

UP THE CREEK

Natalie Hyde

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For Craig, who is always ready for an adventure.

CHAPTER 1

MINE TOO!

I found my grandfather's toe lying in some liquid at the bottom of a Mason jar. I knew it was his because Dad once told me Granddad lost a toe chopping wood. Plus, it's gross enough to keep your own toe, but I couldn't even imagine what sort of person would keep someone else's. The toe was all blackened and surprisingly long. The toenail was even still on it. I almost gagged. I had stumbled across it tucked up in the rafters when I was poking around the old, decrepit cabin on our claim outside Dawson City, Yukon.

"By Jove, this is quite a mess, heh?" Neils said, blocking the light of the doorway with his broad shoulders. If your only parent has been sent to county jail for getting mixed up with some stolen goods and you have to have a foster father, you want one like Neils: a six-foot-tall Norwegian with hair that looks like he cuts it

with a chainsaw. No one messes with you when you've got a Viking on your side. "It'll take some doing to set this right."

I had to agree with him. Granddad's old cabin had been abandoned for years and years, and I think even when it was new, it was just thrown together in a hurry. From the old pictures I had seen, miners were eager to get on with pulling a fortune in gold out of the ground — they didn't care what kind of house they lived in.

But I did. I was going to try to fix it up for when my dad came and we started mining our claim. *Our claim*. I loved the sound of that.

I didn't even know where I'd begin. Most of the wooden shelves had fallen or were hanging by one nail. Rusty cans and broken bottles were scattered on the ground. The slats of the small bed tucked in a corner had snapped in two, and the thin mattress hanging off it seemed to be a motel for mice, judging from the stuffing strewn about.

"It'll be fine once it's fixed up," I said. With summer vacation on, I could work on it most days.

Neils raised his eyebrows. "Look, Chris, I know how much you went through to get up here and get your grandfather's claim back, but fixing up this cabin is just the beginning. It's a lot of work to get a mine up and running . . . not to mention making a profit. A lot

of people never make a go of it.”

I didn't answer. I had never told Neils what I left behind, but one thing was for sure — the city was no place for Dad and me. We had been hours away from being evicted from our tiny, crappy apartment that was way too close to the bars my dad snuck away to, spending our rent money on beer. This gold claim was our ticket to a new life; the kind of life other people took for granted, with money to pay your bills so the electricity was never turned off, a fridge full of food for the whole month and even new shoes when the bottoms wore through your old ones and your feet got soaked when it rained.

“I know,” I told Neils. “But if I can work on the cabin, that will give my dad a head start on getting the mine going.”

Neils huffed like he wasn't getting through to me. I turned around and pretended to be sizing up the work the cabin needed so I wouldn't have to continue the conversation. I didn't care if we had to drink water from the creek, eat nothing but ramen noodles for a year or even use a tree for our bathroom — we were *never* going back.

“We better get going. Anna has supper ready, I think,” he said, walking out the door. Neils's wife, Anna, might be a softie when it came to chores but she was a stickler for punctuality. We

both knew that if we were late for a meal, we might not get any.

As I put the toe jar back on the rafter, a small packet fell to the ground. It just looked like a bit of brown paper tied with a string. I almost didn't open it, but then I figured something that had been hidden behind a gross jar of toe might be interesting. I untied the string, and the folds of paper crackled as I peeled them back. There, in the gloom of the cabin, glowed a piece of deep yellow rock about the size of a cough drop.

I couldn't take my eyes off it. It was heavier than you'd think for something that small, and as I closed my fist around it, I knew it was gold. It must have been my granddad's — it was in his cabin. I opened my fist again. A gold nugget. I knew it. I knew my granddad was right. The Dearing claim *did* have a pay streak. It was like my grandfather was talking to me, telling me everything was going to be all right.

I put the nugget in my pocket and pulled the door closed behind me — gently, because from the sounds of the hinges, one good yank and it would come right off. I wished I could get started on the cabin right away — my dad would need somewhere to stay. I hoped he wouldn't take too long to come or we would miss the mining season.

Gold mining in the Yukon is only possible for

a few months during the short summers, so you have to get started as soon as it turns warm and go right until the snow comes. But so far not even one shovelful of dirt on our claim had been moved. Nothing could start until my dad was released from jail and got up here. I guess it's not a good thing that there are so many criminals the jails were stuffed to bursting. But an overcrowded county jail did mean that people with less serious charges, like my dad, were getting released sooner. It seems the only time we Dearings have good luck is when prison is involved.

I had only heard from Dad once in the few weeks I'd been in Dawson. He wasn't really regular with stuff like phone calls, but it worried me just the same. At our meeting the week before, I had asked Mrs. Child Protective Services, also known as Mrs. Olsen, if she had talked to him lately.

"Yes, briefly," she had answered.

I waited for her to go on, but she was suddenly very preoccupied with paperwork on her desk.

"Well?"

"Well, what?"

"Is he okay? Does he have a release date?" I almost added "Did he ask about me?" but changed my mind. If he hadn't, it would sting too much.

"No, he doesn't have a firm date. There are . . . complications."

“Like what?”

She finally looked at me. “Nothing for you to be concerned about. He’ll get out when he gets out. Meanwhile, let’s talk about school in the fall.”

I barely heard what she said after that. The word *complications* made my stomach hurt. Was she hiding some bad news from me?

* * *

After chicken and dumplings, Neils and I went out to the dog yard in the clearing behind the house to feed his sled dogs. In the few weeks I’d been here, they’d gotten pretty used to me. Bullet was my favourite. Neils said Bullet got his name because he liked to go fast. His floppy ears and the way he tilted his head to the side when I talked to him reminded me a bit of Bandit, the stray I left behind at our old apartment building. When I left Ontario to come to the Yukon and get the Dearing claim back, I didn’t really think about the fact that I probably would never see Bandit again.

“How fast does Bullet go?” I asked Neils.

“So fast that you feel like the sled isn’t even touching the ground and the wind burns your cheeks.”

I couldn’t wait to try it.

Anna came out to dump the scraps from supper in her compost bin.

“So, when are you planning to start mining, Chris?” she asked.

I shrugged.

She gave Neils a look.

Neils cleared his throat. “I think we had better start with the basics. I’ll drive you down to our claim tomorrow,” he said.

“Drive? I thought *this* was your claim,” I said, looking around.

Neils shook his head. “This spot was cleared out years ago. No, I’ve got a block of claims a few kilometres south of here on Badger Creek.”

“A block? How many claims are there?”

“Oh, about sixteen or so.”

“Why do you have so many?”

“Well, to get the yardage we need to make a profit, we chew through the dirt pretty fast.”

I suddenly began to worry about my family’s claim. It was tiny compared to Neils’s. Maybe it wasn’t big enough for a pay streak. Maybe my granddad had already found all the gold on it and all that was left was the nugget I found. And then it dawned on me that even if there *was* still gold, I had no idea where to start searching for it. My dad never said what Granddad’s hint was, and I sure hoped he remembered, otherwise we’d be worse off than we were before — if that was even possible.