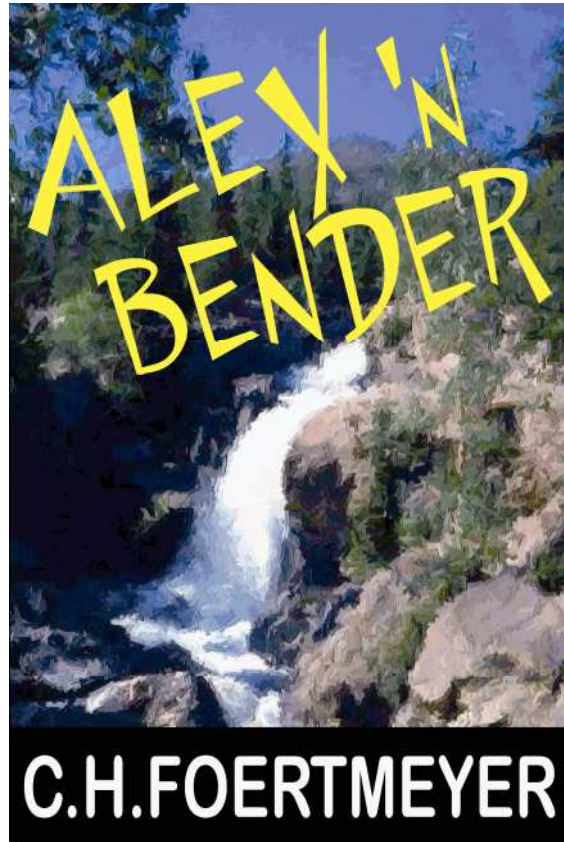


Alex 'n Bender



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Alex 'n Bender

C.H. Foertmeyer

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*To my father—for his great interest in my writing
and a lifetime of love and devotion.*

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Foreword

The language of the Atiri is extremely complex in its simplicity. What do I mean by that? Well, the structure is simple, but the pronunciation of their words is extremely difficult and there is no spelling. Their language is not a written language and varies slightly from clan to clan. In an attempt to make it possible for the reader to read their dialogue throughout this book, yet keep as a constant reminder the fact that they do not speak English, I have written their dialogue in English, but spelled the words backwards. Strangely enough, when read aloud, it sounds very similar to their actual speech.

The derivation of their language is not known. It is not derived from Latin, or any language currently in use anywhere in the world today. Perhaps it is pre-historic. Perhaps it is derived from the Neanderthal, although scientists aren't sure the Neanderthal actually had a language. Perhaps, then, it would be safer to assume that it came from the Cro-Magnon if it is indeed derived from anywhere external to the Atiri. There is also the definite possibility that they created their own language without outside influence.

Suffice it to say that their language would make absolutely no sense to the reader if I attempted to use it in this book. Therefore, simply read the words in their dialogue, then read the words backwards and you will get the feel of their communication, yet still be able to follow their thoughts.

C.H. Foertmeyer

CHAPTER ONE

"You go first, Bender," Alex said, backing away from the edge of the cliff.

"What's a matter-chicken?" Bender goaded.

"No! I ain't chicken!"

"Then go ahead, let's see you jump."

Alex took another step back, looked at Bender, and then ran for the edge. "Ayeeeeeeee!" echoed through the narrow river gorge as Alex plummeted toward the water below. Bender stared over the edge as his friend shot down toward the pool in the narrow stream. *Damn*, he thought. *He actually did it*. Bender watched, amazed, as Alex splashed into the pool.

This was a new spot the boys had found while following the river down from Bender's house. School had just let out for the summer and the unseasonably warm weather had prompted the boys to go for their first swim of the season on this warm Saturday afternoon. When they had arrived at their usual hole, however, Dirk and Carter were already there. A new swimming hole for the coming summer was now in order as Dirk and Carter had taken over their usual spot and had made it quite clear that Alex and Bender were no longer welcome there.

There were times when the two sets of friends seemed to get along, and others when they were on the outs. Right now, Dirk had decided that they were no longer friends, again, and had sent Alex and Bender away. At nearly twice the size of either Alex or Bender, Dirk had merely to give Bender a good shove, a foul glare, and utter the threat that he'd break Bender's arm, and Alex and Bender were off in search of a new place to swim.

As it turned out, Dirk may have done them a favor this time. They had ventured further downstream than they had ever gone before and this new spot seemed even cooler than their old one. The cliff was a good ten feet higher here and the pool at its base was wider and deeper than upstream. The first thing that Alex and Bender had decided about this new spot was not to let on to Dirk or Carter about its existence.

Bender watched as the water smoothed out from Alex's splash into their new pool. He didn't want to jump himself until Alex came to the surface and he could see where he was. He waited until all signs of Alex's splash had settled and the pool was once again calm, but Alex did not surface. Bender took a step back and then ran forward, silently making the leap into the river below. He surfaced and

scanned the pool for any sign of Alex, and then he dove under the surface in search of his friend.

Where the hell is he? Bender wondered, panic beginning to set in. *Alex, where the hell are you?* Bender swam around, frantically searching for Alex beneath the pool's surface. He went deeper, until he could hold his breath no longer, and then shot to the surface for air. Again, he dove, eyes wide as saucers, heart pounding, and his mind racing in directions it was totally unfamiliar with. When he could stand it no longer, he surfaced, looking up at the cliff above. He tried to visualize the jump Alex had made to determine where he had hit the water, and then he dove again. As Bender neared the bottom of the pool he spotted Alex, vertical in the water, arms floating motionless around his head. One leg was hiked up in a bent position, as if trying to climb to the surface, but the other leg was firmly anchored to the bottom, Alex's foot lodged tightly among the rocks that formed the bed of the river.

As Bender dove deeper to Alex's foot he noticed the wide-eyed terror on his best friend's face, his mouth agape, eyes fixed and motionless, empty. Bender surfaced and filling his lungs with fresh air dove again and tried to blow his air into Alex's mouth and lungs. He grabbed onto Alex's ankle and tried to dislodge his foot from the grip of the riverbed, but his efforts were in vain. *More air-* he thought, and surfaced once again. Bender made one last dive, and looking into Alex's face he realized there was nothing more he could do for his friend other than go for help in retrieving his body from the depths of the Latoon River.

Bender swam to shore and collapsed in a heap on the rocky beach. He began to weep and no matter how tightly he closed his eyes he could not avoid seeing the look on Alex's face, that last, fixed stare.

Warmth was the first sensation he felt on his face; the last conscious thought he could remember was of *breathing* in the cold river water, and slowly, painfully slowly blacking out as the last vestiges of oxygen were used up in his brain. He remembered Bender's panicked look as the world had gone blank beneath the surface of the river.

Alex opened his eyes to the source of the warmth he felt and saw a small fire several feet away. *Hard*, he thought, as he noticed he was lying on a smooth floor of

rock, but his hand was cold. *Strange*. Alex turned his head in the direction of his hand, which was dangling over the edge of the rock floor in a pool of cold water. He withdrew his hand and pulled himself, still lying on his belly, toward the fire. His ankle was on fire with pain, but he was able to move it in all directions, and looking down at it he noticed that it was wrapped in some sort of moss-like material.

