



“Daddy, Daddy,” Joey screamed as he ran into the living room where his father sat reading the morning paper. His son’s panic-stricken face told him the boy was scared to death.

“What is it?” James Anderson asked as he put the newspaper down. “You look like you’ve seen a ghost.”

“It’s a....” Joey started to speak but had to pause to catch his breath. He had just finished running a mile as fast as his feet would allow. “It’s a bear...in the woods,” he finished as he pointed out the door.

“A bear?” The large man cocked his head and scrunched his face in obvious disbelief. “There’s no bear in this part of North Dakota.”

“We saw it, Daddy, on the other side of the trees by the point. It’s just huge and the ugliest thing you ever saw. Hurry up and do something!”

The kitchen door creaked open and then slapped shut as three more kids hurried through. It was Samantha, Joey’s older sister, and their friends, Kimberly and Tim. They also were out of breath. They had run from the woods along with Joey, but couldn’t keep up with him. They bounced into the living room where they found Joey pleading with his dad to come and look. Mr. Anderson still sat in his easy chair with his feet plopped on a footrest.

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[www.candyrice.com](http://www.candyrice.com)

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[www.joyminion.com](http://www.joyminion.com)

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“Samantha,” he turned to his daughter for answers. “Joey claims that—”

“It’s true, Daddy,” she interrupted, coming over to her father and pulling him by the arm in a gesture to get up. “There’s a gigantic bear out there.”

Mr. Anderson stood up at his children’s urging. His doubt had changed to confusion. “Okay, I’ll have a look.” He went to his gun case on the wall, pulled a key out of his pocket, and unlocked the glass cabinet. He grabbed some shells from a drawer in the desk underneath the gun case, loaded two shots into the weapon and headed for the door. The four kids followed. They were less nervous now that they had the protection of an adult. Together they walked across the back yard and into the woods. The woods were shallow, and the five-some soon arrived on the other side.

Mr. Anderson stopped at the edge of the small forest and looked out onto the rolling prairie where no trees were visible for a couple of miles. To their right was a pond about the size of a football field. Thousands of cattails dominated the entire shoreline along its perimeter.

Joey caught up to his father. “There!” he exclaimed as he pointed to the opposite side of the pond. Mr. Anderson lifted up the binoculars that hung on a strap around his neck and focused them in the direction Joey was pointing.

Before long he began to laugh. He took the binoculars off his neck and passed them to his son. Joey found the big black object that had frightened him earlier and looked at the magnified version of it.

“It’s only the roots of an old tree,” Mr. Anderson told the others. “That tree must have blown over in last night’s thunderstorm. The tree was on soggy soil next to the pond and fell over easily, roots and all. Your awful bear is nothing more than tree roots with black dirt still clinging to them.

The kids all looked relieved and slightly embarrassed as they took turns using the binoculars. Mr. Anderson looked at them more seriously and scolded, “Next time check things out better before you jump to any outrageous conclusions.” With that, he turned around and returned to the house. He had no clue that his words would come back to haunt him later that summer when a mysterious woman suddenly came to live in the spooky old mansion near the Anderson house.

When he had passed out of sight, Samantha suggested they go to their secret fort for a meeting. The other children agreed and they all headed south, following the line of trees. A few hundred yards later they approached a gigantic row of towering lilac bushes whose purple blossoms had just opened the week before.

Samantha led the way into the secret interior of the hideout by lifting up several branches and crawling on her hands and knees into the bushes. Inside, the shrubbery opened up into a small room-like area, big enough to hold a small group of young people comfortably. A canopy of branches and leaves hid their view of the sky above.

When all four children had entered and situated themselves in their usual places, Samantha called the meeting to order. As a sixth-grader, she was the oldest of the group. She was tall for her age, with long, straight auburn hair and large brown glasses on her nose. She was sensible, responsible, and more serious than the others.

Kimberly and Tim were both in fifth grade. Kimberly was a small girl with a large smile. Her blond hair was always in a pony tail, and her bangs hung long over her forehead and into her eyes. She was the firefly of the group, always positive and usually happy.

Tim was Joey’s best friend. He was medium height and a little heavy. He had not yet sprouted upwards like most of his friends but looked forward to getting taller for basketball. He was a sports freak, spending hours every day with a ball of some kind. He was soft-hearted and kind to animals as well as to people.

Joey was in fourth grade. His parents called him a “live wire” and his teachers had labeled him “hyper.” He was always moving in some direction and talked constantly. He was a smaller-than-average boy and strangers often thought he was only in the second grade. In smarts, however, he excelled beyond everyone in his class.

These four kids had formed a club which they had not yet named, even though summer vacation was already a month old. They lived in a tiny North Dakota town called McAlister where there were only a few kids in each class. The school in town had been closed for some time now and the children were bussed fifteen miles away to Lisbon. Kids here had to play with others from different grades, unless they wanted to play alone. They did not mind, however, because they did not know anything different.