

SECRETS AT SILVER PINES INN ~ Chapter One



Super Stuff

Truck noises?

Nick dropped his pencil and rushed to the window. Was it the roofers?

He pushed the window open. Below him lay the damaged kitchen roof, covered with a blue tarp to keep out the rain. The maple tree that had blown over still leaned against the house, and dead branches lay everywhere.

A truck door slammed. He leaned out of the window but still couldn't see far enough.

He studied his pine tree. The weekend's big storm had torn off a couple of branches, so he'd stayed out of it. But the thick limb curving below—the one he always used—looked fine. He'd better make sure.

He jumped up onto the windowsill, grabbed for the branch, and gave it a shake. Strong as ever! He eased himself down and crawled along it until he was close enough to hang onto the trunk.

Now he could see the Inn's parking lot. A truck stood there with a red sign: SUPER ROOFERS. Two men were unloading ladders while a tall, bearded man wrote something on a clipboard.

At last!

Nick glanced past the parking lot into the trees and caught sight of his brother. Robbie was carrying suitcases toward cabin C-1. New guests must have arrived! Maybe they had kids.

A battered blue truck rattled into the parking lot, and a man with curly brown hair jumped out.

The bearded man called, "Hey, Wylie, grab a chain saw. We'll get rid of these trees first."

Nick hooked an arm around the trunk and twisted lower. Trees? Which trees?

The curly-haired man was walking up to the old maple tree. "This one?"

"Yeah," the bearded man said. "And that old pine tree too."

"No!" Nick snatched for a pinecone and threw it down onto their heads.

"No!" he yelled again. "Wait!"

The two men looked up, but he didn't waste time explaining.

Mom. He had to find her. She'd stop them.

He crawled back along the branch, then he ran down the stairs and into the kitchen.

Grandfather stood by the stove, wearing his old red baseball cap, as usual. He'd been stirring something in a pot, but he turned, balancing on his cast, and raised a shaggy

eyebrow.

“You’re down here?” Nick asked. What had made the old man drag his broken leg downstairs? “Where’s Mom?”

Grandfather waved the spoon. “Your mother’s sleeping in, so I’m the cook.” He tilted his head. “You look as if something’s chasing you. What’s the matter?”

“Those men!” Nick could hardly get the words out. “They’re going to cut down my tree!”

Grandfather’s black eyes glittered. He left the stove, saying, “Let’s go see about that.” He picked up his cane and hobbled out the kitchen’s back door.

Nick followed.

They rounded the corner of the Inn, and Grandfather headed straight for the men standing by the pine tree. In spite of his cast, the old man seemed to grow taller and straighter.

“Who’s in charge here?” Grandfather’s voice sounded stern.

“Me.” The bearded man stepped forward. He looked twice as big as Grandfather, but that didn’t seem to matter right now.

“Those trees are in our way,” the man said. “So we were going to take them down for you.”

Grandfather’s black eyes flashed. “We need to talk,” he said. He glanced at the fallen maple tree. “That one is in your way, and it’s dead. You may cut it down.”

He turned for a long look at the old pine tree, and Nick’s breath tightened in his throat.

“That one’s lost some branches,” Grandfather said. “But it’s a white pine and I want it to stay.”

The bearded man frowned. “We might have to call in our tree expert to deal with it. That’ll cost you extra.”

Grandfather shrugged. “So call him. And send someone to tell me what he says.”

“Okay.” The man muttered something to himself, but Grandfather had already turned away.

As they left, the curly-haired man gave Nick a good-for-you smile, and he couldn’t help smiling back.

Once they were inside, Grandfather lowered himself into a chair at the kitchen table.

“Whew!” His eyes still looked fierce. “Who do they think they are, anyway?” He answered his own question. “Just trying to make the job easier, I guess.”

He glanced at Nick. “How’d you find out what they were going to do?”

Nick looked down at the table. “Um . . . I was in my tree, and I heard them.”

Grandfather gave him a stern look. “Okay, no more tree-climbing until we get this settled. But I assume you checked that branch before you used it?”

