

New Series: The Carver cousins and their Indiana Jones-type adventures.

Mystery Of The Shrieking Island

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CHAPTER I

The Storm

Dave Carver wasn't all that worried—yet. On the other hand, he was cramped, cold, aching, and soaked. In short, he was miserable. His nearly six-foot frame was packed into a tiny sheltering cave. The smell of damp earth and moss was practically overwhelming in the confined space.

Dave stared sullenly through the endless curtain of rain streaming from the overhanging rocks. At the same time, he attempted the useless task of trying to wring the mixture of rain and seawater from his sopping wet clothing. He squirmed back into his badly wrinkled shirt, shivering uncontrollably as the biting wind raised even more goose bumps on his already chilled skin.

His one-year-old Wave Skipper watercraft, a present from his parents for his sixteenth birthday, was barely visible where he had abandoned it in near panic. He shuddered as he listened to the furious waves roaring and crashing nearby as if trying to snatch his ride away from him. Lucky for him, his watercraft rested solidly on the narrow rocky beach in front of his shelter, a tiny rock-strewn cavity at the base of a cliff on Sea Gate Island.

Sea Gate, a heavily forested loaf of land five miles long and three miles wide, pushed up out of the surrounding sea, towering almost six hundred feet at its highest point, an imposing hill that made up the core of the island. Reminiscent of Robinson Crusoe's fictional castaway island, Sea Gate featured caves, waterfalls, several small bays, and even a few spring-fed fresh water ponds. Sea gulls, snakes, turtles, and mosquitoes were the primary inhabitants. In spite of today's misadventure, or maybe because of it, Dave was looking forward to bringing his cousin Andy here.

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Squinting at his watch in the half-light, he estimated about four hours of daylight left. “What a rotten time for a storm. I hope this stupid weather blows over soon.” His voice boomed in the small space, startling him. Talking to himself was like whistling up courage while taking a shortcut through a dark cemetery—except it wasn’t working. Today’s vicious storm had trapped him on this Florida coast island located six miles out into the Gulf of Mexico.

Worst of all, he was out of cell phone range, with no other way to let his mom and dad back in Captain’s Cove know he was okay. Determined to make the best of it, he rolled up his soggy jacket to use as a pillow, leaned back against the cold hard stone, and closed his eyes in numbed weariness.

Fifty miles north of Captain’s Cove, Andy Carver, Dave’s eagerly awaited cousin, scrunched up against the window of the bus. He was attempting to put as much distance between him and his unfriendly seatmate as possible. The man had acted really bizarre throughout the entire trip. From the time the stranger had argued with the driver over loading a large crate, to the angry exchanges with someone on his cell phone, he had made Andy nervous. He wondered what Dave would make of this guy? Well, he’d know in about ninety minutes. The thought of meeting up again with his cousin made him smile.

He checked his watch and then closed his eyes pretending to sleep. In truth, he was keeping a cautious watch on the man seated next to him through narrowly shuttered eyelids.

Dave was instantly jolted upright by a piercing, shrieking, screech. It sounded like the cry of a huge animal—or thing—in agony. Moments later, the entire island seemed to tremble, accompanied by a low rumbling that vibrated the rocky walls surrounding him.

“Wha—what was that?” His voice was shaky.

Then...nothing...only eerie silence, except for the continuous hiss of rain. He sat frozen for several heart-stopping moments, afraid to breathe. A horrifying thought—maybe it was an earthquake.

Now he was starting to get worried.

FLASSSH! Lightning stitched the lacy foam caps on the tumbling waves to the low-hanging, dirty clouds. He cringed from the blinding light.

BLAAM! A massive smash of thunder announced the nearness of the next strike. He swallowed to clear his ears and shrank further back into his shelter.

He recalled his mother's words as he left home that morning. "Look, Dave, your dad and I understand that you have a perfectly good reason to go out to the island, but why did you have to wait until the last minute? You know the coastal weather forecast is calling for possible thunderstorms, and that makes me uneasy."

"I'll be okay, mother. You know all the things I've had to do to get ready for Andy's visit. Time slipped away from me. It should only take an hour or so to run out there. I promise I'll be back in plenty of time to pick him up at the bus station."

Andy, short for Andrew, his younger-by-one-whole year cousin, lived in the mountains near Denver, a long way from Dave's hometown. During school breaks or long holidays, the boys took turns visiting each other's homes. This time it was Dave who was hosting his cousin during summer vacation.

Both loved to Scuba dive and spearfish. That was what brought Dave to the island to scout for a campsite near the best diving and fishing locations. Three of their close friends, Tom Wiley, Steve Jackson, and Marty Dobbins, would be joining them with enough camping and fishing equipment for a weekend filled with fun and good eating.

It had all started with his cousin's call last week. "Hey, Dave, it's me, Andy. Everything's set for my trip to Florida. I'll arrive

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next Tuesday. Don't forget you promised we'd go diving at Sea Gate Island."

