

Hermit's Revenge

BY

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Visitors By Night

High in the branches of a ragged jack pine, a great horned owl turned its head in the darkness, alert to every sound and movement.

The silhouette of an oddly-shaped building stood in the moonlight, its tall shadow reflected on the waters of a nearby river. Crowding the buildings perimeter was a thick wall of trees that cast the moonlit clearing in a multitude of shades and shadows.

The dull throb of a truck engine broke the stillness, and the old owl withdrew silently into the branches of the jack pine. Headlights emerged from the forest, bobbed eerily across the clearing, then stopped beside the deserted building.

Two men left the cab of a beat-up half ton truck. While one began working the large padlock on the buildings only door, his partner walked to the rear of their vehicle, undid the tailgate, and climbed aboard.

Within twenty minutes the contents of several large barrels had been transferred into the rickety frame shack. The men relocked the door, climbed into their truck and disappeared back into the forest.

As the sounds of the vehicle slowly faded into the darkness, the owl edged out from under the branches of the jack pine, blinked its great, bright eyes and returned to the survey of its lonely realm.

Chapter 1

The Storm.

Calvin McBride struggled free of the blankets and swung his feet over the edge of the top bunk. He peered sleepily down at his cousin, Eric, who was slowly rousing himself. The luminous hands of a clock sitting on a nearby dresser registered twelve o'clock. Midnight!

Come on, guys, Eric's mother repeated from the doorway of their bedroom. The storms knocked out our power and I need your help. She placed the hissing kerosene lantern on a desk by the bunk bed and retreated to the hallway. Ill meet you downstairs.

Calvin groaned. Waking up in the middle of the night, was tough after putting in a full days work. He jumped from the top bunk, narrowly missing his cousins foot.

Hey! Eric protested loudly. Watch it. We didnt bring you all the way to the wilds of northern Ontario just so I could be crippled by a rampaging galoot.

Calvin grinned as he pulled a thick sweatshirt over his blond hair and the T-shirt he'd worn to bed. Yes, he said. Its moments like this that make me grateful for leaving my cozy home in the suburbs to come up here and help you and your mom for the summer.

Outside the small bedroom window he could hear the summer storm lashing furiously against the pane. It looks like the power to all the cabins has been knocked out, he said, peering out the window into the blackness. No lights anywhere. He caught a glimpse of his reflection in the glass and ran a hand through his blond hair.

Why do people need electricity at this time of night anyway? Eric asked as he pulled on his jeans, They should all be in bed asleep.

Calvin smiled at his dark-haired cousin. Despite Eric's quiet, serious manner, there was something about him that always made Calvin smile. Hurriedly he finished dressing, picked the kerosene lantern off the desk and led the way down the stairs of the lodge. His haggard-looking aunt was waiting for them by the front door, a carpenter's belt fastened over her raincoat. Wed better get going, she said. One of the bear hunters staying in Cabin Six came by a few minutes ago complaining that their roof was leaking. The storm blew a tree down and it tore off some shingles. She pushed open the front door pointed to a bulky plastic bundle on the porch. Well drape this large tarp over the roof until morning, she said. Shouldnt take us long. She waited

while Calvin and Eric dragged heavy raincoats over their heads. Through the open door, flashes of lightning lit up the wild night sky.

Calvin shuddered. Well be soaked to the skin in no time. He and Eric picked up the tarp, tucked their heads into their chests and followed Aunt Helga out into the storm, the beam of her flashlight pointing the way.

The rain quickly drenched Calvin - running down his collar and into the various crevices of his clothing. By the time they reached the bear hunters cabin, he was soaked.

Aunt Helga drew them under the spreading branches of an evergreen, then turned the flashlights beam on to the cabin before them. An old wooden ladder was propped against the side wall. I came by a few minutes ago to check things out, she explained, moving the light upward to the roof. Theres the culprit! In the glow of the flashlight the remnants of a large poplar branch could be seen scattered across the roof.

Those things are always breaking off in the wind, Eric complained. Usually at the worst times.

Looks like the branch tore off quite a few shingles near the peak, Calvin said.

Aunt Helga looked up into the black night sky and took a deep breath.

How many hunters are staying in this cabin, anyway? Calvin asked.

Three, his aunt said. As far as I can tell, anyway. Its like having three phantoms staying with us, though. We hardly ever see them. She drew another breath. I guess wed better let our guests know what were up to.

She walked up to the front door, rapped loudly, and stepped back.

Almost immediately the door opened a crack and a dark face appeared before them.

Were going to drape a tarp over your roof, Helga explained. That should keep the rain out for now. Well fix it properly tomorrow.

Calvin expected the man to make some kind of response, but instead he continued to stare out into the rain, his dark eyes burning into Helga McBride. Then ever-so-slowly the mans head pivoted toward the two boys, and for several long seconds his malevolent gaze fell directly on Calvin and Eric. Finally, without a word, he nodded sharply and disappeared back inside the cabin.

Eric's mother rejoined them at the bottom of the steps. Man of few words, I guess, she said, pulling a small flashlight from her jacket pocket and handing it to her nephew. Calvin, Id

like you to check the other cabins and see if everything's alright. Eric and I can handle this job. If anyone's up fretting about the storm, let them know that their electricity should be back on soon. If they're really scared - take them over to the lodge. They can wait by the fire.

Turning to go, Calvin glanced up at the small window by the front door of the bear hunters cabin. As he did, the same dark eyes quickly disappeared from sight. A shiver passed through him - a shiver he knew wasn't caused by the cold night rain seeping through his clothing.

The path that wove among the cabins was cast in darkness, and even with the flashlight Calvin had difficulty negotiating his way. Four cottages were occupied, but only one showed signs of life - a faint light shining from a kitchen window.

Calvin paused by the front door, straining his ears for any sound from within. Finally he mounted the steps and rapped lightly. He could barely hear the timid voice that answered his knock.

Yes. Who is it?

Mrs. Martin? It's Calvin McBride from the lodge. I've just come by to make sure everything is alright and to let you know that the hydro will be back on shortly. Do you want a lantern or some more candles in the meantime?

There was another pause, and Calvin could hear the faint sound of voices from within. He thought it best to continue. Mrs. Martin. You and your niece are welcome to come over to the lodge and wait by the fire until the electricity comes back on.

After another long moment, the door opened a crack. A tiny figure stood outlined in the dim light, a candle clutched tightly in one hand. With her other hand the old woman gripped a blanket covering her frail shoulders. I think we'll take you up on that, she said, a slight English accent marking her speech. She snuffed the candle, set it back inside the door, then stepped gingerly out into the rain. A young girl of about Calvin's age moved into the beam of the flashlight and helped Mrs. Martin down the steps.

He'd met the girl before - Sarah Martin. She was slim and dark-eyed, her long, auburn hair fell halfway down her back. A plastic raincoat was draped over her head and shoulders.

Calvin put a reassuring hand on Mrs. Martin's arm. We're very sorry for the inconvenience, he apologized as he led his two guests up to the lodge. We'll get you dried out in no time.

A kerosene lantern burned on the table by the fireplace in the main room of the lodge. In

the hearth, a fire glowed warmly.

Mrs. Martin stepped up to the fire. Thats better, she said, removing the wet blanket from around her shoulders.

Sarah slipped up beside her elderly aunt, and put a protective arm around her. Calvin was mildly surprised at how attractive Sarah was, even with the rain soaking her hair, and streaking her face.

That was rather frightening, the aunt continued. I dont remember hearing the air-raid sirens, though. Did they come on tonight?

Calvin looked at the old woman. Air-raid sirens? He asked.

Sarah gave her head a quick apologetic shake. Its okay, Aunt Martha. There are no air-raid sirens anymore, remember?

A puzzled frown creased the old womans face.

Calvin stepped back from the fire. Id better see how my aunt and Eric are doing.

Hed no sooner spoken then the front door banged open and his aunt and cousin stomped into the lodge.

Calvin crossed the room to join them. Youre finished already? He asked.

Oh yah, Eric said. My moms an old pro at emergency roof repairs.

Aunt Helga looked worriedly at her guests as she hung up her raincoat. I hope Calvin has made you comfortable. She kicked off her wet boots and stepped into a pair of worn slippers.

Hes been the perfect gentleman. Mrs. Martin said.

Im really sorry for the inconvenience, Calvins aunt said. We have a vacant room upstairs. How would you like to stay there for the night?

Thats very kind, Mrs. Martin said. But I think well be alright once the power comes back on. It shouldnt be long, should it?

I dont think so, Aunt Helga said. The power company is usually very quick in times of emergencies. A tree probably fell on a line somewhere.

She turned to Calvin and Eric, drawing them away from the fire and the Martins before she spoke. You boysll have to get over to Cabin Six in the morning and fix that roof.

Ill bet those bear hunters will be long gone by the time we get there, Calvin said. This morning I heard their motor boat leave at the crack of dawn.

I know, Aunt Helga said. I watched them from my bedroom window. She lowered her

voice slightly. I noticed something peculiar about that though, come to think of it - I had almost forgotten.

Calvin and Eric edged closer. What was that? Eric asked.

Theyre supposed to be bear hunters, right? Aunt Helga asked.

The boys nodded.

Well yesterday morning when they left on their great bear hunting expedition, they were completely unarmed. There wasnt a gun to be seen anywhere!

Bear Trap

The heavy downpour had long since soaked the old man to the skin, saturating his clothing and thick beard. It was past midnight and the stretch of river he navigated in the darkness was empty. Beaching his canoe, he motioned for the big dog in the back to stay, then stepped onto the shore. Cautiously he made his way through the thick brush edging the shoreline and entered a small clearing.

He moved across the rain-soaked ground to a thick stand of willows growing in a cluster across from him. High above him, almost obscured by the downpour, rose a platform.

The old man shook his head in disgust. Looks like them hunters came back, he said, wiping the rain from his face. As if the poor black bear in this area dont have enough trouble trying to survive.

It was then he noticed a large piece of meat hung by a rope from one of the willows, dangling enticingly about four feet from the ground. He walked up to the bait and sniffed it. Cant smell no poison.

He sighed deeply. Well, here we go again. With a heave on the rope he brought the side of meat crashing to the ground. He then carefully carried it over to the river and tossed it into the current.

Come here Shep, he called.

The large dog leaped from the canoe and padded over to the old man. Carefully the master led his dog under the sweeping branches of the willow trees - an area that was still mostly dry from the rainfall. He watched as the dog wandered under the trees for a moment, sniffing and marking its territory. The old man examined the dog tracks in the sandy soil.

That should cause these city slickers some excitement, he said, retreating to the canoe with his dog. Pretty pathetic way to catch a bear; but even so, there just aint enough black bear in these parts to be killed. No matter how ignorant the hunters.

The old man and his dog settled themselves into the canoe, then eased down the darkened river toward home.

Chapter 2

Breakfast Plans.

When Calvin and Eric arrived down for breakfast the following morning, a number of guests from the resort were already seated around the long oak table. Eric's mom was bustling between the dining area and the kitchen, heaping the breakfast table with platter after platter of steaming food. As the boys entered the kitchen, she motioned to Eric. It's your turn to help out this morning, she said. Eric groaned as he followed his mom into the kitchen.

A large, red-faced man with a receding hairline waved Calvin over to the table. Look what the wind blew in. His booming voice filled the dining area.

Morning, Mr. Gray, Calvin said, dropping into a seat beside the big man. Sorry we're late for breakfast, but we had a late night. A mild surge of panic raced through him as he noticed Sarah Martin seated at the far end of the table. Quickly he looked across at the woman seated opposite him. That was quite a thunderstorm we had last night, he said.

The woman on the other side of the table nodded pleasantly. She was on the stout side and rather dishevelled-looking, with her green shirt untucked and her tan trousers badly wrinkled. It's been awhile since I've heard thunder that loud. She extended her hand. I'm Donna Partridge.

Calvin shook the young woman's hand. That's a good name for a game warden.

Donna Partridge smiled warmly. This is a lovely resort, she said. Even if I *am* here on business.

What business are you on right now, Miss Partridge? asked the old woman who was Sarah's aunt.

You might have read in the newspapers a few months ago that the government put a temporary ban on all exploration in this area. No mining or lumbering - not that it matters to too many people. Most folks figure there's no gold around here anyway. The assurance in Donna Partridge's voice turned everyone's attention her way. Now the politicians are considering making your region into a provincial park. The final decision is supposed to be made next week, she said. I've been in the area for the past month exploring that possibility.

A Provincial Park! How exciting! Mrs. Martin's wrinkled face lit up.

What would that mean? Calvin asked.

Well, Im sure it would be a real bonus for tourist operators like yourselves, said Miss. Partridge. On the other hand, a lot of pressure is being put on the government to reopen the area for development. Some mining companies insist that this is still a viable area for finding gold and developing a mine.

I think a parks a wonderful idea, Aunt Helga said.

Speaking of business, Mr. Gray interrupted, turning to their hostess. That was a most generous offer I made to you yesterday. Have you given it any more thought?

Aunt Helga refilled the milk pitcher before answering. Ill be discussing it with my husband when I visit him at the hospital tonight, she said.

Your husband is in the hospital? Old Mrs. Martin asked.

Aunt Helga nodded. He fractured his leg in a fall earlier this summer. Unfortunately, complications set in. We hope hell be able to come home in a week or so.

Must be tough not having your husband around - especially on a place with so much to do, Donna Partridge said.

Well, getting back to my offer, Mr. Gray interrupted again. This resort does need a lot of work, and itll never fetch more than what Ive proposed, especially considering the additional investment I plan on making to bring this place up to snuff. He turned to his breakfast partners. My dream is to turn this little establishment into a five star resort and casino, he said. Lake Kenogami is the perfect location - all thats lacking is a generous infusion of capital.

Calvins mouth dropped in surprise. He glanced quickly at his cousin who was standing by the kitchen door, a look of shock on his face. Surely Aunt Helga wasnt thinking about selling the resort? If they sold the resort, where would the McBrides move to . . . ? There was no way Eric would want to leave Kenogami and move back to the city! Hed hated living there.

What if they do make this area into a provincial park? Eric stammered. Will they still allow you to build a casino?

All the better if they do make it into a park, Jack Gray said, slapping his hand on the table. Ontario doesnt have enough provincial parks as it is, so the tourists will flock here like honey bees to a daffodil. He paused and stared thoughtfully for a moment at Helga McBride. You know, I think I just might drop in at the hospital today myself and talk some sense into that husband of yours.

Calvins aunt flushed angrily. She turned on her heels and disappeared into the kitchen.

So, Miss Partridge, what exactly does a conservation officer do? Sarah Martins sudden question caught Calvin by surprise. He looked up at her as she continued. It sounds like an exciting job.

Donna Partridge smiled broadly. Oh - call me Donna. She paused as if searching for the right words. Well, my first business is to investigate a report of a wolf attack.

Mr. Gray gave a grunt and looked up at the speaker. A wolf attack! he echoed, his voice rising. I had no idea there were timber wolves in this part of the north.

Eric appeared at the table with a fresh platter of toast. It must have been those bear hunters in Cabin Six that made the report, he said with a groan. A couple of days ago they mentioned that one of the bear baits theyd left out had been destroyed. I doubt if those hunters would know a wolf from a porcupine.

Mr. Gray laughed nervously. I dont think we need to worry, do we? he said. Timber wolves are supposed to be afraid of people.

They usually keep their distance, Donna Partridge agreed. On the other hand they might prove to be a great attraction for casino-goers. She smiled teasingly at Jack Gray. Anyway, the bear hunters have given me directions on how to get to the spot - so I should be able to determine whether or not it was wolves. I plan on heading over there this morning to take a look.

Aunt Helga reappeared. Bacon and eggs, anyone?

Her words were almost drowned out by a sudden commotion at the front door. Everyone turned as the door banged open, and a young man carrying a canvas packsack entered. He paused to drop his bundle, then flashed a broad grin at Aunt Helga. Dont tell me Ive missed breakfast again!

You know its never too late to eat here, Willis, Aunt Helga said with a laugh. Weve barely started. She steered him over to a spot by Mrs. Martin.

Has everyone met Willis? She asked.

Sarah Martins aunt looked up at the dark-haired, dark-skinned boy and smiled politely. I dont believe Ive had the pleasure, she said.

Well, this is Willis Hamilton, Aunt Helga continued. Willis lives across the lake. Hes a good friend of Eric and Calvin and has been a big help since my husbands accident. We seem to be putting him to work all the time lately.

Willis nodded to those at the table.

Miss. Partridge and I met Willis yesterday, Jack Gray said, his red face broken by an enormous smile. First time I met an honest-to-goodness Ojibwa, he added. Didn't know there were any native people in these parts.

Calvin squirmed as Jack Gray continued.

In fact, Donna and I transacted a small business arrangement with Willis. He paused, relishing the attention. We've hired Willis to take us down the Blanche River this morning on his barge.

Eric's eyes widened. His *barge*?

Willis laughed, slapping Eric on the back. A sightseeing tour, my curious white friend.

Sounds like fun, Eric said weakly.

Where did you get a barge? Calvin asked.

Willis stacked his plate with a mound of blueberry pancakes. Remember my Aunt Jesse, Cal? he asked. You must have met her last week at my grandfathers funeral. She lives on an island down at the north end of the lake?

An image of a stocky, colourfully dressed older woman flashed through Calvin's mind. Jesse let you use her barge? He asked in surprise.

Oh, sure. She thinks I'm the cat's meow. And what's even better - there's room enough for everyone on that contraption.

We thought we'd make it a bit of an outing, Jack Gray cut in.

What a hoot! Eric said. Can anyone go?

I've only signed up Mr. Gray and Donna - so far, Willis said.

If everyone comes, we can have a big picnic, Jack Gray suggested.

Sarah's aunt clapped her hands together, her eyes shining brightly. What a lovely idea.

So, you're going down the Blanche? Aunt Helga asked, frowning slightly.

Willis was taking Mr. Gray on a tour of the river, Donna Partridge answered. So I asked him if he could stop for a few minutes at the spot where the complaint was made about the wolves. It's on the way.

A picnic! old Mrs. Martin said. I'm sure Sarah would love to go, it's such a beautiful day.

Well then it's settled, Mr. Gray boomed. We'll make a morning out of it. Now you boys, he pointed to Eric and Calvin. You'll have to come too. We can't have you working while

everyone else is out having fun. He looked over at Aunt Helga. And you, Mrs. McBride. Its high time you took a break and spent a couple of hours relaxing and enjoying yourself. What do you say?

