

PASSAGES™

MANUSCRIPT

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ARIN'S JUDGMENT



PAUL MCCUSKER
FROM ADVENTURES IN ODYSSEY®



TYNDALE

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ARIN'S JUDGMENT

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PROLOGUE



Jack Allen brought his old, blue Buick to a stop alongside the curb. Jagged ice crunched loudly beneath the tires. It reminded him of the sounds of a child eating a candy cane. Otherwise, the cold, snow-filled day was silent.

“Well,” said John Avery Whittaker from the passenger side of the car. “I remember when this part of Odyssey was nothing but open fields and farmland. The town has grown a lot.”

Jack looked through the smeared windshield at the avenue of middle-class homes. They were built in a Colonial style popular in the early 1970s. The sun, barely a smudge of white in the overcast sky, gave a hazy look to the bare trees and shrubs that poked like pencil marks out of the snow-covered lawns. A tall “For Sale” sign waved gently to them from the front of Maude McCutcheon’s house. She was the reason they were there.

“Do you think we’ll find any more manuscripts?” Jack asked as he turned off the car’s engine.

Whit, as John Whittaker was best known, smiled. His lips curled up and disappeared under his bushy-white mustache. “I hope so,” he said.

Jack pulled a large, brown envelope from the top of the

dashboard. In it was the first clue in a mystery the two men hoped to solve. "Shall we?"

Whit nodded. The two men climbed out of the car and carefully made their way up the icy driveway to the front door of the house. They stepped onto the porch, and Whit rang the doorbell. Somewhere inside, it chimed pleasantly. Jack shivered and withdrew into his overcoat as the wind blew his salt-and-pepper-colored hair in odd directions. Whit's hair, normally wild and disheveled anyway, moved above his head like a white flame. The two men looked at each other and laughed. They'd been friends since childhood and knew what the other was thinking at that moment.

The door was unlocked and opened by a middle-aged man with ruddy cheeks, dark brown hair, and sad eyes. Without a doubt, he was Maude McCutcheon's son. The eyes in particular made it obvious; Whit saw Maude in those eyes.

"Yes?" he asked.

"Hello, Mr. McCutcheon," Jack said. "I'm Jack Allen. I phoned this morning."

"Oh, yes, Mr. Allen. You're the antiques dealer we sold some of my mother's things to."

Jack nodded. "That's right. This is John Avery Whittaker."

"I know Mr. Whittaker," the man said, shaking Whit's hand and smiling. "It's good to see you again."

"It's good to see you, too, Billy."

“How do you two know each other?” Jack asked.

“Billy was a student of mine one year when I taught at the high school. Got an A in English if I remember right.”

“Did I?” McCutcheon asked. “It’s one of the few A’s I got in high school then. Sports took up most of my time. Come in, gentlemen.”

The man called Billy led Whit and Jack down a short hallway into the living room. The furniture sat at odd angles, having been pushed aside to leave space for the many packed cardboard boxes. A fire blazed in the fireplace on the far wall. It was the only hint that this room was probably a cozy place to sit and read once upon a time. Whit imagined Maude McCutcheon sitting in here often, drinking tea, reading her students’ essays or story assignments. *Is this where she first read the mysterious manuscript?* he wondered.

“I’m sorry about the mess,” McCutcheon said. “We’re selling the house, and, as you know, we’re trying to get rid of a lot of Mother’s things.”

“We’re sorry to bother you at a time like this,” Jack said.

“I was deeply saddened to hear about your mother’s death,” Whit added. “She was a wonderful woman. A great teacher, in fact.”

“Thank you for saying so. She spoke highly of you as well.”

“We won’t take up too much of your time.”

McCutcheon looked perplexed. “You said something on the

phone about a . . . I'm sorry, I don't remember what you said you found."

Jack opened the brown envelope and took out an old tablet bound on one side with black adhesive tape. The front had a standard black cover with a white panel in the center that said simply, "School Notebook."

"We found this in one of the trunks I bought at the auction," Jack said.

McCutcheon took the notebook and casually flipped through the pages. "I don't recognize the handwriting. I'm sure it doesn't belong to anyone in our immediate family. Do you think it belonged to one of my mother's students? She had a lot of them over the years."

"It's possible," Jack replied. "We were hoping you could tell us."

McCutcheon shrugged. "My sister and I carefully went through everything sold at the auction—and in the trunks. I assume my sister saw this and decided it wasn't worth keeping. What is it?"

