

Chapter 38

Stanley took hold of Zero's forearms and pulled him upright. Then he stooped down and let Zero fall over his right shoulder. He stood up, lifting Zero's worn-out body off the ground.

He left the shovel and sack of jars behind as he continued up the mountain. Zero's legs dangled in front of him.

Stanley couldn't see his feet, which made it difficult to walk through the tangled patches of weeds and vines. He concentrated on one step at a time, carefully raising and setting down each foot. He thought only about each step, and not the impossible task that lay before him.

Higher and higher he climbed. His strength came from somewhere deep inside himself and also seemed to come from the outside as well. After focusing on Big Thumb for so long, it was as if the rock had absorbed his energy and now acted like a kind of giant magnet pulling him toward it.

After a while he became aware of a foul odor. At first he thought it came from Zero, but it seemed to be in the air, hanging heavy all around him.

He also noticed that the ground wasn't as steep anymore. As the ground flattened, a huge stone precipice rose up ahead of him, just barely visible in the moonlight. It seemed to grow bigger with each step he took.

It no longer resembled a thumb.

And he knew he'd never be able to climb it.

Around him, the smell became stronger. It was the bitter smell of despair. Even if he could somehow climb Big Thumb, he knew he wouldn't find water. How could there be water at the top of a giant rock? The weeds and bugs survived only by an occasional rainstorm, like the one he had seen from camp.

Still, he continued toward it. If nothing else, he wanted to at least reach the Thumb. He never made it.

His feet slipped out from under him. Zero's head knocked against the back of his shoulder as he fell and tumbled into a small muddy gully.

As he lay face down in the muddy ditch, he didn't know if he'd ever get up again. He didn't know if he'd even try. Had he come all this way just to . . . You need water to make mud!

He crawled along the gully in the direction that seemed the muddiest. The ground became gloppier. The mud splashed up as he slapped the ground.

Using both hands, he dug a hole in the soggy soil. It was too dark to see, but he thought he could feel a tiny pool of water at the bottom of his hole. He stuck his head in the hole and licked the dirt.

He dug deeper, and as he did so, more water seemed to fill the hole. He couldn't see it, but he could feel it— first with his fingers, then with his tongue.

He dug until he had a hole that was about as deep as his arm was long. There was enough water for him to scoop out with his hands and drop on Zero's face. Zero's eyes remained closed. But his tongue poked out between his lips, searching out the droplets.

Stanley dragged Zero closer to the hole. He dug, then scooped some more water and let it pour out of his hands into Zero's mouth.

As he continued to widen his hole, his hand came across a smooth, round object. It was too smooth and too round to be a rock.

He wiped the dirt off of it and realized it was an onion.

He bit into it without peeling it. The hot bitter juice burst into his mouth. He could feel it all the way up to his eyes. And when he swallowed, he felt its warmth move down his throat and into his stomach.

He only ate half. He gave the other half to Zero.

"Here, eat this."

"What is it?" Zero whispered.

"A hot fudge sundae."

Chapter 39

Stanley awoke in a meadow, looking up at the giant rock tower. It was layered and streaked with different shades of red, burnt orange, brown, and tan. It must have been over a hundred feet tall.

Stanley lay awhile, just looking at it. He didn't have the strength to get up. It felt like the insides of his mouth and throat were coated with sand.

And no wonder. When he rolled over he saw the water hole. It was about two and a half feet deep and over three feet wide. At the bottom lay no more than two inches of very brown water.

His hands and fingers were sore from digging, especially under his fingernails. He scooped some dirty water into his mouth, then swished it around, trying to filter it with his teeth.

Zero moaned.

Stanley started to say something to him, but no words came out of his mouth, and he had to try again. "How you doing?" It hurt to talk.

"Not good," Zero said quietly. With great effort, he rolled over, raised himself to his knees, and crawled to the water hole. He lowered his head into it and lapped up some water.

Then he jerked back, clutched his knees to his chest, and rolled to his side. His body shook violently.

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Stanley thought about going back down the mountain to look for the shovel, so he could make the water hole deeper. Maybe that would give them cleaner water. They could use the jars as drinking glasses.

But he didn't think he had the strength to go down, let alone make it back up again. And he didn't know where to look.

He struggled to his feet. He was in a field of greenish white flowers that seemed to extend all the way around Big Thumb.

He took a deep breath, then walked the last fifty yards to the giant precipice and touched it.

Tag, you're it.

Then he walked back to Zero and the water hole. On the way he picked one of the flowers. It actually wasn't one big flower, he discovered, but instead each flower was really a cluster of tiny little flowers that formed a round ball. He brought it to his mouth but had to spit it out.

He could see part of the trail he had made the night before, when he carried Zero up the mountain. If he was going to head back down and look for the shovel, he realized, he should do it soon, while the trail was fresh. But he didn't want to leave Zero. He was afraid Zero might die while he was gone.

