

## I

### Summer Camp

Patty Flaugherty gazed intently out the window with serious blue eyes, watching the passing countryside as the train sped along. As it chugged across a bridge that spanned a wide river, she felt the train slowing down. Looking up ahead to the end of the bridge, she could see the roofs of several buildings poking out above the trees that lined the tracks there.

She brushed back her long, dark hair and turned to her twin brother, who was sitting in the seat beside her. “It looks like we’re almost there.”

Her brother Pat, a broad-shouldered youth, 17 years of age, with dark, curly hair, smiled at her when he heard the familiar screech of the brakes as the train entered the station. His blue eyes twinkled mischievously. “And it looks like you are correct,” he murmured, “as usual.”

As the train ground to a complete stop, the conductor stepped smartly down from the passenger car onto the platform and announced loudly, “Portageville. All passengers for Portageville: This is your stop.”

The twins gathered up their luggage and shuffled down the aisle of the train car with several others as they headed for the doors to disembark.

“Smell that mountain air,” Pat exclaimed as he stepped onto the train station platform.

Patty emerged from the train next and set her bags down near her brother’s. She surveyed their surroundings. “Bob said he would meet us at the station at 11 this morning.” She looked at her watch. “And we’re pretty much right on time.” Bob Daily, Patty’s boyfriend, had come to Portageville two days earlier to help his sister Barb and brother-in-law Rev. Doug Alexander. They

were in charge of a summer camp in the mountains.

Several others stepped off the train onto the crowded platform, including another young couple who made their way to where the twins were standing.

“So this is Portageville,” Bill Johnson, a Black youth, said as he placed his bag near the twins’ luggage. He was handsome and athletically built, with short-cropped dark hair. He was a member of the swim team at Temple High, where all the young people attended.

His girlfriend, Nicole Freeman, set down her backpack. Nikki, as her friends called her, was petite but muscular, with short, dark hair and doe-like brown eyes. She was a gymnast and a member of the high school cheerleading squad. “I can’t wait to meet the kids,” she said, smiling brightly. She put her arm through Bill’s arm and leaned against him affectionately.

The foursome had agreed to work with Bob at the summer camp as last-minute replacement camp counselors.

“Too bad Cathy couldn’t make it,” Patty sarcastically said to her brother. “What was her excuse, anyway?” Cathy Brent was a fiery redhead with flashing green eyes who was Pat’s sometimes date and one of the prettiest girls at school. The only problem was, she knew it.

“She’s just not the outdoorsy type,” Pat said. “She didn’t feel like she could rough it.”

“What a shame.” Patty feigned sadness. “You know I really don’t see what you see in her, Pat.”

“Hey, c’mon, lay off,” Pat shot back. “She’s really a nice girl.”

“If you say so,” Patty said as she turned to survey the crowd, hoping to see Bob. Across the platform, she noticed a group of several youngsters, mostly boys, ranging in age from about 8 to 12 who had come through the doors from the train station. Normally, a group like that she would have expected to stick

together in this crowd, but instead they all separated and made their way individually through the throng. One boy, dressed in particularly shabby clothing, headed their way, and just as he was about to pass their group, he accidentally bumped into Bill.

“Sorry, sir,” he said as he looked up innocently at the teen, and then continued on his way.

“No problem, kid,” Bill said. “Take it easy.”

Pat did not notice the children as they passed his group of friends. Instead, he was watching another couple standing by themselves on the far end of the platform. *They must have been riding further up in the train*, he thought, as he had not seen them onboard. But for some reason, the girl looked familiar to him.

“Patty, do you recognize that blonde?” Pat said quietly, nodding in the couple’s direction. The girl was slightly chubby, with short, pale blonde hair and blue eyes, and the boy with her, who was much bigger, was deeply tanned with dark hair and dark eyes.

“I think that’s...” Patty tried to observe the couple without appearing to stare. “I believe it’s Bob’s sister, Susie.”

“Ohmigosh, you’re right!” Pat exclaimed. “I should have recognized her immediately.”

“Hey, Susie,” Patty called out as she strode across the crowded space to where the other couple was standing.

