

Jailbirds

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"Hank," my mama likes to say, "you were born for trouble."

If that's true, then 1888 was a good year for it. My friend Eli was born then too.

I don't recall our first meeting—we were only babies—but I do remember this one. I was out in the front yard, playing in the dirt with a stick, minding my manners like I always do, when up walked Eli with his mama. I saw him eyeing my stick, and sure enough, as soon as his mama had her back turned, Eli grabbed it and headed for the street.

Being a four-year-old of uncommon intelligence, I knew that Eli was in certain danger. A runaway horse could come charging down that dirt road any minute. So I tackled him and saved his life. While I was at it, I got my stick back.

There's nothing like a shared love of sticks to bring two boys together. And that first tackle was just the beginning. From then on, Eli and I stuck close. But it wasn't sticks that got us into fixes after that. Most of the time, it was Eli.

Take, for example, a certain day in September 1899. It was a Saturday, a warm one, but with a whiff of fall in the air that called for adventure.

"Hank," Eli said. "What do you say we visit the old fort? See if there's still fish in the pond."

That was fine with me. Even though the fort had shut down the year we were born, we still found traces of the soldiers who'd lived there. I kept a collection of tarnished buttons and spent shells under my bed.

Eli grabbed his fishing pole as we passed his house and we started the two-mile trek through town, east toward the mountains, where the abandoned buildings sat snug against the foothills. Eli practiced casting his line as we walked, but I should have known he had more on his mind than trout. The Devil's own gleam shone in his eye—the same look he'd had when he was after my stick.

Sure enough, as soon as we reached the pond, he leaned over the mossy edge, took one look, then tossed his pole down on the bank.

"Don't see any fish," he said. "How about we explore."

The pond filled one corner of a large grassy rectangle surrounded by rock buildings—the old barracks, the hospital, the laundry, the store. Eli surveyed them, rubbing his hands together like he does when he's choosing a candy to spend his penny on.

It was all for show. I knew there was only one building he wanted to go in--the one we hadn't explored yet, the one I told him I'd never step foot in.

"Not the jail," I said.

"Ah, Hank." He grabbed my hand and pulled. "Just one peek."

I held back, making like a mule at the end of Pa's lead rope. "I told you before. I'm not going in there."

Eli stopped yanking, and his nose wrinkled up till his freckles made one brown blob. "You're scared of Zeke Jones, aren't you? You think he's a ghost."

"Do not," I said. But it was a lie. I figured if anyone were to come back as a ghost, it would be him—Ezekiel Jones. He'd spent time in that jail for killing a sheriff. Most of the townsfolk didn't believe it. They said Zeke Jones was a good outlaw, a kind of Robin Hood who robbed from the rich, gave to the poor, and helped old ladies down from carriages. The jury didn't agree. They found him guilty. The judge sentenced him to an unhappy end—at the bottom of a rope.

Now, I wasn't Zeke Jones, but I was me, and if a jury sent me a-swinging, I'd be unhappy. I'd be looking to come back and find someone to haunt. What better place for Zeke Jones to lie in wait than his last home on earth.

I opened my mouth to tell Eli exactly what I thought of his scheme, but nothing came out. He had a look in his eye that told me I was a 'fraidy cat, and I couldn't bear it.

"All right, I'll come," I said.

The jail was the end building on the left, a low squat square that called out for me to stay away. Still, I followed Eli. Pa always told me if you're scared of a thing—like falling off a horse—the best way to get over it is to do it. I hoped his advice worked for ghosts, too.

We knelt by a basement window with thick metal bars. "There," I told Eli, not one bit sorry to see it. "Can't get it."

Eli stuck a leg through, but only fit up to his knee. "Hmph." He stood up and disappeared around the side of the building. "Hank!" he called a moment later. "Over here."

I followed the call to find Eli already halfway through a window that was missing three bars. He slid through and a *plop* told me he'd found the bottom. I peered in. Eli stood below, looking around in the dim light. A plank of wood leaned against a far wall. If we propped it next to the window, we could use it to climb back out. So far, things didn't look too bad.

One *plop* later, I was standing next to Eli, gazing down a long narrow room with rock walls and a dirt floor. Rusty metal cages stood in a row, cages almost like the ones I'd seen at the

traveling circus. These were about eight feet long and six feet wide, and I was pretty sure they weren't made for lions. "Man cages," I whispered, wondering which one of them had held Zeke Jones.

I set off down the room, peering through bars as I went. No sign of a ghostly Zeke, but the walking wasn't easy. Water had run across the dirt floor, making it rutted and uneven.

I heard Eli tripping along behind. Then he stopped, and an awful *reeet* echoed through the room. The sound bounced off the rock walls and sent icy fingers tickling down my spine. Hunching my shoulders, I turned to see Eli walk into a cage.

"Look at me, Hank," he said, with a grin the size of a corncob. "I'm a jailbird." He let go of the door and took a step in.

That's when the Horrible happened. The door moved all by itself. It swung shut—*Clang!*—and Eli was inside.

I knew then whose cage it was. Ezekiel Jones had come back, and Eli was his prisoner. I felt his unseen arms squeeze the breath out of my chest and I knew my own unhappy end was near. I did the only thing I could do. I ran.

