



Hermit's Revenge

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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 shadow reflected on the waters of a nearby river. Crowding the perimeter of the building 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 building's only door, his partner walked to the rear of their vehicle, undid the tailgate, and climbed aboard.

Within twenty minutes 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 storm's 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. "I'll meet you downstairs."

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

"Hey!" Eric protested loudly.

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

Outside the small bedroom window the summer storm lashed 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 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 up the kerosene lantern from the desk and led the way down the stairs of the lodge. Aunt Helga was waiting for them by the front door, a carpenter's belt fastened over her raincoat. "We'd 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 and pointed to a bulky plastic bundle on the porch. "We'll drape this large tarp over the roof until morning," she said. "Shouldn't 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 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, Calvin was soaked.

Aunt Helga drew them under the spreading branches of an evergreen, then turned the flashlight's 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. "There's 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. It's like having three phantoms staying with us, though. We hardly ever see them." She drew another breath. "I guess we'd better let our guests know what we're up to."

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

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. He beached his canoe and motioned for the big dog in the back to stay. Then he stepped onto the shore. He went 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 don't 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. "Can't 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. 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 ain't 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

Submerged

It seemed like for the first hour of the next morning Calvin found himself in a sleepy fog. Even though Aunt Helga had allowed them to sleep for an extra half hour. It was hard to get the cobwebs out, after so late a night.

They were only halfway through breakfast when the pounding on the launch door told them that time for rest and relaxation would definitely have to wait.

Aunt Helga had barely opened the door when Jack Gray, a businessman staying in one of the cottages, burst into the room. . Aunt Helga stepped back in surprise.

Jack Gray just stood there for a moment, his breath coming in short gasps. His eyes swept the room.

"My boat," he finally managed to say." My boat sank in that storm last night."

Calvin and Eric got to their feet and crossover to the upset guest. "It sunk?" Eric said in disbelief.

"It sure did," Jack Gray said. "I had it tied to your dock and now it's on the bottom of the lake!"

"Well, it's not a very deep lake," Aunt Helga said. "I'm sure we'll be able to be floated without too much trouble."

"It's going to take days for that motor to dry out," Jack Gray said.

"We'll look after it, Mr. Gray," Eric said, stepping past their guest toward the door.

"I sure hope so," Jack Gray following the two boys outside.

Eric led the way down to the dock which was about a hundred feet from the lodge. Lake Kenogami was calm and silent, the sun shining peacefully down on the surface of the water. It was hard to believe that the previous evening had been so wild.

Calvin could see two boats moored to the long wooden dock. He recognized them both as belonging to his aunt. From the way they sat in the water, he could tell even from a distance that they had taken in a great deal of water - but at least they were still afloat.

"There she is," Jack Gray said, pushing past the others and pointing down. Calvin and Eric peered down over the edge of the dock. Sure enough, just below the

surface of the water they could see the outline of the sunken boat. The powerful outboard motor was evident on the boat's stern

"Wow!" Eric said. "That's really something. I've never seen a boat sink around here before. I wonder why yours sank and ours' didn't."

"How do we get it up?" Calvin asked. He looked over at Aunt Helga, who was standing there a puzzled expression on her face.

"Well, it's a cinch we can't bail her out," she said. "It's completely underwater."

He stood there for a moment, looking down at the sunken vessel. It was only after a moment that Calvin became aware of the low throbbing of a boat motor approaching the dock. He looked up. A hundred feet or so from them was a large, cumbersome looking barge-like vessel.

The craft was a picture of simplicity. A flat surface the width of three parked cars rested securely on two large, green aeroplane pontoons. Under a canvas tarpaulin which was perched on four rusty poles several metal lawn chairs were scattered. On the stern a beat-up twenty horsepower motor coughed and sputtered the barge slowly toward the dock.

"Willis," Aunt Helga said with a smile.

"What on earth is that he's driving?" Eric asked.

He stood there in silent as Willis negotiated the cumbersome vessel to the dock. Eric and Calvin grabbed hold of the end and managed to tie it up on the other side of Jack Gray's stricken boat.

"Morning folks," Willis called out jumping onto the dock. He was dark-haired and dark-skinned. Although not quite as tall as Calvin and Eric, he was stockier with the shoulders and arms.

"Willis Hamilton," Aunt Helga said. "What on earth are you driving?"

Willis laughed and looked back at the strange looking contraption.

"Remember my Aunt Jesse, Cal?" he asked. "She told me that she met you boys the other day when you were out fishing. 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 for half of the people in northern Ontario on this contraption."

Willis was just finishing when Donna Partridge made her way down the dock, looking seriously at the barge, then at Jack Gray's stricken boat.

Calvin smiled and nodded at the conservation officer.

