

Sherlock Jones  
and the  
Hidden Coins

A novel  
by Ed Dunlop

Book Five in the Sherlock Jones Detective Series

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## Chapter 1 – The Letter

Like an angry rhinoceros, the school bus came charging up the hill toward my bus stop. The growl of the motor increased in pitch as the bus driver downshifted. I heard the hiss of air brakes, and the big yellow vehicle slowed for my stop. The flashing yellow lights near the top of the bus abruptly changed to flashing red lights, and the octagon-shaped stop sign flipped out from the left side as if the bus itself was holding out one hand to stop traffic.

I was running as hard as I could for the bus stop, but I wasn't going to make it in time. My heart sank. I was still half a block away, and our driver was notorious for her unwillingness to wait even three seconds for a latecomer. It seemed that she delighted in pulling away just as you reached the bus stop, leaving you to breathe diesel exhaust as your desperate mind raced to figure out how you were going to find a ride to school.

Ignoring the burning in my lungs and the painful stitch in my side, I put on an extra burst of speed. I had to catch that bus! The books in my backpack thumped up and down against my shoulder blades as if they were determined to punish me for being late. My legs ached, and my heart pounded so hard against my rib cage that it felt as if I were having a heart attack. But it was no use! I wasn't going to make it!

Mrs. Geargrinder looked up through the windshield and saw me coming. Grinning evilly, she slipped the bus out of gear for a couple of seconds and raced the engine, just to be sure that I would have plenty of diesel fumes to inhale as she pulled away. As I ran, she slammed the bus back into gear and released the air brakes just enough so that they hissed ominously. The message was clear. "I see you, girl, but I'm not about to wait. You should have been on time!" I sprinted as hard as my weary legs could go, but it made no difference. She was going to leave without me.

The bus driver glanced at the one student stepping up to board the bus, and then back at me. It was obvious that she was estimating the time it would take that student to board against the time it would take me to reach the corner. If I reached the bus stop before she could get the door closed, she would have to wait for

me. But if she could get the door closed and put the bus in motion before I reached the corner—even if it was just half a second—she could legally pull away and leave me standing there. She grinned confidently. She had calculated the odds, and I was clearly the loser.

But she had overlooked one small detail: the identity of the student boarding the bus. It was my friend and classmate, Sherlock Jones! And what are friends for? I was just close enough to hear Mrs. Geargrinder bellow, “Come on, kid, I ain’t got all day!” The air brakes hissed again, and the bus crept forward, just an inch or two.

But Sherlock wasn’t about to be intimidated. “Come on, Penny!” he shouted at me. “You can make it!” To my surprise, he dropped his lunch box on the sidewalk. Stepping up into the doorwell of the bus to make sure that Mrs. Geargrinder couldn’t close the door and pull away, he slowly bent over and reached out for the lunch box.

The driver saw through Sherlock’s little charade, and she knew perfectly well that he was stalling to enable me to catch the bus. But there was nothing she could do about it! She looked as if she were about ready to take a bite out of the steering wheel.

“Thanks, Sherlock!” I puffed, reaching the bus just as he picked up the lunchbox. “I wouldn’t have made it without your help!” It didn’t matter that Mrs. Geargrinder heard me; she already knew what Sherlock had just done.

Huffing and puffing like an asthmatic steam engine, I followed my friend up the steps of the bus. The driver glared at us like an angry dragon about to consume a helpless princess. Sherlock grinned innocently at her. “Good morning, Mrs. Geargrinder! I hope that you’re having a pleasant day!”

The driver just snorted in reply. Sherlock patted her gearshift hand and she jerked it away as if he had just touched her with a piece of red-hot metal.

We hurried to our seats halfway back in the bus. “Thanks,” I told Sherlock again. “I never would have made it without your help!”

He grinned at me. “What are friends for?”

Sherlock and I are both seventh-graders at Spencerville Junior High, the school we go to since our town, Willoughby, is too small to have a junior high. Sherlock is a skinny little guy who probably doesn’t weigh more than seventy pounds, even though he’s in junior high. He wears thick glasses that make him look

just a bit bug-eyed. But he's got more brains than the rest of our class put together! Believe it or not, he memorizes all his textbooks the first week of school, just so that he won't have to carry them home. He makes perfect grades in every subject, without even trying. Mensa—the organization for geniuses like Sherlock—has been after him to join for the past two years. But he always refuses because he doesn't want other kids to think he's different.

Like me, Sherlock knows the Lord as his Savior, and he lives for the Lord. He and I both go to Calvary Baptist Church, the only Bible-preaching church in Willoughby.

I watched the sleepy little town of Willoughby parade by the windows as Mrs. Geargrinder guided the bus on its meandering route through the neighborhoods that I knew so well. Smedley's Grocery was on the right as we turned onto Main Street—the little green street sign on the corner still misspelled it as “Mina Street”—and we cruised past the First National Bank of Willoughby where Sherlock and I had witnessed our first bank robbery. We passed St. Jerome's Episcopal Church, rolled past another block of tiny, aluminum-sided houses, and then picked up speed as we left the dinky town of Willoughby behind.

I was puzzled. Mrs. Geargrinder had skipped all the stops after ours! She had driven the usual route, but passed the other bus stops without even slowing down. I looked around, and suddenly realized that, except for the three of us, the bus was empty! Something mighty strange was going on!

Even though Spencerville is fifteen miles away, it seemed just a moment or two later when the bus pulled into the circular driveway in front of our school. Several buses were discharging their passengers. The students were disembarking with all the eagerness and enthusiasm of a six-year-old on his second visit to the dentist. Mrs. Geargrinder threw the bus door open and scowled at us as we hurried forward and descended the steps.

Mr. Murphy was waiting for us on the sidewalk. “Where have you been this past week?” he stormed, grabbing Sherlock and me by the upper arms. “Do you think you can just decide to stay home when you feel like it? Well, I'm here to tell you—there's a penalty for playing hooky!”

“Hooky?” I echoed dismally, hardly able to believe my ears. “Mr. Murphy, nobody came to school this past week! You know, because of the asbestos!”

“What kind of a game are you trying to play, Miss Gordon?” the principal shouted at me. “Whatever it is, you are going to regret it!” He jerked us both toward the rear of the bus.

I looked in dismay at Sherlock. “But you told me that school was out for the whole week!” I accused. “You said that they had to close the school to remove asbestos from the band room!” Sherlock just shrugged, and my heart sank.

Mr. Murphy was dragging us along at such a rapid pace that my feet hardly touched the ground. It almost seemed that I was floating, except for the pain in my upper arm. “I think we can change your attitude,” Mr. Murphy shouted. “A little time in jail should teach you the importance of regular school attendance!”

“Jail?” I mumbled. “You can’t send us to jail!” Horrified, I looked up to see a police “paddy wagon” pulling up behind our bus. Two burly officers leaped out and opened the back doors. I was terrified. “Mr. Murphy, you can’t do this!” This couldn’t be happening!

Mr. Murphy grinned wickedly as he snapped handcuffs on our wrists. “It’ll be a long time before you two even think about playing hooky again,” he crowed.

“Wait!” I pleaded. “Mr. Murphy! You can’t do this! You’re not even our principal! You’re the principal at Willoughby Elementary, where we went last year! You can’t do this to us!” But Mr. Murphy just laughed and turned away.

One of the officers motioned for me to climb up into the paddy wagon. Raising both shackled hands, I grabbed the chrome handle at the side of the door and pulled myself up on the bumper step. I lost my balance and fell flat on my back on the pavement, knocking the wind out of myself.

I closed my eyes, shook my head as if to clear my thoughts, and then reopened my eyes and looked around. The paddy wagon was gone; the school was gone; and Mr. Murphy and the two police officers were gone! I was lying flat on my back on the carpet beside my bed!

Groggily, I got to my feet. The afternoon sun streamed through the windows in my room at Diamond Point, Mr. Diamond’s luxurious seven-thousand-square-foot lodge overlooking Thunderbird Lake. The whole thing with the bus and Mr. Murphy had been a dream! I was still trembling with emotion.

Glancing at the screen-saver clock on the computer monitor on the desk, I saw that the time was 2:38. *Mr. Diamond’s van was*

*supposed to leave for Willoughby at 2:00!* I reminded myself. *I must have fallen asleep while I was waiting.*

Rubbing the sleep from my eyes, I hurried downstairs. Sherlock was in the den. I must have still been half-asleep, because I told him, “Thanks for delaying Mrs. Geargrinder! I never would have caught the bus without your help!”

He gave me a funny look. “Mrs. Geargrinder? Who— Penny, what are you talking about?”

“Uh, nothing,” I mumbled. “I just—oh, forget it.”

“Penny, are you all right?”

“Yeah, I’m fine,” I told him. “I guess I fell asleep while I was waiting for the trip home. I hope I didn’t keep everybody waiting. Are we ready to go?”

School had been cancelled this past week because the janitor had found asbestos above the ceiling in one of the classrooms, and the asbestos had to be removed. Sherlock and I had just spent the past five days here at Thunderbird Lake with Lisa Diamond and her father. Larry Diamond is a multi-millionaire. He’s the principal owner and CEO of Diamond Computer Technology, a highly successful company. Lisa and her dad are two of the best Christians I know. It had been a good week, but now it was

Saturday afternoon, and Mr. Diamond’s custom van had been loaded for the trip back to Willoughby.

“Didn’t you hear?” Sherlock replied, with a note of disbelief in his voice. “Mrs. Diamond called just after lunch. The asbestos removal project isn’t finished, and school is closed for another whole week! Mrs. Diamond called our parents and got permission for us to stay here at Diamond Point another week.”

“What about Brandon?” I asked, referring to a classmate of ours who had come along on the trip. “Is he gonna stay?”

“He has permission, too,” Sherlock told me. “His mother was a bit hesitant at first, but she finally consented.”

“Great!” I responded. “Then all four of us are staying.”

He nodded. “Another week at Thunderbird Lake.”

Lisa swept into the room just then, brushing her long, dark hair back from her face. “Brandon and I are going over to see Mrs. Pendergrass,” she told us. “You guys want to go?”

Five minutes later, Lisa, Brandon, Sherlock and I headed up the trail behind Diamond Point. The October air was cool but not chilly, and the woods were alive with the vibrant colors of autumn. The leaves underfoot made a pleasant crunching sound as we walked. I hiked along behind Lisa, watching her as she

walked. Lisa Diamond is so beautiful! She's tall and graceful, with the loveliest raven-black hair and the most beautiful face that God ever created. But Lisa has more than just a beautiful appearance; she has a beautiful personality to match. She's cheerful and sweet, with a servant's heart toward others and a desire to see people come to know Jesus as Savior. For a rich girl, she's pretty unusual.

I thought about my own stringy blond hair, freckled face, and skinny body. *I just wish that God had given me just half of the good looks He gave Lisa, and half of the intelligence He gave Sherlock*, I thought enviously. *Sometimes it doesn't seem quite fair!*

The trail crossed the top of the ridge and dipped down to a gently rolling valley. We came to the barbed wire fence that marked the boundary of Mrs. Pendergrass' farm. "There's Mrs. Pendergrass, now," Brandon said, pointing. "Looks like she's just coming back from the mail box."

A slender, white-haired figure in a faded blue dress was striding briskly up the lane toward the farmhouse. Even from three hundred yards away, we could see the white envelope in her

hands. *She sure walks fast*, I thought, *for an eighty-some year old woman!*

"Mrs. Pendergrass!" Lisa shouted. "Wait for us!"

We ducked through the barbed wire fence and ran toward the old lady. Mrs. Pendergrass stared at us in surprise as we approached. "Well, what are you all doing still here?" she asked. "I thought you'd be halfway to, uh, —Willoughby, is it? —by now!"

"We're staying at Diamond Point another week!" Lisa told her eagerly. "The asbestos thing at school isn't finished yet."

Mrs. Pendergrass' face lit up with delight. "Good! Then I'll see some more of you this coming week!" The afternoon sunlight sparkled and glistened on her snowy white hair, giving it the appearance of a large puff of silver cotton candy.

My friends and I fell in step with the elderly lady as she walked toward the house. I was right beside Mrs. Pendergrass, and she reached over and gave me a hug. We'd only known each other for five days, but the expression of affection seemed perfectly natural. She tore open an envelope and scanned the letter inside. "Oh, my!"

The tone of her voice stopped us dead in our tracks, and we all looked at her in alarm. “What’s wrong?” Sherlock asked, before the others could get the words out.

Mrs. Pendergrass sighed heavily. “I’m afraid it’s more bad news,” she replied. She stared at the letter in silence, and the rest of us waited anxiously. Finally, she folded the letter and looked at us. “This is too much for an old woman like me to carry by herself,” she said, “and I need the four of you to pray with me. Let’s go up in the house and I’ll tell you all about it.”

We took seats around the little kitchen table, under a large, hand-lettered plaque that said: “For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also. Matthew 6:21”

Mrs. Pendergrass pulled up a stool and sat at the end of the table. She dropped the offending letter in the middle of the table. “I never told you what was in the letter from the APE the other day,” she began.

“I’m still not clear on who the APE is,” Lisa interrupted.

“APE stands for the ‘Administration Protecting the Environment’, Sherlock told her. “It’s a state regulatory agency modeled after the EPA, or Environmental Protection Agency, which is federal. The APE was started by our environmentalist

friend, Senator Greene, while he was still a state senator.

Apparently, he wasn’t satisfied with the thousands of environmental regulations that the EPA has generated, and wanted even more. Even though Greene is now a United States senator, he left this state the legacy of its very own environmental agency, the APE.”

“Just what they needed,” Brandon remarked.

Sherlock laughed. “Right.” He turned to Mrs. Pendergrass. “Forgive us for interrupting.”

The old lady smiled. “That’s all right. As I was saying, you were here the other day when I got the letter from the APE, but I never told you what it said. I’ve never been one to trouble others with my problems, but this is getting too big for me, and I’m asking for your prayers.”

“What did the letter say?” Brandon asked.

“The APE is charging me with two violations of the Wetlands Act,” Mrs. Pendergrass told us. Her chin was quivering, and I could tell that she was very upset. “They’re fining me \$50,000 on each count.”

I was shocked. “But that’s a hundred thousand dollars!”

She nodded. "I don't have a tenth of that. Or even a twentieth, for that matter." She reached out a trembling hand and picked the envelope up from the table. "And this one is from the Tax Assessor's office, informing me that they're reclassifying my property from farmland to commercial real estate."

"That's ridiculous!" Sherlock snorted. "There's no way they can classify this property as commercial! It's obviously farmland!"

"Has been for the sixty-some years I've lived here," Mrs. Pendergrass agreed. "But the edge of my farm touches Lake Thunderbird, meaning that I have six hundred feet of lake frontage. You probably know that it's right between Diamond Point and Senator Greene's vacation house, Briarwood. The Tax Assessor claims that the lake frontage automatically classifies this property as commercial. He's raising my property taxes this year from twelve hundred dollars to just over ninety-six hundred!"

"Almost ten thousand dollars!" I exclaimed softly. "And with the fines from the APE, that's almost \$110,000! What will they do if you can't pay it?"

Mrs. Pendergrass was nearly in tears. Her chin was quivering, and she was blinking rapidly. "They'll seize my farm," she

answered sadly. "It's all I have, but they'll take my farm away from me."

## Chapter 2 – The Missing “Treasure”

The four of us sat stunned by the distressing news Mrs. Pendergrass had just shared with us. We knew that the gentle old lady did not have the money to pay the fines and the higher taxes, but it was unthinkable to even imagine that the government would actually evict her from her own property. Where would she go?

“This is mighty strange,” Sherlock remarked. “Why would two government agencies, one from the county and one from the state, just happen to send notices demanding large amounts of money in the same week? It’s just too much of a coincidence.”

The troubled look on Lisa’s face told me that she was worried about the dilemma that her elderly friend was facing. I felt like crying.

Sherlock looked at Mrs. Pendergrass. “Would you mind if I look at the letters?”

She handed him the letter from the Tax Assessor, left the room, and returned moments later with a second envelope. Sherlock glanced over the letter and “Notification of Property Values Reassessment” form from the Tax Assessor, and then reached for the letter from the APE. “Listen to this,” he told us, reading from the letter. “Be advised that officials of the Administration Protecting the Environment have determined that your farming operation is in violation of the State Wetlands Act, directive number 147A365. It has been determined that two violations have occurred, each punishable by a fine of \$50,000.”

He looked up soberly. “It goes on to say that she has ninety days to pay the fines, or sustain forfeiture of the property.”

“Sustain forfeiture of the property,” Brandon repeated. “What does that mean?”

“It simply means that the APE is getting ready to seize her farm,” Sherlock replied.

“But what have I done?” Mrs. Pendergrass wailed. “And how can they say that my farming violates the Wetlands Act? I thought ‘wetlands’ were swamps and marshes.”

“Technically, they are,” Sherlock told her. “But the Little Bear River runs along the western border of your property, and you

have a small bit of lake frontage on the north boundary. Apparently, the APE is going to try to use that to classify your farm as 'wetlands'."

"That's preposterous!" I exploded. "Can they do that?"

"It is preposterous," Sherlock agreed, "but they've made similar judgments in other cases and used it as justification to seize the property of innocent property owners."

"But Mrs. Pendergrass hasn't done anything illegal!" I argued. I turned to her. "Have you?"

Mrs. Pendergrass smiled sadly. "Not that I know of."

Lisa walked over and put her arms around Mrs. Pendergrass. "What are you going to do?" she asked softly.

"Pray," Mrs. Pendergrass replied. "That's why the Lord brought you back, I'm sure. To help me pray." We bowed our heads around the little table and took turns praying, asking God to somehow overturn the decision at the APE and the Tax Assessor's office. I don't suppose that any of us had enough faith to ask God to simply provide the money; we were asking Him to make another way out.

I listened in amazement when Brandon prayed. He had been saved less than a month—the result of Lisa's witnessing to him—

but he prayed in simple faith asking God to keep the state and county from seizing our friend's property. "You promised to take care of us and supply what we need, God," he said in closing, "and Mrs. Pendergrass is one of your children. So I'm just asking you to take care of her, and not let her lose the farm that she loves so much. Thank you, Jesus, Amen."

Mrs. Pendergrass wiped her eyes. "Thanks, kids," she said softly. "I feel better already. I'm glad I have you to help pray about this."

"We'll keep praying, too," Sherlock promised her. "Everyday, until this whole thing is settled."

My eye fell on the plaque over the table, and I read it out loud. "For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.' That's what we need right now—some treasure."

I noticed a special twinkle in the old lady's eyes as she gazed at the wooden plaque. "George made that for me the day he died," she said softly. "I guess I haven't told you the story yet, have I?"

We shook our heads in unison. "No, Mrs. Pendergrass."

A faraway look came into the old lady's eyes, and I knew that she was remembering some special memory from days gone by. "You know, there was a treasure. A real one."

“What was it?” I asked eagerly. “Would it have been enough to pay the fines and the taxes?”

She paused and looked at me tenderly. For just a moment, I imagined that I was her granddaughter. Then she chuckled. “No, Penny, it wasn’t that much. It was only nine hundred dollars—in a canning jar. That wouldn’t pay the fines and the taxes, but it would have been a start. Anyway, the money disappeared years ago, and I never did figure out what could have happened to it.”

She paused and adjusted her glasses. “Come to think of it, it was the day that George died—the same day he made the plaque. It’s funny, but I hadn’t thought about that for years.”

“Why was the money in a canning jar?” The question came from Brandon.

“Because George didn’t trust banks,” Mrs. Pendergrass replied. “He got that from his father. But I can’t say that I blame him. His family had lost everything they had not too many years before in the stock market crash and the Great Depression.”

“Tell us the whole story,” Lisa begged.

“George and I were married over sixty years ago,” the old lady began. “George was twenty-two, and I was only twenty. George bought the farm from his uncle in September, and we were

married the very next month right here on the property. We were as happy as two people could be! Three years and two months later, God took him home with a heart attack.”

“He was only twenty-five, and he had a heart attack?” Brandon said. “I didn’t think twenty-five-year-old people had heart attacks!”

“A heart attack can strike at any age,” Mrs. Pendergrass told him, “but they usually strike middle-aged and older people.”

“Where did the nine hundred dollars come from?” I asked.

“George inherited it from his father,” Mrs. Pendergrass replied. “He paid cash for the farm, and had nine hundred dollars left over.”

“And he kept it in a canning jar,” Sherlock added.

Mrs. Pendergrass laughed. “George and I called it the ‘treasure’,” she told us. “We weren’t going to spend a dime of it until we had children to send to college. But the Lord never gave us any children, and now the treasure is gone, too.”

“What happened to it?” I asked.

“George kept the canning jar hidden somewhere in the barn. Even I never knew where he kept it. But on the morning of December 19, he brought it into the house. For some reason he

thought that the hired man had found it, and George was going to hide it in a better place. As I recall, he put the jar in the oven as a temporary hiding place until he could think of a permanent place. He went up to the Wedding Chapel and cut a lovely blue spruce for our Christmas tree that year. I still remember him dragging that Christmas tree in through the kitchen door.

“He had been sick for a couple of days, and when he came in with the tree, I could see that he wasn’t feeling well. But when I suggested that he go back to bed, he just laughed and said that he had to trim the tree. ‘I found a place to hide the treasure,’ he told me. ‘I’ll hide it before I get the tree up.’

