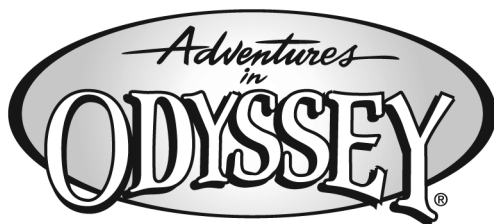


STRANGE JOURNEY BACK



Paul McCusker



Tyndale House Publishers, Inc.
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Strange Journey Back

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A note to readers: The Adventures in Odyssey novels take place in a time period prior to the beginning of the audio or video series. That is why some of the characters from those audio and video episodes don't appear in these stories—they don't exist yet.

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Contents

BOOK ONE

Strange Journey Back 3

BOOK TWO

High Flyer with a Flat Tire 75

BOOK THREE

The Secret Cave of Robinwood 145

BOOK FOUR

Behind the Locked Door 211

Book
One

*Strange
Journey
Back*





Chapter One

MARK PRESCOTT WALKED DOWN the sidewalk with grim determination. In his hand, he clutched an envelope. In his heart, he carried a single desire: More than anything else, he wanted things to be the way they used to be.

He wanted things to be the way they were earlier in the spring before his dad left them; before Mark and his mom moved from his neighborhood and friends in Washington, D.C.; before they came to this little town called Odyssey; before . . . before, well, before everything went wrong.

No matter what Mark was doing or thinking about, that one desire stayed with him—to change things back.

He didn't have time for the hot June day or the gentle breeze that whispered the first secrets of summer. He was on a mission. He had written a letter to his father, and he had to get it mailed.

Mark walked quickly, glancing from one side to the other. The tarred street to his left looked like a steaming black river. To his right, the last Victorian house slipped away like the last car on a long train. Odyssey Elementary School slid into view. It would be Mark's school in the fall, if he were still living in Odyssey, if he couldn't make things the way they used to be.

He was looking ahead when his attention was suddenly

drawn to the playground. Two kids were wrestling on the grass. Next to them, a couple of bikes lay like crippled horses that had fallen to the ground.

“Ouch,” cried one of the wrestlers.

“Cut it out,” hollered the second kid.

The one with sandy hair, dirty jeans, and T-shirt sat triumphantly on the chest of the darker-haired one.

“Say you’re sorry,” the victor kept shouting.

“Ow! Get off!” the dark-haired kid whined.

Mark felt sorry for the kid on the bottom. He knew what it was like to be bullied. One time Cliff Atkinson sat on Mark’s chest at recess and tried to take his lunch money. Just as Mark was about to give in, Lee Brooks grabbed Cliff and pulled him off so Mark could defend himself. Lee did crazy things like that. From then on, Lee had become his best friend.

Remembering how Lee had rescued him, Mark started across the field toward the fighters. Maybe he could help. Maybe he would make a new friend like Lee Brooks. His pace quickened to a run as he shoved the letter into his back pocket.

“Say you’re sorry,” the sandy-haired kid shouted again.

“Let me go!” the darker-haired kid on the bottom cried.

Mark locked his arms around the one on top and pulled hard.

“Hey, stop it!” the kid cried out with surprise.

The one on the bottom jumped up like a freed animal. His dark hair was matted to his sweaty forehead; his face was dirty and streaked with tears. A drop of blood bubbled out of his nose. He was taller than any of them.

“Hah,” the boy shouted, as if he had gotten free without any help. “You’re in big trouble. I’m going to get you for this!”

The boy pulled his bike upright, climbed on it, and pedaled off without even saying thanks to Mark.

The sandy-haired kid broke loose from Mark's grip and turned on him. Bright blue eyes shone with fury, and the face contorted into an expression that could have withered houseplants.

Mark gave a startled gasping sound and exclaimed, "You're a girl!"



Chapter Two

THE GIRL THREW A PUNCH at Mark. As her hand flew past his face, he stepped backward, tripped, and fell. Catlike, she pounced onto his chest and pinned his arms to the ground.

“Do you know what you did?” she screamed. “I waited the whole school year to get Joe! He picked on me. Called me bad names. And just when I—” She let out an angry huffing sound, swallowed, and then asked in a hoarse growl, “Do you know what you did?”

