

UP THE CREEK!

KEVIN MILLER

Up the Creek! by Kevin Miller
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Dedication

For Victor, who accompanied me down the real Milligan Creek and on so many other adventures, and for Mom, who was the first to brave those frigid waters.

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1

THE FIRST BOOTFUL

“On your mark, get set, go!”

Thirteen-year-old Chad Taylor waved his scarf in the air as his younger brother, Matt, and their friend, Dean Muller, raced to the edge of the gravel country road. They each grabbed a gray stick off the ground, tossed it into the water that rushed through the pair of aluminum culverts that passed beneath the road, and then dashed back to the other side.

“Beat ya!” Matt said, raising his arms in triumph.

“Not yet you haven’t. Watch.” Dean put his cap on backwards, lay down on a culvert, and peered at the water below. “There it is!” He pointed to his stick as it sailed through ahead of Matt’s. “I beat you!”

“That’s not your stick. Yours was the short one,” Matt protested.

“Yeah right.”

“I’m serious.”

Chad shook his head and smiled at his brother. “Just admit you lost, Matt.”

“Yeah,” Dean added.

“Alright, alright, you got me. Let’s do it again,” Matt said, already searching the ground for more sticks.

Dean checked his watch. “I don’t think so. I should be getting home.”

“Come on, Dean,” Matt said. “Your mom won’t mind if you’re a few minutes late for supper.”

“That’s what you said last time. And I got grounded from TV for a week.”

“That’s because you didn’t make it home until after ten o’clock.”

“Because you left him stuck up on a roof with no way to get down,” Chad reminded him.

“In the rain,” Dean added.

“How did I know you were waiting for me to help you get down?”

“Because you had the ladder.”

Matt smiled sheepishly. “Oh yeah. Well, we can’t worry about that right now. There’s too much to do. The snow is melting like crazy, and we haven’t even gotten a bootful yet.”

Just then, something in the water caught Chad’s eye. “Hey look, a whirlpool!”

Matt and Dean ran over to the edge of the road. Sure enough, a small whirlpool had formed between the two culverts. It sucked small sticks, straw, and other debris down into the cold, dark water.

Matt grabbed a larger stick off the side of the road and tossed it into the water. It inched toward the whirlpool and then turned on its end before it was sucked down into the blackness.

Dean shivered. “I’d hate to get caught in that.”

“Yeah, if you were an ant,” Matt replied, punching Dean playfully in the shoulder.

“Or a frog,” Chad said, punching Dean from the other side.

“Hey, knock it off!” Dean swiped at Matt, but he

ducked out of the way, laughing. Dean gave Chad a friendly shove instead.

Chad regained his footing and then looked out at the ribbon of water that flowed out of the muddy fields. “The water sure is high this year.”

What was normally a dry grassy ditch had become a full-fledged stream swollen with the runoff from the winter’s unusually high snowfall. The stream glistened and sparkled in the fading sunlight as it flowed through a flooded clump of trees that were just starting to bud.

The boys picked up their bikes to head home.

“My dad says it hasn’t peaked yet,” Dean said. “Lots of snow in the bushes still hasn’t melted.”

“Hmm . . .” Matt stared at the water, a faraway look in his green eyes.

Dean swallowed hard. He had seen that look before—too many times. “What are you thinking, Matt?”

Matt looked at him and grinned wildly.

Chad laughed. “I think you’d better get home for supper, Dean—while you still can.”

“Okay, see you guys tomorrow.” Dean got on his bike and started pedaling.

“Not so fast, Dean. Just hear me out for a moment,” Matt said.

Dean’s shoulders sank as he glided to a stop. He knew Matt would not take no for an answer. “Just make it quick.”

“Do you guys remember that TV show about white-water rafting we watched a few weeks ago?”

“Not me. I was still grounded, remember?” Dean reminded him.

“Yeah, that looked wild,” Chad replied. “I’d love to do something like that.”

Dean shook his head. “You can count me out. Way

too dangerous.”

“Aw, get off it, Dean,” Matt said. “What could go wrong? They were wearing life jackets and helmets, and there’s no way a raft like that could ever sink.”

“That’s what you think,” Dean replied. “What if it ran into a tree or a rock? I’m sure people die every year doing that sort of thing.”

Matt stared out at the reddish sun, which was just starting to dip toward the horizon. “Well, I don’t think there’ll be any danger of that happening on the trip we’re going to take.”

Dean eyed him suspiciously. “What do you mean *we*? What trip?”

