

WHIZ TANNER AND THE STOLEN AUTOMATON

Tanner-Dent short

“Whiz!” I yelled loudly, but my partner couldn’t hear me.

“Agent M!” I tried again, hoping he’d hear his code name. No luck—and we were in big trouble!

Whiz and I witnessed the biggest toy heist ever in Jasper Springs, and now we were marked for elimination. I can see the Jasper Springs News headline; *‘Local Youths, Whiz Tanner and Joey Dent, Killed by Automaton Thief’*. The paper would at least mention the Tanner-Dent Detective Agency—that would make Whiz happy, since he was always looking for publicity.

Anyway, I was on the far side of Clifton Gorge, above the waterfall. Whiz was edging across the narrow slippery ledge that goes behind the falling water, following my path across the gorge. Rick Maples, the thief we spied coming out of the broken window of Mr. Watson’s Repair shop, was on Whiz’s tail—and mad. Whiz was unaware that Rick was so close. And, the whole world was unaware that our story was about to end.

The noise from the crashing water prevented Whiz from hearing my warnings. But, on the positive side, Rick couldn’t hear them either. He had his eyes on Whiz, while I was hidden in the shadow of the full moon. Whiz was much more careful crossing than

Rick, so the gap between them was shrinking. I needed to think fast. Whiz and I were highly-trained detectives—even if we trained ourselves—and we could evade one guy. We’ve done it before.

Looking around, I spotted a rock the size of a golf ball—nice and round. As an outfielder for the Jasper Springs Twins, my throws are pretty good. So, I aimed as Rick was ducking behind the waterfall. With a good windup, I let loose a hard drive straight for where Rick would be when the rock arrived.

My aim was true, and the rock hit Rick’s thigh as he disappeared behind the sheet of water. Whiz reappeared and scampered to the rocky steps that led up and out of the gorge.

“A hand, if you please, Agent K,” Whiz shouted, using my code name, as he reached the top—still unaware how close Rick was.

But, where was Rick. He had not reappeared, and I didn’t see a splash from a fall.

“Hurry, Rick is right behind you,” I replied. “I hit him with a rock, and he’s still behind the waterfall.”

“We have no time to waste. We must proceed with haste.” Now, Whiz doesn’t normally talk in rhyme, so I assume he didn’t

mean to this time. We proceeded—with haste.

We headed up the path that followed Clifton Gorge. With luck, we could make it to the swinging bridge at the gorge overlook. We should be far enough ahead that we could make it to Johnny's Pizza—and a phone. This is one call, from two sixth graders, that Chief Reid would welcome.

I looked back as I ran and saw Rick climbing up the stone steps. He looked angry—and wet. So, he must have stumbled when I hit him. But, he didn't fall off the ledge.

"Bad luck, K," cried Whiz, as he suddenly slowed.

"What, M?" I asked, matching his pace.

"The bridge is out," he responded.

"What? The swinging bridge?" I asked.

He shot me one of his looks that said, 'what planet are you from?'

"Of course, the swinging bridge."

I looked ahead for myself and saw that there was a chain link fence blocking the walkway up to the bridge. The swinging bridge was a rope and wood suspension bridge crossing the gorge. Some of the boards had gotten weak and the town was repairing it. Whole sections of boards were missing.

"We must continue on to the college campus and cross there," Whiz said.

"Right," I responded, glancing back at Rick. "But, we're outta time!"

Rick, limping, was closing fast and the few seconds we halted to discuss our jam allowed him to get much closer. Whiz sized up the situation.

"Over the fence, K!" he yelled.

Whiz was already near the top of the fence when I began to climb, and in no time we were both dropping on the other side. I took a careful look at the bridge.

On a good day, there was an inch of space between the boards. Today, was not a good day. Many boards had been removed and

very few were as close as one inch. Many places had a several foot gap.

"Move!" I heard Whiz shout, bringing me out of my haze. "We need to traverse this bridge before Rick gets a chance to hamper our crossing."

With all the running and escaping, I haven't had a chance to tell you about Whiz. For one thing, he's very smart and uses words nobody else has heard of—Whiz Words, I call them. When I get—if I get—safely back home, I'll look up traverse, but I'm sure it means we need to cross the gorge.