Mark considered wrestling his way out from under her. He knew he could, but he didn't. Instead, he said calmly, “Get off my chest.”

“You ruined it! You ruined everything! Joe Devlin's been needing a good pounding all year.”

“I'm sorry,” Mark said. “I didn't know.”

“You're sorry!” she shouted.

“Yeah,” Mark answered quietly.

She looked puzzled. “You're sorry?”

“Yeah.”

She blinked a couple of times. Her weight on Mark's chest lessened as she climbed off.

“Oh,” she said and sat on the grass next to him. She looked confused.

Mark propped himself up on his elbows and took a deep breath.

“Well . . .” the girl fumbled, “you should be sorry.”

Mark got up and pulled the letter out of his pocket. It was wrinkled and sweaty. *It doesn't look too bad*, he thought.

He turned back to the girl. “I have to leave,” he said and started to walk across the field toward the post office.

By the time Mark reached the sidewalk, she was at his side walking her bike.

“I don't know you,” she announced. “You're new in Odyssey, right?”

“Yeah.” Mark picked up his pace.

“You live in old lady Schaeffer's house, right?”

Mark nodded. *Old lady*, Mark mused. *Is that what they called her?*

“Old lady” Schaeffer was Mark's grandmother, his mom's mom. The house had been his grandmother's until she died a couple of years ago and left everything in a will to Mark's mom. He hadn't known his grandmother very well, only through the usual Christmas and birthday cards.

“You're there with your mom, right?”

Mark wished this girl would leave him alone. She asked too many questions. Sooner or later, she would ask about his father.

“Look,” Mark said, suddenly stopping. “I said I was sorry for ruining your fight. But I have to go. Nice to meet you.” He took longer strides, hoping she wouldn't follow anymore.

The bike rattled behind him. *Maybe she'll climb on it and ride away*, he thought.

But she was at his side again. “Are you going to Whit's End? Looks like you're headed that way. I'm going to Whit's End, too.”

“I'm going to the post office. I don't know what a Whit's End is.”

“You don’t know about Whit’s End? Guess you’ve been hiding somewhere since you moved here.”

“We’ve been busy. We had to unpack lots of boxes,” Mark said defensively.

“Oh. Well, Whit’s End is the best place to go in all of Odyssey! It’s kind of an ice cream shop, but it’s also got a bunch of inventions and displays and . . .” she paused. “You’ll just have to see it. I’ll take you after we go to the post office.”

After we go to the post office? Mark didn’t like the sound of it. His mission didn’t include a strange girl.

“But I . . .” he stopped. He could be rude and tell her to get lost, but his mom had taught him better. “Okay,” he finally said.

The rest of the walk to downtown Odyssey took only five minutes. It could have been five hours. Except to tell her his name when she asked, Mark never got a word in because the girl didn’t stop talking.

She told him that her name was Patti Eldridge, and then she went on to say, “I like to do a lot of things boys usually like, but the kids make fun of me because I’m a girl. And Whit’s End is owned by a man named John Avery Whittaker who used to be a teacher, but he quit because he likes to invent things for kids.”

Her sentences never ended; they just kept going with the word “and.” Eventually, Mark did what he always did with people who talked a lot. He stopped listening and let his mind drift to other places.

He was in his bedroom again. Not the bedroom at his grandmother’s house but *his* bedroom, the real one in Washington, D.C. He was buttoning his shirt, rushing to get ready for school. He was feeling nervous.

In another part of the house, he heard the voices of his mom and dad. Another fight. They seemed to be having more and

more of them. Mark suspected they had tried to hide their fights from him, but they couldn't. He heard them in the morning and sometimes late at night. And even when they weren't fighting, he suffered through the silences at mealtimes. He knew what the late hours his dad kept at the office really meant.

He fumbled with the buttons on his shirt and listened to the voices. His name was mentioned. He froze. As the questions sneaked into his mind, he felt like a fist was punching his stomach. They weren't questions like he had on tests. They were more like feelings with question marks at the end of them: Why did his parents have to fight so much? Why did they say his name?

Maybe he was doing something to make them fight. Maybe it was because he had woken up late for school again. Maybe he had left his shoes in the middle of the living room floor again. Maybe . . . maybe . . . it was his fault. Maybe that's why they didn't fight around him, so he wouldn't hear their list of terrible things he had done to make them fight.