Oh, I couldnt. Not today, anyway. How long will you be? she asked. I need the shingles on Cabin Six replaced before dark.

We should be back just after lunch, Willis said. Theyd still have lots of time to finish the roof.

Helga shrugged. As long as the job gets done, she said reluctantly. Im afraid it may rain again tonight. And . . . she added looking at her son. These breakfast dishes need doing before anyone goes out on the river.

Calvin pushed back from the table, grinning. Might as well bring our fishing rods. He glanced over at Sarah and caught her eye for a fleeting second. Had he noticed the beginnings of a smile, or was it just his imagination?

Well fellas, Willis said. Youd better get in there and wash those dishes. He looked up from his pancakes and winked. Then its down the Blanche River for a little fishing - on old Aunt Jesses barge.

Chapter 3

Aunt Jesses Barge

The Blanche Rivers narrow green waters wove calmly through the forest of tall evergreen and poplar trees.

Jesses cumbersome barge seemed strangely out of place as it lumbered through the peaceful wilderness. The craft was a picture of simplicity. A flat surface the width of three parked cars rested securely on two large, green aeroplane pontoons. Several metal lawn chairs were scattered under a canvas tarpaulin which was perched on four rusty poles. Squatting on the stern was a beat-up twenty horsepower motor, coughing and sputtering the barge down the winding river.

In addition to Calvin, Eric and Willis, five of the resorts guests had made the trip: Jack Gray, Donna Partridge, Sarah Martin and her aunt, and a newspaper reporter named Gallagher. Gallagher was a thin, curly-haired man with the unhealthy look of someone who spent too much time indoors hunched over his computer. Calvin guessed that the reporter was about thirty-five years old, and except for the curly hair, looked a lot like a skinny Clark Kent, dark-rimmed glasses and all. Periodically he would lift his camera and snap a shot of the slowly-passing landscape.

Willis stood at the wheel in the middle of the barge, a blue and white sailors cap perched jauntily on his head. A few feet to his right, Calvin and Eric leaned over the barges one rail, their fishing lines trailing behind the slow-moving craft.

Not bad, eh? Willis said.

Eric grinned. Truly one of the worlds great wonders, Will. As old and mysterious as the pyramids of Egypt.

And that sailors hat, Calvin said, watching Willis out of the corner of his eye. What rank does a sailors hat like that make you - Admiral?

Youre in no position to make light of my favourite aunts most prized possession, my fine, fickle friends, Willis retorted. When you were given the opportunity to get out of a little work, you were all happy to go on a free fishing trip. Just because the old girl hasnt been out of the boathouse in a couple of years doesnt mean she should be made light of by the likes of you two

landlubbers.

Hard to tell whether youre talking about the barge or Aunt Jesse, Eric said. His and Calvins laughter drowned out Willis indignant protests.

Gallagher got up from his lawn chair and joined Calvin and Eric by the railing. What beautiful scenery, he drew in a lungful of the warm July air. It makes me feel like were the only people for miles and miles.

Willis laughed. Well, thats not far from the truth, Mr. Gallagher. It doesnt get much more remote than this.

Thats the beauty of it, Jack Gray chimed in enthusiastically. He struggled from his chair and made his way over to where Sarah sat with her aunt. People who have lived all their lives in the city can only dream of places like this. Why, theyd be falling all over themselves to spend their hard-earned cash up here, relaxing and soaking in the atmosphere. He turned and winked at Sarah, then walked slowly over to the railing where Calvin and Eric stood fishing. Thats why Im so interested in setting up a casino in this area. Its perfect - right smack-dab in the middle of the north country. With an infusion of investment capital and a concerted advertising campaign, Ill turn this spot into the Shangrila of the north.

I dont think my parents are interested in selling, Eric said shortly.

Oh, they will be, Jack Gray said. We all have our price.

Everyone was quiet for a moment. The low mutter of the outboard motor suddenly seemed out of place on the peaceful river. Willis swung the barge close to the east bank, manoeuvring it around another twist in the current before starting slowly down a straight stretch.

Sarah Martin turned in her chair and looked back at Calvin. Where does this river lead? She asked. I mean if we followed it long enough.

To a little town called Swastika.

Swastika! Sarahs aunt echoed loudly. What kind of name is that for a town? Our boys went to war to get rid of things like Swastikas.

Eric, who had been preoccupied with his fishing line, turned to the elderly lady. Actually its not what you might think, Mrs Martin. *Swastika* is the name of an ancient good luck symbol - and the town got its name long before anyone ever heard of Hitler. The Canadian government tried to change the towns name to *Winston* during the War, but the local people objected - and eventually the government backed down.

Willis slowed the barge, navigating it around a tree that had toppled into the river.

How much farther to the bear trap? Donna Partridge asked.

Another twenty minutes, Willis said.

At the speed we're travelling, Eric said. That's only about 200 yards.

Willis grunted as a ripple of laughter passed among the passengers.

On the south bank of the river the tall shape of a mine's headframe appeared.

What on earth is that? Jack Gray asked, A grain elevator?

The old Baldwin Mine, Eric said. Or at least what's left of it. It's been out of production for years.

What did they mine here? Gallagher asked.

Gold, Eric said. The Baldwin was never much of a mine, though. Now all that's left is the headframe.

That building has such an odd shape, old Mrs. Martin observed.

The headframe stands over the mine shaft and houses the cage or elevator which moves men and material down into the mine, Willis said, guiding the barge to within a few feet of the shore. That's why the building is so tall. The cage takes the miners underground.

Most of the passengers had now risen from their lawnchairs for a better look.

The mine building was set back from the river in a small clearing. A large pile of crushed rock was the only other feature visible from the barge.

Look at that, Donna Partridge said, pointing to an object floating along the shoreline.

The others leaned over the railing for a better view.

A dead fish, Calvin said.

Willis shifted the outboard motor into neutral so that they drifted ashore at a narrow stretch of beach in front of the mine.

It *is* a dead fish, old Mrs. Martin said, drawing a lace-trimmed handkerchief from her pocket and covering her mouth and nose.

There must be a dozen of them, Calvin said, shaking his head. What could have killed them?

Donna Partridge rummaged around in her packsack for a pair of rubber gloves. She leaned over the edge of the barge and scooped one of the small dead perch from the shallow water. I'll send this one back to the lab for analysis, she said, dropping it into a plastic bag.

Perch are quite sensitive, she explained. Sometimes even a change in water temperature is enough to kill them.

Or they could have been poisoned, Willis said ominously.

Calvin looked over at his friend. Poisoned? How could they have been poisoned way out in the middle of nowhere? Wed better get going, Willis said. He shifted the motor into gear, then manoeuvred the barge away from the shoreline and out into the current.

Gallagher joined Willis by the wheel as the large craft resumed its ponderous course. I wouldn't mind taking a closer look at the Baldwin Mine sometime, he said. Ive never been that close to an abandoned gold mine before. It might make for a good story.

Willis shrugged. Why not, he said. I can bring you back in a day or two. Give you time to look the place over.

Gallagher smiled and nodded. That would be dandy.

They had only travelled for another five minutes when Willis suddenly cut the motor and guided the barge into the far shoreline.

The river bank was cluttered with brush and fallen timber, and it was not until they had bumped into a clutch of tag alders that Calvin noticed a canoe hidden among the brush by the river bank. Whose canoe is that? he asked.

Willis face remained impassive as he allowed the barge to drift downstream for several more feet before beaching it beside the mouth of a narrow waterway.

Beaver Creek, Willis said, motioning to the stream. He stepped from the barge and anchored it to a large piece of driftwood. Come ashore, he said with the wave of his arm.

Donna Partridge stepped gingerly from the barge and reached back to help Mrs. Martin down onto the beach, then one by one the passengers climbed ashore, each eyeing Willis curiously. With a mischievous grin on his face, Willis turned and parted two large bushes, exposing a narrow pathway.

If you will kindly step this way, ladies and gentlemen, Willis said, pretending to speak into a microphone. You will soon have the opportunity of meeting one of the norths truly remarkable characters.

The others fell in behind their guide, carefully negotiating the narrow trail while keeping one eye on the stream which ran a parallel course a few feet away. Large poplar and willow trees provided a canopy of cover high above their heads.

In less than five minutes Willis drew them to a halt at the top of a slight rise.

A beaver dam, Donna Partridge exclaimed, peering through the thin veil of trees ahead of them. Calvin looked in amazement at a large beaver dam stretched out before him. Three feet high! Beyond it lay a pond whose surface was strewn with numerous dead trees and stumps. The late morning sun cast a great variety of reflections on its still surface.

A wall of grey mud seemed to line the pond near where Calvin stood, and emanating from it was a muddy, sour odour. Suddenly an old man dressed in baggy khaki pants and a soiled white T-shirt stepped from behind a cedar tree directly in front of them. Everyone instinctively took a step back as the strange-looking man glared angrily in their direction. A long ragged beard stretched halfway down his thin chest, and a shock of white hair seemed to erupt straight up from his head. Willis broke into a broad smile. Shubel, he called, then waved his small group forward. Come on everyone, and meet a real, honest-to-goodness hermit.

The old woodsman remained beside the cedar tree, his angry expression unchanged as Willis led his little party toward him.

Folks, Willis said. It gives me great pleasure to introduce you to Shubel Chase, one of the orneriest, most backward men ever to grace the far north. In fact hes so ornery he lives out here in the middle of nowhere by himself. No one else can stand him.

Appears you brung the whole reserve down with you, Will. I reckon you mustve seen my canoe back at the river and curiosity got the best of you. The man nodded at the eight people gathered around, his eyes falling on Eric. I know this young fella, he said. Youre Jim McBrides boy.

Eric grinned. Im surprised you remember me, Mr. Chase. You havent been by our place for awhile.

What are you doing here, Mr. Chase? Old Mrs. Martin asked. This certainly isnt a place where one would expect to find another human being.

Well, I was just checking out this beaver colony, Shubel Chase answered with disgust. But I reckon I might as well be in downtown New York City - what with all the tourists this spot seems to be attracting.

How many beaver would live in a pond like this? Gallagher asked, snapping a picture.

The old man turned and looked out over the pond behind them. See that house over yonder? he asked, pointing across the pond to a large mound of twigs and branches protruding

from the water. A family of four beaver live there - two adults and two one-year-olds. They're sleeping right now, though. They do most of their work at night.

Are you going to trap them? Gallagher asked.

Nope, Shubel Chase said with a grunt. Gave that up years ago. Not enough beaver left anymore for me to be going around killing them.

Calvin stared curiously at the old man.

What are you doing here then? Eric asked.

Just keeping my eye on things, Shubel answered. I guess you might say I'm concerned for this little family's welfare. Wild animals need all the friends they can get nowadays.

Mrs. Martin took a cloth handkerchief from her pocket, spread it on a fallen log beside the trail and sat down. Calvin and the others promptly followed her example, taking an opportunity to quietly study the scene before them.

You go by the old Baldwin lately, Will? Shubel finally asked.

Willis nodded.

Notice anything strange?

Dead fish, Shubel. There must have been a dozen dead fish floating in the water.

Something strange is going on at that old mine, Shubel said. Lots of tracks - vehicles and people coming and going. Looks like someone might be storing stuff there.

Why would someone be storing things *there*? Eric asked. They're not thinking of reopening the mine, are they?

Not likely, Shubel said. They never found much gold at the Baldwin. Despite what a lot of folk might say, though, this is still a great gold mining area.

Maybe the company is storing equipment at the site while they do some exploration work in the area, Calvin suggested.

They shouldn't be, Donna Partridge said. This whole area has been off limits to mineral exploration for months. And if the government decides to turn the area into a provincial park it'll be off limits to mineral exploration forever.

Jack Gray moved his big bulk with a shrug. Well, I don't suppose they're doing any real harm - way out here.

Willis looked up. Unless whoever is storing stuff in the old mine is responsible for killing those fish.

Calvin raised one eyebrow and exchanged a glance with Eric.

Donna Partridge got to her feet. I hate to rush everyone, but Ive got a lot of work to do today. That bear trap still has to be checked. She paused, looking at the old man. Which reminds me, Mr. Chase. Have you seen any signs of wolves in this area?

The faint shadow of a grin flitted across Shubel Chases face. Not that I can recall - least wise not recently. There was a family of timber wolf just west of here - maybe theyve come back.

I sure hope not! Jack Gray said, his eyes widening.

Well, Willis said, rising to his feet. Lets get a move on. Weve got to finish our little excursion and make sure that these boys get home in time to finish shingling that roof.

As they trudged back down the trail to Aunt Jesses barge, Calvins thoughts went to his own aunt alone back at the lodge and a feeling of guilt crept over him.

Chapter 4

Up on the Roof

Calvin sat on the small stool staring at the telephone receiver in his hand for almost a full minute before he finally set it back down on the cradle. Aunt Helga moved up beside him and put a hand on his shoulder. Are you alright?

Calvin looked up at her blankly before nodding his head. He rose slowly to his feet.

I spoke to your mother earlier this morning, Aunt Helga said. She explained everything to me then.

I thought they might be able to work it out, Calvin said, a note of bitterness creeping into his voice. Thats one of the reasons I agreed to come up here for the summer, to give them some time alone so they could patch things up. I didnt expect my dad to move out of the house already. He hardly gave it a try.

I know, Aunt Helga agreed. She gave her nephews arm a squeeze. Dont give up on them yet. And keep praying for them. The Lord promises to answer prayers.

Calvin picked up his aunts Bible that had been sitting on the small table by the phone. Willis grandfather said we should read through the Gospel of John this summer. Im almost halfway through, he said. Its an amazing book for learning more about Jesus.

Aunt Helga smiled. Theres no better way to spend your time than learning more about the Lord. You know the Bible tells us to cast all your cares on Him because He cares for you. And that means telling Jesus exactly how you feel about your parents splitting up.

Calvin nodded. Ill try, he said. In the meantime Id better get out there or Eric will have that roof all fixed up by himself. He set the Bible back down and gave his aunt a quick hug.

Outside, the late afternoon sun beat down mercilessly as he made his way down the trail to Cabin Six. Quickly he scaled the ladder and scampered up the slope to where his cousin sat straddling the peak.

Everything okay? Eric asked. Mom seemed kind of bent out of shape about that phone call.

Calvin nodded. My folks have split up, he said.

Eric groaned softly. I was afraid of that. He finished tacking the shingle into place, then

eyed his cousin uneasily. I think I pretty well finished things off while you were gone, he said. The only spot I'm not sure about is up here on the peak. The rest of the roof ought to be okay, but we did this section pretty much piecemeal. Hope there aren't any spots for the rain to get in.

It looks fine, Calvin said, surveying their finished work.

Eric mopped his brow with the bottom of his T-shirt. There is one way to find out, he said.

How's that?

Put it to the test.

Calvin wrinkled his brow. How do we do that? Wait for the next storm?

Come on. Eric led the way down off the roof and over to a long length of garden hose rolled up on the ground by an outside tap. Quickly he unrolled the hose, attached one end to the tap, then dragged the other end up the ladder. Turn on the water when I give the word. He scrambled up the roof to the peak, turned and pointed the nozzle down toward the shingles. Turn it on!

For several minutes Eric stood on the peak thoroughly drenching the new shingles. Finally he gave Calvin a wave. Okay. That oughta do it. Turn it off.

Eric tossed the hose to his cousin, then began edging his way down the wet shingles. Halfway to the bottom of the steep slope his feet suddenly shot out from under him. With a sharp cry, Eric slid the length of the roof, slammed into the ladder, and then came crashing to the ground at Calvin's feet.

Eric - are you okay? Calvin dropped to his knees by his cousin.

Eric was on his back. His eyes were closed and he was muttering to himself, but the ground under him looked soft and was covered with pine needles.

Are you okay? Calvin repeated.

Eric rolled slowly over, pushed himself to his knees, then struggled to his feet. He stood for a moment, gathering his breath. Then he bent over and rolled up his pantleg. His calf was scraped from knee to ankle.

Ouch, Calvin said. That looks sore.

At least it isn't bleeding much, Eric said. Mostly just a scrape. He hobbled a few steps, then leaned on Calvin's shoulder, gritting his teeth.

Looks like you guys are having fun.

Both boys jumped at the unexpected voice. They turned to find Willis Hamilton standing in the shadows of a spreading willow tree. What are you up to now? Do I always have to be watching over you like a mother hen to keep you out of trouble?

Eric made a face at his friend, then looked back down at his knee.

My nimble-footed cousin, here, fell off the roof, Will, Calvin said with a grin. We were fixing some shingles that were knocked off in last night's storm.

Willis ambled over to Eric and looked at his rolled-up pant leg. Looks like you came out second best, alright, he said. Usually happens when you take a notion to tumble off an eight foot roof.

You'd better go get that cleaned and put a bandage on it, Calvin said.

Eric glanced down at the scrape, then with a shrug started up the path to the lodge. Wait until I get back before you check out that leak, he said over his shoulder. I'll just be a minute.

Nasty scrape! Willis said, watching Eric's retreating figure. Lucky he didn't break his neck.

Eric's tough, Calvin said.

The two boys were quiet for a moment as they watched their friend disappear up the trail to the lodge.

Willis finally cleared his throat. Your aunt told me about your parents splitting up, he said. Tough break, but hopefully they'll patch things up.

Calvin nodded. Maybe.

Willis turned and looked out over the lake. Do you like it here? he asked.

Calvin was taken back by the unexpected question. Yeah, he said. It's great.

Willis grinned at him. I wish my old grandad was here, he said. He always knew the right thing to say when someone was having problems. But you knew that.

Calvin nodded. Your grandfather was pretty amazing. I wish I'd gotten to know him better.

Well, I guess you will.

Calvin looked at the other boy in surprise. Then his face lightened. Oh, I see what you mean. . . I'll get to know him better one day in heaven.

Willis nodded. Now there was someone who could roll with the punches. Being a

Christian wasn't just some philosophy or dried-up old religion to him. He really put his faith in Jesus to watch over him and turn everything out for the best.

Calvin looked back up the trail to see if his cousin was returning. Too bad Eric hasn't made that decision yet, he said.