Whiz jumped up to the landing—the stairs were also out—and I followed. Carefully, as carefully as we could with a madman on our tail, we stepped out onto the bridge and began 'traversing' it. I could feel the creaking of each board as I stepped on it.

"Gimme that camera!" I heard the voice behind us, and looked back.

Rick was on the fence, and we were only a quarter of the way across the bridge as he dropped to the ground. In two bounds he hopped up where the steps should have been. The flimsy bridge was bouncing a lot with just Whiz and me, but it got much worse when Rick started stomping on it. I turned to face the Jasper Springs side of the gorge and saw that Whiz had reached the center of the bridge where the missing section was more than eight feet long—I picked up the pace.

As I hopped from one board to the next, I heard Rick doing the same thing behind me. The shaking got even worse as he came closer. Whiz, by that time, was tight-rope walking along the edge where the boards should have been fastened. I almost reached that spot when my foot came down hard in the center of the last good board before the long open stretch.

I felt, more than heard, the crack as the 'good board' gave way under my weight. As I fell through, I tried to grab the side rope, though my hand kinda bounced off. I tried to think fast—really—but my brain wouldn't

come up with a plan. I went through the bridge in slow motion and hit my head hard on the only solid plank left near me.

I think I heard Whiz calling my name—Joey, not Agent K—as my eyesight went black. It was strange how I didn't feel my body falling toward the rushing water below—that would have been scary! But, my brain kept working—perhaps this was only a bad dream. Or am I dying...?

<<<>>>

There I was, skidding to a halt in Whiz Tanner's driveway, like most Saturday mornings. Without skipping a beat, I jumped off, dragged my right foot up and over to extend the kickstand and parked my bike just slightly out of the way of Mr. Tanner's car. Then, after a quick look for spies—you can't be too careful when approaching a secret location—I made my way through the backyard to the shed.

I knelt down and pressed the fake knot in a cedar shingle on the back wall and waited.

'Name?' came the first computerized response from a small hidden speaker.

'Agent K,' I replied, a little above a whisper.

'Password?' came the second response.

'C. Auguste Dupin', I said, giving our newest. Whiz comes up with these passwords. This one was the name of the first ever story detective—even before Sherlock Holmes, our favorite.

The hidden section of the wall popped open and I entered. As I shut the door, it triggered a black light causing a glow from the white surgical tape on the edges of the steps leading down into the old underground bomb shelter—some townsfolk say it was a storm cellar, but they're not telling this story. At the bottom, I entered the Crime Lab of the Tanner-Dent Detective Agency. Agent M—of course, that's Whiz, however we use our

code names in the Crime Lab—sat at the Crime Computer clicking away.

'Good of you to hurry through your pancakes and rush over,' he said as I closed the door.

'How do you know I had pancakes this morning and what makes you think I rushed?' There's no way he could know, unless, 'You didn't call my house and talk to my Mom, did you?'

'No need, Agent K,' he responded. 'The deductive process is much more elementary than that.'

Okay, here I had him. He's always telling me something he shouldn't know, and he always has a good reason for knowing it. But, I brushed my teeth and there are no tell-tale signs of breakfast left on my face. And, I'm actually late, so he couldn't deduce rushing. He's making this one up.

'Let's have it, M. Why do you think I ate pancakes?'

'Well, the pancakes and the rushing are related.'

'Enlighten me,' I said.

He looked at the wall clock.

'Last night, we agreed to meet this morning to begin a full day of detective training... you are approximately ten minutes late.'

'I'm late so you think I rushed? Wouldn't it make more sense to say I was dragging my feet or something?'

'Each clue, by itself, only gives a piece of the story. Do not settle on a conclusion before all the clues are examined and a result is formed that considers the entirety.'

'So, I'm late. What other clues?'

'Your hair is uncombed, though that is not unusual. What is unusual is that your shirt is buttoned up incorrectly... you have an extra button hole at the top. You were obviously in a hurry after breakfast.'