"Not to worry, I haven't forgotten. Marty, Tom, and Steve are going with us. I've collected enough gear for you and me, so all you have to do is bring yourself and an appetite for fresh grouper and sea bass."

"Man, that sounds great. Mom and Dad told me to say 'hi' and to tell you that they're looking forward to your return visit here next summer. I've got a million things to..."

Dave was jarred back to the present as a burst of lightning struck so near that the thunder crashed at the same instant. The impact showered him with clumps of the dirt and moss that dotted the ceiling of the cave.

"Oww! That was too close for comfort." He shook his head to clear the ringing in his ears. He hated storms while Andy could sleep right through one. But then it was their differences, and not just their similarities, that made their adventures so much fun.

The relentless downpour increased—drumming, splashing—invading his cramped haven with constant noise, the mist soaking him to the skin. He hoped that Andy's bus hadn't run into this mess. Some visit this will be if their first weekend was starting out this nasty.

CRACK—ZZZZAAP—HISSSS! Triple bursts ripped jagged streaks across the sky in quick succession, followed by a continuous grumbling like a gigantic case of indigestion. Dave could smell the ozone that always filled the air during big storms, and he was becoming more anxious by the moment. As an encore to the spectacular light show, the already heavy rain doubled yet again in volume. Everything outside was obscured, making it impossible to make out anything beyond the water gushing down across the entrance.

He shivered, remembering how he came to be in this mess. The sudden thunderstorm had caught him completely off guard

while he was cruising offshore in search for a clearing large enough for their campsite. The wind had risen rapidly, slicing the tops off the waves—whipping the spray into his face like millions of razor-sharp needles.

He had no choice but to swing the powerful watercraft, around, and head directly for the level strip of land he had passed a few moments ago. Running nearly wide open to within yards of the beach, he killed the engine and rode the crest of his own wake into the surf near the shore.

Salt water burned his eyes as he slid from the seat into the cold sea. Rolling waves buried him until he fought his way to the surface, gagging on the briny seawater. His wildly rocking watercraft missed crashing down on his head by inches. A huge roller pushed the ski and its owner into shallower water, where Dave could touch bottom. He seized the line attached to the bow cleat of the Wave Skipper, and using the next incoming wave to help lift the heavy craft, he pulled it as far up on the beach as possible. Wedging a piece of driftwood threaded through the loop in the line between two large rocks, he anchored the ski against being washed back out to sea.

The barometer was falling dangerously fast, and the wind-driven rain punished him as he half-ran, half-stumbled to the cliff wall ahead. There, almost hidden behind a pile of tangled driftwood and kelp, he found an opening barely large enough to squeeze into, and here he crouched, waiting for the storm to break.

Katie, Dave's mother, nervously sipped her cup of tea as she sat at her kitchen table looking out over the Gulf. Her husband, John, was on the phone to the Shore Patrol, checking to see if they had spotted their son.

"What did they say?" asked Katie as John returned to the table, a frown creasing his brow.

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“Huh? Oh, they haven’t seen him yet, but they promised to launch a boat as soon as the storm lets up a little. Look, Katie, Dave’s got a good head on his shoulders. I’m sure he’s found a safe place to wait this out. Here, let me warm this up for you.” He gently removed the cup from her hands and crossed to the microwave. She gave him a tentative smile and returned her gaze to the window and the rain.

To Dave, the minutes had passed like hours while he sat, miserably curled up on the cold, hard rock floor watching his plans be literally dampened by the churning waves and drenching rain. His biggest concern—before that hideous bone-chilling shriek and that frightening tremor—was that his family would become uneasy about him. He shook his head in disgust. If only I had taken my father’s boat, he fumed, I could have buttoned up the canvas, radioed my location and ridden out this lousy storm in relative comfort.

His imagination began taking on a life of its own. This shaking and all that rumbling could have been an undersea earthquake—or maybe something even worse—a *tsunami*! It was of no consequence to Dave that such a monstrous wave had never struck these shores. He once read of whole islands disappearing under one of those giant ninety-foot high walls of water caused by a massive underwater quake. He could be trapped and drowned if he remained in this crevice.

It happened again. Another violent quaking! Small pieces of rock broke loose from the stone ceiling of his shelter and pelted him on the head and shoulders. He had to get out before the whole thing collapsed and buried him alive.

He spiked his jacket on a finger of rock to drip dry and crawled out into the deluge. Dave blinked back the salty spray blown from the crashing surf, shielded his eyes under cupped hands, and studied his surroundings for a path to higher ground.

To his left was a vertical wall that stretched up out of sight. To his right was a steep but passable trail shelving out from the cliff. He could see, between gusts of rain, that it ended at a ledge perhaps eighty feet above the beach. It won't be a Sunday stroll to get up there, he argued with himself, but given the alternative of staying here and drowning, that's my best and only choice.