Alex was fully aware of what had happened to him in the river and that was precisely what was confusing him now. *Where the heck am I?* he wondered, *and how did I get here? Who built the fire and who wrapped my ankle?* He could see from the glow of the fire that he was in some sort of small room, much like a cave, but devoid of the stalagmites or stalactites that he would have expected to see in a cavern. The fire did not illuminate much of the room and he could not see how far it stretched in length, only that the ceiling was low, perhaps seven feet high at its greatest height and no wider than a dozen feet.

I drowned! I know I did. I remember, raced through his head. Alex collected himself by the fire, taking its warmth into his chilly body. There were a thousand questions running through his mind and no answers were coming forth. He remembered Bender trying to pull his foot free and also staring into his face with the most terrified of looks. He remembered that he had not been able to respond, but he remembered it all, and then everything had gone blank.

Alex sat by the fire and decided that he needed to find the way out of this cavern. Whoever had brought him here and built the fire was nowhere to be seen and he had no way of knowing how long it might be before they would return. He reached over and removed a small log from the fire, and using the light from the small torch, proceeded into the darkness of the cave. There was only one way to go, as he seemed to be at the end of some sort of passage with only water to his one side and a rock wall curving upward into the ceiling beyond that.

As Alex moved away from the fire the small room gave way to a more narrow corridor about six feet in width. Fifteen feet down this passage his torch burned out leaving him facing total blackness. He looked back and was glad to see the glow from the fire behind him, but his first instinct was to push forward into the darkness. He took several steps forward before caution derailed his courage. *If I get lost in this blackness I may never find my way out of here,* he thought to himself, and decided to return to the fire for another torch.

By now, his ankle was screaming at him to stop and give it a rest, but he knew the fire wouldn't last much longer and he needed light to find his way out. Alex started again, new torch in hand, and proceeded into the dark corridor once again. He got no further on this second voyage than he had the first time. Once again his torch burned out before he had made any real progress into the blackness. Once again he returned to the warmth of the fire and sat beside it, rubbing his throbbing ankle and wondering what to do next. *I guess I wait*, he thought. *Maybe whoever brought me here will return soon*. He could only hope so, as his fire was now burning down to embers and the light, what little there was, was waning.

Alex was glad to be alive and thankful to whoever pulled him from certain death, but he was very perplexed and concerned over why he had been brought to this place, rather than having been taken to a hospital, or at least, to his home. The thought flashed through his head that perhaps he wasn't alive at all, but he dismissed that notion almost immediately. He didn't know what being dead was like, but he didn't think this was it. *My ankle hurts too much to be dead*, he reasoned. He didn't think that went hand and hand with being dead, unless of course, he was in Hell. *Too cold for Hell*, he reasoned, and he lay down beside his dying fire and closed his eyes. It had been, and continued to be, a harrowing day and sleep soon claimed his thoughts.

Alex had no idea how long he had slept, but when he opened his eyes he was shocked to see that his fire had been refueled and was blazing strongly. Above the fire, impaled on a spit, was what appeared to be a rabbit, fully dressed out and nearly completely roasted. He lunged to his feet and looked frantically around the chamber, squinting into the darkness for any sign of his benefactor, but there was no one to be seen. Alex settled back down by the fire and stared at the carcass sizzling over the flames. He reached for the spit and rotated the roasting meat to the lesser-cooked side and studied it carefully. *Rabbit*, he thought. *Who-?* "Hello!" he screamed at the top of his lungs. "Who are you? Where are you?" he yelled as loud as he could. The only reply was the echo of his voice. He looked back at the roasted meat and carefully removed the spit from the rocks it was resting upon. Cautiously, but eagerly, Alex took a bite of the meat. *Rabbit for sure*, he thought as he took a second bite, and then a third.

Alex finished the welcomed meal and lay back on his elbows studying the fire. It was constructed like fires he

had seen in cartoons, with perfect symmetry, each log laid carefully in place forming a circle, like spokes on a wheel, rising in the center to a peak, giving the appearance of a cone. He thought about the fire as he studied it and came to the realization that no one actually builds fires like that. It was as if his unseen *friend* had learned to build a fire by reading a comic book. Regardless of the appearance, the fire seemed to be doing very well and burning evenly. The spit was cut from very green wood, almost wet, and therefore refused to burn. Whoever had provided his meal seemed to know about cooking out over a fire, as if perhaps it was his normal way of doing things. *But-who in these parts actually lives in that fashion any longer? Indians?* Alex hadn't heard of any Indians living around Latoon. There weren't even any rumors of such. *Maybe some old hermit*, he thought. Alex tossed that idea around for a minute or two and liked that theory. That would explain why he hadn't taken him to town. *Sure! He wouldn't want to go to town if he were a hermit. That has to be it*, Alex decided. *That's got to be who he is.*

With that at least partially settled in his mind, Alex turned on his side and looked out at the water which formed the floor of the end of this small cavern. It was still and black, as if stagnant, yet it smelled fresh enough and was free of any form of algae or mold. It looked perfectly clean and fresh, and Alex was getting very thirsty now, especially after finishing his roast rabbit. *Maybe the hermit intended for me to drink from this pool. Maybe that's why he hasn't left any water for me to drink.* He leaned toward the water and scooped up a double-handful and tasted the cool liquid. It seemed perfectly fine and he slowly sipped down what his hands had held. *That's enough for now*, he thought. *Better take it slowly, just in case.*

Alex lay down on his back and stared at the ceiling of the cave. It was smooth and free of any formations, as if it had been formed by running water slowly eroding the soft rock and almost polishing it as it had done so. Alex closed his eyes. When he opened them again he realized that he had dozed off. The fire was nearly burned down now and only softly glowing embers remained. The cavern was very dark and he began to become a little frightened. *What if the hermit doesn't come back again? What if he has gone on his way and left me here?* Alex began to shiver, both from the chill of the cave and from his own fears of being left alone in this dark place. *How am I going to get out of here if he has left?* Alex turned onto his side and rose to one elbow, looking out at the water, now barely visible in this

darkness. He stared at the pool and slowly, but perceptibly, he thought he saw something different about it. It was almost as if it were glowing with a light of its own. *That's queer*, he thought. *What's with that?* He edged closer to the rim of the pool and stared hard into its depths. *It is glowing! There's light coming from it.* Then it hit him square. *Daylight! Darned if that isn't daylight!*

Alex scrambled to his feet and looked about the cavern. Everywhere he looked he saw only blackness, but when he looked at the pool of water, he saw light, blessed light. *That must be the way out*, he thought, exuberant at the discovery. *That must be how I got in here. The hermit must have pulled me free from the river and brought me in through there!* Alex took one more look around into the black pitch of the cave and then lowered himself slowly into the cold water. His feet felt bottom and he stood waist high in the black pool. Turning to face the source of the light, he ducked under the surface and looked around, seeing what appeared to be a short tunnel through the rock, completely under the water, but with a definite light source at its end. He came up and took a deep breath, ducked back under again and shoved off with his legs into the passage. As he swam through its length the light became brighter. The tunnel appeared to be about fifteen feet long, and with each foot he traveled the opening at the end grew larger in appearance. He knew he had plenty of air as he looked ahead to the oval opening of light only a few feet ahead. With one last hard stroke, he passed through the opening and was swiftly whisked sideways by a strong current. *Shit!* he screamed in his mind, and then found himself being washed along completely out of control and at the mercy of the powerful current. As he twisted and rolled in the water he could catch glimpses of the surface above him. It was so near, yet totally unreachable. He was powerless to propel himself in any direction, including up, as the river was in full control. As his lungs began to ache and scream for air, he struggled fiercely with the memory of the last time, only a day or so ago, that he had been faced with this same decision; fight a little longer, or give in to the demands of his body and breathe. As the river was about to make the decision for him, he looked up at the surface above him and realized that it was only inches away from his face. Then he felt his back hit something hard and his body twisted and rolled along the object until his head shot from the water into the air. Alex gasped in the blessed air and he went limp. As he

teetered on the brink of consciousness he realized that he had washed up on a sand bar. He closed his eyes.

