cutting off the barrel and making a hand grip instead of the stock,” Lance suggested.

They were older and wiser since the cherry bomb pirate pistol project that blew up in their faces. They cut off the barrel of the rifle just ahead of the short fore stock and replaced the shoulder stock with a curved handle that they stained and waxed to look like hardwood. They decided to take it on a camping trip and see if they could shoot something.

“Let’s take the Green Dragon up to Beaver Island and stay there overnight,” Lance said. “I’ll buy some more .22 shorts and some dog shot.”

“What’s dog shot?”

“They’re .22 shells loaded with tiny pellets instead of a slug—sorta like a little shotgun shell.”

“Are you supposed to kill dogs with ‘em?” Grinner frowned, not pleased with that prospect.

“No, they wouldn’t kill a dog. People use them to scare dogs away. They just sting them pretty good, like a BB gun.”

With the proper permissions—Lance from his mother and Grinner from sister Mary—they loaded some basic camping gear and blankets in the Green Dragon and rowed up the lake. They spent the remainder of the day plinking at bottles they threw in the water for targets.

“Hey, there’s a squirrel,” Lance noticed. “Let’s scare him with a dog shot.”

Bang! The squirrel fell to the ground near their feet.

“He’s plumb dead, Roy,” Grinner said in his best Gabby Hayes imitation.

#### Illustration:

#### Beaver Island, Ten Points Off the Port Bow

“Yep, he’s sure enough dead alright.”

“Yep, he sure enough is that.”

“He’s downright dead, sure enough,” Lance added.

“Yep, you got him dead to rights, pardner.”

After their Roy Rogers movie dialogue ran its course they noticed there was no blood.

“He doesn’t even look like he’s been shot. We can skin him and stuff him,” Lance said.

“Good idea, I bet Ol’ Sam will help us,” Grinner suggested. He was referring to their neighbor who ran the local taxidermy shop.

That night it started to rain. They hadn’t brought a tent so they took their blankets to the boat and huddled together in the little cuddy cabin. Water dripped between the cracks in the boards above them and they spent the night cramped and shivering under wet blankets.

Back home the next day Lance made an entry in the ship’s log:

*Votre navire rendu à le belle  
saison à Beaver Island.*

*Les 'équipage tiré un écureuil.  
Il plu toute nuit.*

Then he decide to add some fanciful details about battling pirates.

*Nous lutté contre les pirates et tué tous.*

## **Chapter 22**

### **Motor Skills.**

THE GANG was pretty well set up for tools. Gerbel's dad ran the Texaco service station so Gerbel had access to mechanic's wrenches and stuff, including old inner tubes, which were always handy for making rubber guns. Lance's granddad had a blacksmith shop down by the Second Street Bridge in the old days. There were tools from that operation in their shed. When cars took the place of horses he gave up blacksmithing and went to carpentering for a living and there were tools from that period also.

Lance's dad was terrible at fixing stuff. His mother always had to redo anything his dad did around the house to make it look right. So his dad avoided the tools as much as possible.

Lance and Gerbel were examining an old Maytag gas powered washing machine that had sat rusting behind the Texaco station for a couple years.

"See this motor," Gerbel pointed out, "we could make the Green Dragon into a motor boat with it."

Gerbel's dad had intended to replace a broken gear but his mother nixed that plan in favor of a new electric motor model.

"Does it still run?" Lance asked.

"I dunno. It might. It's been sitting out here for a long time."

"Can we put some gas in it and see?"

Gerbel looked hopeful. "Yeah ... why not. My dad said it was a worthless piece of junk that wasn't worth messing with, but we can give it a try." He went in the station and brought out a coffee can with some oily looking liquid in it.

"Jeez, Gerbel, that doesn't look like gas."

"Yeah, it is. It just had some parts cleaned in it so there's a little oil mixed in." He poured it in and pulled on the starter rope but the motor wouldn't turn over. "Wait ... I know what's wrong." Gerbel jerked a lever until it moved to a new position. "It has to be in neutral to start." That helped.

They took turns pulling the rope about twenty times but couldn't get a pop out of it. Then Dan showed up. He was a high school kid that pumped gas there part time. "If you guys really want to get that running you're probably gonna hav'ta clean the spark plug and use some starter fluid." He smirked at their ignorance and walked away.

"He's dumber than a box of rocks," Gerbel said after he was out of hearing range. "But he might be right."

They didn't get it running that day. But the following day with the help of Gerbel's dad it finally took off. It was a noisy rattling banging little monster and it puffed out a lot of smoke from the oil in the gas tank. They were excited, anticipating the joy of skimming across the lake in a motorized Green Dragon.

They shut it down and went about removing the rusted bolts that held it to the frame under the tub. It had a pulley on the shaft and a belt that went over a larger wheel above. They visualized using that same arrangement to make a propeller turn at the stern of the boat. It wasn't as though they had a definite plan, but they were confident they could engineer it somehow. They hauled all the parts over to Carl's house in a Radio Flyer wagon and he helped get it down the hill to where the Green Dragon was pulled up on the riverbank.

"I think it would be easier to run it with a paddle wheel," was Carl's idea after they explained theirs.

"It wouldn't go as fast." Gerbel answered. "Plus, it's easy to carve a propeller out of wood but it would be hard to make a paddle wheel."

