



THE
**WEST END
TREEHOUSE
MYSTERY**

MARK WEAKLAND

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PELICAN PUBLISHING COMPANY

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This book combines fiction and memoir. While some elements of place, time, and character are accurate, most names and all character traits and plot elements have been changed, reimagined or totally invented.



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To the memory of my father, Gilbert Weakland

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The West End

To Laurel Ridge

Candy Shop

Roseland Skate Rink

← Fairfield Ave. →

Bheam Elem. School

Thrift Shop

Harris-Boyer Bakery

Appliance Store

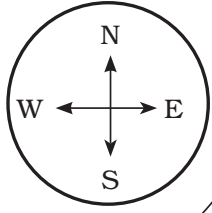
← Barron Ave. →

Maul Ball Area

Cemetery

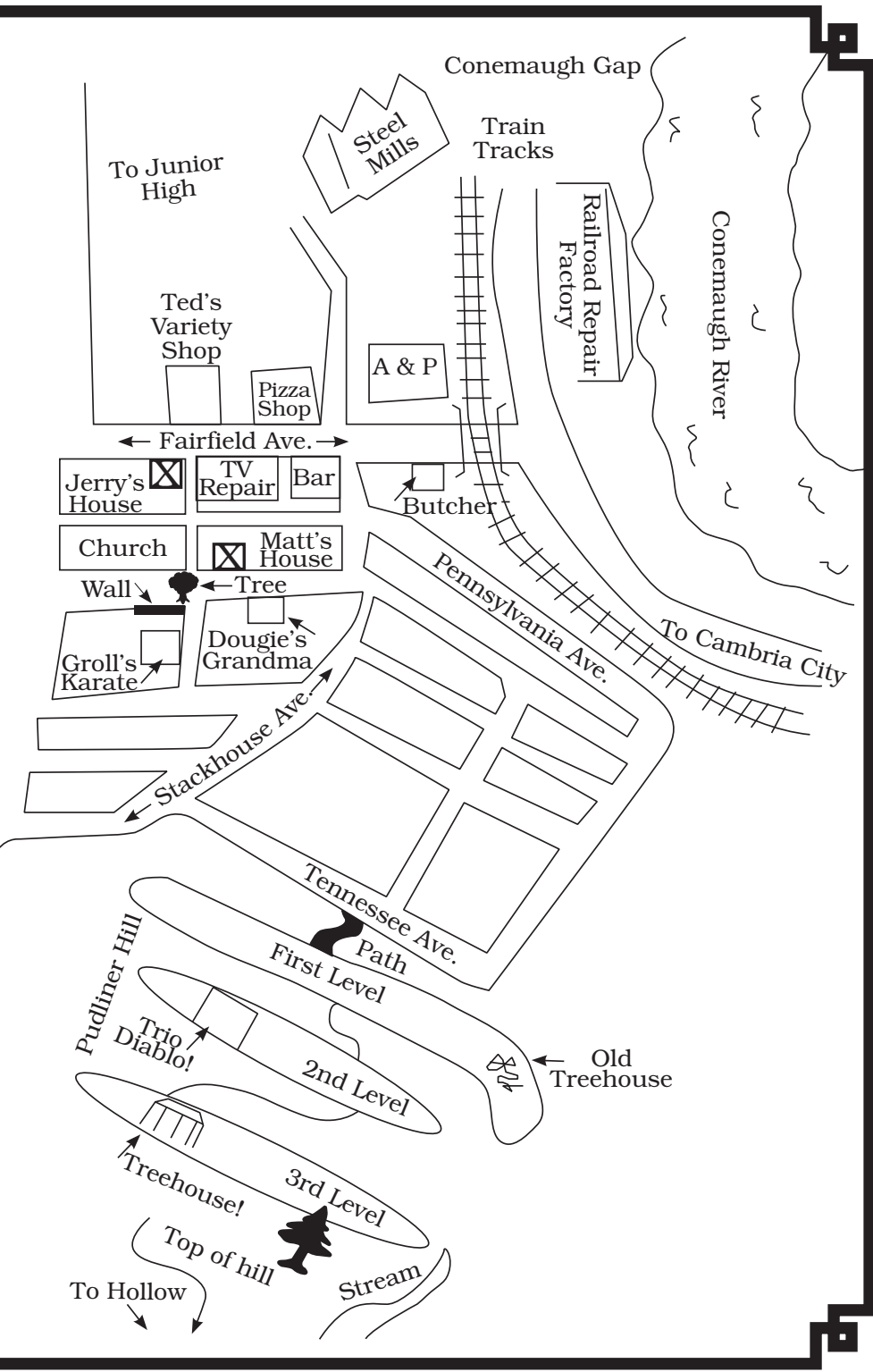
← D Street →

Baseball Field



To Westmont & Westwood





Chapter 1

Into the Woods

The mystery began with a weird thing in the woods. Jerry and I were making our way up the backside of the Second Level and heading for the Third. That's where we were building our treehouse. Jerry was in the lead, hunched over, his arms extended behind him, his gloved hands gripping the bottom boards of our lumber stack. I, of course, was bringing up the rear. We had been walking for a while and the stack was growing heavier by the minute. A thousand invisible needles pricked my arm, and my left thumb had long ago gone numb.