Willis nodded. We've all got to make that decision for ourselves - and we can only do it when we're ready. Let's just pray he doesn't leave it too late.

They stood silently together for the next few minutes deep in thought until finally Eric reappeared, limping slowly down the trail toward them. Calvin's cousin was now wearing a clean T-shirt and jeans, and his hair was freshly combed. Calvin's hand went to his messed-up hair.

I cleaned out the grit and swabbed it with ointment, Eric said, walking past them to the door of the bear hunter's cabin. Come on, we'd better check to see if any water got inside. He fished in his pocket. I brought the master key. He unlocked the door, then looked over at Willis. We doused the roof with water after replacing the shingles. Now we'll find out if all our hard work paid off.

The room into which they stepped was large and gloomy. The thick log walls seemed to soak up most of the sunlight allowed by the cottages windows.

A few pieces of furniture were scattered around the room: a large cooking stove, table and chairs, and a long sofa which stretched the length of one wall. A card table was set up in front of the cook stove and several sheets of paper were scattered across its surface.

Looks like everything's dry enough, Eric said.

Yep, Calvin agreed. I guess our operation was a success.

Eric limped over to the card table. Good thing it didn't leak on any of these papers, he said. They look important. He picked up one as Calvin and Willis joined him.

Look at this! He thrust a paper at his cousin, and picked up a couple more. They're land deeds to property on Lake Kenogami.

And take a look at this, Calvin said, picking up a topographic map from the table. It's a map of the Kenogami area.

What would bear hunters be doing with property deeds? Eric asked, moving around the table and peering over his cousin's shoulder.

Calvin pointed to a red mark beside the Waboose River on the north end of the lake. What could that large X mean?

Must be where they put one of their bear baits, Eric suggested.

In the distance the faint sound of an outboard motor drifted in through the open front door.

Lets get out of here, Calvin said. That could be them.

Quickly they dropped the documents back on the table, then tumbled out the doorway into the sunshine.

I think its only Donna Partridge, Calvin said, peering through the trees to the lake. A motor boat was approaching the dock in front of the lodge.

Eric glanced back at the cabin. What could those bear hunters be doing with all those property deeds? he asked again.

Calvin was silent for a minute. Did you notice something else? The men in that cabin are supposed to be hunters, but there wasnt a thing in there that reminded me it was being used by a bunch of hunters.

But if theyre not hunters, Willis said. Who are they, and what are they doing here?

Chapter 5

The Parable

A light evening breeze drifted in from the west end of Lake Kenogami stirring the tall stand of birch trees in front of the lodge. On a stretch of beach by the dock a bonfire blazed, casting shadows on the figures gathered in its glow.

What time did you tell everyone to be here? Calvin asked his cousin.

Eric dropped an armful of long pointed sticks onto the sand, then stepped back to admire the blaze. Anytime now, he said, squinting at the luminous hands of his watch. Its past nine-thirty, although Willis did say hed be late.

Calvin eyed the packages of hotdogs and buns stacked on the table beside them. Did you bring your guitar?

Eric was about to answer when they were interrupted by a shout from the trees behind them. Hi, guys. Donna Partridge appeared from the darkness. Close behind was Gallagher, the newspaper man.

This is neat, Donna exclaimed. Reminds me of summer camp when I was a kid.

Gallagher grinned widely as he took in the scene before him.

Who else is coming? Donna asked.

Sarah Martin and her aunt, Calvin said. Jack Gray, and my aunt, of course. I dont think any of the others are interested.

Not even our bear hunter friends? Gallagher said with a laugh.

Havent seen them all day, Calvin said.

A slight noise from the shoreline drew their attention. What a beautiful bonfire! Aunt Helga was leading Jack Gray, Sarah and Martha Martin down onto the beach.

Good evening, everyone, Jack said in his loud voice. What a wonderfully primitive sight this is. He stretched his hands out to the fire with a satisfied air.

Glad you could make it, Mr. Gray, Calvin said. You too, Mrs. Martin . . . Sarah.

Sarah smiled shyly, stepping slightly into the shadows.

Well, come on everyone, Aunt Helga said, waving them all over to the benches around the fire. Have a seat. Eric, lets break out that guitar, and well make them earn their dinner

tonight.

The guests seated themselves while Eric nervously strapped on his guitar. Ill try to stick to songs that everyone knows.

Yah, Jack Gray bellowed. None of your rock and roll stuff.

Why dont we start with a few old folk songs, Aunt Helga suggested. *Like Michael Row the Boat Ashore?* Everybody probably knows that.

Good choice, Mrs. Martin said. Thats one I know.

A moment later they had a real singsong going and even Jack Grays singing voice didnt sound too bad.

Calvin had always been embarrassed by his own singing, especially since his voice had changed octaves a couple of years ago. So he kept his volume to a minimum, and listened for Sarah.

The songs went from Michael and his boat, to *Ill Fly Away*, to *This Land is Your Land*. Finally after twenty tunes and a third rendition of *Shell be Comin Around the Mountain*, the singers had had enough and voted to start roasting some wieners.

Oh, this is so much fun, Mrs. Martin said with a giggle. Reminds me of going to the shore over ome when I was a girl.

I wonder what happened to Willis, Calvin asked as the wieners were doled out and fastened to the end of the sharp sticks that Eric had prepared.

Well, knowing Willis, Aunt Helga said. Hell probably show up just as were heading off to bed.

Wieners always taste better roasted over a fire on the beach, Calvin said. Burned or not.

Weve got marshmallows for dessert, Aunt Helga reminded everyone.

Calvin crouched beside Donna Partridge and held his stick out over the fire. Did you find any sign of wolves back at the bear hunters camp?

She looked at him, then back at the fire. There were some tracks, alright, she said. But I couldnt tell if they were made by a wolf or a dog. That rain we had last night obliterated most everything else. I was able to make out some people tracks, though.

You think it might have been *people* who destroyed the bear bait? Calvin asked.

Donna paused, scanning the faces gathered around the bonfire. Perhaps, she finally said. Maybe the same ones that are killing the fish at the Baldwin. The bear bait was set not too far

from the mine.

Mrs. Martin sucked in her breath noisily , then gave a few soft *tch, tchs*. Sarah moved up beside her aunt and placed a blanket around her shoulders. The pale light from the moon and the glow from the bonfire lit up Sarahs dark hair and fair complexion.

What a bunch of gloomy Gusses, Jack Gray scoffed. Come on. This isnt the city where there are killers and con men at every corner. This is the Garden of Eden, for crying out loud.

Remember, Helga reminded him. There was a serpent in the Garden of Eden, too.

Just then the low sound of an outboard motor muttered from the darkness. A faint light could be seen rapidly approaching the shoreline.

You were right, Mom, Eric said. Everyones ready to go home, and Willis shows up.

In the glow from the bonfire they could see Willis draw his boat up onto the beach, loop a rope around the dock, and stroll casually toward them.

Howdy folks, he said with his ever-present grin. Started the party without me, I see.

Come and join us, Willis, Helga said. Better late than never.

Eric handed his friend a stick and a wiener.

Im starved, Willis said. I went out with Aunt Jesse to check on some problems shes been having with her trapping ground - so I missed supper. He held the wiener out over the dying flames.

Donna Partridge immediately perked up. Anything serious?

Willis shook his head. I dont think so. She had a few traps sprung last week. Someone or something seems to be taking offense at Jesses predatory ways.

Jack Gray edged up to the fire. Do you know any good Ojibwa legends? He asked.

Willis gave the older man a sly glance. One or two, he admitted.

Well, this would be the perfect place for one of those tales - a real scary one.

Gallagher perked up. Yes, that would be splendid, he said. Might make for a good newspaper article.

Willis stared down into the fire for a moment or two. Finally he looked up at the circle of people surrounding him. I remember a tale that my grandfather told me which Mrs. Martin might appreciate, he said. It was one that Ill never forget.

Calvin found himself crowding a little closer to the campfire.

Many years ago during the time of the great wars with the Iroquois, there was an Ojibwa

village on the shores of the Grassy River west of here. It was a small village, and the people lived in constant fear of an attack by the dreaded Iroquois warriors.

One warm spring morning many of the men left the village for the day to hunt moose. While they were gone a roving band of Iroquois attacked the village. During the raid one of the Iroquois entered the teepee of an old woman who was caring for her tiny grandson, the chiefs only child. The warrior pushed the woman aside, then went to where she had hidden the baby, for he heard its cry. He pulled the infant from its hiding place and was about to dash the child against the floor when another warrior entered the teepee. The second man seized the child from his comrade, handed it to the old woman, then thrust the other man from the birch bark dwelling.

It was at that moment that the men of the village returned, routing the surprised Iroquois.

When the battle was over the old woman went among the dead and injured looking for the Iroquois warrior who had saved her grandson. Finally she found him, badly injured and just barely alive.

The woman carefully moved the man to her teepee and began to nurse him back to health. This, however, caused much anger among her neighbours and former friends.

This man saved the life of the chiefs son, she exclaimed angrily, but the people were determined that this one remaining warrior should meet the same fate as his comrades. The old woman stubbornly held her ground, refusing to let anyone into the teepee where the wounded Iroquois lay.

In the days to follow, while the warrior continued to recover from his wounds, hard times fell upon the village by the Grassy River. No moose were killed that spring, and the fishing was very poor. Even the small animals like the rabbit and the partridge seemed to have fled the area. Once again the people began to murmur about the Iroquois warrior.

One evening the men of the village met around the campfire, furious at their chiefs mother-in-law and determined to remove the ill fortune which hung like a black cloud over their village. Surely our children go hungry because of this dog, the Iroquois, who has brought trouble to our people, they said. But the old woman would not relent.

The next evening one of the elders of the village presented a plan to the others. He reminded them that every morning at sunrise the old woman left her teepee to go down to the river for water. We will go into the womans teepee when she leaves for the river and we will kill the Iroquois, he told the others.

The next morning when the old woman left for the river, several of the men entered her teepee. To their dismay, they discovered that their enemy was armed with a rifle and waiting for them. The men quickly backed out of the teepee and decided instead to burn the Iroquois out of his shelter.

Swiftly they piled branches and dried grass around the birch bark dwelling and set it on fire. The flames leaped up the walls of the teepee and soon engulfed the flimsy structure, smoke billowing high into the air.

But the old woman had seen the smoke from the river and rushed back to her teepee. When she returned the men grabbed her to prevent her from entering the flames, but she fought like a wildcat, biting and scratching and hitting them with a wooden stick. Finally they were forced to release her and back away.

Without a thought for her own safety she raced into the burning teepee, and almost at once emerged dragging the Iroquois warrior to safety. The men of the village did not know how to respond to the old woman's courage. But before they could even begin to collect their thoughts, the courageous old woman collapsed onto the ground before them and died. The tremendous exertions of the morning had caused her heart to give out and she died there in the sands by the ruins of her teepee.

The people of the village gazed in silence at the result of their morning's work. The old woman was dead, perishing in her efforts to save their enemy. The Iroquois lay where the old woman had dragged him, still weak from his terrible wounds, tightly gripping his flintlock rifle, ready to protect himself one last time against his sworn, mortal enemies.

Finally the Ojibwa chief stepped forward. He knelt beside the warrior and the body of the old woman, his mother-in-law. Carefully he removed the rifle from his enemy's hands. His people nodded in understanding, expecting that the chief would quickly end the life of the Iroquois, but instead he stooped down and lifted the injured man into his arms. With great tenderness he carried the warrior to his own teepee, and in the weeks that followed, he nursed the man back to health.

The courage of the old woman was spoken of by my people throughout the generations from that time to this, Willis said. And the small baby that the Iroquois warrior had saved from certain death grew to be our most celebrated chief - my great-great-great grandfather. Many weeks later the Iroquois warrior recovered and was allowed to return to his village in the south.

And what is remarkable is that from that time forward, the terrible wars between the Iroquois people and the Ojibwa ceased forever. All because of the courage and determination of one old woman.

The others were quiet for a moment as they considered Willis remarkable story.

You know, Martha Martin finally said. It does remind me of a more familiar story. Especially the part of how the old woman was willing to die for her enemy.

Willis smiled over at Mrs. Martin. I wondered if you'd see the parallel, he said. My grandfather told me that the story reminded him of what the Lord Jesus Christ did for us. He said that we are like the Iroquois warrior, strangers and enemies, and yet Jesus willingly died for us.

Mrs. Martin nodded her head. And the end result was the same for us as it was for the Iroquois and the Ojibwa, she said.

The others looked up at her.

Peace, she finally said. In our case, peace with God.

Calvin looked over at his cousin. Eric was gazing intently at the old woman, a troubled expression creasing his face.

The Baldwin By Night

The great horned owl peered down from its perch high atop the jack pine, its tiny kingdom once again the scene of late night activity. Lights bobbed eerily between the building and a truck which was parked nearby.

The bird turned its head to the river. A canoe slipped silently onto the shoreline and a lone canoeist stepped from the craft. It was an old man with a great white head of hair and a long beard. He ducked behind a large juniper bush at the edge of the clearing then eased his way toward the lights.

Staying close behind the bush, the old man stared into the blackness. Then he nodded. Behind the building was the bulky black shadow of a truck. But the Baldwin Mine had been closed and abandoned for decades!

He started at the sound of a voice. Lets get some light here.

Suddenly the darkness was split by the headlights of the truck. The brilliant beam shone into the face of the headframe, and in its glow two men began unloading large steel barrels, carrying them into the mine building.

The old man watched them with intense interest. What could these people be doing at the Baldwin Mine in the middle of the night? Surely some mining company wasnt thinking of reopening the facility. He shook his head. And what about all those barrels? Their contents might explain why so many fish were dying in the waters only a few feet from where he stood.

High above Shubels head the great horned owl stirred in the shelter of the pine, stepped from its perch, and glided silently into the blackness of the night.

Chapter 6

Shubel Pays a Visit.

With a deafening roar the Cessna 180 bushplane turned its nose and taxied the final hundred yards across the lake to the McBrides dock. Eric and Calvin stood on the end of the pier with Donna Partridge, watching as the pilot cut the engine and expertly guided the plane so that it drifted gently into the dock. Only a faint breeze from the west disturbed the early morning waters of Lake Kenogami.

You're using the plane to do a wolf check? Eric asked Donna Partridge as they secured the plane to the end of the dock.

The conservation officer nodded. I doubt if we'll have much luck, though. Spotting wild animals from a plane is much easier to do during the winter when the leaves are off the trees.

I still don't think any wolves have been stealing bear bait in the area, Calvin said.

Those tracks at the bear bait were made by something, Donna said.

Just then a large, balding man with a green leather jacket swung open the door of the Cessna and stepped down onto the dock.

Morning, Miss. Partridge, he said.

To Calvin, the pilot's voice was surprisingly high for such a big man.

Good day, Grant, Donna replied. Good to see you again. She shook the pilot's hand. Grant, I'd like you to meet a couple of friends of mine, Eric and Calvin McBride. Eric's family owns this resort.

The pilot shook the boys' hands, then turned back to Donna. Any chance I can get a coffee before we head out? He asked. I was burning the midnight oil getting this old tub ready for the trip.

Sure, Eric said. My mom just put on a fresh pot.

Why don't we have our coffee out here? Donna said, pointing to a picnic table under a spreading willow tree. It's too nice to go inside.

Great idea, Eric agreed. Have a seat. I'll go in and get the coffee.

When Eric returned, Calvin and the others were seated comfortably around the rustic table.

So, the pilot said, wrapping both hands around his steaming mug. Were looking for wolves, are we?

Donna nodded, her eyes brightening. There's been a report of wolves in the area. I thought it would be a good idea to take a look from up there.

Sure, the pilot agreed. Never tried to spot wolves from the air before, although we do it every year for moose. Too much vegetation during the summer to see much, though, and wolves usually do their running at night.

I want to scout this area anyway, Donna said. I need to get a better lay of the land around Kenogami.

Fine, Grant said agreeably. You'll be the one with her eye on her ground. I'll be occupied keeping that old crate up in the air.

The pilot laughed when he noticed the frown that creased Donna's face. Oh, don't worry, he said. That plane's as reliable as the ten o'clock news.

There was a break in the conversation for a moment as they gazed out over the still surface of Lake Kenogami. A lone canoe had appeared and was making a line for the McBrides dock.

That looks like Shubel Chase, Calvin said. The hermit we met yesterday.

Eric nodded. It sure is, he said. I wonder what he's up to.

Eric and Calvin rose from the picnic table as the old man pulled his canoe up on the beach in front of the lodge.

Morning, Mr. Chase, Calvin said.

Their guest dropped wearily into a lawn chair. Morning, folks.

Want a coffee? Eric asked.

No thanks, boy.

My mom just went into Kirkland Lake to visit my dad in the hospital, Eric said.

Shubel grunted. I did hear that your dad was laid up with a busted leg. He sat silently for a minute while the others stared at him. Finally he turned to Grant, You the pilot of that plane?

Grant nodded. I'm here to take Miss Partridge up this morning to look for wolves, he explained.

Wolves, eh? the old man said. Instead of looking for wolves you government people should be checking things over at the Baldwin. He looked from the pilot to Donna. Something

strange is going on there at night.

Calvin sat a little straighter as Shubel Chases words sank in.

Something strange? Donna finally asked. What exactly?

I went by there late last night, he continued. It was really late - after midnight. A truck was parked by the headframe and a couple of men were unloading barrels. I checked things out after they left, but theyd locked the place up tight.

The pilot shrugged. So what? he said in his peculiarly high voice. Probably just storing some supplies there.

Well, maybe so, Shubel said. But why do they do their work in the middle of the night? And another thing, the fish around the mine are dying. Maybe theres a connection with whats being stored in the old building, and the fish dying the way they are.

What could be in those barrels that would do that? Calvin asked.

Chemicals or toxins of some kind, Donna offered. Gold mines tend to use a lot of poisonous materials in their refining process.

But why would they be storing things in a mine thats been abandoned for over fifty years? asked Eric.

The old man pushed back from the table, his small dark eyes blazing. Thats what we gotta find out, he said, banging the picnic table with his fist. If enough poison is leaking into the river to kill our fish, what else is it doing? People like me depend on the Blanche for their drinking water. Weve gotta find out whats going on and put a stop to it!

