

Prologue

“Jason! Hey, Jason!” Andy called, maneuvering his horse a little to the right to miss some low overhanging branches. The sun was beginning to set in the western sky in the late November afternoon, and Andy was worried. He had been looking for his thirteen-year-old brother, Jason, for quite some time, and hadn’t seen any sign of him. None, that is, except for a pencil that Andy recognized as Jason’s that was lying in the path a few hundred feet back. But Jason could have dropped that pencil out here earlier today, or even yesterday. There was no way to know for sure. Jason almost always had it with him, in order to take notes about any mysteries the boys were working on.

One thing was sure. If Andy didn’t find his older brother soon, he was going to have to tell Mom that Jason was missing. He surely didn’t want to do that. He knew how much Mom would be worried by that bleak news.

“Hey, Jaaasssssoooooonnnnnn! Where are you, Jason? Come on out if you can hear me.”

No answer. Andy’s horse, Major, seemed agitated and stamped around, nervously pawing and looking from side to side. Eleven-year-old Andy spoke calmly to his horse when Major jerked his head impatiently. “It’s okay, boy. I’m just looking for Jason. He’s around here somewhere. He has to be!” Andy gently patted Major’s mane and carefully scanned the area. “If you see him or smell him, you whinny, okay?”

Andy had the impression that he saw some movement far over to his left, and turned his head quickly. Was that something or someone moving in the bushes? After staring at the bushes for a while, and riding closer to get a better look, Andy decided it was probably nothing but the wind rustling the leaves.

Carefully, he dismounted and walked his horse while thinking out loud. “Let’s see, I looked in the barn. I looked in all the outbuildings, in the pastures, and in our north and southwest woods. Where should I look now, Major?”

Andy started slowly walking his horse back in the

The Case of the Missing Man

direction of the Nelson homestead. Was there someplace he was missing? Somewhere he should be looking? He dreaded telling Mom that he couldn't find Jason, but what else could he do? Probably the sooner he told her the better. That way, a search party could be started before it was totally dark.

A search party? Surely not another one. There was already one major search party looking for someone in their county. That got Andy to thinking some more. *What is going on with that search? Why can't the searchers find that lost man who has been missing for several days? And now, why can't I find Jason?* "Two people who have disappeared in the last three days," he said to himself soberly.

Andy carefully picked his way through the woods leading his horse, and headed toward the house. "Jason!" Andy called mournfully, one more time. No answer. More rustling in the leaves. Andy turned to look, but saw nothing. Probably just the wind blowing the leaves again. Leaves rustling in late November sound so cold, so lonely, so depressing, compared to the cheerful, almost playful, rustling of midsummer. "If only Jason could hear me and answer," Andy said quietly, zipping up his jacket against the cool breeze. He got back on Major and cantered toward home.

But someone did hear him. As Andy's horse cleared a bend in the dim path through the woods, a boy rose and looked after him. He had been several yards off the path as Andy was talking, but Andy had missed him completely. The person shook his head at Andy's inability to spot him. Then he started moving in the same direction and along the same path that Andy was traveling. The two were now quickly heading toward the Nelson farmstead, but only one of the two realized that there were two on the path.

But we're getting a little ahead of the story. Let's back up and see how we got to this point . . .