“Yes, I did,” Nick said. “I know my tree looks pretty bad, but most of the branches that got knocked off were dead.”

Grandfather nodded as he pulled himself to his feet. “So what else did you do this morning?” He glanced at the cereal box on the table. “Looks like you came down and got some breakfast.”

“Yeah, and I worked on a bunch of school stuff,” Nick said. “My seagull notebook. Mostly I was waiting for the roof guys to come. Is Mom okay?”

Grandfather hobbled to the stove and picked up his spoon. "She has a bad headache, so I told her to stay in bed. I'm making her some soup."

"It smells good." Nick looked into the pot. "What kind?"

"Chicken and black rice," Grandfather said. "My own special recipe."

"Black rice?"

"It's really super stuff. Guaranteed to make you strong." Grandfather stirred the soup. "I don't mind telling you—I'm a little worried about your mother. It's been a couple of days since that storm, and I know she got a bad knock on the head, but still . . ."

Nick eyed the soup. The rice in it looked like floating black bugs, but if that was going to help Mom, okay.

Grandfather began filling a mug with soup. "Here, you can take this up to her. It looks like we've got a busy day ahead, and I don't want her to think I've forgotten her."

"Sure," Nick said. "I saw Robbie over at C-1. Who's moving in?"

"An old friend of mine from New York. Dr. Velardi."

"A doctor? Maybe he could help Mom."

"No, not that kind. Kurt Velardi teaches biology." Grandfather handed the mug to Nick. "Grab a spoon for her. Tell me how she likes it."

Nick took his time climbing the stairs, trying not to spill Mom's soup. Maybe she would know something about Dr. Velardi. Kids? Old or young? Nice or grouchy?

But when he saw her pale face and how slowly she sat up, he didn't ask.

"Oh-h-h," she said with a long sigh. "Thank you!" She bent her head, breathing in the steam that rose from the mug. "How kind of your grandfather! Is he managing all right?"

"I guess so," Nick said. He'd better not tell her about his tree or the storm damage in the kitchen. Maybe she wasn't as "fine" as the doctor thought.

"I guess the Inn won't be especially busy now," she said. "Aunt Margo told me that it's never full during October. We don't have any guests coming this week, but I'm not sure about the cabins." She frowned. "I hope it doesn't cost very much to get the roof fixed."

"They're working on it now," Nick said. "Don't worry."

He held back his questions about Dr. Velardi, handed her the spoon, and tried to look cheerful.

"I'm not sure how long it's going to take me to get well," she said slowly. "Grandfather might consider hiring someone to help in the kitchen. After all, the Inn belongs to him—Aunt Margo is just his manager."

"I didn't know that," Nick said. "Why don't you take a bite of soup? Grandfather wanted to know how you like it."

She smiled as she tasted the soup. "He's a dear person underneath that tough skin of his. Black rice!"

"It's super stuff," Nick said. "It'll make you strong." To cheer her up, he added, "I finished my seagull drawing today."

"Good for you," she said. "Now we can send that notebook off to your teacher along with your other assignments."

"What's the next project?" It was kind of fun to do schoolwork long-distance while they helped at the Inn.

"Your teacher will have you make another notebook, of course. She also wants you

to start a collection of leaves, or something like that. But it should be more complicated than gluing things onto cardboard. She wants you to include the Latin name and a description.”

Mom drank more of the soup. “How about insects—you’ve always liked bugs. Did you hear the katydids last night?”

“They sounded cool,” Nick said. How hard would it be to find bugs like that? And then to catch them?

She handed him the empty mug with a smile and leaned against the pillows, closing her eyes. “Tell Grandfather the soup was delicious.”

“Okay,” Nick said, smiling back. “Thanks for the bug idea.”

He shut her door gently, started down the stairs toward the kitchen, and paused. Was someone talking to Grandfather? Whoever it was spoke in a deep, hoarse voice, as if he had something wrong with his throat.

“You might just want to think about it, Mr. Radford,” the man said.

Grandfather didn’t answer, and then the man must have left, because the kitchen door squeaked shut.

