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MANUSCRIPT

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DARIEN'S RISE



PAUL MCCUSKER
FROM ADVENTURES IN ODYSSEY®



TYNDALE

Tyndale House Publishers, Inc.
Wheaton, Illinois

DARIEN'S RISE

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ISBN: 1-58997-167-1

Library of Congress has cataloged previous edition as follows:

McCusker, Paul,

Darien's rise / by Paul McCusker.

p. cm.

Summary: Kyle and his sister Anna find themselves in an alternate world in which they have special powers to help carry out the will of the Unseen One.

ISBN: 1-56179-773-1

[1. Time and space Fiction. 2. Brothers and sisters Fiction.

3. Christian life Fiction.] I. Title.

PZ7.M47841635Vo 1999

[Fic]—dc21

99-14208

CIP

A Focus on the Family book published by

Tyndale House Publishers, Wheaton, Illinois 60189

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The author is represented by the literary agency of Alive Communications, 7680 Goddard Street, Suite 200, Colorado Springs, CO 80920.

Editors: Larry Weeden and Mick Silva

Cover design: Greg Sills

Cover copy: Larrilee Frazier

Printed in the United States of America

2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 /10 09 08 07 06 05

PROLOGUE



The winter rain fell like cold splinters on Odyssey. John Avery Whittaker, or *Whit* as he is best known, stood at the front window of Whit's End, his popular soda shop and discovery emporium. He watched the drops hit the grass that stretched out to the street. Cars splashed past. Men and women with large overcoats and billowing umbrellas crouched as they walked up and down the sidewalk. The grayness washed all color out of the day.

I won't get a lot of kids asking for ice cream today, he said to himself. He decided to get out an extra supply of hot chocolate mix.

One man suddenly ducked from the main street and made his way up the sidewalk to the front door of the shop. He burrowed deep into his coat to brace himself against the rain. One hand struggled with an umbrella. His other hand clutched a large, brown envelope. Whit smiled. It was Jack Allen, a childhood friend who now ran an antique shop in Odyssey. Whit was always glad to spend time with Jack.

The small bell above the door jingled as Jack opened it and stepped in from the cold. "My word!" he said when he saw Whit by the window. "It's a mess out there."

"Hi, Jack," Whit said. He walked over to the counter to fetch his friend something hot to drink. "What in the world are you doing out on a day like this?"

"I wanted to see you." Jack closed his umbrella and leaned it against the wall. He took off his coat, shook some water from it, then hung it on the rack that stood next to the door.

"Drink?" Whit held up a mug.

Jack nodded. "Coffee, please."

Whit poured a mug for each of them. As he did, Jack sat down at the counter and dropped the envelope onto the marble top.

"What's that?" Whit asked.

"A manuscript I thought you'd be interested in."

Whit gave Jack his mug of coffee. "A manuscript?" he asked.

"I found it in an old trunk I bought at an estate sale," Jack explained. "You know the McCutcheons?"

"Mrs. McCutcheon used to teach English at the middle school. She was a wonderful woman. Taught for nearly 50 years, I think. Passed away a month and a half ago." Whit smiled fondly as he remembered Maude McCutcheon. She was a kind and dedicated teacher, loved by everyone in Odyssey.

"Her family decided to sell the house and almost everything in it. I went out yesterday for the auction. I bought some

of the furniture, a few lamps and end tables, tapestries, and an old trunk from her attic.” Jack sipped his coffee. “The trunk was filled with old clothes, a few books, the usual odds and ends. Nothing remarkable—except this manuscript.”

“You think it’s remarkable?” Whit asked.

Jack gazed at his friend. “I’d like you to read it and tell me what you think.”

Whit opened the envelope and pulled out a thick notebook. The front of it had a standard black cover with a white panel in the center that said simply, “School Notebook.” It was bound in black adhesive on the spine.

“It’s a school book?” Whit said curiously. He opened the cover and saw page after page of neatly scripted handwriting on lined paper. “Somebody’s class assignment?”

Jack shook his head. “That’s what I thought until I read it. Now I’m not so sure.”

In the upper-right-hand corner of the first page was written the date: October 3, 1958. Whit couldn’t think of anything significant about the date. To the left, the author had written, “Chronicle of the Chosen.”

Whit looked at Jack. “That’s an interesting name.”