Susan Daily smiled broadly and waved at her. “Patty Flaugherty!” she said as they embraced. “What a surprise to see you here. I guess my sister Barbie called you for the same reason she called us.” She pointed to the young man with her. “This is my boyfriend, Tony Grinaldi,” she said. “Tony, this is my little brother’s girlfriend, Patty.”

Susie was three years older than Bob and attended State University.

Patty led the couple over to her group of friends and made introductions.

“Is Bobby here yet?” Susie wanted to know.

“Here he comes now,” Pat noted as a tanned and handsome teen emerged from the train station and approached the group. Bob was 17 years old and a little shorter than Pat, with straw blond hair and dark brown eyes. Besides being Patty’s boyfriend, he was also Pat’s best friend.

“Hey, you guys.” He beamed as he shook Bill’s and Pat’s hands, then gave Patty a big hug and a kiss on the cheek. “Thanks so much for coming up on such short notice.”

“Bob,” Bill said, “this is my friend Nikki. Nicole Freeman.” She shyly shook Bob’s hand. “You might have seen her on the cheerleading squad with Patty. That is, if you ever take your eyes off your lady friend.”

Bob turned crimson.

“C’mon, relax, Bob.” Bill laughed. “I was just kidding.”

Next, Bob gave a great bear hug to his sister. “Suze, good to see you,” he said. “How’s school?”

“Summer term is over, finally.” She sighed. “So this was perfect timing for Barbie to call us. Oh, this is my boyfriend, Tony,” she added. “I told you about him.”

“Nice to meet you, Tony.” Bob offered his hand to the older boy. “Susie tells me you’re on the wrestling team up at State. How do you think you’ll do this year?”

Tony extended a meaty hand, enthusiastically shaking Bob’s hand. “I believe we’re on target to make State finals this year. Looking forward to it.”

“Say, Bob,” Bill interjected, “I wanted to say ‘thank you’ for asking us to come up and help. This will be a great experience for us and a great way to end

our summer before senior year.” The other young people all nodded in agreement.

“So what’s the story?” Pat asked. “You said summer camp started a week ago, but now your sister doesn’t have enough counselors?”

“Doug will explain more when he gets here,” Bob said. “He had to stop in town to run some errands. He dropped me off so I could meet you guys.”

The young people bantered back and forth for a few minutes. After a while, Nikki asked, “So how many kids are at the camp?”

“I think about 30,” Bob replied. “And they range in age from 8 to 16, so we’ll be busy with a lot of different stuff to keep them occupied.”

“And they’re all from the inner city?” Nikki continued. “So how does that work?”

“Well, none of them have been out in the country before,” Bob explained. “The purpose of this camp is to show them what it’s like to live in the wild, and also to teach them some life lessons along the way. They don’t have much at home, so this could change their world. That’s why Barbie and Doug feel so strongly about doing this.”

“I’ve always been impressed with your brother-in-law,” Pat said. “He’s a real go-getter. And a big-picture kind of guy.”

“Yeah,” Bob agreed. “His first church assignment out of seminary, and he revives this summer camp. That was two years ago, and already it’s becoming known as a place that makes a difference for these kids. He’s great.”

He turned at that moment and waved as a small school bus painted in bright colors pulled up near the front of the building. Stenciled on the side of the bus in big, bold black letters were the words CAMP KITAWNEE.

“C’mon,” Bob said. “That’s our ride.”

The young people gathered up their luggage and walked across the open-

air platform and down the steps to the parking area. Bob grabbed one of Patty's bags and strolled with her to the waiting bus.

"Trish, this is going to be such fun," he said as they walked. "I've been here only a couple days and already I'm so excited about what we can do to help these kids."

"And you didn't have any problems getting out of your lifeguard job at the community pool?" Patty wanted to know.

"No," Bob said. "I told them it was a family emergency, and I'd be back in two weeks so I could be there before they close for the fall. Well, here we are."

They arrived at the bus just as the driver, a tall, handsome young man in his late twenties with light brown hair and serious blue eyes, stepped from the vehicle.

"Doug, you remember my friends Pat and Patty?" Bob introduced them.

"It's nice to see you again." Patty smiled as she shook his hand.

Pat shook the man's hand next. "Reverend Alexander," he intoned.

"No formalities here, Pat." Doug smiled at him as he shook the youth's hand. "Call me Doug, or if you have to be formal, call me Pastor Doug. That's what the kids usually call me."

