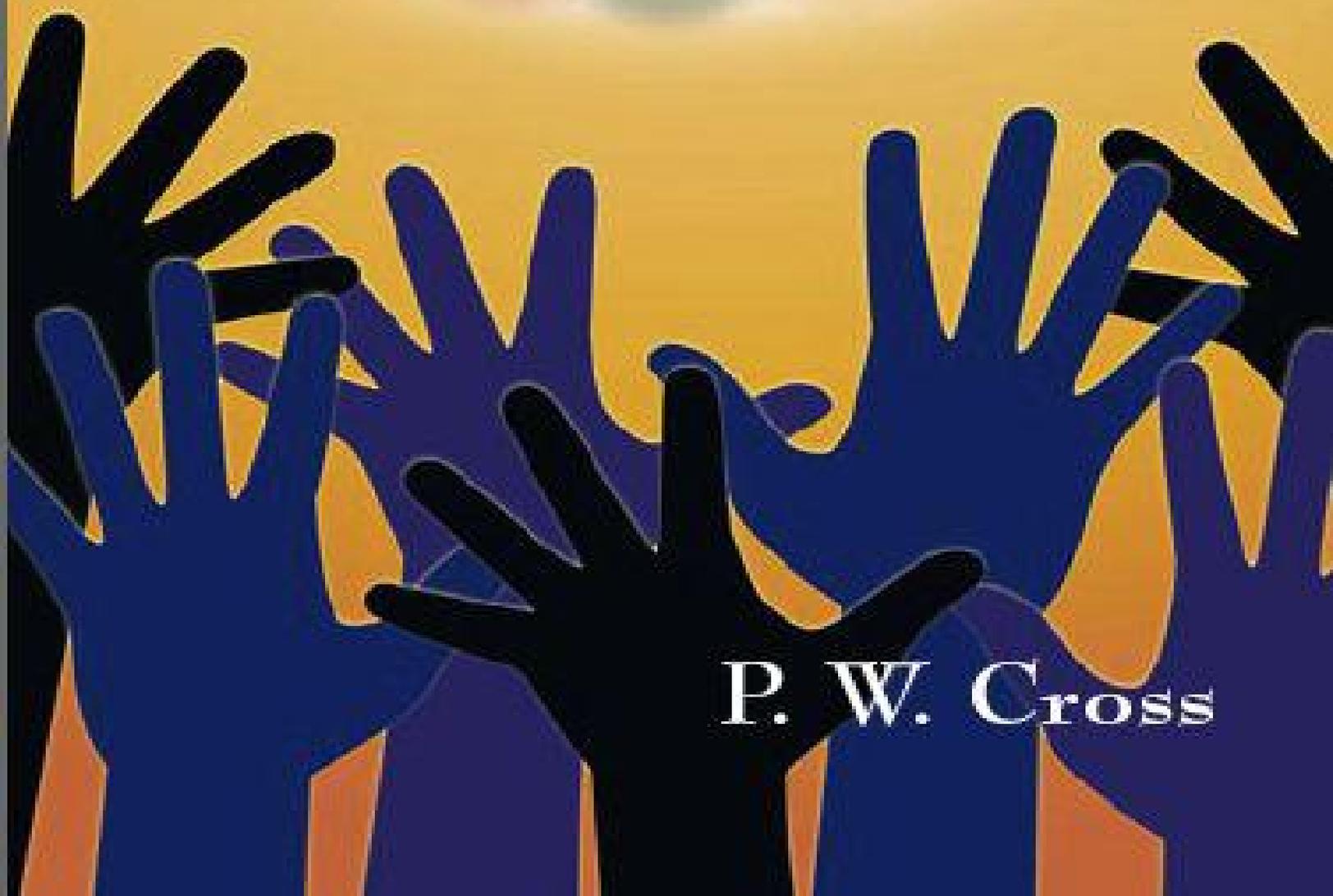


**THE IDEA MINERS**

# The Lost Lake Dig

The bottom half of the cover features several silhouettes of hands reaching upwards. The hands are rendered in two colors: dark blue and black. They are positioned against a background of soft, glowing light rays that emanate from behind the title, creating a sense of hope and aspiration.

**P. W. Cross**

# Praise for The Lost Lake Dig

*Ideas define us: our past, our present, and, more importantly, our future.* With these words PW Cross closes the Epilogue on this charming story about seeking and finding fresh ideas as only children, untainted by the complexities of growing into adults, can discover. Though the book, apparently the first in a series, is written for 'age twelve' readers, the book is a very fine fable for adults as well. . . . Far more than a fine children's book, this story invites further tales that magnify the thoughts suggested in this book. There is enough charm, adventure, and excitement in Cross's excellent writing to suggest this might just be another series worthy of a film + sequels!

—Gary Harp, *Amazon* Top 10 Reviewer

*Wonderful 5-star read for middle readers—and all ages. The Lost Lake Dig* is an imaginative and refreshing story for kids and adults alike. . . . I especially enjoyed the historical fiction that is woven into *The Lost Lake Dig*. By providing historical facts in association with the ideas contained within the squirts and gushers, Cross has found a unique way to teach our youth about history while keeping their interest at the same time. . . . My twelve-year-old daughter began reading the book after I finished it, and I could hardly get her to put it down to come to the kitchen for dinner! I'm sure my nine-year old will feel the same way when it is her turn, and we are all looking forward to Cross's next book release!