The voices reached a peak and stopped. It was as if a bell had rung, sending the fighters to their corners after another round.

Mark heard a soft shuffle of feet coming up the stairs, down the hall, then stopping at his bedroom door. Mark's dad opened the door and surveyed the room with that familiar frown.

"You're not ready yet," he said. "You want to be late for school again?"

"No, sir," Mark whispered.

"And look at this room. How many times do I have to tell you to clean it?" He shook his head. "Hurry up. Your mother has breakfast waiting for you downstairs."

Mark's father turned and walked away. Shortly afterward, his parents' bedroom door slammed.

In the kitchen his mom didn't say anything. Her eyes were red and wet as she served Mark his breakfast. At one point, she kissed him on the forehead while he ate. She had never done that before. He usually got a kiss on the way out the door. It scared him, and he didn't want to eat anymore.

Finally he put on his coat, grabbed his books, and braced himself for the cold morning air. His mom opened the door, leaned down, and kissed him again. One of her tears smeared his cheek. And the tear was warm.

Mark stepped out into a nippy February day, thrusting his hands into his coat pockets. He heard the laughter and chatter of the other kids waiting at the end of the block for the school bus. He wondered if they had mornings like he did. Did their parents have fights before breakfast?

He walked down the front porch steps and glanced back to see his mother close the door. His eyes drifted up to his parents' bedroom window. The curtain moved slightly. For a brief moment, Mark thought he saw his father looking down at him.

Later that afternoon when he came running in after school, Mark's mom asked him to sit down and listen carefully. With a quavering voice, she explained that his dad had left them. She gave some excuses about why he had. She said he was overworked, they had some problems, and he was confused about things.

But Mark knew the truth. His dad had left because of him. He had left because Mark had woken up late again, his room wasn't clean, and his dad couldn't take it anymore. It was Mark's fault.

"There's the post office," Patti said, bringing Mark back to the present.

Mark rushed into the small brick building, waited in line, then handed over his letter when it was his turn.

The woman behind the counter smiled wearily and handed it back. “It’s too crumpled,” she said. “Put it in another envelope, honey. You don’t want it to get lost, do you?”

He shook his head and stepped away from the counter. He had to get the letter to his dad soon.

Outside the post office Mark said to Patti, “I have to go home right away.”

“But we were going to Whit’s End.”

He started to protest, but she grabbed his sleeve and tugged him along. “It’s right over there,” Patti pointed, “across from McAlister Park. Come on.”

He didn’t want to be rude; he figured he could escape soon enough. Patti identified the various buildings for Mark as they walked through the park. She showed him the gym, the basketball courts, and sports facilities, but he didn’t care. Then a different sort of building came into view. It was a large house sitting off by itself, as if it didn’t belong.

As he got closer, Mark noticed that the house looked more like a collection of odd-shaped boxes with small, medium, and large squares and a rectangular section with windows. It also had a jutting tower and roofs that angled every which way, as if the creator couldn’t make up his mind which way to build them.

“That’s Whit’s End,” Patti said.

For a moment Mark was drawn to the strange-looking place. But his mission came to mind again. He didn’t want to go to an ice cream shop. He wanted to go back home. He wanted to get a new envelope and mail the letter to his dad. He wanted to get away from Patti Eldridge, who kept talking even when he stopped listening. Mark was about to tell Patti he had to leave when—BOOM!



Chapter Three

THE EXPLOSION SHOOK THE PARK, sending echoes through the trees and scattering the birds like a shotgun blast.

“Come on!” Patti said, running toward Whit’s End.

By the time they reached the front of the house, a group of kids and a few adults were filing out in orderly fashion. Mark was surprised by the lack of panic. No one was running or screaming. He didn’t see any signs of damage. Small clouds of smoke drifted from the basement window.

What a strange place, Mark thought.

“Let’s try to get in,” Patti said, as they reached the front door. “I want to see what happened.”

That was as far as they got.

A man stood in the doorway with a fire extinguisher in his hand. White foam dribbled from the nozzle. “Nothing to worry about,” the man announced. “Everything’s under control.”

His voice was low and fuzzy, and his face was lifted into a large smile. His friendly eyes were bright and clear beneath white, bushy eyebrows. The eyebrows matched his mustache and hair, which were thick and untamed.