"Has everyone here met Willis?" Aunt Helga asked.

"I don't believe I've had the pleasure," Donna Partridge said.

"Nor have I," Jack Gray piped in.

"Well, this is Willis Hamilton," Helga continued. "Willis lives across the lake. He's a good friend of Eric and Calvin and has been a big help around here. We seem to be putting him to work all the time lately."

Willis nodded to those standing on the end of the dock.

"You must be one of the local native people," Jack Gray said, his red face broken by an enormous smile. "From the Ojibwa tribe, if my research is correct. Well, this is a first for me." He stuck out his hand and shook Willis' enthusiastically. "I was glad to find out there are native people in these parts. It might help pull in the tourists when I open my casino."

"Your casino?" Aunt Helga echoed.

The big man turned to Helga McBride, the smile dimming slightly. "That's right," he said. "I plan on purchasing some waterfront land on this lake and building a casino. It's a perfect location - beautiful spot, middle of Northern Ontario, right on the Trans-Canada Highway."

"A casino!" Willis said. "Sounds awfully busy."

"Oh it will be," Jack Gray assured him. He looked back to Helga. "I'll be speaking to all the tourist operators on the lake to see if they are interested in the offer I have in mind."

Aunt Helga frowned, then shook her head. "I'm not interested in selling out of the moment," she said.

Jack Gray grinned. "We'll see. Now although my boat - how are we going to get her back on top of the water?"

The boat that shouldn't be much of a problem," Willis said leaning over the

sunken boat "Eric, why don't you back your old truck to the beach and we'll just how it up onto the shoreline. Then we just bail her out."

Eric's face broke into a wide grin. He took the keys from his mom and sprinted up the shoreline, quickly disappearing from sight.

Jack Gray breathed a big sigh of relief. "I hope the outboard motors not ruined," he said.

"Nah," Willis said. "Just told spark plugs out, dry everything out and it should be as good as new. Say," Willis said, his gaze sweeping the four remaining people on the dock. "How would you all like to go for a ride down to Blanche with me? I'd like to take this old barge for a spin."

Donna Partridge nodded eagerly. "That would be perfect," she said. "I have to check on some wolves down in that direction."

"Wolves!" Jack Gray echoed. "There are wolves in this area?"

"The bear hunters that are staying in one of your cabins complain that a wolf destroyed one of their bear traps. From the information they gave me, the trap is located on the shores of the Blanche River about two miles east of here."

Jack Gray laughed nervously. "I don't 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 planned on heading over there this morning to take a look."

"Well then it's settled," Mr. Gray boomed. "We'll make a morning out of it. Now you boys," he pointed to Calvin. "You and your friend will have to come too. We can't have you working while everyone else is out having fun." He looked over at Helga. "And you, Mrs. McBride. It's high time you took a break and spent a couple of hours relaxing and enjoying yourself. What do you say?"

"Oh, I couldn't. 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. "They'd still have lots of time to

finish the roof.”

Helga shrugged. “As long as the job gets done,” she said reluctantly. “I’m afraid it may rain again tonight. And . . .” she added looking at Calvin. “Let’s get Mr. Gray’s boat hauled out of the water and bailed out first..”

A grin inched its way across Calvin’s face. “Might as well bring our fishing rods.”

“Well fellas,” Willis said. “Let’s get that boat hauled out of there.” He looked up at Aunt Helga and winked. “Then it’s down the Blanche River for a little fishing - on old Aunt Jesse’s barge.”

The Baldwin by Day

As the echoes of the passing barge faded into the wilderness, two men stepped out from behind the headframe of Baldwin Mine and stood silently watching the river.

The taller of the two men turned his dark eyes toward his partner and shook his head. "That was too close for comfort."

The other man grimaced. "Never expected traffic," he said. "This river's hardly ever used."

The man with the hard, dark eyes glanced back at their pickup truck, which was tucked in behind the building. A number of metal barrels were stacked in the back of the vehicle. "From now on," he said, "We do all our work here at night. It's too risky during the daytime - especially now that we're almost done. We sure don't want to blow it by getting careless or impatient."

His partner nodded. "Let's finish up here and get back to the site. We've only got three more days, and if we're not done, all our hard work for the past three years goes straight down the drain."

Chapter 3

Aunt Jesse's Barge

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

Jesse's cumbersome barge seemed strangely out of place as it lumbered through the peaceful wilderness.

In addition to Calvin, Eric and Willis, three of the resort's guests had made the trip: Jack Gray, Donna Partridge, 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 sailor's cap perched on his head at a jaunty angle. A few feet to his right, Calvin and Eric leaned over the barge's one rail, their fishing lines trailing behind the slow-moving craft.