Feet scrabbling for a foothold, hands grasping and pulling at the tree limbs and thick vines that grew out of the cracks in the wall, Dave inched his way upwards above the beach. The gushing river of water and mud pouring from the top of the cliff made the climb even more slippery and treacherous.

Midway up, the path narrowed where the wall bulged outwards, forcing him closer to the edge of the cliff. He choked on the torrent of filthy water relentlessly splashing against his face and up into his nose. He glanced back over his shoulder and decided that working his way back down would be more dangerous than moving ahead. "Come on, come on. You can do it," he urged himself.

Slowly, carefully, he dangled one leg over the edge and braced his foot against a scrubby bush jutting from the wall. From here, it was at least fifty feet straight down to a bed of jagged rocks—murderous teeth waiting to chew into his crushed body if he fell. He shuddered, swallowed hard, and pushed himself around the rocky barrier. Panting from exertion and the adrenaline rush, he finally gained a sheltered perch on the ledge by squeezing beneath a small overhang. Gasping for breath, Dave forced himself to concentrate.

Aside from the hiss and splash of the unrelenting rain, the only other noise was the throbbing of his own pulse, pounding and echoing in his head. Thankfully there were no more episodes of trembling earth or of the shrieks and booms like the ones that had driven him out into the weather.

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Studying the ocean from beneath hands that shielded his eyes, he noticed the rain running off his fingers resembled the water curtain back at the cave. An unexpected benefit of his desperate flight from the beach was that he now had a lofty view toward the mainland and could see a line of sunlit waves marching toward him. Yes! The storm was almost over.

Even more important was the absence of the feared tsunami. He chuckled at his over-active imagination. On the other hand, he thought, anyone else in the same situation would probably have the same fears. Yeah. That's right. He nodded, feeling better about himself. Nevertheless, he was glad Andy wasn't here to see right through his little act of bravado.

With the storm breaking up, he could soon make a dash for home. Dave pressed back against the cliff, deciding to wait out the last few minutes until the rain stopped. No sense taking a chance slipping on the way down to recover his jacket. He laughed quietly. Andy and his storms—he'll probably be sorry he missed this, Dave thought.

The boys were always in contact because of the close relationship of their fathers. More than just relatives, they were best friends. Each of their fathers had successful careers, and had remained in frequent touch after graduating from college. Dave's dad and mom both worked at Channel Seven, the leading TV station in the area. Andy's dad headed up the computer software company he had founded, while his mom considered that watching after her two men and their beautiful home in the mountains was a full-time job in itself.

The warm, welcome rays of the sun reached him just as the relentless downpour drizzled out. Torrents of water rushing down the trail with its oozing burden of mud would continue for a while until the stored up water drained from higher ground. This after-storm condition could be even more threatening than the wind and

rain if Dave were caught in the path of a mudslide. Still, it would be getting dark soon, and he had no choice but to start home.

Not able to wait any longer, he eased his way over to the first handhold and began the slow and careful reverse trip back down the treacherous route. A third of the way down, a small tree pulled away in his hand, and he tobogganed wildly down the narrow trail. He fought to keep from plummeting off the ledge as limbs and vines flailed at his arms and face. Rocks pummeled his knees and stomach.

Like a slow motion replay in his head, he recalled his tortuous climb upward and the narrow place that had almost forced him off into a five-story plunge to the rocks below. He'd never make it past there. In a day or two, they'd find his broken body sprawled near the cave, his jacket hanging inside, his loyal Wave Skipper waiting for the master who would never return. It was just like an old-time movie without the ragtime piano—and then the film broke.

His right foot struck the bulging wall, flinging him sideways over the edge. Pain shot through him like electricity as he landed astride the same bush he had used to help boost himself on his way up. He felt the roots beginning to snap one at a time. Frantically, he clawed for a handhold in the craggy face. Finding one, he jammed his fingers into it.

As the last of the roots pulled loose in a rush of pebbles and soil, Dave hauled himself back onto the ledge. His heart hammered in his chest as he stared down over the side, watching as the valiant bush bounced from rock to rock, striking the craggy beach and splashing to a stop. That could have been me! He shivered, but only partly from the cold and damp.

Wearily, he dipped his face into the gushing runoff, shook his head, and emptied his lungs of the breath he'd been holding. He remembered the melodramatic scene he'd rehearsed in his mind moments before, and smugly noted that the body-baggers would

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just have to wait this time. He and his faithful watercraft were going home. Cautiously, he pried his fingers from the life-saving crevice in the cliff and began, crab-like, to inch his way down again.

By now, the ledge was as slippery as chocolate pudding, and finding handholds became more and more difficult. He was still twenty-five feet from bottom, when his stiff, cold-numbed fingers slipped from a golf-ball sized knob, and he was once more on an uncontrolled slide to the rocks below.