"This is my friend Bill." Bob continued the introductions. "As I mentioned, he's on the swim team with me."

Doug shook the teen's hand.

"This is Nikki. Nicole Freeman," Bob said next.

"I understand you're eager to work with the younger kids," Doug said as he shook her hand. Nikki smiled broadly and nodded.

"Good," he said. "We'll need someone to head up the crafts and activities program for them."

"Sounds perfect," Nikki said. "So maybe we can make some project the

kids can take home to their mom or dad?”

“These aren’t kids from traditional families, I’m afraid.” Doug sighed. “You might not even want to use that kind of language with them. But we can certainly let them make projects. It’ll be great for them.”

Bob concluded the introductions. “And, of course, you know Susie. And this is her boyfriend, Tony.” Doug hugged Susie and shook the boy’s hand.

“You look great, Susie,” Doug said, “and nice to meet you, Tony. I’m so glad all you guys could come to help us out.”

“You can stow your bags under here,” Bob said as he raised a panel on the side of the bus. The young people each handed him their bags, and he placed them in the compartment. Then they all clambered on board the bus.

Doug hopped into the driver’s seat and pulled on a lever to close the door, and then the bus lumbered off down the road. “It’s about a two-hour trip to the camp, so sit back and relax,” he called out over his shoulder.

“And Barbie has a summer feast planned for you guys when we get there,” Bob said. “She’s been working with the cook all morning to put things together.”

Doug turned to face the young people. “Up ahead is Black Mountain.” He pointed to the imposing wooded hills on the horizon. “Our camp is about two-thirds of the way to the top.”

“Why is it called ‘Black Mountain?’” Patty asked.

“It comes from the Native American name for it,” Doug explained. “We don’t know why they called it that though. We know the soil on the mountain is rich and dark, almost black. But the theory that best seems to explain it is that the land is heavily forested and very little sunlight gets through to the ground, so the forest floor is pretty much always in darkness.”

“Sounds creepy,” Pat chimed in.

“Not so much,” Doug disagreed. “But you certainly wouldn’t want to try to hike it. It’d be pretty rough.”

“What about the name for the camp?” Patty wanted to know. “Is that also Native American?”

“Yes, it is,” Doug responded as he turned back to his driving. “*Kitawnee* means ‘by the big river.’ Our camp sits on the shores of Lake Kitawnee, which is the headwaters for the Wapahawnee River. *Wapahawnee* means ‘white river.’ That river flows all the way down here, past Portageville. You may have seen it when the train was coming in?”

Patty nodded. “Yes, I did,” she murmured.

“And the road we’re taking is the only road up the mountain,” Bob chimed in. “It goes around the far side of the mountain away from the river, so we won’t see the water again until we hit camp.”

“And this is all protected state lands in between,” Doug added. “Raging River State Forest. It practically surrounds our camp. Most of the land by the lake is private though. Next to us are some summer homes for wealthy people, and then there’s the old Native American land that’s pretty much directly across the lake from us to the west. Their land goes all the way downstream on the far side of the river toward Portageville, but the rest of the land in these parts is state forest.”

“Would the ‘Raging River’ name have anything to do with conditions on the Wapahawnee, the ‘white’ river?” Pat asked.

“You got it,” Doug replied. “There are some nasty rapids on the upper part of the river that are almost non-navigable. A couple miles downriver is a place they call Devil’s Drop, and it’s treacherous—I’d say the most dangerous part of the rapids. They used to allow white water rafting on the river, but there have been too many deaths in recent years, so they closed it to the public. We

don't see nearly as many tourists up this way since."

"Didn't you tell me the Native American land was being settled by some kind of cult?" Bob asked his brother-in-law.

"Oh, yeah." Doug laughed. "The Children of the Moon, I believe they call themselves. They somehow claim to be descended from the original tribes that lived in this territory, and they're now squatting on the land. No problems have been reported and no one else has laid claim to the land, so the authorities pretty much leave them alone. They shouldn't bother us," he added. "They're all the way across the lake, which is almost two miles wide, so they're nowhere near where we are."