“‘Tell me where you’re going to put it,’ I begged. He hugged me and said that he would make up a riddle for me to figure out, and that the riddle would tell me the location of the treasure.”

Mrs. Pendergrass grew quiet for a moment or two. “Jacob White came by and hallooed the house just then. George and I ran to the door, and there was Jacob sitting in his buggy looking like he was ready to faint. His wife was having a baby, and he couldn’t reach the doctor. He wanted me to come and serve as midwife. I ran and got my coat. When I passed through the kitchen again, George was sitting right here at this little table with

the treasure right there in front of him. It was the last time I ever saw him alive.”

My eyes grew misty as I listened to her.

“My last memory of George is him sitting right here in his overalls and red flannel shirt, looking at that little pint jar of gold,” Mrs. Pendergrass said softly.

Sherlock’s head jerked up. “Gold?”

Mrs. Pendergrass nodded. “The money was all in ten and twenty-dollar gold pieces. I suppose that little jar was nearly a third full.”

Sherlock leaned forward. “Gold was twenty dollars an ounce back then,” he said, “so if your husband had nine hundred dollars in that jar, he had the equivalent of forty-five twenty-dollar gold pieces! The gold content of the twenty-dollar gold piece was ninety-six hundredths of an ounce, so he had over forty-three ounces of gold!”

“What would that be worth today?” I asked.

“Gold is several hundred dollars an ounce,” he answered, “so that would easily be more than ten thousand dollars!”

“That would be enough to pay the taxes!” Brandon exclaimed.

“Yes, but that’s just the value of the gold content,” Sherlock replied. “The coins would have numismatic value, and some of them could be worth many times the gold content value to collectors.”

“The gold has been gone for well over half a century,” Mrs. Pendergrass reminded us. “Martha White had a little girl that day. I was at the house for over six hours. When I came home, George was seated at the table, slumped over the Matthew 6:21 plaque. Apparently he had just finished it. Doc Edwards thinks he died of a heart attack. We never did find the treasure; George had hidden it too well.”

“What if one of the neighbors came by and found it on the table?” Brandon suggested. “They might have stolen it.”

Mrs. Pendergrass shook her head. “Folks were honest back then, Brandon. I don’t suppose there was a person in the entire county that would have taken it.” She paused. “Except perhaps the hired man. George never did trust him.”

“You said that George was going to give you a riddle telling where he had hidden the gold,” Sherlock pointed out. “Was that the Matthew 6:21 plaque?”

My eyes darted to the verse. “For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.”

“I still think so,” the old lady replied. “George and I called the gold our ‘treasure’, and the verse does mention treasure, doesn’t it?”

“What if we could find the treasure,” I thought aloud, “we could pay the taxes and part of the fines, too!”

“You mentioned a wedding chapel a few minutes ago,” Sherlock said. “You said that’s where your husband got the Christmas tree. Where was the wedding chapel?”

Mrs. Pendergrass smiled. “George and I were married in the Wedding Chapel,” she said, with a coy expression. “We wanted a church wedding, and the preacher agreed to hold the ceremony there. George built split log benches for all the guests, and then used them for firewood that winter.”

“But where was the chapel?” Sherlock persisted.

“I guess I didn’t answer your question, did I?” Mrs. Pendergrass replied. “The Wedding Chapel is a natural amphitheater on the side of the ridge above the farm. When you came over the ridge today, if you had taken a right turn instead of crossing the fence, you would have walked right into it. There’s a

beautiful grove of blue spruce lining each side of the Chapel, and that's where George cut our Christmas tree each year. At the head of the amphitheater, just below the rock face, there's a scarlet oak that wasn't there when George and I were married. If you'd go up there in the winter, you'd see why we called it the 'Wedding Chapel', and why we decided to have our wedding there."

Mrs. Pendergrass stuffed the letters from the Tax Assessor and the APE back into their envelopes. "I'd better get milking," she said. "Thanks for stopping in. I hope I didn't bore you with my stories of days gone by."

I glanced out the kitchen window and was surprised to see that the sun was already dropping behind the hills on the far side of the Little Bear. It would be dark in half an hour.

"Why don't we come with you and help you milk?" Lisa suggested. "We'll head home after that."

"Fine with me," Mrs. Pendergrass replied. "I'd be happy for your company. Boys, Penny, do you want to come?"

"I've never tried milking," I replied. "Sounds like fun!"

"I think I'll decline the opportunity," Sherlock said. "I want to check something out. Do you mind if I take the letters back to

Diamond Point and copy them? I'll bring them back tonight."

Mrs. Pendergrass handed him the letters.

"Daddy doesn't have a copier at the cabin," Lisa pointed out.

"No, but I'll scan them into the computer," Sherlock replied.

"Brandon, you gonna go with me or stay here with the girls?"

"I think I'll head back to Diamond Point," Brandon replied.

"The girls will have to walk home alone in the dark."

I snorted. "We're not scared."

"Fine, but watch out for bears," Sherlock warned darkly.

"Bears!" I scoffed. "Sherlock, there are no bears around here!"

"Where do you think bears live?" Sherlock replied. He winked at Brandon, but I saw him. "Penny, we're in the north woods! How do you think the Little Bear River got its name?"

"You can't scare me, Sherlock, so give it up! Come on, Lisa, let's go help Mrs. Pendergrass with the milking."

Brandon stood up and sauntered toward the door. "See ya, Mrs. Pendergrass," he said. "We'll be praying for you!" He threw a glance in Sherlock's direction. "Race ya to the cabin!" He darted out the door and was gone, and the screen door slammed behind him. Sherlock tucked the letters from the APE and the Tax Assessor carefully inside his windbreaker and hurried after him.

Lisa and I accompanied Mrs. Pendergrass to the sagging old barn. As we entered, the door squealed like a creature in pain. Two huge, black and white cows—Mrs. Pendergrass told us they were Holsteins, whatever that means—came walking in through the double doors at the far end. They sauntered into the narrow milking area as if they knew the schedule and stood patiently waiting while Mrs. Pendergrass got the milk buckets and a funny little stool that was missing one leg.

She placed the bucket under the first cow and set the stool beside the cow, and then turned to me. “This is Lisa,” she told me. “Care to try milking her?”

“Lisa!” I hooted. “Good name for a cow, huh, Lisa?”

Lisa gave me a funny look. “The other one is named Penny, so there!”

I looked at Mrs. Pendergrass. “Is her name really Penny?”

The old lady shook her head. “That one is Mona. Mona and Lisa.” She sat down on the little stool and reached under the cow named Lisa. “Watch. I’ll show you how.” She made a tugging, squeezing motion with her fist, and a thin, white stream of milk squirted into the bucket with a funny, tinny sound. Her hands flew as she alternately squeezed with one hand, and then the other. The

little streams of milk made the funny sound every time they hit the metal bucket. Mrs. Pendergrass backed out. “You try.”

I sat down on the stool and reached under the cow. I squeezed and squeezed, but nothing came out. Lisa laughed. “Let me show you. It’s easy.”

When she took my place on the stool, the little jets of milk hit the bucket almost as fast as when Mrs. Pendergrass was doing it. Lisa laughed at the look on my face, but it was a friendly laugh, not a laugh of derision. “You’ll learn,” she told me. “It’s easy, once you get the feel of it. I learned how to milk a cow the first summer I came up here.”

When both cows had been milked—without my help—Lisa and I said good-bye and headed for Diamond Point. I was thinking about the canning jar filled with gold coins as we crossed the soybean field. “I know that the treasure’s probably long gone now,” I told Lisa, “but wouldn’t it be great if we could find it for Mrs. Pendergrass? That wouldn’t pay everything for her, but it would pay some of it.”

“Where would we look?” Lisa asked.

“Oh, I don’t know. Let’s think on it for a while. George Pendergrass made that plaque right after he hid the coins, and

Mrs. Pengergrass thinks it's the riddle he was talking about. Maybe we could figure it out."

"Well, Sherlock could find it if anybody could," Lisa suggested.

For some reason, her statement frustrated me. "Let's find it without his help," I replied hotly. "It'd be fun to show him that girls are just as smart as boys."

Lisa shrugged. "I guess so." She laughed. "But if you think you're as smart as he is..."

"Thanks!" I said. "Thanks a lot!"

Lisa looked up at the sky. "We'd better hurry. It's getting dark, and the woods will be even darker."

"Don't tell me that you're afraid of Sherlock's imaginary bears," I taunted.

"I've never seen one, but I guess bears could live up here. This is pretty desolate country, and there are not a lot of people around."

I didn't reply, but for some reason, I found myself walking faster. The woods loomed just ahead, and since we had just been talking about bears, my imagination was juiced up and ready to go. Each shadow looked like a bear.

It was just about dark as we entered the woods. I heard a rustling sound in the leaves beside the trail, so I grabbed Lisa's arm in an attempt to scare her. "Lisa!" I whispered, "it's a bear!"

"It's just a squirrel or something," she whispered back, but she didn't sound very sure of herself.

"It's a bear," I moaned, trying my best to sound terrified. "They always come out at this time of night!"

To my surprise, Lisa fell for it. She grabbed my arm so tightly that her fingernails were digging painfully into my wrist. She let out a little moan, and I tried to hold back the snickers. The rustling, crunching sound in the fallen leaves came closer. It *wasn't* just a squirrel. Something BIG was behind those trees, and it was coming toward us!

My heart pounded with fear. At that moment, an angry roar blasted through the trees, reverberating and echoing across the valley behind us! I recognized the fearsome sound immediately. We were about to come face to face with an angry bear!

### Chapter 3 – Bear Attack

The bear growled again, an angry, awesome roar that must have been audible over a mile away. The fearsome sound seemed to stop my heart. I turned to run, but my legs had turned to jelly. I was terrified, so scared that I literally could not move. Lisa and I clutched each other in the darkness, shaking so badly we could hardly stand up.

I tried desperately to run, but my feet refused to respond. We were going to be eaten alive!

“What can we do?” Lisa cried out.

“I don’t know,” I whimpered. For some reason, the thought of running suddenly left my mind. “I read somewhere that you’re supposed to play dead if you’re attacked by a bear,” I whispered. “Drop to the ground!”

The bear roared again, a loud, prolonged bellow of rage that must have sent tremors of fear through the heart of every creature

in the forest. I could hear the huge, powerful creature shuffling toward us. Lisa and I dropped face down to the ground and lay still. Well, except for the trembling and shaking. It’s hard to play dead when every nerve in your terrified body is twitching and jerking. I was crying, and I think Lisa was too.

I thought of Mom and Dad. Would I ever see them again?

The bear gave a softer, low-pitched growl. Suddenly, I felt him grab my foot! I screamed with horror.

Laughter echoed through the trees. But the sound didn’t even register in my terror-crazed mind. The bear tugged at my leg, and I screamed again. I kicked with all my might.

“Penny!” It was Sherlock’s voice. “Penny, don’t have a heart attack!”

I rolled over and looked up. Sherlock and Brandon were standing there grinning at us! Sherlock was holding an empty, one-gallon can with a shoelace hanging from it. I looked around frantically, but there was no bear. Brandon and Sherlock doubled over with laughter. “That was good, girls!” Sherlock hooted. “I wish we had gotten this on videotape! You should have seen your faces!”

Lisa and I scrambled sheepishly to our feet. My heart was still pounding, and I was trembling. I looked at Lisa, and her face was as white as a new marshmallow. My fear instantly turned to anger. “Sherlock, if you ever do that again...” I was so angry that I was trembling. I couldn’t even finish the sentence without bursting into tears, so I simply closed my mouth. I took several deep breaths, trying to calm down and waiting for my heart to get over its panic attack.

Lisa stepped toward Sherlock. “How did you do that? The growl was so real, and so loud! It sounded just like a bear!”

Sherlock raised the can in the crook of his arm and pulled on the shoelace with the other hand. An authentic, stop-you-in-your-tracks bear growl came blasting from the open end of the can and echoed across the valley! Sherlock pulled on the shoelace again, slowly and gently this time, and a low, angry-sounding growl came out.

“Awesome,” I said, as my anger evaporated into curiosity. “Let me try it!”

Sherlock handed me the can, and then a little block of resin, like violinists use on their violin bows. “Lay the shoelace across this and grip it with your thumb,” he told me. “Pull the resin down

the shoelace, keeping pressure on it with your thumb. It takes a little practice, but pretty soon you’ll get an authentic-sounding bear growl.”

I held the can in the crook of my left arm and gripped the shoelace with my right hand, holding it against the resin with my thumb. As I pulled the resin block down the shoelace, the can let out a growl. But it wasn’t very loud, and it sounded kind of tinny. “Try it again,” Sherlock urged. “It just takes a little practice.”

I tried several more times. Some of my attempts sounded like a dying cow instead of a fierce bear, but I finally got the hang of it. I pulled hard on the shoelace as I slid the resin across it, and an authentic-sounding bear roar echoed through the forest. It was awesome!

“How does it work?” Lisa asked.

“The vibrations from the string are amplified by the can, which acts as a resonance chamber,” Sherlock explained. “Slide the resin down the string, and Voila! Mr. Bear comes to life!”

We hurried back to Diamond Point. Mr. Diamond’s “summer cabin” is a two-story, seven thousand square foot lodge with eight bedrooms. Each bedroom has its own bathroom and Jacuzzi tub! The lodge sits on the east side of Thunderbird Lake, which is a

secluded, fourteen hundred-acre lake shaped like a bird with its wings outstretched. The side of the building facing the lake is all glass, and the view is breath taking. Senator Adam Greene, an ultra-liberal, United States senator who pushes all the extremist environmental nonsense, has an elaborate, three-story summer residence across the lake called “Briarwood”.

When we reached Diamond Point, Mr. Diamond’s caretaker, Robert, was out on the deck grilling steaks. Robert is a tiny little, elf-like man with a raspy voice that sounds like a cross between a chain saw and a bellowing moose. Listening to him talk is like having your eardrums rubbed with sandpaper. He calls me “Freckles”, but I don’t mind because he doesn’t say it to be mean. He was an alcoholic, but he got saved after he started working for Mr. Diamond and he hasn’t touched any booze since. He’s a really nice old man.

Brandon grabbed Sherlock’s arm just before we stepped out of the woods. “Give Robert a bear scare,” he suggested.

Sherlock grinned and got out the little block of resin. We knelt in the bushes, peering excitedly through the branches as Sherlock let loose with a rumbling bear growl that would have stopped your heart. Robert’s head jerked up. “Good heavens!” He ran for

the house, and we doubled over with laughter. This was a lot more fun than when Sherlock had done it to Lisa and me!

Robert came charging out of the house with a huge flashlight. He swept the powerful beam across the forest, and Sherlock made the bear can growl again. Robert focused the flashlight beam on the bushes behind which we were hiding. He stood as still as a park statue. It was hard to keep from laughing.

“All right, gang, come on out,” he said, finally. “The steaks are almost done.”

We emerged from the bushes. “How did you know it was us?” Lisa asked. “You were supposed to think it was a bear!”

“Bears don’t giggle,” Robert answered. He grinned at us. “I have to admit, though, you scared the life out of me with that first roar.” We followed him over to the grill, and he noticed the can in Sherlock’s hand. “So that’s why you wanted the applesauce can,” he said. “Sherlock, you scared me out of a year’s growth!”

“That’s bad news,” I teased. “You need all the growth you can get!”

“Watch your mouth, Freckles,” Robert warned jokingly, “it’s gonna get you in deep trouble!” As he stepped back to the grill and began turning the steaks, his wife Maimee came out on the

deck and began to set the table. “Call your dad, would you, Lisa?” Robert requested. “These rib eyes are about done.”

We sat out on the deck after supper, watching the stars above the lake. It was a beautiful night. The moon wasn’t quite as full as it had been the last few nights, but it hung like a chunk of silver against a velvet sky studded with glittering diamonds.

Thunderbird Lake is an awesome place at night.

“Another week at Diamond Point,” I sighed contentedly. “I miss Mom and Dad, but I’m glad we’re getting to stay here a few more days.”

“You know the best thing about this?” Brandon remarked. “We’re getting out of school! No assignments or homework or book reports for another whole week!”

“We’re going to end up paying for it, you know,” Lisa warned. “Mom said that they’re talking about making us go on Saturdays for awhile.”

“Well, it’s still a vacation from school,” Brandon said. “I’m going to enjoy it, thanks to the asbestos in Room 301!”

Sherlock snorted. “I don’t mind having another week here at Thunderbird Lake, but this asbestos thing is ridiculous! Removing the asbestos was a total waste of taxpayers’ money!”

“But asbestos causes lung cancer,” Lisa argued. “Why shouldn’t it be removed?”

“First of all, if the asbestos in the ceiling could cause cancer,” Sherlock told her, “it should have been left alone. It would have been simpler, easier, and far safer to stabilize it with a good coat of paint. Removing it multiplies the airborne fiber count by more than twenty thousand times!”

“You mean there will be more asbestos in the air in the band room when we get back?” Brandon asked.

Sherlock nodded. “Far more. Removing it was not only a waste of money; it would increase the health risks to students, if that type of asbestos could cause cancer.”

“But if the asbestos posed a health risk,” Lisa argued again, “shouldn’t it have been removed?”

“The environmentalists created a senseless panic over the asbestos issue,” Sherlock replied, “which wasn’t based on facts. Two types of asbestos, crocidolite and amosite, also known as ‘blue asbestos’ and ‘brown asbestos’, can cause serious lung

problems, but these were not used as insulation or fire-proofing in schools or other buildings. The asbestos in the band room ceiling at school is chrysotile, or soft white asbestos, which occurs naturally in many places in the United States and has never been linked to health problems. In fact, a federal court lifted the ban on chrysotile, but the EPA just ignored the court's ruling."

Mr. Diamond came out on the deck just then. "Better head in and have devotions, kids, then it's time to get ready for bed. We want to be alert in church tomorrow."

That night I lay in bed thinking about the "treasure" that Mr. Pendergrass had hidden. *Where would a man who didn't trust banks hide a canning jar full of gold coins? Was the Matthew 6:21 plaque really a clue to the mystery? The canning jar has been missing for over half a century! What if someone else has already found it?* I dismissed that thought immediately. *The coins are still somewhere on Mrs. Pendergrass' farm—I just know it! If we can just figure out what Matthew 6:21 has to do with it, we can find them and help Mrs. Pendergrass.* I fell asleep resolving to hunt for the treasure until we found it.

The tires squealed in protest as Mr. Diamond's van swept around a tight curve in the road. "It's less than ten miles to church," Lisa told us, "but it takes twenty-five minutes to get there, cause these roads twist and wind so much."

Brandon pointed forward. "Look. There's another one of those dairy trucks."

Just ahead, a long tanker truck crept into a hairpin curve. A puff of black smoke spurted high into the air as the driver downshifted. A bright red and white decal on the back of the shiny chrome tank identified the vehicle as belonging to the "Pleasant Valley Dairy". Mr. Diamond frowned as he slowed down behind the tanker. "I sure would like to know where these trucks are going," he remarked. "There's no dairy up here, at least, not as far as I know."

"You've seen these trucks before, haven't you?" Lisa said.

Her father nodded. "Add five minutes to that twenty-five minute trip," he grumbled. "It's gonna take me forever to find a place to pass this guy." We poked along behind the dairy tanker for two or three miles. Finally, the road straightened out for a

quarter mile stretch, and Mr. Diamond pulled out and passed safely.

We arrived at church to find Norm Aysee waiting for us on the front steps. Norm and his brother Max are identical twins in their sixties. They own a hardware store in the little town of Comanche. Lisa has been giving them Gospel tracts and witnessing to them for several years. The day before yesterday, she had led Norm to the Lord!

“Mind if I sit with you?” Norm asked us. He seemed a little nervous.

Robert, Maimie and Mr. Diamond led Norm to the adult class, and the rest of us followed Lisa to the Junior High class. We slipped in quietly because class had already started. After a few choruses, a tall, skinny man with bright red hair taught a rather interesting lesson on faith. When Sunday school was over, we met the men again in the church auditorium for the morning service. I saw Mrs. Pendergrass on the other side of the auditorium, but I didn't get a chance to say hello.

As it turned out, the tall, red-haired man was Pastor McClain. He preached another interesting message. When he gave the invitation at the close of the service, Norm Aysee walked forward

and talked with the pastor for a couple of minutes. Pastor McClain stepped back into the pulpit and addressed the congregation.

“Norm Aysee comes today to make a public profession of faith,” he announced. “He got saved yesterday, but here's the interesting aspect of his conversion—he was led to the Lord by a seventh-grade girl, Lisa Diamond! This just goes to show that the Lord can use anybody in His service, especially young people. I know that some of you have prayed for the Aysee brothers for years, and this is a day for rejoicing. Norm wants to be baptized at the close of the service tonight.”

“Wasn't that a great service last night?” I asked Mrs. Pendergrass, as we sat around her kitchen table watching her get lunch ready. “I was really happy to see Mr. Aysee get baptized.”

The old lady nodded as she took a steaming pan of corn bread from the oven. “You don't know what a thrill that was for me,” she said happily. “I've prayed for that man for years, but I'm afraid I wasn't the faithful witness that I should have been. And then Lisa comes along and leads him to the Lord!” She took her oven mitts off and gave Lisa a hug. “The Lord used you, dear.”