For a few terrifying seconds he slid backwards down, down, until he tumbled and splashed into a shallow pool at the bottom. He lay there wondering if he were still alive. Pointy rocks and ice-cold water convinced him that he was. Slowly, painfully, he pulled himself to the edge of the pool and rolled out onto the muddy bank. An involuntary moan escaped him as he explored his body for broken bones.

Luckily for him, the water, thick mud, and rotting vegetation had cushioned his rapid plunge. Still, he'd have scrapes, bruises, and strained muscles to explain to his parents, but nothing worse.

As the wind and waves quieted with the arrival of the sun, he collected his jacket from the cave, carefully picked his way back to the beach, and tugged his ski into waist-deep water. Hanging onto the bowline, he dunked himself several times in the surf to flush away the mud and sand. He tightened his grip on the line, ready to pull himself aboard.

SHH-R-I-I-EEEEK-K-K! The high-pitched, nerve-wracking noise jangled his senses again, cutting through the tumbling roar of the surf like a siren. Dave froze and then quickly scanned the beach and the cliff top to find the source.

It was a frightful, bone-chilling sound—like fingernails scraped across a chalkboard—making him shiver in spite of the warming sun. What was causing that horrible racket? Curiosity tempted him to beach the craft once more and to try and solve the

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mystery, but he knew his family would really have something to worry about if he didn't get back before sunset.

The fearful screeching stopped. He heard only the slapping of waves against the hull of his Wave Skipper. It might happen again, but he planned to be long gone before it did.

Dave made a mental note to search the island when his cousin and friends returned for their weekend. Then he moved the water-jet ski into deeper water, heaved himself aboard, and mashed the starter button. With a healthy roar and trailing a giant rooster tail of spray, his speedy craft carried him on what was normally an exhilarating trip back to the mainland. Not this time. It was a brutal pounding of aching flesh and bones, a race to beat any leftovers of the storm.

Behind him, unnoticed by Dave because of the noise of his racing engine and the solid curtain of spray, Sea Gate trembled again—then lay quiet under the fading light.

Fifteen minutes later, Dave turned his watercraft into the waterway that served as an access to his subdivision. Easing up to his family's dock, he idled the Wave Skipper into the boathouse next to the family cruiser, and gratefully shut down the powerful engine for the night.

Locking the door behind him, he slogged his way up the walkway to the house. The immediate thoughts of a warm kitchen, hot food, dry clothes, and most importantly, his parents, were already pushing the storm and other disturbing events from his mind.

“Mom ... Dad ... I'm back,” Dave called through the slightly opened back door, as he shed waterlogged shoes and socks. Inside, he heard his mother drop the phone on its cradle and scurry toward the kitchen.

“Thank heavens you're safe,” she exclaimed, and then added in a stern voice, “and I don't even want to know what you're safe from. Well, yes, I do. Where have you been? Are you all right? Get

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some dry clothes on and I'll fix you some dinner. We've been worried sick about you, with this storm and all. Want some hot chocolate?"

Dave almost laughed at his mother's sudden shift of emotions, but he knew better than to do that. Instead, he nodded at the suggestion of his favorite hot drink and started for his room.

At that moment, his father, came into the kitchen and gazed sternly at Dave's soggy clothes. He was about to speak, but was halted by a warning look from his wife.

"He'll tell us all about where he's been, but first let him change into something dry while I fix him a bite to eat."

Dave returned a few minutes later wearing his comfortable old blue terrycloth robe and plunked himself down at the table. Mr. Carver walked over behind his son's chair and grasped his shoulders in a welcome home grip.

While his mother heated a cup of chocolate in the microwave and stacked a handful of homemade pecan cookies on a plate, Dave described how the storm had trapped him in the tiny cave on the island. He started to tell them of the mysterious shaking and the eerie shrieking, but he knew that his parents would probably think it was only his very active imagination. Worse, they might refuse to let him have his campout on Sea Gate if they were concerned about it.

Besides, he'd still get to share the adventure with his cousin when he arrived. They'd have much of the summer to explore those kinds of mysteries. It seemed that something exciting occurred every time the two got together, whether it was at the beach or at the mountains. Anyhow, it'd be a lot safer with all the guys with him.

Suddenly mindful of the time, he asked, "Have you heard from Andy or his family yet?" He licked the chocolate mustache from his upper lip as he checked his watch against the kitchen clock. At least the storm hadn't damaged his prize timepiece.

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“Oh, yes—yes, I did. All the excitement of your getting home almost made me forget. Andy's bus should be at the station in about, let's see now...about an hour and a half.”

“Wow!” exclaimed Dave. “I'd better grab a shower and get into some dry things if I'm going to pick him up. The bus stop's a good fifty-minute drive from here.” He grabbed the sandwich his mother had placed before him, wolfed down another cookie and headed for the bathroom.