"A story."

"It must be an interesting story to have you out on a cold day like this."

"We thought it was *very* interesting, to be honest," Whit agreed. "It piqued our curiosity."

"Why?"

“It’s a story about a boy and a girl who somehow slipped from Odyssey into an alternate world.”

“An alternate world?” McCutcheon asked. “You mean like another planet or a fantasy world?”

Whit nodded. “Something like that. They wound up in a country called Marus, where they helped a general become a king and seemed to develop unusual powers with the help of a mystical old man.”

“Sounds fascinating.”

“Fascinating—and possibly *true*,” Whit said.

“You’re joking.”

“Nothing about the story indicated it was fiction.” Whit smiled. He knew he must sound like a lunatic.

“If it took place in another world, wouldn’t you *assume* it was make-believe?” McCutcheon asked.

Jack chuckled. “One would assume so, yes,” he admitted.

Whit lightly brushed his mustache. “Billy,” he said, “I run a soda shop for kids in town—”

“Whit’s End. I’ve heard about it.”

“One of the things I encourage the kids to do is to use their imaginations. I ask them to allow that sometimes the impossible may be possible.”

“You sound like my mother,” McCutcheon said affectionately. “But she never came right out and said she believed in other worlds, worlds that are parallel to ours. Do you?”

Whit smiled and shrugged again. "Like I said, I think it's healthy to imagine ways in which the impossible may be possible."

"If nothing else, it's a nice diversion on a cold, wintry day," said Jack.

"How can I help you?" McCutcheon asked.

Whit said, "We were wondering if you found any other notebooks like this one while you were clearing out your mother's things."

"I haven't. But I was going through Mother's financial records mostly. My sister went through Mother's school files and boxes."

"Is your sister here?" Jack asked.

"No. She had to go back to Detroit this morning." He thought for a moment, then waved a hand at Whit and Jack to follow him. They went up the stairs to a small room near the back of the house. It had the appearance of a study, with a desk and bookshelves built into the wall from floor to ceiling. They were empty. "There are some boxes in here that my sister found in the attic," McCutcheon said. "She didn't get a chance to go through them. I think they're more old files from Mother's various classes. You're welcome to have a look if you want."

"Are you sure it's not an imposition?" Jack asked.

"Not at all."

"Thank you."

McCutcheon left them alone to go through the boxes, which were filled with files and papers related to Maude McCutcheon's years as a schoolteacher. Old reports, essays, letters, and awards spanned her career of more than 50 years. Apart from stopping when Whit saw a student's name that he recognized, the two men didn't find anything related to the mysterious manuscript.

"It's possible there was only one story," Jack observed. "We don't know for sure that any more exist."

"I know," Whit said. "But I'd hate to miss the chance of double-checking."

A little over an hour later, they had gone through all the boxes thoroughly. "That's all," Jack said, a trace of disappointment in his voice. He folded his arms and leaned against the desk.

Whit sighed. "Too bad. I had hoped we'd find more." He ran his fingers through his white mane and stretched. "My back is stiff." He tipped his head back to stimulate the muscles in his aching neck.

"I suppose we should go," Jack said, reaching for his coat.

"Wait a minute," Whit said suddenly. His gaze was fixed on the top shelf of the bookcase.

Puzzled, Jack looked up at whatever had caught Whit's attention. "What?" A tiny corner of something—a book? a notebook?—peeked over the edge of the shelf.

Whit reached up and, barely able to pinch it between his fingers, pulled it down. It was identical to the other school notebook Jack had found in the trunk.

Jack's face lit up. "Do you think?"

"I hope so." Whit opened the cover. With a dusty flurry, some papers fell out. Jack picked them up. They were yellowed newspaper clippings.

"Newspaper clippings?" Whit said curiously.

Jack skimmed the articles. "Flu Strikes Odyssey," one of them said. It was from the *Odyssey Times* and dated August 3, 1945. The single-paragraph article reported that a flu epidemic in Odyssey had nearly half the students at Odyssey Elementary out sick. A second article, dated August 7 of that same year, said that many children were still sick with a flu, several were hospitalized, but so far none had died. A third article, dated August 28, 1945, was about the return of Odyssey's "heroes from the war"—men who had fought in World War II and were about to come home. The article also mentioned other families who were still awaiting news about their missing sons, husbands, and friends.