—Julina K. Small, *Armchair Interviews*

*The Lost Lake Dig* is sure to intrigue children of all ages. There are things in this book that no one will be able to predict. If you are looking for something entirely new and thoroughly creative, then give this book a try! You'll be introduced to finders, winders, diggers, seers, gushers, and squirts, not to mention miners and parallel dimensions, in this fast-paced novel. If you're up for an adventure, this book is guaranteed to thrill you. It's nothing like anything you've ever read before.

—Erin Doran, *Allbooks Reviews*

*I want to see this movie!* This is a winner—an extravagantly imaginative and cunningly constructed adventure that tackles the age-old question of where ideas come from. . . . Incidentally, the title *The Idea Miners: The Lost Lake Dig* makes me wonder if this is the first in a series. One can only hope. Bravo, Mr. Cross!

—Tim Grundmann, Author of Disney’s Doug Chronicles series: *Winter Games*, *Lost in Space*, and *Funnie Haunted House*

I would recommend this book to people who like fantasy and adventure. This book would probably be best for kids aged eight to twelve. . . . *Idea Miners: The Lost Lake Dig* by P. W. Cross was a good book and I think that everyone who reads this book will like it as much as I did.

—Ben Weldon (age 11), *Reader Views*

Award Finalist

—*The National Best Books*

Have you ever wondered where ideas come from? This creative tale explains exactly that. . . . This story is a wonderful fantasy adventure that leaves the reader anxiously anticipating a sequel.

—Millicent Prendergild, *Cybrarian Reviews*

A wonderful adventure story, this book also leads readers to think about the nature of ideas. With a fine eye for detail, P.W. Cross leads readers into a parallel world but he creates such a vivid picture that it feels entirely natural. . . . With elements reminiscent of *The Hobbit* and *Harry Potter*, the pace and variety of challenges carry the reader along to a surprising and satisfying conclusion.

— Larry Luxenberg, Author of *Walking the Appalachian Trail*

Loved the book!

—*Benjamin Franklin Awards*

Adventure needed, this story is a must read. The author does a fantastic job describing the fantasy world, a parallel world by the name of Land of Lights. This is the place where ideas are mined - squirts (the small ones) and gushers (the huge ones). . . . I found the squirts and gusher idea priceless. The world is vivid. It's no problem to picture and wish one was there themselves. . . . Summed up, this is a fun, refreshing read, which lovingly introduces readers to a new, vibrant world. Children ages 9 and up will enjoy diving into this adventure and will dream of getting their hands on one of those ideas themselves.

—Dr. S. Drecker

Award Finalist

—*Next Generation, Indie Book Awards*

*The Lost Lake Dig* is the first book in *The Idea Miners* series. The concept is unique and imaginative. I like that. Many of today's adventure books seem to stick to wizards, vampires and devious mastermind criminals. I love the freshness of this storyline and feel most kids will appreciate it too. . . . Now that the premise is built, I am very curious to see what adventure Joey and Ben take in the future!

—Tracy Farnsworth *Roundtable Reviews for Kids*

One of the best newly released, independently published titles, exhibiting superior levels of creativity and originality.

—*Independent Publisher*

I'm an omnivorous reader, and I unabashedly enjoy escaping to fiction targeted at young adults. *The Lost Lake Dig* satisfied my urge for a fast-paced narrative that picks up momentum throughout. During the excitement, I met characters I cared about . . . I hear that this book is the first of a trilogy. I will wait impatiently for the second installment.

—Richard Judy, Author of *THRU: An Appalachian Trail Love Story*

Click [here](#) to visit the book's website, TheIdeaMiners.com, to see more.