The five of us were startled by a knock at the kitchen door. Mrs. Pendergrass opened it to find two tall, well-dressed men standing on her porch. “We’re looking for Ms. Pearl Pendergrass,” a deep bass voice announced.

“I’m Mrs. Pendergrass,” the old lady replied. “May I help you?”

“My name is Al Luciani, and this is Amos Keene,” the man told her. “We represent Royal Investment Properties, and we’d like to discuss a business opportunity with you. May we come in?”

Mrs. Pendergrass hesitated. “I have company, but—all right, come in.”

The men stepped into the kitchen. Mr. Luciani frowned when he saw us. He turned to Mrs. Pendergrass. “Is there some place the kids can go for a few minutes?”

“We were just getting ready to have lunch together,” Mrs. Pendergrass told him. “Whatever business you have in mind can be discussed in their presence.” She stepped toward the table. “Sherlock, Brandon, why don’t you let these men have your seats, please?”

The boys jumped up and the men took their places at the kitchen table. Al Luciani sat beside me, and I scooted over. I wasn’t sure that I liked this man. Sherlock and Brandon leaned against the kitchen sink.

“Ms. Pendergrass, I’ll get right to the point,” Mr. Luciani said. “Royal Investment Properties would like to buy your farm.” He laid a manila folder on the table, and then took out what looked like a legal contract. I saw a huge crown at the top of the page.

Mrs. Pendergrass shook her head. “The farm’s not for sale,” she said flatly.

The man gave a condescending laugh. “Let’s not be too hasty,” he told her. “You haven’t even heard our proposal.”

Mrs. Pendergrass smiled sweetly. “Doesn’t matter. I’m not selling.”

The men exchanged glances. Mr. Luciani continued talking as if he hadn’t even heard Mrs. Pendergrass. “We’re aware of the fact that property values have plummeted in this area in the last few years,” he said smoothly, in a voice that purred with self-confidence. “But Royal Investment Properties is willing to make you a reasonable offer on this old place.” He slid the contract

across the table toward her. “We’re offering you the sum of ninety thousand dollars.”

Mrs. Pendergrass stared at the man. “Mr. Luciani, the acreage alone is worth far more than that! Ninety thousand dollars is a ridiculous offer!”

Mr. Luciani smiled that condescending smile again. “Ms. Pendergrass,” he said slowly, patiently, as if he were talking to a slow child, “this region is experiencing a depressed economy! Property values have been steadily falling for the past five years. Ninety thousand is a very fair offer. In fact, it’s more than fair—it’s generous!”

The old lady frowned at him. “I don’t know where you’re getting your information, sir, but ninety thousand is hardly generous. The answer is no. The farm is not for sale.”

The men looked at each other again, and Mr. Keene nodded slightly, almost imperceptibly. “Ms. Pendergrass,” Mr. Luciani said, “I understand that you are facing some huge liabilities in connection with this property.”

“What are you talking about?” Mrs. Pendergrass snapped, which seemed out of character for her.

“I understand that the APE is levying some rather heavy fines against you,” the man said smugly. “I also understand that your property taxes have escalated rather sharply this year. If you sell to us, Royal Investment Properties will assume your liabilities on both counts. I wouldn’t dismiss our offer too quickly, dear lady.”

It made me mad to hear the way he was talking to Mrs. Pendergrass. I think it was making her angry, too. She stood up and pushed the papers back across the table. “There’s no need to discuss this further, Mr. Luciani. My mind is made up. I’m not selling.”

The men walked toward the door. “I’m sure you’ll change your mind, Ms. Pendergrass,” Mr. Luciani told her. He handed her a business card. “Call us when you’re ready to talk business.”

Sherlock met him at the door. “Could I please have one of your cards, sir?”

Al Luciani look puzzled, but he dug out a card and handed it to Sherlock. “Good day, Ms. Pendergrass. We’ll be in touch.” The screen door slammed as the men left the porch.

Mrs. Pendergrass frowned as she sat back down at the table. “Ninety thousand dollars,” she grumbled. “He thinks he’s going

to buy my farm for ninety thousand dollars. What was that man thinking?"

Sherlock was studying the man's business card as he sat back down at the table. "It all fits together!" he said excitedly.

"What fits together?" I asked. "What are you talking about?"

"Don't you see?" Sherlock replied, dropping the card on the table. "Royal Investment Properties is behind the letters from the Tax Assessor and the APE! Both letters were a ploy designed to frighten Mrs. Pendergrass into selling the farm!"

"Can you prove that?" Lisa asked eagerly.

"Not yet," the young detective told her. "But I will! I'm going to check out Royal Investment Properties, the APE, and the Tax Assessor's office. I think I can already tell you what I'm going to find!"

"Are you saying that the letters weren't really from the APE or the Tax Assessor?" I asked. "Do you think that they were forgeries?"

Sherlock shook his head. "They were real. But I don't think they were authorized by the proper people. And unless I miss my guess, Royal Investment Properties is behind the whole scam."

Mrs. Pendergrass began to cut the cornbread into wedges. "Ninety thousand dollars indeed!" she muttered. "Who do they think they're dealing with? This old farm is worth far more than that. George would turn over in his grave if I sold his farm for ninety thousand."

Sherlock took off his glasses and cleaned them with the tail of his shirt. "They aren't making you a fair offer, Mrs. Pendergrass. And I'm afraid they're going to try to put pressure on you to sell. I'm convinced that's why you got the letters from the APE and the Tax Assessor. But I'm going to do some checking and find out just who's behind this, and what can be done to stop them."

She patted his arm and smiled. "Thank you, Sherlock. I appreciate your concern." She wasn't taking him seriously, but if it hurt his feelings, he didn't let it show. He just smiled politely and nodded.

*Wait till you see what this skinny little seventh-grade kid can do, I thought silently. You haven't seen Sherlock in action! When he gets through, you're in for a surprise! I thought about the jar full of gold coins. And when I get through, you'll have George's treasure back!*

The phone rang just then, and Mrs. Pendergrass hurried to answer it. “Hello? Yes, this is Pearl Pendergrass.” She listened for a moment and then said, “No! Oh my! When? Yes, thank you for telling me. Yes, I’ll tell the kids.”

The expression on her face was serious as she hung up the phone. “That was Pastor McClain,” she told us. “Norm Aysee died this morning with a heart attack.”

#### Chapter 4 – The Search

Sherlock, Brandon, Lisa and I stared at Mrs. Pendergrass as the meaning of her words slowly sank in. We sat in silence for at least half a minute, too stunned by the news to say anything. *We just saw Norm last night*, was my first thought. *How could he be dead?*

Lisa was the first one to speak. “When did he die?” she asked softly.

“This morning, shortly before nine o’clock,” the old lady answered. “He and Max were getting ready to open the store. Max found him dead behind the counter. Pastor McClain is helping take care of the funeral, which will probably be on Thursday.”

“It’s hard to believe that he’s dead,” Brandon said soberly. “He was a neat guy.”

“Thank God he got saved before he died,” Lisa said thoughtfully. She began to cry. “He received Jesus just two days ago.”

“I guess we can thank God for the asbestos removal,” I commented. “It may have been unnecessary, but if it hadn’t been for that, we wouldn’t be up here, and Norm may not have gotten saved.”

“‘Surely the wrath of man shall praise thee:’” Sherlock quoted, “‘the remainder of wrath shalt thou restrain.’ That’s Psalm 76:10. God can even take the foolish things that people do and use them for His own glory. And He can also decide when enough is enough, and put an end to the foolishness. He’s still sovereign, and He’s still in control of this world.”

“Norm was the one who saved you from drowning when you were little, wasn’t he?” I asked Lisa, and she nodded. “And God let you pay him back by showing him how to be saved.” She nodded again, and began to cry harder.

Mrs. Pendergrass served lunch, and we ate in silence. I have no recollection of what we even ate. My mind was on Norm Aysee, the man who had just gone to heaven to live with Jesus. I was so glad that Norm got saved.

Lisa wiped her eyes with the back of her hand. “I wonder how Max is taking it.”

After lunch Sherlock stood to his feet. “Thanks for lunch, Mrs. Pendergrass,” he said. “May we help you with dishes?”

Our hostess shook her head. “Run along,” she told him. “I’ll take care of them.”

Sherlock headed for the door. “I’m heading back to Diamond Point,” he announced. “I’m gonna get on the computer and try to track down these Royal Investment Properties people, and also see what I can find out about the two letters.”

Brandon followed him. “I think I’ll head home, too. Thanks for lunch, Mrs. Pendergrass.”

Mrs. Pendergrass looked at Lisa and me. “What are you girls planning? Are you going to stick around, or are you going to head home, too?”

“I’m staying,” I blurted. “I thought that I’d...” I hesitated. It sounded almost silly to actually say it.

“You thought that you’d what?” the kind old woman coaxed.

“I thought I’d...well, I think we can find the treasure for you, Mrs. Pendergrass. If the coins are worth as much as Sherlock thinks they are, it would at least pay the taxes for you.”

Mrs. Pendergrass smiled sadly. “I searched off and on for ten years, Penny, before I finally gave up. I must have searched this entire house from top to bottom at least twenty times. I know I’ve searched the entire barn at least a dozen times. I finally came to the conclusion that the Lord didn’t want me to have the money, and I quit searching.”

“Maybe God didn’t want you to find it then,” Lisa remarked. “But now that you have a major need, maybe He’ll help us find it for you.”

The old lady laughed. “So you’re going to search, too, are you? Well, girls, I won’t stop you, but I will tell you this—you’re wasting your time. The treasure’s been gone for decades and decades, and we’re not about to find it now. And like I said, perhaps the Lord just didn’t want me to have it. Perhaps it would have kept me from trusting Him.”

“But you don’t mind if we search?” I asked, timidly.

“Gracious, no!” Mrs. Pendergrass said, with a wave of her hand. “I hope you *do* find it. But I’m warning you—don’t get your hopes up! The treasure’s been gone for years. Either George hid it so well that it will never be found, or somebody passing

through found it. But if you want to look for it, more power to you, I say.”

I looked at Lisa. “Where should we start?”

Lisa thought for a moment. “Let’s look in the attic. People often hide valuables in their attics.”

“Where is the attic?” I asked Mrs. Pendergrass.

“The stairs are in the next room, dear,” she answered. “There’s a light at the top of the stairs. You’ll feel a pull string hanging in front of your face when you get up to the landing.” She tied her apron around her waist. “I don’t think I’d start with the attic, though.”

“Where *would* you start?” Lisa asked.

“Somewhere outside,” Mrs. Pendergrass answered. “George was an outdoor man, and I can just imagine him hiding the treasure somewhere outdoors. I’ve been over this entire farm countless times, but I still think he would have hidden the coins outdoors. It’s just the way he was.”

“Have you searched the attic?” The question came from Lisa.

“More times than I could count,” Mrs. Pendergrass replied. “You’re welcome to search it once more. But I still think that I would start outdoors.”

“We’ll just do a quick search of the attic, if that’s OK,” Lisa replied, “and then search outdoors.”

My heart was pounding a little faster as Lisa and I climbed the steep, narrow stairs. The search was on! I found the pull string at the top of the stairs, pulled it, and stepped back in time. The first thing we saw was an old-fashioned phonograph, the kind with the crank on the side and the big, black thing on top that looked like a giant Morning Glory flower. “I think that’s called a gramophone,” Lisa told me.

The phonograph even had a dusty, scratchy-looking record on the turntable, so Lisa tried to wind the ancient machine up. But the crank was rusted tight, and she couldn’t turn it. Losing interest in the antique phonograph, we started searching the attic in earnest.

I found three dusty cardboard boxes stacked one on top of the other. I opened the top box, and my heart leaped. Canning jars! Holding my breath, I began examining the jars one by one. I didn’t call out to Lisa because I didn’t want to get her excited and have it turn out to be nothing. But I was hoping. To my immense disappointment, all the jars were empty. It was as bad as getting a

Christmas present and then unwrapping it to find that someone had given you an empty box.

“Look at this,” Lisa called to me. “I found it in this old trunk.”

I hurried over to find her holding a huge photo album. It was the old-fashioned type with black paper pages and little white triangular things holding the pictures by the corners. The pictures were black and white, just as I expected. We paged through the album, studying the photos in the dim lighting. The photos were all of people that neither Lisa nor I recognized, and we finally came to the conclusion that they were some of Mrs. Pendergrass’ relatives.

Lisa started to close the album. “Wait!” I said, “there’s a page we must have skipped!” It was the first page in the album, and there was only one photograph, right in the center of the page. The photo was badly yellowed and faded, but it showed a group of people standing beside a grove of evergreen trees. The woman in the center of the picture was wearing a beautiful, long white dress, and I suddenly realized that the picture was of a wedding. Standing beside the woman was a tall, happy-looking man in a black suit and tall top hat.

“It’s somebody’s wedding,” I told Lisa.

“I can see that, Penny,” Lisa said patiently. “But don’t you know who these people are?”

I leaned closer and studied the photo in the dim light. “It’s an *ancient* picture, Lisa. These people are all dead by now. How would I know who they are?”

“It’s Mrs. Pendergrass’ wedding, silly. The man in the top hat is George Pendergrass! And that’s the Wedding Chapel that she talks about.”

I studied the picture again. “You’re right, Lisa! It is her wedding! She was beautiful, wasn’t she?”

“Look at her husband,” Lisa said wistfully. “George was one handsome man!”

We hurriedly searched the rest of the attic, but quickly decided that the canning jar treasure couldn’t possibly be hidden up there, unless there was some sort of secret panel concealing a special hiding place. I carried the photo album downstairs. “Look what we found!” I called to Mrs. Pendergrass as Lisa and I entered the kitchen. “It’s your old photo album!”

I flipped the album open to the first page as Mrs. Pendergrass hurried into the room. “Is this *your* wedding?”

The old lady beamed with the delight of old memories as she looked at the photo of the outdoor wedding. “That’s our wedding day,” she said grandly. “That’s the only picture I have of George.”

“You were beautiful!” I said, and I meant it.

“And your husband was good-looking, too,” Lisa said, blushing as we both turned to look at her. “He sure was tall.”

“Six-foot-two, which was rather tall, especially in those days,” Mrs. Pendergrass agreed. She sighed as she looked at the picture. “George was quite a man, and he loved the Lord with all his heart. It was hard to understand why God took him when he was so young.”

She looked like she was about to get teary-eyed, and I thought that maybe the picture was upsetting her. “I’ll take the album back to the attic,” I offered.

“No, leave it here for a few days,” Mrs. Pendergrass replied. “I’ll take it back up when we’re through with it.” She closed the album and set it on a tiny cherry wood table by the door.

With Mrs. Pendergrass’ permission, Lisa and I searched the rest of the little farmhouse, but found no trace of the precious canning jar. We finally headed for Diamond Point. I was disappointed, but tried not to show it. “I didn’t expect to find the

treasure the first day, did you?” I told Lisa as we hiked across the soybean field. “But we’ll find it soon! I can feel it.”

Lisa stopped suddenly and snapped her fingers as if she had forgotten something. “What’s wrong?” I asked.

“Sherlock’s bear can,” she replied. “We took it down to show Mrs. Pendergrass, but I left it on her back porch.”

“We can get it tomorrow,” I reassured her. “Sherlock won’t need it tonight, anyway.”

Sherlock was pacing the deck when we reached Diamond Point, and I could tell that he was deep in thought. “Hello, Brains,” I called. “What did you find out about Royal...uh, the company that wants to buy Mrs. Pendergrass’ farm?”

He looked up, startled. “Oh, hi, Penny. Hi, Lisa. Did you find anything?”

“I asked first,” I told him. “What did you find out?”

“Plenty!” he said enthusiastically. “Royal Investment Properties is owned by—guess who? Northern States Enterprises! And of course, Northern States is owned by—”

“Senator Greene,” I finished.

“Right! I tracked down Royal Investment on the Internet and traced it back to Senator Greene. But you know what else I

discovered? On two separate occasions, land fraud charges were filed against Royal Investment Properties. Both times the charges were dismissed without even a hearing. And, of course, the stories never even made news. What does that tell you?”

“Senator Greene has plenty of friends in the news media,” I said. “What did you find out about the APE fines, or the property taxes?”

“Those were a little trickier,” Sherlock said, “and even more interesting. It took quite a while to figure it out, but I was finally able to get into the APE computer system and locate the file on Mrs. Pendergrass. The report was filed by APE agent Debra Ginster. Remember how the letter stated that Mrs. Pendergrass had two violations of the Wetlands Act, directive number 147A365? Well, guess what I found out—there *is* no directive number 146A365! The entire report was made up, and the charges against Mrs. Pendergrass have no legal basis!”

“Can you have the APE drop the charges?” Lisa suggested.

“I’m going to work on that, but I haven’t had time yet,” he replied. “But guess what else I discovered? Debra Ginster is not even an APE agent! She worked for the APE until eighteen

months ago, but she's not there now. Guess where she's employed now—Northern States Enterprises!”

“So she's working for Greene.”

Sherlock nodded. “Exactly. But even though she's gone from APE, she knows the system, and was able to use her computer to file a report against Mrs. Pendergrass. Once she built the file on Mrs. Pendergrass, the computer took over and did the rest.”

“So the whole thing is illegal,” I declared.

“Very. The charges against Mrs. Pendergrass are totally fictitious.”

“But can't you just do what Lisa suggested? Call the APE and ask them to delete the file against Mrs. Pendergrass! If the whole thing was simply made up, they ought to just erase it from the computer.”

Sherlock shook his head. “It may not be that simple. But I am going to work on it.”

“What about the Tax Assessor's office?” I asked. “Did you learn anything there?”

“Not yet,” the young detective replied. “I was able to locate her file, but I ran out of time, so I haven't been able to pick up any

details. I'm going to work on it tomorrow.” He looked at me curiously. “Any progress in finding George's treasure?”

“Not yet,” I sighed. “But we did learn one thing.”

“What's that?”

“The treasure is not in the attic,” I told him wearily. “So we only have two million other places left to look.” We told him about the picture of the Pendergrass wedding, and he said that he'd like to see it.

“Where's Brandon?” Lisa asked.

Sherlock shrugged. “Somewhere inside, I suppose. The last time I saw him, he was talking with Robert.”

The little chipmunk that lives under the deck came scampering across the railing just then, and I forgot about everything else as I watched him go. His little legs were flying! He was so cute. *I'd trade my stuffed animal collection for you any day!* I silently told him. *I wish I had something to feed you right now.* The chippy scurried under the deck and disappeared.

“Why don't we find Brandon, and go visit Max?” Lisa suggested. “I'm sure he could use some company. Daddy will let us take the *Gemstone*.”

Five minutes later, Mr. Diamond's powerful speedboat was thundering across Thunderbird Lake with Lisa at the wheel. The *Gemstone* was powered by a V-8 that developed 385 horsepower! Lisa had told us that the boat would do eighty. The bow of the boat pounded up and down as we sped across the water, and the wind blew my hair straight back. I laughed in delight. What a boat!

The *Gemstone* left the south "wing" of the Thunderbird behind and zipped across the north "wing". Lisa guided the speedboat in a wide, gentle turn, and we sped for the eastern shore. Moments later, we were tying the *Gemstone* up at a rickety dock. "That's Max's place to the left," Lisa told us as we approached two tiny cottages set back a hundred yards from the shoreline. "Norm lived in the little house on the right."

I got just a little nervous when Lisa knocked on the front door. What do you say to someone who has just lost his closest companion and best friend of sixty-some years?

Max answered at Lisa's second knock. His eyes were red, and he looked extremely tired. "Yes?" he said coldly. "What do you want?" I stared at him. This didn't seem like the same Max Aysee that we had met last week!

"Max," Lisa began, "we just wanted to—Oh, Max!" She burst into tears, and grabbed the old man in a fierce hug. "Max—I'm so sorry! We'll miss Norm so much!"

Max seemed to soften immediately. He hugged Lisa. "Thank you, Miss Lisa," he said hoarsely. "I just don't know how I'm going to make it without him!" He wiped away his own tears with the back of a trembling hand. "We were together almost every hour of every day! It's as if half of me has been torn away." His shoulders shook as he convulsed in sobs.

Lisa patted his shoulder. "Norm's in heaven now, Max," she said softly. "Saturday he asked Jesus to be his Savior, and now he's in heaven with Jesus!"

The old man jerked away from her as if she had just insulted him. "Norm told me about that," he growled bitterly, "and he wanted me to do the same thing. But if God's so good, why did He let Norm die just two days after Norm got right with Him?" He stepped back several paces. "No sir, if that's the kind of God He is, I don't want Him!"

"Look at it this way," Lisa pleaded. "God was merciful to your brother, and let him live until he got saved. What if He had let

Norm die three or four days earlier? Norm would be in hell instead of heaven!”

Max didn't answer. He strode angrily across the porch and into the house, slamming the door behind him.

Lisa was in tears on the way home, so Brandon drove the *Gemstone*. “He’s so bitter,” she sobbed to me. “He’s blaming God for Norm’s death. We’ve got to find a way to help him see the love of God, and see how badly he needs Jesus as his Savior. We’ve got to, Penny!”

## Chapter 5 – Visit from the APE

Tuesday morning I awoke to find rain pelting against my bedroom window. I dressed, had my devotions, and hurried into Lisa’s room. “Get up, sleepy head,” I teased, throwing back the covers on her bed. “Robert and Maimee will have breakfast ready soon!”