As Doug turned his attention once again to his driving, the young people continued to talk, discussing their excitement about the upcoming days. The bus sped along the tree-lined highway, but soon they could feel the strain on the engine as it climbed steeper into the hill country as they began their ascent of Black Mountain.

"We should be at camp in just a bit," Doug said as he once more roughly shifted the bus into a lower gear. "This old clunker will get us there yet."

After a while, he flipped his left turn signal on and expertly steered the vehicle onto a dirt road that had a rustic wooden sign next to it: WELCOME TO CAMP KITAWNEE.

"Just a few more minutes and we'll be there," he said.

Dust rose everywhere as the bus bumped and lurched down the dirt road. It had been a dry summer; it hadn't rained in weeks.

"There's the camp, up ahead." Doug pointed after several more minutes of travel down the wooded roadway. Suddenly, the bus broke into a clearing and they could see several wooden buildings up ahead, all situated around a circular driveway with a flagpole at its center.

Doug drove into the circle and slowed the bus to a stop in front of the largest and longest of the buildings. Then he said, “Welcome to Camp Kitawnee. This is the main lodge, where we have a lot of the indoor activities and the staff offices. Over there”—he pointed to his left to another large building—“is the dining hall. And beyond that”—he pointed to a tall barn-like structure—“is the recreation building. The baseball diamond and archery range are in the field right behind that.”

“And that smaller building that looks kind of like a cottage?” Patty asked.

“That’s where Barb and I stay,” Doug said. “That’s our home for the summer. You guys will be staying in cabins closer to where the kids are. All of those cabins are down the hill, near the lake.”

The young people had noticed a young woman standing on the wooden steps of the lodge, her arms folded in front of her. Barb Alexander was slender in build and athletic, with dark brown hair and bright blue eyes. She was wearing jeans, a dark green polo shirt, and a bandana over her hair. On her shirt were embroidered the words CAMP KITAWNEE.

Now she waved and ran down the steps, reaching the door of the bus as Doug pulled the lever to open it.

“Hey, hon, how’s it going?” asked Doug as he stepped from the bus and kissed her on the forehead. He put his arm around her shoulder as the young people began to alight from the bus.

“Everything’s ready for lunch,” she said. “I hope you guys all brought an appetite.”

Everyone quickly made introductions and piled into the lodge with their luggage. The interior of the lodge was rustic like the outside, with dark wood paneling and hardwood floors. Comfortable furniture was grouped around the center of the main, or great, room in front of an enormous stone fireplace.

“You can all leave your luggage here for now,” Doug suggested. “We’ll get some lunch, and then we’ll settle you guys in.”

“The kids have already eaten,” Barb explained. “And they’re down by the lakefront with Roger. He’s teaching them about boating.”

“Roger is my only remaining team member,” Doug added. “You’ll get to meet him, and the kids, after a while. First, lunch. Then an orientation meeting here in the lodge. Finally, the kids. C’mon.”

He led the way back outside and across the courtyard to the dining hall. Inside, the building had the same dark wood paneling and hardwood floors. Here, there were rows of long wooden tables with benches filling most of the room. A great stone fireplace took up one whole wall. On the opposite side of the room was a long counter filled with picnic foods. Beyond the counter, they could see the cook still busy in the kitchen as she began cleaning up from the meal preparations.

“Let’s ask a blessing on the meal,” Doug offered. Everyone gathered around and bowed their heads. When he finished the prayer with “in Jesus’ name,” there was a chorus of amens.

“Well, now, help yourselves,” he said as he stepped to one side. “Line forms over there where the plates and silverware are. C’mon, fill up.”

The young people lined up and quickly filled their plates with hot dogs and hamburgers, potato salad and pasta salad, baked beans, fresh veggies, and corn on the cob. Taking seats at one of the long tables, they hungrily dug into the repast. Doug and Barb stepped up to the end of the line to get their lunch and then joined the teens as they ate and laughed and talked.

The cook, a heavysset woman in her fifties with dark hair pulled back into a bun and covered with a hairnet, was scurrying about the kitchen, putting dirty dishes in the sink and containers back in the cupboards. Pat watched her

as she grabbed a large bag full of trash and attempted to drag it toward the back door.

“Reverend—” Pat began. “I mean, Doug, is it okay if we help with cleanup?”