THE IDEA MINERS

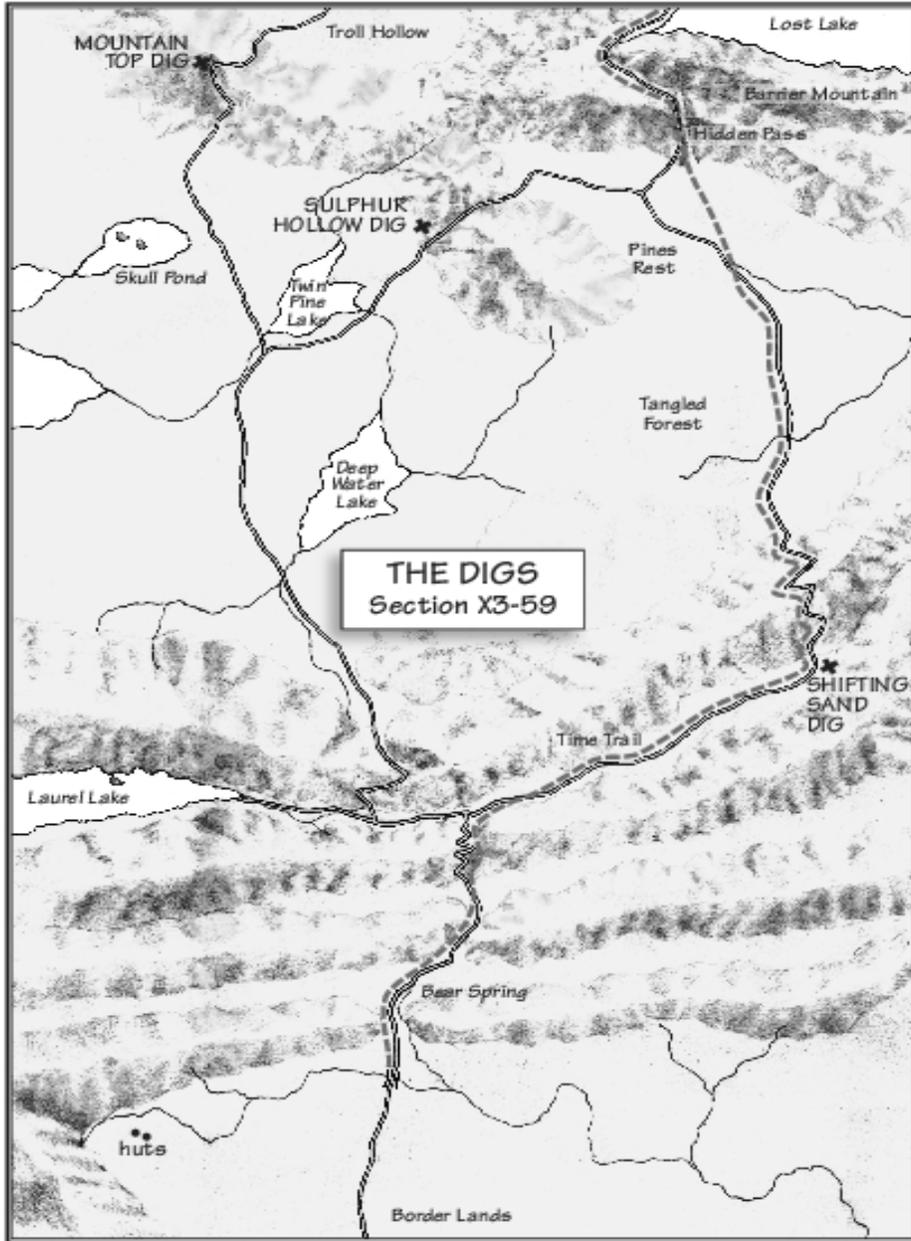
# The Lost Lake Dig

P. W. Cross



APPALACHIAN  
HOUSE





# Prologue

“The reports coming out sound good.”

“Is that so? We’ve been fooled before.”

“I know, but not this time. Everything I’m hearing points to a gusher.”

“And what exactly have you heard?”

“Well, nothing specific. There never is. The miner’s keeping it hush-hush, as they always do. But he’s doing strange things. I don’t have to tell you how the logos can affect them.”

The pudgy man and slender girl were sitting at a wooden table, in the center of a circular room with a dirt floor and low domed ceiling. “But is it worth a trip?” said the man. “I assume that’s why I’m here. What’s he doing? We don’t need another superhero or flying disc.”

The girl chuckled, a dimple punctuating each cheek. “No, I agree. But like I said, I believe it’s a gusher, not a squirt.”

“I see. And what makes you think so?”

“The way he’s behaving. He’s comparing things. It’s said that he closed his mine for a whole day because some odd-jobbers dressed alike.”

“His *entire* operation? For a *whole* day?”

The girl nodded. “Heard it from three different sources.”

“I’ve never heard of a miner just taking a day off,” said the man, shaking his head.

“Nor I. I didn’t believe it when I first heard it. You know how the reports change by the time they get out to us. Someone tells someone who tells someone, and it gets all jumbled up. What starts as a miner catching a cold ends up as a miner finding gold. But if what I’m hearing is true—and I believe it is—it must be important. You know how they push and make the diggers work all the time, especially on a new dig like this one. Taking a day off without a good reason is unthinkable. And I don’t think odd-jobbers dressing alike is a good reason, do you?”

The girl stared across the table at the man. The late-day sun shone through a small window, warming the room. They looked at each other through a shaft of light, dust motes floating in the air.

The man cleared his throat. “I’d ask you what else you’ve heard that he’s done, but it doesn’t really matter, does it?”

“I presented it to the Council two weeks ago and they didn’t think so.”  
The man smiled, his teeth sparkling. “I see. So it’s all set then.”  
“That’s what you get for missing a Council meeting.”  
The man stood up. “I guess you’re right. See you soon.”

## The Winder

Joey sat on the ground with his back against a gray stone farmhouse, his arms propped on his knees, and his chin in his hands. He wore a tattered shirt and breeches, and his feet were bare and brown with dirt. Lady, his dog, slept in the grass in front of him.

His pa had gone to town for supplies and his ma was in the house washing dishes, the sound of sloshing water coming through the open doorway. Usually he had to help, but not this time; she hadn't asked.

He brusquely wiped a tear from the corner of his eye, jumped up, and darted toward a brown field behind the house with Lady close at his heels. He hollered over his shoulder, "Going to the Hole, Ma!"

Ma appeared in the doorway drying her hands. "Don't stay too long . . . and be careful!"

Joey and Lady ran into the field and along a creek that wound into a thicket of small trees. In the middle of the thicket, the placid water in the creek rippled over stones, then smoothed out again where the bottom dropped away. That was the start of the Hole. It ended at a dam of stones a little farther downstream.

Joey and his best friend Ben had built the dam to make the water deeper for swimming, but even so it was just over their heads on a good day, after a heavy rain the night before. Joey flung a stone across the Hole into a bush on the other side, then plopped on the bank and sighed.

Ben used to try jumping across the Hole all the time. He had even talked Joey into trying it once. Joey had made it over, but Ben never had.

Joey smiled to himself. Ben wasn't one for thinking things through. He would always charge down the bank to the water's edge before springing out. He needed to jump sooner to get more elevation.

Ben and Joey had spent a lot of time together at the Hole fishing, swimming, and talking. Usually it was the best place in the world to fritter away a hot summer day, but not today.