“Just wait until you read the story.”

“Ah!” Whit exclaimed, as if Jack had just given him an important clue. “It’s a story. Fiction or nonfiction?”

“You tell me after you read it.”

"Is there an author? Do you know who wrote it?"

Jack smiled at him mischievously. "I won't say a word about it. Just read it."

"Okay, I'm hooked," Whit said with a smile. "I'll read it tonight."



By the time Whit got home from the shop that evening, the rain had turned to a beautiful snow. It fell in heavy, white flakes. The weather man on the radio called for a couple of feet of it to settle by morning. Whit guessed that the roads around town would be impassable by then. No doubt the businesses would shut down the next day and the children would get the day off from school. Even as an adult, he loved days like that. He felt a delightful sense of peace and security when he was forced to stay at home on cold, wintry mornings. Then again, he might pull out his sled and join the kids who were sure to be playing on Bennigan Hill after breakfast.

Whit ate dinner, then made his way to the living room. He started a fire in the fireplace, got it to a satisfying heat, and sat down in his favorite chair with a cup of hot tea and the envelope Jack had given him. He opened the notebook and read once again, "The Chronicle of the Chosen."

"This isn't a child's handwriting," he said thoughtfully to no one. The handwriting gave Whit the impression of maturity:

a formal style of penmanship resulting from an old-fashioned, classical education.

“Kyle and Anna pressed on through the thick, green forest,” the story began. ...

CHAPTER ONE



“Come on!” Kyle ordered his younger sister impatiently.

Anna had been snagged by the wild underbrush. “I’m going as fast as I can,” she insisted. “Why don’t they have paths in these woods?”

“Because they’re old woods, and nobody comes here anymore,” Kyle answered. “You remember what Uncle Bill said. Now hurry up!”

“Uncle Bill might have been pulling our leg,” Anna said. She broke free from the underbrush. Old twigs snapped like firecrackers under her feet. “Slow down, Kyle!” she called as she raced to catch up.

Kyle slowed a little, but not enough for Anna to notice. He was a stubborn 12-year-old who would never openly concede to doing something nice for his 10-year-old sister.

She puffed irritably behind him. “I knew this would happen,” she said. “I should have stayed with Grandma.”

“And get bored stiff,” Kyle reminded her.

Anna didn’t respond. Kyle was right. Since they’d come to Odyssey to stay with their grandparents at the beginning of the summer, they’d been bored. As a couple of “city kids,” they found it hard to cope with the slower pace and less-sophisticated pleasures of a small town. Their grandparents did their best to keep the two kids active, but there was only so much that could hold their interest. Kyle and Anna finally admitted to themselves that they’d made a big mistake when they let their parents talk them into going to Odyssey for a month.

A glimmer of hope arose, however, when their Uncle Bill came to visit just last evening and told them about an old, mysterious house in the middle of the woods. He said it had been empty for years. Some said it was haunted, others that it was magical, while still others claimed it once belonged to an eighteenth-century pirate who'd buried his treasure in the garden. "Whatever it is," Uncle Bill said, "it might be a fun way to pass the time."

Both Grandma and Grandpa pooh-poohed the story. Neither of them could remember an old house in the woods. But Uncle Bill insisted it was there, not far from Rock Creek in what they called the Black Forest.

Kyle was immediately intrigued and wanted Uncle Bill to draw a map. Uncle Bill scribbled directions as well as he could remember them—he hadn't been there since he was a child, he admitted. Kyle said he would go the next day if it was all right with his grandparents.

"Sure, you can go," his grandfather said. "But you won't find anything."

Anna didn't agree to go with Kyle until the next morning. She didn't really want to, but she thought it would be better than holding Grandma's yarn while she knitted. Now—in the middle of the hot and humid Black Forest—she thought of that yarn and a tall glass of lemonade and wished she'd stayed behind in spite of the boredom.

Kyle tripped on a rock and fell, getting covered in dark mulch. Dead leaves stuck to his close-cropped, blond hair. Two circles of wet dirt formed on the knees of his jeans. "I'll bet nobody's walked through here in years," he said happily.

Anna didn't understand her brother. How could he be happy? It upset her to discover that her white sneakers were now a spotted brown. Her pants were streaked and smudged

with dirt and decaying bark. She had torn the sleeve on her shirt. This expedition was turning into a disaster as far as she was concerned.