A fire engine siren screamed in the distance, growing louder as it approached Whit’s End from Main Street.

“Completely unnecessary,” the man said quietly. Glancing at Mark, he winked.

“What happened, Mr. Whittaker?” Patti asked.

Mr. Whittaker. So this is the one Patti kept talking about. Mark studied the man more seriously.

“A fractured filament,” Mr. Whittaker answered. He put down the extinguisher and moved toward the firemen who were jumping off the parked fire engine. Their red helmets and yellow coats looked bright against the green of the park. Whit waved them back. “False alarm, boys. A lot of smoke, that’s all.”

As the fire chief approached Whit, he ordered the others to go in and check the building.

“The third time in two weeks, Whit,” the chief said with a hint of disapproval.

“There’s no danger,” Whit replied.

“Uh-huh, and what was it *this* time?” the fire chief asked.

Whit hesitated, his cheeks turning red. “The Imagination Station.”

“Huh?”

“A time machine, sort of,” Whit offered reluctantly.

A time machine! Mark thought. *Can people really travel through time?*

The fire chief shook his head. “Whit, you’re a wacko.”

Mark heard affection in the man’s voice.

Patti leaned toward Mark. “This happens all the time,” she whispered. “Whit’s always inventing stuff like that.”

“Do . . . do the inventions work?” Mark asked.

“Of course!” Patti exclaimed proudly.

Then Mark heard a breathless puffing and a high-pitched voice muttering behind them.

“Uh-oh, here comes Emma Douglas,” Patti said with a snicker.

Emma Douglas went straight to Whit. “Mr. Whittaker, please!” she said in a voice full of shaky nerves. “I . . . I told you when I took this job that I’m . . . I’m not very good with . . . with this.” She gestured toward Whit’s End. A strand of her silver hair came loose from the knot at the back of her head.

Whit smiled, his upper lip disappearing beneath his mustache. Mark thought the smile was reassuring.

“I’m sorry, Emma,” Whit said. “I must have made a mistake in my figuring.”

Her small hands twisted her apron, as if she were strangling it. “I know you’re sorry, Mr. Whittaker, but I . . . I don’t think I can stand it anymore. All the tinkering you do, the strange inventions, kids everywhere, loud noises.” Emma Douglas caught her breath. “It’s too much for me.”

Whit pleaded with her. “Emma, give it a little more time.”

“I quit, Mr. Whittaker. This minute. This very second. I quit.” Emma Douglas turned and went back through the door into Whit’s End. The knot of hair at the back of her head bobbed up and down like the tail of a rabbit.

Whit shoved his hands deep into the pockets of his work overalls. “Another one,” he said. “That’s the third worker I’ve lost in less than a month.”

“No surprise,” the fire chief chuckled as he walked away, calling orders to the other firemen to return to the station.

Patti tugged at Whit’s sleeve. “Hey, Mr. Whittaker, you have to meet Mark.”

Whit turned, giving his full attention to the two of them.

Patti went on, “He’s old lady Shaef—” she caught herself and started again, “He’s Mrs. Shaeffer’s grandson. He lives in her house.”

“Ah,” Whit said. He reached out, took Mark’s hand, and shook it vigorously. “I knew your grandmother well. A wonderful woman. Are you Julie’s son?”

Mark nodded, suddenly shy.

Whit nodded too. “Of course. Your grandmother talked a lot about your family. There were pictures of you in her living room. I remember now.”

Mark relaxed. There was something comforting about Whit’s knowing who Mark was. He imagined Whit in his grandmother’s living room, maybe drinking tea, looking at the family photos and talking about them like old friends would.

“You’re better-looking in person.” Whit grinned. “Don’t you think so, Patti?” he asked with a nudge.

Patti blushed. “I don’t know. I never saw the pictures.”

Mark’s mind went back to the Imagination Station. He had a lot of questions he was bursting to ask. He had to say something, anything.

“It’s very nice to meet you, Mark,” Whit said with sincerity. “You should come on into the shop and have a look around. Meanwhile, I need to figure out how I’m going to replace Emma Douglas. Poor woman.” He started to walk away from them.

“Mr. Whittaker,” Mark blurted suddenly.

Whit stopped and looked back.

