

1 The Miner Forty-Niner

Steve felt his heart quicken in excitement as he stared at the cell phone lying at the center of the coffee table in his living room. “Are you serious?”

Jack Evan’s laughter came through the speakerphone. “I am. The movie set I’m working on is near the old mining town of Shakesville, where, rumor has it, there’s a secret mound of buried gold left behind by a forty-niner back in the day.” Jack had worked on the movie set of the Decoders second mystery and was one of the only adults who knew about the kids’ secret detective agency.

“Hold up.” Matt held up his hand, even though Jack couldn’t see him. “Some football dude hid a buried treasure? Totally cool. Especially since San Francisco is, like, the best team ever.”

Steve rolled his eyes, slightly annoyed with his friend. “Seriously, Matt, you need to pay more attention at school. Forty-niner is the nickname they gave to men who moved to northern California to hunt for gold during the gold rush of eighteen forty-nine. That’s what Jack’s referring to, not some sports team.”

“Oh,” Matt said, then shrugged. He reached for a piece of chocolate in the candy dish next to the phone on the coffee table. “Whatever. It’s still a good name for a football team.”

Jenny threw a pillow at him. “Anyway, Jack,” she said, “tell us more about the treasure.”

“The museum in Shakesville has the whole story. The way I understand it, a man named Josiah Carney moved there in the heat of the gold rush, hit a mother lode, then got sick and died, leaving behind a note that supposedly told people where to find the hidden gold. Thousands of treasure-seekers tried, but no one ever found anything. Most people decided the note was a hoax, something he did as a joke, and gave up on the search.”

Steve's enthusiasm grew. "Where's the note now?"

"In the museum. As soon as I heard the story, I knew if anyone could find that gold, it'd be the three of you. So, if you're interested—"

"We're definitely interested," Steve interrupted.

Jack laughed. "I figured as much. There's a couple of trailers on the lot that you guys can bunk in, but there is one small catch...I need to use you guys as extras occasionally. I couldn't exactly tell my director that I'm bringing you all out here to hunt for treasure, so I told him you three had worked with me before, and that you were very reliable kids. It also helps that he's met Jenny's dad."

"OMG. You mean we get to hunt for treasure and be in a movie?" Jenny clapped her hands. "This is, like, a dream come true."

"I'll email you the paperwork about the movie," Jack said, "so you can get permission from your parents."

At four o'clock that afternoon, the three kids stood on a platform in Beachdale waiting for the train to take them to Sacramento. Steve pushed a bead of sweat from his forehead up into his slight afro, wondering if he brought enough sunscreen for his dark skin. "Jack said he'll be at the station waiting for us when we get there."

Jenny tied her long blonde hair into a pony tail. "OMG, I'm so excited. A treasure hunt and a movie set!"

Matt swallowed the last bite of his granola bar, then wadded the wrapper into a ball and tossed it into the nearby trash can. "And you know what the best part is? No ghosts. No psycho-killers with guns. This might be the first treasure we've gone after where no one's actually gonna

try to kill us or scare us off.”

The train arrived, and the trio clambered on board, discussing the various ways they would spend the treasure. An hour and a half later, they arrived at the station in Sacramento and found Jack waiting for them, as promised.

“Hope you guys aren’t in too much of a hurry, the movie set is still over an hour’s drive.”

“Will there be food when we get there?” Matt asked.

Jack chuckled. “I forgot about that appetite of yours. Good to see some things never change.” He glanced at his watch. “Yeah, we’ll probably catch the tail end of the dinner buffet if we hurry.”

Matt hurled his suitcase inside the open trunk of the car, then tossed Jenny’s and Steve’s bags inside, and slammed the trunk shut. “Let’s go!” He flung the back door open and jumped inside. Laughing, Steve and Jenny climbed in after him.

“Tell us about the movie,” Jenny said as the car merged onto the freeway.