“Absolutely,” Doug replied. “Let’s get to work.”

Pat quickly left his place and headed for the kitchen. He took the garbage bag from the struggling woman and lifted it. “Tell me where you want this, and I’ll take it from here.”

“Thank you, sir,” the woman said. “There’s a dumpster right out back.”

“Call me Pat,” the boy said as he allowed her to open the rear door for him.

“I’m Marcie,” the older woman said. “I’m so glad you and your friends have come to help, Pat. We don’t want this camp to close again.”

Pat stepped through the door and walked the bag over to the dumpster. As he was walking, he asked the woman, who was still holding the door, “What do you mean, ‘close again’?”

“My husband and I used to run this camp for the church,” Marcie said. “But they couldn’t keep it funded, so we had to close about five years ago. It was such a blessing when Pastor Doug came and found new funding so the church could open it again. An answer to prayer. Bert and I—that’s my husband—jumped at the chance to come back and help. We love it here.”

Pat smiled reassuringly at the woman. “Well, we’ll do whatever we can to help out,” he said.

“Oh my!” the woman suddenly exclaimed. “That’s not right.” She had been looking past Pat as he walked back toward her. Letting go of the kitchen door, she walked out into the center of the courtyard behind the building, looking down the hill toward the lake.

“Look”—she pointed—“at all that smoke. I believe one of the cabins is on fire!”

## II

### Fire!

“One of the cabins is on fire!” Marcie exclaimed again. She dashed back into the dining hall, shouting as she ran. “Fire! There’s a fire!”

The young people rose from their seats and scrambled through the door, led by Doug and Barb.

“Quick, we’ll have to form a bucket brigade,” Doug said. He had grabbed a couple of cleaning buckets from the kitchen as he was heading out the door. He now handed them to his wife. “Here, Barb,” he said. “Get the kids lined up down below in two lines from the lake to the cabin.”

Barb raced off ahead of the others as they ran down the path that led from the dining hall to the residence cabins. She called out to the group of children and their counselor, Roger Goodlow, who were all down by the lake. Looking up from his lesson, Roger, a man in his late thirties with dark hair and eyes, saw the flames shooting from one of the cabins for the first time.

“Quick, kids,” he called out as he tried to round them up. “Make two lines from the water’s edge up the hill.” The children obediently fell into place.

As the older teens reached the spot, they positioned themselves at the top of the two lines. One of the buckets was quickly passed down one row, and Roger, who was nearest the lake, plunged it into the water and passed it quickly back up through the other row. For several minutes, they worked feverishly to try to douse the flames. Pat, who was near the top of the second line, handed the bucket of water to Doug, who threw its contents on the flames, then passed the empty bucket swiftly back to his wife, who was at the

head of the other line. Pat wished he could do more, but there didn't seem to be anything else that could be done.

After it seemed that they had thrown several dozen bucketloads of water onto the flames, the fire came under control. Finally, they got the last of the flames out, and everybody heaved a sigh of relief. Many of the younger children dropped to the ground where they had been standing, exhausted.

Doug, his face blackened and sweaty, his breathing coming in heaves, looked down the hill at the group in front of him. "I am so proud... of you guys," he managed to say. "This is real... teamwork. It shows what can be done... when everybody works... together." He smiled broadly at them. "I'm wondering... Marcie," he said to the cook, "do you think... you might break out... the ice cream... to celebrate?"

"Absolutely, Pastor Doug," the older woman said. "You kids go to the washroom and get cleaned up a little. Then we'll have some ice cream in the dining hall." With renewed energy, she headed up the hill to the dining hall.

The kids all cheered and made a beeline for a long, low building that was their communal bathroom located beyond the cabins at the bottom of the hillside.

As the kids ran off, Doug stepped back into the cabin. Hands on hips, he looked around the room, surveying the damage. Pat walked up the steps to the front porch and peered in through the doorway. From what he saw, the damage seemed limited, but it was certainly going to be a mess to clean up.

"So what do you think happened?" Pat asked as he looked at the other man.

Doug was staring intently at the doorframe, and what he was looking at seemed to upset him. "We'll talk about it at the orientation," he uttered tersely, then walked past Pat and started up the hill.