And what would they do if they didn't find a house? Worse, she thought, what if they did find it and it was all the things Uncle Bill had said? Maybe that pirate still haunted the house, scaring away strangers who hoped to dig up his treasure.

"That would be cool!" Kyle said when Anna told him her worries.

No, she didn't understand her brother at all.

Half an hour later, she was beyond trying to understand him and openly complained that it was time to go home. "The house doesn't exist," she said. "Uncle Bill was just teasing us."

Kyle wouldn't hear of it. "It's around here somewhere. It has to be."

Another half hour went by, and Anna began to worry out loud that they were lost.

"We're not lost!" Kyle snapped. "I never should have let you come along. All you do is gripe, gripe, gripe!"

"I want to go home," she said and abruptly sat down right where she was. "I'm tired and thirsty."

Kyle towered over her with his hands on his hips. "Then go home," he told her. "I don't care."

"I'll get lost," she said.

"That's not my problem."

"It will be if Mom and Dad find out you let me wander around alone in some strange woods."

He groaned.

"You know I'm right."

"You really get on my nerves," he said with a frown.

"That makes us even."

"Yeah, sure." Kyle glanced ahead longingly. He wanted to

go on. But he had to admit—not out loud, though—that he was getting tired, too. He sighed deeply, then said casually, “Okay, let’s go back. But first you’d better knock that bug out of your hair.”

Anna had long, thick, brown hair and lived in horror that a bug would hide in it somewhere. One night before bed, she had brushed a small spider out of it. She had screamed loudly enough to wake up the neighbors. The police had come. She’d had nightmares for a week.

If there had been any sleeping neighbors in these woods—or police—the situation would have repeated itself. She screamed out one long note, leaped to her feet, and danced wildly around while flicking her hair with both her hands. “Get it out! Get it out!” she shrieked.

Of course the bug flew away the instant Anna moved, but that didn’t stop her from screaming, dancing, and flicking for a full seven minutes.

As Kyle tried to calm her down, he caught a glimpse of the house through the trees.



“This is incredible!” Kyle exclaimed. “I told you we’d find it!”

The house stood awkwardly in an area so thick with trees that the sunlight couldn’t break through. It looked completely out of place.

“What’s it doing here?” Anna whispered. “It’s like it got lost from all the other houses and died here. Why would anyone want to build a house in the middle of nowhere?”

“I don’t know,” Kyle said breathlessly as he circled around to the front. It was everything Uncle Bill had said: big, empty, and mysterious. Part of it reminded him of an English castle,

with walls made of large blocks of uncut stone and a tower sticking up from the corner. It had round, arched windows leading up to a conelike roof. Then it was as if the builder had gotten bored with that idea and decided to do something else. The rest of the house looked Gothic, with decorative gables, ornamental shingles, and shuttered windows jutting out of long walls. The porch was framed by intricate molding on the rails between the slim posts. It surrounded three sides of the house as if it were a belt meant to hold it all together.

Kyle's imagination went wild with images of pirates, secret meetings, and treasure. "Maybe Darien's Creek used to be a big river that led to the sea," he said. "I'll bet the pirates brought their ships in and hid here."

"Pirates?" Anna asked with a loud gulp. She hadn't forgotten the image of the ghost of a captain protecting his booty.

They slowly approached the steps leading up to the long front porch. Closer now, they could see how dark and dirty the place was. Windows were broken out. A tree had fallen and smashed through a wall on the far side. Portions of the roof had collapsed, the wood having given up its strength and decomposed a long time ago. Kyle reached the front door. It was made of heavy wood, worn and scarred, with panels of glazed glass, most of which were shattered.

"This is great!" Kyle said.

Anna lingered behind. She didn't believe in haunted houses, but this looked too much like the kind she'd seen in the movies.

"I don't like it," she groaned. "Let's go home." She knew Kyle wouldn't listen to her. He never listened to her. Nobody did, as far as she was concerned. She was just a little girl without a voice.

He tried the door handle. It turned, and the door opened with a loud creaking sound. Kyle winced at the smells of rotten wood, mold, and animal droppings.

Anna stayed by the steps. “Kyle!” she called.

“Stay out here if you want to,” he said. He was turned away from her, so she couldn’t see his wry smile. “I’m sure the bugs will leave your hair alone.”