I checked and, sure enough, he was right. I re-buttoned my shirt as he continued.

“The grease stain on your right pant leg means you rushed to drag your right leg over to extend your kickstand. I have seen you park that way, but only when you were in a hurry.”

“Okay, two for two... or three if you count the hair.”

“I could go on, but I think we have ascertained that you were in a hurry this morning,” he said, using one of his Whiz Words.

Rather than wait for a dictionary, I asked. “What’s ascertained?”

“We have learned, deduced, determined... we have figured out what happened. We used the clues at hand to produce a correct conclusion... we ascertained.”

I moved on. “And, the pancakes?”

“You hurried, but were still late. So, what made you late?” Whiz paused and stared at me. I thought he was waiting for me to answer—that wouldn’t be fair. Eventually, he answered himself. “Pancakes.”

“That’s a wild guess.”

“Not really. Your normal Saturday breakfast is either cereal, which you make yourself, or eggs and toast, which your mother usually makes. Experience has shown that both of those take nearly the same time to make and eat. Pancakes, however, require significantly more time to prepare. Your mother does not begin mixing the batter until you have indicated that you want them. And, I have seen you eat them. You take considerable time to ensure each one is buttered to your liking and you play with the syrup as you pour.”

“Okay, so you got me. I had pancakes and rushed to get here. Now that the morning clue training is over, what’s our plan for the day?”

Whiz placed a sheet of paper on the desk and slid it toward me.

“Here is a map of the abandoned Hilltop Logging Camp east of Belmont Village. My idea for a great training exercise is to ride out

there and practice approaching and entering suspected hideouts. We shall use various techniques to sneak up on the buildings and enter them, quickly and quietly.”

“The logging camp? That’s a six-mile bike ride. Can’t we do it somewhere closer?” I couldn’t help remembering the last time we were at the camp—it didn’t go so well.

“Agent K, the camp is the perfect spot. Its remote location provides solitude while giving us several different buildings to approach. And, its rundown condition allows us to use any means we need without hurting real property.”

He drew some circles and lines on the paper to indicate the stuff we would practice and we packed up to leave the Crime Lab. By packing up, I mean we gathered up two Surveillance Kits—small backpacks stuffed with things we find useful during investigations; rope, flashlights, tape, lockable sandwich bags for collecting evidence, knives, a compass, a camera, you know, stuff like that.

Outside, we ran to our bikes and headed downtown to cross the Old Bridge toward Belmont Village. It was a three-mile trip to good old BV and nearly a mile to get to the other side. We stopped to recharge with a drink at the Village Grocery, then headed out of town, going east on Hilltop Road. Two miles out, we turned onto the old dirt logging road that winds up the mountain. Halfway up we ditched our bikes in the thick brush. With the bikes hidden, we hiked the rest of the way to the camp.

As we got close enough to make out the cabins through the trees, we stopped to set up. Mostly, this was tightening the straps on our Surveillance Kits so we could run and jump and crawl without worrying about dropping them.

“Our objective,” began Whiz, “will be to crawl to the closest building with four walls.”

The camp consisted of a dozen, or so, cabins and they were all run down. Only

three or four were in reasonable shape. Most no longer had windows and doors. Many had no roofs. And a few had missing walls. We made our way to the edge of the woods near the first building that had all four walls. It had no windows or doors.

“Okay Joey, we commence our surveillance and approach,” Whiz commanded.

“Aye, aye,” I replied, in my best military voice.

Whiz dropped to his hands and knees and I did likewise. In a few minutes, he covered the distance to the cabin and took up a spying posture below a window. He waved me to follow—I did, plopping down beside him. Using hand gestures, Whiz indicated that we should climb through the window to enter the building. He went first.

“Great job,” Whiz said, after I entered.

“Yeah, but it’s easy when nobody’s watching.”

“So true, but plenty of practice will make it easier when there is someone observing.”

We did this for a while, going from building to building. At one point, we stopped for a break and ate the snacks we brought. Soon, Whiz steered us back to business.

“Let us continue on to the next building.”

“You know which cabin that is, don’t you?” I asked, with some concern in my voice.