Donna got to her feet. I sent one of those dead fish to our lab to see if they can determine what killed it, she said. I should have the results in the next day or two. Ill let you know as soon as I find out. In the meantime, Ill do some digging around to see if I can discover who could be storing stuff at the mine. Maybe new owners have taken over the property.

Shubel Chase shook his head in exasperation, then turned to Eric. When you see your dad, tell him I was asking about him.

I sure will, Mr. Chase. He glanced down at his watch. Well, wed better get to work, he said. My mother left us quite a list of things to finish before she gets home.

Shubel Chase rose wordlessly to his feet and started down the path to the lake. Suddenly he turned.

If you happen to see your renegade Indian friend, Willis - tell him Im gonna start

charging him next time he brings tourists by for a visit.

You dont have to worry about that, Mr. Chase, Calvin said with a laugh. Aunt Jesses barge sank last night. Willis is over there right now trying to refloat it.

The old man grinned, then turned and slowly made his way back down the path to his canoe.

Eric shook his head. Boy, old Shubel must really be upset to come down here and let us know about the goings on at the Baldwin. He usually likes to keep to himself.

The pilot got to his feet. Well, wed better get going, Miss. Partridge. Lets see if we can find us some wolves.

The Witness

A light breeze from the west blew in from the woods and through the branches of the tall jack pine. The great horned owl edged its way farther along a branch and leaned forward to stare at the scene below. Two men were once again transporting steel barrels from a truck into the mine building. The owl turned its head toward the river, attracted by another, fainter sound. In the pale starlight it watched as the intruder beached his canoe and edged his way through the screen of bushes lining the riverfront.

The latest interloper paused for a moment behind a hedge of alder trees, silently observing the men who were working at the mine building.

Suddenly a figure loomed in the darkness directly behind the silent observer. A large blunt instrument rose, then fell with a sickening thud on the head of the watcher. The man staggered several steps forward under the force of the blow and collapsed to his knees shaking his head. The attacker sprang forward and raised the club high in the air. In the instant before the weapon came crashing down a second time, its victim spun round and lunged at the attacker, clawing at his assailant in the darkness. The club thudded down once again, sending the man sprawling to the earth.

The assailant looked down at the still form of his victim, then turned and threw the large stick far out into the river. As he did so another man joined him, kneeling over the prone body. I think you killed him.

High above them, in the pine, the great horned owl stepped back into the shadows of the branches, pulled its head down into its chest feathers and settled in for the night.

Chapter 7

Back to the Baldwin

Eric set the heavy wheelbarrow load of rocks down on the beach and watched while Calvin placed a particularly large stone in the break wall. I think that load oughta do it, Calvin said. Dump it down here. He pointed to a spot by his feet.

My dad will be happy to see this job done when he gets out of the hospital, Eric said, tipping the load onto the beach.

Its looking good, isnt it? Calvin said, admiring the fifteen-foot length of rock wall. It should keep that old willow from being washed out in the spring. He winced as he pressed against a large blister that had formed on the palm of his hand.

The roar of a high-powered outboard engine turned his head back to the lake. Willis, Calvin said glancing at his wristwatch. We finished just in time.

Looks like he has someone with him, Eric said, as they made their way down to the dock. Is that Aunt Jesse? He shielded his eyes from the afternoon sun to get a better look at the second person in Willis boat.

Now why would Willis be bringing Aunt Jesse along on our fishing trip? Calvin asked.

Willis cut the engine, then wheeled the prow of the boat so that it settled with a noisy flourish against the rubber tires at the docks end.

Aunt Jesse sat serenely in the prow, a long, brightly-coloured dress decorating her large frame. Her straight, black hair was cropped collar-length and stuck out from under a straw hat. Help an old woman, she said, rising cautiously to her feet.

Eric and Calvin quickly moored the boat to the dock, then helped Aunt Jesse out of the bobbing craft.

The old woman stood on the end of the dock, a bent stick in her right hand. She was carefully smoothing her colourful dress and patting down her cropped-off hair. Willis stepped from the boat, his eyes large with excitement. Were in for a bit of luck today. Aunt Jesse agreed to come with us.

Calvin gave Willis a curious blank look, while Jesse eyed them suspiciously. Willis told me that you boys could hold your tongues.

Hold our tongues? Eric repeated.

She edged closer to the McBrides. This old womans got a deep spot in the river where the pickerel bite. Big pickerel!

Calvins stared. Really?

Jesse turned her head slightly and gazed from Calvin to his cousin. Her great, fleshy eyelids seemed almost closed, giving her a strange, mysterious look.

A loud thump from the other end of the pier brought Calvin back to reality. Gallagher, the newspaper reporter, was heading down the dock toward them, a huge camera bag swinging from his neck. He had a mini-cassette recorder held to his mouth, and was dictating something into it.

Ah - dont worry, Calvin said quickly. Thats Gallagher. Were dropping him off at the Baldwin Mine. He wants to get some pictures for his newspaper.

The Life and Death of A Gold Mine, Willis added dramatically. Hello, Shakespeare! He shouted as Gallagher approached.

The old woman nodded her head approvingly. Dont say nothing to him about my fishing spot, she warned.

Gallagher, Eric and Calvin helped Jesse into her seat in the prow, then wedged themselves into the middle portion of the boat. Willis piled an assortment of life-preservers, fishing poles, cans of bait and other assorted paraphernalia all around his four passengers.

Calvin turned and glanced back at the shoreline. Sarah had appeared and was standing under a willow tree, waving at the departing boat. He felt a pang of regret as the girl receded from sight.

I sure appreciate you fellas taking me as far as the old mine, Gallagher shouted above the roar of the engine.

No problem, Willis shouted back, Were going right by there anyway.

The passengers ducked their heads as they swept under a bridge and started down the Blanche River. Calvin could tell that Gallagher was just itching to continue the conversation.

Ive never seen an abandoned mine up close, Gallagher shouted. He patted the large camera bag at his side. I should be able to get some great shots - its a perfect day.

Aunt Jesse gave the tall, thin man one of her unfathomable looks.

The seventy-five horsepower motor sped full-bore down the meandering waterway,

much of it no wider than a four-lane highway. Despite Calvin's reservations, Willis maintained the same breakneck speed all the way to the Baldwin Mine.

There she is, Willis shouted as they rounded a long sweeping bend. He cut the throttle and guided the boat skilfully into shore. Several dead perch were still floating on their backs by the edge of the river.

Pick me up on your way back, Gallagher said, scooping up his camera bag and hopping into the shallow water.

Willis nodded. I doubt if we'll be able to fit you in for the fish we're gonna catch, but we oughta back in a couple of hours. Is that enough time?

Gallagher's narrow head bobbed up and down. That should do fine.

Calvin jammed a paddle into the riverbed to push the boat away from shore when he was stopped by a sudden shout from Willis.

Wait! Willis was standing in the boat's stern, pointing to a spot a few feet from the shoreline. What's that lying on the ground over by those bushes?

It looks like a body! Calvin said in alarm.

He and Eric leaped over the side of the boat while Willis secured the craft to a nearby poplar tree.

In a small clump of juniper bushes lay the crumpled form of a man lying on his back, one arm thrown across his face. Calvin recognized him immediately. Shubel!

Aunt Jesse scrambled from the boat. Pushing past the boys she dropped to her knees and felt Shubel's wrist for a pulse.

For one terrible instant, Calvin thought the old man was dead. Crusted blood covered the side of his face and his forehead. His eyes were closed, and his complexion a ghastly white.

For almost fifteen seconds Jesse knelt in the pine needles holding Shubel's wrist and studying his ashen face. Gallagher stepped anxiously from one foot to the other, every so often raising his camera and snapping a picture of the proceedings. Finally Jesse lifted her head and gave a slight nod.

Get my canteen, she said.

Calvin sprinted to the boat and returned with the canteen of water.

By the time he got back, they already had Shubel propped against an old stump. Jesse pulled a kerchief from her pocket, soaked it with water, then dampened the forehead of the

injured man.

Shubel didnt stir, but Calvin was relieved to note that as blood was washed from the injured mans face he began to appear less frightful. Jesse set down the canteen and lifted Shubels eyelid, studying his eyeball intently. Well see if hell take any water, Jesse said holding it up to Shubels mouth and gently pouring a trickle between his lips. There was a brief pause, then the old man coughed violently. His eyes flew open and he looked wildly around him.

Calvin jumped back from the suddenness of Shubels actions. The old hermit blinked rapidly, then tried to push himself up from the stump. He groaned softly and fell back.

What happened? he whispered.

Thats what we were wondering, Eric said.

Shubel rubbed his forehead with the back of his hand. I dont know. He sat still for a moment or two, his eyes closed. I remember coming here late last night to check on things. A truck was parked at the mine and a couple of men were unloading barrels. I crept through the bush as close as I could to see what was going on when . . .

The old man stopped, and looked down at his right hand, a puzzled expression creasing his wrinkled face.

Whats this? He opened his hand and lifted it up for the others to see.

Jesse picked the contents from his grip and held them up to the sunlight. Pinched between her pudgy fingers was a simple piece of blue plaid cloth. Jesse turned it over and drew it closer to her nearsighted eyes. A flat wad of paper was stuck to the cloth.

Pack of matches, Calvin said. He picked the booklet from Jesses hand and turned it over. It was small and silver-coloured with a dark red inscription on the front.

Those are from the resort, Eric said in surprise. See! He pointed to the name of the McBrides Resort inscribed in bold lettering across the front.

What about the piece of cloth? Gallagher asked. Where did it come from?

Everyones attention turned to the piece of blue plaid still pinched between Aunt Jesses fingers.

Someones shirt pocket, Shubel Chase said, rubbing the back of his neck. He looked up at the faces clustered about him. Its coming back to me, he said slowly. I remember crouching behind those bushes when I heard a sound behind me. As I turned to see what it was, someone hit me hard over the top of my head. I could feel myself going under, but I managed to reach out

and grab something. Whoever slugged me is now missing the front pocket of his shirt.

Calvin looked back down at the plaid piece of cloth. It looks like a pocket from one of those bush shirts.

And whoever it was is also missing a pack of matches, Calvin added.

Eric looked thoughtfully at the matches. The guy must have been staying at our resort, he finally said.

Yah, Willis said. Maybe hes *still* staying there.

Calvin let the thought percolate in his head for a moment, a wave of uneasiness settling over him. Finally he turned to the old trapper. Wed better get you to a doctor, Shubel - let him have a look at that head of yours.

With the help of the boys, Jesse hauled Shubel to his feet and guided him down to the boat.

No pictures of the mine or fishing today, Gallagher said sadly as they pushed away from the shoreline and started back for Kenogami.

Chapter 8

Contaminated.

Calvin stood in the middle of the small cluster of people watching as the lights of the ambulance disappeared down the road to town.

Hell be alright. Aunt Helga assured everyone as she led the group back down the trail to the lodge.

Id like to go into town this evening and see how Shubels doing, Eric said.

Thats a good idea, his mother agreed. Im sure your father would appreciate a visit too. But in the meantime its time for lunch.

Willis, Sarah and Martha Martin, Gallagher, Donna Partridge and Aunt Jesse followed the McBrides up to the lodge porch. The long, screened-in room offered a spectacular view of Lake Kenogami, its beautiful dark waters stretching far to the north and west. As soon as everyone was seated around the table, Helga McBride brought a large platter of sandwiches in from the kitchen.

Im surprised the police arent here yet, Willis said.

Helga took her place at the end of the table. The dispatcher on the phone said it might take them an hour or more to get here. I guess theyre understaffed this summer. She glanced over to Mrs. Martin. Martha, would you mind saying grace for us?

The old woman nodded agreeably, then bowed her head. We thank, thee, Lord, for the provisions which you have so generously bestowed, and for the hands that prepared it. We commit Mr. Chase to your tender care at this time, thanking thee that his injuries were no more severe than they are. May he feel thy presence even now as we remember him to thee. Amen.

The others chorused their *amens*.

The relaxed atmosphere of the luncheon was just what Calvin seemed to need. The tension of the mornings activities and the nagging anxious thoughts of his parents slowly dissolved, sped on their way by Willis high-spirited rendition of the sinking of Aunt Jesses barge.

With the lull in conversation Calvins thoughts again turned to his parents, far away in the city - now not even living under the same roof. He excused himself from the table, feeling a terrible heaviness clutch at his heart. The cool breeze off the lake felt good on his face as he

exited the porch and walked slowly across the yard. Perhaps he should return home. There he might be able to help his parents patch things up.

I'll bet you're wishing you were home now.

Calvin spun around at the unexpected voice. Willis was standing there, his dark eyes serious for once.

Calvin nodded. You guessed it.

Willis led the way down to the sandy beach and together they stood looking out over the peaceful waters of Lake Kenogami.

Do you really think God cares about my problems? Calvin asked, his voice catching ever-so-slightly. Sometimes I don't think so.

Willis shrugged. It probably doesn't seem like it right now, does it?

I've been reading my Bible, Will, and praying, yet it just seems like I'm not getting through.

I remember my grandfather saying once that one of the most important lessons he ever learned about life was perseverance during times of trouble. He compared it to being out in a wild blizzard in the middle of winter. He said All we can do is just tuck our head down and follow the compass. Willis smiled at his friend. And keep doing what you're doing!

Just then a blue and white police car pulled into the yard and two uniformed officers emerged from the cruiser. Calvin and Willis hurried up from the beach and met them at the lodge door.

We've been expecting you, Aunt Helga said, ushering the policemen into the porch. She wiped her hands on her apron, looking nervous.

The police officers wore the tan-colored everyday uniforms of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, the first officers' sleeves decorated with the two stripes of a corporal.

Afternoon, the corporal said, tipping his hat. My name is Corporal Jesop. This is my partner, Constable Anderson.

I was expecting the provincial police, Helga said.

They'll be questioning Mr. Chase in the hospital when he's up to it, Corporal Jesop explained. We were asked to investigate the crime scene. Apparently they think there may be aspects of the case which could fall under our jurisdiction.

Constable Anderson pulled a small notebook from his breast pocket. From the initial

report it appears that Mr. Chase was assaulted at the Baldwin Mine, about two miles east on the Blanche River.

That's right, Helga answered.

Was he alone at the time?

Now if he was alone, how could he have been assaulted? Willis asked with a grin.

Helga gave Willis a dirty look, then smiled sheepishly at the two policemen. Shubel had grown suspicious of some late-night goings-on at the old mine, so he was keeping an eye on the place.

Do you have any idea what might have aroused his suspicions?

Perhaps, Helga said. You see, the Baldwins been abandoned for years, yet last night Shubel witnessed several men unloading barrels into the headframe.

And, Donna said. We suspect that whatever is in those barrels is killing the fish around the mine site.

Corporal Jesop looked around him curiously. Is there someone here who can take us down to the mine?

We'll take you, Calvin offered. We've got a motorboat, and know the way.

The police officer nodded. Can we leave now?

You bet.

Helga drew in a shaky breath and glanced nervously at her son.

I'm coming too, Willis said. And I'm bringing Aunt Jesse. No one is better at reading signs than her. He glanced at the two policemen. She may come in handy.

I'd like to come along too, Donna Partridge said. I need answers as to why fish are dying in the waters by the mine. Maybe you gentlemen can help me uncover something we missed.

The two Mounties glanced warily at the circle of people, but offered no objections.

Let's go, Calvin urged. Willis, you'd better take your boat too. We can't all fit in ours.

* * *

The brilliant afternoon sun beat down on the two power boats as they swept down the Blanche River. The two Mounties were seated in the middle portion of Eric's boat, with Calvin in the prow. Willis, Jesse and Donna Partridge followed close behind in Willis' sleek speed boat.

Finally they rounded the final bend and beached in the shadow of the tall headframe of the Baldwin ruin. They were led ashore by Eric.

This is where he was lying, Eric said, pointing to the juniper bushes between the two birch trees.

Corporal Jesop drew a plastic bag from his pocket and produced the piece of shirt and pack of matches taken from Shubel.

Apparently this was in the old mans hand when you found him, the officer said. He opened the package and reexamined the evidence while his partner scoured the ground around them.

We tried not to trample things, Calvin assured them sitting down on a stump just outside the clearing. He watched Jesse edging her way up from the shoreline. Donna Partridge, meanwhile, stood in the shallows of the river, staring intently down at a dead perch.

Look at this! Donna pointed to the water at her feet. A thin flim of green extended out into the river for about six or seven feet. Well one thing for sure. Its not algae. She filled a small plastic container with the water. Another job for the lab.

Aunt Jesse slowly eased her way through the undergrowth up to the Baldwin Mine. Eyes lowered to the ground, she inched her way across a cluttered forest floor, her colourful dress blowing lightly in the breeze off the river. Every now and then she would stop, get down on one knee and sift through the twigs and debris. She would then rise to her feet and continue her methodical journey up to the mine building.

Calvin and the others followed the old woman, each examining the ground that Jesse had so carefully searched. Calvin could see nothing but brush, packed muddy earth, old boards and bits of junk that lay scattered around the site. Finally, at the mine building, Jesse stopped.

As the policemen approached the old woman, she nodded toward the building. Three men were here with Shubel last night. If it hadnt rained, I could tell you more.

Corporal Jesop raised his eyebrows doubtfully as Jesse continued. The trail of poison begins here, she said, indicating the building in front of them.

Are you sure? One of the policeman asked.

Willis pointed back down to the river. Something has to be killing those fish, he said. Thats why Shubel came here last night. He thought the mine was being used to store toxins that are draining into the river.

What company owns this mine? Constable Anderson asked.

Willis shrugged. Dont know. Its been out of operation for years.

Well have to run a check on that.

Corporal Jesop walked over to the front door of the building and tried the handle. Its open, he said, giving the door a gentle push. It swung inward with a rusty creak.

Im sure I saw a big padlock on that door the last time we were here, Willis said.

The corporal stepped forward and opened the door all the way, revealing an interior as black as a moonless night.

Better be careful, Willis said. These abandoned headframes are supposed to have their shafts capped so no one can accidentally fall in, but sometimes theyre not. There may be an uncapped shaft just inside the door.

Corporal Jesop turned and looked at Willis. You say the door was locked yesterday?

It sure was, Willis said. I remember being surprised at the size of the padlock.

Then why did someone leave such a dangerous building unlocked? Constable Anderson asked. He pulled a small flashlight from his belt and flipped it on, but the light did little to illuminate the coal-black interior. A small, square vent high above their heads was the only other source of light. The building was dark, hollow and eerily silent. A slight shuffling sound stirred high in the darkness above them.