Anna hurried to Kyle’s side and held on to his arm.

The house looked as bad on the inside as it did on the outside. Cobwebs clung to the corners of the cracked ceiling and chipped plaster walls. Black smudges outlined the places where framed pictures had once hung. Leaves swirled and spread across the floor like brown fairies. Nests of branches and bush filled some of the corners and the fireplaces.

“Cool,” Kyle whispered.

The lower floor was made up of what was once a spacious living room, a library (with collapsed bookshelves), a dining room that led into what must have been the kitchen, and a small pantry. After their tour, Anna insisted that they go home.

“Not yet,” Kyle said. “Not until I see the whole house.” He started walking up the stairs. They protested with creaks and groans.

Anna looked around nervously and knew they’d made a mistake. They shouldn’t have come here. Why didn’t Uncle Bill learn to keep his mouth closed? Why couldn’t she make Kyle listen to her?

“Hey! Is anybody here?” Kyle suddenly called out when they reached the top of the stairs.

Anna jumped. “Are you trying to give me a heart attack?” she protested.

“Do you hear that?” he asked her softly, cocking his ear.

“Hear what?”

He hesitated as he listened again. “Voices. I hear someone talking.”

“You’re trying to scare me,” Anna said nervously.

"No, I'm serious," Kyle said, then crept along the second floor. "Back here."

"I don't hear anything."

They passed a couple of open doors that led into what were probably bedrooms. Their condition was the same as that of the rooms on the first floor.

"I don't like this," Anna whispered again. The floor beneath her felt wobbly. They were walking on loose boards. Kyle ignored her and pressed on down the corridor. He stopped at a closed door.

"In here," Kyle said softly. Putting his ear against the rotten wood, he listened, then whispered, "Someone's in here."

Anna watched her brother carefully. Was he teasing her, or had he been out in the woods too long?

"Can't you hear them?"

"No," she replied sullenly.

Kyle shot her an annoyed look, then knelt down and peeked in the keyhole. His eyes grew wider than she'd ever seen them. He gasped. "There are people in there!"

"Cut it out, Kyle," she demanded. "You're not funny." All her instincts told her to run away as fast as she could. But she didn't dare. She knew he'd never stop teasing her for falling for his joke.

He continued in a low whisper, "It's so weird! They're dressed in old-fashioned clothes. Like ... like ... uniforms and ..." He couldn't find the words to describe it and gave up. "The room is full of furniture and paintings and ..." His voice trailed off. "This doesn't make any sense. How can there be a room like this in an abandoned house?"

Anna tugged at his arm. "Let's get out of here!" she begged.

"But you have to see this," he insisted.

"I don't care! Let's go before we get in trouble!"

"Look first. I want to prove I'm not crazy." He stepped

back so she could see into the keyhole.

Anna figured the only way to get Kyle out of the house was to do what he said. She bent down to look. At first she didn't see anything. She squinted and looked again. The room was there, but it was as empty and run-down as the rest of the house. "I don't see anything," she said.

"Look harder!" Kyle whispered.

She did. The room was still empty and run-down. "Kyle—" she began to say.

Suddenly they heard a loud crack. The floorboards beneath Kyle's feet buckled, then gave way. Kyle shouted as he fell backward. His hands clawed at the air. Anna reached for him, but it was too late. He crashed through the floor.

Anna crawled on her hands and knees to the edge of the gaping hole of old wood and splinters. "Kyle!" she screamed.

She couldn't see below. The hole was black except for a swirling cloud that Anna thought was dust from the ceiling plaster. The cloud spun around and around but didn't clear. If Kyle was down there, Anna couldn't figure out where he was.

"Kyle! Are you all right?" she called out. He didn't answer. Certain he was hurt, Anna got to her feet to run to the stairs. The floorboards in front of her also cracked loudly. *The whole floor is going to cave in*, she thought. She stepped back, pressed herself against the wall, then slid along to the closed bedroom door. "Kyle!" she cried.

She felt for the doorknob and prayed it wasn't locked, suddenly desperate for someplace safe. It turned easily. She pushed the door open and carefully inched backward into the room, turned on her heels to walk in, and was suddenly engulfed in a bright, white light.

Nobody ever listens to me was the last thing she thought before the light drew her in.