"Interesting," Jack said. "Odyssey had a flu epidemic at the end of World War II."

"I wonder what that has to do with this?" Whit had opened the notebook and was now flipping through the pages.

"Is it another story?"

“It’s a story, but I’m not sure that it’s—” Whit stopped mid-sentence. “Wait. Yes.” He pointed to a word on the page.

“Marus. It mentions Marus.”

Jack grabbed the notebook they’d brought with them. “Check the handwriting,” he suggested.

They held the two notebooks side by side.

Whit smiled. “They’re the same. It’s the same chronicler.”

“Is there a date on that one?” Jack asked.

Whit turned to the first page. “September 18, 1945.”

Jack opened the first notebook. “This is dated October 3, 1958. I wonder if they were really written 13 years apart or at the same time and merely dated differently?”

Whit shook his head.

“What do we do now?”

“Talk to Billy,” Whit said as he picked up his coat. “And read this story.”

Billy McCutcheon was pleased that Whit and Jack had found what they were looking for. After confirming that it wasn’t something his mother had written personally, he gave them permission to take the notebook away. Half-jokingly he added, “Just remember where you got it if you make lots of money on the story.”

Jack drove Whit back to Whit’s End. “I have some errands to run with my wife,” Jack said. “You read the story now and I’ll pick it up from you later.”

"Are you sure?" Whit asked. "You can read it, then bring it back to me if you want."

Jack shook his head no. "Go on," he urged.

Whit said good-bye to his friend and went into Whit's End. It was closed for the day because of all the snow. He had decided it would be good for Connie and Eugene, his two employees, to have the day off. He didn't think many kids would come around anyway since it was such good sledding snow.

In his office, Whit settled down with a cup of hot chocolate and the notebook. He felt an almost childlike twinge of expectation as he opened the cover. Glancing at the three newspaper articles again, he wondered what their connection to the story could be. He put them aside and started to read. "The Chronicle of the Destroyed," it began . . .

CHAPTER ONE



A punch to the stomach sent Wade Mullens doubled over to the ground. Black spots pulsated before his eyes, and he barely heard Steve Calloway mutter, “Kraut-loving freak!” before he walked away.

Bobby Adams rushed up to Wade. “Are you all right?” he asked. His voice seemed miles away.

“I ... can’t ... breathe ...” Wade croaked.

“Stay calm,” Bobby said. “Relax.”

Wade rolled around on the ground, gasping like a fish out of water. After a few minutes, the air came back to him and he sat up.

Bobby knelt next to him. “Oh, boy, you’re going to have a shiner,” he announced.

Wade gently touched his left eye where Steve had punched him right before the decisive blow to his stomach. He could feel the eye swelling up.

“Can you stand up?” Bobby asked.

Wade nodded. Clasp hands with Bobby, he was tugged to his feet. His legs were wobbly.

“Where are my books?” Wade asked.

“All over the place,” Bobby replied. Silently the two boys retrieved Wade’s books, which had been littered around the school yard by Steve and his gang.

Bobby, a stout boy of 11 with curly, brown hair, grunted at the exertion of bending over for the books and bits of paper.

Wade dusted the dirt from his blond hair and checked his clothes. A black eye was bad enough, but if he’d torn his

trousers or shirt, his mother would have a fit. Apart from smudges of grass and mud, however, they seemed to be all right.

Bobby shook his head. "You shouldn't have said it. How many times did I tell you not to say it?"

Wade shrugged. "I was just stating a fact."

"Fact or not, you can't go around talking about German airplanes as if you *like* them," Bobby said.

"All I said was that the Messerschmitt has a sleek design. What's so bad about that?"

"And you said that the German Me-262 has turbojet power and beats anything we've invented."

"It's true. It has a top speed of 540 miles per hour, and that's a lot faster than—"

"You don't have to tell me! I'm the one who first told you about the Me-262, remember? But Steve's dad was at Omaha Beach on D-Day! You can't talk to people like Steve about the Germans unless it's something you *hate* about them. Otherwise you sound like a traitor."

"I'm not a traitor. Steve's dad came home after the Germans surrendered. My dad is still—" Wade stopped, unable to continue. America had just dropped two atomic bombs on Japan a month before, and the Japanese had surrendered, but Wade and his mother still hadn't heard anything about his father. He'd been missing somewhere in the South Pacific for several weeks.