Matt turned to his brother. “Chad, does Andrew still have that three-man rubber dinghy we used at the lake last summer?”

Andrew Loewen was a close companion of the boys. He lived on a farm a few miles away from the Taylors, who also lived on a farm about four miles outside of town.

Chad nodded. “Yeah, his dog bit a hole in it, but I think it could be patched.”

“Good. We’ll call him when we get home.”

Matt got on his bike and started to pedal away. Chad followed.

“See you tomorrow Dean,” Chad called back over his shoulder. He and Matt grinned at each other.

Dean stood there for a moment, a confused look on his freckled face. Then he looked toward his friends. “Wait a second. Why do you need a dinghy?” He turned back to the water, and his eyes went wide. “You’re not going to try floating down here, are you? You’d get stuck in the culvert!”

“Not here, dummy,” Matt said as he circled back to Dean. “On Milligan Creek. I bet the water is roaring through there.”

Dean looked up. In the distance he saw the lights from the grain elevators in the town of Milligan Creek, Saskatchewan, where the boys went to school. Matt and Dean were in grade six, and Chad was in grade seven. The town took its name from the stream that flowed through it. The creek itself was named after the first family who settled in the area. Throughout most of the year, the creek was small and sluggish, but it was sure to reach record heights with the extra runoff.

“Well, you can count me out. I’m not getting in any flimsy boat and floating down a raging river,” Dean said. “You’ll probably get hung up on a beaver dam and sink.”

“Suit yourself,” Matt said, still circling on his bike. “Maybe you can stay on shore and be our safety manager.”

Dean got on his bike. “Oh yeah? We’ll see what your parents have to say about the idea.” He started to pedal away, but his front wheel hit a huge rock.

“Hey, wait a second, I’m—”

Before he could get the words out, he flipped over his handlebars and tumbled down the ditch—right into the flowing water.

“Whoo-hoo! The first bootful!” Matt cried as he turned back to help his friend.

“First pantful too!” Chad added.

Chad and Matt ditched their bikes and then climbed down to help Dean out of the stream. Once they dragged him and his bike back up onto the road, Dean sat down and tugged at his rubber boots.

“Agghh! They’re stuck!”

“Here, let us help.” Matt grabbed Dean’s right boot, and Chad grabbed the left. Matt looked at Chad. “Ready? One, two, three—heave!” The boys pulled as hard as they could.

“Hey, careful, you’re pinching my toes!”

Just then there was a loud sucking noise, and Dean’s

right boot popped off, sending Matt stumbling backwards down the ditch—straight into the water. Chad nearly fell over with laughter as Matt coughed and spluttered.

A horn honked in the distance. They looked up as an old, blue pick-up truck pulled up. Chad recognized Andrew's tight, curly hair in the passenger window. He was with his dad, Fred. As soon as the truck came to a stop, Andrew jumped out.

"Hey guys, what's going on?"

Chad pointed at the stream where Matt was sloshing around trying to stand up. "It's the second bootful!"

Matt spluttered and puffed as he finally regained his footing.

Dean scanned the water. "Hey, where's my boot?"

Matt searched the water flowing around his legs. "I must have dropped it."

"Can't you see it?" Dean hopped on one foot toward the edge of the road for a better look.

Matt looked around again and then shook his head. "No. Current must have carried it off. Sorry, Dean. I'll replace it, but you can have one of mine 'til you get home, if you like."

He stood on one foot and tried to pull off his other boot. He hopped for a couple of steps before he fell back into the water.

Andrew slapped his forehead. "I can't believe that just happened."

Dean smiled despite himself. "Hey, quit fooling around, I have to get home. And wait 'til my mom hears about my boot."

Matt, who was completely drenched, grinned as he climbed back out of the water. He sat down on the grassy bank, pulled off his boot, and then turned it upside down. Water poured out of it.

“Here you go.” He tossed it to Dean.

Dean grimaced as he held up the sopping wet boot. He winced as he squeezed his foot into it. “It’s cold.”

“Not nearly as cold as Milligan Creek is going to be when we raft it this weekend,” Matt said as he hopped up the bank.

Andrew shot him a quizzical look. “What are you talking about?”

Matt put his arm around Andrew’s shoulders. “If you give us a ride home, I’ll tell you all about it.”

Andrew turned to his dad. Mr. Loewen looked Matt up and down and then jabbed his thumb at the truck box.

“That’s okay with me, but you’re riding in the back, Aquaboy.”

Matt jammed his sopping wet cap over his thick blonde hair. “You ain’t seen nothin’ yet.”