"Not bad, eh?" Willis said.

Eric grinned. "Truly one of the world's great wonders, Will. As old and mysterious as the pyramids of Egypt."

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

"You're in no position to make light of my favourite aunt's 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 hasn't been out of the boathouse in a couple of years doesn't mean she should be made light of by the likes of you two landlubbers."

"Hard to tell whether you're talking about the barge or Aunt Jesse," Eric said. His and Calvin's 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 we're the only people for miles and miles."

Willis laughed. "Well, that's not far from the truth, Mr. Gallagher. It doesn't get much more remote than this."

"That's the beauty of it," Jack Gray chimed in enthusiastically. He struggled from his chair and made his way over to the fishermen. "People who have lived all their lives in the city can only dream of places like this. Why, they'd be falling all over themselves to spend their hard-earned cash up here, relaxing and soaking in the atmosphere." He turned and grinned at Calvin. "That's why I'm so interested in setting up a casino in this area. It's perfect - right smack-dab in the middle of the north country. With an infusion of investment capital and a concerted advertising campaign, I'll turn this spot into the Shangrila of the north."

"I don't 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, maneuvering it around another twist in the current before starting slowly down a straight stretch.

Donna Partridge 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!" Donna echoed loudly. "What kind of name is that for a town?"

Eric, who had been preoccupied with his fishing line, turned to the game warden. "Actually it's not what you might think, Donna. *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 town's 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," Jack Gray observed.

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

All of the passengers had now gathered by the railing 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.

"It looks like 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," Jack Gray said, drawing a handkerchief from his pocket and covering his 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?”

“We’d better get going,” Willis said. He shifted the motor into gear, then maneuvered the barge away from the shoreline and out into the current.

Gallagher joined Willis by the wheel as the large craft resumed its course. “I wouldn’t mind taking a closer look at the Baldwin Mine sometime,” he said. “I’ve 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.

One by one Willis’ five passengers climbed ashore, each eyeing their guide curiously. With a mischievous grin on his face, Willis turned and parted two large bushes, exposing a narrow pathway.

“Follow me, folks,” Willis said. “This morning you will be given the unique opportunity of meeting one of the north’s 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 lined 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 he's 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 must've 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. "You're Jim McBride's boy."

Eric grinned. "I'm surprised you remember me, Mr. Chase. You haven't been by our place for awhile."

"What are you doing here, Mr. Chase?" Jack Gray asked. "This doesn't seem to be the 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 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."

Jack Gray took out his handkerchief and 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 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 I've 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 Chase's face. "Not that I can recall - least wise not recently. There was a family of timber wolf just west of here - maybe they've come back."

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

"Well," Willis said, rising to his feet. "Let's get a move on. We've got to finish our little excursion and make sure these boys get home in time to finish shingling that roof."

As they trudged back down the trail to Aunt Jesse's barge, Calvin's 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. "That's 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 didn't expect my dad to move out of the house already. He hardly gave it a try."

"I know," Aunt Helga agreed. She gave her nephew's arm a squeeze. "Don't give up on them yet."

Calvin nodded. "I'll try," he said. "In the meantime I'd better get out there or Eric will have that roof all fixed up by himself."

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. "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.

"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. “Yah,” he said. “It’s great.”

Willis grinned at him. “I wish Aunt Jesse was here,” he said. “She always knows the right thing to say when someone’s having problems.”

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 hunters’ 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 cottage’s 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.

“Let’s 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 it’s 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 wasn’t a thing in there that reminded me it was being used by a bunch of hunters.”

“But if they’re 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. “It’s past nine-thirty, although Willis did say he’d 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 and Aunt Helga.

“This is neat,” Donna exclaimed. “Reminds me of my childhood summer camp.”

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. "Let's 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 wasn't 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 Shubel's 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 Harrison's dock. Joel and Matt 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.

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

She 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," Matt 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.

"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, Joel and Matt. Joel's mother 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," Joel 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," Matt agreed. "Have a seat. I'll go in and get the coffee."

When Matt returned, Joel and the others were seated comfortably around the rustic table.

"So," the pilot said, wrapping both hands around his steaming mug. "We're 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.” He laughed. “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 McBride’s dock.

“That looks like Shubel Morgan,” Matt said. “The hermit we met yesterday.”

Joel nodded. “It sure is,” he said. “I wonder what he’s up to.”

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

“Morning, Mr. Morgan,” Matt said.

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

“Want a coffee?” Joel asked.

“No thanks, boy.”

“My mom just went into twn,” Joel 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.”

Matt sat a little straighter.

“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 they'd locked the place up tight."

The pilot shrugged. "So what? 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 there's a connection with what's being stored in the old building, and all the fish dying."