“Well,” Jack began, “it’s an action thriller about two guys on the run from the police. The scenes we’re filming now are when the main characters end up in a small town, hiding in a barn while their car is being fixed by the local mechanic. We’re only in Shakesville for another few days, then we pack up and move to Sacramento.”

Steve nodded slowly. “Which means we’ve only got a few days to find that treasure.”

Leaning back, Jenny flipped her hair to the side. “Which will be no problem for the Decoders.”

“Okay if we eat first?” Matt rubbed his belly. “No way am I gonna be useful on an empty stomach.”

Steve noticed Jenny’s blue eyes twinkle and a smile spread across her face.

“Technically,” she said, “you aren’t really useful with a full stomach either.”

Matt threw her an evil look. “At least I—”

“Tell us more about the treasure,” Steve interrupted before his two friends began to argue pointlessly like they always did. “Is the gold supposed to be in coins or bars or what?”

Jack shrugged. “To tell you the truth, I don’t know the specifics about it. The museum can give you more details. They’ll be open tomorrow at nine.”

For the remainder of the ride, they discussed the movie and the different scenes that would require the kids to stand in as extras.

When they arrived at the set, Jack escorted them to their trailers. “I’m afraid these aren’t quite as nice as the ones you stayed in last time, but at least they’re next to each other.”

The group walked into the boys’ trailer first, which Steve noticed had two twin beds separated by a small, wooden nightstand. Matt and Steve put their suitcases down and then followed Jenny next door into her trailer, which had only one bed and a small loveseat with a nightstand between the two which held a candy dish full of chocolate.

“These are perfect,” Jenny said as she rolled her suitcase next to her bed. “I mean, it’s not like we’re gonna be in here much, anyway.”

Matt rubbed his hands together. “You said something about a dinner buffet?”

Jack grinned. “I guess I better show you guys the mess tent before Matt passes out.”

As they walked toward dinner, Steve took a quick survey of the area. Several trailers dotted the outskirts of the set. Toward the middle was a large fake front of a barn, which Steve knew in the movie industry to be called a façade, and farther away stood more fake fronts made to look like the main center of a town.

Jack pointed to the facades. “We’re only shooting the outside scenes here. All the inside

shots were done back in the studio in Burbank, that's why we don't need the full buildings."

"And the actors?" Jenny looked around. "Are they staying here, too?"

Jack shook his head. "The main actors don't get here until the day after tomorrow. Till then, we're just shooting the background shots and the stunts."

Jenny's shoulders slumped a little and Steve knew she was disappointed. She followed the movie scene very carefully and he imagined meeting the actors in person would've made her whole year.

As they approached the food tents, the smell of bar-b-que overpowered everything. Matt sniffed the air and his eyes closed. "Aw, dudes, I am in heaven."

Jack motioned for them to grab plates. "Help yourselves. I've got some things to work on, but you all feel free to roam around the set. Just don't break anything." He paused. "But then again, if you did break something, you've got Miss Fix-Anything here to help you out."

Jenny beamed. Her dad owned a repair shop, and after helping him out many times, she had become great at fixing things herself.

Matt grabbed a plate. "The only thing I plan on breaking is the world record for rib-eating."

After saying goodbye to Jack, the three friends loaded their plates with food and found an empty table to sit at. Jenny opened her cornbread muffin and smeared honey on it. "What should we do when we're done eating?"

Steve wiped bar-b-que sauce off the side of his mouth. "Go exploring. What else?"

"Mind if we sit with you guys?" a man said.

Steve looked up and saw two men in their early thirties motioning toward the empty seats next to the kids.

Matt nodded. "It's all good."

"Thanks." The taller of the two men sat down next to Matt. His brown hair was cropped military-style and his clothes had a few tears in them. "I'm Grant Anderson and this is Brian Metcalf. We're stunt doubles on the set."

Brian, whose blond hair hung down to his shoulders, sat beside Steve and gave them a short wave. "How's it going?"

"Good," Matt said before shoveling a giant spoonful of baked beans into his mouth.