Carl conceded that. They started tossing out ideas as to how to mount it, where to run the shaft and pulleys and so on. There were some sticky problems that they decided to solve the next day. That night Lance couldn't get to sleep thinking about the different ways to get the power from the motor to a propeller in the water. But when he woke up the next morning it was clear as could be. He had an exact plan.

His first stop was the Toler house where he dispatched Ronny, the crow's nest communication guy, to gather the gang. They gathered around the Green Dragon, until Mickey and Donny showed up.

"We all been waitin' for ya," Gerbel said. "What took ya so long?"

"We were in the smoke hole." Mickey answered. He looked a little pale.

The 'smoke hole' was an inspection opening in the concrete abutment under the Second Street Bridge. There was a crawl space there big enough for a couple of kids to sit on the hard packed dirt and smoke.

"I got some Wings," Donny explained. He looked like he'd just licked a toad or swallowed a worm. "I might quit smoking."

The little market next to Central School sold Wings cigarettes for ten cents a pack. All a kid had to say was that they were for his dad and the lanky Norwegian owner never questioned their veracity.

Lance showed a drawing of his plan. "We're going to need an engine fan from a car for our propeller," he explained. "We'll put it down on the bottom of the stern, then we'll mount the motor on the seat with the pulley over the transom. That way we can put a belt from the motor to the fan."

"Where are we gonna find that stuff?" Carl wanted to know.

"That's our mission for today. We'll split up and all go looking. We'll need some two-by-fours, some bolts and nails."

Mickey looked interested. Carl looked thoughtful. Gerbel looked eager. Grinner looked excited. Marlee looked skeptical and Ronny and Donny just looked.

There were a few questions on the details as they passed the plan around.

"I can ask my dad if he has an old fan we can have," Gerbel said. "And if he doesn't have one I bet I can talk the guy at the wrecking yard out of one."

By mid-afternoon they were all back with various bits and pieces they had collected. Lance brought a hand drill, hammer and some wrenches. They set to work and by suppertime they had the motor and the fan mounted and bolted in place.

Gerbel was the first to notice a flaw in the plan. "That belt I got with the fan is too long. We either have to raise the motor up or find a shorter belt."

"Yeah," Lance agreed. "Maybe we can use a piece of rope, instead."

Gerbel frowned. "Bad idea. How would you fasten the ends together?"

"Well, we might as well give it a try." Lance was anxious to see his invention in action. "If it doesn't work, we can try finding a shorter belt."

Carl ran up the hill to his house and brought back a length of rope. He circled it around the two pulleys and tied a knot. Lance trimmed the extra pieces off with his pocketknife.

"Okay, let's crank it up and see what happens," Lance said. The transom of the boat was propped up on a log so the fan could spin freely.

"I should get to start it since I got the motor and the fan," Gerbel insisted. He gave the rope a tug but the drag of the rope and the fan kept the motor from firing. "Oops, we forgot something, Lance. Your plan didn't include a clutch."

Lance scratched his head. He wasn't sure how a clutch worked.

Gerbel came up with a solution. "Forget the rope. We'll use the belt since its a little looser, then have another little pulley that can be pushed against it to tighten it when the motor is running."

Lance seemed to understand the principle of that suggestion. "Yeah, that might work," he agreed.

"Sure it will work." Gerbel was positive. "I think there's a little pulley on the old washing machine that will do the job."

The shipyard closed down for the day and they all vowed to be on hand for the big motoring event to take place the next day.

The next morning it was blustery and raining. Lance fussed around the house trying to contain his anticipation. It was late afternoon when they all got together again.

"Carl's grounded today," Gerbel told them. "His raisin jack sort of blew up and sprayed stuff all over their car."

"What's raisin jack?" Marlee asked.

"It's Kickapoo Joy Juice," Lance teased, then added, "He was trying to make some wine."

Gerbel produced the little pulley and showed them how it should be mounted on the transom with a pivoting board that served as a handle to hold pressure against the belt. They added the impromptu clutch and got ready for action.

Once again, Gerbel did the honors. It took several pulls before the motor kicked off. He pulled the clutch pulley against the belt and the fan started turning. A notch in the old belt caused a putappaputacking as it circled the two pulleys and passed the clutch pulley. But the fan was turning.

There was much jubilation.

“Yee-Hah!” Lance shouted. “It’s a great day for our navy! Let’s shut it off and get this fine vessel in the river.”

Once afloat Lance insisted on being the starter. “I’m the commodore, so I should start it.” The engine kicked off easily.

“Let’s go. Everybody aboard!” he hollered over the putappaputacking.

Marlee hung back and tried to dissuade Ronny. “I don’t think you should go until it’s tested better.”

Ronny paid no attention and climbed in with the rest of the gang. Grinner pushed off from the bow to get them into deeper water.

“Okay, here we go,” Lance warned as he pulled the clutch lever to engage the belt.

The boat started moving.

Backwards.

The fan was spinning in the wrong direction, spreading little circular eddies of slime and oil across the surface of the river as they plowed through the pollution in reverse.

“Turn us around,” yelled Carl.

“I can’t,” Lance answered.

“Put it in forward gear,” Donny offered.