Bats, Willis muttered.

Where are the barrels? Calvin asked. Shubel saw them moving barrels in here.

Maybe they were moving barrels out of the building, Willis suggested.

Or dumping the contents of the barrels down the shaft, Corporal Jesop suggested.

Whats that? Donna Partridge whispered, pointing to a spot about ten feet in front of them. The policeman swept his flashlight in the direction indicated, revealing a large black hole about the size of a small room. A pile of planks lay scattered in a heap by the gaping chasm.

The shaft, Willis said. Stay away from there. Its probably about a half mile straight down.

Maybe, Constable Anderson agreed. Or it could be filled with water and all sorts of junk. Mine shafts have a tendency to cave-in over time. He took a step toward the hole. Everyone stay well back!

They inched their way across the room, Calvin staying close behind the lead policeman.

Theres one way to tell how deep it is, Willis said. He eased even closer to the mine shaft and then tossed a fist-sized rock into the hole. Almost immediately they heard a splash.

Its full of water, Eric exclaimed.

Well, were going to have to get a team in here to find out if toxins are being dumped down that hole, Corporal Jesop said with a shake of his head.

Aunt Jesse pushed past the Mounties and moved up to the edge of the shaft. She eased herself down onto one knee, motioning for the flashlight to be shone on the ground in front of her. Carefully she picked up a handful of sand and held it up to the light. Calvin and the others leaned forward for a better look. Even in the dim glow of the flashlight they could all see the faint traces of a green powder among the grains of sand.

It looks the same as the green powder we saw in the river, Calvin said.

Jesse nodded her head. Poison, she agreed.

Chapter 9

Trapped!

The two Mounties climbed the front steps of the lodge and were met at the door by Aunt Helga. Their host had changed into a light-coloured summer dress, and had taken her dark hair down from its usual bun. Willis, Eric and Calvin joined them by the door.

We've questioned all your guests, Corporal Jesop informed them. It seems that each of them can corroborate their whereabouts last night. Of course the assault on Mr. Chase happened when most people were sound asleep in bed. We've told your guests to stay close at hand for the next few days. If any of them check out, please notify us at once. He handed Helga a business card.

One other thing. An investigative team will be sent in to take a closer look at the mine site. In the meantime we'll be touching base with the provincial police to see if they found out anything from Mr. Chase.

Thank you for all your help, Aunt Helga said. It's been a very stressful summer, and it doesn't seem to be improving.

We'll get to the bottom of it, the corporal reassured her. We always do.

Aunt Helga shook her head wearily as she and the boys said their good-byes and watched the police officers drive away in their cruiser. With a soft moan she collapsed into a wicker chair and buried her face in her apron. Eric put his hand on his mother's shoulder. Finally she wiped her face, straightened up and let out a long quivering breath. Calvin looked questioningly at the other two boys.

Willis cleared his throat. I found out this morning that two of your neighbors are selling out.

Aunt Helga looked up. Selling out?

Hendersons and *The Shady Willow*, Willis explained. It seems that your guest, Jack Gray, bought them both out yesterday. Apparently he only needs the land your resort is on to set his casino plans in motion.

Aunt Helga slapped her hand down on the arm of the chair and got to her feet. I'm selling out too, she said. I can't take this anymore. When I was visiting Jim in the hospital this morning, his doctor told us that he may never be able to walk properly again. She turned to her son. It's

just one thing after another! How will we be able to keep up with this place if your dad has only one good leg? It was hard enough when he was healthy and working twelve hours a day . . . but now. Her voice faded.

Well be alright, Eric said sympathetically. You cant give up now, Mom. Calvin can come up and help out when were busy in the summers. Dont sell out, Mom. Wait until Dad gets home and then well decide.

No, Aunt Helga said firmly. Your dad and I have already talked about this enough. Im speaking to Mr. Gray as soon as I can. Ive had enough. I want to move back down south to the city and lead a normal life. I want to live in the suburbs and shop at a mall. I want to go out in the evening to a concert and see all my old friends again. She wiped her tears. Im just tired of all this.

Calvin looked at his two friends. His aunts dismay was something hed never expected - and the thought of Erics family moving back to the city turned his heart into a giant block of concrete. He could see the look of anguish on his cousins face. Eric hated living there!

The screen door behind Aunt Helga banged open and Donna Partridge entered with Sarah Martin.

Aunt Helga looked up and gave them an embarrassed wave. Dont mind me, she said. I just need a good nights sleep. She disappeared into the kitchen.

Sarah looked questioningly at the boys, then followed Aunt Helga out of the room.

Is now a good time to show you something? Donna asked.

Calvin recovered first. Sure. He ushered Donna over to the dining room table. Did you spot any wolves yesterday?

Nothing. Donna said, carefully spreading a map out on the table before them. I need you to look at something,

See this little lake? She pointed to a spot just north of Kenogami.

Willis nodded. Wildwood Lake, he agreed.

Can we get there by boat?

Willis shook his head. Theres only a shallow creek joining Kenogami and Wildwood. I guess you could hike back in there, but it would probably take two or three hours. Your best bet is to go by A.T.V. - all terrain vehicle.

Thats what I thought, Donna said, studying the map intently. Theres a trail back in there

then?

Theres a trail leading everywhere up here, Willis said. If you know where to look.

Would you be able to take me back to Wildwood Lake? Donna asked. This afternoon?

Willis glanced down at his watch and gave his customary shrug. Sure. Its only three oclock, and its not that far.

Sarah re-entered the dining room just then and crossed over to the table. Your mothers lying down, she said to Eric. She just needs a rest.

Thanks.

Why do you want to go back to Wildwood Lake, Donna? Calvin asked. Theres nothing much there. The fishings not even that good at this time of year.

When I was up in the plane yesterday, I noticed something near the lake that looked peculiar. She bent over the map and pointed to a narrow peninsula jutting into the western end of the small body of water. The area near this point of land looked like it had some serious exploration work going on.

Theres not supposed to be any mineral exploration in this region, is there? Willis asked.

Donna shook her head. I had a feeling Id need an all-terrain-vehicle to get back in there to take a look, so I had one dropped off this morning. I know you boys have a couple of machines. Could you take me back in there? What do you say?

Willis glanced down at his watch, then at the McBrides and Sarah. Its only about a forty-five minute trip. What do you think?

Eric looked uncomfortably around at his friends. Willis, youre going to have to come by tomorrow and help us get caught up on our work. My mothers already getting stressed out.

Willis flexed his muscles playfully. Agreed, he said with a nod.

* * *

Calvin knew that the sleek, four-wheeled A.T.V. was Erics pride and joy. His uncle had purchased it that spring for use around the resort, and both boys had used the machine almost daily on the many wilderness trails surrounding Lake Kenogami. Calvin loved the solitude of the forest and the reviving effect the rides had on him after a hard days work. The fact that Eric willingly agreed to let Calvin drive the machine back to Wildwood Lake was a mild surprise. He gave his cousin a wink as Eric jumped onto the back of Willis bike, and Sarah climbed on behind Calvin.

The three A.T.V.s formed a small convoy of vehicles, with Eric and Willis in the lead on Willis beat-up yellow and green four-wheeler. Donna took up the second position, and Calvin, with Sarah as passenger, brought up the rear.

The hard-packed trail back to Wildwood Lake was especially memorable, winding through some of the prettiest country in northern Ontario. Great forests of tall spruce and jack pine stretched for miles in every direction.

Despite the deafening roar of the engines, their meandering route had a lulling effect on the travellers, so that their arrival at Wildwood Lake seemed to catch them by surprise.

It was a much smaller lake than Kenogami. Calvin estimated that a good motorboat would probably take less than a minute to cross from one end to the other, and from what he knew about such northern lakes, it was probably quite shallow as well.

I thought you said there was some exploration work around here? Willis remarked, glancing around them.

It should be just west of that point of land. Donna said, dismounting from her A.T.V. and leading them past a rocky protrusion extending out into the lake.

The underbrush in the north is really thick, isnt it? Sarah said as they left the trail. Its hard to imagine that anyone has ever passed through this area before.

Calvin grinned, helping her scale an abrupt rock face. Youre doing great, he said.

Theyd gone no more than another hundred yards when they stepped into a wide clearing that had been bulldozed clean of all topsoil and vegetation. A deep trench stretched almost the entire length of the bulldozed area.

Wow, Eric said, stepping into the clearing. What happened here?

Nothing like this should be happening anywhere near here, Donna said. This whole area is restricted to exploration of any kind.

I guess someone didnt read the rules, Willis said.

Sarah gave Calvin an uneasy glance. Surely no ones still here, she said quietly.

Oh, I dont think so, Donna said. It looks abandoned - at least temporarily. Lets take a closer look at that trench and see what theyre up to.

The small party skirted the pile of dirt heaped in front of them then stood gazing down into the deep chasm. It was more than eight feet deep with a bottom of grey bedrock.

They must have brought a bulldozer in here to get down to the bedrock, Willis said.

Donna slid to the bottom of the trench and worked her way slowly along the outcropping of granite, studying the surface.

Look at this, she finally said, holding up a grey cylindrical object about a foot in length and the diameter of a broom handle. This is a core sample from a diamond drill. There's a whole bunch of them down here. She looked up at Sarah. An exploration company drills deep holes in the bedrock so they can test the mineral content. Whoever was working this spot went to a lot of trouble and expense. They must have high hopes for developing a mine in this area - no matter what laws are being broken.

Why didn't they fill in the trench and clean things up? Calvin asked.

Donna shook her head. I don't know - unless they're not finished. Whatever they're up to, though, they're gambling big time. She climbed back up the bank and stood looking around her.

Is this the only trench? Eric asked.

That's all I could see from the plane, Donna said.

They may be waiting for their drilling results before planning their next move, Willis suggested. Maybe they'll dig another trench . . . do some more drilling. See if this area has enough potential for a mine.

The workings *are* very fresh, Donna said. Certainly within the last few days. She looked over at Willis. How would they have gotten their heavy machinery in here - their bulldozers and diamond drilling equipment?

There must be a skid road here somewhere, Willis said, scanning the wall of trees surrounding the clearing.

Let's take a look, Donna suggested. Perhaps we can follow their trail back to its source and find out who is responsible for this.

Willis pointed to what looked like a gap in the trees at the far end of the trench. I'll bet that's the road.

The opening in the trees was narrow and extremely rough. Calvin shook his head doubtfully. How could they even get an A.T.V. through there?

I guess this is all the road they need, Willis said. They'd just drive their bulldozer in here pulling whatever other equipment they need.

A sudden sense of foreboding washed through Calvin. Something was dreadfully wrong.

What is it? Sarah asked.

The quiet, Calvin whispered. Absolute silence had descended on their little place in the wilderness. Somethings wrong! He could feel his eyes widen as he saw a thin pillar of smoke materialize before him, rolling from the treetops to the south. Even as he watched, the cloud of smoke grew in size.

Forest fire, Willis said.

Chapter 10

Fire!

For a moment Calvin stared at the skyline, gazing in disbelief at the growing cloud of smoke. Then Willis took charge.

The bikes! Willis turned and sprinted across the clearing and into the woods.

Calvin managed to catch Willis just as they arrived back at their A.T.V.s. Shouldn't we try to put out the fire?

Too late, Willis said. Besides, we have nothing to fight it with. He hopped onto his machine and started the engine. Drive your A.T.V.s right out into the lake, Willis shouted as the others piled onto their machines. We'll go as far as we can - the lakes not very deep. We should be safe from the fire there.

With Eric settled in behind him, Willis wheeled his yellow and green A.T.V. down the bank and into the shallow water of Wildwood Lake. We can't let the motors get wet, he shouted over his shoulder. Or we'll never get them started again. A hundred feet from shore the water was still only halfway up the large wheels of the A.T.V.s. Willis yanked on the handle bars, pulling his machine into a tight loop, then turned off the ignition. The other two vehicles rolled in beside him so that the three machines were lined up facing back toward the shore. Great billows of smoke now rolled above the trees in front of them.

If the fire gets too close, we may have to leave our machines and wade further out into the lake, Willis said.

How do you think it got started? Sarah asked.

Someone must have set it, Donna replied. Forest fires are usually started by either lightning or careless people.

But who'd be back *here* to start a fire? Eric asked.

An uneasy quiet fell over the small group as they watched the smoke rolling over the forest and filling most of the southern horizon. Here and there the flicker of flames could be seen leaping above some of the smaller trees.

Eric looked over at Sarah. Are you okay?

I'm okay, Sarah said. I was just praying.

Eric laughed nervously. That might not be such a bad idea.

I wish I'd brought my cell phone, Donna said. I could call for help. This smoke is getting worse. She coughed and waved her hand in front of her face to help dissipate the thin layer of smoke that was now settling over the lake.

Oh it won't take them long to spot that fire, Willis said. The forestry station on Kenogami should have a water bomber here in no time at all.

We'll be safe out here, won't we? Sarah asked. I've read of people in forest fires who were suffocated by the smoke. They say it sucks the oxygen out of the air so that people can't breathe.

We should be alright out here, Calvin reassured her. We can wet our shirts if we have to and breathe through them until the fire passes.

Let's hope so, Donna Partridge said in a low tone. In the meantime, breathing may become a little uncomfortable.

Calvin looked back over his shoulder at the body of water stretching out behind them. How deep does this lake get, anyway? It sure looks shallow.

Willis shrugged. Not very deep. That's why it's such a great lake for catching pike in the spring. Pike love the warm, shallow waters.

I sure hope you aren't catching any pike during spawning season, young man, Donna Partridge said.

Of course not, Willis said with a laugh. I always believe in giving the fish a sporting chance. Shubel Chase drilled that into me.

Suddenly they were aware of a faint humming sound from somewhere above them and to the east. Calvin tried for several seconds to isolate the noise, but the growing crackle of the flames made it impossible.

Plane, Willis said, pointing to a silver speck just above the trees on the eastern horizon.

The speck grew ever-larger until the single-engine plane was circling the lake at an altitude of no more than a couple of hundred feet.

With a deafening roar the aircraft swept directly over their heads, then banked sharply as it turned toward the rolling billows of smoke. As it passed above the trees at the south end of the lake, two doors on the plane's underside dropped open and a great canopy of water exploded from its undercarriage.

Wow! Willis whistled through his teeth.

Will that be enough to put it out? Sarah asked.

Not just one pass-over, Willis said. But its a start. Watch. The plane made a wide turn far out on the western horizon, then roared back toward them, descending so rapidly that it seemed to almost touch the trees on the western end of the lake. The silver pontoons of the aircraft skimmed lightly across the surface of the lake for more than a hundred yards before the pilot abruptly gunned his motor and the plane lifted off.

Whats he doing? Eric asked.

Keep watching, Willis said. That pilot is really good. Wildwood is such a small lake that I thought hed go back to Kenogami to pick up his water.

The others glanced curiously at Willis, then back up at the bush plane. The aircraft had now cleared the trees on the far shore and was again banking in the direction of the forest fire. Ascending, the plane levelled off at no more than a couple of hundred feet above the fire, then once again the trap door opened and water burst from the bottom of the plane.

What a pilot, Willis said shaking his head in admiration. Thats what Id like to do someday.

For the next half-hour they sat on their A.T.V.s watching the circling bushplane. Never did the aircraft falter in its routine: circling, picking up its load, taking off in a thundering roar, then dropping its load of water on the inferno. At the end of the half-hour the plane circled the area, dipped its wings, then vanished into the western horizon.

He must figure the fires out, Willis said.

But theres still so much smoke, Sarah said.

The great, billowing clouds hovering over the area had now changed from a dark grey color to pale white.

A firefighting crew will be sent in to mop up, Donna suggested. They may already be in there, although I think they would probably run their fire hoses in from this lake.

It was only then that Calvin became aware of how extremely uncomfortable he was, his shirt sticking to him, and a film of smoke burning his lungs.

What should we do? Sarah asked. Is it safe to go home now?

Calvin was about to answer when he noticed a figure emerge from the forest in front of them, pause for a moment then give them a beckoning wave.

Firefighters, Donna said, starting her machine. You can tell by their gaudy orange

uniforms.

The fireman was tall with a sandy coloured beard and bright blue eyes which seemed to blaze right through Calvin and the others. Are you responsible for this mess? He shouted above the noise of their A.T.V.s as they approached him.

No sir, Eric said, his eyes widening. We first saw the smoke over beyond the trench - from over that way. He pointed to where they had first seen the smoke and flames.

Donna dismounted from her machine and approached the man. My names Donna Partridge, she said, extending her hand. Im a conservation officer.

The firefighter stared stonily at her. Donna dropped her hand to her side. Is the fire out? She asked.

The man nodded. My men are over there looking for hot spots.

We didnt hear you come up, Calvin said. How did you get here?

The man grunted. Swamp buggy, he said. He pulled a small notepad from his pocket and wrote something in it. I need your names, he said gruffly.

Once he had scrawled the information in his notebook, he turned and started back through the bush. Hed gone only a few feet when he stopped. Youll be hearing from someone, he said. Somebody started this fire, and you people are the likeliest candidates - conservation officer or not.

Donna glared at the retreating firefighter. What a pompous man, she said. Well, one thing for sure, we know that *we* didnt start the fire. And that being the case we have to ask ourselves not only who did start the fire, but why!

Escape

The old owl stirred uncomfortably high on its branch in the jack pine. It bent its head down into its chest feathers for a moment to escape the uncomfortable wisps of smoke which still drifted past it on the warm evening breeze. It was much easier to breathe now than earlier in the evening - then the smoke from the burning trees had been so thick that it was impossible to even see the ground in the clearing.

A faint rustling noise at the far edge of the forest drew the owls attention. A large female moose and her gangly calf stepped quickly from the trees and trotted across the cleared area to the river.

The owls eyes grew wider as it watched the two huge creatures pass beneath it. At the rivers edge the two moose gazed fearfully back over their shoulders, then plunged into the river, driving awkwardly forward until the depth made it necessary for the two animals to swim the remainder of the distance to the far bank.

The owl blinked once, then blinked again. Seeing the great moose pass beneath it on such an evening was not surprising. In the short time it had been in the branches of the jack pine several large animals had already passed through the clearing to the safety of the far side of the river.