Hot water cascaded off the top of his head and streamed down over his eyes, once again bringing back the memory of the rain curtain that had trapped him in the cramped shelter on the island. What in the world had caused the tremors, the quaking, and that piercing shriek on the island? Would he ever find out?

At this moment, these were only intriguing problems to mull over as he enjoyed the luxury of the shower. He had no way of knowing that when his cousin's bus arrived, there would be more questions raised about these puzzling events. When all the pieces came together, it would reveal a picture that Dave, Andy, and the people of Captain's Cove would not soon forget.

CHAPTER II

A Strange Passenger

The bus pulled in right on time, a rather unusual occurrence, but one that Dave welcomed. He was keyed up at the thought of seeing Andy and exchanging news about the friends each had met while staying at the other's home. After checking to make sure the car doors were locked, he took off for the terminal at a fast run.

"Which is the connecting bus from Denver?" he panted at the ticket window, trying to catch his breath.

"Over there, through gate two," came the answer. "If you're here to pick up one of the passengers, your timing's good. Only arrived a couple of minutes ago."

"Thanks," called Dave over his shoulder as he hurried to where the man was pointing.

Outside of the terminal gate Dave circled the green and white bus, jumping up and down to grab a peek through the windows, hoping he could catch sight of Andy before Andy spotted him.

He almost fell over an elderly lady waiting to board. "Young man," she scolded, "I don't know whom you're expecting, but it would be a lot safer for all of us if you would just settle down and be patient."

"I'm really sorry. I was looking for my cousin. He's coming for a visit, and I haven't seen him for ..."

Dave discovered that he was talking to himself. The woman had turned and walked away, mumbling to herself about impolite teenagers. He shrugged and turned back to the bus.

In his complete circuit of the coach, he had not recognized the familiar face he had waited months to see. Doubt began to gnaw at him and he wondered what had happened. Andy had called from the bus station right before boarding. Could he have

been left behind during a rest stop? If so, Dave was ready to gas up the car and go after him. He had no sooner turned back toward the station entrance to check with the agent, when a tired but cheerful voice hailed him.

“Dave! Hey—Dave, I’m over here. Give me a hand with this duffel bag,” shouted Andy.

Overjoyed, Dave executed a perfect catch of the heavy bag, then dropped it, grabbed his cousin in a bear hug, and swung him around in a circle. Ignoring the amused travelers surrounding them, each tried to outdo the other in catching up on the latest events.

The two were as different physically as they were in character. Dave was an older brother type to his cousin, not only because of the one-year difference in their ages, but also by his being a full inch taller. In a good-natured way, he never let Andy forget those important statistics.

Dave was tanned a deep bronze from long days on the beach, and his blonde hair was bleached to an almost dazzling white by the summer sun. During the autumn and winter months, his skin lightened and his hair darkened slightly. Swimming and working in the sun had helped him build and maintain an enviable physique.

Andy's years in the mountains had equipped him with a ruddy complexion and a lean, hard body with strong climbing muscles in his legs and arms. His dark brown locks were naturally curly, and his nose sported a few prominent freckles, a source of kidding from his male peers, but reason enough for second looks by the hometown girls. Like his cousin, he looked at life through deep blue eyes that shone with humor and intelligence.

Dave, who had been helping to collect Andy's luggage into a single pile while bombarding him with questions, stopped in mid-sentence and frowned up at his cousin. “Hey! I looked in every window of that bus and couldn't see hide or hair of your homely face. Where in the world were you?”

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“Wait 'til we get to the car, and I'll tell you about the weird thing that happened on the bus. There—see that man getting into the four-wheel drive by the telephone? Have you ever seen him before?”

Dave shaded his eyes against the glare of the mercury vapor lights of the parking lot and attempted to make out the face of the man that Andy was pointing out.

“Nope, I can't say I recognize him, but I'm fairly sure I've seen that truck around here someplace.”

The white Chevy Blazer sported a blue diamond-shaped logo with the name, Mackland Mining Company, on the door. Knowing that he would learn more about the man in question once they were underway, he led Andy toward his parents' car in the adjacent lot.

“I see you got your driver's license,” said Andy, “but I can't believe Uncle John would let you use the car.”

“Ah hah! I think I detect a touch of jealousy from my ‘much-too-young-to-drive’ cousin,” taunted Dave. He grinned at the faint reddening of his companion's face. “Keep an eye on me and learn the techniques of a master behind the wheel.”

“Are you kidding? If I had a choice, I'd rather walk,” Andy countered with a grin.

“Okay by me,” said Dave as he slung the heavy duffel over his shoulder and began to sprint for the car. Andy recovered the rest of his bulky luggage from the pile near the baggage compartment, shouted his thanks to the driver, and hurried in a duck-waddling gait to the Carver sedan. Tossing the bags inside and closing the trunk lid, he slipped into the passenger seat and heaved a sigh of relief.