“There is no forward gear, Jeez.” Lance looked as though he might start to cry. He realized it wasn’t the only thing he had overlooked in his proud conception. There was no way to steer the boat either. He shut off the motor and looked around.

“We’ll have to row back. Where are the oars?”

They had left the oars behind so they all leaned out and hand-paddled to shore.

Marlee took in Ronny’s slimy pollution covered hands with a smug I-told-you-so look, but she understood their disappointment and kept her mouth shut.

## **Chapter 23**

### **The Supernatural.**

THE IDYLLIC days of summer were shattered when Lance found two days of newspapers still lying on Mr. Gretsky’s doorstep. He knocked but there was no answer. The door was unlocked and Lance found the old man sprawled lifeless on his kitchen floor. Lance didn’t do any of the stuff that movie detectives do. He didn’t feel his pulse or hold a mirror to his face to see if he was breathing. He was dead enough for Lance, just looking at him.

He ran home and told his mother. She ran across the street and told Mrs. Dorn who had a telephone. All the kids in the neighborhood turned out for the ambulance coming down First Street.

Lance was basking in the admiration of the other kids who were awed by his part in the drama.

“Weren’t you scared?” KennyBenny asked.

"Naw. You seen one dead man; you've seen 'em all," he bragged.

"What'd he look like?"

"He had a terrible crooked expression on his face ... like he had just seen a ghost ... or the devil. He was all crumpled up in a heap and I think there was probably a lot of blood under him." He hadn't actually seen the face or any blood but he had to make a good story out of it to justify the hero worship going on.

"I wouldn't be surprised if his ghost roams the halls of that old school for years to come." he continued.

KennyBenny gave him their duplicate look of fear that Lance was hoping to achieve.

He warmed up to the narrative. "In fact he told me just last week when I took in his wood that there was something going on in the vacant classrooms on the main floor. He said there were strange sounds like clanking chains and moans."

KennyBenny shivered and gulped.

"He said that he felt cold winds come from nowhere past his chair and once he saw something moving in the bedroom doorway. I think he knew some evil spirit was after him and he wanted me to know about it ... just in case he suddenly turned up dead."

In the following days Lance became the fount of all knowledge concerning dead men and ghosts. His friends eagerly sucked in every word when he described his observations and reactions to finding the body. He also pushed the idea that the old schoolhouse was haunted. It was fun to promote the idea, but it never occurred to him that he was setting himself up for a spine-chilling night of paranormal terror.

## **Chapter 24**

### **The Old Schoolhouse.**

THE OLD schoolhouse was built about fifty feet from the river. Apparently in 1900 all little kids must have known how to swim. Cottonwood trees surrounded it, almost hiding it from the street. Since it was built on a side hill, the main floor entrance was at street level at the top of the hill and the bottom floor entrance was at ground level at the bottom. Above the main foyer a bell tower gave the old building an old world look. The clapboard siding had lost its paint and weathered to a hoary gray. If Hollywood's artisans had built it for a spooky movie set they couldn't have built a scarier facade or chosen a more frightening setting than the old gnarled cottonwoods.

Mr. Gretskey's kin had boarded up the windows when they came for his belongings. It was left in the care of a real estate agent.

Illustration:

The Old Schoolhouse

A week or so after the death, the River Rats had abandoned the plan to motorize the Green Dragon. Gerbel, Grinner and Lance rowed the boat upstream to the railroad bridge to see if there were any bums hanging out there in the "hobo jungle". It was just something to do. When they didn't see any they drifted back downstream and stopped to investigate a shallow cave on the west bank. It was only about four feet wide and deep.

"We could hide a treasure here," Lance suggested.

"Like Long John Silver," added Grinner.

Gerbel started piling brush in front of it. "We need to disguise it so we can use it as a hideout."

Lance and Grinner agreed and helped him cover the entrance.

They drifted on down the river and pulled the boat up on the bank below the schoolhouse.

"We ought to just leave it here all the time," Lance suggested. It was only a block from his house.

"Somebody might get mad about that." Grinner said.

"Somebody like a ghost, you mean?" Lance jibed. "Nobody else would give a hoot. That real estate guy who is supposed to be caring for the place is never around."

Gerbel had wandered up to a boarded window and was tugging on one of the boards. It came off easily. The nails were too short to make a secure job of it.

"I don't know if you should be doing that," Lance called.

"C'mere and look at this." He was shading his eyes and peering through the opening. "There's some neat old junk in there."

Beneath the boards the glass was broken out of the window. Mr. Gretsky hadn't maintained the parts of the school other than his living quarters. The room had some dusty old chairs and some gears, chains and junk, including parts to a broken cream separator.

"I'll bet there's a lot of neat junk in these old classrooms," Gerbel said. He tugged off two more boards and picked out the broken glass shards still held by the cracked putty.

Grinner was nervous about his intentions. "You goin' in there?"

"Dang right. Stay out if you're chicken."

"What if..."

"What if, shmut if. Don't be such a worry wart." He crawled through and started pawing through the junk. "Hey, come here and look at these!" He had found a box of old magazines and catalogs. "Here's a Sears Roebuck from 1903, and there's a bunch of old National Geographics."

That did it. Grinner and Lance crawled through the window. The best source of seeing female parts was in National Geographics. Photos from Africa and Bali always showed some bare boobs.