When Nick walked in, Grandfather stood by the kitchen table, frowning.

“Who was that?” Nick asked, putting the mug into the sink.

“A neighbor. Captain Charles Cunningham. He stopped by to see if we needed help.” Grandfather’s clipped voice sounded as if he hadn’t enjoyed the Captain’s visit.

Before Nick could ask another question, someone knocked on the door.

Grandfather sighed and sat down at the table. “Get that, will you please?”

It was the curly-haired man. Close up, he had a mustache, thick as a furry caterpillar.

He grinned at Nick, looked at Grandfather, and said, “My name’s Wylie Pettisen, sir. The boss sent me with an update. We had our expert look at your pine tree, and he thinks it can be salvaged if it gets some professional trimming.”

“So—trim it,” Grandfather said.

Wylie nodded. “I guess that’s an important tree, isn’t it?” He wiggled his eyebrows at Nick. “I understand.”

“Yes siree,” Grandfather said, and he almost smiled.

Wylie gazed across the room. What was the man thinking? Ever since the storm had slammed a tree branch through the roof, the kitchen had looked like a mess. Did he notice the ragged pieces of drywall and bits of plaster and wood scattered all around?

Maybe so, because he said, “We’ll fix up that ceiling for you. And I know someone who’s real good at cleaning.”

To Nick’s surprise, Grandfather answered with a nod. “Captain Cunningham told me you have a sister who might be able to help us out.”

“I sure do!” Wylie said. “Anna is a whiz at any kind of cleaning.” He paused. “She’s between jobs right now, so she could start tomorrow.”

Slowly Grandfather stood up. “Tomorrow would be fine. Maybe she could work all day and then just mornings for a while.”

“You bet! I’ll tell her!” Wylie left, whistling.

Grandfather sighed. “That should help your mother, at least. If the woman can stay out of my way, all the better.”

Nick glanced at the crowded sink. “I hope she’s good at doing dishes.”

“Who?” Robbie came in from the hall.

“The new girl,” Nick said. “That guy working on the roof? It’s his sister. Grandfather just hired her.”

Robbie grinned as he stepped across a pile of boards. “Great! Maybe she’s young and pretty.”

“I doubt it,” Grandfather said. “I made soup for lunch, and there’s a bag of chips somewhere. Soon as you two finish eating, I’ve got a job for you.”

He looked up as footsteps thudded across the roof overhead. “Sounds like they’re finally getting started.”

He handed Nick a mug of soup. “Start with this, and you can have more. Did your mother drink all of hers?”

“Sure did! She said it was delicious.” Nick cleared a space on the table and sat down.

“Good.” The old man’s face brightened as he turned back to the stove. “Here’s yours, Robbie. Open that bag of chips for us. How’s everything at C-1?”

“All moved in—easy. Just the one guy and his cameras and stuff. I swept off the porch for him.”

Nick ate a handful of chips. No kids. Too bad.

Robbie slurped at his soup. “He’s got a dog, though.”

Nick looked up. “How big?”

“Small.”

“What kind? Is it a puppy?”

“I dunno,” Robbie said. “Not exactly a puppy, but small and thin. Red. Long ears. How about passing me the chips?”

Nick handed him the bag of chips. Robbie didn’t especially like animals, so he wouldn’t have noticed very much. Maybe he should go for a walk down by C-1 and find out some more about this dog.

After they finished eating, Nick waited to see what Grandfather would do. Was he going to take his afternoon nap?

No, he’d picked up a box of trash bags and was talking about the dining room. “Your mother’s going to be upset when she sees what happened in there, so let’s tidy things up.”

Robbie nudged him. “Let’s go, Short Stuff. There’s always a chance we’ll find that treasure you keep hoping for.”

Nick added his dishes to the pile in the sink, nodding to himself. Robbie had the right idea.

A place as old as this just had to have some kind of treasure hidden—somewhere—and he, Nick Radford, was going to find it. Maybe they’d even write it up in the newspaper.

KID FINDS PIRATE GOLD AT NEW JERSEY INN