"What could be in those barrels that would do that?" Matt 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 that's been abandoned for over fifty years?" asked Joel.

The old man pushed back from the table, his small dark eyes blazing. "That's 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. We've gotta find out what's 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. I'll let you know as soon as I find out. In the meantime, I'll 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 Morgan shook his head in exasperation, then turned to Joel. "When you see your dad, tell him I was asking about him."

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

Shubel Morgan 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, Rance - tell him I'm gonna start charging him next time he brings tourists by for a visit."

"You don't have to worry about that, Mr. Morgan," Matt said with a laugh. "Aunt

Jesse's barge sank last night. Rance 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.

Joel 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, we'd better get going, Miss. Partridge. Let's 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.

"It's looking good, isn't 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 came across 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 dock's end.

Aunt Jesse sat serenely in the prow, a long, brightly-colored 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. Aunt Jesse remained seated, 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. "We're 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.

Aunt Jesse leaned toward the boys. "This old woman's got a deep spot in the

river where the pickerel bite. Big pickerel!"

Calvin 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 - don't worry," Calvin said quickly. "That's Gallagher. We're 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. "Don't say nothing to him about my fishing spot," she warned.

Gallagher, Eric and Calvin 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, "We're 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.

"I've 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 - it's 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. 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 be back in a couple of hours. Is that enough time?”

Gallagher chuckled softly. “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 pointed 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.

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 was 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.

Jesse pulled a kerchief from her pocket, soaked it with water from the vanteen,

then dampened the forehead of the injured man.

Shubel didn't stir, but Calvin was relieved to note that as blood was washed from the injured man's face he began to appear less frightful. Jesse set down the canteen and lifted Shubel's eyelid, studying his eyeball intently. "We'll see if he'll take any water," Jesse said holding it up to Shubel's 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 Shubel's 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.

"That's what we were wondering," Eric said.

Shubel rubbed his forehead with the back of his hand. "I don't 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.

"What's 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 wad of paper was stuck to the cloth.

"Pack of matches," Calvin said. He picked the booklet from Jesse's 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 McBride's Resort inscribed in bold lettering across the front.

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

Everyone's attention turned to the piece of blue plaid still pinched between Aunt Jesse's fingers.

"Someone's shirt pocket," Shubel Chase said, rubbing the back of his neck. He

looked up at the faces clustered about him. "It's 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 he's *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. "We'd 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. The lights of the ambulance disappeared down the road to town.

"He'll be alright." Aunt Helga assured everyone as she led the group back down the trail to the lodge.

"I'd like to go into town this evening and see how Dad and Shubel are doing," Eric said.

"That's a good idea," his mother agreed. "I'm sure your father would appreciate a visit too. But in the meantime it's time for lunch."

Willis, 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.

"I'm surprised the police aren't 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 they're understaffed this summer." The relaxed atmosphere of the luncheon was just what Calvin seemed to need. The tension of the morning's 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 Jesse's barge.

With the lull in conversation Calvin's 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 around the building to the front 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.

"Maybe if I was home I could help my mom."

Willis shrugged. "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 officer's 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 telephone conversation with you, Mrs. McBride, 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 stern look. "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 Baldwin's 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 Eric.

"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'm a conservation officer with the Ontario government and I need answers as to why fish are dying in the waters by the mine. I think it might be tied in to the assault on the old man. 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."

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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 man’s 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 film of green extended out into the river for about six or seven feet. “Well one thing for sure. It’s 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 hadn’t 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. “That’s 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. “Don’t know. It’s been out of operation for years.”

“We’ll have to run a check on that.”

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

“I’m 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 a pitch black interior.

“Better be careful,” Willis said. “These abandoned headframes are supposed to have their shafts capped so no one can accidentally fall in, but sometimes they’re 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.

“What’s 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. It’s 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.

"There's 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.

"It's full of water," Eric exclaimed.

"Well, we're going to have to get a team in here to find out if toxins are being dumped down that hole," Corporal Jesop said easing himself down on one knee.

He motioned for the flashlight to be shone on the ground in front of him. Carefully he 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.

Corporal Jesop nodded his head. "Poison," he agreed.

Chapter 9

Trapped!

The two Mounties climbed the front steps of the lodge and were met at the door by Aunt Helga. 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.

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

Aunt Helga looked up. “Selling out?”

“*Henderson’s* 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. “That’s it! I’m selling out too,” she said. “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.

“We’ll be alright,” Eric said sympathetically. “You can’t give up now, Mom.”

Calvin can come up and help out when we're busy in the summers. Don't sell out, Mom. Wait until Dad gets home and then we'll decide."