The black, sooty dust from the railroad's powerhouse smokestack had permeated the old building. After an hour or so of finding and sharing the coveted pictures the three were as dusty as the old junk in the room.

"Let's see what else they left behind," Gerbel offered.

Grinner jumped up, eager to explore. But Lance was apprehensive. "I feel kinda funny about being in here, ya know." He paused, looking around the room.

"...after seeing old Mr. Gretsky dead here and all." He shook off an involuntary shiver.

Grinner's eyes became bigger—almost occidental. "You found him in this room?"

"No, not here. It was downstairs on the bottom floor where he lived."

Grinner looked relieved.

"Come on, you guys." Gerbel urged. "Follow me."

They left the room and entered a hallway. The school was "L" shaped with one hallway running west to east and the other perpendicular to it. Straight ahead the east wing of the school had two classrooms on each side of the hall. To their left the hallway led north past two classrooms on the river side, which included the one, they had just left. At the end was the main entrance and cloakroom.

They checked out every room and found most of them bare. Even the blackboards were gone. One still had a faded picture of George Washington on the wall, filmed over with roundhouse grit. And another contained more broken furniture and useless junk—gears and flywheels from motors, chains and lengths of cable.

At the end of the east hallway there was a door marked "Fire Exit". The door was nailed shut, but the boys knew what was on the other side. A tubular slide, about five feet in diameter, made of galvanized iron was the means of evacuating that part of the school in an emergency. It had a short flat area at the top outside the door and sloped down to another short flat area at the bottom. It was a source of fun the previous summer.

Lance, Donny and KennyBenny would clamber up the slippery slope to the top and slide back down.

Then Donny had an urgent need for the bathroom, but he was too far from home.

"I gotta go real bad," he complained, squirming and casting about for a place to go. His solution was to climb up to the top of the tube so no one could see him.

Lance and KennyBenny exchanged glances knowingly. They foresaw the problem with that location, but chose not to warn him. Up he went.

The tube became a giant megaphone, amplifying the grunts and gaseous sounds by its length. Pretty soon a yellow stream dribbled down to puddle in the flat area at the bottom. Shortly after a little pile of turds came sliding down to form an island in the puddle. It was then that Donny realized his predicament.

"How'm I gonna get outa here?" The plaintive question came floating hollowly from the top of the tube.

"Slide! Slide!" KennyBenny hollered together.

"It's all greased up for you," Lance called. Then they all went into a giggle fest.

There were a few moments of silence from the tube. Finally they heard Donny say, "Oh Crap."

"Yeah, you got that right," Lance shouted back. That unleashed a new round of hilarity.

The grand finale came when Donny came sliding out, splashing and spattering through his little yellow lake with the little brown island.

Near the fire exit a janitor closet revealed a rusty mop bucket, a coal hod and a push broom. Outside the door a ladder was propped against the hall wall.

The rooms were gloomy; the only light came from the cracks between the boards on the windows. Cobwebs were frequent and Lance, who hated spiders, graciously let Gerbel and Grinner break trail.

The foyer, which served as a cloakroom, projected out from the north side of the school. It was a little wider than the hall and the bell tower rose above it. There was no bell but there was a square opening in the ceiling where the pull rope had once hung down.

"We better get out of here before somebody catches us," Lance warned.

The others agreed.

"Let's come back tomorrow and check out the bottom floor," Grinner suggested.

Gerbel was all for it, but Lance balked. The idea of revisiting the death scene put him off.

Gerbel picked up on his apprehension. "You're not scared of old Gretsky's ghost, are you Lance?"

Lance bristled. "No, I'm not scared. It's just that . . . it might be sacrilegious or something."

"That's bull pucky," Gerbel countered. "You're just chicken!"

"Am not!"

"Am too!"

The dialogue continued until they were back outside and heading up the hill.

"There's no such thing as ghosts," Lance said. "Even if there were such a thing, Mr. Gretsky liked me and was always nice to me."

"So you wouldn't mind running into him tomorrow, then, would you?" Gerbel kept teasing.

"He'd probably scare the crap out of you two and just say 'Hi' to me."

"Okay, it's settled then," Gerbel said, "Tomorrow we'll check him out. See just how scary the old guy is. You in, Grinner?"

"You bet. I've always wanted to meet a ghost."

## **Chapter 25**

### **The Dark Spector.**

IN THE days following, the boys explored the rest of the building. The bottom floor consisted of four classrooms, two of which had been converted to the Gretsky living quarters. The third one was used for storage. Mr. Gretsky's wife had died before Lance began chopping wood there but he remembered her as a wiry tough little lady who would walk past their house, heading for town with a purposeful stride. She was a hoarder and kept all the catalogs, magazines, bottles—stuff dating back to World War One. She had even saved all their waxed bread wrappers—bundled and stacked neatly in that third room.

The fourth room was bare with a 12-foot ceiling. Grinner jokingly suggested they could play basketball in there. Grinner's brother and his high school buddies had put a hoop on their garage, but the uneven dirt driveway made dribbling difficult.

Lance considered the idea seriously. "Yeah, it would be like having our own gym."

"What about hoops?" Gerbel asked.

"We can figure that out later." Lance was always ready for action. "Grinner, why don't you run up to your place and get the ball?"