"You know that and I know that, but Steve doesn't know." Bobby handed him a sheet of paper he'd picked up from the ground. It was a picture Wade had drawn of the B-29 Superfortress, number 77. *The Great Artiste*, it was called. It had carried the second A-bomb to Japan.

In Wade's picture, the plane flew through clear skies. Somewhere below lay the great shipping center called

Nagasaki, represented by a distant shoreline and dots depicting buildings. There were no people in Wade's picture because, like most Americans, he didn't want to think about the thousands who'd died from the two bombs. But, also like most Americans, he was glad that the 20,000 to 40,000 tons of TNT in those bombs had persuaded the Japanese to surrender. Now maybe they'd find his dad and let him come home.

Wade took a moment to assemble his textbooks so he could carry them home. Jammed between the books were comic books about space travel and war, a science fiction novel, and one of the academic journals lent to him by Mr. Curfew, his neighbor. He'd brought that in for show-and-tell, and to tell the class about the various weapons of war. He had told them about the B-17G, the "Flying Fortress Bomber," which was able to carry more than 6,000 tons of bombs over 2,000 miles. He'd also described the Hawker Tempest Mark V, with its ability to go faster than 400 miles per hour; it was one of the few Allied planes that could catch and destroy the German "buzz bombs" (the V-1 jet-powered bombs). Then he'd mentioned the superiority of the Messerschmitt's design and the Me-262's speed. This last part had guaranteed his afternoon fight with Steve Calloway.

Wade had tried to explain to Steve that he didn't like the war or the Germans, but that didn't stop him from learning about the machines and weapons they'd used in the war. Steve wouldn't hear it, and the fists had begun to fly.

"Remember Pearl Harbor!" Steve had proclaimed when he hit Wade in the eye. "Remember the death march on Bataan!" he had then shouted before hitting Wade in the stomach.

Wade and Bobby made their way toward home.

"Do you want to stop by my house to clean up?" Bobby asked.

Wade nodded.

“Good, because there’s something I want to show you.”

Bobby’s mother worked afternoons at Hudson’s Drug Store in downtown Odyssey, so the two boys could move around the house easily. Wade gave himself a quick wash in the bathroom while Bobby’s younger sister of seven kept asking why Wade’s eye was so puffed up. *It looks bad, all right*, Wade thought as he inspected it in the mirror. It was already taking on the tell-tale tones of blue, black, and yellow.

Bobby gestured for Wade to follow him into his bedroom, then nearly closed the door on his younger sister, who whined and protested for a few minutes.

“Look what my cousin sent me,” Bobby said quietly. He looked around the room and out the window, then double-checked to make sure his sister was gone before spreading some pages out on his desk. On them were rough drawings of what looked like a large bomb.

“What are these?” Wade asked.

“Top secret,” Bobby said.

“Top secret?”

Bobby’s voice fell to a whisper. “This is from my cousin Lee in *New Mexico*.”

“So?”

“So! *New Mexico* is where they’ve been working on the atomic bomb.”

Wade looked from Bobby’s face to the pages, then back to Bobby’s face again. “You mean ...?”

“My cousin Lee’s dad—my Uncle Walter—is a scientist who’s been working on the atomic bomb. Lee made these drawings from some papers and photos he’d seen in his dad’s briefcase.”

Wade’s heart lurched. “Are you crazy?” he asked breathlessly.

“There are spies out there who’d *kill* to get their hands on stuff like this.”

“Yeah, I know,” Bobby said. “Why do you think I’m being so careful?”

Wade pointed to the next page. “What’s all this stuff?”

“I think it’s how they make them. See?”

Wade glanced over the list: “Uranium 235 ... Uranium 238 ... plutonium ... nuclear fission ... isotopes ... altimeter ... air pressure detonator ... detonating head ... urea nitrate ... lead shield ...”

“Lee said he scribbled down everything he could,” Bobby explained.

Wade’s mouth was hanging open now. He read about how the various components interacted to cause an explosion. He also saw a page about the effects of radiation on human subjects after the bombs exploded. Many were burned, and some got sick and died. It also warned of radiation getting into water systems and sources of food. “We shouldn’t be seeing this,” he said finally.

“I know,” Bobby said, smiling. “That’s why I showed it to you.”

“We have to get rid of it.”