“Of course I do. However, past failures cannot interfere with current operations.”

“Well, it does look less scary in the daylight,” I reluctantly admitted.

“That one still has doors and windows. First, we will attempt to enter a window as quickly and quietly as possible. But, we need to approach unseen. Go.”

He climbed through the window on the far side and slid down the outside wall. I tried to copy his move, but wasn’t so graceful. I slipped and plopped on the ground and my backpack hit with a noticeable thud under

me. Recovering quickly, I belly crawled next to Whiz until we were under a window.

“Try it,” whispered Whiz.

I slowly inched up until I could push on the double hung window. To my surprise, it moved. I pushed up until there was about an 18-inch gap that allowed me, with my backpack, to crawl in. I leaned in and pulled myself through. Whiz entered right behind. I stood up—and froze!

“Look Whiz.” I pointed to the table in the center of the room.

“It appears that this cabin is not as vacant as we had assumed.” Whiz walked to the table and examined the papers scattered about.

“This is a map of Jasper Springs,” he announced, as I joined him.

“There’s a circle around Mr. Watson’s shop,” I pointed out.

“This just became interesting,” Whiz said, as he slid his Surveillance Kit off his shoulder and unzipped it in one smooth motion. “We need documentation.”

He took out his camera and started photographing the papers.

“Enough documenting,” I eventually said, as I looked around the room at the two sleeping bags in the corner and a pile of clothes next to each. “Whoever is using this cabin will return, and I don’t want to be here when they do.”

“You have a good point, Joey. We shall retreat and regroup in the Crime Lab to discuss further details.” Whiz stashed his camera.

Once outside we used the same crawling technique to make our way to the woods. When we were well hidden from the camp clearing, we stood up and raced to our bikes. As we arrived, I heard a car coming up the dirt road. We both ducked down while it passed—on its way up to the camp. That was our cue to ride in the other direction.

We rode fast, without much talking, all the way back to Jasper Springs. It was a long

ride, but when Whiz is not in the mood to talk, he doesn't talk. However, I could sense his brain churning a mile a minute or faster. As we crossed the Old Bridge, Whiz seemed to get a burst of energy.

"Agent K," he called to me, signaling we were on a case. "Check out Watson's shop. Look for anything suspicious."

"Will do, M," I replied, as I peeled off onto Broad Way, though I didn't see much of a case.

As I approached the corner where Mr. Watson's Repair shop was located, I could see some of the guys heading toward the Public Works yard. They were sure to be starting a pickup game of football or soccer. I did some quick calculations in my head and figured fifteen minutes of play wouldn't hurt, so I turned to follow them.

An hour later, I realized I hadn't checked out Watson's Shop yet, so after the next hike, I peeled off the scrimmage line and ran for my bike. Fortunately, for me, the shop was between the Public Works yard and the Crime Lab. I made a quick check in front and rode through the alley in back. Nothing looked out of the ordinary, so I continued on to Whiz's house.

Like this morning, I skidded to a halt and ran to the back of the shed. After quick work with the security system, I headed down the steps and entered the Crime Lab.

"Ah, Joey. Football. That explains your tardiness," and he turned his attention to the photos scattered across the desk.

"How did you know I was playing football?"

"The clues, Agent K... grass stains for one... but we have more important clues to discuss."

"So, what do our other clues tell us," I asked, knowing he was right about the football and wanting to change the subject.

"It is certain that a crime will be committed and Mr. Watson's Shop is the target."

I looked at the photos. One showed the map we saw of Jasper Springs with Mr. Watson's corner, circled several times. It had some handwriting that said, 'Sat 12pm to 4pm—leaves by 4:30'.

"What do you think this writing means, Whiz?"

"Agent K," he responded, and he really emphasized it. "We are in the Crime Lab and on a case, please use Code Names."

"Okay, Agent M," I replied with nearly the same emphasis. I didn't mention that he called me Joey when I arrived. "What does the writing mean?"

"Mr. Watson's Saturday hours are from noon until four o'clock, as posted on his door, and I assume 4:30 would refer to the time he leaves to go home at the end of the day. Apparently, our culprits have been watching Mr. Watson so they know when it will be safe to execute their crime."