It was a hot day and the room was sweltering with no open windows or ventilation. When Grinner returned they took off their shirts and started dribbling and passing the ball around. Every time the ball bounced off the floor a film of black dust would leave the ceiling to join the dust that rose from the floor. Before long the boys were camouflaged with black sweaty streaks and swirls.

"Too hot for me!" Gerbel tossed the ball over his shoulder and left the room.

"Me, too," echoed Lance.

Grinner looked disappointed. "I think it's okay." He bounced the ball a few times, hoping they'd come back. Then he followed them.

If there had ever been a stairway from the bottom floor to the street level it must have been removed when the Gretskys converted the living quarters. The boys left by the kitchen window they had jimmied.

Outside, Lance got a brainstorm. "Hey ... let's see if we can get up in the bell tower."

"Yeah, we can use that ladder down by the janitor closet," Gerbel contributed. They got back in through the window on the side toward the river. They hauled the ladder into place in the foyer and climbed up through the opening in the ceiling.

The bell tower was about eight feet square with a two-foot solid rail. Lance knelt down and started firing an imaginary rifle. He was Beau Geste behind the parapet of Fort Zinderneuf holding off the Berber hordes.

"Holy crap ... this is the neatest place, ever," Gerbel said.

"You know what would be fun?" Grinner's eyes lit up. "We could come up here tonight and make spooky noises and scare the roundhouse guys when they go by."

Gerbel flopped down behind the rail and started making groaning gurgling sounds.

"Yeah!" Grinner voiced approval. "You wanna do that, Lance?"

"Yeah ... but," Lance didn't seem as eager. "I'm not sure I want to wander around these halls after dark. It'll be pretty scary." He considered the idea for a minute. "Let's just fix it so we can come in the window by the ladder."

A footpath to the roundhouse wound through the cottonwoods past the front of the old school. Every night between 10:30 and 11:00 the workers for the night shift would walk by carrying their lunch pails.

That night the boys crouched down behind the rail and waited patiently as several groups walked by. When one lone worker was below they started their ghostly groans. Then they had to suppress their giggles when they saw him start walking faster. The game was repeated every few days and Carl and the other River Rats became willing participants.

One night the whole gang showed up with the exception of Gerbel. There was a full moon casting eerie shadows through the old cottonwoods.

"Where's Gerbel?" Lance asked Ronny, the crow's nest guy who was responsible for facilitating intergang communications.

"He said he was grounded tonight for some reason."

They steeled themselves, summoning the courage to enter the dark spooky foyer, then opened the window and climbed in. They were giggling and all set to scare the bejeezus out of some poor soul. Carl and Ronny were on the ladder when Donny whispered.

"Wait... did you hear that?"

"Hear what?" Lance said.

"Shhhh! Listen!"

Carl and Ronny stopped climbing and they all listened.

There was a sound like heavy breathing from down the hall. A shaft of moonlight was coming through the door of the classroom where they had removed the boards on the window.

They froze. A tangible current of fear welded them in place. Then they heard chains rattling and dragging from down the hallway. There was just enough moonlight to show a dark specter lurching from the classroom door draped in chains.

The boys pushed and shoved each other aside to get out of the window, frantically diving headfirst into the tall grass and running up the hill to the street like the hounds of hell were in pursuit.

They were grouped on the street, breathless and round-eyed. Then they heard hysterical laughter from the school. There was Gerbel in the window, draped in chains, reveling in the success of his caper.

## **Chapter 26**

### **Melting Lead.**

LANCE'S mother had a deep-felt aversion to Old Mr. Hansen and there he was banging on their front door. Through the window she saw him spit tobacco juice on her flowerbed.

"Lancey, go get your father. He's in the garage. Tell him Hansen's at the front door and I don't want to talk to him."

Lance delivered the message. Hansen saw Mr. Carpenter come out of the garage and walked to meet him in front of the clubhouse.

"There, there ... see that!" Hansen pointed at the clubhouse. He was chewing his tobacco cud, spitting and having a temper tantrum. "Those little sonsabitches stole my lumber. They're a bunch of goddam thieves!" He was sputtering out the words and thrusting his pointed finger at Lance like a swordsman's riposte.

"Hold on, how do you know they're your boards?" Mr. Carpenter asked.

"You think I don't know my own goddam boards when I see them? Them's my boards in that shack."

"Is that right, Lance?"

Lance nodded sheepishly.

Hansen glared at him. "I'm gonna call the cops. They'll jerk his ass into jail right quick!"

Mr. Carpenter looked almost amused. "I don't think that'll be necessary. Tell you what. How about if I pay you for the boards?" He reached in his pocket and pulled out a fifty-cent piece. "How about four bits? Would that cover it?"

Hansen eyed the coin, spit a brown gob on the porch steps and calmed down. Apparently mollified, he took the coin, gave them a nasty look, and walked away.

Lance's mother, who had watched the transaction through a kitchen window, came out and joined them. She rested her hand on her husband's arm. "What a horrible man. I'm glad you don't have to work in the woods with him any more."

"Yeah, well, not as glad as I am. But his bark is worse than his bite. Hansen's a blowhard ... likes to hear himself talk."

She turned her attention to Lance. "And you, young man ... you are going to tear this, this ... this *outhouse* down today. It's an eyesore in the yard and makes me ashamed of our property." She was adamant and was clearly set on its removal.