Mark didn’t know how he was going to say what he wanted to say, but he didn’t want to lose the chance to get closer to the Imagination Station. “If you need help, I . . . maybe I could help you.”

Whit cocked an eyebrow.

Mark continued, “Maybe until you find someone else, I could be an errand boy or something. You don’t even have to pay me.”

Whit rubbed his chin thoughtfully. “Hmm, an errand boy.”

Mark wanted to say something else, something to convince him, but he couldn't think of anything. His stomach tightened with anticipation.

"Not a bad idea, as a temporary measure."

"It's a great idea," Patti said.

"Come on inside, Mark." Whit motioned to him. "I'll call your parents. If it's okay with them, it's okay with me. I could use the help, and I'll even pay you for it."

Mark's heart raced as they stepped into Whit's End to make the phone call.



Chapter Four

WHILE WHIT TALKED WITH MARK'S MOM on the phone, Patti offered to show Mark around the shop. He wanted to tour the place, but more than anything he wanted to see the Imagination Station. He had it all worked out in his mind. If the Imagination Station could really do what they said it could, then Mark might be able to go back in time and change what had happened with his dad. He could make things like they were before his dad left them.

Mark's excitement surged like a current of electricity. He had to find that machine. As Patti guided him through the soda shop, he looked anxiously for something that might resemble an Imagination Station. He noted the snow-white refrigerators and shining silver dispensers. Was the time machine white? Or silver?

Next they went into a room with shelves filled with books. "This is the library," Patti explained.

Mark nodded, imagining that one of the bookcases slid away to reveal a secret room. If one did, Patti didn't give him the chance to see it.

Then she led him into a large auditorium containing a stage for theatrical performances. Looking at Whit's End from the outside, Mark wouldn't have guessed the building was so big.

Upstairs, Patti showed him the county's largest train set. At least that's what the sign beside it declared. The train layout featured scale replicas of classic engines chugging around lifelike hills, valleys, and miniature villages.

Kids and adults were everywhere. No one seemed to be concerned about the earlier explosion. Everyone was involved in one game or another. Mark had to admit that Whit's End really was unlike anything he had ever seen before.

They had finished the tour, but Mark hadn't seen anything that looked like an Imagination Station. Patti took him back to the kitchen, where Whit was still talking to Mark's mom on the phone. It was an endless conversation about his grandmother. Finally Whit asked if it was all right for Mark to be his errand boy. The tension was growing in his stomach again.

Whit finally smiled at Mark and gave him the okay sign.

Mark's mind spun with plans. Now that he was an official employee, he hoped Whit would hurry up and show him the Imagination Station.

Whit hung up the phone and slipped behind the ice cream counter to serve some newly arrived customers. As he dished out scoops of ice cream, he said, "For now, I'll need you to run some errands for me. I'll show you how to take care of things around the shop later. I don't think it'll be too hard for you."

What about the Imagination Station? Mark wanted to ask. Where is it? When can I use it? Put the ice cream away and show me how to go back in time!

Whit glanced at Mark. For a moment he was afraid Whit had read his mind.

"I know what you can do," Whit said. "You can run out to Tom Riley's place and pick up a box for me."

"A box?" Mark asked.

“Not a big one,” Whit assured him, lowering his voice to a near-whisper. “It’s top secret, though. It’s a very important part that I need to get the Imagination Station working again. It broke in the explosion.”

“Can I go?” Patti asked.

Mark darted a disapproving look in her direction. He wanted to explain to her that this wasn’t a job for a girl. Top secret stuff was for guys. He was just about to say so, but Whit spoke first.

“Good idea, Patti,” Whit said. “You can show Mark how to get to Tom’s house.”

Patti straightened up proudly. “I know a shortcut.”

“I figured you would. You’ll make a good team.” Whit dropped a scoop of vanilla ice cream into a cone and handed it over the counter to a customer.

Patti tugged at Mark’s sleeve. “Let’s go.”

Mark looked to Mr. Whittaker for any final instructions. Whit smiled at him and nodded. “Tell Tom I sent you. He’ll know what to do.”

Mark followed Patti outside, but he didn’t like having to depend on her. *She’s nice enough*, he thought, *but she still talks too much.*

“I know a shortcut,” she said in the same proud voice she used back at the shop.

“I know, I know,” Mark said. He didn’t care how they got there. He just wanted to get the missing piece to the Imagination Station.