"What crime?"

"Examine the rest of the photographs. They tell a very convincing story of a crime that will take place."

I looked. The photos showed a newspaper clipping, some handwritten notes, a couple of typed letters, and what appeared to be printouts from the Internet. As I examined each one, Whiz got a bit impatient. He finally couldn't take it any longer and began talking.

"The newspaper article is from the New York Times. It discusses automatons from the early 19th century, mostly mechanical toys."

"Okay, Mr. Whiz Word," I had to ask. "What's an automaton?"

"A self-operating machine, often in human form. They were the first robots or androids, really."

"Robots? From 200 years ago?"

"Very ingenious robots... no computers running them." Then, Whiz jumped back to business. "One of the paragraphs mentions a particularly valuable automaton built in 1823. It would tap its feet to the rhythm of a

music box while picking up a dart from a tray and throwing it quite accurately. The collector who purchased it contacted a restoration expert in the Midwest to repair it to working order.”

“Restoration expert? Mr. Watson?”

“It appears so. This other printout shows part of a Wikipedia page that I also pulled up on the Crime Computer. It describes Mr. Watson as one of the few remaining experts in the workings of old clockwork automation devices... automatons. It says he lives in this county, outside of Jasper Springs. How many people named Mr. Watson live in our county and can repair anything?”

“But, is he the only one in the whole Midwest? It seems to me, Agent M,” I was sure to stress his code name, “that you’re jumping to a conclusion based on some flimsy evidence... from the Internet, no less.”

He seemed to ignore the sarcasm I was trying to put in my voice—or maybe he didn’t get it.

“If that was the totality of the clues, you would be correct. However, these other photos show more of the evolving picture.”

He scooted two more photos toward me.

“These show what appear to be items of correspondence between our own Mr. Watson and the collector, Mr. Baker Lai, who is mentioned in the paper. One discusses the cost of doing the restoration and one discusses when the work can start and instructions on how to ship the automaton. I would be immensely interested in how our culprits came to possess these letters.”

I must admit, Whiz laid out a nice complete story, but there was one big missing detail.

“That’s all well and good, but there’s no mention of a crime.”

“Predicting a crime beforehand is a difficult endeavor, however there are further items that point toward that outcome. First, look at this photograph.” And he pushed another photo in my direction. “Here we

have a hand-written note that says ‘I will buy, but only if you get away cleanly—NO trace to ME’. No name or other identifying information, but it does indicate some nefarious activity.”

“Quit with the Whiz Words. Nefarious?”

“Criminal activity, Agent K,” he said with a bit of irritation in his voice. “We do have a dictionary on the bookshelf.”

“Criminal activity,” I repeated, ignoring the dictionary remark. “Why didn’t you say so?”

“I did,” he replied. “Anyway, the second hand-written note states ‘Deliver to Belmont Village Guest House—cash will be waiting if no cops.’”

“That sure does sound like someone is going to steal something.”

“There is more... a date.”

He stopped talking and I waited. And waited.

“Well?”

“The 23rd.”

“Tomorrow?”

“No month is specified. But, I would surmise tomorrow is the logical time, given that Saturday activities are noted and tomorrow is Sunday the 23rd.”

“That doesn’t give us much time to stop it. We need to get this to the police.”

“The authorities will not be impressed with this little bit of circumstantial evidence. I suggest a stakeout is in order tonight, Agent K. If we see something unusual, we shall document it and bring in the authorities.”

And with that, we officially started our newest case!

“I’ll grab my sleepover gear and meet you here after supper,” I replied and left. If I hurried, the football game may still be going on.

Whiz and I have been sleeping at each other’s houses so often that it was no problem to talk my parents into it. And it’s been weeks since we got into any late night trouble. So, by eight o’clock I was back in

the Crime Lab rolling out my sleeping bag—waiting for Whiz.

By ten o'clock we were hidden inside the dumpster in the alleyway behind Mr. Watson's shop. We kept quiet as we waited and watched, and it got boring, but that's what detective work is—a lot of boring waiting. Eventually the excitement started.