Dean rolled his eyes. “Here he goes.”

The other boys laughed as they helped Mr. Loewen load their bikes into the back of the truck.

2

A NEW PLAN

The next day after school, Matt, Chad, Dean, and Andrew raced to Milligan Creek on their bikes. They skidded to a halt on the old, rusted bridge next to the graveyard. Matt got there first, as usual. He jumped off his bike and ran to the edge of the bridge.

“Awesome. Look at all that water!”

The swollen creek had risen so much overnight that barely three feet remained between the water and the bridge.

Chad stood beside his brother. “Wow, if a big tree swept through here, it would wipe the bridge right out.”

Dean, who was about to step onto the bridge, thought better of it and remained on the road.

Andrew studied the water. “I’ve got bad news though. You’ll never get down that with a rubber dinghy.”

Matt stepped back from the railing and looked at Andrew. “What are you talking about? It’s perfect.”

Andrew pointed at a clump of alder bushes downstream. “See how the current flows through those trees over there? You’d go down in a second as soon as the dinghy hit them. It’d be full of holes.”

“So we portage around the bushes,” Matt said.

“Onto what? There’s no solid ground anywhere around there. Besides, you wouldn’t have a chance. The water’s moving so fast the dinghy would be impaled on those trees before you knew what hit you.”

“Andrew’s right, Matt,” Chad said.

Matt frowned. “Aw, all you guys ever do is look for problems. I think we should just throw the boat in the water tomorrow and see what happens. Even if we sink, we’ll be wearing life jackets. Besides, it’s Milligan Creek. How deep could it be?”

“Over your head in some places I’d say,” Andrew replied. “Plus, that water is freezing. You’d be lucky to last a few minutes.”

Andrew, who planned to be a lifeguard at the local pool when he got older, knew all about survival times in cold water from swimming lessons.

He looked up at the gray sky. “And if the weather turns cold, it’ll only make things worse.”

Dean pointed at the water. “Look, an iceberg!”

As the boys turned to look, a huge, triangle-shaped piece of ice surfaced about ten feet from the bridge. It sank again as it passed beneath them.

Dean shivered. “Brrrr. There’s no way you’re getting me into that dinghy tomorrow.”

“Don’t worry about it. I guess none of us are going,” Matt said, kicking a rock in disappointment. It skittered across the bridge and then disappeared into the rushing water.

“Good,” Dean said. “It was a dumb idea anyway.”

“I wouldn’t say that,” Andrew replied.

Matt’s ears perked up. “What do you mean? I thought you said we couldn’t do it.”

“Not in a dinghy we can’t.” A hint of a smile crossed Andrew’s face.

“Keep talking,” Matt said, turning to grin at Chad.

“No, forget it. We can’t—”

“Let him finish, Dean,” Chad said. “You don’t have to go if you don’t want to.”

“A dinghy won’t work, because it’s too soft,” Andrew said. “We need something that can take a bit more punishment.”

“Then we’ll build a raft!” Matt said.

“Well, we could. But I was thinking about something even more seaworthy: canoes. My Uncle George has two old aluminum canoes out behind his shed that he hasn’t used for ages. I bet he’d lend them to us if I asked him.”

“Excellent, let’s go call him right now.” Matt was already on the way to his bike. “We can phone from Dean’s house.”

“Oh no you can’t. My mom won’t let you,” Dean said.

“Sure she will.” Matt hopped onto his bike. “Besides, she’s not even home from work yet.”

“No, but she specifically said she didn’t want our phone used for any more of your crazy schemes.”

Matt smiled. “Relax, Dean. It’s not *my* plan; it’s Andrew’s. He’ll make sure everything works out. Isn’t that right, Andy?”

“We don’t have to use Dean’s phone, Matt,” Chad said. “We can wait ‘til we get home.”

Dean shook his head and sighed. “Don’t worry about it, Chad. You can use the phone. But only if Andrew makes the call.”

“Righto, Sir Worrywart,” Matt said.

“Hey, give him a break,” Chad replied, trying hard not to smile.

Dean hung his head. “I just don’t want to see you all get killed.”

Chad laid a hand on his worried friend’s shoulder. “It’ll be alright, Dean. Andy’ll make sure we do this safely. Right?”

“Of course,” Andrew replied.

Dean stared down at the rushing water and shivered. “I sure hope so.”

Andrew’s Uncle George said the boys were free to use his canoes, but only if their parents agreed to the venture. When Andrew phoned home to get permission from his parents, they told him they were invited to a barbecue at the Taylors’ that night, so they could talk about it when they were all together. Andrew passed the news on to the rest of the guys.