"No," Aunt Helga said firmly. "Your dad and I have already talked about this enough. I'm speaking to Mr. Gray as soon as I can. I've 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. "I'm just tired of all this."

Calvin looked at his two friends. His aunt's dismay was something he'd never expected - and the thought of Eric's family moving back to the city turned his heart into a giant block of concrete. He could see the look of anguish on his cousin's 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. "Don't mind me," she said. "I just need a good night's 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. "There's 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."

"That's what I thought," Donna said, studying the map intently. "There's a trail back in there then?"

"There's 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. It’s only three o’clock, and it’s not that far.”

Sarah reentered the dining room just then and crossed over to the table. “Your mother’s 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. “There’s nothing much there. The fishing’s 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.”

“There’s not supposed to be any mineral exploration in this region, is there?” Willis asked.

Donna shook her head. “I had a feeling I’d 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. “It’s only about a forty-five minute trip. What do you think?”

Eric looked uncomfortably around at his friends. “Willis, you’re going to have to come by tomorrow and help us get caught up on our work. My mother’s already stressed out.”

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

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Calvin knew that the sleek, four-wheeled A.T.V. was Eric’s 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 day’s 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.

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, 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, the multitude of twists and turns in the trail had a curious lulling effect on the travelers, 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 motor-boat 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 on foot past a rocky protrusion extending out into the lake.

"The underbrush in the north is really thick, isn't it?" Calvin said as they left the trail. "It's hard to imagine that anyone has ever passed through this area before."

They'd 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 didn't read the rules," Willis said.

Eric glanced around uneasily. "You don't suppose they're still here."

"It's pretty quiet," Donna said. She cautiously led the little group out into the clearing. "I wonder what's going on here."

The small party skirted the pile of dirt heaped in the middle of the cleared area,

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 Calvin and Eric. “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."

Calvin felt a sudden hand on his shoulder. He turned. Willis was standing next to him gazing toward the western horizon. Calvin followed his friend's gaze. A thin pillar of smoke materialize before his eyes, rolling from the treetops about a half mile away. 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 lake’s 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.”

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.

“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 your cell phone probably wouldn’t work out here anyway,” 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?” Eric 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,” Willis said. “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.

“Plane,” Willis said, pointing to a silver speck just above the trees on the eastern horizon. “I told you it wouldn’t take them long to get here.”

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?” Calvin asked.

“Not just one pass-over,” Willis said. “But it’s 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.

“What’s he doing?” Eric asked.

“Keep watching,” Willis said. “That pilot is really good. Wildwood is such a small lake that I thought he’d 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 leveled 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. “That’s what I’d like to do someday.”

For the next half-hour they sat on their A.T.V.s watching the circling bush-plane. 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 fire’s out,” Willis said.

“But there’s still so much smoke,” Calvin 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 there, although I think they would probably run their 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?” Eric 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 name's Donna Partridge," she said, extending her hand. "I'm 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 didn't 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. "You'll be hearing from someone," he said. "Somebody started this fire, and you people are the likeliest candidates - conservation officer or not." He turned and strode off into the trees.

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

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.

"I'm surprised he's 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 Shubel's 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. "Don't worry, Mom," Eric called out, strapping on his helmet. "You can't get much safer than in a museum."

"Just be careful," his mother said.

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The Museum of Northern History was housed in a beautiful three story mansion built decades earlier by the founder of the Lakeshore Gold Mine, 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 museum's curator greeted the boys at the front door. "Mr. Chase is upstairs in Nancy's Room," she said. "He's 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. “I’ve got quite a headache, but other than that I’m 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 that's 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 didn't you notice the pictures on the wall?"

Eric shrugged. "We'd never seen anything like that before."

"You weren't looking," Shubel said emphatically. "That's 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 don't 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 what's going on there, boys. There's some no good characters creeping around in the middle of the night, doing goodness-knows-what . . ."

"The police are working on that, Shubel," Eric said.

"I think the police just figure I fell and bonked my head," Shubel said.

Calvin was about to disagree when Shubel lifted an arm and 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 doesn't start to happen pretty soon, the only animals left will be in museums like this one. Now's our chance to make a bit of a difference, to give these poor creatures a hand."

"But how are we supposed to find out what's going on at Baldwin?" Calvin asked.

"That's why I had you come here." Shubel said, leaning forward on the arms of the rocker. His eyes narrowed and his brow furrowed. "Whoever's 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 it's not likely

they'll return to the Baldwin, but we've got to find out who it is that's behind all of this."

"Maybe we ought to leave it to the police," Calvin said doubtfully.

"Maybe," Shubel said. He leaned back in the rocker and looked thoughtfully out the window.

"Who do you think it was?" Eric asked.