He picked up a stick and lobbed it into the pool. Lady plunged in and paddled out after it, grabbed it, and then returned to his side, water dripping from her brown hair. She patiently waited with the stick in her mouth, her tail wagging.

Joey took the stick and said, "Good girl."

She barked and shook, a spray of water encircling her like a dandelion head in full seed.

Joey laid the stick on the ground beside him. Her ears drooped, matching the corners of his mouth. "I sure do miss Ben," Joey said. "It's not going to be the same without him. Why'd he have to move away? I'll probably never see him again!"

"Never's a long time."

Lady barked and Joey jumped to his feet, slipped, and almost fell into the water.

Sitting on the opposite bank was a pudgy man with dark blue eyes, a wrinkled face, and coils of bright red hair sprouting from his head. He was wearing a worn leather vest and breeches, an orange plaid shirt with matching stockings, and calf-high moccasins. A dirty leather pouch hung from a strap over his shoulder.

Joey stepped back. "Where'd you come from? I didn't see you coming."

"You were busy playing with that pretty dog of yours."

The man nodded toward Lady, his coiled hair moving in concert with his head. "She sure is a good swimmer."

Joey jutted his head forward. "Who are you? You from the farm upstream?"

"Nope. I'm not from around here. I come around whenever I'm needed. . . . Or I should say, whenever *somebody's* needed."

Joey took another step back.

The man shook his head. "I'm not going to hurt you, Joey, but I'd feel like running, too, if I were you. I know your pa did when he first met me. I am, shall we say, an eyeful."

He smiled. His teeth sparkled.

"You know Pa?! And how'd you know my name?"

"Your pa helped me when he was young."

"What do you mean 'helped you'?"

The man took the pouch from his shoulder, opened it, slipped his hand inside, and pulled out a small leather bag. "Ask him for yourself, but when you do give him this."

He tossed the bag across the creek.

Joey caught it. It felt empty and he said so.

"Just give it to your pa when you ask him," said the man.

He reached into his pouch again and withdrew a small ball, unlike any Joey had ever seen. It was translucent and gave off a silver glow. “And this is for you,” he said, throwing the ball to Joey.

Joey reached out to catch it, but as soon as he touched it, it burst into a silver light that washed over his hand, glowing brighter, then fading away.

He jerked his hand back. The ball was gone. He looked across the stream, and so was the man. “Where’d you go?” hollered Joey.

He scanned the brush on the other side of the stream, but the man was nowhere to be seen. He looked down at the leather bag. At least that was still there. He pushed it deep into his breeches pocket, looked for the man one more time, then shrugged, turned, and started home. Lady ran ahead of him.

Joey walked slowly, replaying in his mind what had happened. He knew Pa wouldn’t be back from town yet so there was no use hurrying. He moseyed along the stream into the field, frequently glancing back—just in case the man was following him.

He stopped and picked some wildflowers, something he’d never done before, pricking his finger in the process. He gave the flowers to his ma when he got home and said, “Thanks for not making me help with the dishes today.”

She gave him a hug and a kiss, then washed his pricked finger with soap and warm water.



“Good meal,” said Pa.

He pushed his chair back from the table, stood up, and announced he was going to the barn to work.

Joey followed him outside.

“Pa,” he said, “do you know a short, red-headed man?”

Pa scowled down at him. “Why?”

“Well, I know you’re upset with me because I went to the Hole today and didn’t do my chores, but—”

“We went over this at the table,” Pa said. “It’s not your ma’s job to remind you. It’s time you do things on your own.”

“I know,” Joey said.

“I know you’re missing Ben, but this is far from the first time.”

Pa was right. Joey tried, but it seemed he was always making a mess of things. It wouldn't have taken long to do his chores before going to the Hole, and by the time he had gotten home he had forgotten all about them—what with the strange man and all. He was starting to doubt that he'd ever learn, and he knew Pa felt the same. Just the other night, while lying in bed, he had heard Ma scolding Pa: "Be patient! He's still young. He needs time to grow up."

"So what about a red-haired man?" asked Pa.

"I met him down at the Hole today. He said he knew you when you were a boy."

Pa frowned. "You met a man at the Hole today?"

Joey nodded.

"Let's talk," Pa said.

They sat down on the wooden bench in front of the house.

"What's his name?"

Joey shrugged. "I don't know. He didn't say."

"Well, what did he look like then?"

"He was short and chubby with bright red hair, and his face was all wrinkly."

"Wrinkly? I don't remember anyone like that. What'd he say?"

"Said he knew you when you were a boy and that you helped him."

"Helped him? Are you sure?"

Joey nodded.

"All right," Pa said sternly. "What's the joke?"

"I'm not kidding, Pa. It's true!"

"Joey, I don't have time—"

"Oh yeah," Joey said, leaning to the side. "He said to give you this."

Joey pulled the leather bag from his pocket. Pa took it and looked inside. A silvery light shone from the opening. He poked a finger into the opening and the light climbed it, enveloped his hand, grew brighter, then faded away.

He stared at his hand with a faraway look in his eyes. "I know *exactly* who you met today."

"Who?" said Joey excitedly. "And what was that light? What did you help him do? What's his name?"

"One thing at a time," Pa said, handing the bag back to Joey. "It was a long time ago, when I was about your age."

He paused, a gentle smile settling on his face. “Ben’s pa and I had a lean-to in the woods where we spent our free time in the summer. It was a day pretty much like today when Frendric joined us there.” Pa laughed. “He like to have scared us silly.”