CHAPTER TWO

"There's no sign of him here, Sheriff."

Sheriff Wilson cocked his hat back, and still looking at the diver spoke to Bender, who was standing by his side with a very worried look on his face.

"Son-Are you sure this is the right place?" he asked.

"Yes-I'm positive, Sheriff. This is the exact spot and Alex was right down below where Ernie is now. I know it for sure," Bender replied, pointing to the spot.

"Is the water clear down there, Ernie?" the sheriff asked Ernie Bell, Latoon County Deputy, and for the first time in his career, Latoon County Diver.

"Perfectly, Bart. Couldn't be clearer," he answered. "If Alex was stuck down here he must have broken loose and gone on downstream. He sure isn't here."

"Okay, Ernie. You can come on out of there and we'll start looking down-river. Bender is sure this is the spot, so if he ain't here he must be down there aways."

"But, Sheriff-Alex was stuck good. I tried to pull him free but he was stuck good. I don't see how he could've broke free and gone downstream. I just don't see how. Tell Ernie to try one more time-where he is-please."

"If Ernie says he isn't down there, Bender, then he isn't down there. We're just wasting our time at this spot. Funny things can happen in the water, Bender. I'm sure he somehow came loose of his anchor and drifted on down the river. We're not going to give up until we find him, so don't fret that any. We'll find him, son. We will."

Ernie dried himself off and dressed and they headed down the south bank of the river. From what Bender had told the sheriff there wasn't any real hurry, other than to try to find Alex's body before his parents returned from their buying trip. Robert and Kathy Carey owned a used furniture store in Latoon and made frequent trips to various places in search of items for their inventory. Right now, no one knew where to locate them so the hope was to locate Alex before they returned and spare them the agony of the search. At least, Bart figured, he could break the news to them about Alex and they could go visit him right away at the funeral parlor. It wouldn't be much, but it would be better than having to agonize over locating their son's body. All he could offer them now was some closure, if they could locate Alex.

The hike downriver was a somber one for Bart, Ernie and Bender, alike. Bart and Ernie had watched Alex grow up in Latoon, and of course, Alex had been Bender's best friend. None of the party expected to find Alex alive, so the mission they were on was not a rescue mission and held no hope of a pleasant outcome. The only thing they could hope for was to find Alex's body and return him to his parents for burial. This all-enveloping thought showed on their faces and in their gait and demeanor. They walked down the Latoon River, heads lowered and silent, speaking not a word among themselves.

Bart had no idea how long Alex had been free of the hold the river bottom had had on him, but it had now been nearly twenty-four hours since Alex had made his fatal plunge from the bluff. There was no telling how far downstream he may have traveled by now and darkness would be upon them in a matter of an hour or so. They had brought along a litter to carry Alex out of the forest, but they had made no provision for camping out overnight. After all, Bender had known exactly where Alex could be found, or at least he had thought he did, so this was to be a short excursion at its outset. Now, however, it might take days to locate Alex.

"Tell you what, Bender," Bart said, softly. "We're going to have to start back soon or we'll be stuck out here all night with no shelter or provisions."

"But, Sheriff..." Bender began to protest.

"No buts about it, Bender. We can't stay out here all night. Ernie and I have duties back in town tonight and besides, I want to radio down to Olson and have Sheriff Haas put someone on the river down there to be on the lookout for Alex's—for Alex, I mean."

"Can we go just a little further, Sheriff? Just a little ways further?" Bender pleaded.

"Just a little, Bender, then we'll have to start back to town."

Bender moved ahead, going as fast as he could along the rocky shore and watching both riverbanks intently. Bart and Ernie followed along behind Bender.

"That boy's really broke up about this, Bart," Ernie commented.

"Yes he is, but I wouldn't expect any different. They've been friends since they were old enough to walk."

"I wonder why they came this far downriver to swim? Don't they usually swim up at the Toebluff hole? Why did they come way down here, I wonder?" Ernie asked.

"I don't know, Ernie, but if I had to guess, I'd guess it probably had something to do with Dirk Mitchell. He's been giving a lot of kids around town a hard way to go lately. He's turned into a real bully, lately. Could be he ran them off from Toebluff. Wouldn't surprise me."

Bart looked downstream to where Bender had taken quite a lead over them, but was now just standing and looking at something along the shoreline. Suddenly, Bender turned and shouted back to them.

"Sheriff! Sheriff! Here's Alex! He's right out there!"

Bart and Ernie broke into a run and as they approached the spot Bender was pointing to they saw Alex's body lying on a sandbar just a few yards offshore. Ernie reached the spot first and jumped into the river, allowing the current to take him down to the sandbar. He scrambled onto it and rolled Alex over on his back.

"Damn, Bart! He's alive! He's unconscious and damn cold, but he's alive!"

Bender started to cry, but Bart looked him straight in the face and scolded, "No time for that, Bender. Get the blankets off the litter and lay them out over there on the sand."

Bart grabbed a coil of rope from the litter and tossed one end to Ernie.

"Ernie. Tie that rope off around your waist and also around Alex, like a figure eight. Start wading back to shore and I'll keep the line taught in case you lose your footing."

Ernie hiked Alex up into a standing position and began feeding the rope around and between the two of them as Bart had instructed. When he had tied it off securely he yelled to Bart that he was ready and stepped into the swiftly moving water. He made it about halfway back before his feet were swept out from under him, but Bart had a firm hold on them and the bulk and brawn to pull them safely to shore.

Ernie pulled his knot loose and began uncoiling the rope.

"Damn! He is cold!" Bart said, helping Ernie get Alex free of the bindings.

"But he's still with us!" was Ernie's reply.

Once free, Bart carried Alex to the blankets Bender had laid out and rolled Alex in them and lifted him onto the litter.

"Bender. You go on ahead and find Doc and make sure he meets us at the clinic. Check his house first. Ernie and I will carry Alex out of here and straight to the clinic, so find the Doc and get him there," Bart instructed, as he and

Ernie lifted the litter. "And, Bender. Run as fast as you can, but be careful. I don't think Alex has much time left for us to get him to the clinic and have Doc warm him up. Understand? And hurry, 'cause it won't do Alex any good if we get him there and the Doc ain't around."

"Yes, sir. I understand."

With that, Bender was off and running at a good clip and as fast as the rocky shore would allow.

"Let's move, Ernie," Bart said, and they began the long trek back to the edge of town where they had parked Bart's Bronco. Fortunately, Doc lived at that south edge of town and his office was in his house, so Bender would have only a quarter mile to go beyond the Bronco to get to Doc's. If Doc was there, which he usually was, he could drive Bender and himself to the clinic and prepare for Alex's arrival.