"Don't know, boy," Shubel said with a grunt. "Right now I haven't 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 a 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 Shubel’s shoulder. “We’ll talk to Gallagher,” he said. “Your idea just might get the ball rolling.” He paused and looked straight into Shubel Chase’s face. “One condition, though, old man. You’ll 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 she’d 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, you’ve got a deal. Anyway, I could sure use some of Mrs. McBride’s 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?"

"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 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 send it in for tomorrow's edition."

"Perfect," Willis said. "Make sure you mention that Shubel got a good 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-paneled 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. “We’re looking for Mr. Jack Gray,” one of the men said.

“He’s 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.

“We’re 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 hasn’t 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 won’t 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. “We’ll be back tomorrow,” he said. “Make sure you 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. “You’d think he already owned this place.” She turned back to the boys. “Gallagher was just telling me that Mr. Chase will be recuperating at your lodge for the next few days.”

“That’s 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. 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.”

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The hot afternoon sun bore down on the travelers as Willis edged his speed boat away from the McBride’s 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 can't 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 it's 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 water.

"We might as well head back," Calvin said. "There's nothing interesting around here."

"What's that?" Donna asked, pointing to the west bank of the narrow river.

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 hunter's *camp*?" Donna asked.

"Let's take a look," Eric suggested.

"Wait," Willis said, holding up his hand. "Just in case the tent isn't empty and they didn't 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.

"There's not much here," Sarah observed.

"It's not likely they're 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 there's 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 of the torn paper.

"Duncan Township," Calvin read. "And then there's some numbers: 1187004 . . . The rest is torn off."

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

"It's 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 they're actually out here staking claims?" Calvin said in disbelief.

"They can't be staking them now," Willis corrected. "Duncan Township is in the area that's now off-limits to staking. Look at the date - it was last year."

"Maybe they're the ones doing the exploration work over by Wildwood Lake," Donna suggested. "Isn't that in Duncan Township?"

Willis nodded in agreement.

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

"Let's get going," Willis said, wiping his brow. "It's 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. "We'd better scram." 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. "Can't 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 can't even be sure that they're doing anything illegal." He started up the motor and eased the boat out into the narrow channel.

"Shouldn't we report what we found to the authorities?" Sarah asked.

Donna's 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.

"What's wrong?" Calvin shouted.

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

Chapter 13

From Bad to Worse

Calvin stared open-mouthed at his cousin as his words sunk in. "Kidnapped!" he said in disbelief.

"You'd better sit down," Eric said with a grin, pointing to a bench by the dock.

Calvin and the others quickly sat down and looked over at the old man.

"So tell us what happened with Shubel," Willis said.

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 up sheepishly. "If I hadn't 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.

"What did the police say?" Willis asked.

"Shubel wouldn't let us call them," Eric explained.

The others looked over at the old man.

"Never mind," Shubel said. "They had their chance. Now it's up to us."

Donna Partridge stared dumbfounded at Shubel. "What a day it's been. We'd better not be leaving you alone anymore." She got to her feet. "I've got to be going. I'm really getting behind in my paper work."

Donna had barely left when the sound of an approaching outboard motor drifted across the open water. "Who could that be?" Calvin asked.

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 I’m 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.

“Where’s your mother, Eric?” Jesse asked, looking around the lodge. “It’s past six o’clock.”

“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. “I’ll bet you boys haven’t even eaten anything since breakfast. Where’s that moose meat I brought over for your mother the other day? Is it still here?”

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

“Willis,” Aunt Jesse said. “You say grace.”

When the blessing ended Calvin glanced around the table at the others, then looked hesitatingly down at the platter of moose steaks. “I’ve never eaten moose meat before,” he admitted.

“You’ll 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 I’ve tasted moose meat this good.”

“Since last Thursday.” Aunt Jesse corrected.

The others laughed.

“We’d better check on old Shubel,” Eric suggested. “Make sure he’s alright.”

“You’d 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 haven’t been

going very well lately.” His eyes met Calvin’s. “Shubel gets beat up; someone poisons the river; my mother is selling the resort . . .”

Willis cleared his throat. “Let’s just take things one day at a time,” he said.

Calvin glanced uneasily at the flight of stairs at the far end of the room. “I don’t mean to be a Nervous Nelly, but there’s no other way of getting to Shubel’s 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.”

“We’d 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!

“He’s probably sleeping,” Calvin whispered.

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

“He’s 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.

“Doesn’t 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.

“It’s 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 didn’t 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.”

“Let’s go,” Eric said, taking a couple of steps in the direction Jesse had indicated. “We’ve got to catch up to them.”

“Just hold on,” Willis said. “We’re not even sure which way they’ve gone. Let’s 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 mom’s back,” Eric said.