“Change your mind?” laughed Dave.

“Hey, all kidding aside, if I have to do any more traveling tonight, I'm glad it's in a quieter, more comfortable style. Now if you'll just keep all four tires on the road, I'm going to relax.” With that, he fastened his seat belt, reclined the seat back a few

degrees, and settled in for the ride to his cousin's home at the beach.

As soon as they left the parking lot and were headed down the main highway, Dave glanced over to find Andy with his eyes closed, a soft snore coming from his gaping mouth. He was disappointed. He really wanted to hear about the stranger on the bus and to continue their catching-up on what was happening, but didn't have the heart to wake his exhausted companion. He sighed and turned his attention back to the dark road ahead.

"Well, aren't you going to ask me what happened on the bus?" came a sudden exclamation from the passenger seat.

Startled, Dave almost ran off onto the shoulder of the road. "You weren't asleep at all! That was a sneaky trick to get me all charged up for your story."

Andy laughed, pulled down the visor mirror, and began to comb his hair in preparation for greeting his aunt and uncle. He didn't even react when Dave, kidding him about his vanity, shut off the lights on the mirror.

"Okay," said Andy, "I just wanted to see how long it would take for you to ask about the man, anyhow. Let's see. I seem to remember his getting on the bus at a stop about fifty miles out of Stockbridge. He was arguing with the bus driver over a large wooden box that he wanted loaded into the baggage compartment. The driver was telling him it was too large to carry by bus and he'd have to ship it by truck." Andy paused, yawned, and squirmed into a more comfortable position, loving the suspense building up.

"So, what happened? Did the bus driver finally give in, or did the man arrange to have a truck haul it? What was in the box? Why...?"

"Whoa," interrupted his cousin. "Give me time to reply. The answers are no, he didn't—yes, he did—I don't know..."

"Cute," responded Dave. "So why, if it was so important to him, didn't he just rent a truck and come with the box?"

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“How should I know? Maybe he needed to get here sooner. Maybe he doesn’t drive. Anyhow, the box hadn’t been picked up at the time we left. Could be whatever’s in there isn’t needed right away. Boy, did he ever seem upset when he couldn’t bring it with him, though.”

“So, did you have a chance to talk with him on the bus? Hey, wait a minute. I had asked you to explain why I couldn’t see you through the bus windows when you pulled in. What, if anything, has this box got to do with that?”

Andy looked thoughtful for a moment and then turned to his cousin. “My, aren’t we the patient one? Okay. The guy sat right next to me and didn’t do a thing but sit and stew for a long time. I have to tell you I don’t think he had been acquainted with a bar of soap or deodorant for some time. Pheew!

“Well, then he pulled a cell phone out of his briefcase and tried several times to call someone, but we were in the mountains and away from any of the pickup towers. When he failed to get his call through, he threw the phone back in his case and slammed it shut. Then he just kept tapping his fingers on the lid and seemed really impatient to get to the next stop.”

“Did he use the regular phone when you stopped?”

“No, as we got closer to the next town, he tried his cell phone again and finally got an answer. He covered his mouth and phone with his hand, but I did hear him mention something about plastic and carbor... carborunding, or something like that.”

Dave looked thoughtful, then smacked the palm of his hand against the steering wheel. “That was a mining company vehicle he was getting into. Maybe he was talking about plastic explosives. You said the box was big and heavy. How long was it?”

“I don’t know. Maybe six feet. Why?”

“Besides explosives, it might have had those drill bits used in mining. They’re usually tipped with carborundum to harden them.

Wow, you don't think he was hauling drills *and* plastic explosives in that box, do you?"

Andy shuddered. "I hope not. We went through some pretty rough spots in the road and I'd hate to think he was trying to carry anything that dangerous on the bus with all of us."

"Well, there shouldn't have been any real danger of setting off the plastic with a jolt, but what if something had happened and there had been a fire or bad accident? Man, it's really scary how some people don't think about the results of their actions. But you still haven't explained how all of this relates to your invisible man act on the bus."

"Right. Where was I? Okay...as we pulled in, the guy stood up and his briefcase fell open and spilled everything on the floor. I was crawling around under the seats trying to help him gather up his belongings. He kept tugging at me and telling me to go on and get off the bus. Said he'd take care of it himself. The guy was really rude. A 'thank you for helping' would have been nice."

"Then I must have been looking for you while you were under the seats," reasoned Dave. "It's too bad you didn't have a chance to see what he was hiding by shooing you away."

"Ah, but I did. As a matter of fact, I still have a couple of souvenirs from his briefcase. Not on purpose, of course, but as I was pushed from the bus I still had these, and so I stuck them in my pocket," he said, switching on the map light and holding his hand under it.