“Excellent!” Matt said. “Hey, Dean, why don’t you and your parents come too?”

“I don’t know . . .” Dean toed the floor and then looked up hopefully. “Will Joyce be there?”

Matt rolled his eyes. Dean had been in love with Matt and Chad’s older sister, Joyce, since third grade.

“Of course she’ll be there. But don’t let her distract you. This is serious business.”

“Yeah,” Chad said. He punched Dean playfully in the shoulder.

Dean was unfazed. He picked up the phone. “Right. I’ll just phone my mom at work and let her know.” He tried to look nonchalant, but he couldn’t restrain a huge grin from breaking out on his face.

Matt shook his head and laughed. “Make it quick, lover boy.”

The other boys chuckled.

That night after a delicious supper of ham steaks, potatoes baked in foil, creamed corn, and strawberry pie, the three families held a conference around the Taylors’ backyard fire pit. Feeling content after the big meal, they sat in lawn chairs clutching steaming mugs of hot chocolate that

warmed their hands against the cool evening air.

Joyce, who was not overly fond of Dean's attention, had tried to avoid him all evening. But somehow he had still managed to nab a lawn chair right next to hers. She tried to sit as far away from him as possible without actually getting out of her chair. Dean, who was oblivious to her disinterest, sat with a grin on his face as he basked in the nearness of her presence.

"Well, I guess we've put you boys off long enough," Mr. Taylor said as he got up to throw more wood onto the fire. The other adults chuckled. They knew the boys had been practically bursting to talk about their plans from the moment everyone got together. Even Andrew, who rarely displayed much emotion, could scarcely contain his excitement.

Matt rose to his feet. "It's about time. Now, for those of you who don't know already, the reason we're gathered here tonight is to—"

"Eat some more of your sister's delicious strawberry pie?" Dean smiled dreamily at Joyce.

She rolled her eyes and scooted her chair even farther away. "Keep talking, Matt," Joyce said. "Keep talking!"

Dean slid his chair a little closer to hers.

She scooted away again. "And hurry!"

Matt glared at Dean before continuing. "As I was saying, we—being Chad, Andrew, Dean, and myself—would like to propose an adventure of the most amazing, most spectacular kind."

"What is it this time, Matthew? A voyage to the bottom of the lake in your homemade submarine?" Mrs. Loewen asked.

"No, he wants to make a flight in his pedal-powered glider," Mrs. Muller said. "From the top of the barn roof, no less." The parents laughed. The mention of those inventions hearkened back to two of the boys' earlier exploits,

both of which turned out to be unqualified disasters. Thankfully, no one was hurt in either one.

“Yes, yes, all of your suggestions are quite amusing,” Matt said. “And I know we’ve experienced many failures in the past. But this time I’m thinking much simpler than that. In fact, the adventure we are proposing is none other than a whitewater canoe trip—down Milligan Creek!”

The group was silent. A knot popped in the fire and sent sparks flying. Finally, Mr. Taylor spoke. “That’s quite the idea, Matt. When would you want to leave?”

“Tomorrow morning.”

Mr. Taylor’s eyebrows shot up. “Tomorrow? You need time to prepare for a trip like that. Do you even know where you can get a canoe at such short notice?”

“Two canoes, actually,” Matt said, “from Andrew’s Uncle George.”

Mr. Taylor glanced at Mr. Loewen, who nodded.

“Besides, we have to go tomorrow or the next day at the latest. Otherwise the water will have gone down too far,” Andrew said. “The runoff only lasts a few days.”

“I understand, Andrew,” Mr. Taylor said, “but have any of you guys ever gone canoeing before?”

“I learned how to do it last summer at camp,” Andrew said. “I know all the strokes. We even went on an overnight trip to an island. I can teach these guys the basics in a jiffy. It’ll all be very safe, Mr. Taylor. I’ve got our route all planned out.”

Matt crossed his arms and smiled smugly. “See, Dad? We’ve got it all worked out.”

“Yes, but canoeing in moving water is a lot different than paddling across a lake,” Mr. Loewen pointed out.

“I’ve never canoed before,” Dean said. “But that’s okay, because I’m just going to stay on shore and watch.” He turned to Joyce. “Maybe you can watch with me.”

“No way,” she said, shaking her head violently. “I’d rather—”

“That’s okay, Joyce, I need you at home here tomorrow, anyway,” Mrs. Taylor said.

Joyce gave her mother a thankful smile.