Pat entered the cabin and glanced up at the spot where Doug had been focusing his gaze. He saw some kind of symbol drawn there in white chalk. It appeared to be a circle surrounding an inverted triangle.

“Interesting,” he said, as he turned and left the cabin.

In a few minutes, the twins and their friends took seats around a large table in the conference room in the lodge. Doug stood at the head of the table, his wife, Barb, seated next to him.

“I’m sorry your introduction to Camp Kitawnee has been such a difficult one,” he began, looking over the young people. “I was hoping to start out on a much more positive note. But be that as it may...”

He paused, as if trying to gather his thoughts. Then he continued, “In front of you, you have a team member shirt, which I ask you to wear whenever you’re doing official activities with the kids. That’s what we call you guys—team members.”

Each of the teens picked up a dark green polo shirt with an embroidered logo that Barb had handed out to them.

“I hope I got all the right sizes,” she said. “Let me know if you need to exchange yours for any reason.”

Doug continued, “You also have a map of the grounds in your packet. It shows all the locations for the various activities: the nature trails, the boathouse, and dock—all those kinds of things—plus the location of all the residence buildings. All the cabins have names. Each is a Native American word. You’ll find a plaque on the front of each cabin with the Native American name plus a translation underneath. We have eight cabins for the kids. Each is equipped with electricity, but no running water. The kids all use the central bathhouse.”

“For you guys,” Barb added, “we have four team member cabins, which

are close to the children's cabins. Those cabins are set up with both electricity and water. You have a sink in your room, but you'll still have to use the bathhouse for showers and the facilities."

"Each of you has been assigned one of the children's cabins near you as a house parent," Doug said. "On the second sheet, you have the name of your cabin and also which children's cabin you're assigned to. There is also a list of the duties of a house parent, including making sure your kids are out of bed on time, that they are where they're assigned to be on time, and that they keep their cabin neat and clean."

"Susie, you'll notice you are assigned to two cabins of girls. I'm sorry we are a little short on women since Cathy Brent couldn't make it," Barb added. She paused for a moment, then cleared her throat and said, "And Pat and Bill, I'm sorry to say that was your cabin where the fire was, so we'll have to make other arrangements for you until we can get that cleaned up."

"As for the activities," Doug quickly interjected, "Tony, I want you to help Roger with the older boys in the wilderness survival skills. Bill, since you're a certified swim instructor, you'll work with the kids with all the water programs, including beginning, intermediate, and advanced swim lessons. Susie, you'll be in charge of the program for the older girls, and Nikki, as I mentioned earlier, I want you to take charge of the program for the younger children."

He looked at the twins and Bob. "I want the three of you to help out wherever is needed. You can fill in the gaps in the programs and relieve the other team members as needed."

Pat and Patty nodded in understanding; Bob made no reply.

"And now to some more serious matters," Doug finally said. He paused as the teens looked at one another, wondering what he might be alluding to.

"The reason we called you here in the first place is part of what I'm

talking about,” he continued. “You see, we started camp last week with my usual team members. But on Friday last week, almost the entire staff came down with a serious case of food poisoning, and now, because they’re recuperating, we needed to have some last-minute replacements. Otherwise, we would have had to close the camp.”

“And we want to again thank each of you for being willing to change your plans so quickly for the end of your summer,” Barb said, sounding almost embarrassed.

“We understand these kids are from broken homes,” Doug continued. “And some of them already have police records. Summer camp has always been a place where children play pranks on one another and the staff, but what we’ve seen in this camp has far exceeded anything I have had experience with in the past. Please, be careful. And keep your eyes open. I wouldn’t want any more mishaps with you guys.” He looked over the group, his expression grave, and asked, “Any questions?”

There were several head shakes and some murmured no’s, so Doug dismissed the group. “You can head back to the lodge, grab your bags, then take them to your cabins. Then we’ll meet down by the lake and officially introduce you to the kids,” he said.

As everyone got up from their seats and began to move toward the door, Doug spoke in a hushed tone, “Bob, Pat, Patty, please wait a few minutes, will you?”

The twins and their friend Bob sat back down as the others exited the room.

“I need to share a few more things with you,” Doug said quietly as he sat down. As soon as the others were gone, Barb closed the door behind them and returned to her seat.