Zero was still lying doubled over on his side. "I got to tell you something," he said with a groan.

"Don't talk," said Stanley. "Save your strength."

"No, listen," Zero insisted, then he closed his eyes as his face twisted with pain. "I'm listening," Stanley whispered.

"I took your shoes," Zero said.

Stanley didn't know what he was talking about. His shoes were on his feet. "That's all right," he said. "Just rest now."

"It's all my fault," said Zero.

"It's nobody's fault," said Stanley.

"I didn't know," Zero said.

"That's okay," Stanley said. "Just rest."

Zero closed his eyes. But then again he said, "I didn't know about the shoes." "What shoes?"

"From the shelter."

It took a moment for Stanley to comprehend. "Clyde Livingston's shoes?" "I'm sorry," said Zero.

Stanley stared at him. It was impossible. Zero was delirious.

Zero's "confession" seemed to bring him some relief. The muscles in his face relaxed. As he drifted into sleep, Stanley softly sang him the song that had been in his family for generations.

"If only, if only," the woodpecker sighs,

"The bark on the tree was just a little bit softer."

While the wolf waits below, hungry and lonely,

He cries to the moo— oo— oon,

"If only, if only."

Chapter 40

When Stanley found the onion the night before, he didn't question how it had come to be there. He ate it gratefully. But now as he sat gazing at Big Thumb and the meadow full of flowers, he couldn't help but wonder about it.

If there was one wild onion, there could be more.

He intertwined his fingers and tried to rub out the pain. Then he bent down and dug up another flower, this time pulling up the entire plant, including the root.

"Onions! Fresh, hot, sweet onions," Sam called as Mary Lou pulled the cart down Main Street. "Eight cents a dozen."

It was a beautiful spring morning. The sky was painted pale blue and pink— the same color as the lake and the peach trees along its shore.

Mrs. Gladys Tennyson was wearing just her nightgown and robe as she came running down the street after Sam. Mrs. Tennyson was normally a very proper woman who never went out in

public without dressing up in fine clothes and a hat. So it was quite surprising to the people of Green Lake to see her running past them. "Sam!" she shouted.

"Whoa, Mary Lou," said Sam, stopping his mule and cart. "G'morning, Mrs. Tennyson," he said. "How's little Becca doing?"

Gladys Tennyson was all smiles. "I think she's going to be all right. The fever broke about an hour ago. Thanks to you."

"I'm sure the good Lord and Doc Hawthorn deserve most of the credit."

"The Good Lord, yes," agreed Mrs. Tennyson, "but not Dr. Hawthorn. That quack wanted to put leeches on her stomach! Leeches! My word! He said they would suck out the bad blood. Now you tell me. How would a leech know good blood from bad blood?"

"I wouldn't know," said Sam.

"It was your onion tonic," said Mrs. Tennyson. "That's what saved her." Other townspeople made their way to the cart.

"Good morning, Gladys," said Hattie Parker. "Don't you look lovely this morning."

Several people snickered.

"Good morning, Hattie," Mrs. Tennyson replied.

"Does your husband know you're parading about in your bed clothes?" Hattie asked.

There were more snickers.

"My husband knows exactly where I am and how I am dressed, thank you," said Mrs. Tennyson. "We have both been up all night and half the morning with Rebecca. She almost died from stomach sickness. It seems she ate some bad meat." Hattie's face flushed. Her husband, Jim Parker, was the butcher.

"It made my husband and me sick as well," said Mrs. Tennyson, "but it nearly killed Becca, what with her being so young. Sam saved her life."

"It wasn't me," said Sam. "It was the onions."

"I'm glad Becca's all right," Hattie said contritely.

"I keep telling Jim he needs to wash his knives," said Mr. Pike, who owned the general store.

Hattie Parker excused herself, then turned and quickly walked away. "Tell Becca that when she feels up to it to come by the store for a piece of candy," said Mr. Pike.

"Thank you, I'll do that."

Before returning home, Mrs. Tennyson bought a dozen onions from Sam. She gave him a dime and told him to keep the change.

"I don't take charity," Sam told her. "But if you want to buy a few extra onions for Mary Lou, I'm sure she'd appreciate it."

"All right then," said Mrs. Tennyson, "give me my change in onions." Sam gave Mrs. Tennyson an additional three onions, and she fed them one at a time to Mary Lou. She laughed as the old donkey ate them out of her hand.

Stanley and Zero slept off and on for the next two days, ate onions, all they wanted, and splashed dirty water into their mouths. In the late afternoon Big Thumb gave them shade. Stanley tried to make the hole deeper, but he really needed the shovel. His efforts just seemed to stir up the mud and make the water dirtier.

Zero was sleeping. He was still very sick and weak, but the sleep and the onions seemed to be doing him some good. Stanley was no longer afraid that he would die soon. Still, he didn't want to go for the shovel while Zero was asleep. He didn't want him to wake up and think he'd been deserted.