“If Dean isn’t going in the canoe, who’s going to be the fourth person?” Mrs. Taylor asked. “We can’t have one of you boys in a canoe all by yourself.”

The boys were quiet as they considered her question. The other three boys had been so excited about the trip that it hadn’t even occurred to them that Dean might actually back out.

“How about if three of you go in one canoe?” Mrs. Loewen suggested.

Andrew shook his head. “Too tippy.”

Matt looked at Mr. Taylor. “Hey, Dad, why don’t you come? You always tell me how we should do more things together.”

“I’m sorry, Matt, but I’ve got to fly a client up to Yorkton tomorrow.” In addition to running his farm, Mr. Taylor owned a four-passenger plane that he took the boys up in from time to time when one of their shenanigans required it.

Matt turned to Mr. Muller. “How about you?”

“No can do, Matt. I’m booked solid all day tomorrow.” Mr. Muller was an electrician. He also lent his expertise to help the boys in their various escapades.

His eyes pleading in desperation, Matt turned to Mrs. Taylor. “Mom?”

She shook her head, as did Mrs. Muller and Mrs. Loewen.

“There’s no way I’m getting involved in one of your hare-brained schemes, Matt Taylor!” Mrs. Muller said. The other parents laughed.

"I'd love to do it, boys," Mr. Loewen said, "but someone has to drop you off and pick you up at the end, and I guess that's me."

Matt looked at Dean. So did Andrew and Chad. Dean shifted uneasily as their eyes burned into him.

"I told you I'm not going."

"But Dean, if you don't go, the entire trip will be off," Matt said.

"Would you feel better if you went in my canoe?" Andrew asked.

"No, I said forget it, I'm not going."

"I'll go then," Joyce said. "Is that okay, Mom?"

Dean gaped at her. "I thought you were busy."

"That's okay, I can do without her for tomorrow, I guess," Mrs. Taylor said, trying to suppress a smile.

Dean frowned. "Wait a minute. On second thought, maybe I do want to go."

"I don't know, Dean. It's going to be pretty scary out there," Chad said. "Tons of rapids and icebergs. You probably should let Joyce take your place." He winked at Matt and Andrew.

"No, no I think I should go." Dean turned to Joyce. "If you don't mind, that is. It's just that I would hate to see you get hurt."

Joyce tried to keep a straight face. "Why, thank you, Dean. You're so kind—and brave."

Dean beamed.

"Okay, it's settled then. We leave tomorrow morning at nine." Matt stood up to warm his hands over the fire and then stopped. "Oh, I mean if that's okay with you, Mr. Loewen."

Mr. Loewen nodded, his eyes on the fire. "I think I'll have had enough beauty sleep by then. What route are you planning to take, Andrew?"

Andrew stood up and cleared his throat. “Well, in the interest of safety, I think the best route is straight through town. That way we’re never far from help, and you’ll be able to keep your eye on us the entire way. We can put in at the highway bridge on the south side of town and get out by the graveyard bridge.”

Mr. Loewen nodded. “Sounds good to me.” He looked at Mr. Taylor and Mr. Muller. They nodded. “Okay then, well, we better all turn in early tonight.” He drained his hot chocolate and then stood up. The other adults followed suit.

“Say a special prayer for Dean tonight too” Matt said as he clapped Dean on the shoulder. “He looks like he needs it.”

Everyone laughed. Dean tried to smile, but there was no way he could erase the worried expression from his face.

Despite her annoyance with him, Joyce laid a comforting hand on his shoulder. “Don’t worry, Dean, you’ll be fine.”

At the sound of her voice—not to mention the touch of her hand—Dean’s face brightened. It was all Joyce could do not to roll her eyes.

After everyone said their goodbyes, Matt, Chad, and Joyce helped their parents bring the food and dishes back into the house. As Matt passed Joyce, he smiled.

“Thanks, Joyce. We owe you one.”

She grinned back. “I won’t forget it. And be careful tomorrow.”

“We will, right, Chad?” He turned to his brother, who had come up behind them.

“Of course, aren’t we always?” Chad broke out into a huge grin as he shoved a leftover piece of ham into his mouth.

“Don’t get me started,” Joyce replied.

They all laughed as they went inside.

3

BON VOYAGE!

The following morning, the Taylor household bustled with activity as everyone helped prepare for the trip. Mrs. Taylor was making a lunch for the boys who, despite their excitement, had slept in and were wolfing down their breakfast so they would be ready when Andrew and his dad came to pick them up. Mr. Taylor had already left on his flight.