“We believe there may be more going on here than just children’s pranks,” Doug began, “and that’s why we asked Bob specifically to invite you two up here. We’ve heard about some of the things you’ve been doing earlier this summer, and we wanted to see if maybe you could help us with our situation.”

“We understand it’s probably not nearly as exciting as capturing jewel thieves or uncovering counterfeiting operations,” Barb said, “but we had hoped that you would be willing to help us solve our ‘mystery.’” She was referring to the last two adventures the twins and their friend Bob had been involved in, including the most recent *Mystery on Campus*.

“Why do you believe it’s more than just children’s pranks?” Pat wanted to know.

“It seems too organized to me,” Doug declared. “And the scale is bigger. We had to call the authorities regarding the food poisoning incident. They’ve sent the food off to a lab to test what may have caused it. This wasn’t just a case of leaving the food out too long or something like that. Some of my people are still in the hospital.”

“And now that cabin fire,” Barb added. “Either one of the children is a much worse criminal than we’ve ever experienced before, or something bigger is going on here. We need to know.”

Doug reached under a small stack of papers he had in front of him and pulled out one sheet. “And then there is this.”

He passed the paper to the twins. It was a photograph of a doorframe with the same chalk mark that Pat had seen at the cabin.

“We found this on the kitchen door right after the food poisoning incident,” Doug said. “I didn’t think too much about it at the time, but somehow I thought I should keep record of it.”

“And there was another one in the cabin where the fire was,” Pat said. “That’s what upset you so much.”

“You saw it?” Doug asked. “Now you see why I was upset. That’s the reason I didn’t give you guys as much responsibility as the others. We want you to have more free time to see if you can figure out what’s really going on here.”

“Oh, and we still need to find a place for you to sleep, Pat,” Barb added. “We only have a three-bedroom house, and Bob is staying in the second bedroom. Perhaps you and Bill would be willing to share the third bedroom?”

“That would be fine by me,” Pat said.

“Okay then,” Doug concluded as he stood. “Let’s get with the others and get you situated, wherever you’re going to be.” His good nature seemed to return as they left the room and headed back across the circle to the lodge. As they arrived at the front porch, Susie burst through the door, her face flushed.

“Our luggage is gone!” she cried.

As the young people all gathered on the porch, wondering what their next move might be, a little army green RV pattered to a stop in front of the building. In tow behind the vehicle was a little utility cart.

The driver alighted from the vehicle and stepped up to the group gathered on the porch, pulling his ball cap from his head as he stopped in front of them. He was in his late fifties, with a graying fringe of dark hair and thick glasses. His girth hinted at a well-fed man.

“Bert!” Doug said as the man approached the young people. “I’d like you to meet our new team members.” He turned to the teens and added, “Bert Lockhart is our chief groundskeeper and all-around handyman.”

“Good to meet you all,” he said as he shook their hands. “I hope you don’t mind, but I hauled your luggage down to your cabins so you didn’t have

to carry them so far. I had a list, so I hope I got everything in the right place.”

He pointed to the utility cart, where the young people noticed for the first time a few bags remaining. “I brought these back since Pat and Bill’s cabin isn’t fit to move into. We’ll take care of that for you later though, don’t you worry.”

As they were talking, Marcie joined the group, standing next to her husband and instinctively taking his hand.

“The boys can room with us, in our third bedroom,” Barb offered, “though it might be a little crowded.”

“We have an extra room in our apartment,” Marcie offered. “Why doesn’t one of them stay there with us?”

“We live right above the lodge,” Bert noted. “And it is a nice, cozy apartment.”

“I’d be glad to room with you,” Pat offered. “If that’s okay with you, Bill? Then you could take Barb and Doug’s third bedroom for yourself.”

“Sounds good to me,” Bill agreed.

“Wonderful!” Doug exclaimed. “Then it’s all settled. Bert, would you take each of the boys’ suitcases to their new rooms? Then the rest of us will head down to the lake to meet the kids.”