Steve swallowed a quick sip of soda. "I'm Steve Kemp, and these are my friends, Matt Peterson and Jenny Reed."

"Nice to meet you guys," Grant said. "I haven't seen you around before. Did you just get here?"

Jenny nodded. "Yeah, literally, like ten minutes ago. We're extras in a couple of the scenes coming up."

After unrolling the utensils from the napkin, Grant began to cut into his chicken. "That's cool. They have a nice museum in town if you get bored. There's some interesting stuff from the gold mining days to look at."

"Yeah," Brian said. "There's even a treasure map."

"A treasure map?" Steve threw Matt and Jenny a warning look. "That sounds interesting. What kind of treasure map?"

Grant smiled. "An old miner supposedly hid a treasure and left a note as a challenge for someone to find it. If you're smart enough to figure out where it is, you'll be rich."

"Yeah," Brian said and chuckled. "Just watch out for the ghost."

Matt choked on a potato chip and began coughing. He rubbed his chest, then reached for

his can of cola.

“Are you okay?” Jenny asked, patting his back.

Matt took a few sips and nodded, then pushed her hand away. “Yeah, I’m okay. Did you just say ghost?”

Brian chuckled again. “According to the museum, the ghost of the miner is still out there, protecting his treasure from anyone who might want to steal it.”

“But, if he left a note for people to find it,” Steve said and frowned, “why would he be trying to keep people from taking it? That seems illogical.”

Grant shrugged. “Exactly. It’s just a crazy story. But the note is still pretty cool to look at, even if the old man was insane.”

A blonde woman in her twenties sat down at the table next to Grant. “Hey, big guy. Missed you at lunch.”

“Sorry, Peg. Had to skype with my son.” He pointed to the kids. “These three just joined us on set. Kids, this is Peggy Ayers.”

“Hi, guys. Welcome to the set.”

“Thanks,” Jenny said. “Are you a stunt double, too?”

She laughed. “No way. Have you seen the crazy things these knuckleheads do? I’m a camera gal. That’s my thing.”

“We were just telling the kids about the hidden treasure,” Grant said.

“And the ghost,” Brian added.

Peggy shook her head. “I hope you kids aren’t thinking about going after the treasure. You know what happened to the last guys who tried it, don’t you?”

Matt gulped. “Wh...what happened to them?”

She looked around as though making sure no one was listening. “They set out one morning to look for the gold, then,” she paused, leaned her head in, and lowered her voice, “they gave up and came back for lunch.”

She burst into laughter. “Sorry, kids, I couldn’t resist. But seriously, don’t go out into the desert on a wild goose chase. There are rattlesnakes and wolves out there. It could be dangerous.”

“For Pete’s sake,” Grant said. “Stop mothering them, Peg. They’ll be fine.”

A tall man with salt-and-pepper hair and matching neatly trimmed beard walked up to the table. “Sorry to interrupt dinner, but Stan needs to see you three in his office, pronto.”

Grant sighed and put down his fork. “Never a moment’s rest.”

Peggy stood. “That’s the breaks when you’re the best.”

Once the adults left, Jenny turned to her friends. “Did you hear that? A ghost is protecting the treasure. OMG, this is getting better and better!”

Matt gripped his over-stuffed pulled-pork sandwich. “Dudes, can we please not talk about ghosts while I’m eating?”

Jenny reached for her soda. “Well, I guess that means we can never talk about ghosts again.”

Matt scowled, his mouth full of food. “Hmmp, hmmp, hmmp.” His fake laugh came out muffled.

Grinning, Jenny dipped a French fry in ketchup.

As Steve pushed baked beans around his plate with a fork, he contemplated the rumor of a ghost protecting the gold. The thought intrigued him. “I wonder what the real story is behind the miner’s treasure.”

“Aww, dang it!” Matt wiped spilled bar-b-que sauce on his shirt with his napkin and ended up smearing it around even worse. Finally, he shrugged and threw the napkin down. “Jack said the museum opens at nine. We’ll find out then.” He took another bite of his sandwich and more pulled pork plopped onto his shirt.