He waited for Zero to open his eyes.

"I think I'll go look for the shovel," Stanley said.

"I'll wait here," Zero said feebly, as if he had any other choice.

Stanley headed down the mountain. The sleep and the onions had done him a lot of good as well. He felt strong.

It was fairly easy to follow the trail he had made two days earlier. There were a few places where he wasn't sure he was going the right way, but it just took a little bit of searching before he found the trail again.

He went quite a ways down the mountain but still didn't find the shovel. He looked back up toward the top of the mountain. He must have walked right past it, he thought. There was no way he could have carried Zero all the way up from here.

Still, he headed downward, just in case. He came to a bare spot between two large patches of weeds and sat down to rest. Now he had definitely gone too far, he decided. He was tired out from walking down the hill. It would have been impossible to have carried Zero up the hill from here, especially after walking all day with no food or water. The shovel must be buried in some weeds.

Before starting back up, he took one last look around in all directions. He saw a large indentation in the weeds a little farther down the mountain. It didn't seem likely that the shovel could be there, but he'd already come this far.

There, lying in some tall weeds, he found the shovel and the sack of jars. He was amazed. He wondered if the shovel and sack might have rolled down the hill. But none of the jars were broken, except the one which had broken earlier. And if they had rolled down the hill, it is doubtful that he would have found the sack and shovel side by side. On his way back up the mountain, Stanley had to sit down and rest several times. It was a long, hard climb.

Chapter 41

Zero's condition continued to improve.

Stanley slowly peeled an onion. He liked eating them one layer at a time. The water hole was now almost as large as the holes he had dug back at Camp Green Lake. It contained almost two feet of murky water. Stanley had dug it all himself. Zero had offered to help, but Stanley thought it better for Zero to save his strength. It was a lot harder to dig in water than it was in a dry lake.

Stanley was surprised that he himself hadn't gotten sick— either from the sploosh, the dirty water, or from living on onions. He used to get sick quite a lot back at home. Both boys were barefoot. They had washed their socks. All their clothes were very dirty, but their socks were definitely the worst.

They didn't dip their socks into the hole, afraid to contaminate the water. Instead they filled the jars and poured the water over their dirty socks.

"I didn't go to the homeless shelter very often," Zero said. "Just if the weather was really bad. I'd have to find someone to pretend to be my mom. If I'd just gone by myself, they would have asked me a bunch of questions. If they'd found out I didn't have a mom, they would have made me a ward of the state."

"What's a ward of the state?"

Zero smiled. "I don't know. But I didn't like the sound of it."

Stanley remembered Mr. Pendanski telling the Warden that Zero was a ward of the state. He wondered if Zero knew he'd become one.

"I liked sleeping outside," said Zero. "I used to pretend I was a Cub Scout. I always wanted to be a Cub Scout. I'd see them at the park in their blue uniforms." "I was never a Cub Scout," said Stanley. "I wasn't good at social stuff like that. Kids made fun of me because I was fat."

"I liked the blue uniforms," said Zero. "Maybe I wouldn't have liked being a Cub Scout."

Stanley shrugged one shoulder.

"My mother was once a Girl Scout," said Zero.

"I thought you said you didn't have a mother."

"Everybody has to have a mother."

"Well, yeah, I know that."

"She said she once won a prize for selling the most Girl Scout cookies," said Zero.

"She was real proud of that."

Stanley peeled off another layer of his onion.

"We always took what we needed," Zero said. "When I was little, I didn't even know it was stealing. I don't remember when I found out. But we just took what we needed, never more. So when I saw the shoes on display in the shelter, I just reached in the glass case and took them."

"Clyde Livingston's shoes?" asked Stanley.

"I didn't know they were his. I just thought they were somebody's old shoes. It was better to take someone's old shoes, I thought, than steal a pair of new ones. I didn't know they were famous. There was a sign, but of course I couldn't read it. Then, the next thing I know everybody's making this big deal about how the shoes are missing. It was kind of funny, in a way. The whole place is going crazy. There I was, wearing the shoes, and everyone's running around saying, 'What happened to the shoes?' 'The shoes are gone!' I just walked out the door. No one noticed me. When I got outside, I ran around the corner and immediately took off the shoes. I put them on top of a parked car. I remember they smelled really bad."

"Yeah, those were them," said Stanley. "Did they fit you?"

"Pretty much."

Stanley remembered being surprised at Clyde Livingston's small shoe size. Stanley's shoes were bigger. Clyde Livingston had small, quick feet. Stanley's feet were big and slow.

"I should have just kept them," said Zero. "I'd already made it out of the shelter and everything. I ended up getting arrested the next day when I tried to walk out of a shoe store with a new pair of sneakers. If I had just kept those old smelly sneakers, then neither of us would be here right now."