"No argument, Lance" his dad warned. "I'll give you a hand." They went to work with crowbar and hammer and reduced the clubhouse to a stack of old lumber.

When Grinner came by, Lance was sitting on the lumber absently carving on a board with his pocketknife.

"Jeez ... what happened?"

"My mother made me tear it down."

Grinner climbed up beside him for moral support. They were sitting there, lost in moody speculation, when KennyBenny came by.

"What happened to the clubhouse?"

"My mother made me tear it down. She said it was an eyesore. What're you guys up to?"

"Donny got some more lead and a mold from some kid in Lakeside," KennyBenny One said.

KennyBenny Two expanded the report. "It's a mold for like a Greek or Turkish World War One soldier with a skirt and pom-poms on his shoes."

"And a fez with a tassel," his twin added.

"Sounds more like a mold for a ballerina," Grinner offered.

"No, he's carrying a rifle with a bayonet like he's charging."

Lance and Grinner jumped off the lumber and joined them. They left for Donny's house to see this ballerina soldier.

Donny had a part-time job at the *Whitefish News*. On Thursdays he helped "kill" the paper. All the lead slugs were dumped out of the chases (the metal frames that held them) and melted into pigs for reuse on the linotype. It was Donny's job to melt the lead type down, skim off the dross, and ladle it into the pig molds. When that was done he swept up the shop and cleaned up the papers that were ruined in the press run. There were always some bits and pieces of lead in the sweepings that he picked out and pocketed.

Donny and the twins had created a small army of lead soldiers from molds of WWI doughboys and German infantry. They heated the lead in an old iron skillet with a blowtorch.

When the boys got to Donny's house they found he and Gerbel fiddling with the blowtorch.

"It just quit on us before we could get the lead melted," Donny explained.

Gerbel shook it. "It's out of gas. You got any more gas?"

"There's some gas in the garage but it's not white gas. My dad says to only use white gas in it."

"Yeah, he's right," Gerbel agreed. "Regular gas gums them up or something."

"My grampa used to get things red hot with his forge. Too bad we don't have one of those," Lance said. "Just pumping air into a coal fire with bellows can make it really hot."

Gerbel's eyes lit up. "That's it. I can make a bellows or my name ain't Gerald Bellows!" He explained how it could be done.

They forgot about the ballerina soldier and went in search of parts for the new project. In a couple of hours the forge was in operation. Gerbel used an old enamel washbasin that had a rusty hole in the bottom. He propped it up on four bricks in Donny's back yard and hooked the rubber hose of a tire pump to the hole in the bottom. They got a coal fire going in it, set the skillet on the coals and pumped away. It worked fine. The coal glowed red, the lead melted and they were able to pour a dozen ballerina soldiers before the forge started to fail.

Donny was the first to notice. "I smell rubber burning." Black smoke came pouring from under the basin. The heat from the coals above melted the rubber hose of the pump and it fell away.

In spite of the flawed technology a squad of Greek infantry in tutus became another factor in Donny's metal army.

## **Chapter 27**

### **Momentous Discovery.**

LANCE exercised his official power in the chain-of-command and had the crows-nest guy, Ronny, alert the River Rats for an assembly to address the clubhouse dilemma.

They straggled in one-by-one until they were all together on the grassy riverbank below the old schoolhouse. There was no breeze and the stink of the river pollution hung heavily in the air.

Before they got started Marlee insisted on a roll call. "As the secretary I should get to do that," she insisted.

"You can see we're all here," Mickey said. But she was determined. She produced a little notebook and assumed the demeanor of a schoolteacher in front of a class.

Illustration:  
Taking the Role

“Lance Carpenter.”

“Here.”

“Carl Dunne.”

“Here.”

“Mickey Maguire.”

“Here.”

“Gerald Bellows.”

“Oh, for God’s sake, Marlee...we’re all here! Let’s get on with it,” was Gerbel’s reply.

“Yeah,” Grinner agreed.

Lance cleared his throat and tried to sound official. “First order of business. My mother made me tear the clubhouse down so we need to find a location to build another one.”

Marlee looked miffed. She put her notebook away.

“What about lumber?” Carl asked.

“I still have that. It’s piled in our yard.”

“How about our secret cave hideout?” Grinner suggested.

Gerbel took the floor—or, in this case, some spongy riverbank grass. “We couldn’t all fit in that cave, but you guys are missing the big picture.”

They looked at him, all puzzled.

“What’ya mean?” Lance asked.

“We got a great big clubhouse right behind us.” He waved his hand at the old schoolhouse.

“I don’t know...” Carl looked doubtful. “That real estate guy might walk in on us, or find our stuff, and raise hell with our parents.”

“I’m thinking the attic,” Gerbel explained. “We could have stuff up there.”

The attic was open from the bell tower access so the location sounded feasible.

“Let’s check it out,” Lance invited and turned to lead the way.

“Wait a minute,” Gerbel checked him. “What’s the second order of business?”

“Well, there ain’t one. Let’s go.”

“Seems to me if there’s a first order there must be at least one more order.”

Lance knew Gerbel was just exercising his puckish humor, so he ignored him.