Alex. You hang in there until we get you there, Bart thought to himself. "You hang in there, son," he said softly.

Bender made good time along the shore of the Latoon; after all, his best friend's life was at stake, a life given back by some miracle. Flying past the sheriff's Bronco, he legged the last quarter mile in no time at all, raced up on Doc's porch and began beating on the front door.

"Doc! Doc! Emergency, Doc!" he yelled, as he continued banging. "Alex Carey's been hurt bad!"

Bender paused and listened. There was no sound coming from inside Doc's house, no reply and no footsteps. *Damn!* Bender thought, beginning to panic. He bolted from the porch and ran around the side of the house to the garage, peering through the garage door window. *Hell, his car's here. Where's Doc?*

"Bender. Bender, is that you?" Doc's voice came from behind him.

Bender swung around to see Doc standing in his garden, hoe in hand and the knees of his dungarees covered with dirt.

"Doc! Thank God you're here! Alex Carey's been drowned, but he ain't dead yet, just freezing cold. The sheriff and Ernie are bringing him to the clinic right now. The sheriff says for you to meet him there to warm Alex up. Come on, Doc, we've got to hurry!"

"Okay, son," Doc answered, wiping the crusted dirt from his knees. "I've got the car keys right here. Open that garage and we'll head on in to the clinic right now. You drive, Bender. My eyeglasses are in the house."

"I don't have my license yet, Doc," Bender said.

"Somehow, Bender, I don't think the sheriff is going to mind that a bit. Get behind the wheel and let's get moving."

Bender swung around the back of the car and hopped behind the wheel. Doc got in beside him and handed him the keys, showing Bender where the ignition was located on the dashboard. Doc's car was old, a fifty-five year old Nash Rambler, but not nearly as old as Doc himself who was approaching his seventieth birthday.

Bender was glad to see that Doc's Rambler was an automatic. He'd driven his dad's car a few times, out at the lake, but he had never driven a stick shift before. He was very thankful that he didn't have to learn at a time like this.

He pulled the lever into reverse and backed out of Doc's garage and driveway, and onto the street. The clinic was across town, but Latoon wasn't much of a town and they would be there in about ten minutes at the longest.

"You're doing pretty good with the driving, Bender. When do you get your license?" Doc asked.

"I'll turn sixteen next month, Doc. June the twentieth. Guess I'll get it then," Bender replied.

"I see. Well then you're old enough to know better than to go swimming in the river this time of year. I know the weather is unseasonably warm, but you should know by now that the river water is still frigid this time of year," Doc admonished.

"I know, Doc, but we weren't going to stay in long. It's just that Alex got his foot caught between two rocks and couldn't get loose. I thought he was dead and I couldn't free him. By the time I got back to town it was total dark. The sheriff said there was no point then in trying to get down there in the dark so he and Ernie went back with me this morning. But we found Alex washed downstream and still alive on a sandbar. I don't know how he got free; he was stuck so good," Bender explained, as he drove.

"Must have scared you to near death," Doc commented.

"Sure did, Doc. I mean he was stuck to the bottom of the river in fifteen feet of water, just floating there, anchored to the bottom. I tried to pull his leg free, but I couldn't do it. I was sure he was drowned and dead, he was just staring at me, not moving or anything, just staring."

"Well, the Lord works in mysterious ways, Bender. I guess it just wasn't his time yet.—Good, we're here. Pull

around the back, Bender. We'll use the back entrance and get started warming up some blankets."

Bender pulled the Rambler around to the back of the clinic and Doc got out and unlocked the back entrance. Once inside he turned on all the lights and began instructing Bender on how he could help out.

The clinic itself wasn't much to speak of. Latoon was a small town and couldn't afford any of the more modern equipment that Doc would have liked to have, but it did meet the general requirements of the community. Doc had managed to acquire an old x-ray machine for looking for broken bones, but that was about it as far as equipment went. It was well supplied with the essential supplies of daily care, bandages, sutures, antibiotics, tetanus vaccine, and the like. The clinic was clean and a good place to go when you had any sort of minor accident or when time didn't allow traveling to Sagamore to visit the Latoon County Hospital.

"Bender. In that large white cabinet over there you'll find plenty of blankets. Grab three or four of them and throw them in the clothes dryer in the back room. Set the dryer on high and the timer at thirty minutes," Doc instructed.

"Clothes dryer?" Bender questioned.

"That's how we do it here, son. That's all we can afford to heat up blankets for situations like this," he explained.

Bender did as he was told and began selecting several blankets from the cabinet and headed for the back room. Doc picked up the phone and called Latoon County and requested an ambulance be sent to transport Alex once they got him warmed up and stable. He then went and unlocked the front door and sat down on the front stoop to await the arrival of the sheriff and Alex. *I hope they make it in time for me to do some good*, he thought. A cardinal landed on the railing nearby and began to sing. *That's a good sign*, Doc thought to himself and smiled. He then fixed his gaze on the road and prayed for Bart's quick arrival.

Bender came out and joined Doc on the stoop, sitting down next to him and watching intently for the arrival of his friend.

"Dryer's on, Doc," he commented.

"Good, Bender. Did you set it on high?"

"Yes, sir. I put four blankets in it, too."

"Good job, Bender. How far down the river were you boys?" Doc asked, wondering how far Bart and Ernie would have to carry Alex.

"Oh, I don't know, Doc. Maybe a mile below Toebluff. We were always downstream from town. That dern Dirk and his buddy, Carter, drove us off our usual hole at Toebluff. Dirk said it was theirs for this coming summer and we should get lost. We wandered on down until we found another good diving cliff, even higher than Toebluff. Alex jumped first..."

"Did you check to see how deep the water was first?" Doc asked, cutting Bender off.

"Sure, Doc. It was plenty deep enough. Alex just went all the way to the bottom and got his ankle wedged between two rocks is all. It was just a freak thing. It probably wouldn't happen again in a hundred years of jumping there."

"I see. Well let that be a lesson to you, Bender. Anything can happen when you start taking chances."

"Yes, sir. I know that-now," Bender answered.

Silence fell between them as they turned their attention once again to the road. For Bender, the waiting was fraught with anxiety, the not knowing, nearly unbearable. He knew his buddy would be along soon, but he didn't know if his arrival would be joyful or deeply sad. He cradled his face in the palms of his hands, elbows resting on his knees and began counting his heartbeats as they throbbed in his ears.

Twenty silent minutes passed before Bart's Bronco came into sight as it screeched around the last bend in the road and turned into the clinic drive. It skidded to a stop in front of Bender and Doc, Bart jumping out as the vehicle came to a stop. Bender, who had rushed down the stoop as the Bronco had turned into the drive, looked at the sheriff with a look that asked the question he couldn't find the words to speak.

"He's still with us, Bender," Bart said, opening the back hatch of the Bronco. "He's still out cold, but he's still alive."