I shifted my end of the load to the right and the boards clunked softly. Jerry slowed. I thought it was because I was making noise, but it wasn't. "What's that?" he hissed, coming to a stop.

"What?" I whispered. As far as I could tell, there was nothing to see but trees and ferns and mountain laurel.

"Looked like a deer," said Jerry. "Or an old lady in a dress."

"Very funny." I looked around again, just in case he wasn't joking. Nothing. I listened intently but heard only the wind and the creaking of branches. I sniffed the air.

On most days the forest smelled of leaves and water and soil. But today I could smell wood burning, and something else. Cigarettes. Downhill from us, beyond a tangled thicket of maple saplings and honeysuckle, Jerry's older brother Drew was partying with Scott and Brian at the Trio Diablo treehouse.

When I caught that first whiff of cigarette smoke,

my heart began thumping. It wasn't the deep, strong lub-a-dub thumping you feel after you've sprinted for a touchdown or raced your friend to the stop sign and back. It was the constricted, fluttery thumping you feel when you're afraid of heights but you nonetheless find yourself slowly climbing a ladder to the ten meter diving platform, and when you finally reach the top, you can barely bring yourself to look out to the fields beyond the pool, let alone look down as you inch your way to the edge of the board that juts into nothingness thirty feet above a small rectangle of water that looks as solid as a slab of concrete. And so you just stand there at the back of the platform, paralyzed, your stomach churning and your hands clenching the hot-from-the-sun metal railing, embarrassed and ashamed because you know you are blocking the ladder and you can't move forward and you can't go back and the kids behind you are starting to call you chicken and wuss.

Here's the thing, some kids love gunning a dirt bike over a dirt ramp or leaping from a cliff into North Fork Lake. I'd much rather read a sci-fi book or listen to my records. On the playground I know kids who'll pick a fight just because somebody *looks* at them. I think that's crazy. Isn't looking at people something we do naturally, like, every day? When somebody looks at me, my first reaction is to smile, not fight. Live and let live, that's what I say.

I hope this helps you understand why I didn't want to be here in *these* woods, so close to violence, so near to Trio Diablo that any one of the three could have burst through the underbrush without warning, snatched me up, thrown me down, and threatened to burn me with a cigarette. On the other hand, Jerry and I really wanted to build an awesome treehouse. And we had decided the only place we could do *that* was the Third Level, which is what all the neighborhood kids call the flat, wooded place near the top of Pudliner Hill.

I couldn't see Drew or Scotty or Brian through the trees and underbrush, but I could hear them carrying on, hooting and hollering. And I could make out some of what they were saying. It wasn't pretty.

"Hey, Drew, why didn't the toilet paper cross the road?"

"I don't know, Brian. Why?"

"Cause it got stuck in a crack!"

"That's stupid."

"No it ain't."

"Yeah, it is. It's stupid."

"Well who are you?"

"I'm the guy who says your joke is stupid. Stu. Pid!"

"Hey! Guys. Is anybody going to the concert?"

"I dunno. I might. How much are tickets?"

"Six bucks."

"No they ain't. They're seven."

"No they *aren't*. Didn't anyone ever teach you how to talk right? And *no*, they aren't. They're six. I got the concert ad right here in my pocket. Look, it says Foghat and Blue Oyster Cult, Johnstown War Memorial. May 25, 1975. \$6 in advance, \$7 at the door."

"Ha ha, Brian. Guess he showed you. In . . . your . . . face!"

"Man, don't ever do that . . ."

"Hey, numb nuts, gimme a light, huh?"

"Who you calling numb nuts?"

"Oh sorry, Drew. Not you. I meant to call you butt breath."

Jerry snorted and I almost laughed out loud, even though my arms were about to fall off.

"Let's go," said Jerry, stepping ahead. Unlike me, Jerry was always one to move ahead with the mission, no matter the danger.

We stumbled to the left, across a little stream and then up the small rise that would take us above and directly behind Trio Diablo's place.