Lisa rolled over, and I saw that she had been reading her Bible. “Oops! Sorry,” I said, feeling rather foolish. “I’ll leave you alone for a while.”

“That’s OK,” she responded. “I just finished this morning’s reading.” She closed her Bible.

“Let’s search the perimeter of the farm today,” she suggested. “You know, work along the fence lines, search along the Little Bear, check out the ‘Wedding Chapel’. Mrs. Pendergrass told us yesterday that she thinks the treasure is hidden outside, and maybe she’s right.”

“Good idea, wrong day,” I told her. “It’s raining!”

Lisa made a face. “Well, then, I guess we check the barn. At least that way we’ll be indoors out of the rain.”

After another one of Robert’s delicious breakfasts, Lisa and I got ready to head for the farm. Brandon came upstairs just as we were leaving. “I think I’ll go with you,” he told us.

I ran down to the lower den, where Sherlock was already on the computer. “Come with us and help us look for the treasure,” I invited. “Brandon’s going.”

Sherlock shook his head without taking his eyes from the monitor. “I’m probably going to be on the phone and computer all day,” he told me. “I’m trying to work through this thing with the APE and the Tax Assessor’s office. Pray that I get through to the right people.”

“Then you pray that we find the gold coins,” I replied, but I don’t think he heard me. His mind was already focused on the task before him, and he had totally blocked me out. He’s that way. I shrugged and slipped out to catch up with Brandon and Lisa, and we ran through the drizzle all the way to the farm.

We found Mrs. Pendergrass in the barn, painting the frames on some old storm windows. “Good morning,” she greeted us

cheerfully. “Just a mite damp outside, isn’t it?” She waved her paintbrush in a sweeping gesture toward the storm windows. “Winter’s just around the corner, and this is one old lady that intends to be ready.”

She looked at Brandon. “Are you going to help the girls search for the treasure?” He nodded.

“Mrs. Pendergrass,” Lisa said, “we were going to search outside today, but it’s kinda wet, so we’re gonna do the barn instead.”

Mrs. Pendergrass nodded. “Fine with me. The weatherman says it should clear up today before noon.”

Leaving her to her painting, Lisa, Brandon and I set to work searching the barn. I thought we would finish in less than half an hour, but it was amazing to find out how many hiding places there are in a barn. The part that took the longest was the hayloft. You’ve heard the expression about looking for “a needle in a haystack”. Ever try to find a pint jar in a haystack? We searched in the barn all morning.

“Daddy asked us to come home for lunch,” Lisa told Mrs. Pendergrass, when it was just about noon. “We’ll come back this afternoon.” We slipped from the barn to find that the sky was still

overcast, but the rain had stopped. A gentle breeze was playing with the fallen leaves, swirling them around and making them dance in tight circles.

“What did you learn?” I asked Sherlock, as we ate lunch in the upper dining room.

Sherlock sprinkled shredded cheese over his bowl of chili. “Not much,” he admitted. “I’ve been on the phone with people from the Tax Assessor’s office, trying to find someone who can tell me why Mrs. Pendergrass’ property classification was changed. Nobody seems to know, and they keep switching me from one office to another. I’ve been on hold most of the morning.”

He picked up a spoon and stirred the cheese into the chili. “I’m going online this afternoon to see if I can find a way to track down just who made the change, and why.”

“We didn’t do any better,” Lisa told him. “We searched the entire barn, but came up with nothing. I’m beginning to wonder if the treasure really exists.” Sherlock gave her a funny look, as if he knew something that we didn’t and wasn’t telling, or as if he

didn’t really care. I couldn’t tell which. I finally decided that he was preoccupied with the problems with the APE and the Tax Assessor.

The sky was unusually dark as Brandon, Lisa and I hurried back to Mrs. Pendergrass’ farm after lunch. The wind was howling in an eerie way, and leaves were falling from the trees like snowflakes in a blizzard. I drew my windbreaker tightly around myself as we hurried across the ridge and down toward the farm. The strange atmosphere gave me a weird, uneasy feeling. I just had this premonition that something really bad was about to happen. A jagged bolt of white-hot lightning slashed across the blackness of the sky, and the resulting boom of thunder rocked the valley. But there was no rain.

“This is strange!” Lisa shouted above the noise of the wind. “I don’t like the looks of this!”

“Maybe we should go back to Diamond Point,” Brandon suggested. “It looks like a really bad storm is brewing!”

But Lisa shook her head. “We promised Mrs. Pendergrass that we’d come back and search again,” she said. “I’m like Penny. I want to find the hidden coins before this week is over! We have to!”

The tops of the trees were whipping back and forth in the fierce wind. As we left the woods, a huge branch came crashing down to land on the trail less than ten yards behind us. We leaned into the wind, fighting our way forward step by step.

The sky grew darker, and suddenly, the wind died completely. It was as if someone had thrown an electric switch and turned off a gigantic fan. This was the strangest weather I had ever seen. We ducked through the fence and hurried across the soybean field toward the farmhouse.

“Look!” called Brandon, who was in the lead. “I wonder who that could be!” A huge black car rolled down the narrow lane toward the farmhouse. The car’s headlights blazed brightly against the darkness of the afternoon.

We ran toward the house, reaching the corner of the back porch just as the car came to a stop in Mrs. Pendergrass’ front yard. I saw a large, official-looking emblem on the driver’s door. The logo was a vivid green globe partially covered by a blue mist. Across the bottom of the globe, written boldly in blood-red capitals, were the letters “APE”. Three women in pants suits and high heels climbed from the car.

Mrs. Pendergrass stepped from the porch to meet them. “May I help you?”

“We’re from the Administration Protecting the Environment,” a thin-faced blond woman told her stiffly. “We’re just doing some checking.”

“Checking for what?” Mrs. Pendergrass asked.

“We’ll discuss that with you if we feel it’s necessary,” the woman from the APE told her. She turned and took a camcorder from the trunk of the car, and, without another word of explanation, she and the other two women headed for the barn.

“I’ll go with you,” Mrs. Pendergrass said, hurrying to catch up with the women.

The woman with the camcorder swung around to face her. “You’ll do nothing of the sort,” she snapped. “You’ll go back in your house and stay there unless we call for you.”

Mrs. Pendergrass’ head snapped back as if the woman had just slapped her. “May I remind you,” she said slowly and evenly, “that you are on my property!”

The other woman pulled a tiny phone from the pocket of her blazer and snapped it open with one hand. “I’ll call the police

right now,” she warned, “and have you arrested for obstructing an investigative search!”

Mrs. Pendergrass retreated to the safety of her front porch. She was trembling with anger, but realized that it was futile to protest the invasion of her property by these power-hungry bureaucrats. Rather than go inside her house as she had been told, she stayed on her porch. “How do you like that!” Brandon exploded. “They’re just going to snoop around Mrs. Pendergrass’ farm without even asking permission! Did you see the camcorder?”

“Spies from the APE,” I muttered. “I suppose they’re looking for more ‘violations’. Let’s follow them.”

We crept to a huge crack in the wall of the barn and peered in. The woman with the camcorder was filming the interior of the barn while the others looked on. She filmed Mrs. Pendergrass’ tractor and implements, the milking stalls, the ladder leading to the hayloft, everything. If she hadn’t been wearing high heels, I think she would have gone up to the hayloft and filmed that. After capturing the barn’s interior on film, the women exited the barn and headed across the farmyard.

They filmed the hen house next, inside and out. Just moments after the women ventured inside the stuffy little building, we

heard a terrific squawking and cackling, and dozens of chickens exploded out the little doors at the end of the building. “I wonder what those women did,” Lisa said. The women came back out a couple of minutes later with slightly disheveled hair and an occasional feather sticking to their clothing. A squawking chicken crossed right in front of the visitors, and one of the women pulled back her foot and kicked the fowl as hard as she could. Lisa winced.

One of the women spotted Mrs. Pendergrass’ outhouse—which she no longer uses because she has indoor plumbing—and brought it to the attention of the woman with the camcorder. They must have spent the next five minutes filming that tiny building, inside and out! One of the women flipped a cigarette butt into the dry grass beside the outhouse, and a tiny wisp of smoke curled upward. When they lost interest in the outhouse, they headed for the Little Bear River.

I hurried over to the outhouse and stomped the cigarette butt out so it wouldn’t start a fire. Lisa, Brandon and I slipped around the backside of the house, trying to keep the women in sight without letting them see us. “I wonder why they were so interested in the outhouse,” Lisa said.

“Maybe they’ve never seen one before,” I told her. “They were trying to figure out what it was.”

“They’re spies,” Brandon said, with a note of frustration in his voice. “Did you see the way they treated Mrs. Pendergrass? Why would anyone talk that way to an eighty-some year old woman?” He clenched his big fist as if he was ready to punch somebody’s lights out. “I wish there was some way to get them out of here.”

I glanced up toward the back porch of the farmhouse, and a crazy idea hit me with all the force of a speeding school bus. “Maybe we can, maybe we can’t,” I said. “But we can at least have some fun while they’re here.” I slipped up on the porch and grabbed Sherlock’s bear can and resin block.

The women were still making their way toward the river, but they were having a hard time crossing the soybean field in their high heels. *You should have stayed at the office*, I told them silently. Finally, they reached the narrow stretch of pasture that separated the field from the river. You should have seen those women cross the fence! I won’t even try to describe it. The woman with the camcorder stood beside the river for a minute or two, filming the distant farm buildings, the fields, and then the river.

At the lower corner of the pasture, the Little Bear deepens and flows through a narrow ravine, then widens out and gets shallow again. The banks are about five feet above the water at that point, and a narrow footbridge crosses the river. The three APE women found the bridge, timidly crossed it—there were no handrails—and disappeared into the woods on the other side. We had no idea what they were after and I’m sure the women had no idea that they had just left Mrs. Pendergrass’ property and were now on Senator Greene’s land.

We crossed the little footbridge, slipped along the riverbank for about a hundred yards, and circled around behind the women. I noticed that it was pretty dark as we entered the woods, almost as if the sun had just set. *Perfect*, I told myself. Creeping quietly through the underbrush, we spotted the women less than forty yards away. They were down on their knees with their backs to us. It looked like they were either having a prayer meeting or collecting soil samples, but I couldn’t tell which. Lisa, Brandon and I knelt behind an elderberry bush.

I pulled the little resin block from my pocket. Gripping the shoelace of the bear can tightly against the resin, I pulled gently. The can emitted a low growl, and the three women immediately

leaped to their feet. The woman with the camcorder cursed. “What was that?” All three stood dead still, peering fearfully about in the gloomy darkness of the forest.

I let loose with the loudest bear growl that you can imagine, and the effect was hilarious! All three women went charging through the trees, screaming at the top of their lungs. Their dignity and their high heels were left behind. Brandon, Lisa and I went running after them to watch.

Two of the women apparently forgot about the Little Bear River, or at least forgot where the bridge was. They came tearing out of the woods and charged right over the edge of the riverbank! We heard two loud shrieks, followed by two loud splashes, followed by more shrieks and some really bad language.

The woman with the camcorder tried for the bridge, but she didn't fare much better than her two companions. She hit the bridge at full speed, made it halfway across, and lost her balance. Flapping her arms like an oversized vulture, she toppled over the side, and the camcorder flew through the air in a graceful arc to land in the river with a nice splash. The woman made an even bigger splash, and you should have heard the screaming!

Lisa, Brandon and I had made it out of the woods in time to see most of the show. We fell to our knees in the weeds on the riverbank, doubled over with laughter.

Screaming and cursing, the three women waded upstream through the chest-deep water to a point where the bank was not as steep. Disheveled and dripping, they emerged shoeless from the water and made their way across the pasture, wincing with each step on the rough ground. They looked so humbled and helpless that I almost forgot how arrogant and bossy they had been just moments ago. I almost felt sorry for them, but not quite.

Lisa, Brandon and I waited until the fancy car pulled from the farmyard, and then hurried across the fields to the farmhouse. Mrs. Pendergrass was waiting on the front porch. “What in the world happened down there?” she asked in amazement. “I thought I heard a bear, of all things, and then those... those women came racing up here looking like they'd just taken a swim in the Little Bear. They jumped in that car as if they couldn't get out of here fast enough! What happened?”

“They did take a swim in the Little Bear!” Lisa told her with a chuckle. She told Mrs. Pendergrass about the bear can, and of course I had to demonstrate by producing a bear growl.

Our elderly friend stared at the can. “Incredible!” she said softly. “That sounds exactly like an angry bear! But how did those women get so wet?” We told her about the APE women missing the bridge, and she howled with laughter. She laughed until the tears ran down her face. “That’s the funniest thing I’ve ever heard,” she told us. “To be honest, it sounds like something that George would have done.”

Mrs. Pendergrass took the bear can from me and looked it over. She laughed again and shook her head. “I can’t think of a better way to get rid of bossy, bothersome bureaucrats!”

“They’ll be back, though,” Lisa said soberly, “and I’ll bet they’ll be even meaner next time!”

“I don’t think they’ll be back right away, though,” Brandon remarked.

“If they don’t come back personally, they’ll at least send someone else,” Lisa replied.

“I don’t think so,” Brandon insisted.

We all looked at him. “Why not?” I asked.

“You saw what kind of women they were,” Brandon replied. “Tough, arrogant, feminist-type women with I’m-as-tough-as-any-man attitudes. Do you think they’ll go back to the APE office

and tell their coworkers that they were scared off by a bear? I don’t think so. But I don’t think they’ll be in a great hurry to come back themselves, either.”

Mrs. Pendergrass shook her head again and laughed. “I hope you’re right.”

The clouds split open just then, and a brilliant shaft of golden sunlight splashed across the farm. We looked up in surprise. Rain was falling to the west, but Mrs. Pendergrass’ farm was bathed in sunshine. A gorgeous rainbow spanned the valley, reaching from the ridge behind Diamond Point to the hills just south of the farm. The colors were vivid and bright. “It’s going to be a beautiful day after all,” Lisa said, gazing at the rainbow.

We spent the rest of the afternoon searching for the treasure. Mrs. Pendergrass hiked with us up to the “Wedding Chapel”. As she had told us, it was a natural amphitheater, framed by a grove of beautiful blue spruce. The rocky face of the ridge swept around in a semicircle to form the walls of the chapel, and a double row of perfect blue spruce lined the walls. At the far end of the chapel, below the face of the cliff, a single scarlet oak stood proudly displaying its vivid red foliage.

“This is the ‘Wedding Chapel’,” Mrs. Pendergrass told us proudly. “George and I were married here, right at the base of the cliff. That scarlet oak wasn’t there at the time, though.” A faraway look passed over her wrinkled features as her gaze swept over the “Chapel”. “George loved this place,” Mrs. Pendergrass said softly. “He used to come up here to pray.”

My heart beat faster. Maybe this was where George hid the treasure!

Leaving Mrs. Pendergrass alone with her memories, Brandon, Lisa and I did a quick search of the chapel. We followed the perimeter of the rocky face, pushing our way through the scratchy branches of the spruce that grew so close, checking every nook and cranny at the base of the precipice. But we found nothing. *What if George actually buried the treasure? I thought in dismay. Sixty years later, we’ll never find it, unless he left a map.*

After searching unsuccessfully along the banks of the Little Bear, we quit for the day. It was less than an hour till sunset. “We could get a metal detector,” Brandon proposed, “but it would still take weeks to search this whole farm.”

“We don’t have that long,” I told him. “We have only three days left.”

When we got back to Diamond Point we found that Robert had a huge feast spread out on the picnic table on the deck. I hurried over to check out the menu. Fruit salad, piping hot baked potatoes with cheddar cheese and strips of smoked turkey, broccoli casserole, fresh bread—everything looked delicious! Plump, juicy pieces of chicken were sizzling on the grill as Robert lovingly turned them. Maimee hurried out of the house with a pitcher of cold apple cider.

“Perfect timing,” Robert said when he saw us. “I was just getting ready to call the farm. We’ll be ready to eat in five minutes.”

Sherlock and Mr. Diamond appeared on the deck just then. “Looks good, Mr. and Mrs. Biddler,” Mr. Diamond said appreciatively as he looked over the table. “Can you believe it? This is the middle of October, and it’s still warm enough to eat outside.”

“Native American summer,” Lisa said, and we all laughed.

After prayer, we all dug in hungrily. Supper was as good as it looked. “How did you do on the computer?” I asked Sherlock, as I took a bite of grilled chicken. I couldn’t wait to tell him about the

bear can and the APE women, but I thought I'd let him share his story first.

"I got a little further, but not much," Sherlock told us. "I finally got someone at the Tax Assessor's office to tell me who was responsible for reclassifying the farm as commercial property, but the man responsible was off today. I'm supposed to call back tomorrow. I went online and snooped around in the APE database, trying to find out who's in charge, and who I should talk with regarding having Mrs. Pendergrass' file deleted."

"You went into their database?" I was surprised. "Can you do that?"

He nodded at me. "Sure. But certain parts of it were password-protected."

"So what did you learn?"

"Well, for one thing, I can't touch the file on Mrs. Pendergrass." He looked frustrated.

"What do you mean?" Lisa asked.

"The files are password-protected so that they're read-only," he explained. "I can access them just fine as long as I'm just reading from them. But when I try to write to them, to change or delete Mrs. Pendergrass' file, for instance, the computer asks for the

password. I spent an hour trying various guesses, and getting an error message every time."

"Can you call the APE and just ask for the password?" I asked innocently.

Sherlock laughed. "Hardly. That would be like calling Fort Knox and asking for the combinations to the safes. They aren't going to give it out over the phone!"

"It was just an idea," I pouted.

"So anyway, I guess I'll have to call tomorrow and talk with this Melody Long person. She's the one in charge of 'violations and punitive fines'. I'm just going to explain the situation to her, let her know that we know that the violations are fictitious, and ask her to remove the fines. I'm anxious to get her response."

"Don't expect too much cooperation if she's one of the women we met today," I said. I told him about the visit from the APE, and how we had used the bear can to scare the agents away. Sherlock and the three adults were convulsed in laughter by the time I finished my account of the women falling into the Little Bear River.

“I wish I could have seen it,” Sherlock declared, wiping tears of laughter from his eyes. “It sounds like you put the bear can to good use!”

“Were they really that mean to Mrs. Pendergrass?” Mr. Diamond asked.

“It was terrible, Daddy!” Lisa interjected. “They were on her property without her permission, and they ordered her to go up and stay in her house till they were through!”

“That kind of thing shouldn’t happen in America,” Robert rasped. “People still have property rights, don’t they?”

“Not if the environmental extremists like Senator Greene get their way,” Sherlock warned. “Property rights and personal freedoms will be relics of the past.” He poured himself a glass of apple cider. “Believe it or not, Senator Greene is pushing for a complete ban on the automobile! He wants to use the empty threat of global warming to take away people’s mobility.”

“I wonder if he plans to give up that big, fancy motor home,” I muttered, looking across the lake at Briarwood, where a huge motor home sat at the edge of the woods.

“Maybe he hasn’t thought of that,” Mr. Diamond remarked. “And I doubt if he’s ready to give up that fancy Jaguar, the Mercedes, the Suburban...”

“But is the atmosphere actually warming up?” Lisa asked.

“NO!” Sherlock insisted. “In the past hundred years, the average temperature of the earth, as measured on land, has risen less than half of a degree Centigrade! And this is just part of a cycle; the earth’s average temperature has always varied from year to year, and from decade to decade. The environmental extremists keep telling the public that carbon dioxide is a ‘greenhouse gas’ that contributes to the ‘global warming’, but man-made carbon dioxide comprises less than eight hundredths of one percent of the ‘greenhouse gases’ in the atmosphere! And the carbon dioxide levels in the atmosphere have nothing to do with atmospheric temperatures. Water vapor does, but not carbon dioxide. Mankind is not changing the climate of this planet!”

“So why are they feeding us all this global warming stuff?” Robert rasped.

“Power,” Sherlock replied. “Evil human beings have always sought to gain control over others. America has always been a shining example of what can happen when people are free, but

there are many today who hate what America has stood for. In fact, the bottom line of the environmental movement is the dissolution of America's sovereignty. They're pushing us towards a 'global community', which simply means a one-world government."

Mr. Diamond stood up. "Kids, we need to pray for our country." He looked at his watch. "I want to challenge all four of you kids to a private fishing tournament tonight. There's no prize for the winner, but the loser does the dishes for Maimee for the next two days! What do you say?"

"You're on!" Brandon exclaimed. "And it won't be *me* washing dishes!"

"I like the idea," Robert said. "I'll get the *Gemstone* ready."

I ran to my bedroom to get my windbreaker. This sounded like fun!

## Chapter 6 – The Fishing Tournament

The *Gemstone* rumbled impatiently at the dock as we scrambled aboard. The night was dark. Thick clouds obscured the moon, and a light breeze was blowing, creating moderate swells on Thunderbird Lake. The boat rocked gently, nudging against the dock like a child wanting her mother's attention.

"Everybody aboard?" Mr. Diamond called.

"All except for Robert and Maimee," Lisa replied. "But they're not going."

"OK, here are the rules," the tall millionaire told us, putting the boat in gear and cruising slowly from the dock. "We fish for exactly two hours. I'll start the stopwatch when we reach the fishing spot and everyone has their hook baited and ready to cast. The winner is the one with the greatest accumulated weight in fish. Each person weighs his own fish and keeps his own score. For simplicity, we'll round the weights to the next pound. For

example, anything weighing less than a pound still counts as a full pound; a fish between one and two pounds gets counted as a two-pounder, etc. At the end of two hours, the fisherman with the lowest total weight washes dishes tomorrow and Thursday. Any questions?”