Ernie helped Bart pull Alex from the back of the Bronco and they carried him up the stoop and into the clinic. Bender was already retrieving the hot blankets from the dryer as Doc instructed Bart to get Alex out of his wet clothes. Then Doc instructed Bart to lay Alex on the examination table where he had an electric blanket already draped and plugged in. As they were wrapping Alex in the electric blanket, Bender returned to the room with the heated blankets from the dryer, which they draped over Alex in folded layers, further heating and insulating his body. Doc then placed a thermometer under Alex's tongue, pulled

his watch from his watch pocket, popped open the cover and began counting off the seconds in his mind.

"Ninety point two degrees. That's good. He's warm enough to defibrillate if he goes into arrest," Doc said, as he moved toward the sink.

"You've got paddles?" Bart asked.

"No," Doc answered. "But the ambulance from County should be here soon, and they have them onboard."

Doc began filling the sink with hot water and soaking washcloths in the hot water. Turning from that, he wheeled an oxygen tank to the side of the table and placed the attached mask over Alex's mouth and nose. Returning to the sink he pulled a washcloth from the sink and wrung out the excess water, returned to Alex's side and placed the cloth over the oxygen mask.

"What's that for, Doc?" Ernie asked.

"Inhalation warming is the most effective way of warming his core temperature. I made the mask myself, drilled holes in a regular oxygen mask to allow a mixture of oxygen and warm, moist air to be inhaled by the patient. It serves several purposes. First, it warms the brainstem and improves the general level of consciousness, and it helps prevent further respiratory heat loss. It could turn out to be the one thing that makes the difference between pulling Alex through and losing him. The hot blankets alone won't prevent further heat loss from his core, but inhalation warming will greatly help. It's the fastest way to stabilize his core and brainstem temperatures."

"So, you think we got him here in time, Doc?" Bart asked.

"I hope so, Bart. But the first thirty minutes are the most critical after rescue. This type of warming should be done immediately, if possible. When you rescue someone who is in hypothermia, even a jar or a jolt can bring on cardiac arrest instantly. It's extremely important to get their core and brainstem temperatures stabilized and warming just as soon as possible."

Doc went back to the sink and retrieved another washcloth, wrung it out and returned, replacing the first one.

"We'll just proceed in this manner until we get a response from Alex or until the ambulance gets here. And, Bart, if you're a religious man-pray. He could use a little help from above right about now also. I don't think he's in critical hypothermia any longer, but it's still significant at ninety-one degrees. We need to get him up over ninety-

five as fast as possible. It will then be safer to transport him to County."

Doc checked Alex's pulse again and noted that his heart rate had picked up slightly. He smiled and nodded to Bender who had been trying to stay out of the way and let Doc do his work. His concern and fear was written all over his face and as much as he wanted to help, he knew that staying out of the way was the best thing he could do for Alex right now."

"How's he doing, Doc?" Bender asked, when Doc nodded to him.

"Better," Doc replied. "His heart is beating stronger now."

They heard the ambulance pull into the drive out front and moments later two paramedics entered through the front door.

"Hi, Doc," one of the paramedics greeted.

"Hello, Ben. Long time no see," Doc answered. "How've you been?"

"Just fine, Doc. Whatcha got here?" he asked.

"Hypothermia. But, I think he's warming nicely now. You should be able to transport him soon. I don't think he's critical at this point."

"Want us to take over then?" the other paramedic asked.

"If you would, please. We've got him inhalation warming and wrapped in an electric blanket. His heart rate has been going steadily up and his sublingual temperature is at about ninety-six degrees now. I think the worst is over, but I've got to sit down now that you're here. I'm not as young as I once was, you know."

The paramedics smiled at Doc and moved to the table.

"Looks like you've pulled another one through, Doc," Ben said. "Go sit and rest a spell. We've got it from here."

Doc was happy for the relief. He would have stayed on his feet for the next twelve hours if necessary, but nonetheless, the relief was welcomed. He knew Ben from a previous run, and strangely enough, it was another hypothermia case. He knew Ben knew his stuff and what to do, so he was not at all concerned about turning over Alex's care to him. He had watched Ben closely on the previous occasion and had noted his expertise in handling these types of cases. Doc pulled up a chair and sat nearby, just in case he was needed again.

Ben and his partner, Steve, began monitoring Alex and for the next hour took over the duty of exchanging the

cooled off washcloths for fresh hot and moist ones. When they were sure Alex was warmed enough to transport safely, they carried Alex to the ambulance, Bart and Ernie helping out with the move. Alex had not regained consciousness, but Doc told Bender that was not unusual and certainly didn't mean that he wasn't going to be okay.

With Alex secured in the ambulance, Ben and Steve whisked out the drive and onto the road to Sagamore.

"Tell you what, Bender," Bart said, placing his hand on Bender's shoulder. "Let's go inside and call your folks and let them know what's going on so they won't be worried about you, and then you can ride over to County with me and we can check up on Alex."

"We better call Alex's folks first," Bender replied, still staring in the direction the ambulance had gone.

"Ernie just went inside to do that, son. But I doubt they're home from their trip yet. We left them a message before to call the station when they returned and Mary hasn't heard from them yet. She'd have called us here if she had."

"Okay, Sheriff-thanks. I'll go call my folks and then let's hurry to the hospital. I won't feel good until I can see Alex is awake-and I can talk to him, okay?"

"Sure, Bender. We'll turn the lights and siren on and be there in no time. Go make your call."

Bender trotted back into the clinic and made his phone call, explaining to his folks what was going on with Alex and that he was going with the sheriff to Latoon County to check on Alex's progress. His folks had no problem with him going and Mrs. Baxter promised that she would keep trying to reach Mrs. Carey so that she would know what was happening at the earliest possible time.

Bender ran back outside where he found Bart already waiting in the Bronco, lights flashing and motor running. He hopped in the passenger's seat and Bart hit the siren, pulled out onto the road to Sagamore, and stomped down on the accelerator.

"We'll be there in twenty minutes, Bender," Bart commented. "We'll keep her wide open all the way."

Bender just stared at the road ahead. There were a thousand questions and thoughts running through his head and they had grabbed his full attention as Bart had started down the highway. First and foremost on his list of questions was how Alex had survived and had come free of Death's grip at the bottom of the Latoon River. Bender knew what he had seen down there, and what he had seen was a lifeless Alex Carey, drowned and gone from this world. He

was greatly happy to have his best friend back, but he could not understand at all how it had come to be. *Miracle*, he thought. *Maybe it was a miracle*. That seemed to be the only explanation that fit, but then again, how do you explain a miracle?

Bart's estimate of the arrival time was dead on and twenty minutes after departing the clinic in Latoon, he and Bender were scanning the parking lot at Latoon County for an open parking space, which they finally located at the far end of the lot.

Bart and Bender walked into the hospital together and inquired at the patient information desk as to the whereabouts of Alex. What they learned was that Alex was resting peacefully in the recovery area of emergency, out of immediate danger and awaiting an available room in the ICU. Bender relaxed a bit and smiled at Bart, a big, happy smile, which had "Thank you, Sheriff" written all over it.

"I think I'll head on back to Latoon, Bender. You stay here and visit with Alex when you are permitted to see him, and I'll come back later and take you home," Bart offered.

"Thanks, Sheriff. I guess I'll be able to see Alex as soon as they can move him to a room, don't you think so?" he asked.