“Thanks for making our lunches, Mom,” Chad said, as he wiped his mouth and then put his bowl and cup in the dishwasher.

Mrs. Taylor smiled. “You’re welcome. But remember, not many kids have such a wonderful mother to depend on.”

“I know. You’re the best, Mom,” Matt said. He gave her a kiss.

Just then the phone rang.

“I’ll get it.” Matt picked up the receiver. “Hello?” He listened and then smiled. “Oh, hello, Dean. So you’re not feeling too good, hey?”

He grinned at Chad and shook his head. Chad slapped himself in the forehead and chuckled. Mrs. Taylor smiled as she sliced the boys’ sandwiches.

“So, you don’t think you can do the trip, huh?”

Just then Joyce wandered into the kitchen in her pajamas and opened the fridge, still bleary-eyed with sleep. “Who’s on the phone?”

Matt winked at Chad. “Uh-huh, you had a tough night, I see. Well, I’ll tell you what. So did Joyce, and you just woke her up with your phone call.” He listened. “Yep, that’s right. No, she doesn’t look angry right now.”

Joyce rolled her eyes. “Dean.” She grabbed the jug of orange juice and shut the fridge door.

“But I think she might get angry when I tell her that she has to leave in five minutes to go canoeing with us.”

Joyce stopped short. “What? Let me talk to him.” She grabbed for the phone, but Matt waved her away.

“Oh, so you think you might be able to make it after all? Good. Yep, we’re leaving right away, as soon as Andy gets here. Okay, see you then.” Matt hung up.

“He’s coming?” Chad asked.

“He’s coming.” Matt turned to his sister. “Thanks to Joyce and her incredible powers of persuasion.”

“You can leave me out of your little escapades from now on, please.” Joyce said as she headed back to her bedroom with a glass of juice. “By the way, have fun on your little trip—and don’t do anything stupid.”

Just then, a vehicle drove onto the yard. Mrs. Taylor looked out the window. “Andrew and Mr. Loewen are here. Quick, grab your lunches.”

She followed Matt and Chad to the door and watched as they put on their jackets and boots. “Have you got everything?”

“Yeah. Dad put our stuff out last night. We just need to throw it in the truck,” Matt said.

“Okay, we’ll see you when you get back. Have fun, but most of all, be careful. And don’t be too hard on Dean.”

She kissed them both.

“Alright, Mom. We will be—and we won’t be,” Matt said.

“Bye, Mom!” Chad waved as he followed Matt out the door.

Outside, Mr. Loewen’s pick-up rumbled in the driveway, sending plumes of blue exhaust swirling into the chilly air. The rising sun glistened off the frosty undersides of the two aluminum canoes that were strapped in the truck box. They were scratched and dented, but to Matt and Chad, they couldn’t have looked more perfect.

“Yikes, it’s chilly out there,” Matt said as he bounded into the truck. He reached over and cranked up the heater. “Ah, that’s better.” He warmed his hands over the vent.

“Hey, turn that off, it’s boiling in here,” Andrew said as he turned the heater off.

“Okay boys, let’s not argue about it. We can keep it on low.” Mr. Loewen turned the heater back on. “Now, have you got all your gear?”

Matt pointed out the window. “Yeah, if you’ll drive us over to the shop we’ll throw it in.”

Andrew stared at him. “It’s only twenty-five feet away. Can’t you walk?”

“Are you kidding?” Matt rubbed his hands together over the vent.

Mr. Loewen chuckled. “Don’t worry, fearless adventurers, it’ll warm up soon enough.” He slid the truck into reverse.

At the shop, Matt and Chad leapt out of the truck and grabbed their life jackets off the workbench. Chad looked around. “That’s funny. I thought Dad said there was a bunch of stuff we were supposed to take.”

“Guess he changed his mind,” Matt said. “Come on.” He held the door open for Chad. Chad took one last look

around and then shrugged and went out.

Once they got to town, Mr. Loewen and the boys pulled up to Dean's house and honked. A moment later, Dean stumbled out the front door carrying a mountain of gear. In addition to a bulging backpack, his arms were full of extra clothes, a life jacket, his lunch box, and a paddle. A camera and a pair of binoculars were slung around his neck. Mrs. Muller stopped him on the front step and gave him a goodbye kiss. He tried to rub it off his cheek and ended up dropping his paddle. Mrs. Muller picked it up and handed it to him. She waved and then went back inside.