“Are we allowed to have help landing the fish?” Lisa asked.

“Yes, if you can get someone else to stop fishing long enough to help. Any other questions?”

“Yes,” Brandon said. “What are we waiting for?”

Mr. Diamond punched the throttle lever down hard, and the *Gemstone* leaped forward like a leopard pouncing on an antelope. The powerful boat bounded effortlessly across the south wing of the lake, crossed the body of the Thunderbird, and entered the north wing. We cruised to the fishing spot where we had done so well the previous week, and Mr. Diamond shut the engine down. “OK, get your tackle ready,” he instructed. “I’ll start the clock when everyone’s set.”

My heart was actually pounding faster as I baited my hook with a fat, wriggling worm. I was *not* going to lose this contest! I found a good spot in the bow, and Lisa joined me. “Just go for the

big ones,” I coached the worm, “and leave the scrawny ones for Lisa.”

“That’s not fair!” Lisa teased. “You’re not allowed to talk to the bait!”

“Everyone set?” Mr. Diamond asked, moments later. “Ready, set, cast!” Five baited hooks went flying through the darkness in their quest for the heaviest fish in the lake. The moon broke through the clouds just then, giving us a little light to fish by.

“I’ve got one!” Brandon cried just moments later. We all watched enviously as he fought the fish for two or three minutes and then brought his catch alongside the boat so that Sherlock could land him in the net. Brandon lifted a smallmouth bass from the net and weighed him. “Two pounds seven,” he announced. “Mark me down for three pounds!” He gently released the bass over the side and re-baited his hook.

It was my turn to catch the next one. But when I reeled him in and weighed him, he weighed a little less than fourteen ounces. “I’ve got my first pound,” I told the others. “Tonight’s score so far: Brandon—three; Penny—one; everyone else—keep fishing!”

The other fish must have arrived in a school just then, because suddenly, we were all catching fish. We were reeling them in, weighing them, and re-baiting our hooks just about as fast as we could move. There were times when two or three of us were trying to use the scale at the same time. Sherlock caught a largemouth bass that weighed in at nearly five pounds, jumping his total to eleven pounds and putting him in the lead. The big bass went into the live well to await a trip to the kitchen table.

Just after Sherlock caught the big one, the school of fish must have gone out to recess because suddenly we weren't catching anything. All five of us just sat there waiting and waiting without even a nibble. Perhaps the big fish was the teacher, and when he left, the little fish figured that school was dismissed. So they went home. Whatever the reason, the fish were gone, and we sat waiting. At this point in the "fishing tournament", Sherlock was in the lead with a total of eleven pounds, and Brandon was close behind with nine. Lisa had eight pounds, and Mr. Diamond and I were tied for last place with five pounds apiece.

"I'm *not* washing dishes for two days," I informed Mr. Diamond. "You're gonna lose if I have to swim out of the boat and catch one with my bare hands!"

He grinned at me and opened a can of soda pop. "I'll get you a pair of rubber gloves if you need them," he teased me. "I'd hate to see you with dishwater hands!"

"Why's that?" I asked.

"Cause you're a dishwater blonde," he informed me. I took a fat worm from the bait bucket and stuffed it in the pocket of his jacket.

"Does anybody know what 'megabytes' are?" Sherlock asked, as we continued to wait for the next hungry fish.

"It's a computer term," I answered. "It means one million bytes of information."

"No, it's a fishing term," he countered. "It means a good day's fishing." It took a moment for the meaning to sink in, and then we groaned at the pun.

"How about 'megahertz'?" he continued. I knew that it was another computer term, but I wasn't sure what it meant. When no one answered, Sherlock gave us *his* definition. "It's when you reach into the tackle box without looking." We laughed at that one.

“Do you know what a ‘parallel port’ is?” Brandon asked. “It’s a boat launching area with side-by-side boat ramps.” His pun drew more groans.

“I’ve got one,” I announced. “Do you know what ‘RAM’ is? It’s the result of not cutting the engine soon enough as you approach the dock.” I got a couple of laughs.

Mr. Diamond, the computer tycoon, got into the act. “How about ‘floppy drive’? That’s an outboard motor not properly fastened to the transom of the boat. And a ‘hard drive’ is full-throttle acceleration to reach your favorite fishing spot rapidly.” We laughed politely.

“Do you know what a ‘hard drive crash’ is?” Sherlock asked him. “That’s the result of too much full-throttle acceleration.”

“Do you know what ‘on line’ means?” Brandon asked. “On line is the best place in the world for an eight-pound bass!” He got a couple of chuckles.

Mr. Diamond was laughing as he held up his hands. “OK, gang, we’re getting carried away here. What say we get back to fishing? We haven’t had a bite for fifteen minutes, so I’m gonna head up to the north tip of the lake.”

The powerful engine rumbled to life. We cruised a mile or so farther north, and then shut down and started fishing again. I had a strike on my very first cast. “I got one!” I crowed. “Mr. Diamond, I’m leaving you behind! Get ready to scrub those dishes!”

To my delight, the largemouth I reeled in weighed three-and-a-half pounds, to give me a total score of nine pounds. “Get your apron ready,” I politely teased Mr. Diamond, “cause we both know who’s doing the dishes tomorrow!”

Lisa soon reeled in a small fish that scored two pounds for her.

Three or four minutes later, Mr. Diamond got me back by pulling in a striper that weighed in at just over four pounds. I was in last place by one pound. He didn’t say anything, but every time I glanced in his direction he’d flash me a taunting, hey-Penny-you’re-losing grin.

Sherlock caught two more medium-sized fish, bringing his total to fifteen pounds, and Lisa caught one that weighed in at just over three pounds, giving her a score of fourteen. But Brandon leaped into first place by catching a whopper that weighed just over six pounds! Finally, Mr. Diamond switched on a flashlight and looked at his stopwatch. “Three minutes left in the

tournament!” he announced. “Penny, I hope you’re better at washing dishes than you are at fishing!”

I hadn’t had a bite in several minutes, so I pulled in my line. To my dismay, the worm was gone and my hook was bare. I grabbed frantically at the bait bucket, feeling around for a nice, fat worm. Mr. Diamond laughed. “No wonder you haven’t been catching anything, Penny,” he teased. “The fish don’t bite the hook for fun, you know! They bite if you have a nice worm for them to eat!”

“I was just trying to give you a chance,” I shot back as I impaled the selected worm. “Now I fish in earnest!”

“I hope so!” he replied, “cause you have exactly . . .”—he shined the flashlight on the stopwatch—“two minutes, six seconds to catch up.” He handed the stopwatch to Lisa. “Call time for us,” he told her, “so Penny can’t accuse me of cheating.” He reeled in his line and made another cast.

“Ninety seconds!” Lisa called moments later. I was frantic. I had to have another fish! I reeled in hurriedly and cast on the other side of the boat.

“Sixty seconds!”

Mr. Diamond laughed and began reeling in his line. “Penny does dishes!” he teased.

I felt a jerk on my line, and my heart leaped. “I’ve got one!” I screamed. The line jerked again and began to cut through the water toward the stern of the *Gemstone*.

“Forty-five seconds!”

“He has to be in the boat to count,” Mr. Diamond declared.

“Sherlock, get the net ready!” I screamed. “There’s not much time!” My line went slack, and my heart sank. I had lost the fish! I started reeling my line in. Suddenly, I felt resistance, and the line went racing through the water again. My fish was still there!

“Thirty seconds!”

Sherlock knelt at the side of the boat with the net down in the water. “Bring him to me, Penny!”

“I’m trying to!” The fish made a run toward the boat, and I reeled in like crazy.

“Fifteen seconds!”

The fish took another run away from the boat. The reel whined as the fishing line stripped off. The fish was going way out this time.

“Ten seconds!”

Just then, my line went slack again, and my heart sank. I wasn’t sure what to do, and there certainly wasn’t time to lead the

fish over to Sherlock's net. I would have to concede defeat to Mr. Diamond. I had come in last by one measly pound, and I would have to wash dishes!

"Got him!" Sherlock yelled. "He swam right into the net!" Sherlock jerked the net out of the water and slung it into the boat, soaking Lisa and Mr. Diamond in the process. To our astonishment, there was a struggling, writhing fish in the meshes of the net!

"Four seconds!" Lisa shouted. "You caught him with four seconds to spare!"

Winning a gold medal at the Olympics could not possibly be more exciting than catching that fish in the last few seconds of the "tournament". I jumped up and down, laughing and screaming, "I won! I won!"

"No," Sherlock corrected me, "you didn't win. But you did come in fourth."

"It doesn't matter!" I shouted ecstatically. "I don't have to do the dishes! Mr. Diamond does!" I laughed as I turned to him. "Be sure to get the drinking glasses sparkling clean! We don't like streaks!"

"Hold it just a minute!" Mr. Diamond boomed. "You may be joining me in the kitchen! That's a rather small fish! Penny, you just tied with me!"

I looked at the fish in the net, and my heart sank. My catch *was* pretty small. I knew that I had at least tied with Mr. Diamond, because even a guppy would have counted as a full pound. But I needed two pounds added to my score to beat him.

"Here's the scale," Brandon offered. "Weigh it."

Sherlock pulled my fish from the landing net and hung him on the scale. Lisa shined a flashlight on the dial. The little needle moved toward the one-pound mark, and then bounced up and down, crossing and recrossing the line. "One pound!" Mr. Diamond exclaimed. "We tied! Penny, get a dish towel! I wash, you dry!"

Lisa focused the light on the scale and leaned closer. "Sorry, Daddy," she said, "but it's *just over* a pound! Not much, but it is over! This fish counts as two pounds!"

We all leaned closer and saw that it was true. The needle was just above the mark. Not much, but just enough! The fish would count for two pounds. I had beaten Mr. Diamond in the last four seconds, by less than half an ounce!

It was the best fishing trip I've ever been on.

## Chapter 7 – The Map

The next morning after breakfast Lisa and I headed over the ridge to Mrs. Pendergrass' farm to continue our search for the treasure. Mr. Diamond was in the kitchen doing dishes—I stopped in just long enough to tease him about it—and Sherlock was already on the computer, looking over the APE file on Mrs. Pendergrass again. Brandon was working with Robert on some project outside. They seemed to enjoy each other's company, and I think that Robert was trying to disciple Brandon in the things of the Christian life. So it was just Lisa and I.

Mrs. Pendergrass was just coming in from the barn when we arrived at her front porch. "Good morning, girls," she greeted us in her cheerful way. "Isn't it a lovely day? Don't you love this sunshine?"

"We came to search for the coins again," Lisa volunteered. "We only have three days left!"

Mrs. Pendergrass gave us each a hug. “Before you girls get started with your search, would you do something for me?”

“Sure, Mrs. Pendergrass!” we both chorused. “What is it?”

“Yesterday when you searched the barn, you moved that stack of planks that were leaning against the west wall, but you left them in the middle of the barn floor. Would you mind putting them back?”

We looked at each other sheepishly. “Certainly, Mrs. Pendergrass,” I said.

“Happy searching, girls,” the old lady said. “I’ll be in the house if you need me.”

Lisa and I hurried into the barn and went to work putting the planks back in their proper place. Most of them were two-by-twelves, about eight feet long, and they were heavy and cumbersome. Once we had the big ones back in place, we placed some smaller odds and ends of wood against them. The last piece was an old, weather-beaten scrap barely eighteen inches long. It looked ancient.

An idea popped into my clever head, and I showed the board to Lisa. “Look!” I told her excitedly, “this piece is out of Noah’s ark!”

She gave me a scornful look, which is rare for her. “Don’t be silly!” she hissed. “It would have to be thousands of years old!”

“But it’s out of Noah’s ark,” I insisted.

“No way, Penny. You’re not gonna get me to believe that!”

“This board is out of Noah’s ark,” I said again, “and I can prove it!”

“OK, you’re on,” she said. “Prove it.”

“This board is not *in* Noah’s ark, right?”

She nodded.

“So that means it’s *out of* Noah’s ark!”

Lisa shook her head and rolled her eyes. “Oh, Penny.”

I grinned at her. “You never can tell what you’ll find in an old barn. Just think, a board out of Noah’s ark!” I noticed that there were tiny little holes in the board, smaller than the point of a pin. I figured they were made by tiny worms. I turned the board over. The back of the board had a crude sketch done in pencil.

“Lisa! Look at this!”

She could tell by the tone of my voice that I wasn’t playing another prank, and she was at my side in an instant. “What is it?”

“Look at the back of this board! It looks like a sketch of this farm!” I laid the board on the straw-covered barn floor, and we

both knelt beside it. “See, here’s the barn, and this is Mrs. Pendergrass’ house. This tiny square is the outhouse, and there’s the Little Bear. It’s the farm!”

Lisa shrugged. “OK, so it’s a sketch of the farm,” she agreed. “So what’s so exciting about that?”

“Lisa, don’t you see?” I was so excited that my voice trembled. “It’s a map!” I touched my fingertip to a small rectangle drawn between the house and the barn, but farther to the east. The rectangle was marked with an “X”. “This is the chicken house. George Pendergrass hid the treasure in the chicken house!”

Lisa Diamond did something that I had never seen her do before. She actually squealed with delight when she realized what the old, weather-beaten board really was. We had a map, drawn by George Pendergrass! I grabbed the board and raced for the door.

My heart pounded with anticipation as Lisa and I dashed across the barnyard, scattering chickens left and right. I reached the chicken house two steps ahead of Lisa. I flipped the wooden latch up and flung the door open. Lisa leaped through the narrow doorway ahead of me. We stood blinking in the dim light, waiting for our eyes to adjust. It didn’t smell too good in there.

The roof was awfully low, but even a tall man could probably stand up straight if he stood in the middle of the chicken house. Row after row of straw-filled nesting boxes lined both of the longer walls, and some of them were occupied by sleepy-looking hens. We were standing on a floor of greenish-gray dirt, and feathers were *everywhere*. Chickens milled around uncertainly, while others strutted in and out of their little chicken doors as if they were on important business. I looked around eagerly. There were plenty of places in here where George could have hidden something as small as a one-pint canning jar! “We should have searched here earlier!” I told Lisa.

“I’ll search the nests on the north wall and you take the south,” she suggested. “Try not to disturb the hens any more than you have to.”

“Yes, Miss Poultry Expert,” I replied. Kneeling on the feather-strewn dirt floor, I reached gingerly into the darkness of the first nest. *Please, Lord, don’t let there be rats*, I prayed silently. I felt around carefully, but there was no canning jar, so I moved on to the next nest.

The third nest had a chicken in it. When I reached toward the nest, she stuck her head toward my hand as if she was going to

peck it, and I jerked back. “What should I do?” I asked Lisa. “This one has a chicken in it!”

“Just reach in slowly,” Lisa laughed. “She won’t bother you. And if you’re gentle enough, you won’t bother her.” Following Lisa’s instructions, I felt all around under the hen while she stared at me with those little beady eyes. I found six eggs, but no canning jar full of coins.

It took less than two minutes to check all the nests on the bottom row. None of the hens that I had disturbed seemed too upset about my invasion of their privacy. I stood to my feet and started on the second row. The next two would be easier, since I wouldn’t have to kneel. When I reached into the third nest, I found myself face to face with a large, angry hen that must have had a bad night. She stood up, flapped her wings, and scolded me angrily. When I tried to reach in again, she went for my hand like a hungry woodpecker drilling for a fat grub.

“I’ll wring your neck,” I threatened, but I don’t think she was listening. Every time I reached toward her nest, she assumed the fighting stance of a karate instructor. To be honest, I was a little bit afraid of her.

“What do I do with this one?” I asked Lisa. “She won’t let me in without a search warrant!”

Lisa simply walked over and plucked the indignant hen off her nest, holding the fowl tightly against her chest so that she couldn’t move. “Go ahead, check it,” she told me. I did, and the nest was empty. There weren’t even any eggs! So why was that hen guarding it so ferociously? The way she was acting, I expected to find at least a dozen eggs. Lisa set the hen back in her place, and the irritated fowl settled back, squawking and clucking angrily.

Lisa and I finished searching the nests three or four minutes later. We scouted around inside the building, checking up under the eaves and around the feed boxes, but there was no canning jar. Lisa headed for the door. “Where are you going?” I asked.

“I just want to look at George’s map,” she replied. She stepped outside with the old board in her hand, and I followed her. The air was better outside, anyway.

“The ‘X’ is marked right in the middle of the chicken house,” Lisa observed, “not along one of the walls. So where would the treasure be?”

“He must have buried it in the floor,” I suggested, “in that funny, green dirt.”

“That funny, green dirt is chicken manure,” Lisa told me. “Sixty years’ worth!” She walked toward the barn. “Let’s get a couple of shovels.”

An hour and a half later, we had a rectangular hole nearly a foot deep and eight feet square. We had piled the chicken manure in long, narrow piles along both sides of the hole. The chickens had slowed us down somewhat because they kept climbing in and out of the hole and across the piles of dirt and we had to watch out that we didn’t step on them or hit them with the shovels. But there was no canning jar.

“What now?” Lisa asked, as we stopped for a breather. “We can’t dig up the entire hen house floor!”

“Sure we can,” I replied, “if this is where George Pendergrass buried the gold coins! We’ll just dig farther and farther over, and throw the dirt in this hole.”

The door opened just then, and Mrs. Pendergrass stepped inside the chicken house. You should have seen the look of surprise on her face! “Girls!” she exclaimed. “Whatever are you doing?”

“We’re digging for the treasure,” I told her. “We weren’t going to tell you until we found the coins, but we have a map. Your husband drew it.”

“A map?” A look of amazement passed over the old lady’s features. “You found a map?”

“We found it in the barn,” Lisa explained, picking up the old board with the sketch on the back. “Let’s step outside where you can see it better.”

Once we were outside the door, Lisa handed the map to Mrs. Pendergrass. The old lady adjusted her glasses and peered eagerly at it. “See,” I said, pointing to the “X” in the diagram, “this is where George buried the treasure! It’s somewhere in this chicken house!”

Mrs. Pendergrass studied the map for several seconds, and then began to laugh. And laugh. And laugh. Her shoulders shook, and she laughed so hard that tears streamed down her cheeks. Finally, she took her glasses off and wiped her eyes with the sleeve of her tattered, brown sweater. Lisa and I looked at each other in confusion and embarrassment.

“Girls,” Mrs. Pendergrass said, when she regained her composure, “this was just a diagram to show where George wanted the chicken house built!”

“The chicken house?” we both echoed.

I was nearly in tears. “But we thought it was a map for the treasure,” I said lamely. “We thought that George had drawn it.”

“George did draw it,” Mrs. Pendergrass told us. “But it’s not a treasure map. George wanted the hired hand to start building the chicken house while he went into town to get the tin for the roof. George drew him this diagram to show him where to start laying out the building. I didn’t realize that this was still around after all these years.”

Disappointment swept over me. “So it’s not a treasure map.”

Mrs. Pendergrass smiled gently. “No, Penny, I’m afraid not,” she told me kindly. “It just shows the location of the chicken house, and we already knew where to find that.” She stepped inside the chicken house again. “You girls will have to fill in this hole. The hens will never get used to that.” Her eyes twinkled, and I think she was having a hard time keeping from laughing.

“I came out to find you and tell you that I just had another visit from Mr. Luciani and Mr. Keene,” she told us.

“Mr. Luciani and Mr. Keene?” I echoed. “Who are they?”

“The men from Royal Investment Properties,” she answered.

“What did they want?”

Mrs. Pendergrass sighed. “They’re still trying to pressure me into selling the farm. When I turned them down again, they made a couple of thinly veiled threats about having more trouble with the APE. It makes me wonder what they’re planning next.” She shook her head and walked back to the house.

It only took about ten minutes to fill in the hole, but I was breathing pretty hard by the time we were finished. The air was filled with dust, and I tried hard to forget what the dust was made of. I leaned on the end of my shovel. “All that work for nothing,” I lamented. “I thought for sure we were going to find the treasure today.” I looked over at the hen that had given me such a hard time about checking her nest, and honestly, I think she was laughing.

“Let’s head back to Diamond Point and get some lunch,” Lisa suggested as we returned the shovels to the barn. “I’m starving.”

We said good-bye to Mrs. Pendergrass and headed over the ridge. “Don’t tell anyone about digging in the chicken house,” I warned Lisa. “They’ll just laugh at us.” I made a fist and punched

an imaginary APE agent to show my disappointment and frustration. “I thought for sure we were going to find George Pendergrass’ treasure today! I was so sure! Lisa, after today, there’s only two days left!”

## Chapter 8 – Computer Sleuthing

“Pizza!” Lisa exclaimed as we walked in the door at Diamond Point. “I smell pizza!”

Sure enough, when we walked into the kitchen we found that Robert had two pizzas in the oven. “I don’t know how you smelled them though, Miss Lisa,” he said in his raspy voice. “I just put them in the oven! They’ve hardly started cooking! We’ll eat in about fifteen minutes.”

Looking through the kitchen door into the dining room, I could see the back of Mr. Diamond’s shirt. “Robert, how did that new dishwasher do?” I asked loudly. “Do you think he’ll work out?”