"I'm sure that's the case, son. But just in case they only permit family in the ICU, just tell them Alex is your brother. They'll be keeping him for a day or so for observation, so that may be the only way for you to see him for a couple of days. It's a lie, but it's a *white* one. I don't recall ever arresting anyone for telling a white lie."

Bart ruffled Bender's hair and smiled at him warmly. "It's been a rough couple of days for you, son, but you did really good by us for Alex. We may not have been able to save him at all without your help. You should be proud of yourself," Bart complemented. "You should be very proud of yourself."

Bender smiled back at Bart and the sheriff turned and headed for the exit. Bender found a seat in the waiting area and nestled into it to await further word on his buddy. It was only a matter of a minute or two before he dozed off to sleep in his chair. It *had* been a very rough two days.

CHAPTER THREE

"Son... Young man..."

Bender awoke, groggy, to the sound of a voice and someone gently shaking his shoulder. He looked through fuzzy eyes at the nurse standing in front of his chair.

"Son... Your friend, Alex, has been moved to ICU. I'm told by the doctor that he's doing very well."

"Oh... Good, but Alex is my brother. When can I see him?" Bender asked, anxiously.

"You can go visit him now if you'd like, but the doctor is asking about your parents. Are they aware that Alex is here yet? The doctor wants to talk with them and give them an update on his condition."

"His...Ah...Mom and Dad are out of town on a buying trip for our furniture store. We're not sure where to locate them at the moment."

"Don't they have a cell phone?" the nurse asked.

"Nope. Dad's kinda old fashioned. He never had any interest in getting one. Can I go see Alex now, please?" Bender asked, abruptly.

"Oh, sure... I'm sorry. I guess you are anxious to see your-brother," she replied, smiling a devilish smile at Bender. "Come on. I'll take you to him, but remember, only ten minute visits are permitted in the ICU."

The nurse led the way, Bender following along at her heels. She was a nice lady, but she sure walked too slowly for Bender's liking. She finally stopped and pointed to an opening in the ICU corridor.

"He's right in there, son. Remember, ten minutes. He needs his rest," the nurse pointed out.

"Okay, thanks," Bender replied, and walked briskly to the doorway. As he entered the room, Alex flashed him a big smile and Bender's heart skipped a beat. This was an opportunity he had thought he would never have again. Now, he had his best buddy back and it felt great. He returned the smile and pulled up a chair beside Alex's bed.

"Hey, Alex, how you doin'?" Bender asked, leaning forward in his chair.

"Pretty good. My chest hurts a lot, but other than that, I'm good," Alex answered, rolling onto to his side to face Bender.

"Good-Man, I thought I'd lost you for good, Alex. When I saw you down there, just suspended in the water-not moving or anything, I thought you were gone for good," Bender said, shaking his head and trying to fight back a tear.

"I was gone, Bender. I saw you down there. I felt you trying to pull my foot loose and I saw you trying to talk to me and breathe air into me. I couldn't do anything, but stare back and wait. Then everything went slowly black. By the time you got down there I had already breathed in the water. God, that's hard to do, to give in to it, I mean."

"Then you don't remember breaking loose or how it happened?"

"I didn't break loose, Bender. That's the cool part! I was rescued," Alex said, excitedly.

"Rescued?—But we found you over a hundred yards downstream washed up on a sandbar. We rescued you," Bender explained.

"No, Bender, before that. I woke up after I drowned...in a cave! Someone pulled me out of that river and into a cave, built a fire for me and even roasted a rabbit for me to eat!"

Bender just stared at Alex, his mouth open and eyes wide. He knew Alex had been through a lot, but he hadn't expected this.

"Alex—Do you mean that you dreamed all that?" Bender asked, cautiously.

"No, Bender! I didn't *dream* it—it happened!" Alex said, explicitly and as if it was not challengeable. "I—was—rescued, period. It happened, Bender, I swear to God it happened!" Alex insisted.

"Okay, buddy. I believe you, but who rescued you then? Do you know who it was?" Bender asked, trying to appease Alex and hopefully, settle him down a bit.

"No, not really. I never saw him, but I suspect it must have been some hermit that lives up there. It's got to be. Anyone else would have brought me back to town or taken me home, or something. Anyway, that's the way I see it. Can you think of any other explanation, Bender?" Alex asked, seriously searching for any other possibility Bender might think of.

"Not right off, Alex, but I'll think on it and see if I can think of anyone else it might have been," Bender replied.

"Well, whoever it was, I intend to find him and thank him. You'll come with me, won't you, Bender?" Alex asked.

"Sure—Alex. When?"

"As soon as the weather warms up and the river drops a bit. The current is too strong to go now, or anytime soon. We'll have to wait for the water to warm up a bit, too. But then we'll go, okay, Bender?"

"Sure-okay, Alex," Bender answered, not at all enthusiastically.

Bender smiled at his good friend and thought about what Alex had just told him. *Who could it have been?*

"Alex-You said whoever rescued you took you to a cave, right?" Bender asked.

"Yes, a cave. I had to leave the cave under water, into the river. That's why you found me still in the river on that sandbar," Alex explained.

"And you think you can find this cave again?"

"I don't know-I hope so. I'm hoping the river will drop low enough this summer to spot the opening I escaped through. If not, at least the current should be less strong. Maybe we can swim in the way I swam out," Alex suggested.

"Maybe," Bender replied. "I've never heard of any cave up there though. That probably means the river never drops low enough to see this opening. If it did, folks would know about it," Bender theorized.

"Well-Then we swim in," Alex answered, smiling at Bender. "We can do it, if we can find it."

Bender smiled again and nodded his affirmation. Alex was a spry little fellow, that was for sure. To look at him you would never guess that he possessed such stamina. A day after drowning and nearly dying a second time from hypothermia, he was talking about going back into that river. Alex, all five-feet six inches of him was an unlimited bag of surprises.

He was the spitting image of Howdy Doodie, complete with carrot-top and freckles. He was also scrawny, skinny to be exact, and if he had any muscles at all they were in his personality and intellect, not in his physique.

Alex and Bender were an unlikely pair, or perhaps it wasn't so unlikely when you stopped to think about it. What Alex lacked in physical appearance, Bender had in spades. He was extremely handsome and nearly six-feet tall already, less than a month from his sixteenth birthday. Bender was physically fit and evenly muscled and walked with a confident gate, whereas Alex shuffled along, dragging his feet with each step as if walking was a chore he'd rather not perform any more often than absolutely necessary.

But, Alex was sharp. He possessed a keen sense of humor and a great wit. What Bender had trouble seeing clearly, Alex had no problem understanding at all. So, perhaps it wasn't so unlikely that they would pair up as best friends. Meld the two boys and you had a complete, well-developed and organized individual. Perhaps it was

their differences that had made them stick with one another, like brothers, ever since either could remember.

They had no enemies, other than Dirk and Carter, but even they weren't usually a problem. Ever since Dirk's mother had passed away from breast cancer last winter, he had grown meaner, but it came in spurts. One day he might be perfectly friendly and jovial with Alex and Bender, then the next, mean and pushy. Carter, on the other hand, was simply the mirror of whatever Dirk's current mood seemed to be. If Dirk chose to be friendly, so did Carter. If Dirk decided he would give Alex or Bender a hard way to go, Carter would follow suit. Bender simply referred to Carter as Dirk's puppy dog, always doing or saying whatever he saw or heard Dirk do.