Dean started down the driveway, but he kept dropping things as he walked. When he stopped to pick them up, more things fell until nearly everything was on the ground, including his lunch box, which had popped open and sent his apple rolling down the driveway.

Mr. Loewen laughed. "One of you guys had better help him, or he'll never make it to the truck, never mind the creek."

Chad opened the door and jumped out. Matt was right behind him.

"Dean, you didn't have to bring everything you owned," Matt said. "We're only going to be gone for a couple of hours."

"Tell that to my mom," Dean replied. "She wanted me to take even more stuff, but I told her the boat would sink if I brought it all."

"It's not a boat, it's a canoe," Andrew said, as he came up behind Matt and Chad.

"Whatever." Dean picked up his gear.

Matt bent down to help him. Then he stood up in surprise, holding a copy of *Sports Illustrated*. "You brought a magazine?"

Dean shrugged. "In case I get bored."

Matt stared at him. "On a whitewater canoe trip? I doubt it. Leave it here." He tossed it aside.

"You can leave those binoculars at home too, if you want," Andrew said. "I've already got a pair."

"You won't need that paddle either," Matt added.

"What are you talking about? Of course he needs a paddle," Andrew said.

Matt looked at him. "Well, we didn't bring any."

"Why not?"

"I thought they came with the canoes."

"Oh, shoot," Andrew said. "I forgot to phone you. Turns out my uncle only had one paddle. Do you have any more, Dean?"

"Yeah, we've got another one. I'll go get it." He dropped his gear and went back inside.

"That's three. We still need one more. Do you guys have any at home?" Andrew asked.

"I think so," Matt said.

"Well, maybe my dad can go and pick it up while I run you all through a little canoeing refresher course," Andrew replied.

Matt frowned. "Refresher course?"

"Yes, to make sure everyone remembers their strokes. You're going to need that stuff out there today."

"That sounds like a good idea, Andrew," Chad said as he gathered up the rest of Dean's gear.

"I guess so," Matt replied. "But I think you're taking this whole trip way too seriously."

"We'll see about that," Andrew said.

Just then, Dean came out the front door with the second canoe paddle. While inside, his mom had burdened him with another pile of gear, which he was struggling to balance in his arms as he kicked the door shut. He just

managed to get the door closed when he slipped on the first step, which was icy from the previous night's frost, and tumbled to the ground.

Matt tried not to laugh. "Dean, are you okay?"

Chad, who was also trying not to laugh, ran up and helped Dean to his feet.

"I knew this trip was a stupid idea," Dean grumbled as he stomped off toward the truck.

Matt and Andrew exchanged amused glances. Chad scowled at them as he hefted an armload of gear. "Come on, you guys, quit fooling around and help out. You should be thankful Dean is even coming."

Matt blushed. "You're right, Chad. I'm sorry." He picked up Dean's life jacket and then ran off to help him and Chad load the truck.

A few minutes later, Mr. Loewen dropped the boys and the canoes beside the bridge south of town and then headed back to the Taylors' farm for the extra paddle.

After they checked out the creek, which was running even higher than the day before, Andrew led the boys through a brief review of the basic canoe strokes.

"Okay, if you'll all pay attention we can get through this quickly," Andrew said, using an official tone of voice. "Chad, can you come up here and demonstrate the basic forward stroke?"

Chad stepped up beside Andrew and started paddling an imaginary canoe.

"Excellent, see how he brings the paddle straight back and then gently curves it up out of the water? Do it exactly like that. Dean, let's see yours."

Dean knit his brow in concentration and pretended to paddle.

"That's good, Dean, but you need to grip your paddle on top. Here, like this." Andrew demonstrated by putting his

palm on the top of the paddle. Dean followed his example. “Good, good, just like that.”

Andrew turned to Matt. “Now, how about—”

He stopped short. Matt wasn’t there. Andrew looked around until he spotted him stepping gingerly across the ice-encrusted snowbank that ran along the shoreline.

“Matt, get over here,” Chad said.

Matt held a finger to his lips. “Shhh . . . You might cause the snowbank to crack.” He took another step.

Andrew stepped toward him. “Careful, Matt. Sometimes the water flows under the snow and makes an overhang that weakens the—”

“Aaaaagh!” Matt yelled as half of the snowbank sank into the water. He tried to scramble back onto solid ground, but his movement only made things worse. In less than a second, he was chest deep in the water. He gasped at the sudden rush of cold. “Help!” he croaked.

Andrew leaped into action immediately. “Chad, grab my paddle!”