“I figured I’d throw it in the furnace as soon as we looked it over,” Bobby agreed. “Uncle Walt would put Lee on restriction for the rest of his life if he knew Lee had mailed this to me.”

Suddenly a voice at the door said, “Bobby?” It was his mother. The door handle turned. Acting quickly, Bobby grabbed and folded the sheets of paper and shoved them under Wade’s untucked shirt. “What’s going on in here?” Bobby’s mother asked.

“Nothing,” Bobby answered with a voice that said just the opposite.

His mother eyed him suspiciously, then looked at Wade. "Good heavens! What happened to you?" she said. "Is that a black eye?"

Wade stammered incoherently.

"He fell down on the way home from school," Bobby lied.

"Looks more like you were in a fight," his mother said. "I think you should go home right away."

"But—" Bobby started to protest.

"No 'buts' about it." She put a hand on Wade's shoulder and guided him out of the room. "You go home and get that eye looked at," she instructed him.

Bobby's mother stayed with Wade all the way down the stairs to the front door. He tried to think of a way to get the papers back to Bobby, but Bobby's mother was in the way the entire time. She handed him his jacket and books. Bobby shrugged helplessly at Wade as Wade walked through the door and it closed between them.

On the front porch, Wade zipped up his jacket and pressed his books to his chest. He could feel the papers under his shirt. He looked around nervously. What if there were spies watching him? What if the government found out that Lee had sent the drawings to Bobby and secret agents were coming to arrest them even now? Wade swallowed hard and walked quickly down the steps of the front porch and out onto the street. His walk soon became a run as he took off for home.

Every casual glance from people he passed took on sinister meaning. *They know about the papers*, he kept thinking. A large, black sedan drove past, then suddenly pulled up next to him. *It's them! It's the agents!* Wade thought. The door opened, and Wade cried out—then blushed with embarrassment as an older woman got out of the car to put a letter in the curbside mailbox.

He ducked down some back alleys and zigzagged through his neighborhood, just to make sure he wasn't being followed. When he finally reached his own home, he burst through the front door and raced up the stairs to his room.

"Wade?" his mother called from the kitchen.

Wade dropped the books on his bed, pulled out the papers, and shoved them under his mattress. It was the only place he could think to hide them on the spur of the moment.

His mother called for him from the bottom of the stairs. Forgetting about his black eye, he went back to the top and smiled down at her. "Hi," he said innocently.

"What in the world are you doing?" she asked.

"Putting my books away."

"Why the rush? Didn't you hear me call you from the kitchen?" She wiped her hands on her apron.

"I'm sorry," he said.

"What's that on your face?"

"My face?"

"Come down here," she ordered. Wade went down the stairs to her. She gasped. "Your eye! You've got a black eye!"

"I—"

"Who was it this time, Richard King or Jim McClendon?"

"It doesn't matter," Wade said, shuffling uncomfortably as she ran her fingers gently around his eye.

"Oh, Wade!" she said. "Into the kitchen right now. We're putting an ice pack on it."

Wade groaned.

"And don't make a fuss."

As he walked down the hall toward the kitchen, he suddenly sneezed. It made his eye throb. Then, in the kitchen, he sneezed again.

"Are you coming down with a cold?" his mother asked. Only then was Wade aware that his nose was running.



It was an illness. And in spite of Wade's protests, his mother insisted that he have a bath after putting an ice pack on his eye and then spend the rest of the evening in bed. As the night progressed, he began to feel worse. By bedtime, he had a full-fledged flu of some sort. His mother made him stay home from school the next day. And the day after. What made Wade feel worst of all, though, was knowing Steve and his gang would think Wade had missed school because of his black eye. When he returned to class, they would call him a sissy and a baby, and the teasing would be far more difficult to take than if they'd gotten into another fight.

In his illness, Wade dreamed of evil-looking men trying to sneak into his bedroom to steal the drawings of the atomic bomb. He dreamed of being arrested by government agents who accused him of being a spy. He saw his name in horrible accusatory headlines on the cover of every newspaper in the country. "Spy!" they said. "Hang him!" the editorials demanded. His mother would live in shame, and his father would never be allowed to come home from wherever he was.

A scraping sound echoed distantly in the register near the door. The sound penetrated his deep sleep. He knew instantly what it was: His mother was in the basement, trying to throw some life into their old coal furnace. From the sounds of it, she wasn't having much success.