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

“Someone’s 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 didn’t 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.”

Willis looked back out over the lake. “We’ve got to do something about Shubel,” he said. “There’s only one reason why they would risk coming in here and grabbing him like that. They must be planning on getting rid of him!”

“Let’s call the police.” Eric said.

Aunt Helga sprang into action. “I’ll 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 can’t waste any more time,” Calvin said. “No telling what’s happening to Shubel.”

“They *are* going to kill him, aren’t they,” Eric said. “Why else would they take him? They’re afraid that he’ll be able to identify one of them, and their whole operation will unravel.”

“There’s 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 it’ll be about half an hour before they can get an officer out here.”

“A half hour!” Willis echoed.

“We can’t wait a half hour,” Eric said.

“We’ve got to go after Shubel now,” Calvin said. “Every minute counts.”

“You mean we should go after him ourselves?” Willis asked.

“We’ve got to,” Calvin said.

“But where could they have taken him?” Eric asked.

“Well, we can’t just go charging blindly out of here unless we have an idea where they might have taken Shubel,” Willis said.

“Let’s stop and think for a minute,” Eric said. “If it *is* the bear hunters, where might they be going?”

“I think they’ll head to the remotest place possible,” Willis said.

“But where?” Calvin asked. “There’s over a million remote places around here. In fact just about everything’s remote.”

Suddenly Willis' eyes widened. "The campsite we found on the Waboose River!" He said excitedly. "If that was the bear hunter's camp, maybe they went there."

"Yah," Calvin agreed. "That's right. The Waboose River is just about as remote as you can get."

"It's worth a try," Eric said. "Let's 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. "I'm coming."

Willis shrugged. "You sure you're up to it?"

Aunt Helga put her hand on Eric's arm, "I don't want you boys to get involved," she said. "Promise me you'll be careful - it's getting dark. If you do find out where Shubel is, come back right away and notify the police. The bear hunters mustn't know you're there."

"Don't worry, Aunt Helga," Calvin said. "With Aunt Jesse and Willis along they'll make sure no one knows we're anywhere near the bear hunters."

Jesse led them down to the lake, knelt by her boat and lifted out a long, double-barreled 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. "I'm ready. We'll take Willis' boat - it's fast! Let's go."

A light rain was beginning to fall as Willis' modified seventy-five horsepower outboard roared out onto the lake. Mounted on the boat's prow, a spotlight lit up the dark waters of Lake Kenogami for more than a hundred feet.

"Better watch for rocks," Aunt Jesse suggested. "They're bad at the far end of the lake."

"Don't 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 hadn't gone more than a few hundred yards when Willis abruptly turned off the motor and spotlight. "Grab a paddle," he ordered. "We don't want to advertise our

arrival.”

Calvin found a couple of canoe paddles lying on the bottom of the boat and handed one to Eric.

“Can’t 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-barreled 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 along the shoreline in the direction of the bear hunters camp.

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 aunt’s double-barreled shotgun cradled in his left arm. With a quick nod he stepped out from the trees.

Calvin grasped his friend by the arm. “What’s the plan?” He whispered.

“Follow my lead and stay close.” Willis handed Eric his hunting knife. “Go around back. When the time’s right slice open the rear of the tent with this knife and make an appearance - but don’t 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 Shubel’s voice. Perhaps he’s not here, Calvin thought. Maybe it’s 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, leveling 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. “What’s this?” He asked belligerently. Calvin’s 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 hunter’s 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. “I’ll 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 Jesse’s elbow.

Willis waved the shotgun at the three men. “Move back from the table,” he ordered. The bear hunters edged reluctantly away from Willis as he approached with his double-barreled 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 arm's 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 don't know what you're talking about," he said, straightening his shoulders.

"And I'll bet you're partnered with that snake-oil salesman, Jack Gray," Willis said. "He's 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.

The dark-eyed bear hunter pushed his way through the others, grabbed Willis and gave him a shove. Gallagher reached out and snatched the weapon from Calvin.

"Good work," the dark-eyed bear hunter 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 they'd be coming here. I happened to notice their boat pulled up on the shore downstream," he explained. "I figured I'd 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. I'd 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. "You've got a point there, old man," he said. "Because right now there's 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 won't tolerate any more traps around Kenogami. I've made it my own personal responsibility. I even sprung a couple of Jesse's 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 ain't enough wildlife left in these parts. I know because I've 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 weren't 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 it'll 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. "We're gold hunters, and we've been criss-crossing the Kenogami area for the past three years. Each year we've 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

analyzed even as we speak, and if they're 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."