Mr. Diamond’s voice boomed through the doorway. “Robert, if that’s a couple of pan-handlers, just send them on their way!”

Lisa and I slipped into the dining room. “Hi, Daddy!” Lisa hugged her father. “Have a good morning?”

The millionaire smiled. “Not bad at all! We just settled some major questions on that new software suite we’re developing. I’m glad that’s behind us.” He studied our faces. “How did your morning go, ladies?”

Lisa and I looked at each other. “Not bad,” Lisa said. “But it was a bit disappointing.”

“Still hunting for that treasure, huh?”

“We’re gonna find it, Daddy, I know we are!”

Mr. Diamond smiled. “I hope you do; I really do. But you’re almost out of time.”

“We know,” I replied. “This is Wednesday, so we have only two days left!”

Sherlock appeared in the doorway just then and slid into a chair. “Hi, Penny. Hi, Lisa.” He turned to Mr. Diamond. “Sir, I need to ask you something,” he said. “I talked with Melody Long from the APE this morning, and she finally admitted that the violations that Mrs. Pendergrass has been charged with are not valid. She also admitted that the file was built by some unauthorized person outside the agency, but she wouldn’t admit that it was Debra Ginster. She kept referring to ‘the unauthorized party in question’. But even though she admitted—off the

record—that there are no legal charges against Mrs. Pendergrass, she refused to have the file removed!”

He looked at me with a funny expression. “She thinks that I’m an attorney representing Mrs. Pendergrass.”

I laughed. “Why does she think that?”

He grinned. “I suppose because I threw some legal jargon at her.” He grinned again. “I didn’t do it to mislead her—I did it just to intimidate her, and I think it worked.”

“Sherlock, that’s funny!”

He shrugged and looked embarrassed. “She also thinks that I’m a woman,” he said quietly.

“That’s really funny!” We all laughed, and Sherlock grew red in the face.

“Anyway, sir, here’s my question,” Sherlock told Mr. Diamond. “If I can get past the password protection, would it be right for me to go into the APE’s system and delete the file on Mrs. Pendergrass? She hasn’t done anything wrong, and it isn’t right for them to hassle her this way. Besides, the whole thing is just a maneuver on the part of Royal Investment Properties to scare her into selling the farm.”

“But the file was built by someone not connected with the APE?” Mr. Diamond questioned. “You’re certain of that?”

“Yes, sir,” Sherlock replied. “Mrs. Long admitted that. And I traced the file back to that Ginster woman, who works for Royal!”

Mr. Diamond thought it over for a few minutes, and we all sat quietly. Finally, he spoke.

“I’ll call my attorney,” he said, speaking more softly than I had ever heard him, “and have him call this Mrs. Long. If she refuses to drop the charges and dismiss the fines, we’ll simply file a lawsuit.”

“Daddy, I thought that Christians weren’t supposed to sue people.”

Mr. Diamond shook his head. “The Bible doesn’t say that. First Corinthians six tells believers not to take each other to court, but rather, to settle disputes by having another Christian brother serve as arbitrator. But this is a situation where a dishonest organization has tried to use a government bureau to unlawfully intimidate and harass an honest citizen. The laws of this land are supposed to serve for our protection. In this case, I believe it is right to use a court of law to protect Mrs. Pendergrass.”

Mr. Diamond studied Sherlock thoughtfully. “But you’re absolutely certain that the file on Mrs. Pendergrass was not built by an APE official?”

The young detective nodded. “It was done by the woman from Royal Investment Properties. There’s no legal basis for it. I’m certain of that, sir.”

“I’ll call right after lunch,” Mr. Diamond decided.

Robert and Maimie strutted into the dining room just then, each bearing a very large, very hot pizza. Brandon passed out plates while Robert cut the pizzas. “Maimie made a fruit pizza for dessert,” Robert told me, “’cause you made such a fuss over the last one.”

“Thanks!” I told his wife gratefully. “The last one was awesome!”

I picked up a juice glass. “Doesn’t look too clean,” I teased Mr. Diamond. “You’d better pay more attention to what you’re doing!”

Mr. Diamond grinned. “I want to invite Sherlock, Lisa, and Brandon to participate in another fishing tournament tonight. But we won’t be using worms for bait. We’ll be using Penny!”

After lunch Sherlock, Brandon, Lisa and I took the two wave runners out on the lake for an hour or so. We took turns driving the speedy little craft, and had a lot of fun. Finally, Sherlock and Brandon pulled their wave runner alongside the one that Lisa and I were riding. “I have to get back to work!” Sherlock shouted. “I have to finish trying to help Mrs. Pendergrass!” We headed back to the boathouse.

“Did you get anywhere with the Tax Assessor’s office?” I asked Sherlock as I followed him to the den.

“Yes, and no,” Sherlock replied. “I finally got to talk with the Tax Assessor himself, and explained the situation to him. He finally agreed that the new assessment was incorrect, and that Mrs. Pendergrass’ property should still be taxed as farmland and not as commercial property. He agreed to change the tax status of the property back to farmland.”

“That’s great!” I exclaimed. “Do you think he’ll actually do it?”

“He already has,” Sherlock told me. The boy detective sat down at the computer and went online as he talked. “I checked the file on Mrs. Pendergrass’ property just before I went up for lunch, and it’s now listed as ‘class 4 taxation structure property’, which

is defined as ‘farmland utilized for husbandry and agricultural purposes.’”

“Fantastic!” I rejoiced. “Congratulations, Sherlock!”

“But he informed me that the tax assessment for this year was already entered into the revenue base calculations—whatever that is—and insisted that Mrs. Pendergrass has to pay the higher amount this year.”

“So Mrs. Pendergrass still has to pay the ninety-six hundred dollars?”

Sherlock nodded. “I’m afraid so. I tried and tried to reason with him, but he insisted that there was nothing he could do.”

“He’s afraid of Senator Greene.”

Sherlock nodded again. “That’s the bottom line, I believe. He agreed to make the change in next year’s assessment just to get me off his back for now—”

“And next year—if Senator Greene’s people ask him to—he raises it again!” I finished.

Sherlock nodded.

“Can you go in and change her file?” I asked. “You know, like they did to Mrs. Pendergrass through the APE?”

“This is different,” he told me, clicking the mouse like crazy as he zipped from one screen to another. “The assessment was actually done by a member of the assessor’s staff, so as far as I know, it’s legal. It’s not right, but it’s legal. The only recourse would be to file an appeal, and I think we know what the answer to that would be. I’m afraid she’ll have to pay it.”

“But that’s not right!” I exploded.

“I know, but it’s legal. And I don’t think it would be right for me to go in and change the file, even if I could get away with it. She’s going to have to pay the ten thousand.”

“Then we have to find the treasure!” I declared. “We have to!”

I hate to admit it, but I hardly heard a word of Pastor McClain’s Wednesday night message. Lisa and I were sitting with Mrs. Pendergrass that night, and I’m afraid that my mind was on the situation that she was facing. Mr. Diamond’s attorney would undoubtedly be able to make the APE drop the fines, but she would still have to pay the higher property taxes. If only we could find the treasure!

I thought back over the various places we had searched. *There’s nothing left to search, I told myself. We’ve searched the house, the barn, the chicken house, and the “Wedding Chapel”. We looked along the river. Where else could the coins be? There has to be some place that we’re just not thinking about. We’ve got to find those coins! If we don’t, Mrs. Pendergrass will lose her farm!*

## Chapter 9 – The Dairy Truck

Norm Aysee's funeral was sad. There was a good crowd of people; the music was cheerful; and Pastor McClain preached an excellent salvation message. He told how Norm had been saved just two days before he died, and he encouraged people who were not saved to trust the Lord Jesus as their own Savior right then and there. It was a nice funeral.

But it was so sad. We sat two rows behind Max Aysee. He had his head down and we couldn't see his face, but his shoulders shook during the entire service. I could tell that he was crying his heart out. Norm and Max had been much closer than most brothers are. Norm had been a constant companion to Max every day of his life, and suddenly, Norm was gone. Worst of all, Max was not saved, so even though I had the assurance that I would see Norm again some day, Max did not.

What do unsaved people do when a loved one dies? How do they handle the grief and pain, since they don't have the Lord to comfort them? I hurt inside, watching Max struggle with his great loss. I prayed for him, and wept as well. I've never seen anybody so grief-stricken as Max Aysee was that morning.

It was quiet in the van during the drive back to Diamond Point.

We were almost back to the driveway leading down to Diamond Point when it happened. Mr. Diamond was guiding the van through a tire-screaming curve—I still think he takes those curves too fast—when he suddenly slammed on the brakes to keep from rear-ending a slow-moving tanker truck. The tanker was barely creeping along. Black smoke belched from its exhaust stack as it growled and snarled its way up the steep grade. It was one of those trucks from Pleasant Valley Dairy.

Mr. Diamond swung out into the other lane and then pulled back. "Don't try to pass him, Daddy!" Lisa begged. "We're almost to our driveway, anyway! It's less than half a mile!"

"I won't, Lisa," her father reassured her. "We'll just putter along at five miles an hour until this guy pulls off, or until we reach our driveway."

Two or three minutes later the dairy truck slowed even more, and then swung wide to make a right turn onto a narrow dirt road that was very steep. Mr. Diamond frowned, turning his head to watch the truck as we passed. “Now why in the world would he be going up there?” he mused. “There’s no dairy up there!”

“What’s up there?” Sherlock asked.

“Nothing, really,” Mr. Diamond answered. “I sometimes hunt up there. That road leads up to an old fire tower, and there’s a leveled clearing about halfway up where some developer dug some fill dirt. But other than that, there’s not a thing up there.”

“Can he turn that rig around up there?”

“I suppose he could in the clearing, but just barely.”

When we reached Diamond Point, Sherlock drew me aside from the others. “I want to check out that tanker, Penny,” he told me in a low voice. “He’s up to something!”

“Oh, Sherlock! He was just looking for a place to turn around!”

“Penny, listen. There’s no such business as ‘Pleasant Valley Dairy’, at least not in this state. I checked several days ago. Do you know who owns that truck? Superior Waste Management!”

“Senator Greene’s company?”

“Exactly. I memorized the license number the first time we saw one of those trucks, and I checked the number through the DMV. Now tell me why a truck belonging to a waste disposal company would be labeled as a dairy truck, and explain what a rig that big would be doing out here in the boonies.”

I shrugged. “OK, he’s up to something.”

“Let’s borrow two of the scooters and buzz over there. I want to check it out.”

“Sherlock! I’m not gonna walk into another dangerous situation again!”

“We’ll be cautious. I’m not gonna get that close. I promise.”

The alarm bells were going off inside my head, trying their best to get my attention and warn me of danger, but for some reason I agreed to accompany Sherlock. I guess I just give in too easily. In less than three minutes, he and I were buzzing up the road on two of Mr. Diamond’s little motor scooters. Sherlock turned off the road before we got to the turnoff for the fire tower.

“Why are we stopping here?” I asked, as we parked the scooters in the shadows of the woods.

“The fire tower road is just around the next curve,” he told me. “We’ll hike over the ridge and see if we can’t come out above the

clearing that Mr. Diamond told us about. Unless I'm mistaken, that's where we'll find the truck."

"What's he doing up here, anyway?" I asked, but Sherlock just adjusted the straps on his backpack and started up the slope.

"Wait and see," he replied over his shoulder.

Five minutes later we found ourselves on the crest of a ridge overlooking a small clearing. Sherlock dropped to his knees behind a leafy green bush, and with heart pounding, I joined him. Sherlock pointed. "Look!" The tanker truck was parked at the edge of the clearing, just above the point where the side of the hill fell away sharply.

Sherlock pulled a small camcorder from his backpack and filmed the tanker for a few seconds. He turned to me. "Follow me, but stay low!"

We hiked along just below the crest of the ridge, staying low and trying to keep out of sight of the truck. When we reached the eastern side of the slope, Sherlock and I crept cautiously up through the undergrowth. We peered over the crest of the ridge to see the tanker just ten yards beyond us. A black rubber pipe about six or seven inches in diameter snaked from the bottom of the tanker to the edge of the clearing, discharging a fast-flowing

stream of milky-white liquid down the steep slope. Sherlock whipped out the camcorder again and captured the scene on film.

The air was filled with a strong, disagreeable odor that made my eyes burn. The tanker wasn't dumping milk!

Sherlock grabbed my elbow to get my attention. "There's the driver," he whispered. Down below us, a bearded man with a long ponytail stood in the middle of the dirt road leading up to the clearing. He was smoking a cigarette. As he raised his arms and stretched, I saw a handgun in the waistband of his blue jeans.

"He's keeping a sharp watch, isn't he?" Sherlock observed.

Sherlock dug in the backpack again and produced a small glass jar and a pair of rubber gloves. "What are you going to do?" I asked in alarm.

"Just going to get a sample of the discharge," he replied, slipping the rubber gloves on. "Keep an eye on the driver for me. Throw a pebble at me if he heads this way." I watched anxiously as my friend crept up to the tanker. He opened the little jar and scooped up a small amount of the milky liquid flowing from the tanker, and then tightly recapped the container. "There's a plastic bag in my back pack," he told me as he slipped back to our hiding

place. “Get it out and open it for me.” When I complied, he carefully dropped the jar into the bag.

“You came prepared, didn’t you?” I remarked.

“Let’s get out of here,” he said, as he pulled the rubber gloves off and put them in another bag.

“What’s going on here?” I asked. “What is that stuff coming from the tanker?”

“Hazardous waste,” he told me. “Unless I’m mistaken, Superior Waste Management is dumping huge amounts of hazardous waste!”

“Why?”

“We can discuss it later,” he told me, suddenly in a hurry. “I have to get this sample to a lab as fast as possible. I have work to do.” I followed him back to the scooters at a dead run. Five minutes later we were back at Diamond Point.

Robert had lunch ready when we arrived, but Sherlock disappeared downstairs instead of coming in to eat. I was surprised—Sherlock is always hungry. We ate without him.

“Let’s go over to Mrs. Pendergrass’,” Lisa suggested when lunch was over. “Tomorrow’s our last day here, and we have to find those coins!”

“I can’t right now, Lisa,” I replied. “Something big is up, and I want to wait and see if Sherlock needs my help.”

“What’s going on?” she asked, mystified. “And where did you and Sherlock go after we got home from the funeral?”

“I can’t tell you yet,” I replied. “Wait and ask Sherlock.”

Fifteen minutes later, Sherlock came dashing upstairs. One look at his face and I could tell that he was terribly excited about something. “Where’s your dad, Lisa?” the young detective asked.

“He’s in the library,” Lisa answered. “Why?”

“I need to talk to him,” Sherlock replied. He grinned at me. “You won’t believe what just happened!”

We raced after him to the library. “Sir, may I talk with you?” Sherlock asked, rushing into the library.

Mr. Diamond gave us a puzzled look as we approached his desk. “What’s this all about?”

“We need your permission to go to the fire tower this afternoon at three o’clock,” Sherlock stated. “The news team from Channel 9 is supposed to meet me there, and the police are going to be there, too.” He paused and turned to me. “They’re dumping cyanides, dioxins, and low-level radioactive wastes! I didn’t even have to get a lab analysis.”

Mr. Diamond looked more confused than ever. “Wait! Slow down,” he said, holding up both hands. “This is going way too fast for me! Sherlock, suppose you start at the beginning.” Lisa, Sherlock and I took the seats he offered.

“When Penny and I borrowed your scooters this morning,” Sherlock explained, “we took them up to the clearing where the ‘dairy’ truck was headed. Just as I expected, we found the tanker dumping hazardous wastes, and I got it all on video, using your camcorder. The truck, by the way, belongs to Superior Waste Management, one of Senator Greene’s holdings.”

Mr. Diamond shook his head in amazement. “The senator is a jack of all trades, isn’t he? It seems that he gets involved in a little of everything.”

Sherlock nodded. “Seems like he does. Anyway, I found out that there’s another truck coming around four o’clock to dump another load! Channel 9 agreed to come, and the police are going to come, and we’re going to catch them in the act. I thought you should know what’s going on.”

He glanced in my direction. “I learned my lesson last week when we tried to investigate the money laundering operation.

From now on, I’m going to try to remember to tell an adult what’s going on.”

I grinned. “That’s a nice change!”

“Wait a minute,” Mr. Diamond said. “How do you know that there’s another tanker coming to dump?”

“Superior does business in several states. They have an operation just outside of Jackson, a little less than an hour from here. I called that location just a few minutes ago to try to ask a few subtle questions and see if I could learn a bit about their operation.” He grinned. “Apparently, the Lord led me to a disgruntled employee.”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“Well, I got this guy on the phone—he’s a vice president in charge of one of the departments—and started asking questions about whose contracts they carried, that sort of thing. This guy stopped me and asked who I was, and the question caught me off guard. Without thinking I told him that I was an independent investigator, which of course, I am. I caught myself just as the words slipped out, but it was too late. But instead of hanging up like I expected, this vice president starts telling me everything he

knows about the illegal dumping operation. He wouldn't tell me his name, but he calls himself 'Pigeon'.

"Superior has been dumping hazardous wastes up here for a little over six months. They were dumping in a more accessible location, but Senator Greene got nervous about the possibility of being discovered and insisted that they move to a safer dumpsite. He chose this location personally. Anyway, when I found out about the four o'clock truck, I called the TV station and the police."

"I can already tell you how this story is gonna end," I said. "The truck driver gets arrested, and maybe some of the workers at Superior, but the senator walks away as if he had nothing to do with it!"

Sherlock grinned. "Not this time, Penny." He pulled a cassette tape from his pocket. "This ties him in tighter than a python hug!"

"What is it?" Mr. Diamond asked.

"Pigeon somehow managed to tape a call Senator Greene made to Superior, giving the order to change the dump site," the young detective answered.

"How did you get it?"

"He played it for me over the phone. I recorded it on your answering machine and then transferred it to a cassette tape. Want to hear it?"

Mr. Diamond pulled a portable cassette player from a drawer. "Roll it."

Sherlock inserted the tape and pressed Play. Senator Greene's voice emerged from the machine. "Anderson? Greene here. Tell your men not to make another dump behind the forest preserve. It's too close to the Interstate, and there's too great a chance of discovery. I want you to start dumping in a new location."

A second voice on the tape—which apparently was Anderson—began to argue with the senator. "But sir, we've been dumping there for nearly two years. We haven't had the least bit of trouble—"

Senator Greene cursed. "We're dumping dioxins, cyanides, and LLWs, you fool! Just one little slip up and there'll be some major fines! I can't afford the bad press!"

Mr. Diamond's eyes grew wide. "He incriminated himself this time, didn't he?"

Sherlock nodded.

“I’ve chosen the new dump site personally,” Greene was saying. “It’s less than five minutes from my place on Thunderbird Lake, but it’s on the south side of the watershed, so the stuff won’t contaminate my lake. It’s gonna be a bit tricky getting the trucks in, but once you see it you’ll have to agree that it’s the perfect location. Here’s how to get there.” The tape continued to roll as the senator gave directions right to the clearing below the fire tower!

“What are LLWs?” I asked.

“Low-level wastes,” Sherlock answered. “They’re liquid wastes that are radioactive. Superior Waste Management has contracts to dispose of the LLWs from two nearby nuclear reactors, but as we just found out, they’re not doing it properly.”

Lisa looked shocked. “And Senator Greene’s supposed to be so concerned about the environment!” she exclaimed angrily. “Why is he dumping hazardous wastes?”

“Profits,” Sherlock replied. “Big profits! Superior Waste Management has government contracts worth millions of dollars annually, as well as contracts with several private industries. Hazardous wastes such as dioxin are supposed to be incinerated at extremely high temperatures, which destroys their toxicity; and

cyanide wastes should be mixed with oxidizing agents which neutralize them. The LLWs are supposed to be sealed in rupture-proof containers and buried in a carefully monitored burial site. These are very safe procedures, but also very costly. According to Pigeon, Superior has been properly disposing of twenty percent of the hazardous waste just for appearance’s sake, and dumping the other eighty percent. It’s far more expensive to dispose of hazardous materials in a safe and responsible manner than it is to just haul it out and dump it somewhere. Why is Environmentalist Greene dumping hazardous wastes on the mountainside? Bigger profits!”

“And he’s supposed to be so concerned about the environment!” Lisa said again in disgust.

“I’m afraid that was just political rhetoric to get the media to jump on his side and help him get elected,” Mr. Diamond said bitterly. “Senator Greene is not concerned about the environment at all. Senator Greene is only interested in what benefits Senator Greene.”

It was just after two-thirty when Mr. Diamond pulled his sport utility vehicle off the road into the woods at the very spot where Sherlock and I had hidden the scooters that morning. He and Robert climbed out of the front, while Brandon, Lisa, Sherlock and I scrambled out of the back. Mr. Diamond looked at his watch. “We have just over twenty minutes to hike to the fire tower.”

“We don’t all have to go,” Sherlock pointed out. “How about if you and I go alone?”

“I’d like to go, too,” I volunteered.

“OK,” Mr. Diamond said. “Robert, why don’t you stay here with Lisa and Brandon? I’ll take Penny and Sherlock with me.”

It was ten minutes till three when we reached the fire tower, an eighty-foot steel structure in a small clearing atop the mountain. I tipped my head back and looked at the little observation shack so high in the air. “You’d get quite a view from up there, wouldn’t you?”