Patti began to talk again, but Mark’s mind wandered off into another daydream. He replayed every detail in his mind of the day his father left, and it gave him new resolve to change things back.

“Hey! Look over there,” Patti said.

Mark looked around, surprised to find that he had followed Patti into a clearing. She was pointing to a small grove of trees. Beyond them, Mark saw a large white house and behind it, a barn.

“Are you hungry?” Patti asked.

Mark was, but he shook his head no. “We have to get to Mr. Riley’s, Patti.”

“I’m hungry,” Patti said firmly.

“Okay, okay. You’re hungry, but we didn’t bring any food.”

Patti grinned knowingly. “We didn’t need to bring any food. See those trees over there? They have the best apples in the whole county. Come on!”

Before Mark could say anything, Patti dashed off toward the trees. Mark grumbled to himself but ran after her. She was already climbing one of the trees by the time he caught up with her.

“Go on, Mark. Get an apple out of that other tree.” Mark hesitated.

“What are you, a chicken? Get yourself an apple! You know you want one.”

Mark reached for a lower branch, but a question nagged him. Will the owner mind? He shrugged it off. He didn’t want Patti to think he was a coward, so he climbed up into the tree.

Patti was back on the ground by the time he found an apple that looked good enough to eat. She called to him, waving her apple proudly. “I found a big one! Hurry up,” she said. “You don’t want to get caught.”

“Caught?” Mark asked, as he snapped off the apple he wanted.

“By the owner,” Patti replied. “He’s kind of, well, crazy. He gets real mad when kids climb his trees.”

“What!” Mark nearly fell out of the tree as he started scrambling down the trunk.

Then he heard a screen door slam.

Mark peeked through the leaves. An old man was working his way down the front porch steps, yelling, "Aha! Caught you!"

Mark looked at the ground and considered his chances of getting down before the old man reached the tree. Then he saw the long barrel of a shotgun.

Patti shrieked, screaming at Mark, "Hurry!"

She stepped back, stumbled, and then took off running. Mark reached the lowest branch and swung his legs down to jump. It was as far as he got. He was helplessly hanging on the branch when the old man rounded the tree.

"I've warned you kids!" he shouted, aiming the shotgun at Mark's rear end.

Mark closed his eyes, his heart pounding wild rhythms in his chest.

"Don't," he squeaked.

Just then, the old man pulled the trigger.



Chapter Five

MARK LISTENED FOR THE TELLTALE ROAR and tensed, fearing the sting of shotgun pellets. Instead he heard a gentle spraying sound, as warm water soaked through his clothes. He opened his eyes and looked down at the wet seat of his pants.

“I got you fair and square!” Tom Riley shouted, laughing as he pulled the trigger on his water-squirting shotgun.

Then he turned and called, “You can come out from behind that tree, Patti Eldridge. I got your friend!”

Patti stumbled out of her hiding place doubled over with laughter.

Mark dropped from the tree and landed with a squish. He brushed at the water on the back of his pants while Patti continued laughing helplessly. Tom did, too.

Everyone in this town is crazy, Mark thought.

“It’s a game,” Patti finally said. “If Mr. Riley finds anyone climbing his apple tree, he gives them a shot from his water gun.”

“Thanks for telling me.” Mark frowned, tugging at his soaked pants.

Tom put out his hand for Mark to shake. “We haven’t been properly introduced. I’m Tom Riley.”

"I'm Mark. Mark Prescott." As they shook hands, Mark felt the calluses on Mr. Riley's palm.

"Mark is living in Mrs. Schaeffer's house," Patti explained. "She was his grandma."

"I see," Tom said and hitched his thumbs into his overalls. "Your grandma was a good woman. Now tell me what you're doing out here besides picking my apples and getting a shower."

"Mr. Whittaker sent us," Patti blurted out.

"He sent me," Mark amended. "I'm his new employee."

"Oh," Tom said, "then you must be here for the part to the Imagination Station."

"Yeah, both of us!" Patti added.

"Then you'd better come with me."

They walked to the house while Tom explained how he helped Whit with some of the inventions and kept the extra parts on his workroom bench. Mark imagined the two men working under a dim light as they discussed and created and invented all sorts of magical things. The thought held wonder for Mark, and he looked at Tom Riley with different eyes.