The owl once again pushed its head down into its chest feathers and waited for the last uncomfortable wisps of smoke to dissipate.

Chapter 11

The Sir Harry Oakes Chateau

Helga McBride studied the slip of paper in her hand then looked up at her son and Calvin. Why would Shubel want to meet you boys at the museum, of all places? she asked.

Im surprised hes even out of the hospital, Calvin said shaking his head. He must be doing better.

The screen door to the kitchen banged open and Willis strode into the lodge. Eric waved Shubels note at his friend. Shubel wants to meet us at the museum in Kirkland Lake this evening. Apparently he has something to show us.

The museum! Willis said in surprise.

Maybe he heard about the forest fire and wants to talk to us about it, Eric suggested.

Helga McBride drew in a deep breath at the mention of the fire. You boys stay out of the bush for awhile - at least until the police find out who set that fire!

Eric gave his mom a hug, then followed his two friends outside and down the path to where their all-terrain vehicles were parked. Dont worry, Mom, Eric called out, strapping on his helmet. You cant get much safer than in a museum.

Just be careful, his mother said.

* * *

The Museum of Northern History was housed in a beautiful three story mansion built decades earlier by the multimillionaire mining magnate, Sir Harry Oakes. Oakes had gained fame by being the discoverer of the richest gold strike in northern Canada - then had achieved even greater notoriety by being the victim of a world-famous unsolved murder.

The museums curator greeted the boys at the front door. Mr. Chase is upstairs in Nancys Room, she said. Hes expecting you.

Shubel was waiting in the small second floor bedroom, seated in a rocking chair, his eyes partly closed. When the boys entered, the old hermit lifted his hand and gave them a tired wave. Thanks for coming, fellas, he said.

How are you feeling, Mr. Chase? Eric asked.

The old man squinted up at the boys. Ive got quite a headache, but other than that Im

okay. Almost anything's better than being stuck in that hospital. No privacy whatsoever! He looked from one boy to the other, his face expressionless. I hear you fellas just missed being on the business-end of a barbeque.

Willis grinned. Almost, Shubel. Looks like someone was trying to discourage our nosiness.

Shubel Chase swung his gaze past the boys to the wall behind them. Take a look at that wall, he said.

The three boys turned to the white stucco wall behind them, edging closer for a better look. Eric rubbed the palm of his hand against the rough surface. Hey, pictures are engraved right into the plaster.

You're right, Willis agreed, moving even closer to the wall. Here's a bird of some kind, and over here is a tree.

Ever neat, Eric said.

Sir Harry Oakes had this room especially done for his daughter, Nancy, Shubel said. He brought this fella in from the city to do the work. Nice huh. But you know what? I'll bet if I hadn't pointed it out, you might never have noticed.

Well, I sure hope Nancy appreciated all the fine work done for her amusement, Willis said.

Shubel pushed his way out of the rocking chair and shuffled stiffly to the door. Come here, he said, leading them down the short hallway and into an area slightly larger than *Nancy's Room*. *It was* filled with stuffed wildlife.

Wow! Calvin said. Look at this: a beaver, timber wolf . . . an owl . . .

Shubel Chase knelt stiffly beside the beaver and began stroking the side of the animal's head. I gave this little fella to the museum almost ten years ago, he said. Marked a turning point in my life. At the time it looked like the beaver might be completely exterminated from these parts. This little guy was the last one I took from my trapline, so I had him stuffed, and sent him over here to add to the collection. I've never trapped or shot another wild creature since then.

He continued to quietly stroke the beaver's head for a moment, then struggled to his feet. Without another word he led them back down the corridor to his rocking chair in *Nancy's Room*.

Willis dropped onto the floor in front of the old man and leaned back against the wall. So why did you ask us to meet you here, Shubel? You need a lift home?

The old man nodded his head. As a matter of fact I do. I need to get home and feed my dog. But thats only part of the reason.

Eric and Calvin joined Willis on the floor and waited for Shubel to continue.

When you fellas came into this room why didnt you notice the pictures on the wall?

Eric shrugged. Wed never seen anything like that before.

You werent looking, Shubel said emphatically. Thats the main reason.

The boys looked at him curiously.

What I mean, Shubel continued, Is that sometimes the most obvious things in life are right in front of our noses and we dont notice them.

Just what are you getting at, Shubel? Willis asked.

The old hermit leaned forward, resting on the arms of the rocking chair. The Baldwin! We need to find out whats going on there, boys. Theres some no good characters creeping around in the middle of the night, doing goodness-knows-what . . . He pointed down the hall to the Wildlife Room. This museum was put here to remind us of what a great country we live in, and that we have a responsibility to look after critters like that. And if that doesnt start to happen pretty soon, the only animals left will be in museums like this one. Nows our chance to make a bit of a difference, to give these poor creatures a hand.

But how are we supposed to find out whats going on at the Baldwin? Calvin asked.

Thats why I had you come here. Shubel said, leaning forward on the arms of the rocker. His eyes narrowed and his brow furrowed. Whoevers storing stuff in the Baldwin is running scared. They were desperate enough to burn you fellas out and try to kill me - so we know this is a high stakes game - whatever it is. Now its not likely theyll return to the Baldwin, but weve got to find out who it is thats behind all of this. He leaned back in the rocker and looked thoughtfully out the window.

Who do you think it was? Calvin asked.

Dont know, boy, Shubel said with a grunt. Right now I havent the slightest notion. But there is a way we may be able to find out.

Willis stirred restlessly from his position on the floor. How, Shubel? You got any bright ideas?

I might have one, alright. As he looked at the boys, a trace of a smile appeared, buried deep in the wrinkles of his whiskered face. Have the local newspapers got ahold of any of these

goings-on?

I imagine the forest fire will be in tomorrow's paper, Eric said. But there's been nothing about the Baldwin or you being attacked.

Good, Shubel said emphatically. Do you think we can trust your newspaper friend, Gallagher?

The boys looked at one another.

I don't know, Calvin said. We just met him this week.

He seems to be alright, Eric added cautiously.

Well, the doctors mentioned something interesting to me last night. I was lying in that hospital bed with all these tubes in me and I was trying to recall the face of the guy who slugged me. I know it was dark, but something told me that I *did* get a look at him.

The three boys looked at him in surprise. Do you think you would recognize him if you saw him again? Calvin asked.

Don't know. But the doctors did say that my memory of the attack would probably become clearer once the shock of the injury wears off. It's possible I might start to remember things in the next few days.

Do you remember the matches you tore from your attacker's pocket? Willis asked. Because they were from the McBride Resort, the police think he must have stayed there at one time. They're going over a list of people who have stayed there during the past few weeks, and Eric's mom has to go into the police station tomorrow to look at some mug shots.

Shubel nodded. Do you think you could get Gallagher to write a story for his newspaper saying that I got a good look at the fella that beat me up? He could mention that the doctors expect that I may have a complete recollection within the next few days.

That would be kind of dangerous for you, wouldn't it? Calvin asked.

We gotta flush them out, boy! Shubel struggled from the rocking chair, then leaned weakly against the closest wall. What do you say? Will you do it?

Shouldn't we let the police in on this? Eric asked, getting to his feet.

They'll find out when it hits the paper! Shubel said emphatically. The cops could care less about a bit of poison leaking into some river in the middle of nowhere. Anyway, having the cops too close would just scare the bad guys off. If we're going to put a stop to these fellas, we're on our own.

Willis put his hand on Shubels shoulder. Well talk to Gallagher, he said. Your idea just might get the ball rolling. He paused and looked straight into Shubel Chases face. One condition, though, old man. Youll be staying with us until all this blows over. He looked over at Eric. Do you think your mom would mind?

Eric shook his head. No. I think shed see Mr. Chase as someone who just might keep the three of us out of trouble.

The old man broke into a broad smile. Tell you what, Will. If you go over to my place first thing in the morning and feed my dog, youve got a deal. Anyway, I could sure use some of Mrs. McBrides home cooking.

Chapter 12

Headquarters

Gallagher took a step back from the small circle of people gathered before him. You're telling me that Shubel Chase got a look at the guy that slugged him the other night?

That's right, Willis said. The doctors believe his memory of the event should return within the next few days.

In the meantime he'll be staying here at the lodge until he's feeling better, Eric added.

Gallagher tilted his thin face up into the clear morning sky, then scratched his chin thoughtfully.

I can see the headline now, he said slowly. *Local Man Beaten - Gold Mine Vandalized.* He smiled to himself.

I'm supposed to be on holidays, but a little freelancing is always good for the old pocketbook.

That would be great, Gallagher, Calvin said. When would it be in the papers?

The reporter shrugged. I'll write it up this morning and fax it in for tomorrow's edition.

Perfect, Willis said. Make sure you mention that Shubel got a look at his attacker.

Where's the old man now, Gallagher asked.

Upstairs in the lodge, Eric said. Resting.

Okay, Gallagher said, turning to go. I'll get started on the piece right away.

The reporter had no sooner disappeared up the walk to his cottage when a green half-ton truck turned into the yard and rolled to a noisy stop by the boys. Donna Partridge hopped from the cab waving a piece of paper.

I got the lab report, she cried excitedly. They tested the perch I sent them from the Baldwin. It was cyanide poisoning that killed them.

Cyanide! Eric said.

And . . . Donna continued. Remember the green residue inside the mine building? They tested that and found that it, too, contained cyanide.

So there's no doubt then, Willis said. The river was being poisoned from whatever was being dumped into the shaft of the Baldwin Mine.

The cyanide was probably part of some other concentrate, Donna continued. Hopefully

the police labs will uncover exactly what was in those barrels that were dumped into the mine shaft. Cyanide was probably only a small, but deadly part of it. Knowing the content of the barrels would give us a better idea of what those men were up to . . . Her voice trailed off as a blue-panelled van pulled into the yard and came to a stop by the lodge.

What now? Willis muttered.

Two men emerged from the vehicle. They were clutching clipboards and wore the green uniforms of a company called CSC. Were looking for Mr. Jack Gray, one of the men said.

Hes gone into town, Donna said.

Can we help you? Eric asked. My parents own this resort.

The men grinned sympathetically at Eric. Not for long.

What are you doing here? Eric asked, taking a step toward the two men.

Were doing a surveying job for Mr. Gray, the one man explained.

Not without my parents permission, Eric said. And neither of them are home right now. Jack Gray hasnt bought this resort yet.

The two surveyors hesitated, then one of them looked down at his watch. What time will they be back?

My mother wont be home until this evening, Eric said.

One of the men slapped his clipboard against the side of his leg, a scowl darkening his face. Well be back tomorrow, he said. Please let Mr. Gray and your parents know. He turned angrily, yanking open the door of the truck.

Jack Gray sure has his nerve, Donna said, watching the truck head back down the driveway. Youd think he already owned this place.

Calvin was listening to Donna continue her angry tirade when he suddenly became aware of someone behind him. He turned to see Sarah Martin approaching them.

Hello, everyone, Sarah said.

Afternoon Sarah, Calvin said.

Gallagher was just telling me that Mr. Chase will be recuperating at your lodge for the next few days, Sarah said.

Thats right, Eric said.

Willis looked down the pathway leading to Cabin Six. Has anyone seen our bear hunter friends lately?

Not since the night of the big storm, Eric said.

Did you come to any conclusions about what destroyed their bear bait down the Blanche? Willis asked, turning to Donna.

I wasn't able to say for sure, Donna answered. Although we still haven't ruled out wolves. Maybe those men aren't even bear hunters, Willis said.

That's what I've been saying all along, Calvin agreed. I think they're using it as some kind of a cover.

Why don't we check out another of their so-called traps? Willis suggested. They must have more than one.

But do we know where another one is? Donna asked.

The boys were thoughtful for a moment, then Calvin's eyes brightened. He snapped his fingers and turned to Eric. Remember that map we saw in their cabin the other day? There was a large X on the Waboose River north of here. That could have been another of their bear traps.

What are we waiting for then? Willis asked. Let's check it out.

Do you mind if I come along? Sarah asked.

Sure. The more the merrier, Willis said. In my boat we can be there in a hop, skip and a jump.

Let's get going then, Donna said. We'll find out what kind of hunters these guys really are.

I think I'd better stick around, Eric said. I promised my mom I'd finish raking the beach, and someone should be here to keep an eye on old Shubel.

You sure? Calvin asked.

Yah. You go ahead.

* * *

The hot afternoon sun bore down on the travellers as Willis edged his speed boat away from the McBrides dock and set a course for the northern end of the lake. Fifteen minutes later they entered the narrow mouth of the Waboose River.

I'll bet they set the bear bait here because of the suckers in this stream, Willis said, easing his way down the twisting waterway. Bears love fishing for suckers.

Yah, Calvin agreed. If there *is* a bear trap.

What exactly are we looking for? Sarah asked. How does one go about *baiting* a bear?

Well, Willis began, A bear bait is essentially an ambush that the hunters set up. They

generally leave some meat in an area that will attract the attention of any bears wandering through the area - the meat is usually left hanging a few feet off the ground so that smaller animals cant get at it. Sometimes the hunters will build a platform in the trees where they can lie in wait and set an ambush.

Hardly seems sporting, Sarah said.

Calvin continued to scan both banks of the narrow river as they wound their way slowly upstream, searching for anything remotely resembling Willis recent description of a bear stand. Within fifteen minutes the stream began to narrow noticeably.

You sure the X was marked on *this* river? Donna asked, as Willis slowed the boat even further. The powerful outboard motor was now reduced to a low rumble.

Positive, Calvin said emphatically. And this is the only river at this end of the lake.

Well, Sarah said. Perhaps its set back from the shoreline.

Or they might have moved the bait, Eric suggested.

Even if they have, Willis said. We should still be able to see signs of them having been here. He shifted the motor into neutral as further progress was blocked by a huge deadhead. Beyond the fallen tree stretched a barren area about the size of a baseball diamond.

This is as far as we go, Willis said. He and his four passengers sat quietly for a moment, surveying the surroundings as their boat bobbed peacefully in the shallow water.

We might as well head back, Calvin said. Theres nothing interesting around here.

Wait a minute, Donna said, pointing to the west bank of the narrow river. Whats that?

A treeless knoll rolled away into a scattering of stunted birch trees. Just visible beyond the top of the knoll was a small patch of white.

Looks like a tent, Calvin said.

Willis dropped the motor back into gear and turned the prow toward the west bank. A moment later Calvin led the others out of the boat and up the little hill.

It is a tent, Sarah whispered as they paused at the brow of the hill. Before them, in the middle of a grove of silver birch stood a large canvas tent.

It looks deserted, Calvin said as they surveyed the clearing.

Could this be the bear hunters *camp*? Donna asked. Lets take a look, Eric suggested.

Wait, Willis said, holding up his hand. Just in case the tent isnt empty and they didnt hear us coming, it might be dangerous for us to come up on them suddenly. He moved toward the

canvas shelter. Hello! He shouted. The others followed closely behind Willis as he made his way up to the flap which served as the door. With one last hello he flipped open the piece of canvas and led the others inside.

The interior of the large tent was a disappointment. Only a few scattered pieces of furniture inhabited the flimsy shelter. Two card tables and several folding chairs took up the middle portion of the tent, and a single canvas cot stood against the far wall.

Theres not much here, Sarah observed.

Its not likely theyre going to leave anything incriminating behind to make life difficult for them, Willis said.

The others gazed around the tent for another minute. This tent may very well belong to our bear hunter friends, Calvin said. But theres nothing here to help our cause at all.

Just a minute! Donna walked over to the cot. A piece of paper was protruding from under one of its legs.

What is it? Willis asked.

Donna flattened out the sheet of paper and squinted down at the faint script. Calvin and Willis crowded in beside her.

Calvin could see that the bottom two thirds of the sheet had been ripped off and was missing.

Look at this, Donna said, pointing to several words at the top of the paper.

Ministry of the Environment, Willis read.

And look here, Donna said, sliding her finger to the bottom corner of the torn paper.

Duncan Township, Calvin read. And then theres some numbers: 1187004 . . . The rest is torn off.

They stared blankly at the piece of paper for a moment.

Its got to be a mining claim certificate, Willis said. My grandfather used to stake claims and this is what the forms look like.

Do you mean that theyre actually out here staking claims? Calvin said in disbelief.

They cant be staking them now, Willis corrected. Duncan Township is in the area thats now off-limits to staking. Look at the date - it was last year.

Maybe theyre the ones doing the exploration work over by Wildwood Lake, Donna suggested. Isnt that in Duncan Township?

Willis nodded in agreement.

This tent could be their headquarters when they're out in the field, Calvin said.

Lets get going, Willis said, wiping his brow. Its hot and smelly in here.

Calvin followed Willis and the others out into the sunshine. The coolness of the morning wafted over him and for a moment he stood relishing the breeze off the river.

Well, Willis said. Wed better scam. He reached up and broke a large branch from a nearby jack pine. As the others started back for the boat Willis trailed behind, using the pine branch to obliterate their tracks. Cant be too careful, he said.

What could those men be up to? Donna asked.

All we know for sure is that their interests seem to lie more in the area of mineral exploration than bear hunting, Willis said. We cant even be sure that they're doing anything illegal. He started up the motor and eased the boat out into the narrow channel.

Shouldnt we report what we found to the authorities? Sarah asked.

Donnas brow wrinkled in thought. I already mentioned the trench we found back at Wildwood Lake to the police. Who knows when they'll get around to checking into it.

Calvin gazed at the shoreline, deep in thought as Willis guided his boat expertly back down the waterway, and then out into Lake Kenogami.

No sooner had they started across the lake when Calvin suddenly straightened and pointed out across the water. Another boat was approaching them at high speed. That looks like Eric's boat, he said.

Appears to be in quite a hurry too, Willis agreed. I hope everything's okay with Shubel. Maybe we should have taken him with us.

With his throttle wide open, it took Eric less than a minute to reach them, and as he neared, Willis killed his motor, allowing the two boats to quickly drift into each other. As Eric's boat approached, they could see Shubel sitting in the prow.

Whats wrong? Calvin shouted.

Eric waited until his boat bumped right into his friend's before speaking. Im glad we found you, he said. Someone just tried to kidnap Shubel.

Chapter 13

From Bad to Worse

Willis guided his speed boat into the beach in front of the McBrides lodge, cut the motor then followed Calvin and the others ashore.