Wade swung his legs over the side of the bed and pushed his feet into his slippers. The cool air of the room made him realize his pajamas were slightly damp. His fever had broken,

he knew. He stood up, expecting to feel light-headed. To his surprise, he felt normal—good, in fact. His eye didn't hurt as much, either. A glance in the mirror showed him that the swelling was nearly gone and the color wasn't as bad as it had been. He grabbed his robe from the back of the door and suddenly had an idea: Now would be the time to burn the papers about the atomic bomb. He slipped them out from under the mattress, tucked them inside his pajama top, then wrapped his robe snug around him.

"Mom," Wade said when he rounded the furnace in the basement.

Wade's mother looked at him. Her face was smudged with coal. Black streaks also covered her hands, the sleeves of her blouse, and her apron. His mother had never learned the knack of working the furnace, and she got tearfully upset with it. More than once, she'd said that she could endure nearly everything about the war except that furnace. "When your father gets home, we're going to tear it out and get a new one," she'd say. "Do you hear?"

Wade always nodded and agreed.

"What are you doing out of bed?" she asked now, her face flushed.

"I came down to help you."

Mrs. Mullens jabbed a shovel at the inside of the furnace. "I don't need your help," she said. "You should be in bed."

"I'm feeling much better," he replied. He reached up and put his hand on her arm to take the shovel. She frowned, then surrendered the shovel to him. Wade smiled.

"You're the expert, aren't you?" she said as she stroked his blond hair—hair just like hers. "Planes, bombs, and furnaces. Your father is going to be very proud to see how you've grown up."

Wade poked at the fire. "We need more coal."

"He'll be home soon, you know," she said.

Wade turned to her with an expression of understanding. "I know."

But the truth was, he *didn't* know. Neither of them did. The chaos of the war against the Japanese in the Pacific—the many soldiers who had fought on the tiny islands around the Philippines—caused a lot of confusion about who was where. No one was sure what had become of Henry Mullens as the war came to a close. He may simply have been one of many soldiers who'd been separated from his unit. Or he might have been captured, wounded, or killed.

"I would like some tea, please," he said to his mother as he went to the coal cellar in the back corner of the basement. "I'll fix the furnace and then come right up."

She pondered him, then turned to go upstairs. "I hate this furnace," she said as she walked away. "When your father comes home, we're going to—"

"Tear it out and get a new one," Wade called out.

"Brat!" she said with a smile in her voice. He heard her footsteps going up the cellar stairs.

Wade wrenched open the door to the coal cellar. Black soot swirled up and around him. He flipped the switch for the single light that hung by a bare wire from the ceiling. It didn't turn on. "Bulb's out," he said.

Enough light shone in from the furnace room for him to get a bucket of coal, however, so he stepped inside to do just that. Retrieving the empty bucket from where it hung by a peg on the wall, he went to the edge of the pile of coal and started shoveling. Now that his mother was gone, he would throw the papers about the atomic bomb into the furnace with this coal.

He was glad he felt well again. He hated being sick; he missed

his talks at lunch, during recess, and after school with Bobby Adams. For the two of them, fascination with the war had taken the place of their fascination with sports. They spoke of the various armed services the way other boys spoke about baseball teams.

He even missed being in his classes, annoying his teachers with his obsession about the war and his extensive knowledge of the weapons and machines that had brought the war to a conclusion. He wondered what they would think if they knew he had top-secret drawings of the atomic bomb.

The doorbell rang upstairs, and Wade heard his mother's footsteps go across the floor. *I wonder who's here?* he thought, and then he suddenly realized, *It may be government agents! They've come to arrest me for having these papers!*

Wade spun around to rush back to the furnace. He could burn them quickly, and no one would ever know. But just then the shed door blew closed.

"Oh, brother," he said in the sudden deep darkness. He made his way carefully to the door and pushed at it. Nothing happened. He pushed again, but it wouldn't budge. He fiddled with the latch, which lifted easily enough, but still the door wouldn't open. He pounded on it and called out, "Mom? Mom!"

He listened, but she didn't reply.

"Mom!" he called out as loudly as he could. Then he pounded some more with the back of the shovel. "Mom!"

He heard heavy footsteps outside the door and relaxed. He was sure that between the two of them, they could get the door unstuck.

The effort wasn't necessary, however. The door suddenly swung open without any problems.

"Thank you," Wade said.

"You're welcome," an old man he'd never seen before replied.