

Chapter 7

JW watched as his father's hand sketched the underground scene.

"This is what young Mickey is doing these days," his father said as he pushed the paper across the table. "The large door opens to allow the horse and cart through, but you have to be quick to shut the door, 'cause that's what keeps the air in the mine. It's an important job. You can't slack off when you're working the trap doors. A trapper boy can't sleep or daydream on the job. If the door's left open, men can suffocate. Everyone could die."

Looking at the large door in the picture, JW drew a breath. Poor Mickey. The horse and cart followed railway tracks, and he found himself wondering where they led and what lay beyond the trap door. He wanted to ask but knew the stories were done for the day when his father rose from the table.

"Can I keep the picture?" JW asked. "I'd like to put it up on my wall." The blackened face of the trapper boy actually looked like his friend Mickey.

JW hadn't known his father could draw so well. Pulling the picture closer, he saw the sad, tired look of his friend. The phrase "old before his time" came to mind, and now he understood its meaning.

"Sure, you can keep it. I'll draw you a new one tomorrow," his father said. Andrew Donaldson headed toward his bedroom. "Maybe we'll go fishing Sunday, JW," he called from the bedroom.

"That would be great, Da. Goodnight," JW said. Even though it was morning, it was nighttime for his father. The picture of Mickey scared him. He could imagine several rats in the corner, waiting to get through the trap door. He shuddered at the thought of rats coming so close in the dark mine. He steered clear of the ones in the barn, and they ran whenever someone came near.

He had never really thought about the harshness that the boys and men in the mines had to endure until now. Long hours, little pay and a boss who rolled back your wages every time he suffered a loss. His parents hadn't told him much, but his room was above the kitchen, and the vent in the ceiling came directly into his room. Their voices were as clear as a foghorn on a foggy night. Often, they sounded as if they were right next to him. He tried not to listen, but sometimes curiosity got the best of him.

JW knew about the mine owners and the man, Roy Wolvin, who'd become known as Roy the Wolf because of his total disregard for the men and their families. His father had told him that as the president of BESCO – British Empire Steel Corporation – Wolvin controlled the lives and livelihood of both the steelworkers and the coal miners. But JW had dismissed this as another grown-up problem. He now understood that without enough money paid to the men, times were going to get tougher. Talks of strikes and the increase in the food and supply prices meant people were going to go hungry, especially if the strikes happened. If Roy the Wolf had his way, the rollbacks would have the same effect.



JW went to his room and neatly tacked the picture to his wall. Sitting on his bed, he stared at the picture for a long time. It was only noon, but he lay down, continuing to stare at the picture. A light rain was falling and he listened to the rhythmic sound it made against his window and felt himself drift off to sleep.

His dreams were vivid but not of pirates and pyramids. The rats had huge teeth and they carried off lunch boxes and hissed at him as he shooed them away. The trap door was heavy and he had to pull it open every five minutes. Men with blank faces passed by, never speaking with him, just shouting orders to the horses and to him.

JW startled awake. He sat up in his bed, surprised that he had fallen asleep at that hour of the day. Trembling at the memory of the dream, he looked at the picture on his wall.

The rain had stopped, so he decided it was a good time to weed the potato patch. The sooner it was done, the sooner he could get back to work on the old fort. There were only a couple of months of summer, and then he would be off to high school. He wanted to enjoy as much fishing and swimming as he could get. You only get to be a kid once, he concluded, and he knew that Mickey hadn't gotten the chance. He wished that his friend could be there with him but knew Mickey had to get his rest to carry out the mind-numbing job of sitting in the dark waiting for horses and rats.

Pulling on his old clothes, JW descended the stairs quietly, not wanting to wake his father. The memory of the picture haunted him as he thought of Mickey. Fear crept into his thoughts as he remembered the importance his father had put on the details of the trap door. He didn't want to think about the mines anymore and pushed the thought aside as he went outside. He finished the weeding in no time and sat with his back against the barn. He saw Beth making her way along the road toward him. He secretly hoped that one day he could pilot a ship with her aboard. Brushing the dirt from his knees, he stood up and pushed the hair off his face, leaving a streak of dirt across his forehead. He stood still while Beth rubbed the dirt off. He wondered when it would be the right time to kiss her again.

"Want some stew and biscuits?" JW asked. "Ma just made a fresh batch, and I'm going to have some."

“Sure, if there’s enough,” Beth said.

“There is, but even if not I’d share mine with you.” He blushed when he realized what he’d said.

“Aren’t you the gentleman,” Beth said. John Wallace Donaldson blushed a deeper crimson.

He held the door for Beth as she entered the kitchen, then hurried to the wash basin and washed his hands.

“Hello, Mrs. Donaldson,” Beth said. “John Wallace told me you’ve been busy baking, and he’s offered me some biscuits and stew. He even said he would share his with me if there wasn’t enough.”

“Oh, he did, did he? He must be going sweet on you, dear,” Mrs. Donaldson said, and this time it was Beth’s turn to blush a little.

JW heard his father stir in his room and lowered his voice. While Beth and his mother set the kitchen table, he went upstairs to get his swimming trunks to take along, just in case the water was warm enough. He’d noticed that Beth had brought her swimsuit.

Stopping halfway down the stairs, JW looked to where his mother and Beth stood. He hadn’t realized that Beth was as tall as his mother. It struck him that he and Beth would be in high school in a couple of months and were no longer children.

“Let’s get going. Time’s a’wasting,” JW said after they’d had some stew. “Bye, Ma.”

“Bye, Mrs. Donaldson. Thanks for lunch,” Beth added.

“Yeah, thanks, Ma.”