Dave glanced over, still careful to keep a watchful eye on the darkened road ahead. His eyes widened as he quickly looked back through the windshield for a place to pull over. He braked to a bumpy stop on the shoulder and took one of the several tubular brass objects from his cousin. It was about three inches long and a quarter-inch in diameter with two six inch wires at one end.

"I thought so," he said. "These are detonator caps used to set off explosives. I'll bet there *had* to have been dynamite inside that

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crate. What's that paper you've got there?" Andy looked down at the white rectangle in his hand and then turned it over. "It's a business card for the Mackland Mining Company. Hey, there's something on the back."

"Well, what's it say?" urged the older boy.

"It doesn't say anything 'cause it's just a piece of cardboard," teased Andy. "Now if you're asking what's *written* on the back, I have to say it's a phone number in the same exchange as yours, so it must be in Captain's Cove or nearby. There's no address listed, but there's a name, a Marvin Bledsoe. Do you know him?"

"Never heard of him, but if that's his home number on the back, it should be easy to trace. Since my parents work at Channel Seven we can get access to a cross-index phone directory and look up the address. That is, if the number's listed. If not, and if you think it's important, we'll make a call to the number written there and simply ask whoever answers where the phone is located."

"Sure, it's important. The detonator caps and this card belong to the man on the bus. I'd want to return it to him, wouldn't you?"

Having settled that, the boys turned to more important topics. Dave recounted his strange and frightening battle with the weather and the bizarre happenings on the island. Andy was fascinated and could hardly wait to investigate the strange shaking and shrieking. Time passed quickly as they caught up on other news from both the mountains and the beach.

Conversation came to a halt as the car finally turned into the drive. Dave's mom and dad were already on the porch to greet their nephew from the Colorado mountains. Hot chocolate and freshly baked cookies awaited the boys, with everyone trying to talk at once.

John Carver laughed. "Come on, guys. Eat and drink up, and then hit the sack so you can get an early start on your weekend plans."

R.T. BYRUM

Dave and Andy needed no further convincing since the long day had begun to take its toll. Sleep would be welcome, now that their anxiously awaited reunion had taken place.

“What's on the menu for tomorrow?” yawned Andy from one of the twin beds.

“I imagine that mom will have bacon, eggs...”

“I don't mean a food menu. Aunt Katie always has the best meals around. Outside of my own mother, of course. I mean, I'm not saying that your mom doesn't cook as well, but...”

Laughing, Dave assured his cousin that he understood what he meant and that the menu on his mind had to do with plans for the next day's activities. “That depends on whether or not you brought the part I asked for.”

Andy sat up in bed and replied in an injured tone, “How could you even think that I'd forget? Of course I brought it, safely tucked away in the center of my duffel bag. I'll unpack it first thing in the morning.”

Dave smiled in the dark. At last, a dream that he had had since he was twelve years old was about to come true. But this was one dream that would have to wait for the light of day, rather than the dark of the night. With that thought in mind, he rolled over on his stomach, fluffed up his pillow, and let himself surrender to a sleep that could ease his aching body.

CHAPTER III

The SandWitch

Morning seemed to break earlier than usual. The sunrise shot between the slats of the venetian blinds, landing squarely across the eyes of the sleepers. Andy's bed was farther from the window, so it took more than the invasion of the sun to stir him to consciousness. The extra effort came in the form of a pillow attack launched at his head.

Before he could fully awaken to reply in kind, he heard the bathroom door slam, followed quickly by the sound of an electric toothbrush and Dave innocently humming a cheerful tune.

Crossing to the door, Andy rattled the knob and challenged, "You attacked a helpless, harmless victim. Let me in, or by the hair of my chinny chin chin, I'll huff and puff and blow this door in."

"Oh, I'm sure you got the wind, Cuz, but that peach fuzz on your face can't be classified as a hairy chin. Besides, I've been here all the time brushing my teeth," he said, with crossed fingers holding the toothbrush.

"Have it your way," said Andy, "but remember, you have to sleep sometime."

And so began another round of the friendly kidding that was so much a part of their times spent together. The truth was that they would do anything for each other, as everyone at the beach and in the mountains near their respective homes knew. In their many adventures, that attitude had gotten them out of some tight situations, but this coming weekend would become a prime test of their relationship.

At last, Dave unlocked the door and Andy slipped inside. Remembering their last words before sleeping, Andy produced a

carton from behind his back. “As I was saying, how could I forget the *SandWitch*?”

He was referring to Dave's VW-powered dune buggy, which had begun life as a “Beetle” belonging to his mother’s oldest brother, Fred. His uncle had signed it over to Dave after discovering his young nephew sitting behind the wheel, pretending to drive the old car, even as it sagged in semi-retirement in the barn. The yellow Volkswagen had ceased running years ago and its body had taken on a moth-eaten look from all the rusted out spots. Uncle Fred had even nicknamed it the *Junkyard Dog*. To its new owner, however, it was the most beautiful chariot in the world.