The summer heat hadn't pierced the walls of the Riley home. It was cool down in the basement, back where the workroom was located. The workbench had a large assortment of tools and gadgets. Some of them Mark recognized, others he didn't.

Tom glanced around with confusion.

"The part for the Imagination Station," Mark reminded him.

"That's right," Tom chuckled, patting Mark on the shoulder. Then he reached to an upper shelf and brought down a mysterious object wrapped in white cloth. "This is what you came for," he said, carefully setting the component on the bench.

Mark stepped closer as Tom pulled the cloth aside. The thing

looked like a black grapefruit with all sorts of transistors and computer parts attached to it. Tom gently placed it in a box and cushioned it with rags.

“What does it do?” Patti asked.

Tom stuffed more rags into the box. “It’s a power unit. It’s one of four in the Imagination Station. Together they make it work. Whit said one blew out when he tried it this morning.”

“It must be pretty wonderful to make such a big noise,” Patti said.

“Mostly noise and smoke,” Tom replied. “We built it so it wouldn’t blow up if anything went wrong. That’s one reason it’s so heavy.”

“Still scary,” Patti said quietly.

Tom nodded. “I reckon it is, if you don’t know what to expect.”

As if struck by a new thought, Tom reached up and grabbed another gadget from the shelf. “Oh, tell Whit I finished the alarm. He knows how to hook it up.”

Mark looked closely at this new piece. It resembled a clock.

“Next time the Imagination Station has a mind to blow up, this alarm will warn Whit before it happens.” Tom patted the alarm proudly. “It even has a test button,” he added, pushing a small red circle on the top. The alarm started to tick.

Mark took a step back.

Tom continued, “You push this button, and in thirty seconds the alarm will go off. That gives you time to prepare for it. It’s a little loud.”

They watched intently for the remaining fifteen seconds or so. Even though they knew the time was up, the bell blasted so loudly it startled them all when it finally went off.

“Wow!” Mark exclaimed.

Tom laughed, “If that doesn’t warn Whit something’s wrong, nothing will.” Tom put a lid on the box and handed it to Mark. “Be careful, son. I only have a couple more of these left.”

“I’ll be very careful,” Mark promised.

Tom led the way back upstairs for homemade lemonade. Afterward, he walked them toward the woods, chatting cheerfully about Whit and Odyssey and expressing his hope that they would come to visit again sometime. Patti said they would. As they said good-bye, Tom gave Mark an apple, which he put inside the box.

Mark remembered his promise to be careful and clutched the box so tightly his arms began to ache. He could have asked Patti to carry it a while, but he was too proud.

Once again they took Patti’s shortcut through the woods. This time Patti asked Mark questions about himself. It was awkward at first. He didn’t like to talk about himself, but she persisted. Finally he told her why they had to move to Odyssey, being careful not to mention that all the trouble was his fault. He didn’t tell her his plans for the Imagination Station, either.

“That’s sad,” Patti said about Mark’s parents. He thought she meant it.

“I wrote my dad a letter,” he added brightly.

“Is that the one we took to the post office?” Patti asked.

Mark nodded and said, “I asked him to come visit for the Fourth of July.”

Mark felt funny telling her. He hadn’t told anyone—not even his mom—what was in the letter.

Patti’s face lit up. “Do you think he will?”

“Yeah! He said on the phone if I ever wanted anything to write and ask, so I did. It’s a long weekend. He has to come.”

“How long before he answers it?” Patti asked.

“He’ll probably call when . . .” Mark stopped, suddenly remembering. The letter was still stuffed in his back pocket. With all the excitement over the Imagination Station, he had forgotten all about it. His heart sank.

Patti searched Mark’s face. “What’s wrong?”

“I was going to mail the letter today.” Mark’s voice was low again.

How could he have been so forgetful? He had a mission.

He quickened his step. He had to get the box to Mr. Whitaker, find a clean envelope, and mail the letter. They came out of the woods on Glossman Street, the road leading to the center of town. They had followed it only a short way when they heard the rattle of bikes behind them. By the time they turned to see who it was, they were surrounded.

Mark groaned quietly.

Joe Devlin and five of his friends climbed off their bikes. “Hello, Patti.” Joe smiled viciously. “Guess it’s time to finish the fight we had this morning.”