He grabbed onto a tree branch and held out his paddle for Chad. Chad grabbed it and, in turn, held out his paddle for Matt, who had slipped a few feet downstream and was holding onto a bush to prevent himself from being pulled away by the current. Matt got hold of Chad’s paddle and pulled himself to shore, nearly pulling Chad into the creek in the process. Chad and Andrew grabbed his jacket and hauled him up onto the grassy bank.

“Oh man, that water’s c-c-cold,” Matt said. He rubbed his hands together vigorously, his teeth chattering.

Just then the boys heard the roar of Mr. Loewen’s truck returning.

“Right on time,” Andrew said. “Get those clothes off. I have some extra ones in the truck. You can get in there and warm up too.”

As Andrew led Matt off to the vehicle, Chad spotted Dean. He was rooted in place, his paddle still frozen in the finishing position of the stroke Andrew had been showing him just before Matt fell into the water.

Chad laid a comforting hand on Dean's shoulder. "He'll be alright, Dean."

Dean bit his lip and watched the creek swirl and boil with the current.

"Dean," Chad said. "Are you okay?"

Dean turned away from the water and looked at Chad. "Yeah, I'm okay. I'm just really afraid of the water, especially cold water."

"Well, why don't you canoe with me? I'll make sure that the only thing that gets wet is your paddle. Sound like a plan?"

Dean nodded. "Thanks, Chad."

They both looked back as the truck door opened, and Matt jumped out wearing Andrew's extra clothes.

"Well, I guess that won't be the last time someone gets wet today, hey Dean?" He clapped him on the shoulder. Dean's face went rigid.

"Matt." Chad motioned for his brother to be quiet.

Matt nodded his understanding. "Sorry." He rubbed his hands together. "Well, I guess it's time we got these canoes in the water."

All four boys went back to the truck to help Mr. Loewen unload them.

"Looks like you cleared away a nice launching spot for us, Matt." Mr. Loewen nodded at the spot where the snow-bank had fallen away.

"Anything to help," Matt said.

Once the boys had their life jackets on and everything else packed into the canoes, they carried them down to the water.

“Okay, who’s going with who?” Mr. Loewen asked.

“Dean is with me,” Chad said.

“Excellent,” Matt replied. “That means I’m with Andrew. We’ll take the lead.”

“Okay. I’ll watch you for a bit to make sure you’re alright,” Mr. Loewen said. “But then I’m going downtown to grab a few things before I meet you at the other end.” Mr. Loewen looked at his watch. “That should be at around eleven thirty. If you get there before I do, you can just beach the canoes and walk down to Dean’s place and wait for me. Remember: Don’t go any farther than the graveyard bridge. If you do, you’ll probably wind up stranded in the middle of somebody’s field and have to walk home, carrying the canoes with you. Got it?”

“Got it,” the boys replied in unison.

“Good. Now why don’t you get in and I’ll push you off. Matt and Andrew, you go first.”

“Whoo-hoo!” Matt leapt into the front of his canoe. Andrew climbed in after him, and then Mr. Loewen pushed them into the creek. They paddled out of the current and waited for Chad and Dean to get in.

Just then, they heard a honk. They looked up and saw the Taylors’ truck pull up beside Mr. Loewen’s. Mr. and Mrs. Taylor and Joyce got out.

“Hey look, it’s Mom and Dad!” Matt said. “And Joyce,” he added, in Dean’s general direction.

“Looks like we made it for the big send off,” Mr. Taylor said. “Hi, Fred.”

The two men shook hands as Mrs. Taylor snapped a picture of the boys.

“Yes, you made it. But you missed Matt’s big splash,” Mr. Loewen replied.

“Someone got wet already? That’s not a good sign,” Mr. Taylor said.

Dean's eyes went wide.

"Okay, boys, hang on." Mr. Loewen pushed the canoe into the water. Dean, who was sitting in the front, gripped the sides of the canoe until his knuckles were white.

"Bon voyage!" Mrs. Taylor smiled and waved to the boys. "We'll see you at the first bridge!"

"See you, Mom!" Chad waved his paddle and then faced forward. "Let's head over to Matt and Andrew," he said to Dean. When there was no response, he prodded Dean in the back with his paddle. "Dean, you can let go of the sides now."

Dean looked down at his hands, which still gripped the sides of the canoe. "Oh, right. Okay." He picked up his paddle.

"And we're off!" Matt said as Chad and Dean came up alongside them. He raised his paddle into the air. "To the graveyard—or bust!"

"Graveyard?" Dean asked.

The other boys couldn't help but laugh as Dean's face went white.