"Won't that get you into trouble?" Calvin asked. "I mean they'll know you've 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 barrel of the rifle that the dark-eyed bear hunter was holding was pointed down at the tent floor. He hesitated, glaring at Willis and the gun in the boy's hand. Willis took a step toward the man, his gun leveled at the bear hunter's chest; his eyes fixed on the other man's eyes. In the space of a heart beat the bear hunter whipped his shot gun up, but before he could get it all the way up Willis drove the barrel of his gun down on the other man's weapon, knocking it from his hands. In almost the same motion he brought the shot gun across his body and shoved it into the bear hunter, knocking him backward into the other men.

The bear hunter's arms flailed wildly as he sprawled backward into his partners. One arm caught the side of the table on his way to the floor, 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. It took only a few short seconds for all of the people within the tent to exit, but in that time span 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. “They must be heading for their boat. We have to get to the boat and scram.”

As he stumbled down the trail after the old hermit, Calvin could see Aunt Jesse and Willis just ahead of them.

“I don’t think they’re following us,” Eric said.

Shubel grunted. “Probably because they know we still have this,” he held up the shotgun. “But they’ll be coming.”

“Wait,” Calvin said. “I wrecked their outboard motor.”

“They’ve got Gallagher’s boat,” Eric said.

Calvin groaned. “You’re right.” He followed Shubel into the trees, his chest still aching.

“We’ve got to make it to the boat,” Eric was saying. “Willis’ outboard is the fastest on the lake - they’ll 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 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. “Don’t worry,” Willis shouted. “We’ve got to get back to the resort - the police should be there by now and 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.

“They’re 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 boat’s steering wheel to escape the spotlight, and as he did they heard a sharp crack - even above the sound of the two motors.

“They’re 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.

“It’s a trick,” Eric shouted. “They’re trying to sneak up on us in the dark.”

“No they’re 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 prow-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 hulk 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 Shubel’s wavering shotgun.

“You watch that gun doesn’t go off, old man,” he said.

Willis maneuvered the boat next to Gallagher’s stricken vessel. A third man was still clinging to the remnants of the overturned boat.

“Better hurry!” Aunt Jesse said. “She’s going down fast.”

By stretching as far as possible Calvin was able to catch hold of the man’s 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.

“Can’t 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 couldn’t have made it to shore, could he?” Calvin asked. “It’s not all that far.”

Eric swung the spotlight toward the distant shoreline.

“I think we would have noticed him,” Willis said. “But I guess it’s possible.”

“He’s gone,” Aunt Jesse said simply. “One way or the other.”

With his aunt’s words Willis eased the throttle of the boat down and moved out across the lake toward the far shore. The lights of the McBride’s 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 waiting for them. 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 Chase's hands. "What's going on, Eric?" she asked.

"It's okay, Mom." Eric put a hand on her shoulder. "Everything's under control now. Aren't the police here yet?"

Aunt Helga's 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. "Can't take any chances," he warned. "These fellas are still liable to be playing possum."

The police arrived a few minutes 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.

"We'll send our divers out to the spot in the morning," the policeman assured them. "If he drowned, we'll find him. If not . . . we'll 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, you're all staying here tonight. We have lots of room, and that's 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.

"I'm 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 I'm going into town. My husband is due to be released from the hospital this afternoon."

"Alright!" Eric exclaimed. "I'll go with you, Mom."

Shubel Chase cleared his throat. "Look, I'm sure grateful for your hospitality, ma'am, but I've got to get back to my shack. Thanks for feeding my dog, by the way."

"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 Helga's 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.

"You're 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 you've 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."

"That's 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 an important announcement." She paused expectantly as all eyes turned her way.

"I'm 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, I’m mighty pleased you won’t be selling out, Mrs. McBride,” he said, tipping his cap to her. “And I hope the rest of Jack Gray’s plans fall through too. We don’t need any casinos on this lake, thank you very much.”

“Wait,” Eric said. “Do you think it’s safe to go back to your cabin? We don’t know yet what happened to that last guy. The police divers haven’t found anything yet.”

“And they likely won’t either,” Shubel agreed. “I think that hard-eyed man just skedaddled. He’s got no reason to stay around here now that his plans have fallen through.”

“I don’t 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 traps around Kenogami either, will they?”

Willis laughed and got to his feet. “Don’t worry, Shubel, I’ll keep Aunt Jesse in line. And speaking of that, we’d better get going, too. It’s 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. “Don’t you be taking these boys away from their work for the next few days. They’ve got a lot of catching up to do.”

“I’ll come by tomorrow and give these poor lads a hand.” Willis 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 what’s even more, God even looks after some of us who aren’t 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.”

“What’s that?”

“It would appear that He’s not finished working yet.”

Calvin laughed. “Well, let’s get going then. Unlike Him, we’ve 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 owl's 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.