“Here comes the news team now!” Sherlock said, pointing.

To my surprise, a blue and white helicopter came skimming over the treetops. Even though the helicopter was several hundred yards away, it was easy to see the huge, bright red numeral “9” on

the side of the body. The sleek, three million-dollar craft hovered for a few seconds at about two hundred feet, and then swooped in gracefully to land less than a hundred feet from the tower. The door opened, and three men climbed out. Two of the men were carrying cameras and sound equipment. I watched in awe as the helicopter rose into the air. “What a way to travel!” I breathed.

The newsmen walked over to us. “Brent McPherson, News Channel 9,” a tall, sophisticated-looking man said. He was wearing an expensive suit, which looked strangely out of place in the woods. “This is my cameraman, Dave McElroy, and my sound man, Jim Beeler.”

“I’m Sherlock Jones, the one who called you,” the young detective said. “This is Larry Diamond, CEO of Diamond Computer Technology, and this is my friend, Penny Gordon.” The newsmen acknowledged the introductions by nodding at Sherlock and me, and shaking hands with Mr. Diamond. I could tell by the respectful way they looked at Mr. Diamond that they knew who he was.

“Where’s the action?” McPherson asked.

“We need to hike down to a clearing four or five hundred yards from here,” Sherlock replied. “That’s where the tanker unloaded this morning. The next one is due in about an hour.”

McPherson looked at his watch. “Excellent,” he said in a business-like voice. “Let’s get moving.”

A white sport utility vehicle came bouncing up the road to the fire tower just then, and McPherson frowned. “Great!” he growled, “we have company!”

A man and a woman scrambled out of the car. The man had two huge cameras: one on a tripod and one on a neck strap. “We’re from the Times,” the woman told us, referring to one of the largest newspapers in the country. “We got a tip that there’s a hot environmental story breaking. What’s up?”

McPherson groaned. “Just follow us,” he snapped. He looked sternly at Sherlock. “Did you call them, too?”

“No, sir,” Sherlock replied evenly. “Just the police, and you guys. Apparently, there’s a leak at Channel 9.” McPherson frowned, but didn’t reply.

We hiked down to the clearing. Two police cars came flying up the dirt road and, reaching the clearing, skidded to a stop in a cloud of dust. Robert, Lisa, and Brandon came walking across the

clearing to meet us. “We won’t even have to air this story tonight,” McPherson grumbled. “Half the people in the country are here already!” He seemed so grumpy, not like the smiling, friendly people you see doing the news on TV.

The police officers climbed from their cars and walked over to us. “I’m Lieutenant Davison,” one of the officers said. “I’ll be in charge here.”

“The tanker was parked right over there,” Sherlock told the police officers and the newsmen. “He backed into position and dumped over the left bank there. I think you need to know that he was armed.”

Lieutenant Davison looked the scene over. “We need to let the driver open the valve and actually start dumping before we move in,” he told his men. “We’ll station ourselves just below the ridge here. Once we apprehend the driver, one of you get that valve closed!”

I’ll do it,” McPherson declared.

The officer looked at him in surprise. “What?”

“It will make a good opener,” the reporter explained. “My crew will remain out of sight in those trees over there. They’ll have a good camera angle, but the driver won’t see them. Once you and

your men have the driver in custody, I'll step up to the truck and turn off the valve. Then we'll move in and do the narrative."

Lieutenant Davison shrugged. "Fine with me."

He turned to us. "What are you doing here?"

"Officer, this is the boy that called us," McPherson cut in. "I want him here for an interview right beside the tanker. After the driver is in custody, of course."

Davison shrugged again. "OK, but I want you all out of the way until this whole thing goes down. I don't expect any shooting, but we're not going to take any chances." He looked at Mr. Diamond. "You with them?"

The tall millionaire nodded.

"Then you keep everyone behind that tree line until we call you out," the lieutenant said, pointing to a spot about fifty yards from where the tanker would sit. "These kids are your responsibility."

The police officers and news reporters took up positions as we walked toward the woods. We sat down on the ground just inside the woods on the ridge above the clearing. We were a little farther away than I would have liked, but at least we would be able to see the whole thing when it "went down".

"I don't like Brent McPherson," I told Sherlock. "He growls like an old bear with a bellyache, and he bosses everybody around. Why would they have a grouch like him on TV?"

Sherlock shrugged. "I'm sure he shows a different side of his personality when he's on camera."

"I sure hope so," I told him. "Nobody would watch an old grouch like that!"

We sat and waited in silence. At first I was all excited about what was about to happen, but after a while, I just got bored. I looked at my watch. Ten minutes till four. Maybe I should have gone down to Mrs. Pendergrass' farm and hunted for the coins again.

I looked at Sherlock. "We've been talking about all this environmental stuff," I said. "I've been wanting to ask you something. My dad was all upset 'cause they were banning freon in the air conditioners in cars. He said that the ban was unnecessary and foolish. Was he right?"

Sherlock nodded. "I'm afraid so, Penny. The ban against CFCs, or chlorofluorocarbons, was based on the idea that there was a 'hole' in the ozone over Antarctica, and that it was being caused by CFCs. But as it turns out, the ozone thins out for three to five

weeks every year at the end of the winter, and then rebuilds back to the previous levels. There's no overall depletion of ozone. It's a regular, annual cycle. And CFC molecules are four to eight times heavier than air, so they don't float up to the atmosphere and cause ozone depletion!"

"CFCs are four times heavier than air?" Mr. Diamond repeated.

"That's right, sir," Sherlock replied. "But you never heard or read that anywhere in all this debate about banning CFCs, did you? The media deliberately tries to keep simple facts like these from the public so that they can scare us into following the environmentalists' agenda!"

I glanced down at the TV crew hidden below the crest of the ridge and saw McPherson look at his watch, so I looked at mine. "Four o'clock, Sherlock. Where's the truck?"

"He'll be here, Penny. Pigeon was certain that the truck was going to run today."

"Maybe he was setting you up," I worried.

"I don't think so," the young detective replied. "He was sincere."

"So how should Christians respond to all this environmental stuff?" Brandon asked.

"Well, first of all, I think we should be the most responsible citizens in America," Sherlock told him. "We should be good stewards of the resources that God placed on this planet, and not be wasteful or destructive. Even a simple act like littering is a disgrace for a believer."

"Second, I think we need to be informed, reading and studying and searching out the facts. We need to encourage our elected leaders to base their decisions on scientific facts, rather than media-generated scare stories."

"And third, we need to pray for America. Our country is in better shape ecologically than it was thirty years ago, but our people are in far worse shape morally and spiritually. That's where our real problems lie."

We heard the tanker truck before we saw it. The powerful diesel engine growled as it labored to pull its heavy load up the steep incline. Down below us, the police rechecked their weapons and ducked down into their hiding places. The news people switched on their cameras and poised for the chance to record a story that could possibly scoop every other news item of the day.

Fifteen human beings waited breathlessly for the tanker. The stage was set for a drama that could capture the attention of

millions of citizens across the nation. But none of us could possibly have imagined the unusual way in which it would end.

## Chapter 10 – Hero to Villain

Tension filled the air as we watched the “Pleasant Valley Dairy” tanker back into position at the edge of the clearing. With the hiss of air brakes, the truck came to a stop less than three feet from the drop-off. The same pony-tailed driver scrambled from the cab of the truck and sauntered back to the rear of the tanker trailer, pulling on a pair of work gloves as he walked. He stopped at the back of the trailer and glanced around. My heart pounded with excitement as he pulled a long, black section of hose from its storage housing and dragged it forward.

Once the hose was coupled to the release drain at the bottom of the tank, the driver reached out and opened the valve. Seconds later, I saw milky-white liquid come gushing from the end of the hose. At that instant the police lieutenant and his men sprang from the bushes with their guns drawn. “Police!” the lieutenant shouted. “Hands in the air!”

The driver of the truck whirled around. His left hand dropped as if he were reaching for his gun. Seeing the weapons trained on him, he slowly raised both hands.

The cameraman from Channel 9 suddenly appeared right beside the truck. His camera swept across the police officers clustered around the truck driver, panned across the Pleasant Valley Dairy logo on the side of the tanker, and then dropped down to the hose dispensing its deadly discharge. A figure in a pale yellow contamination suit emerged from the bushes and sprinted toward the truck. The camera followed him as he ducked low, reached under the tanker, and turned the valve. The liquid flowing from the hose slowed almost immediately to a trickle, and then stopped completely. The man in the contamination suit pulled back his hood and removed his goggles. Even from a distance we could see that it was Brent McPherson.

The four police officers led the truck driver across the clearing toward the two patrol cars hidden in the woods. My friends and I dashed across the clearing as Brent McPherson turned toward the camera and began his narrative. When we got close to the tanker, I heard him saying, "...catastrophe was averted. The huge tanker truck, loaded with fifty-five hundred gallons of deadly toxic and

radioactive wastes, was discharging its lethal cargo when I managed to close the valve and interrupt the flow. Fortunately, a minimal amount of hazardous waste has been released, and I am happy to report that the driver responsible for this criminal assault on our environment has already been taken into custody."

McPherson paused for effect. "We must never forget that this planet we call home is poised on the brink of a worldwide disaster of our own making. Responsible citizens of the global community must learn a new appreciation for our planet's fragile beauty, and must resolve a new commitment to preserving it. The criminal, destructive action against the environment we saw today is just one example of the selfish, self-destructive attitude of American technology and industry that may one day lead to the very extinction of the human race. Our technological advances have, ironically, placed us in the precarious position of having the power to unwittingly destroy ourselves. As concerned citizens of a threatened world, we must each be willing to make some very difficult sacrifices in order to assure ourselves a place in the future history of this planet."

*If you were that concerned, I thought, you should have shut off the valve immediately, instead of waiting nearly ten seconds while the cameraman got into position!*

The suave news reporter smiled at the camera. “But there is hope. Our hope for the future lies in the education of our young people. Our school systems are doing an outstanding job of alerting the younger generation to the growing danger threatening the Earth. Thankfully, there is an increasing environmental awareness among the youth of our world, which means that they are being prepared and equipped to deal with the tough questions facing this fragile planet.”

The sound technician gestured for Sherlock to approach Brent McPherson. “In fact,” McPherson continued, as Sherlock walked over to stand beside him, “the hero of today’s story is a young person—a Junior High student who goes by the name of Sherlock Jones. This young man, a visitor to our state, became aware of a plan to dump hazardous wastes and alerted the local police and the Channel 9 news team.”

The reporter reached out and shook Sherlock’s hand. “Thanks, Sherlock, for your contribution today to the safety of our planet. Your alertness in observing and reporting an impending

ecological disaster demonstrates to my satisfaction what a model citizen of the global community you really are.”

Sherlock nodded and smiled for the camera. “I was glad to do it, Mr. McPherson. The dumping of the hazardous wastes was a criminal act, and it had to be reported. But I must say this—I do not consider myself a citizen of this world; I am an American citizen.”

If McPherson heard Sherlock’s remark, he chose to ignore it. He displayed another huge smile for the camera. “Today’s story ends on a happy note because of an observant young man. Just think of what would have happened to the environment had Sherlock not alerted the authorities: fifty-five hundred gallons of lethal, hazardous waste would have been unleashed upon this ecosystem, with tragic results to the wildlife and plant life of this region. The criminal actions of this truck driver, and the corporation for which he works, should be punished to the fullest extent of the law.”

“Mr. McPherson, that’s the real story behind today’s illegal dumping of hazardous waste,” Sherlock said. “According to my sources, the tanker trucks have been dumping in this area for the past six months! The company responsible is Superior Waste

Management, a subsidiary of Northern States Enterprises, which is owned by none other than United States Senator Adam Greene.”

You should have seen Brent McPherson’s reaction to Sherlock’s last statement! He leaped forward, waving his hands as if he could somehow erase Sherlock’s words. “Cut!” he screamed. “Cut!” He turned on Sherlock like an angry Rottweiler. “How could you say that?” he snarled. His features were distorted with rage. “How dare you say that? Senator Greene is a world leader in the movement to protect the environment! How dare you libel him in this way?”

“Check out my story,” Sherlock replied calmly. “This truck is owned by Superior Waste Management, one of Senator Greene’s holdings.”

“Check it out,” McPherson ordered his sound technician. “See if you can find the registration papers in the cab of this truck.” He glared at Sherlock.

The technician was back in less than thirty seconds. “This vehicle *is* registered to Superior Waste Management, Brent. The kid’s right.”

“Then heads are going to roll at Superior Waste Management,” McPherson declared. “When Greene finds out . . .”

“Senator Greene *ordered* the illegal dumping, sir,” Sherlock said politely.

The reporter was so angry that I think he was considering hurling Sherlock over the edge of the embankment. He cursed and shook his fist in Sherlock’s face. “What do you mean, kid, making a ridiculous, irresponsible statement like that? I know Senator Greene personally, and I can tell you that he is the best friend that the environment ever had! He has given years of his life to enact legislation protecting the environment! May I remind you, boy, that Senator Greene is the man responsible for the APE, the state-level environmental regulatory agency that takes up where the EPA leaves off! Your foolish, ungrounded accusations against a man of Senator Greene’s character are absolutely absurd! If you were an adult, you could face charges of libel!”

McPherson paused for breath, and Sherlock calmly pulled a tiny cassette player from his backpack and held it up for the newsman to see. “Allow me to substantiate my claims, sir,” he said quietly. “This tape will verify my charges against the senator.”

Sherlock switched the cassette player on, and the news people all moved in closer as Senator Greene's voice emanated from the little machine. "Anderson? Greene here. Tell your men not to make another dump behind the forest preserve. It's too close to the Interstate, and there's too great a chance of discovery. I want you to start dumping in a new location."

Then Anderson's voice: "But sir, we've been dumping there for nearly two years. We haven't had the least bit of trouble—"

Senator Greene cursed. "We're dumping dioxins, cyanides, and LLWs, you fool! Just one little slip up and there'll be some major fines! I can't afford the bad press!"

I was watching Brent McPherson, and he bit his lip at that point. His face was dark with anger. The tape continued to roll as Senator Greene gave directions to the very location where we were now standing. When the recorded phone call concluded, Sherlock switched the cassette player off.

"Sir," he said quietly, "there's no denying the fact that this truck was dumping hazardous waste this afternoon at the senator's instructions! The tape proves it!"

Every eye flew immediately to Brent McPherson. The tall newsman was so angry he was trembling. I winced as he used

some really bad language. He struggled to regain his composure and then forced a smile as he held out his hand to Sherlock. "May I have the tape, Sherlock?"

Sherlock ejected the cassette and handed it to the reporter. "Of course, sir. I have another copy."

Brent McPherson unzipped the top of the contamination suit and pocketed the cassette tape. "We don't run this story," he announced. "It dies right here."

"But, sir!" Sherlock was aghast. "You have the evidence! Why kill the story? Are you afraid of the truth?"

McPherson ignored him. Pointing a long finger at the newspaper reporter and cameraman, he ordered, "You kill this story, too! I know your editor personally, and if one word of this appears in the Times, I'll make certain that you both are out on the street by tomorrow morning!" He stepped toward the photographer. "Give me your camera."

The man stared at McPherson in silence.

McPherson cursed. "Now!"

Thoroughly intimidated, the newspaper photographer meekly opened his camera and popped out the memory card. "The other one, too," McPherson demanded. The photographer complied.

“This is censorship of the worst sort!” Mr. Diamond blurted angrily. “What right have you to kill this story? The public has a right to know!”

Brent McPherson whirled around. “Try to make an issue of this, Diamond, and the senator and I will bury your company!”

He glared at Sherlock. “Just a word of advice, boy. Keep your nose out of things that don’t concern you! It’s healthier that way.”

My friends and I watched in stunned silence as the five news people walked up the steep road toward the fire tower. “They’re afraid of the truth,” Sherlock said softly. “The liberal media will do anything to get a hot story, but they only want to present one side. Can you tell me that this is unbiased reporting? They’re afraid of the truth.”

“Five minutes ago you were a hero to Brent McPherson,” I teased. “What happened?”

Sherlock just shook his head sadly.

## Chapter 11 – Our Final Search

Friday morning after breakfast, Lisa and I headed over the ridge toward Mrs. Pendergrass’ farm. The morning was clear and cool. Today was our last day to search for the gold coins that George Pendergrass had hidden so many years ago!

“I tried to get Sherlock and Brandon to help us,” I told Lisa, “but they were going somewhere with your dad.”

“Sherlock hasn’t seemed very interested in helping find the treasure, has he?” Lisa replied. “It seems that all week he’s been in another world.”

“Well, his mind *has* been on the letters from the APE and the Tax Assessor,” I reasoned. “But I wish I could get him to use that brain of his to help us figure out where George hid the coins. If it’s at all possible, Sherlock could do it!”

Lisa held the strands of barbed wire apart for me as I stepped carefully through the fence. Then I did the same for her. As I

turned around, I saw a huge, green and yellow machine rolling slowly through the rows of soybeans. Spinning blades at the front of the machine were devouring the plants. An old blue farm truck waited at the end of the rows. “Look!” I told Lisa. “They’re harvesting the soybeans with that big machine!”

“That big machine is called a ‘combine’,” she replied. “They’ll harvest that whole field in less than half a day. They’ll probably start on the corn this afternoon.”

We knocked on the door of the old farmhouse, and Mrs. Pendergrass opened the door and greeted us warmly. “Good morning, girls. I missed you yesterday. I was hoping that you would stop by after the funeral.”

“We were busy,” I answered. I told her about the tanker truck dumping the hazardous waste, and about Brent McPherson’s refusal to run the story.

The old lady sadly shook her head when I finished. “Sometimes people are afraid of the truth,” she observed.

“That’s exactly what Sherlock said,” Lisa replied.

“Well, come on in,” Mrs. Pendergrass invited. “I was just sitting down to a cup of hot chocolate. Would you girls care for some?”

“Yes, please,” we both chorused.

“Mrs. Pendergrass, do you have any idea at all where we should look for the treasure?” I asked. I took a seat at the little kitchen table, and Lisa sat beside me. “We’ve looked everywhere we can think of, and this is our last day! Do you have any ideas? Any at all?”

Mrs. Pendergrass chuckled. “If I did, Penny, I’d dash right out and check them myself. I’ve searched this farm from top to bottom many, many times.”

“Look at this, Penny,” Lisa said. She had Mrs. Pendergrass’ photo album open to the first page, and was studying the picture of the Pendergrass’ wedding. “The picture isn’t very clear, but look at the background. Doesn’t that look like a giant heart on the cliff just above their heads?”

“It does look like it,” I agreed, leaning close to examine the picture. “It looks like a big heart made of stone.”

“It is a heart,” Mrs. Pendergrass told us. “It’s a natural stone formation on the side of the cliff, and it’s nearly six feet tall. That’s why we call the little glen the ‘Wedding Chapel’, and it’s one reason why we decided to get married there.”

“Is the heart still there?” Lisa asked.

“Oh, yes,” Mrs. Pendergrass replied. “I suppose it will be there until the Lord comes back.”

I looked at the picture again. “Then how come we didn’t see it when we visited the Wedding Chapel?” I asked. “We couldn’t have missed something that big! Could we?”

“There’s a scarlet oak growing in front of it now,” the elderly lady reminded us. “If you went into the Wedding Chapel after all the leaves have fallen, you would see the heart. Right now, though, the leaves obscure it from view.”

Mrs. Pendergrass set two steaming mugs of hot chocolate on the table in front of us. “Careful, girls, they’re hot. Let’s not have any lawsuits, OK?” She winked at us.

I tried to sip my hot chocolate carefully, but the drink was so hot that I burned my lips. I set the mug down to cool and pulled the photo album toward me. “That heart is awesome,” I remarked. “It’s hard to believe that it’s a natural formation.”

“I’ll always treasure the memory of standing under it and saying ‘I do’ to the kindest man that God ever created,” Mrs. Pendergrass said softly.

Something clicked in my mind just then. It was as though Mrs. Pendergrass’ words had triggered something that I should

remember, but I just couldn’t put my finger on it. “Say that again,” I told her.

She looked at me strangely. “Say what again?”

“What you just said about you and George being married under the heart.”

“I just said that I’ll always treasure the memory of—”

“That’s it,” I said. “We were just talking about the heart, and when you mentioned the word ‘treasure’, I thought about the treasure that George had hidden.” I frowned. “It’s almost as if my subconscious is trying to tell me that the two ideas go together. But what would ‘treasure’ have to do with ‘heart’? They don’t really go together.”

“Sure they do,” Lisa retorted. “Look at the verse above you: ‘For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.’”

I glanced up at the Matthew 6:21 plaque. “OK,” I decided, “that’s why my brain is trying to put the two ideas together. They’re together in that verse.” I glanced up at the plaque again, and a crazy idea hit me. “Didn’t you say that George made that for you on the day he died? The day he hid the treasure?”

Mrs. Pendergrass nodded slowly.

“Well, what if you switched the two words, ‘heart’ and ‘treasure’? ‘For where your heart is, there will your treasure be also.’ You said that George was going to make a riddle for you to figure out! Maybe this is it!”

Lisa’s eyes sparkled with excitement as she leaped to her feet and spun around to face Mrs. Pendergrass. “Mrs. Pendergrass, how high is the heart above the ground?”

“The bottom is about twelve feet high or so,” Mrs. Pendergrass said slowly.