Trio Diablo. I bet Scotty coined the gang's name. Of the three, he's the smartest. Maybe he read *The Black Pearl*, which is one of my favorite books. It features the Manta Diablo, a giant manta ray that looks like a flying carpet with gills and a barbed tail. The manta lives in an underwater cave in a tropical lagoon, and it guards the great Pearl of Heaven, an immense black pearl of immeasurable value. Or maybe Scotty knows some Italian and Spanish. Trio means three, and Diablo is Spanish for "devil." So Trio Diablo is a pretty accurate name.

The three aren't a *real* gang though, not like the ones that cause problems in L.A. and Chicago. No, they're just a group. But no matter. Gang, group, or goon squad, their main mission in life is to harass and humiliate Jerry and me whenever possible. When they aren't messing with our minds, trying to scare us with tales of witches and werewolves in the woods, then they're busy twisting our arms or crushing our faces into the pavement until we say "Uncle" or "Give" or "Pretty, pretty please with a cherry on top."

Not only isn't Trio Diablo a real gang, but their hangout isn't a real treehouse. Oh sure, everybody *calls* it a treehouse, but I'm telling you it isn't. Once, when Drew and the others were playing in a Little League game, Jerry and I climbed the hillside to the Second Level and scoped their place out. It was nothing but a shack, and a lame one at that.

"Come on, Jerry, let's go," I said. "These boards are heavy."

"Okay," said Jerry. "This way."

The mountain laurel grew thicker on the rise, and this slowed our trudge to a crawl. Jerry plowed into a laurel patch, the branches lashing about crazily in his wake. I dodged a few, but one caught me square in the face, almost knocking my glasses off. "Geez, you could put your eye out in here," I said to no one.

We emerged relatively intact, crossed a clearing, and then struggled into another patch of laurel. We were right in the middle of it, almost at the top of the slope, when my back began to itch. I scrunched my shoulder blades, trying to get some relief, and as I did the hammers in my duffle bag shifted. *Clunk. Ting!*

“Shh!” Jerry turned and scowled, his brown eyes almost black beneath the bill of his camo ball cap. “You make more noise than my ninety-seven-year-old grandmother, and she wears combat boots.”

An image flashed through my mind: Jerry’s elderly granny in steel-toed boots, stomping through the underbrush, dress flying, dentures clacking. I stopped. “That doesn’t even make sense.”

Not knowing I had stopped, Jerry continued to march forward, the bottom boards of the stack clenched tightly in his hands. Before I realized it, the planks in my hands had pulled away, and our pyramid of lumber thunked to the ground.

Jerry turned, his mouth pulled tight in an angry line. “What the heck? Of all the stupid. . . why’d you stop?”

“The combat boots,” I said. “Like, why would your grandma wear them? That’s such a weird thing to say.” I grinned. “But it is kinda funny.”

“Who cares about grandmothers, Matt? We gotta get these boards to the Third Level. If Drew hears us, we’re goners. Do you have a death wish or something?”

The image of Jerry’s grandma faded from my mind, replaced by images of Drew: Drew gleefully giving me a chicken wing, Drew sitting on top of me with a knee in my back, Drew shoving my face into the dirt. Now my heart was really thudding. I admit to being afraid of a lot of things—heights, the dark, Jimmy Gemm, my dad when he gets angry, going to the junior high school in the fall, those giant bug-eyed locusts that you sometimes find crawling up your arm when you

sleep outside without a tent—but right now getting ambushed in the woods by Drew topped the list.

I squatted to join Jerry, who was already rebuilding the pyramid. The laurel branches clawed at my arms every time I moved. But I was motivated. Below us on the Second Level, I could hear Brian and Scotty laughing loudly, and Drew yelling, “Hey Scotty Dog, throw another log on the fire.”

Figuring it would be best to move while the teenagers were making noise, we prepared to climb again. “Ready?” asked Jerry, looking back at me and adjusting the boards in his hands.

“Yep,” I said.

“OK, we’ll lift on three. One . . . two . . . three.”

We straightened from our squat, balancing the pile between us, and pushed forward. Soon we were free of the laurel and I could see a relatively clear stretch of woods before us. In a hundred yards, there’d be good distance between Trio Diablo and us. The thought of this made me feel much more relaxed.

Jerry looked back to check on our load. His gaze followed the length of the boards and then caught my eye. I nodded and grinned. But as Jerry looked past my face, into the woods behind me, I saw his eyes go wide. His mouth opened in an O of surprise. He looked like a large mouth bass about to swallow a minnow.

“Whoa!” he said. “It is an old lady!”

“What?” I said. “Where?”

Jerry spun around, and as I turned to look where he was looking, we both dropped the boards. They fell with a heavy thud, right onto my big toe. Before I could stop it, a very loud “ow!” had shot from my mouth. As the “ow” ricocheted off the trees and echoed against the hill, I wondered if down on The Second Level the guys in Trio Diablo could hear it.