Bender spent the rest of the afternoon and evening visiting with Alex and discussing Alex's experience. No one came to kick him out of the ICU, so he had stayed. Bender apologized at least a dozen times for not being able to pull Alex free from the river's grip, and Alex shrugged it off each time, saying he had done what he could and not to give it another thought.

But Bender was giving it a lot of thought. He was a pretty strong guy and he knew it. How then could he not free Alex when someone else had been able to do it? He had pulled on the two rocks that had held Alex firmly to the bottom. They wouldn't budge and that had been the only way his foot could have been freed from where it had been lodged by his impact with the river bottom. To have yanked his foot free, if that had even been possible, would have been to seriously injure Alex's foot or ankle. Bender was sure of that. Yet, Alex's foot and ankle were fine, scratched and abraded, but fine. *Whoever had saved him had to move the rocks*, Bender thought. *It's the only way he could have been saved without serious injury.*

Bender had been down there and he knew what he had seen. He couldn't get past the fact that those rocks were immovable and that fact made him very curious about who possibly could have rescued Alex, and also made Bender very eager to help Alex find this cave, if it actually existed beyond Alex's imagination.

At eight p.m. the nurse came into Alex's room and informed Bender that *visiting hours* were over and that he would have to say good-bye for now. Bender smiled at her and rose from his chair.

"Okay, then. I'll see you tomorrow morning, Alex," Bender said.

"Better call first, Bender. They may send me home tomorrow, or at least I hope they will," Alex advised.

"They aren't going to send you home until they find your folks. When are they due home?" Bender asked.

"They'll be home later this evening. They always come back from these buying trips on Sunday evening, usually before midnight. They'll be by here then. The doctor left them a message on the answering machine to come straight here when they receive the message, regardless of the time. Hell, maybe they'll just take me home with them then," Alex suggested.

"Don't count on that, buddy. I don't think they'll release you in the middle of the night, but I'll call in the morning to check on you."

Bender left Alex and walked down the corridor to a pay phone and called his dad for a ride home. He had turned down the sheriff's offer when he had returned, wanting to stay longer and visit some more with Alex. Now, he would just call his father, rather than bother Sheriff Wilson. Mr. Baxter arrived fifteen minutes later and drove Bender home, where his mom had a hot meal awaiting him. Bender ate heartily and went straight to his room, promptly collapsing on the bed and soon falling into a sound sleep.

Monday morning greeted Bender with warm rays of sunshine flowing through his bedroom window. His first thought was of Alex and whether or not he had been allowed to return home over the night. He rolled over and picked up the telephone receiver by his bed and dialed 411.

"What city, please?"

"Sagamore."

"What number?"

"Latoon County Hospital, please. Patient information." Bender answered.

A recording came on and said, "The number, 555-2663, can be dialed for a charge of ten cents by dialing one, now."

Bender pressed the number one.

"Latoon County Hospital, patient information. Patient's name please?"

"Alex Carey," Bender answered.

"One moment, please—Mr. Carey is being released this morning, sir."

"Do you know what time?" Bender asked.

"No, sir. Just that he is being released sometime this morning."

"Okay, thank you."

Bender hung up the phone and rolled onto his back. He looked out the window to the sunshine and smiled. *Looks like it's going to be a good day.* He climbed out of bed and headed for the shower.

"Morning, Mom," Bender greeted as he entered the kitchen.

"Morning, Bender. Breakfast?" his mom asked.

"Sure. I'm still starved! What do we have?"

"What do you want?"

"Bacon, eggs and waffles; blueberry waffles," he replied, smiling and licking his lips.

"Okay, one order of bacon and eggs, sunny side up, and blueberry waffles, coming up."

"Thanks, Mom."

"So, how's Alex doing, Bender?" his mom asked as she greased the skillet.

"Pretty good, Mom. I just called the hospital before my shower and I was told they are going to release him sometime this morning. I'm going to walk over to his house after breakfast and wait for him to come home."

"That was a pretty close call he had from what your dad has told me. I wish you boys would stay away from that river, especially when it's high like it is now."

"We will, Mom, at least until the spring melt is over and it drops some. Mom-Alex says it was more than a close call. He says he actually drowned down there and that someone saved him from the river bottom. Have you ever heard any stories about any hermits living down the river around Round Knob?" Bender asked, curiously.

"Well, yes. Years ago there was supposed to be a hermit that supposedly lived in that area, but that was when I was a girl."

"Really?"

"Yes. I remember the stories. He was supposed to have had a cabin on the west side of Round Knob, but no one that I ever knew of had ever seen it. You know how stories can get out of hand though."

"What else did you hear about him?" Bender asked.

"Nothing much, Bender. Just that he lived there, all alone in his cabin and lived off the woods. Oh yes-they called him Old Jubel, if I remember correctly. That's about all I know about it, Bender. Like I said, I was just a girl when that story was going around school."

"Huh-I wonder if there was ever anything to it?"

"Well, you could ask Doc. He's been around these parts all his life. He might know more about it."

"Yeah. I think I'll swing by Doc's before going to Alex's and see if he knows anything about this Old Jubel. Thanks, Mom."

Mrs. Baxter had Bender's breakfast prepared in short order and Bender cleaned his plate quickly. He was anxious to talk with Doc about Old Jubel and see if there might be some truth to the old tales. He figured it would really be neat if he had something to tell Alex about *his* hermit when he went to visit him.

"I'm heading over to Doc's now, Mom," Bender said, as he cleaned the last of the syrup off his plate.

"Okay, Bender. Be careful and stay away from that river, promise?" his mom asked.

"Yep. I promise, Mom. No river today."

Bender slid back his chair and crossed the kitchen, headed for the mudroom door. He turned back briefly and thanked his mom again for breakfast, then went outside into the already warming day. Late May was usually comfortable, even here in the mountains of southwestern Oregon, but this past few days had been Heaven sent. It was almost like mid-July, not May at all.

Bender cut across Maple Street and through the ballpark to Cornell, turning left toward Hill Street. At the corner of Hill and Cornell he ran into Dirk and Carter.

"Hey, pussy, where you going?" Dirk commanded an answer.

"Hey, Dirk. I'm heading over to Doc's place," Bender answered, sheepishly.

"So what's this I hear about Alex nearly drowning? That pussy never could swim worth a crap," Dirk laughed.

"He jumped off the cliff down at Round Knob and got his foot wedged between two rocks on the bottom," Bender explained.

"Bullshit! He wouldn't have the balls to jump off that cliff. What really happened, you lying idiot?" Dirk barked.

"That is what happened! He jumped off that cliff and got stuck on the bottom. And, he *did* drown! I saw it," Bender barked back, agitated now with Dirk's affront.

"Bullshit. I heard he's in the hospital at Sagamore."

"Yeah, because Old Jubel saved him!" Bender blurted out. *Damn, why did I say that?* he thought immediately, but too late.

"Who the hell is Old Jubel?" Dirk asked, cocking his head and squinting at Bender.

"Never mind. I've got to get to Doc's now. He's expecting me," Bender lied.

"Then go ahead, wus, and take your bullshit story with you. Come on, Carter. Let's you and me go find Old Jubel and thank him for Alex-sheesh, what a frickin' bullshitter," Dirk said, as he turned to walk away.