We were actually thinking of calling it a night, when two guys entered the alley. I saw them quite clearly as they walked under the streetlight.

"Hey, that's Rick Maples," I whispered to Whiz. "He's a clerk at the hardware store my dad goes to in Belmont Village. I think the other guy works there too."

"Keep an eye on them, K. And stay very quiet."

"Quiet it is," I replied, quietly.

We watched them pass right by the dumpster without looking over. They were examining the door and windows at the back of the shop.

"This one," I heard one of them say, and he punched the glass with a gloved hand.

The pane shattered and he reached in to unlock it. They both pushed the window up and Rick crawled in. Whiz snapped a few pictures—but, with the only light coming from the moon, I'm not sure how well they'll turn out.

A few minutes later Rick handed something big out to the other guy and climbed out. It could have been some robot looking thing. It was strange enough. Anyway, they moved quickly, without running, right by the dumpster, and out to the road. Whiz poked me hard in the ribs.

"The chase begins," he said. "We shall follow them to their getaway car, then go to the police... Now, would be a great time to have our smart phones."

Someday, when I have more time, I'll tell you why our phones were inoperative. But for now, we climbed out of the dumpster and followed. They took a roundabout path

through town—stopping now and then to rest. I thought they might head directly to a car, but they zig-zagged through the streets, eventually making their way to the river.

That's when things went wrong. When they arrived at Livermore Bridge, they stopped by a parked car and unlocked it. Whiz steadied his camera and snapped some shots as they placed the object in the back seat.

"We must get them with their license plate," he said to me. "I'll need the flash. Get ready to run."

He snapped one shot with the bright flash. This caused the guys to turn toward us. He snapped another.

"Run!" he yelled.

"Get that camera!" the guy on the driver's side yelled and he jumped into the car.

The other guy, Rick, blasted off at a run, but we were already heading down to the river. If we made it to the falls, perhaps we could lose him. We ran faster!

<<<<>>>>

Suddenly, the pain in my head forced all other thoughts out—pain and wetness. I opened my eyes to find myself under water, and needing to breath. I was going further down and my arms wouldn't work. And, the pain—what do I worry about first? Pain? Breathing? Paralysis? Where am I?

As my consciousness came back, I felt my left arm being pulled up. I was moving up—toward air.

My head broke the surface of the water and I could see the Swinging Bridge above me, but moving away. I noticed Whiz. Good old Whiz! He had my arm and was holding me up as I began breathing big gasps of air. He pulled my soggy Surveillance Kit off my back and let it float away—sinking as it went.

My brain was beginning to work again, and Whiz was beside me, pulling me toward the side of the gorge. By the time we reached

the edge, I had regained full consciousness—or at least as much as I normally have. Whiz held on to the rocky side of the gorge and I managed to grab on, also. He removed the wet camera from his water-fill kit and let the kit go down the river. It sank, too.

“The battery is probably shot due to the water,” Whiz declared. “However, the memory chip, with all the incriminating pictures, should survive.”

I didn’t say anything and he looked over at me.

“Are you okay, Joey?”

I guess code names go out the window during real emergencies.

“My head hurts, but I’m fine, I think. You fell, too?” I asked, a little surprised.

“I jumped. I could not let a valued member of the Tanner-Dent Agency drown.” And, he actually gave a bit of a smile.

Rick was at the center of the swinging bridge peering toward us. But, I’m not sure how much he could see with us in the shadow of the moonlight—full moon or not. The way he bent down and looked at the water, it appeared that he was thinking of jumping in after us.

The rest of our situation wasn’t any better. The sides of the gorge were steep and rocky. Some of the older guys in town rock climb here, but I don’t think Whiz nor I were in any shape to do that. There didn’t appear to be an easy way up. I said so.

“There’s no way up, Whiz.”

“I agree with your assessment, Agent K,” Whiz replied. With emphasis on ‘Agent K’ snapping us back to business.

“We can’t stay here all night. I can’t hold on that long. And, what if Rick jumps in after us?” I asked with some alarm.

“Your summary of the situation is correct, and we must get this evidence to the authorities.” He slipped the camera strap around his wrist.