“Frendric?” said Joey.

“That’s who you met today. You ever wonder where ideas come from?”

Joey frowned.

“Have you had any good ideas today?” asked Pa, then waited for a reply.

Joey sighed. “I guess so. I picked some flowers for Ma, but I don’t see what that has to do with—”

“Let me guess,” Pa said. “The red-headed man gave you something, too?”

Joey nodded. “A glowing ball, but it burst when I touched it.”

“It’s called a squirt, a little idea. The kind of thing that just pops into your head—like picking flowers for Ma.”

Joey stared at him dumbfounded, then muttered, “What do you mean ‘idea’?”

“Idea,” said Pa.

“You mean Frendric gives *ideas* away?”

“Sort of, but it’s not that simple.” Pa smiled. “There was a game we used to play. What was it called? It was great fun! If you get a chance . . .”

He searched the air above him with his eyes, then shook his head. “It’s gone. I can’t remember anymore. It was there a moment ago.”

“I’m sure it’ll come back,” Joey said impatiently. “Now, what about the ideas?”

“That, too. It’s all gone. It’s the funniest thing.”

“What do you mean? You can’t just stop there!”

“Sorry. I don’t understand. You’ll have to ask Frendric. He’s a good guy and you can trust him. I do remember that!”

“But what if I don’t see him again?”

“You will,” Pa said, standing up. “Think I’ll take Ma for a ride in the pony cart.”

“But what about your work? I thought—”

“Changed my mind,” Pa said, stepping into the house.

Joey stared at the empty doorway. How could he just forget?

## The Idea Vent

Joey sat on the bank at the Hole, the seat of his breeches soaked through. It was overcast and drizzly; Frendric was nowhere in sight. A shiver shot up his back and he pulled his shirt close around his neck.

It had been three days since Frendric had appeared. Pa had prohibited Joey from returning to the Hole until now as punishment for not doing his chores. Joey said to Lady, “What a terrible birthday this is!”

He shook his head disgustedly. Pa had told him, the past New Year’s Eve, that 1750 was going to be their year. Well, it certainly wasn’t turning out that way. First Ben moves away, and then a crazy man appears at the Hole.

Lady nudged his arm with her head, a stick clenched in her teeth.

“Not today, girl,” he said. “I don’t feel like it.”

“Aw, throw it for her. You’ll both feel better.”

Joey’s head snapped up. Lady dropped the stick and barked.

Frendric was sitting on the opposite bank. “Frendric! Where’d you come from? I just looked over there!”

“I see you’ve had that talk with your pa. Did your ma enjoy her pony-cart ride?”

Joey frowned. “How’d you know about that?”

Frendric looked up at the sky. “Doesn’t look like it’s going to clear off anytime soon. You warm enough?”

“I’m fine!” said Joey with an edge in his voice. “How’d you know about the pony-cart ride?”

“It was in the bag.”

Joey smirked. “That’s impossible! You can’t put a pony cart in a bag.”

The smile on Frendric’s face glowed. “The idea, I mean. Didn’t your pa tell you about squirts?”

Joey was slow to reply. “Pa couldn’t remember much.”

Frendric nodded. “That happens when they grow up. Someday it’ll happen to you, too. You’ll forget all about me, the squirts, everything. You won’t even be able to see me. If your pa was sitting right beside you, he wouldn’t see me or—”

“That’s crazy! How can you say that? He *remembered* you.”

“Only because of the squirt. I sparked it with something special. It didn’t last, though, as I knew it wouldn’t.”

“But that doesn’t make sense. How could he not see you?”

“You’d be surprised what people don’t see,” Frendric said, glancing over his shoulder. “For example, look back there.”

Behind him was a clearing in the thicket. At the far side of the clearing, a path led into the woods to where Joey and Ben dug for fishing worms. Joey saw nothing unusual and said so.

“Keep looking,” Frendric said.

Joey searched the woods with his eyes. A chill ran up his back and he shivered. He was about to say there was nothing there, when he noticed a light. At first he thought it was the sun behind the clouds, but it was different than that, and it was coming from lower down. Then he saw something glowing up in the air: a silver sphere. Beside it was another one. Higher up there were more, and the longer he looked the more he saw. Looking down toward the trees, he could now see that they were shooting out of the woods like a volcanic eruption. He said, “What are they?”

“They’re everything that’s important, everything that’s new. They’re everything.”

Joey scowled at him. “What do you mean? That doesn’t make sense.”

“There you go again, trying to make sense of everything. A moment ago you said it didn’t make sense that your pa couldn’t see me, yet you looked right at the idea vent and didn’t see it.”

“Idea vent? It wasn’t there the first time.”

Frendric laughed. “It’s been there forever. Granted, it’s not always this active, but it’s always been there.”

Joey looked at the spheres shooting into the sky. “If that’s so, how come I never saw it?”

“Because it didn’t make sense. When everything has to make sense, you only see what you expect to see. That’s why your pa can’t see me anymore: winders don’t make sense to him.”

“Winders?” said Joey.

Frendric grinned, but said no more.

Joey looked into the woods. A plume of silver spheres reached into the sky. Currents of wind caught the spheres and carried them off into the distance. “When I met you, you said Pa helped you when he was young. Did it have anything to do with those?”

“Everything has something to do with those, as you’ll soon find out—if you want to. You can see them now. It’s up to you where we go from here.”

Joey sighed and stared at him. How could everything have something to do with them? And go where? He wasn't going anywhere!