“Remember how we traded the old motorcycle for the dune buggy frame?” asked Andy.

Dave nodded. “I also remember all the work stripping the running gear from out of the *Dog*, and how we had to modify everything to make it fit into the buggy. Just think, after nearly two years, we’re almost ready for a test run.” With that, he opened the carton and admired the rebuilt carburetor his cousin had brought. If all went well, they wouldn't have to depend on the family sedan for their transportation.

Since it had been built to run mainly on the beach, and because they knew it would have a wicked sounding exhaust, Dave had christened it the *SandWitch*. Now, it had been transformed from an ugly beetle into a newly painted and very impressive machine, and it was about to spread its wings and FLY!

A rushed breakfast out of the way, the boys raced for the lean-to at the back of the boathouse and stripped the canvas cover from the buggy. An oiled rag had been stuffed into the intake manifold to keep out dirt and insects. A second rag served the same function for the exhaust pipe. The boys removed them and pushed their dune buggy out into the early morning sunlight.

“Okay—we are ready to rock. Please hand me that tray of tools,” said Dave. He selected a set of open-end wrenches and

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tenderly lifted the rebuilt part from the carton as Andy watched with a wide smile. After placing the gasket over the manifold stubs, he carefully lowered the carburetor into place and expertly tightened the nuts in order. Working on one side and with Andy on the other, the pair quickly attached all the linkages and vacuum hoses. Next came the fuel line. Finally, the battery was lowered into its bracket and clamped down, and the cables were attached to the frame and to the starter motor lug.

“Here's for luck,” said Andy, giving his cousin a high five. Then, he jammed his fingers into his ears, and nodded to Dave to crank it up.

Once, twice, three times the starter kicked the engine over, but nothing happened. Disappointment was painted all over their faces, for they had worked toward this moment for a long time. Besides, the carburetor alone had set them back nearly a hundred dollars.

“Wait a minute!” Dave thumped his forehead with the heel of his hand. “We've been so careful to put everything together properly—except for one small detail.”

He paused dramatically, enjoying the chance to repay his cousin for the previous night's story.

“All right with the suspense, already. What did we miss?” snorted Andy.

“Simple. We forgot to put gas in the tank!” Laughing with relief, they filled the stainless steel beer keg, which served as a gas tank, from a five-gallon gasoline can. A small capful of gas was dumped into the carburetor and the air cleaner replaced.

Mimicking an airport ground handler, Andy swung his extended forefinger in a circle over his head to signal all clear for a start, then quickly covered his ears. His cousin pressed the accelerator and turned the key. With a puff of white smoke and a noisy cough, the long silent engine faltered and then roared to life.

Dave backed off, and the four-banger grumbled into an unsteady idle .

“Adjust the low speed jet,” shouted Dave.

“Roger,” came the reply as Andy tweaked the screw at the base of the carburetor. He was rewarded with a comforting rumble from the exhaust. As Andy danced up and down with excitement, his cousin gunned the engine several times, and then let it settle back into a healthy purr.

Dave grinned broadly. “Jump aboard and let's try it out at the beach.”

The younger man needed no coaxing. He grabbed the roll bar and swung into the passenger seat. After carefully fastening his shoulder and seat belts, he pointed to the access road near the boathouse. “YO!” he shouted, tightening his grip on the bar overhead.

Cautiously, Dave eased out the clutch and laughed aloud as the little buggy lurched forward, then began to climb smoothly up the lawn to the road. Turning onto the blacktop, he caressed the accelerator with the tip of his toes and the *SandWitch* effortlessly reached toward the twenty mile per hour mark.

“Let’s go for it,” shouted Andy over the noise of wind and engine. Shifting into second, third, and then fourth gears in turn, the reborn drive train was soon speeding them along at nearly sixty miles per hour.

The invigorating rush of air around the two small windscreens was like nothing they had ever experienced before. It was almost like riding their motorcycles—yet more exciting because this machine existed by the sweat of their own brows.

“There’s the trail to the beach,” said Dave, pointing to an opening in the sand dunes along the road. He swung off the black top and plowed through the salt-encrusted sand to arrive at a stretch of the beach where loose sand mixed with rocks and driftwood, and with shells deposited over thousands of years.

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Though not suitable for swimming or surfing, it was a favorite spot for dune buggy riders. The surrounding salt-water swamp prevented the building of any homes nearby, so there no one was around to be bothered by the noise.

This was the test—the moment that they had waited for from the time Uncle Fred had surrendered the keys to Dave. This was where *SandWitch* would reward them for the loving care the boys had taken to restore her to life. The idling of the now finely tuned engine sounded to the boys like the purr of a contented kitten, but then, with a tap of her master's toe, she became a screaming wildcat!

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