“How?” I asked.

“As you say, we cannot go up... therefore, we must go down.”

I tilted my head down to the rushing water around us. He saw me gazing into the water.

“I meant downstream.”

“That’s where the waterfall is! I thought you jumped in to save me from that?”

“I jumped in to save you from drowning. Presently, we have a different problem and it needs a different solution. Below the waterfall, the gorge empties into the Great Marsh river. We can easily climb out from there.

“But, the waterfall!”

“Agent K, I am willing to discuss any escape plan you can develop, but we are pressed for time. And... we must act before Rick decides to jump. The more lead-time we have the better.”

“Okay, okay... the waterfall.”

“On the count of three,” he said, and before I could chicken out, he counted—fast. “One, two, three!”

We both pushed away from the side of the gorge and swam to the middle of the river. From there we did our best to stay facing forward as we watched the waterfall get closer. The butterflies in my stomach were going crazy and I desperately looked for a different escape route. No luck.

Speaking of no luck—I gave a quick look toward the bridge.

“Rick just jumped,” I yelled to Whiz.

“Swim harder. We must get over the falls with plenty of getaway time.”

Whiz and I held onto each other and paddled like mad with our free arms. Neither of us looked back to see if Rick was gaining.

The roar of the falls grew louder as we approached. We stayed to the middle of the gorge to ensure we went over the center of the falls, where there were fewer rocks. From this point it was impossible to swim to the side, even if there was a place to climb out. We kept swimming straight for the noise of the crashing water.

“Relax when you hit the water at the bottom,” Whiz yelled. “We will hit in the deepest part and the current will toss us around. Get your bearings first, then swim as hard as you can.”

“Okay!” I yelled, in response. I wanted to say more, but I couldn’t think of anything to say or a reason for saying it.

“Feet first!” he yelled.

We tightened our grip as we felt the current speeding up.

“Take a deep breath! We may be under for quite a while!”

That’s when the bottom fell out. I didn’t remember falling from the bridge, but I was wide awake now and my stomach went down faster than the rest of me. It was only a fifteen foot drop, but it seemed forever. It was strange, feeling the water surround me. Kinda like being in a pool, but somehow not at all like a pool. The water wasn’t pressing against my body the way it did in a pool—but it was still as wet.

We hit feet first and went straight to the bottom. I could feel Whiz stopping a split second before my feet hit the river bottom and my legs bent. Whiz’s grip tightened as he pushed upward—pulling me. I followed suit and pushed hard against the bottom, also.

Just as Whiz predicted, we both popped up to fresh air, but, just as quickly, we were under again. And then up. And then down. Eventually, we managed to get downstream enough to do something that resembled actual swimming. We headed toward the shore—safety!

As we climbed out near the Town Limit bridge, I saw Rick come over the falls. I wonder if we looked that ungraceful?

“Quick,” I yelled. “Rick just came over; we need to get to the road before he gets out.”

Whiz followed my lead as any trained Agency member would. And guess what we saw at the top?

A Jasper Springs cop car was speeding down the road. It halted before the bridge and

our good friend, Officer Van Dyke, jumped out. A Fire Department Rescue Squad sped up close behind.

“Joey, Whiz, are you guys alright?” Officer Van Dyke called as he ran up.

“Fine,” I called back. “But, Rick Maples is down there... he’s after us!”

Without further questioning, the cop ran down the path followed by two of the rescue guys. Then another cruiser pulled up—Chief Reid climbed out. When he saw Whiz and me, his face turned from a look of concern to a look of extreme irritation. We’ve had run-ins with the Chief before, and it never goes well.

He strolled over to us.

“You, two?” He gritted his teeth. “Johnny’s Pizza called 911 saying somebody fell from the bridge. Do you know how much it costs the town to send us to rescue you kids?”

The Chief inhaled a deep breath as if he were winding up for a long lecture when Whiz held out the camera.

“What’s this?” he barked, as he took the camera.

“Evidence,” Whiz replied, calmly.

The Chief’s mouth dropped open—and he exhaled.

I just smiled.

The End