He rubbed his eyes. There was something wrong with his sight. Frendric looked fuzzy. Joey was just about to say something when Frendric disappeared.

Joey jumped to his feet and Lady sprang up beside him. "Where'd you go?" he hollered, scanning the bank on the other side of the Hole.

He waited. There was no response. He glanced down at Lady and said, "It's a trick! It has to be."

He pulled the seat of his wet breeches away from his bottom and looked back into the woods. The silver balls were still shooting into the air. He said, "If he wants to play hide-and-seek he can do it alone! Let's go see what those things are."

He crossed the creek on the stones of the dam; Lady waded through the water downstream. They climbed the bank, walked across the clearing and onto the path out the other side. The grass was dripping wet, and by the time Joey got to where he and Ben had dug for worms, his shoes were soaked through. He stopped.

The source of the balls was farther in, a silver glow in the woods. Lady looked back at him from up ahead. Maybe he'd just go home where it was warm and dry, instead of chasing after some dumb balls of light. He decided to do just that—after a quick look. He hollered to Lady, "I'm coming."

The grass and weeds were higher now and brushed against his legs. The path turned away from the glow. He whistled for Lady and stepped off the trail toward the light. Wet grass swept against his shirt. He raised his arms in the air and pushed on.

Lady dived into the grass behind him, then passed him bouncing like a kangaroo, her head popping out of the tall grass. She sprang into a small clearing, stopped, and barked. Joey caught up to her.

There was a slight rise in the center of the clearing, with sharp-edged rocks poking up from the earth. A silver shaft of light shot skyward from between the rocks, accompanied by a hissing sound. Joey crept closer. Lady remained behind, firing a volley of barks after him.

At the foot of the rise was an opening about the size of a woodchuck hole that was lit from within. He got down on his hands and knees and peered inside. The hole went straight down into the earth, then turned, and he could see no farther.

“It’s easier over here.”

It was Frendric. He was around the side of the rise.

“How'd you get there?” asked Joey, standing up.

“Come over here, if you want to see what’s inside.”

A moss-covered wooden door lay on the side of the rise. Frendric bent down and lifted the bottom edge, swinging it up, its hinges squeaking. A damp set of stone steps led steeply down into the earth.

“After you,” Frendric said, extending an arm.

Joey glowered at him suspiciously. Should he go? Could he trust him? Pa had said he could.

Joey whistled for Lady, then said to Frendric, “You first.”

Frendric smiled, then led the way down the stairs into an underground chamber, lit from its ceiling by a bubbling mass of silver globes. Stalactites poked down between the globes like fingers, and immense columns of stone reached from floor to ceiling. The chamber’s walls were frozen streams of color—chocolate brown, sunset orange, blood red. On the floor, stalagmites pointed up with pools of water sprinkled between them. The surface of the water was mirror-like, and reflected the silver light from the globes overhead.

“This is amazing!” said Joey. He pointed up at the globes. “Are those the same things I saw floating in the sky?”

“Yep. And up top, too.”

“What do you mean ‘up top’?”

“Outside, on top of the rise. The silver shaft of light.”

Frendric nodded at the globes. “The shaft of light is just those escaping from inside here. It’s just that there are so many of them right now and they’re shooting out so fast, they tend to blend together when you look at them.”

“What are they?” asked Joey.

“Squirts. The same things I gave you and your pa, only larger.”

Joey gazed at the squirts.

“Would you like to go deeper into the cave?” asked Frendric.

“Into the cave? Why? Where does it go? And where do all the squirts come from?”

“The squirts come from where the cave goes.”

Joey frowned at Frendric.

“Would you like to see?”

“Is it far?”

“Depends what you mean by far.”

Joey sighed. “Can we turn around if I want to?”

“You have my word,” Frendric said with an air of sincerity.

Joey stared at the squirts for a moment, then said, “Sure.”

He and Lady followed Frendric into a large tunnel. Squirts on the ceiling lit their way. The sides of the tunnel closed in as it wound deeper underground. Joey stretched out his arms and slid his hands along the walls. The walls were smooth and cold. He looked up. The ceiling was high above them, with jagged rocks sticking down. Both the ceiling and the walls were a dull steel-gray color—in stark contrast to the vivid entrance chamber.

A cool breeze brushed his cheeks. He shivered and wrapped his arms around himself. Hadn't he decided to go home after a quick look?

There was a steady stream of squirts overhead, flowing toward the chamber behind them. The tunnel curved to the left and then straightened out again. The only sound was the scuff of their feet on the rock floor.

Lady pressed against Joey's leg, her body trembling.

He stopped, bent down, and rubbed her head. “It's all right, girl. Don't be afraid.”

Her trembling eased and she licked his face.

Frendric halted at a wide spot in the tunnel ahead of them, and Joey hurried to catch up.

They stood side by side, the tunnel ending in front of them, intersecting with a much larger one that ran to their left and right. A glowing river of squirts moved toward them on the ceiling from the right, bent round, flowed over their heads and into their tunnel behind them. To the left, only a black emptiness could be seen.

They stood not at the larger tunnel's floor, as Joey would have expected, but partway up the side of the wall. Below them the wall sloped out, with chiseled steps in its face. The steps led down to a dark rectangular shape. To the right of the shape, squirts rolled along the floor.

“Wow!” said Joey, pointing at the squirts. “They're down there, too!”

Frendric grinned. “It looks that way, but it's just the reflection in the water.”

“Water?!”

“That's right. That's a stream down there.”

“Underground?”

Frendric nodded. "Sure. There're lots of them."