Once back inside the lodge and sitting around the kitchen table with large glasses of ice tea, Calvin turned to his cousin. So tell us what happened with Shubel.

Eric looked over at the old man and grinned. Not long after you left, Shubel went for a walk down on the beach when a power boat pulled up close to shore. There were three men in the boat and as they approached the place where Shubel was walking, two of the men jumped out of the boat and came charging ashore toward him. Well, they were in for quite a surprise. Instead of running away, Shubel turned on his attackers and before you knew it, all three of them were scrambling back to the boat and heading for the hills. Eric smiled admiringly at the old man.

Shubel looked sheepishly around the table. If I hadnt been carrying a walking stick the size of a baseball bat, I might have been in big trouble, he said.

Did you recognize them? Calvin asked.

The old man shook his head.

Donna Partridge glanced down at her watch. Well, Id better get going, she said. Ive got a lot of work to do.

Sarah nodded in agreement. Me too, she said. My aunt will be wondering where I am.

Donna and Sarah had barely left the lodge when the sound of an approaching outboard motor drifted in through the open window. Calvin looked around the table. Who could that be?

They rose to their feet and went to the door. A small motorboat was just pulling alongside the dock. The lone passenger deftly looped a mooring line around one of the poles and climbed carefully out onto the pier.

Aunt Jesse, Willis said, a wide smile crossing his face.

Shubel and the three boys made their way down to the lake as Jesse ambled up the shoreline toward them.

How you feeling, old man? she asked Shubel as they entered the lodge.

Shubel gave a feeble little wave. Okay, although Im embarrassed to admit how much all this excitement has tired me out. I was just thinking that it might be nice to lie down for an hour or two. With a tired smile he turned and headed up the stairs to his bedroom.

Wheres your mother, Eric? Jesse asked, looking around the lodge. Its getting late.

She went into town to see my dad and get some supplies, Eric said, glancing down at his watch. She oughta be home soon.

Well, you boys sit down, Jesse bustled over to the cupboards checking for food. Ill bet you boys havent even eaten anything since breakfast. Wheres that moose meat I brought over for your mother the other day? Is it still here?

Calvin could feel the days tension flowing from his body as the smell of frying moose meat soon permeated the small room.

Willis, Aunt Jesse said. You say grace.

Willis bowed his head and offered another sincere prayer of thanks for their food. As the blessing ended Calvin glanced around the table at the others, then looked hesitatingly down at the platter of moose steaks. Ive never eaten moose meat before, he admitted.

Youll love it, Willis said. And Aunt Jesse prepares it better than anyone, he nodded approvingly at his aunt as he took another bite. Been ages since Ive tasted moose meat this good.

Since last Thursday. Aunt Jesse corrected.

The others laughed.

Wed better check on old Shubel, Eric suggested. Make sure hes alright.

Youd better give him a few minutes to get to sleep, Aunt Jesse said. He needs his rest right now more than anything.

He ought to be safe here, Willis said.

Eric grunted. I sure hope so, he said in a low voice. Things sure havent been going very well lately. His eyes met Calvins. Shubel gets beat up; someone poisons the river; my mother is selling the resort . . .

Willis cleared his throat. Lets just take things one day at a time, he said. Weve all seen God work in some pretty mysterious ways before, and things turned out okay. Thats something my old grandpappy drilled into me.

Eric looked across the table at his friend and scowled. Maybe God is just a little too busy to notice a few people in the middle of nowhere.

Willis laughed. Did you know, he said. That according to the Bible God knows the exact number of hairs on your head? Now Im quite sure that if hes aware of how many hairs are on Eric McBrides head, he certainly knows everything else about him. A twinkle lit up Willis dark brown eyes.

Eric stared sullenly at his plate, but did not answer.

Tell him about how we get to be Gods children, Jesse said, passing the platter of tea biscuits down the table. Thats the part I liked best when Willis grandfather talked to me about Jesus.

Willis nodded. Thats my favourite part too. You see, even though God loves all of the people in the world, we can only become his children when we admit to Him that were sinners and ask for His forgiveness. And best of all, Hes provided a fail-safe way for us to get back into his good graces - through His son, Jesus Christ, who died as our substitute. We need to place our faith in Him and realize that we can never please God through our own good deeds.

Your grandfather explained all that to us, Eric said. But a lot of good it did him - God still let him get killed.

Oh, Jesse said. But it did do him good. Where would he be now without Jesus?

Eric looked up at Jesse thoughtfully, then returned to his moose steak.

I think Eric feels that Jesus is fine for getting people to heaven, but he isnt much use for the here and now, Willis said.

Calvin glanced uneasily at the flight of stairs at the far end of the room. I dont mean to change the subject, but theres no other way of getting to Shubels room than by going up those stairs, is there? he asked, turning to his cousin.

Well, there is a back stairway, but the door is always locked from the inside.

Wed better make sure Shubel is alright, Willis said, rising from the table.

Calvin felt his heart begin to race as he rose to his feet and followed his friend up the stairs. Willis rapped lightly on the bedroom door. Nothing!

Hes probably sleeping, Calvin whispered.

Willis hesitated for a moment, then turned the knob and pushed open the door.

Immediately Calvin knew that something was horribly wrong. The bedroom was empty!

Hes gone, Willis said, glancing around the room, then looking back at his friends. Somehow they got in here and grabbed the old man.

Chapter 14

Lives in Disarray

The three boys and Aunt Jesse looked around the empty bedroom in disbelief.

Doesnt look like anything has even been disturbed, Calvin finally said.

What do we do? Eric asked.

Willis led the way to the far end of the hallway and then down the flight of steps. He tried the door at the bottom of the stairs.

Its not locked! He said, pushing it open.

We always keep it locked, Eric said.

They must have sprung the lock and got in here, Calvin said. They may have been waiting for Shubel when he came up to his room. He probably didnt even know what hit him.

Jesse led the way out the door and into the backyard, and then eased herself onto one knee. Very slowly she ran the flat of her hand over the ground, then began inching her way across the yard toward the lake, tracing the signs.

They came from the lake, she said. Two men.

Lets go, Eric said, taking a couple of steps in the direction Jesse had indicated. Weve got to catch up to them.

Just hold on, Willis said. Were not even sure which way theyve gone. Lets think this out. Calvin and the others followed him around to the front of the lodge. They were just rounding the corner when a car pulled into the yard.

Looks like my moms back, Eric said.

Aunt Helga emerged from the car, looking anxiously at the small group of people approaching her.

Someones kidnapped Mr. Chase, Eric said.

His mother stared at him in disbelief. Kidnapped Shubel? How did that happen?

It just happened, Calvin said. They snuck up the back steps and grabbed him out of his room. We were downstairs and didnt hear a thing.

Who would do that? Instinctively she looked out over the surface of the darkening lake before them.

The bear hunters! Calvin said suddenly. Have you seen anything of the bear hunters

lately? It must have been them.

Theyve been pretty quiet the last couple of days, Aunt Helga said doubtfully. Maybe theyre out checking their baits - sleeping in the bush.

Calvin looked back out over the lake. Weve got to do something about Shubel, he said. Theres only one reason why they would risk coming in here and grabbing him like that. They must be planning on getting rid of him!

Lets call the police. Eric said.

Aunt Helga sprang into action. Ill do that, she called over her shoulder as she headed up the steps into the lodge.

Eric and Calvin looked helplessly at each other. We cant waste any more time, Calvin said. No telling whats happening to Shubel.

They *are* going to kill him, arent they, Eric said. Why else would they take him? Theyre afraid that hell be able to identify one of them, and their whole operation will unravel.

Theres a lot of places in this country to make a person disappear permanently, Willis said.

Aunt Helga returned from the lodge. I got through to the police, she said. They said itll be about half an hour before they can get an officer out here.

A half hour! Willis echoed.

We cant wait a half hour, Eric said.

Weve got to go after Shubel now, Calvin said. Every minute counts.

You mean we should go after him ourselves? Willis asked.

Weve got to, Calvin said.

But where could they have taken him? Eric asked.

Well, we cant just go charging blindly out of here unless we have an idea where they might have taken Shubel, Willis said.

Lets stop and think for a minute, Eric said. If it *is* the bear hunters, where might they be going?

I think theyll head to the remotest place possible, Willis said.

But where? Calvin asked. Theres over a million remote places around here. In fact just about everythings remote.

Suddenly Erics eyes widened. The campsite we found the other day on the Waboose River! He said excitedly. If that was the bear hunters camp, maybe they went there.

Yah, Calvin agreed. Thats right. The Waboose River is just about as remote as you can get.

Its worth a try, Willis said. Lets get going.

Aunt Jesse struggled to her feet from where she had been sitting on the steps.

You stay here with Helga, Aunt Jesse, Willis said.

No, the old woman said emphatically. Im coming.

Willis shrugged. You sure youre up to it?

Aunt Helga put her hand on Erics arm, I dont like this, boys. Promise me youll be careful - its getting dark. If you do find out where Shubel is, come back right away and notify the police.

Dont worry, Aunt Helga, Calvin said. Willis has that spotlight on the front of the boat that lights up everything for a hundred yards. Besides, he and Eric know Kenogami really well.

Jesse led them down to the lake, knelt by her boat and lifted out a long, double-barrelled twelve gauge shotgun. Breaking the chamber open, she reached into the pocket of her baggy skirt and withdrew several shells. Now, she said, dropping two of the shells into the chambers and snapping it shut. Im ready. Well take Willis boat - its fast! Lets go.

A light rain was beginning to fall as Willis modified seventy-five horsepower outboard roared out onto the lake. Mounted on the boats prow, a spotlight lit up the dark waters of Lake Kenogami for more than a hundred feet.

Better watch for rocks, Aunt Jesse suggested. Theyre bad at the far end of the lake.

Dont worry, Willis shouted above the motor. I know Lake Kenogami like the back of my hand.

A few minutes later he was easing the boat into the narrow mouth of the Waboose River, then cautiously negotiating each bend of the meandering waterway. They hadnt gone more than a few hundred yards when Willis abruptly turned off the motor and spotlight. Grab a paddle, he ordered. We dont want to advertise our arrival.

Calvin found a couple of canoe paddles lying on the bottom of the boat and handed one to Eric.

Cant see much, Eric whispered as they paddled the cumbersome boat upriver. The trees along the riverbanks are too tall.

How far is it to the campsite? Calvin asked.

Not much farther, Willis replied. We'd better pull into shore over there. He pointed to a small clearing ahead of them.

Eric and Calvin directed the boat into the narrow stretch of beach, then silently stepped onto the shoreline. Together the three boys skidded the boat in among the trees, then helped Aunt Jesse out onto dry land. The double-barrelled shotgun was still gripped tightly in the old woman's hand.

Shh, Willis warned.

Don't you have a flashlight? Calvin asked.

No lights, Willis replied. Too easy to be seen. With that he led the small group away from the river and into the dense wilderness.

Immediately they were plunged into total darkness - the forest seeming to reach out and swallow them. With each step Calvin had to probe the ground at his feet so as not to trip over a stump or tree root. He was grateful, though, that the drizzle had finally let up and a warm, soft wind blew in from the southwest.

After trudging through the damp underbrush for five minutes a faint light appeared through the trees ahead of them. As Willis drew the group to a halt under a huge tamarack tree, a great yellow moon broke from behind a cloud and lit up their surroundings.

Immediately before them was a large white tent, and emanating from within its thin walls was a pale yellowish glow. Even as they inched closer through the curtain of trees they could hear the low murmur of voices drifting toward them on the night air. Willis pointed down to the waterfront. In the glow of the moonlight Calvin could see a motorboat pulled up on the shore.

Can you fix that motor so it won't start? Willis whispered.

Quickly and quietly?

Calvin nodded. Just tear off the spark plug wire. That oughta do it.

Go ahead, Willis whispered. Meet us up by that grove of birch trees. He pointed to a clump of trees between the river and the tent.

Calvin slipped carefully down to the shoreline, dimly aware of the voices coming from the tent. Perhaps he might be able to distinguish Shubel's voice among the others . . . But the sounds were muted and unintelligible.

When he reached the boat he slipped out of his running shoes, stepped into the shallow water and waded around to the back of the outboard motor. The moon lit the area quite well,

revealing the outline of a sixty horsepower engine. Calvin slipped his hand around back of the motor and grasped the rubber hose connecting the motor to a spark plug. With a quick tug, he wrenched the wire free from the motor, then tossed it into a nearby bush. Silently he waded back to shore, pulled his shoes back on, then made his way up to the clump of birch trees.

His friends were waiting for him. Willis now had his aunts double-barrelled shotgun cradled in his left arm. With a quick nod he stepped out from the trees.

Calvin grasped his friend by the arm. Whats the plan? He whispered.

Follow my lead and stay close. Willis handed Eric his hunting knife. Go around back. When the times right slice open the rear of the tent with this knife and make an appearance - but dont be hero! If you hear things going badly head back to the boat and go for help.

Crouching as low as possible, Eric vanished into the darkness.

Willis gave his friend a few seconds, then led the others directly toward the flap at the front of the big tent, the voices inside growing louder with each step. Calvin strained his ears for any sound of Shubels voice. Perhaps hes not here, Calvin thought. Maybe its too late! Or this might not even be the right place. The tent could be filled with a bunch of fishermen from the city . . .

Willis paused by the front of the tent and glanced back at Jesse and Calvin. Calvin moved silently up beside him, surprised at how large the tent was. The peak stood a foot above his head, and the sides extended about fifteen feet on either side of the peak.

Willis drew in a deep breath, reached down and pulled the flaps open and disappeared into the tent.

Chapter 15

Night Pursuit

Calvin threw the canvas flap to one side and followed Willis into the giant tent, his eyes quickly adjusting to the bright kerosene lantern. Three men, leaning over a card table, gaped in astonishment at the sudden intruders.

Everybody stay where they are, Willis ordered, levelling the shotgun at the nearest man. He stepped into the tent so that Calvin and Jesse had room to enter.

The tallest of the men straightened, blinking rapidly. Whats this? He asked belligerently. Calvins breath caught in his throat. The voice! It was the same menacing tone he had heard the night when they had fixed the roof at the bear hunters cabin. And the eyes - the dark, piercing eyes were the same ones that had looked right through him during that ugly night! Calvin pulled his gaze reluctantly from the bear hunter and swept the room. Shubel! The old hermit lay on a cot in the far corner of the tent, bound and gagged.

Untie Shubel, Willis said to his aunt. And Calvin, get the rifle. A Winchester 30-30 was leaning against the table, precariously close to the bear hunter that Calvin had recognized.

Calvin snatched up the rifle, then levered a shell into the chamber.

Aunt Jesse leaned over Shubel, snipping through the cord tying his ankles. Get up, old man,.

Shubel struggled to his feet, then stood for a minute, tottering slightly. Ill be okay as soon as I get the feeling back in my hands and feet, he mumbled, rubbing his wrists. He moved gingerly across the canvas floor to the tent door, one wrinkled hand on Jesses elbow.

Willis waved the shotgun at the three men. Move back from the table, he ordered. The bear hunters edged cautiously to the rear of the tent as Willis approached with his double-barrelled weapon.

Willis, still eyeing his captives, picked up several scattered sheets of paper laying on the table. He handed one to Shubel. What do you make of this? He asked.

Shubel fumbled in his breast pocket for his reading glasses, then holding the paper at arms length, studied it for several seconds.

This appears to be a geological report of some kind, he said, waving the paper in the

direction of the three bear hunters. Looks like our friends have some illicit interests in these here parts. He took a step closer to the man with the dark eyes. I suppose you was the boys that dumped the poison into the old Baldwin . . . He pushed his face to within an inch of the other man. And I suppose you was the fella that wonked me on the head the other night.

The bear hunter retreated a step or two. I dont know what youre talking about, he said, straightening his shoulders.

And Ill bet youre partnered with that snake-oil salesman, Jack Gray, Willis said. Hes probably the brains behind this operation.

A sudden feeling of uneasiness washed over Calvin. Eric! Instinctively he glanced around the room, looking for his cousin. Eric had not yet put in his appearance. Where was he? He looked to the back of the tent where he had expected the other boy to make his dramatic entrance, but there was no ripping of canvas, no sudden appearance. He looked over at Willis. It was then that he felt, rather than heard, a slight stir behind them. He turned slowly, expecting to see Eric poke his head into the tent. What he saw in the entranceway made his heart leap into his mouth! Gallagher stood in the opening, a large silver revolver gripped tightly in his hand and a smile creasing his face. Calvin gaped at the reporter in astonishment. Gallagher? He said.

Gallagher nodded politely. Drop that gun, boy, he ordered, pointing his revolver at Calvins midsection.

Calvin and Willis eased their weapons to the floor of the tent as the dark-eyed bear hunter stepped up to the two boys. He gave Calvin a shove and scooped up the two guns. Good work, he said to Gallagher, pointing the barrel of the shotgun at Willis midsection. We got a little careless. Never figured that anyone would know about this little spot.

Gallagher moved around to where his partners were standing. I saw them leave the resort - kinda figured theyd be coming here. I happened to notice their boat pulled up on the shore downstream, he explained. I figured Id better paddle the rest of the way on the Q.T.

Shubel, his arms raised above his head, shuffled a little closer to the dark-eyed bear hunter. You got us, boys, he said. Now would you do me a small favour - fill us in on exactly what is going on. Id hate to go to my grave not knowing why you folks found me to be so objectionable.

A smile broke across the face of the dark eyed man. Youve got a point there, old man, he said. Because right now theres no one left to save your wrinkled hide. He paused for a second,

the smile leaving his face. But first of all you better tell us something. That bear bait we set up to make people think we were honest-to-goodness men of the woods - did you sabotage our little trap?

Shubel set his mouth in a thin, stubborn line. I did! he said. I wont tolerate any more traps around Kenogami. Ive made it my own personal responsibility. I even sprung a couple of Jesses traps down this way.

Jesse looked at the old man in astonishment. You did?

Shubel Chase nodded his head. I did for a fact, Jesse, and I make no apologies. I told you a dozen times that there just aint enough wildlife left in these parts. I know because Ive been keeping track the past few years.

The hard-eyed man laughed dryly. Well, that explains that! Not that it really matters. We just set that trap as part of our cover.

We knew you werent bear hunters, Calvin said.

Yes, but did you know what we really were? Gallagher asked.

We had our suspicions, Willis said. Especially when we found your trench over by Wildwood Lake.