The attic had no floor. Between the ceiling’s framing there was lath and plaster. The gang filed up the ladder to reconnoiter the site. Marlee told Ronny it was a dumb idea and stayed behind.

“Careful to step on the boards,” Lance warned. “You’ll go right through...”

CRASH. His warning came too late. Donny, spooked by a spider, whirled about, lost his balance and shoved a foot through the plaster in the ceiling of the room below. He was straddling a cross beam with one leg hanging through the hole he created.

“Jeez, Donny...” Lance was about to scold him but the sight was too funny. He started laughing instead.

They all stood by, laughing, while Donny squirmed and struggled to pull his leg out. Carl finally took pity on him and gave him a hand.

They decided to make the east end of the attic their new clubhouse. They carried up boards pulled off the windows to make a floor. The attic had a lot of railroad black dust that clung to the cobwebs, giving them the appearance of scary props in a Hollywood horror movie.

They spent the afternoon sweating in the heat of the attic. To furnish their new clubhouse they brought various articles from the classrooms below and from the ground floor living quarters of Gretsky.

Gerbel managed to bring the old picture of George Washington up the ladder and propped it against a rafter. "That makes it look like kind of an official place," he explained.

When they broke up to go home the black dust, sweat, and sticky cobwebs had transformed them all, except Marlee, into a band of alien creatures.

A few days later when Lance and Mickey were in the attic clubhouse they overheard a conversation between the banker, Baswell, and the real estate agent, Radnor. The sound of their voices came through the hole in the ceiling made by Donny's foot.

With a finger to his lips, Lance warned Mickey to silence. They crept over to peer through the hole. The two men seemed to be discussing terms for selling the schoolhouse.

"...and I'll give you the usual deal on the down payment," Baswell was saying.

"What's my split on the loan gonna be?" Radnor wanted to know.

"We can do 60-40 again. Now that Gretsky is out of the way, that problem is solved."

"I don't feel right about doing Gretsky. Maguire was one thing, but why Gretsky?"

"The old bastard was blackmailing me. He seemed to know everything that goes on at the bank," Baswell growled. "I paid him off but he came back for more."

The two men walked out of the room below and the rest of their conversation was muffled.

Lance looked at Mickey and saw a silent flash of constrained emotion—Mickey's whole body tightened, his eyes flaming anger through swarming tears. Lance shook his head slowly, conveying to Mickey through wide eyes that he had to hold it back.

They waited—Mickey with clamped lips, choking down his grief, while his chest heaved in silent sobs. Lance put his arm around him and talked to him in whispers for more than an hour. Lance didn't want to leave until he was sure there was no chance of being caught.

Then the sound of someone coming up the ladder sent a chill through them.

The rafters creaked with the weight of someone walking. Then Grinner came into view.

"I thought I'd find you guys up here. Wanna go to the lake?"

"Jeez, Grinner, you scared the bejeezuz out of us," Mickey said, letting out the big breath he'd been holding.

"Did you see a couple of men down there?" Lance asked.

"No. What about them?"

“It was the banker and that real estate agent. We were afraid to leave in case they were still there.”

“And they were talking about my dad and Mr. Gretskey,” Mickey declared. “I think they murdered them both!”

“You heard them say that?” Grinner’s mouth dropped in shock.

Lance interrupted. “Not in so many words. But it sure sounded fishy. Like they had something to do with their deaths.”

“I think they are murderers,” Mickey persisted. “I knew my dad didn’t commit suicide.” He was choking on his words and trying hard to hold back the tears.

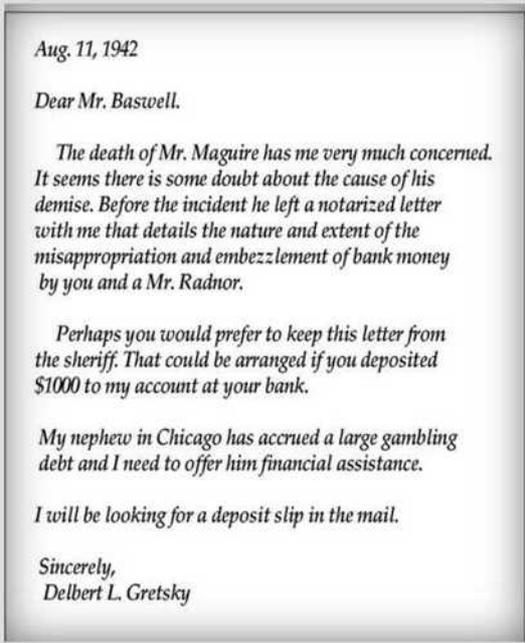
“The banker said that Mr. Gretskey was blackmailing him,” Lance said. “And they talked about ‘doing’ him.”

“Holy Crap! Holy Crap! I know what those letters are about! Holy Crap!” Only the low rafters kept Grinner from hopping up and down with excitement.

Lance and Mickey looked on, bewildered, while Grinner rummaged in their stuff and came up with a cigar box. He pulled out a couple of carbon copies and bank slips.

“Just take a look at these.” He handed them to Lance. “I found this cigar box with some of Gretskey’s old books. I thought we could use it for filing secret messages or something. I was going to show you these letters before I threw them away, but I forgot.”

Lance took the letters and read out loud:



Aug. 11, 1942

Dear Mr. Bastwell.