That was something Joey had never thought of before: underground streams. He looked at the squirts on the ceiling. "Why don't they go that way?" he asked, nodding to the left.

"They're carried by the breeze. That way goes deeper underground with no escape for the air. The air flows through the tunnel behind us, into the chamber, and out the vent."

"So where do we go from here?"

Frendric nodded forward. "Down the steps."

"But the stream?"

"Don't worry about that."

"But—"

"Trust me," Frendric said.

"Is it much farther?"

"Not much . . . until we get out of here, if that's what you mean."

Joey wasn't sure what he meant. Much farther to where?

He picked up Lady and carried her down the steps after Frendric. At the bottom, he slipped and fell forward, Lady flying out in front of him. He rolled over and sat up. He was covered in mud. Lady barked at him and playfully wagged her tail.

"Sorry," Frendric said, offering him a hand. "I forgot to mention the mud. Let me help."

"I can do it myself!" snapped Joey, standing up. "I should've never come along. Just look at me! Ma's going to skin me alive. I'll be stuck at home forever!"

"It's just a little mud," Frendric said, chuckling and walking away. "It's not worth worrying about."

"A little mud?" said Joey heatedly, wiping his chin on his arm.

They were on a wooden platform. Frendric stopped at the far edge. Joey walked to him and looked over the side. A birch bark canoe was tied to a round post at the bottom of the platform.

"It's just downstream a bit," Frendric said. "I'll get in first."

There was a ladder attached to the side of the platform. Frendric climbed down and stepped into the canoe. He waited for the canoe to stop rocking, then reached up and said, "Hand Lady to me."

He gingerly set Lady in the bottom of the canoe, then moved to the back. "All right, now you get in."

Joey climbed down and stepped in. The canoe rocked wildly.

“Weight in the center!” shrieked Frendric. “Weight in the center. Be careful!”

Joey shifted to the front and sat down. Frendric picked up a paddle from the bottom of the canoe, untied the mooring rope, and pushed away from the platform.

They glided into the center of the tunnel. Frendric pointed the canoe in the direction of the oncoming squirts and began paddling. They slipped through the inky-black water, the stream of glowing squirts high overhead. Joey poked a finger into the water and a rippled V trailed behind it. The water felt cold and syrupy.

He jerked his hand back into the canoe. Anything could be in there! What if something had grabbed his finger? A chill ran up the back of his neck.

He focused on where they were going. The tunnel curved to the right, then split into two ahead of them, both dimly lit with silver streams of squirts on their ceilings. The streams edged toward them, merging at the fork of the Y into a bright glowing flow. Frendric steered the canoe into the left tunnel. The light waned. Farther on the tunnel split again, and the light grew even dimmer.

The tunnel continued to branch, until Joey squinted to see what lay ahead. He was about to ask how much farther, when they rounded a bend and the tunnel’s end came into sight.

They emerged from darkness into the full light of day. Joey shaded his eyes with a hand.

On their right, an expanse of grass and wildflowers stretched into the distance. On their left, a mountain climbed from the water’s edge with trees, thick with green foliage, clinging to the side. Overhead, puffy white clouds lazed in a dark-blue sky.

Joey looked back.

The mountain on their left curved around behind them, the entrance to the tunnel a black hole in its base. Squirts funneled down from the sky and disappeared into the hole. Frendric smiled and said, “Just about there.”

Joey faced forward, leaned over the side of the canoe, and washed the mud off his hands. His face reflected in the water, his taut dirty-blond hair gathered at the back of his head in a short ponytail.

He gazed down into the water. It was hard to judge its depth, but he was sure it was well over his head. Wispy plants danced in the current at the

stream's bottom, over a dark carpet of stones. A school of tiny silver fish swam by, moving as one.

Freudric angled the canoe toward shore on their right and brought it aground. The grass and wildflowers spread out before them like a colorful quilt. Two grassy knolls sat side by side a stone's throw away.

Freudric stepped into the water, moved to the front of the canoe and pulled it onto the bank, the bottom scraping the ground. Joey and Lady jumped out. Lady bounded into the field.

"Why'd we stop here?" asked Joey. "I don't see anything."

"Good!" said Freudric, turning to face the field. "That's what I like to hear."

"What do you mean 'good'? We came all this way and—"

"Joey! Joey! You're here!"

Someone was calling his name.

Freudric laughed. "Well, maybe there's more to it than meets the eye."

Joey's friend Ben was running through the field toward them with Lady at his side. He tackled Joey and they rolled in the grass, laughing.

Joey stood up; Ben remained on the ground, petting Lady. "I can't believe it!" said Joey. "Where'd you come from? How'd you get here?"

Ben stood up, pushed a tangle of long brown hair out of his eyes, and said, "Let's talk inside."

"Inside? Inside where?"

Ben smiled, his dark eyes twinkling. "Follow me!"

He turned and darted into the field.

Joey looked at Freudric.

"Go on," Freudric said. "I'll be here when you need me."

Ben stopped in front of one of the two knolls and waited for Joey, then reached into the grass on the side of the rise and pulled open a door.

"Wow!" said Joey. "I never would have guessed!"

"Ella showed it to me," Ben said, grinning, then stepped through the doorway.

Lady jumped in after him, and Joey followed, stopping just inside.

The knoll was hollowed out into a circular room with a low domed ceiling. A network of stout willow branches, arching from side to side, held the dome in place. The room was dark and musty—the only light was that from three small oval windows and the open doorway behind him.