Well, it looks like you were on the right track - not that itll do you any good now, the dark-eyed man said. Now we just have to figure out what to do with you.

Gallagher stepped over to the table and picked up a handful of the sheets of paper. To put it quite simply, he said. Were gold hunters, and weve been criss-crossing the Kenogami area for the past three years. Each year weve been getting closer and closer to what we believe to be the biggest gold discovery ever seen in these parts. But then our wonderful government decided to throw all of our careful plans out the window by shutting this area down to exploration and development. Our last glimmer of hope now remains in making our discoveries public before the government finalizes their plans of making this area into a park. A new gold mine would mean a lot of new jobs for the north. We have a batch of ore samples being analysed even as we speak, and if theyre as rich as we think they are, it might be enough to get the government to leave the area open for the development of a gold mine. Any complications whatsoever, though . . . complications like you people, and the government will never consider changing their plans. We now have everything in place to get them to at least postpone the new legislation.

Wont that get you into trouble? Calvin asked. I mean theyll know youve been doing

exploration work in a restricted area.

Gallagher smiled and turned to one of the men standing behind him. That's where Shorty comes in, he said. The three of us fade into the woodwork and Shorty is well compensated for taking the fall.

What about the poison in the Baldwin Mine? Shubel asked.

Gallagher laughed. The result of some last minute haste, I'm afraid. We were trying to get our exploration work done before the rezoning legislation was passed, and we needed somewhere to stash the waste from the small milling operation we had set up. Anyway, we figured that old mine shaft was a safe bet for storing waste, as it was just sitting out in the middle of nowhere.

Willis looked back at Gallagher. So you're really not a reporter then.

Gallagher's smile broadened. Actually I am what you might call a freelancer, but a different sort than those working for a newspaper. He waved the pistol. Get over there. He herded his four captives to the other side of the table with its collection of charts and hissing kerosene lantern.

The dark-eyed man turned to Gallagher. What do we do with them?

The smile disappeared from Gallagher's face. At the very least they've got to disappear from sight for a few days - until our plans are settled. And if they decide not to cooperate, well maybe that big trench we dug over by Wildwood Lake will serve a dual purpose. He paused while the imaginations of his partners sketched in the details. No one would ever find them there.

Willis peered suspiciously at the four men. Did you start the forest fire over there?

Not one of our better ideas, Gallagher said, nodding toward Shorty. Shorty lit the fire on the spur of the moment when he saw you snooping around the trench. Seemed like a good idea at the time, didn't it? But the fire almost brought the whole of the civilized world down on top of us. He grimaced at the memory. Anyway, fortunately for us, everything turned out alright.

Calvin noticed a slight movement at the door of the tent behind the four men, and his eyes grew large. The dark form of his cousin slipped silently into the entrance behind the men, a stick gripped in his left hand.

Stay perfectly still, Eric ordered, poking Gallagher in the back with his stick, Or I'll shoot you where you stand.

For an instant Gallagher and the other men froze. It was all the edge that Willis needed. He stepped quickly toward Gallagher, yanked the silver pistol from his hand and turned it on the others. Drop those guns, he ordered.

The two men holding the shotgun and rifle hesitated for only a second, then let their weapons fall to the canvas floor.

Calvin scooped up the two guns, handing one to Shubel. Eric stepped forward, skirting Gallagher and the others, then turned. He pointed a long stick at Gallagher and pretended to cock the hammer of a rifle, a broad smile on his face.

You'll pay for that, the dark-eyed man said with a slight tremor in his voice. I'll get you if it's the last thing I do.

Eric nodded. By the time *you* get out of jail, I'll be dead of old age.

The dark-eyed man took a step toward Calvin. How much guts do you have anyway, kid? he asked in a low voice. He took another step. Do you have enough guts to pull that trigger? Calvin retreated a step, his back now against the tent wall, the rifle straightening in his hands.

Shubel Chases wiry form appeared out of nowhere, stepping between Calvin and the other man. The broad end of Shubel's twelve gauge shotgun was pointed squarely at the chest of the other man. Step back, sonny, he said in a low voice. This boy may not want to pull a trigger on the likes of you, but I surely will.

The dark-eyed man hesitated for an instant, then suddenly took a quick step backward. As he did his right hand swept across the table, knocking the kerosene lantern to the floor with a crash. For one brief, terrifying instant the tent was pitched in utter darkness, then a ragged ball of flames exploded from the canvas floor.

One of the bear hunters shouted in terror and stumbled past Calvin toward the doorway. Calvin stood for an instant, watching in horror as the tent wall before him dissolved in a sheet of flames. He spun on his heels and lunged for the exit. As he and the others spilled out into the night, the raging inferno completely engulfed the flimsy structure.

Calvin searched the blackness around him, his eyes gradually adjusting to the sudden darkness. Everyone seemed to have escaped and were now standing in shocked silence, watching the tent dissolve in a roar of flames. Aunt Jesse and Shubel stood slightly apart from the others, breathing in long ragged gasps. The bear hunter they called Shorty was down on his

hands and knees, gasping for air. Calvin glanced down at his hand, thankful that he still had the rifle.

Suddenly from out of the corner of his eye he saw a dark blur barreling out of the night straight toward him. The collision knocked him off his feet, the breath exploding from his lungs in one agonizing gush. Crashing to the ground, he could feel the gun slip helplessly from his grip. He lay there gasping, all breath driven from his body. For one awful moment he felt sure that he would die right where he was lying, unable to take another breath.

Come on, boy! A strong hand was on his arm, hauling him to his feet. It was Shubel. Calvin staggered several steps, dragged from the clearing and into the trees. They got one of the guns, Shubel shouted. We have to get to the boat and scam.

As he stumbled down the trail after the old hermit, Calvin could see Aunt Jesse and Willis just ahead of them.

I dont think theyre following us, Eric said.

Shubel grunted. Probably because they know we still have this, he held up the shotgun. But theyll be coming.

Wait, Calvin said. I wrecked their outboard motor.

Theyve got Gallaghers boat, Eric said.

Calvin groaned. Youre right. He followed Shubel into the trees, his chest still aching.

Weve got to make it to the boat, Eric was saying. Willis outboard is the fastest on the lake - theyll never catch us.

Calvin shuddered to a stop by the bank of the narrow river.

Hurry, Willis shouted, pushing the boat out into the current. The big motor roared to life as Calvin and Eric climbed into the front with Shubel and Jesse. Willis gunned the seventy-five horse power engine and the boat leapt forward. In an instant they were careening down the narrow river, the bright spotlight guiding them around each hairpin turn.

Ya-hoo, Eric yelled above the roar of the motor as they burst from the mouth of the river and sped across the dark surface of Lake Kenogami. Calvin could feel an overwhelming sense of relief as he looked out over the broad expanse of the familiar lake.

Watch out for the rocks, Willis, Aunt Jesse yelled.

Willis was already weaving in and out of the outcroppings of rock that dotted that section of the lake. Dont worry, Willis shouted. Weve got to get back to the resort and call the police.

Gallagher will be right on our tail.

He had no sooner gotten the words out when a light suddenly emerged from the mouth of the river behind them. Even over the din of Willis motor they could hear the roar of the other boat, and what frightened Calvin most was that it sounded even more powerful than Willis motor.

Theyre catching up, Eric said in disbelief. What kind of a motor do they have anyway?

Calvin could feel his stomach constricting as he watched the other boat rapidly gaining on them, its bright spotlight now inching menacingly toward them. Willis jerked the boats steering wheel to escape the spotlight, and as he did they heard a sharp crack - even above the sound of the two motors.

Theyre shooting at us! Eric yelled.

Everyone but Willis ducked below the gunwales. Several more cracks sounded over the water. Shubel threw the barrel of the shotgun up to his shoulder and was about to return fire when there was a resounding crash directly behind them.

Calvin lifted his head back above the gunwales, staring in disbelief at the dark waters behind them. They were gone! The light had disappeared and the sound of the pursuing motor had vanished into the night.

What happened? Willis yelled back over his shoulder.

Its a trick, Eric shouted. Theyre trying to sneak up on us in the dark.

No theyre not, Aunt Jesse said. They hit the rocks.

Chapter 16

On the Rocks

Willis wheeled the boat in a tight circle, then cut the speed so that the wash rolled the boat forward on a foot-high crest. The boat's powerful spotlight lit the lake ahead of them for almost a hundred feet.

You sure they hit a rock and it's not some sort of a trick? Calvin asked, rising from his seat.

Look! Eric shouted, pointing to a spot just out of the spotlight's range. It's them.

Calvin's mouth dropped open at the unexpected sight. The boat had struck a craggy protrusion of rocks and was propped up and sinking fast. The powerful outboard motor had been knocked from its mounts and had already disappeared beneath the lake's surface. Clinging desperately to the crushed hull was one of the survivors. In the nearby water two more heads bobbed in the darkness.

Aunt Jesse eyed the floundering men suspiciously. Be careful, she said. They're full of tricks.

Shubel poked his shotgun over the edge of the boat as they drew alongside one of the men. It was Shorty, and he was floundering desperately in the deep water. No trouble from you, Son. Shubel said, displaying his weapon, One bit of fuss and we leave you right here. He kept the gun trained on Shorty while Calvin and Eric pulled him into the craft, and heaved him into the prow.

Shorty sat there, gasping, the water dripping from his sodden clothing.

There's another one, Shubel said, pointing to a dark figure bobbing nearby.

As Eric swung the powerful spotlight toward the man in the water Calvin could feel his breath catch. Hurry! He shouted, This one's face-down. Together with Eric he leaned over the boat's gunwales and hoisted the unconscious man aboard. It was Gallagher! They flopped him down by Shorty and heard him give a sharp gasp, then sputter feebly. Looks like he won't need mouth-to-mouth, Calvin said.

Shorty put an ear to his partner's face. He's breathing.

Lay him on his side, then, Willis ordered.

Shorty did as he was told, then sat back, eyeing Shubels wavering shotgun. You watch that gun doesnt go off, old man, he said.

Willis manoeuvred the boat next to Gallaghers stricken vessel. A third man was still clinging to the remnants of the overturned boat.

Better hurry! Aunt Jesse said. Shes going down fast.

By stretching as far as possible Calvin was able to catch hold of the mans outstretched hand.

Heave ho, Calvin said with a loud grunt as he and Eric pulled the man aboard. A large cut was noticeable on his forehead.

There must be one more, Willis said, turning the boat in a tight circle while Eric panned the spotlight across the water.

Does anybody see him?

Calvin scanned the water, almost dreading the sight of the man with the dark, evil eyes.

Cant see him, Eric said.

Was the other man in the boat with you? Willis asked Shorty.

He was sitting up by the front, Shorty acknowledged. He must be around here somewhere.

Willis turned the boat in another circle, passing close to the rapidly sinking boat.

He was here a minute ago, Shorty said. I saw him after the crash and he seemed alright.

Watch it, fellas, Shubel said. He may be playing possum on us.

For ten more minutes they scoured the waters around the treacherous rocks.

He couldnt have made it to shore, could he? Calvin asked. Its not all that far.

Eric swung the spotlight toward the distant shoreline.

I think we would have noticed him, Willis said. But I guess its possible.

Hes gone, Aunt Jesse said simply. One way or the other.

With his aunts words Willis eased the throttle of the boat down and moved out across the lake toward the far shore. The lights of the McBrides resort glimmered like distant stars on the horizon.

When Willis pulled the boat into the dock at the resort, the lights in the main lodge told them that Aunt Helga was still up. Before they had even secured the boat she was beside them, a thick housecoat wrapped around her.

I heard your motor, she said, looking nervously down at the extra passengers and the shotgun gripped tightly in Shubel Chases hands. Whats going on, Eric? she asked.

Its okay, Mom. Eric put a hand on her shoulder. Everythings under control now, but youd better call the police.

Aunt Helgas eyes widened. You found Shubel . . . she said. Thank goodness. She turned back up the trail to the lodge as Willis, Eric and Calvin helped the others ashore.

Shubel Chase took up the rear of the small procession, his shotgun still trained on the three injured men. Cant take any chances, he warned. These fellas are still liable to be playing possum.

The police arrived a half hour later.

It was Shubel who did most of the explaining when it came to filling in the Mountie on the events of the last few days.

And you say one of the men probably drowned in the lake when their boat hit the rocks? the policeman asked.

Appears so, Shubel said.

Either that or he somehow made it to shore, Willis added.

Not likely, the policeman said. He probably banged his head and went to the bottom without even knowing what hit him.

Shorty claims to have seen him after the accident, and he appeared to be okay, Eric said.

Calvin found himself wishing that the policeman was right, but something told him that the man with the dark evil eyes was harder to kill than that. A shudder passed through him as he looked out the lodge window into the dark of the night.

Well send our divers out to the spot in the morning, the policeman assured them. If he drowned, well find him. If not . . . well still find him. He grinned slightly. We always get our man.

Aunt Helga rejoined the little group with a large pot of coffee. I thought that everyone could use something hot to drink.

There was a murmur of appreciation as she led them over to the long table in the middle of the dining room. Willis, Jesse, and Shubel, youre all staying here tonight. We have lots of room, and thats that.

Her guests smiled gratefully, exhaustion clearly marked on the faces of the two older

people.

And just to warn you, Aunt Helga added. I've been doing some thinking about this resort and our future plans. I'll fill you in on my ideas in the morning.

Calvin and the others looked up at her curiously.

But not until then, she said.

Epilogue

Decisions

Eric and Calvin dropped wearily into their chairs at the dining room table, exhausted from a morning spent cutting grass under the hot July sun. Calvin glanced around him and managed a smile. The table was crowded with diners.

Im so glad you could all be here, Aunt Helga said, smiling at Willis and Jesse. Today is something of a celebration. As soon as I finish with lunch Im going into town. My husband is due to be released from the hospital this afternoon.

Alright! Eric exclaimed. Ill go with you, Mom.

Shubel Chase cleared his throat. Look, Im sure grateful for your hospitality, maam, but Ive got to get back to my shack. My old dogs probably given up on me by now.

Now you sit right there, Mr. Chase, Aunt Helga said. We all owe you a great debt and I want you to hear this as well. I have an important announcement.

Aunt Helgas words were interrupted by a sudden knock on the door. Without waiting for a reply, Donna Partridge and Jack Gray entered the room, both smiling broadly.

Youre just in time for lunch, Aunt Helga said. Come on in and have a seat.

Jack Gray pulled out a chair beside Willis. I got your message, Mrs. McBride. Glad to hear youve finally made a decision about selling the resort.

I certainly have, Mr. Gray. She waited until the big man and Donna were seated on either side of Willis.

Jack Gray turned to Willis. I hear you boys had quite an adventure last night, he said.

Thats for sure, Willis agreed.

And that newspaper fellow, Gallagher, Jack Gray continued. I sure read him the wrong way, he chuckled to himself. And those so-called bear hunters - they were actually working on developing a mine in this area!

Aunt Helga smiled patiently at Jack Gray. Okay, everyone. Listen up for a minute. I have a couple of important announcements. She paused expectantly as all eyes turned her way.

Im sorry, Mr. Gray, but my husband and I have decided to give this place one more go.

Calvin sagged back in his chair. I thought you were selling the resort to Mr. Gray.

Not anymore, she said.

What! Jack Gray rose to his feet. We had a deal, he said, his voice strained. He waved his hand disgustedly at those gathered around the table and stormed out of the lodge.

Willis laughed. This is great news!

Shubel got to his feet. Well, Im mighty pleased you wont be selling out, Mrs. McBride, he said, tipping his cap to her. And I hope the rest of Jack Grays plans fall through too. We dont need any casinos on this lake, thank you very much.

Wait, Eric said. Do you think its safe to go back to your cabin? We dont know yet what happened to that last guy. The police divers havent found anything yet.

And they likely wont either, Shubel agreed. I think that hard-eyed man just skedaddled. Hes got no reason to stay around here now that his plans have fallen through.

I dont know, Calvin said reluctantly. He made some pretty serious threats about making sure he got even with us, remember - *if it was the last thing he ever does?*

Well, Shubel said turning to go. The main thing is that no one is going to be dumping poison in the river, and no more fish will be dying. He looked across the table to Aunt Jesse. And no one will be setting animal traps around Kenogami either, will they?

Willis laughed and got to his feet. Dont worry, Shubel, Ill keep Aunt Jesse in line. And speaking of that, wed better get going, too. Its been a pretty exciting week.

Shubel nodded to those around the table, then slowly shuffled from the room.

And Willis, Aunt Helga said, walking Jesse and Willis to the door. Dont you be taking these boys away from their work for the next few days. Theyve got a lot of catching up to do.

Ill come by tomorrow and give these poor lads a hand. He gave the group a big wink, then followed his aunt out into the yard.

Calvin drew in a lungful of warm summer air as he followed Eric out into the sunshine. The Lord seems to have had His eye on us all through these difficulties, he said, glancing at his cousin.

It would seem so, Eric said with a grin. And whats even more, God even looks after some of us who arent quite ready for it.

Calvin paused by the great spreading willow tree and looked out over the calm waters of Lake Kenogami. I think those are the kind of people He enjoys helping most, he said.

Eric slapped his cousin on the back, grinning broadly. And in that regard, he said. He has

something in common with you and me.

Whats that?

It would appear that Hes not finished working yet.

Calvin laughed. Well, lets get going then. Unlike Him, weve got a lot of catching up to do.

Alone

There was a slight rustle of branches in a leafy sumac bush. A small dark bird with red-tipped wings flitted from its shelter and flew rapidly to the abandoned building, disappearing through a small hole near the roof.

Far above the forest floor in the branches of the jack pine, the old owl turned its gaze to a slight movement immediately beneath its perch.

The owls huge eyes seemed to bore deep into the thin covering of underbrush twenty feet below for darkness had yet to make inroads in the soft summer evening.

It had been several days now since men had prowled about its little domain, and the owl was visibly more relaxed. That evening it had gone back to its old habit of moving stealthily back and forth on its favourite branch as it waited for the mice to begin their nightly sojourns.

Suddenly the owl cocked its head, puffed out its chest feathers and launched itself noiselessly from its roost. It dropped feet-first toward the ground far below, talons extended, eyes burning into the small brown shape crouching beside a rotted piece of wood.

Life had returned to normal for the small glen harbouring the Baldwin Mine.

The End.