*The death of Mr. Maguire has me very much concerned. It seems there is some doubt about the cause of his demise. Before the incident he left a notarized letter with me that details the nature and extent of the misappropriation and embezzlement of bank money by you and a Mr. Radnor.*

*Perhaps you would prefer to keep this letter from the sheriff. That could be arranged if you deposited \$1000 to my account at your bank.*

*My nephew in Chicago has accrued a large gambling debt and I need to offer him financial assistance.*

*I will be looking for a deposit slip in the mail.*

Sincerely,  
Delbert L. Gretskey

“I knew it! I knew he did it!” Mickey sobbed. “That goddamned dirty son of a bitch murdered my dad!” He was shaking with anger.

“Yeah, sure looks that way. Or maybe had someone do it for him,” Lance suggested. “The second letter is dated a few days later asking for another payment.” He shuffled the papers. “These two slips show that the two payments were deposited to Mr. Gretskey’s account.”

“I gotta show those to my mother,” Mickey demanded.

Lance put them back in the cigar box and handed it to him. "Have her call the sheriff about them. Don't let her give them to the police chief. He may be in on it."

They left the schoolhouse and Mickey hurried home ahead of them, clutching the cigar box like it contained the Holy Grail.

"If they killed Mr. Gretsky, I wonder how they made it look like a heart attack," Lance wondered.

"They probably didn't do one of those 'watchamacallits' on the body. Maybe he was poisoned."

"You're thinking of an autopsy," Lance clarified. "Well, that may stay a mystery unless they dig him back up."

## Chapter 28

### The Smell of Romance.

AFTER Mr. Maguire's suspicious suicide the atmosphere at the bank became somber; his empty desk was a constant reminder of his fate.

For Miss Patricia Albright, the handsome authoritative facade that had attracted her to Baswell was tarnished by a patina of devious and manipulative events—small things that revealed his true character to her. In the last weeks of August she avoided his romantic advances. When his scam was discovered she cooperated fully with Sheriff Spencer to expose him. She filled in some damning details about the bank transactions to help the sheriff and the bank examiners in their investigation.

Baswell and Radnor were locked up, indicted for embezzlement and fraud. The D.A. didn't have enough evidence to charge them with murder. The judge denied them bail, reasoning that they had probably squirreled away enough stolen money to make them an escape risk. At their trial their sentence would likely include restitution which would reduce their assets to the poverty level after all claims were satisfied.

The summer marched on and fall joined the parade. The day after Labor Day they were all back in school. Charity Albright walked up to Lance during recess and smiled at him. His heart soared into the clouds, but he told himself to stay cool. He was still bothered by the beach scene and the mystery boy.

"Hi, Lance," she said sweetly, "did you have a nice summer?"

"Yeah ... lotsa fun."

"My cousin came to visit and he sure thought Whitefish Lake was a pretty place. We went swimming almost every day for the week he was here."

"Your cousin?"

"Yes. He lives back East—in Baltimore."

"He was your cousin?"

"Yes, I just told you that. He's going to enlist when he's old enough."

Lance's poker face relaxed. "Oh, good for him."

“Everybody’s talking about the way you and your friends helped the sheriff.”

“Well, it was actually Grinner, ah Tosh, that found the evidence.”

“But in such a weird place. What in the world were you doing in the attic of the old schoolhouse?”

“Nuthin’ much. Just foolin’ around.”

“Will you have to be a witness at the trial?”

Lance was distracted by a lock of shiny hair that had fallen across one of her blue eyes.

She blew it aside out of the corner of her mouth. “Will you?”

“Ah... yeah... I s’pose.”

“Oooh, won’t that be scary?”

“Nah. The district attorney came to our house. He talked to me. If I’m called up, all I have to do is sit there and answer some questions.”

“But what if they get after you for breaking into the old school? Isn’t that a crime or something?”

Lance’s bravado went south with his confidence. “Jeez ... I never thought of that.”

“It sure wouldn’t be fair if you got arrested for that,” Charity said, concerned.

He gulped and shifted self consciously, not sure how to respond.

Lance knew he was blushing. He glanced aside and kicked up a scuff of dust. He took a deep breath and swallowed the lump in his throat. “Ah... yeah. No big deal.” He wished he could be more suave and actually speak in sentences.

“You should become a detective when you grow up,” she advised. “I think detective’s are very special people. Like Nick and Nora—you know, in the Thin Man movies?”

“You do?” Lance managed to gulp out.

“Yes, especially when it’s a hubby and wife that solve the crimes together. Especially then. Don’t you think?” She waited a moment, then said, “Well, I gotta go.”

Finally he said, “Well I’ll be seeing you around.”

“I’m sure you will,” she answered, then gave him a dimpled smile. She bounced her curls off her forehead and skipped off to rejoin her girl friends.

Lance was ecstatic. He took a deep breath. She sure smelled good. The sixth grade is going to be the best year of my life, he thought.

Lance mused on what just happened. “She really likes detectives... maybe I could start a private eye business.”

He walked off muttering to himself, “I could use a professional name like Sam Solver, or Robby Nabber.” The lightbulb of inspiration flashed over his head. In his excitement he spoke aloud:

“I’ve got it! I’ll be Doc Deductor!”

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