A round wooden table with six chairs occupied the center of the room; a tin basin sat on the table with a towel and square bar of soap beside it. Three cots lined the far wall. Ben sat on the middle one. On the one to his right lay folded clothes and a blanket.

“What is this place?” asked Joey.

“It’s called a mound hut.”

“What’s it for? Where are we, anyway? And how’d you get—”

Joey stopped in response to a raised hand from Ben.

“We’ll talk while you clean up. You’re a mess! The clothes on the cot are for you. You can change after you’ve washed. There’s soap, water, and a towel on the table.”

“What do you mean ‘the clothes on the cot are for me’?”

Ben smiled. “We’ll talk.”

“But how could they be for me?”

“It’s all right, Joey. Relax. It’s going to be a great summer!”

Joey sighed, then smiled. “It’s *really* good to see you, Ben.”

“You too. Now clean up!”

Ben grinned and stretched out on the cot. Lady curled up on the floor beside him. Joey laughed and walked around the table, stopping close to Ben.

He slid the basin to the edge, pulled off his dirty shirt and dropped it on the floor. “So talk to me,” he said, picking up the soap and starting to wash. “How’d you get here? And how long have you been here? And by the way, where *is* here?” He shook his head. “You saw that funny-looking guy I came with? Strange! Says his name’s Frendric. Don’t get me wrong, he’s nice enough—although kind of hard to talk to. It’s just that he’s . . . Well, I don’t know what he is. Calls himself a ‘winder.’ And guess what? Pa knows him—or knew him. And there were all these glowing balls. Frendric calls them squirts. Did you come through a cave to get here? I did. What a cave! And who’s Ella, anyway?”

Joey looked over his shoulder at Ben. Ben’s eyes were closed, but he was smiling. “Are you going to tell me or not?”

One of his eyes popped open. “If you give me a chance.”

Joey turned back to the table and began washing the caked mud off his arms. “All right, I’m listening.”

“I got here yesterday afternoon, spent the night, and have been waiting for you to come ever since.”

Joey turned to face Ben. He was now sitting up, leaning against the wall, his knees pulled up with his arms around them. “Yesterday afternoon? What about your ma and pa? Do they know you’re here? They’ll be worried sick! I can’t stay. I have to be back by—”

“You’re not letting me talk,” Ben said, shaking his head.

Joey stared at him for a moment, then returned to his washing.

“No,” Ben said, “Ma and Pa don’t know I’m here.”

Joey willed himself to remain quiet.

“But they’re not worried, because they haven’t started to miss me yet.”

Joey whipped around. “What do you mean? What’s wrong with you?! Your pa’s going to—”

“I’ve only been gone a few minutes,” Ben said patiently. “I have plenty of time.”

“What?” said Joey, water dripping from his elbow. “You’re starting to sound like Frentric. First you said you spent the night, and now you tell me you’ve only been gone a minute!”

Ben sighed. “I said a *few* minutes, not a minute. Of course I’ve been gone longer than a minute. I spent the night, I just told you.” He stopped and laughed. “If you could only see your face.”

“I don’t think it’s funny! Your ma and pa are—”

“A couple of hours here is like a minute back home. Time’s different here. You could stay for days and only be gone a few minutes.”

Joey reached behind him and picked up the towel from the table, then slowly dried his arms. “You *do* sound like Frentric. When you’re ready to talk for real, let me know.”

“But I am!” said Ben. “I know it’s hard to believe, but it’s true. Two days ago I waited for you all day—Ella thought you might come—and when I went home, it was like I’d never left.”

Joey tossed the towel on the table. It didn’t make any sense . . . but neither did the idea vent, the spheres of light, or Frentric knowing about the pony-cart ride. “So how’d you get here? Did Frentric bring you?”

Ben shook his head. “I came with a winder, but not Frentric.”

“Did the winder ever disappear? I mean, just sort of go fuzzy and fade away?”

Ben grinned. “Yeah. Thought my eyes were going funny. Ella said they can change times: travel from this time to our time back home, and then return. She said that’s what they’re doing when they fade in and out.”

Joey was quiet for a moment, then turned and splashed some water on his face, picked up the towel, and slowly patted himself dry. He turned back toward Ben. “So you’re saying time’s different here.”

Ben nodded.

Joey slid a chair from the table toward Ben and sat down. “So who’s Ella?”

Ben slipped to the edge of the cot. “She’s a seer. She can see what’s inside the balls. She calls them squirts and gushers.”

Joey arched his eyebrows.

“She says gushers are bigger than squirts, and some of them have balls inside—balls inside of balls. And that the ones inside are all different colors and sizes.”

“Pa told me they’re ideas,” Joey said.

“That’s what Ella said, too. She said that’s what this place is all about. It’s where ideas come from! I’m sure she’ll tell us more when she gets back.”

“She’s coming *here*?”

Ben nodded. “She was here earlier and left. Maybe you should finish cleaning up.”

Joey glanced out a window. “I can’t stay long. Pa warned me when I left. I’m already in trouble for not doing my chores.”

“Remember,” Ben said, “time’s different here.”

Joey finished washing, then changed into the clothes on the cot. They fit perfectly. He sopped his dirty shirt and breeches in the basin, wrung them out, and dropped them on a chair, then wiped the tabletop with the towel, and emptied the basin outside. “Any idea what I can do with these?” he said, pointing to his wet clothes on the chair.

“You could lay them in the sun to dry,” suggested Ben.

Joey took his clothes outside and spread them out on the grass. Frendric and the canoe were gone.

Thank you!

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