I flew down the long room, leaping over ruts and gullies. I was trying to pull the heavy plank over to the window when I heard a ghostly wail.

"Haaaank." Somehow, the ghost knew my name. The cry came again. "Hank, don't leave me."

It was Eli. I turned, heart thumping, and realized that I couldn't leave my best friend. Ghost or no, I had to save him. Besides, I couldn't move that plank without Eli.

On tiptoe, I crept back toward the cage where Eli hung through the bars, flailing his arms. "I can't open it, Hank," he wailed, his corncob grin turned inside out.

Taking hold of the door, I gave a mighty push, but it didn't budge. "How did you open it in the first place?" I asked, eyeing Eli's scrawny arms.

"There was a stick in the door, propping it open."

"Check around the cage," I said. "Maybe there's a loose bar."

Eli started circling, jiggling the rusty steel as he went. It was no good—the bars were as tight as a necktie on Sunday. But when he reached the back, something unexpected happened.

Kaclunk. The cage tipped—down in the back, up in the front—and slowly the door swung inward. *Reeet.*

Eli stood frozen, staring first at the door, then at me. "Grab it, Hank," he whispered, as if not wanting the door to hear our plan. I nodded, not daring to speak either—although it was the ghost that had me worried.

The problem was, I couldn't reach the door. I'd have to step into the cage just to touch it. And the cage floor was now higher. There was only one thing I could do—I jumped.

There were two clunks when I landed—the first, when my feet hit the steel floor, the second, when the cage tipped my way. *Reeet*—the heavy door swept past my grasping hand. *Clang!*—we were both prisoners.

Eli and I looked at each other, and I knew we'd just received a life sentence in jail. The ghost had gotten his way. Now he had both of us to keep him company.

As I walked back to join Eli, the cage tipped again. *Kaclunk*, the door swung open, taunting us. There we stood at one end, open door at the other, and I felt like a starving man, only feet away from a feast.

Then I got it! We were dealing with a seesaw, not a ghost. The water that had run across the floor must have taken dirt from under both ends of this cage, turning it into a giant teeter totter. When the cage tipped, the *clunk* jarred the door loose.

Somehow, realizing that made me feel better. Seesaws were predictable—they always went up and down. Ghosts, on the other hand, weren't. You never knew what one of those might do.

"What now, Hank?" Eli asked, tugging at my shirttails.

Being an eleven-year-old of uncommon intelligence, I knew it was up to me to devise a plan. "I'm gonna toss you," I said to Eli. He stared at me, goggle-eyed.

"Look," I explained, cupping my hands in front of him. "You put your foot in here, just like you're getting on a horse. I'll give you a boost and you'll sail clean out the door."

"I will?" Eli asked and he looked at the door. "I don't know."

"Come on," I said. "I do this all the time with my little sister."

"All right." He put his foot in my hands.

"One, two, three . . ." I said, and I heaved as hard as I could.

I noticed then that Eli was a lot heavier than my little sister. I could boost her on a horse like nothing, but Eli wasn't nothing. He was a fifty-pound bag of flour. He flew about a foot in the air and a foot forward before he crashed.

He lay still for a moment and I wondered if I'd killed him. Then he sat up, rubbing his nose. "I'm through," he said. "Next time, you're doing the sailing." He crawled to the far corner of the cell and sat with his arms wrapped around himself, looking like a dried-up spider.

"Eli," I said, sitting down by him. "There's more on those bones of yours than I thought." I guess he liked that idea, because he flexed his arm and his grin grew back. As for me, I didn't feel much like smiling. I was beginning to wish it were a ghost instead of a seesaw that had us locked in there. Sure, a seesaw is predictable, but you can't bargain with a seesaw. You can't beg it to let you go. A ghost, now

Just then, I felt a tickling on my hand and my heart nearly leaped from under my overalls.

I looked down to see a small brown snake, gliding over my fingers. Now, I'm not opposed to snakes, but I prefer to look, not touch. I hollered and shook it off.

"It's just a baby garter snake," Eli said, and he picked it up and put it in his front pocket. The snake peeped out and flicked its tongue at me.

I suppose I could have been offended, but I wasn't. In fact, I could have given its brown slit-nose a kiss.

"That's it!" I said. Eli looked at me, bug-eyed again.

"Grab onto my boots," I told him. I flopped onto my belly and slithered like the snake toward the open door. As I passed the middle of the cell, I felt it starting to tip, but my fingers were still inches away from freedom. "Push, Eli!"

He gave a mighty shove on my boots and I slid forward, snagging the edge of the door just before it closed.

"Whoeee!" Eli yelled and he ran forward to grab it.

He helped me up and we stepped out of the cage. We were free. We pulled the plank to the window and scrambled out.

Eli picked the snake from his pocket and set it on the ground. I watched as it slid between two bars of the window and inched down the wall, back into the jail. Suddenly, I had second thoughts about Zeke Jones.

Eli tugged at my shirttails. "Where to now, Hank?" Already, the Devil's own gleam was back in his eye.

Eli would always be Eli. But from now on, if ever a place called out for me to stay away, I intended to listen. Next time we got into a fix, there might not be a snake—or a ghost—around to get us out.