Bender didn't hesitate to take his leave either, turning and jogging off in the direction of Doc's house. *What the hell did I tell him about Old Jubel for?* Bender thought as he picked up his pace. *Stupid! Now I'll never hear the end of that one, unless...*Bender began running.

Doc's house was only a few minutes from Bender's when he took it on the run and he covered the last three blocks in record time. He flew up on the porch and began knocking on the front door. Remembering Doc's garden out back, he started down the steps and heard the door open behind him.

"Bender. Is that you there?" Doc asked.

"Yeah, it's me, Doc. Are you busy right now or can we talk a minute?" Bender asked, hoping for the later.

"No, I'm not busy at the moment. What brings you here so early this morning?"

"I just wanted to ask you about something, or rather, somebody, Doc."

"Sure, Bender, come on in and sit down. I was just having my morning coffee."

Doc led Bender into the kitchen where they each took a seat at the table.

"Now, what's this all about?" Doc asked.

"Well-This may sound stupid, but have you ever heard of Old Jubel?"

"My God-I haven't heard that name in years," Doc said. "What makes you ask about him, Bender?"

"You've heard of him! Really?" Bender blurted out, totally shocked.

"Sure. Jubel Owens. But, he's got to be dead and gone by now. Where on Earth did you come up with that name, Bender?" Doc asked.

"Then he's for real, Doc?"

"Oh my Lord yes. Lord does that name bring back some memories. Where on Earth did you hear of him?"

"My mom said she remembered hearing tales of an Old Jubel when she was a girl. He was supposed to be an old hermit who lived up around Round Knob."

"Well, she's right, but Jubel wasn't always a hermit. He lived right here in Latoon until he was in his thirties. He ran a gasoline filling station on the highway just outside of town-toward Sagamore. He left town in 1947 and

disappeared into the forest on the other side of the river-over around Round Knob, as you said."

"Why? Why did he give up his gas station and become a hermit?" Bender asked.

"He didn't give it up, it exploded and his wife and four customers burned to death in the fire. There was an investigation and he was exonerated of any wrongdoing, but he disappeared shortly after that," Doc explained. "I guess he simply couldn't live with the thought and having to face the victim's families around town."

"Gee. That's a shame. So he became a hermit because of that then?"

"I guess so, Bender. At first he came to town every now and again for provisions. Then he stopped coming altogether. I guess he died, moved on, or learned to be self-sufficient. I don't know which."

"I don't think he moved on or died, Doc. I think he's still up there," Bender proclaimed.

"I doubt that, Bender. He'd be eighty-five years old now. Living out at Round Knob through one winter would be rough, even on a young man, let alone a man in his eighties. What makes you think he's still out there?" Doc asked, obviously quite interested in Bender's story.

"Alex-He says that he was saved from the bottom of the river by someone who took him into some cave and built him a fire and cooked him a rabbit to eat. He said he never saw the person who helped him, but he figures anyone other than a hermit would have taken him to town or to the hospital," Bender explained, recounting Alex's theory.

"Uh huh-And you think that an eighty-five year old man dove down to the bottom of the river and accomplished what you couldn't, Bender? You did say before that his ankle was wedged between two rocks and that you had been helpless to pull him free, right?" Doc asked, throwing a wet blanket on Alex's idea of what had happened.

"It does sound foolish, doesn't it, Doc?" Bender relented.

"It does to me, son. I don't see how that could have happened unless Jubel is one tough customer," Doc said, smiling.

Bender thought about Doc's last comment.

"Maybe that's it, Doc. Maybe he is tough; tough as nails from living in the wild all these years. Maybe that is the answer. Thanks, Doc!"

Bender jumped up from the table and headed for the back door.

"Where you off to then, Bender?" Doc asked, surprised.

"Alex's house. I've got to tell him about Old Jubel Owens, right?" Bender asked.

"Yes. Jubel Owens," Doc answered.

"Thanks again, Doc!"

Bender was out the door and across Doc's back yard before Doc could even get out of his chair to close the door behind him. Bender ran as fast as he could go, across the Miller's back yard, the Mitchell's and the Cutting's. He broke out of the yards onto River Road and halfway down the block, turned into the Carey's driveway where he discovered their car was gone. He peered through the garage window, but the car was not parked in there either. *Damn! Looks like they're not back from the hospital yet,* he thought to himself. "Damn," he muttered, in a low, but audible voice. Bender walked to the front porch and took a seat on the top step.

He spent the next twenty minutes thinking about what Doc had said. It didn't seem possible that an old man could have done what he couldn't. *How could anyone have moved those rocks?* But-someone had, and Old Jubel was the only likely person, as unlikely as it seemed on the surface of things. Bender rested his forehead in his hands and tried to think of any other possibility, but came up with nothing. He looked up as he heard a car turn into the driveway.

"Hey, Alex! Welcome home!" Bender shouted at the arriving car.

Alex hopped out of the car and limped over to Bender.

"Still hurts?" Bender asked.

"Sure as heck does. The doctor said it was sprained pretty badly, but nothing's broken in there," Alex answered, smiling at Bender.

Bender threw his arm around Alex to lend him some support and said, "Let's go inside to your room. I've got some neat news to tell you."

The two friends headed up the front stoop and into the house, Mrs. Carey following along behind them while Mr. Carey pulled the car into the garage.

"Are you boys ready for some lunch?" Alex's mom asked.

"Not yet, Mom. We're going to my room and talk awhile first," Alex answered. "Thanks anyway."

Alex and Bender went down the hallway and went into Alex's room, Alex resting back on the bed and Bender pulling up Alex's desk chair to the bedside.

"Listen-I talked to Doc this morning before coming here, and you know what he told me?" Bender asked, excitedly.

"No, what?" Alex replied, his curiosity peaked at Bender's tone.

"He told me that there is, or was, a hermit named Jubel Owens that lives up around Round Knob!" Bender blurted out.

"No shit?" Alex exclaimed. "Really? How does Doc know about him?"

"Doc says he used to live in Latoon until about 1947 when he decided to become a hermit 'cause his wife got killed and some other folks, too, when his gas station blew up," Bender explained, hastily running through the story.

"Really? Cool! Maybe it was him that pulled me out of the river then!" Alex exploded.

"Maybe-But-there is one problem with that. Doc says that Jubel would be about eighty-five years old by now. How could he have moved those rocks and have freed you like that? I couldn't do it, I tried," Bender said.

"Huh...", Alex replied, and then sat silently thinking about it.

Bender watched as Alex thought hard about it, and then added, "Doc also says that he can't be sure that Old Jubel is even still alive."

Alex looked up at Bender and spoke in a very matter-of-fact voice, "Of course he is, and we're going to find him and thank him for saving me."

"Did you even hear what I said, Alex," asked Bender.

"Yes, I heard, but eighty-five or not, he has to be the one who saved me. Who else could it have been?"

"I don't know, but just keep in mind what Doc said about him being old. We may be barking up the wrong tree with Old Jubel," Bender replied, smiling warmly at Alex.

"Okay, I'll keep it in mind, but just as soon as I can make the hike back to Round Knob, we're going, right?"

"Sure, we'll go," Bender answered, patting Alex on the shoulder. "We'll go and find him if he's there."