Jenny grabbed a clean napkin, opened it, and tucked it into the top of Matt’s shirt like a bib. “You seriously should do this like every time you eat.”

Steve put his fork down and set his jaw. “I don’t want to wait until morning.”

Matt groaned. “Dude, please tell me we’re not gonna break into the museum tonight. We just got here and you’re already planning a breaking-and-entering job. And I haven’t even eaten dessert yet.”

Steve pulled out his cell. “Relax, Matt. I don’t intend to break into anything. I just meant that we can ask Alysha to look it up for us and see what she finds out tonight. That way, when we get to the museum tomorrow, we’ll already have some background knowledge about the treasure.”

Jenny half-smiled as she looked at Steve. “So, we’re using the treasure as an excuse to call Alysha this time? That’s cool. I’m sure she won’t mind.”

Steve felt his face get hot. Alysha Stonestreet was a whiz on the internet and had helped the Decoders out on all their missions. She also had a huge crush on Steve, something Jenny loved teasing him about.

“Hey, Alysha,” Steve said once the girl answered. “It’s Steve. You’re on speakerphone.”

“Hi, Alysha!” Jenny added.

“Mmfh, mmfh.” Matt pointed at his mouth.

“That was Matt,” Jenny said, “with his mouth full of food, as usual.”

Alysha laughed. “Hey, guys. What’s up?”

“Think you could do the Decoders a favor?” Steve asked.

“Sure. What do you need?”

Steve and Jenny, with occasional interjections from Matt, explained everything they had heard so far about the treasure, including the possibility of a ghost.

“Yeah, no problem,” Alysha said. “But I can’t get to it until tomorrow. We’ve got some family friends coming over tonight so I’m kinda busy.”

“No worries,” Steve said. “Just whenever you get a chance.”

Once the trio finished eating and threw their trash away, they began their exploration of the movie set, starting with the façade of the town. Each “building” had an elaborate front, complete with benches, flower pots, and even a fake sidewalk.

Matt walked behind one of the fronts made to look like a general store. “Dudes, it’s so awesome how this totally looks like a real town and then you walk behind and they’re just wooden frames held up by beams.”

“Right?” Jenny said. “I think the movie industry is like the most amazing thing on the planet. Nothing is ever what it seems.”

As the trio stood examining the backs of the fake buildings, voices approached from the front. Steve put his finger to his lips motioning for the other two to be quiet. He was pretty sure it was okay for them to be back there, but he didn’t want to take any chances, not on their first day.

“I don’t know, Sam,” a man said. “With what’s been happening, maybe we should call the cops.”

Steve perked up. What could be going on that they needed to call the police?

“No,” Sam replied. “No cops. We definitely don’t need the fuzz snooping around out

here. We've come too far to risk getting caught. Hold on. Here they come. We'll talk more about this later."

Steve wanted desperately to see who the two men were. He snuck as quietly as he could to the end of the fake building and peeked. Too late. A crowd of people stood around talking, making it impossible to know which two of the men he had heard speaking.

Afraid he would be noticed and then suspected of eavesdropping, Steve motioned for his friends to follow him. They walked all the way down the backsides of the fake town until they reached the end, then walked away from the crowd. Nobody seemed to notice them.

As they made their way to their trailers, Matt said, "That was weird, right?"

Jenny nodded. "Totally. Did you hear what the guy named Sam said? OMG. He doesn't want to call the cops because he's afraid they'll get caught, so whatever they're doing, it's gotta be illegal."

Steve chewed on his lip. "But, the first guy brought up calling the police because of what's been happening, which obviously has nothing to do with their criminal undertakings."

"Criminal undertakings?" Matt repeated and grinned. "Dude, you've been watching way too many crime shows."

Steve rolled his eyes. Considered a nerd by most, Steve occasionally used big words and his friends loved to tease him for it. "Anyway, whatever the case, there's something going on here, something bad, and I intend to find out what."