As the group started off down toward the lake, the twins and their friends were able to properly take in the camp's beauty. From the crest of the hill, where the lodge sat, the grounds of the camp gradually sloped down to the water's edge. The hillside was covered with pine, maple, and oak trees. The pathway they were on was wide and made of bark mulch. It zigzagged its way down the hill, passing each of the cabins. At the top of the hill, on the first bend, was one of the team member cabins. Next, the pathway passed a grouping of two of the children’s cabins, one on either side of the path and nestled in the shade of the trees. Smaller paths between the cabins led through

the trees straight down to the lake. One of these paths was what they had used earlier to swiftly get to where the burning cabin was located.

After a wide stretch of more woodland, two other cabins for the children were visible, followed by two more team member cabins on the next bend. As the pathway snaked down the hill, they passed a group of two other children's cabins, then a large wooded area, then two more children's cabins, and finally, on the last bend, the last team member cabin, the one where the fire had been. After that, the tree cover opened, and they could see the large bathhouse centrally located near the bottom of the hill. From there, the boathouse and pier were just a few steps away. To the left of that was the swimming area with its sandy beach, and to the right of the bathhouse was a large open pavilion right near the water's edge.

On the lake, almost a dozen small rowboats were tied to the moorings, lining both sides of the pier that stretched out into the water for several feet. The children were all gathered around in a semicircle on the grass at the end of the pier. Roger stood on the pier, holding a bright orange life vest in his hands.

Doug called out from the head of the group coming down the hill as they passed the fire-damaged cabin, "Hey, Roger, got a minute to have the kids meet our new team members?"

"Sure," Roger called back. He set the vest down and looked over the group of kids. "We'll talk more about boating safety later, kids. Let's meet our new team members."

The children all turned their attention to the arriving group. Doug stepped up onto the pier next to Roger and spoke. "Kids, these are our new team members. I'll let them introduce themselves by name and tell us something interesting about themselves. Roger, why don't we start with you," Doug added, "so the other team members can get to know you."

“Sure,” Roger agreed. “My name is Roger, and during the year, I work at the Drop-In Center at the church. At camp, I teach wilderness survival skills because I’m Native American, and I’m sharing the kinds of things all my ancestors knew when they used to live in this area.”

After he finished, each of the young people in turn stated their name and talked a little about themselves. When it came to Pat’s turn, he said, “Hi, my name is Pat. And something interesting about me is...” He paused for a moment, looking over the group of children. “That my sister and I really like to solve—”

“Puzzles!” Patty interjected quickly. “I’m Patty, his sister, and we like to solve puzzles. Any kind of puzzles. You give them to us, and we’ll try to solve them.” She was glaring at Pat as she finished. Pat’s face turned red with embarrassment.

One little girl with unkempt blonde hair who was sitting on the ground raised her hand. “You mean like crossword puzzles?” she asked.

“Yes, we do those,” said Patty. “And jigsaw puzzles. You name it.”

“Okay, thanks, Patty,” Doug interjected. “And Nicole—I mean Nikki, you’re next.”

Nikki stated her name and shared about her love for gymnastics. Another little girl, with pigtails and serious brown eyes, raised her hand and said, “I’d like to be a gymnast when I’m bigger.”

“That’s wonderful!” Nikki exclaimed. “Do you have a program at your school?”

“I don’t go to school much,” the little girl responded. “So I don’t know.”

“Well, the first thing you have to do is go to school and get your education,” Nikki said. “Then when your grades are up, you can try out for gymnastics. I’ll bet I can show you a thing or two to get you started. Maybe

Pastor Doug would let me teach you a tumbling class sometime during camp?”

“Absolutely,” Doug agreed. “We can find time to fit that in. That would be great!”

When the team members had finished their introductions, Doug asked the kids to share. “Tell us your name and how old you are,” he said.

Each of the children in turn stated their name and age. The teens learned that the little blonde-haired girl was Sasha Wilkins, and she was nine. The girl with the pigtails was Violet Shubert, and she was eight.

Next, a little boy with dark hair and brown eyes spoke up. “My name is Anto Marinelli, and I’m 11. I’m going to be 12 next month!”

Tony, who was sitting near the little boy, reached over and raised his hand, palm open, offering him a high five. “Hey, *Pisan*,” he said to Anto, “we’re namesakes!”

The little boy jumped up from where he was sitting and backed away from the collegian. “Don’t you touch me!” he shouted. “You stay away from me!” With that, he began to cry and ran from the circle of children up the path toward the cabins.