“Did you ever search there?” I asked, jumping to my feet. My heart was pounding with excitement.

“No, I never did,” Mrs. Pendergrass replied thoughtfully. “I just never thought of that.”

Lisa and I rushed for the door. “Girls, wait!” our elderly hostess called. “Let’s go together.”

The suspense was killing me as we hurried across the field and up the ridge toward the Wedding Chapel. “I’m sure glad you walk fast,” I teased Mrs. Pendergrass, “or I’d have to run off and leave you. I can’t believe it! We’re about to find George’s treasure!”

“Penny, Penny,” Mrs. Pendergrass admonished, “don’t get your hopes up. We may just be on a wild goose chase.”

“Well, this is the goose that laid the golden coins,” I quipped. “And when we find her, we’ll have the money to pay your property taxes!”

We walked so fast that I was almost out of breath by the time we reached the Wedding Chapel. I rushed forward and stood beneath the scarlet oak, peering up at the face of the cliff above me. Sure enough, there it was—a huge stone heart. It was partially obscured by the branches, but if you were looking for it, you could see enough to tell what it was.

“That’s the heart,” Mrs. Pendergrass said softly. “But how do we get to it?”

“Penny’s the biggest tomboy you ever saw,” Lisa told her, “and she’s part monkey. She’ll just climb the tree.”

I was leaping up to grab the lowest branch before the words were out of her mouth. I climbed cautiously, staying close to the sturdy trunk until I was at eye level with the middle of the heart. Then I began to work my way toward the rocky cliff, stepping out on branches that grew thinner and thinner. “Be careful, Penny!” Mrs. Pendergrass called. “It’s a long way to fall!”

I leaned forward, clutching the top of the heart with both hands. As Mrs. Pendergrass had told us, the heart was nearly six

feet tall from top to bottom, and it was nearly a foot thick. From my vantage point I could see that someone had used a chisel to cut away some of the stone at the top. Apparently, the formation wasn't a perfect heart, and George had done some shaping to make it look more like one. But I didn't tell Mrs. Pendergrass.

"Find anything?" Lisa yelled up to me.

"Not yet," I replied. "I'm just looking at the heart." Gripping the top of the formation with both hands, I pulled myself up where I could see over the top. My own heart leaped. There was a small fissure in the rock above the heart! Wrapping my left arm over the top of the stone formation, I reached into the opening with my right hand.

"Penny! Be careful!"

"Lisa! There's a hole at the top of the rock here, and it looks like it goes in quite a ways! Lisa! There's something in here! I can just feel it with the tips of my fingers! I need a longer arm!"

"Penny! Be careful, honey!"

My heart pounded with a combination of fear and excitement as I stepped across from the tree and trusted my full weight to the rock heart. One of my scrambling tennis shoes found a tiny

toehold at one side of the heart, enabling me to pull myself up farther. I reached into the hole again.

"Penny, honey, be careful!"

My trembling fingers touched something hard and cold. "Lisa! There's something in here!"

"What is it, Penny?"

I managed to scoot a little higher, thrusting my arm in as far as I could. "It's a . . . it's a CANNING JAR!! YES! I can feel the lid!" I hooked one finger over the edge of the lid and dragged the object a little closer to me, then closed my fingers around it. "Got it!"

Lisa cheered as I pulled the jar from its hiding place. Sure enough, it was an old canning jar, so dirty and discolored that I couldn't see through the glass! "I . . . I have to drop it, Lisa! See if you can catch it!" I flipped the jar into empty space behind me and seized the rock formation again, all in one motion. There was no tinkle of breaking glass below me, so I assumed that Lisa had made a successful catch.

I was slowly losing my hold on the heart formation, and I sure didn't want to fall and land on the rocks at the base of the cliff. There was only one thing to do. Tensing my muscles, I shoved off

from the heart with all my might, twisting around in the air as I fell. I managed to grab a sturdy branch of the scarlet oak and swing myself safely into the tree.

“Penny!” Mrs. Pendergrass chided. “You’ll give me a heart attack!”

Anxious to see the contents of the canning jar, I quickly dropped from limb to limb until I was safely on the ground again. Mrs. Pendergrass was shaking her head. “Lisa was right. You are part monkey!”

Lisa was trying to twist the lid from the jar, but with no success. Finally, she handed it to me. “Here. You try.”

Grunting with the effort, I twisted the rusty lid until it broke free. I grinned with anticipation as I lifted the lid from the jar and peered inside. My heart sank, and I felt like screaming. The jar was filled with rocks!

I tossed and turned, but sleep just would not come. Today had been such a disappointment! I could still see the troubled look on Mrs. Pendergrass’ face as I showed her the jar filled with worthless rocks. Worst of all was when we emptied the rocks

from the jar and found the note scrawled on a faded scrap of old paper: “I beat you to it!” Her lower lip had trembled, and her eyes had filled with tears, but she had said nothing. Watching her, I realized that she now knew that George’s “treasure” was gone forever.

I rolled over and tried to find a comfortable position. My pillow seemed so hard. I hurt inside as I thought about Mrs. Pendergrass. Just this afternoon Mr. Diamond had told us that his attorney had already gotten the file removed at the APE, with all fines and charges dropped, but what would happen if Mrs. Pendergrass couldn’t come up with the ten thousand dollars to pay the higher property taxes? Would the farm that she loved so much actually fall into the greedy hands of Senator Greene? It just wasn’t fair!

*Dear God, I prayed silently, isn’t there something you can do? Please, don’t let that wicked senator get Mrs. Pendergrass’ farm. We tried and tried to find the treasure, but somebody beat us to it. Mr. Diamond was able to do something about the fines at the APE, but Mrs. Pendergrass still owes the ten thousand for taxes. And she doesn’t have the money! Please, Lord, do something. We leave for Willoughby tomorrow!*

I sighed again, too troubled to even continue praying. The thought of Mrs. Pendergrass losing the farm was almost more than I could handle.

I thought about the tanker truck that had dumped the hazardous chemicals. Just this evening we had learned that the driver had been released, and that no charges were even being filed against him or his company! The truck, which had been impounded by the police, had been returned to Superior Waste Management. No fines, no penalties, nothing! And of course, there were to be no charges against the senator, in spite of the incriminating tape that Sherlock had given to the police. It seemed that no matter what the senator did, he could always get away with it, and there was nothing anyone could do about it. Somehow, Senator Greene was above the law.

“Penny!”

I jumped at the sound of Sherlock’s whisper. “What do you want?” I whispered back. “I’m in bed!”

“Penny!”

I was a bit aggravated. “What do you want, Sherlock? I’m trying to go to sleep!”

“Penny! Look under the bed!”

My heart leaped into my throat as I suddenly realized that Sherlock’s voice *was* coming from under the bed! Anger bubbled up inside me like a boiling pot and spilled over, raging through my entire being. I was furious! Sherlock had no right to be in my room!

I leaped from my bed and flipped on the light, then dropped to my knees and threw up the bedspread. “Come out of there!” I raged. You have no right—” I stopped in confusion. There was no one under the bed! But I had heard Sherlock—I knew I had!

“Penny.” The voice whispered again, just inches from my face, and I almost screamed. I thrust my hand into the shadowy void under the bed and touched something small and hard. I seized it and pulled it from under the bed. I was holding Sherlock’s miniature cassette player.

“Penny, I hope you’re awake by now,” Sherlock’s voice whispered out of the tiny speaker. “If you are, look under the bed again.”

Puzzled, I dropped to my belly and thrust my hand under the bed, scattering a whole family of dust mice. I swept my arm from side to side. My elbow knocked against a cold, heavy object. I seized it, pulled it from under the bed, and gasped in

astonishment. Even though the glass was dirty, I could see that the one-pint canning jar in my hand was half-filled with golden coins!

I stared at the little pile of ten and twenty-dollar gold pieces in the center of my bedspread, each in a little protective plastic envelope. “So you mean to tell me that the treasure has been under my bed this whole time?” I still hadn’t decided if I should be angry or delighted.

“Just since Saturday,” Sherlock answered.

I looked up at Mr. Diamond. “Did you know that the gold was here in the house?”

The millionaire shook his head. “I just found out about thirty seconds ago when you let out that terrible scream,” he replied with a grin. “I was just about asleep. Do you know how badly you scared me?”

I looked from Lisa to Brandon to Robert to Maimee, all of whom were crowded eagerly around the bed. “Did any of you know?”

Robert grinned. “Someone had to run into town and get the coin sleeves and the coin book for Sherlock,” he replied. “But do you know how hard it was, keeping this secret from you?”

“But why didn’t you tell me?” I asked Sherlock. “Lisa and I have been searching and searching! Do you know how worried we were about not finding the treasure before the time ran out?” I snorted in disgust, suddenly feeling very foolish. “And the coins were under my bed the whole time!”

“I knew how badly you wanted to find the treasure,” the boy detective replied, “and I didn’t want to rob you of the fun of searching for it. I knew that the coins would be a lot safer here at Diamond Point than up there in the Wedding Chapel, so I stashed them under your bed.”

“Why did you put them in these little plastic things?” I asked.

“Many of these coins are quite rare,” he replied, “but they lose part of their value if they get scratched or damaged in any way. I simply put them in protective sleeves so they wouldn’t get scratched if you got too excited when you found them. If I figured the numismatic value correctly, these coins are worth a little over sixty-five thousand dollars.”

“Sixty-five thousand?”

Sherlock nodded.

“How did you find them so quickly?” I asked.

“Mrs. Pendergrass told us that George had decided on a new hiding place on the day that he cut the Christmas tree,” Sherlock replied. “She also told us that she thought that the Matthew 6:21 plaque was a clue of some sort, and that if we went up to the Wedding Chapel after the leaves were gone we would see why they had decided to hold the wedding ceremony there. I looked behind the scarlet oak that afternoon, and when I saw the heart rock formation, I knew immediately where George had hidden the coins. They’ve been under the bed ever since. I put the other jar and the note in their place.”

“Does Mrs. Pendergrass know that we have the treasure?” Lisa asked.

“She has no idea,” Sherlock replied, “but it’s too late to call her now. We’ll tell her first thing in the morning.”

“Baloney!” Mr. Diamond declared. “If you don’t call her right now, I will! News like this is too good to keep until morning!”

I beat them all to the phone, so I got the privilege of explaining the whole story to Mrs. Pendergrass.

## Chapter 12 – Unexpected News

I watched Mrs. Pendergrass’ face as I laid the shiny twenty-dollar gold piece on the table in front of her. “This is from George,” I said.

“After all these years,” the old lady said softly. She picked up the plastic-shrouded coin and examined it. “It’s like a miracle!” Her eyes filled with tears, and she reached across the table and hugged me. “It’s as if the Lord and George planned this. You kids found the treasure at the time that I needed it most! Now I can pay the property taxes.”

“And you won’t lose the farm,” Lisa added softly.

“The rest of the coins are in Mr. Diamond’s vault at Diamond Point,” Sherlock told Mrs. Pendergrass. “The bank is going to place a safe deposit box in your name, and a security officer is going to accompany Robert to the bank Monday morning when he

takes the coins down. They want you at the bank at nine-thirty to sign for the safe deposit box and pick up the keys.”

Mrs. Pendergrass fingered the golden coin. “Thank you, Lord,” she breathed.

“I looked up each of the coins in Spencer’s Guide,” Sherlock told her. “I’m no coin expert, and I may have made some mistakes in trying to grade the condition of each coin, but I figure that the coins are worth a little over sixty-five thousand dollars. I would suggest that you have at least two coin dealers give you an appraisal of the entire collection before you sell. You won’t even have to take the coins from the bank; a dealer can examine them right there at the vault.”

He handed her a business card. “Would you do me a favor? Call me before you sell. I’d like to make sure that they’re giving you a fair price.”

“Nobody’s going to take advantage of this old lady,” Mrs. Pendergrass assured him. “I may be old, but I know a thing or two about business. But I will give you a call to set your mind at ease. And another thing—I plan to give each of you a percentage of the money as a reward for finding the treasure.”

Sherlock shook his head. “We don’t need that, Mrs. Pendergrass,” he said soberly. “It’s a big enough reward for us just to know that Senator Greene isn’t going to get your property!”

Mrs. Pendergrass turned to Brandon. “Tell me the truth, son. Wouldn’t you like to have a little reward?”

Brandon grinned sheepishly. “Well . . .”

“That does it, then,” the old lady declared. “As soon as the coins are sold, you’ll each get a check in the mail! It’s the least I can do. And there’s no use arguing, Mr. Sherlock Jones! My mind is made up, and that’s that!”

Mrs. Pendergrass got teary-eyed as we hugged her good-bye. Her lip quivered as she told us, “These last two weeks have been some of the most joyous times of my life! I don’t know when I’ll see you again.”

“We’ll be back, Mrs. Pendergrass,” Lisa promised her. “I’ll make sure that Daddy invites them back to Thunderbird Lake again, and we’ll stop in and see you every day.”

I felt a sense of loss as we hiked across the empty fields where the corn and soybeans had recently stood. I was going to miss Mrs. Pendergrass!

“What if Senator Greene tries again after we’re gone?” Lisa worried. “I’m sure that he still wants Mrs. Pendergrass’ land. What if he gets someone to file more charges against her at the APE? He can just keep putting pressure on her until she’s forced to sell, and Sherlock won’t be here to take care of it!”

“God is still here to watch over Mrs. Pendergrass,” Sherlock reminded her. “He can stop anything that the senator tries to do. God just used me this time to do it. Remember, she’s His child, and He’s sovereign! He can protect her in any way He chooses.”

“It makes me furious to see the way Greene gets away with anything he does,” I grumbled. “No one else could ever get away with the stuff he does! It seems that he’s above the law!”

“Whoa, Penny, whoa!” Sherlock said. “Senator Greene hasn’t gotten away with anything! The Judge has a record of everything that the senator and his wife have done. When Court convenes, they’ll have to answer to every single charge, and there will be no plea-bargaining or dismissal on technicalities! And there is no court of appeals.”

It took me a moment to realize that he was talking about Judgment Day, when the Greens would stand before God to be judged for their actions. “Yes,” I agreed, “but right now they’re

getting away with everything! And what about people like Brent McPherson? He deliberately killed that story, and that wasn’t right!”

Sherlock sighed. “We have to leave things like that in God’s hands,” he replied. “I get frustrated, too, Penny, when I see what’s going on in this country. The liberals have removed prayer and Bible reading from our schools and substituted evolution. They’ve planted trash in our public libraries. They’ve pushed abortion, even though we all know that means killing innocent children! I get frustrated, too, Penny! But every once in a while I have to stop and remind myself—God is still in charge, and every one of these people will have to answer to Him!”

I nodded. “Thanks. That helps—a little.”

When we reached Diamond Point, Robert met us with the morning newspaper. “Look at this,” he told us, holding the paper up for us to see. The headline declared in bold capital letters: “SENATOR ADAM GREENE DIES OF HEART ATTACK.”

We stood speechless for a full thirty seconds.

At last, Sherlock looked at me and broke the silence. “Like I said, God can protect Mrs. Pendergrass in any way that He chooses. He is still sovereign.”

“When did Senator Greene die?” I asked.

“Last night,” Robert answered. “But that’s not all! Senator Greene’s wife was killed in a car accident last night almost exactly the same time that her husband died! She was coming home from a cocktail party, and veered across the center line into oncoming traffic.”

“That’s quite a coincidence,” I murmured.

“Maybe,” Robert said. “But I don’t think so. I think it was the hand of God.”

“God can do anything He wants, can’t He?” I mused. “I guess we can trust Him to take care of Mrs. Pendergrass.”

“Senator Greene won’t be after her land any more,” Lisa observed quietly.

Mr. Diamond appeared just then with a suitcase in each hand. “Let’s plan to leave in an hour, gang,” he told us. “Make sure that you have all your stuff packed in the van. We don’t want to leave anything.”

He looked at Lisa. “Did you say good-bye to Max?”

Lisa shook her head sadly. “I tried, Daddy. I called the hardware store, and I called his house, but I didn’t get an answer either place. I was really hoping to talk with him before we left.”

She bit her lip. “I hate to go back to Willoughby with Max still unsaved.”

Her father nodded soberly.

I carried my suitcase and stuff to the van, and then double-checked my room to make sure that I wasn’t leaving anything. “Got everything?” Mr. Diamond asked, as he passed me on the deck.

“I think so,” I replied. I hesitated, trying to decide if I should ask for a favor.

He noticed. “What’s on your mind, Penny?”

“It’s our last day here,” I told him. “Do you think I could ride one of the wave runners one last time? This is the first time I’ve ever had a chance to try one.”

“Sure,” he told me. “Just be sure to wear a life jacket. You might ask and see if any of the others want to go. You only have half an hour, though.”

“I’ll watch the time,” I promised.

When I asked Sherlock, Brandon, and Lisa about going, they all gave me the same answer: “It’s too cool today for wave runners.” So I was going to have to do it by myself. Robert

lowered one of the speedy little machines into the water and started it for me.

“Be careful, Freckles,” he told me.

“Thanks,” I replied. I hopped aboard, revved the motor a couple of times, and took off across the lake. The little wave runner snarled happily as it flew over the waves. I looked up at Briarwood as I passed, and a strange feeling swept over me. Senator Greene was gone forever, never to trouble innocent people like Mrs. Pendergrass again. But I didn’t rejoice in the thought; the senator and his wife had undoubtedly died without Jesus.

I looked up to realize that I had already left the body of the Thunderbird behind and was now zipping across the north wing. Putting the speeding wave runner into a wide turn, I headed for the east shore where Max and Norm had lived. To my surprise, I spotted Max out on the rickety little old dock in front of his house. He was wearing the same green plaid shirt that he had worn the first time we met him. I zipped over and cut the engine to coast alongside the dock. “Hello, Mr. Aysee. How are you doing?”

The old man glanced over at me with sad eyes. “I’m OK, Penny.”

“We’re getting ready to head for home, so I guess this is good-bye.”

“Is Lisa leaving, too? I was hoping to talk with her before you all left.”

“I can go get her,” I offered.

He shook his head. “No, there’s no need to do that,” he said. “It’s just that—” He paused, and his eyes welled up with tears. “I went down to the store today, just to get out of the house for awhile. The place was so empty without Norm!” He began to sob.

I took the safety lanyard off my wrist, looped it around the handlebars of the wave runner, and then looped the other end around a nail in the dock. I scrambled onto the dock and put my hand on Max’s shoulder.

“There was one of those little booklets on the counter of the store,” Max told me, “you know, one of the ones that Lisa gave us.” He wiped his nose with the back of his hand. “This one was the one that Norm had read again and again the day before he . . . before he asked Jesus to save him. It told the story of Jesus dying, and how much He suffered for us.”

He raised his eyes and looked at me. “Miss Penny, there were some things in there that I didn’t know! Did you know that they

mashed thorns into His head and face all the way to his skull? Did you know that they ripped the beard out of His face? And He just let them do it!”

“He loved us, Mr. Aysee,” I whispered.

Max was crying softly. “I never really thought much about Jesus suffering for us,” he told me, “but that little booklet got me thinking. It said that Jesus died for me, Max Aysee. I know that Norm did this, and I want to do it, too. Do you know what I need to do to ask Jesus to save me?”

“Just admit to God that you’re a sinner, Mr. Aysee. The Bible says, ‘For all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God.’ Are you willing to admit that to God, and repent of your sins?”

“Oh, I’m willing to admit that,” Max said readily. “Norm and I always tried to be good neighbors, and we tried to treat people right, but . . . well, I’ve done more than my share of bad, too.”

“Do you believe that Jesus died for you?” I asked. “Do you believe that he rose again the third day?”

Max was crying and didn’t answer. But he nodded.

“There’s a verse in the Bible that tells us: ‘But God commendeth His love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.’”

He nodded again.

“The Bible also tells us to receive Jesus by faith,” I continued. “Romans 10:13 says, ‘For whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved.’”

My heart was pounding fiercely as I asked, “Mr. Aysee, wouldn’t you like to do that right now? Wouldn’t you like to just ask Jesus to save you by faith, because He died for you?” I waited breathlessly, wanting so badly for him to say yes!

Max was silent for several minutes. He had his head down, and I couldn’t see his face, but every once in a while a big tear would drip off the end of his nose and land on the dock. I waited quietly, praying as hard as I could. Finally, he raised his head and looked me square in the eye. “I want to,” he said.

Before I could say anything, he bowed his head and began to pray. “Lord Jesus,” he wept, “I’ve always thought that I was a pretty decent person, and that I was as good as the next guy. But I read the story today of what you let them do to you, when you died for me. I—” He broke down for a moment, sobbing so hard that he couldn’t even speak. “Jesus, I believe that you died for my sin, and I’m asking you to save me and forgive me. Lisa and Penny told me that you would if I asked, and I saw it in the Bible,

too. So I'm just askin' you to save me, Jesus. And if you would, Jesus, would you tell Norm that I'm gettin' saved? I think he'd want to know. Thank you, Jesus. Amen."

Max raised his eyes and smiled at me. "Thank you, Penny. Tell Lisa thank you for me, would you?"

I hugged him.

My heart was singing as the wave runner sped across Thunderbird Lake for the last time. I couldn't wait to get home and see Mom and Dad. There was so much to tell them. But best of all, I had just led my first soul to the Lord! God had used me, and it was a wonderful feeling.

I punched my fist into the air and shouted, "YES!"