

Maple Sugar Moon



Sugaring in New Fane, Vermont,
Circa 1930s postcard

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12,800 words

Chapter One

Thunder crashed and rolled across the shoulders of the mountains, bouncing along until it disappeared in its own echo. Beneath the darkening sky, Douglas sprinted through the meadow. Far behind, Scotty struggled to catch up to his twin brother.

Douglas looked back and jerked to a stop. He waved his arms and yelled, "Come on Scotty! We'll never beat the storm if you don't hurry up."

Scotty puffed up and stopped beside his brother. He hunched over, spread his feet and put his hands on his knees while gasping for air. Between pants he said, "Well... maybe if... we were... identical twins... then... I could keep up. I've never... been much of a runner."

"I know. But we're about to get soaked. We're still a long ways from home."

Black clouds boiled over the mountains, covering the north end of the valley with a dark, threatening blanket. The boys could see the front edge of the storm sweeping toward them followed by torrential rain.

When they left home that morning planning to spend most of the day exploring a mountain meadow in the Gallatin National Forest it was clear and sunny. Without warning, the storm blew over the mountains and pelted down the valley. They'd lived in Montana for only a few weeks, but already they knew that sudden thunderstorms could be violent and dangerous.

Douglas pulled on Scotty's arm and pointed. "Come on. We'll run to that big pine tree on the side of the hill. It's all downhill from there."

Scotty glanced toward the storm. "You don't have to tell me twice." He took off running, but after only a few strides, Douglas passed him.

"Meet you there," he yelled, as he dashed by his slower brother.

Scotty ran as hard as he could following Douglas to the tree where both boys stopped and leaned against it to catch their breath. A jagged arc of lightning flashed across the sky followed

almost instantly by a blast of thunder.

Scotty yelled over the gusting wind. "It's almost here! What are we gonna do?"

"Run! What else can we do?" Douglas yelled, as another fork of lightning flashed, hitting the ground only a hundred yards from them. The ground shook when the thunder boomed.

I can help.

Startled, Scotty and Douglas stood up straight and put their hands on their hips. "What did you say?" They asked at the same time.

Staring at each other in surprise they said, "I didn't say anything."

Douglas looked around. "Okay, if we didn't, who did? It sounded like a real old man talking..."

"...like he was right beside us," Scotty finished.

They scanned the area looking for the old man, but no one was in sight. Confused, Douglas leaned against the tree again.

I can help.

He jerked hand away as if he'd touched a hot stove. Pointing at the tree, he said, "I heard the voice again when I touched the tree. Put your hand on it."

Warily, Scotty put his palm on the tree.

I can help.

Scotty jumped away from the tree, almost tripping over his feet. "I heard it, too. Where's it coming from?"

Douglas pointed at the tree. "I think it's coming from the tree. But..."

"...that's impossible," Scotty finished.

The boys stared at each other, eyes wide with surprise. "Okay, let's put our hands on the tree at the same time and don't pull 'em off, no matter what."

“You sure about this?”

“No, but I want to find out.”

They put their palms flat against the rough bark.

I can help.

Scotty jerked and almost pulled his hand off. Douglas leaned forward, pressing harder against the bark. In an unsteady voice, he asked, “Are you talking to us?”

Yes. I can help.

“How? The storm’s almost here!”

Come inside.

Douglas frowned. “Come inside where?” He thought for a moment. “I got it. Inside the tree! Scotty, around to the other side.”

They ran around the huge trunk, one boy in each direction and found a triangular-shaped opening. Douglas dropped to his hands and knees and crawled through it.

From inside the tree, he called, “Come on in, there’s lots of room.”

Scotty peeked into the hollow tree, reluctant to follow his brother. When lightning flashed followed by an explosion of thunder that felt like it was right under his feet, he dived headfirst through the opening.

Chapter Two

Scotty landed on a thick bed of dry wood chips, brown needles, and pieces of pinecones that cushioned his knees when he hit the ground. He pulled himself into a sitting position as the storm burst open. Outside, huge drops of water drove into the ground like liquid bullets while large hailstones rattled against the side of the tree, bouncing and rolling across the grass. Again and again, lightning lit the landscape like flashes from a gigantic camera while thunder roared.

Douglas raised his voice over the noise. “Wow! That was close.” He leaned back against the inside of the tree, staring out at the cascading rain and hail.

Scotty said, “You sure took a chance. What if an animal had been in here?”

“There wasn’t. And anyway, what choice did we have?”

Scotty shrugged and pulled his knees up to get his feet away from hailstones bouncing into the tree. “None, I guess. But that was weird. You know, the old man’s voice. We both heard it, but no one was around. Where do you think he was?”

“No idea. But let’s list the clues.”

Douglas loved mysteries and read the *Hardy Boys* and other mystery stories over and over. He’d always stop reading part way through and then try to figure out the ending from the clues in the story. As he tried to work out the clues, he’d explain them to Scotty and ask for his ideas.

Scotty preferred science fiction stories and when Douglas suggested they talk about the clues in a story, Scotty groaned and tried to change the subject. This time, they had a real mystery on their hands, not a made-up one. Scotty knew Douglas was right and if they were going to figure out where the voice came from, they’d have to look for clues.

Douglas scratched his head while he thought. “Okay, let’s list what we know. We both heard a voice when no one was around. We only heard the voice when we had our hands on the

tree. The voice knew the tree was hollow. There's only one possible answer." Douglas paused and sighed. "You're gonna think I'm nuts, but all the clues are pointing at the tree."

"You're right. I do think you're nuts," Scotty said, nodding. "But then so am I, because I think it was the tree, too. The problem is trees don't talk."

"Yeah, I know. I don't know who was talking, but we would have been in big trouble if we were still outside. Now all we have to do is wait 'til it quits."

It is good to be safe.

The boys almost leaped out of the tree.

In shaky voices, they asked together, "Who are you?"

I am Ponderosa Pine.

"Is that your name?" Scotty asked, looking around the inside of the tree trying to see where the voice was coming from.

It is.

"Well, um... okay then. Mr. uh... Ponderosa Pine, I'm Douglas and this is my brother Scotty."

Douglas hesitated, trying to think of something else to say that wouldn't sound totally stupid. After all, what do you say to a tree to start a conversation? "Er... uh... is Ponderosa your first name?"

It is. I am of the Pine family.

Scotty pointed at Douglas. "We're of the Melcher family. Are there a lot of pines in your family?"

many. Pine family is large.

"Do the other pines have names too?" Douglas asked.

Yes. Red. White. Jack. Bristle Cone. Long Leaf. Many more.

“Long Leaf? I thought pine trees had needles, not leaves,” said Scotty.

All trees have leaves. Pine leaves are named differently. There are other groups in Pine family.

“What groups are those?”

Spruce. Fir. Cedar. Larch. Cypress. There are more.

Scotty snapped his fingers. “I got it. Trees in the pine family are all evergreens that have needles all the time. Right?”

Yes. A few cousins drop their leaves each year. Most do not.

“What are the names of some other trees?” Douglas asked.

Blue Spruce. White Cedar. Tamarack. Douglas Fir...

“Douglas fir! There’s a tree named after me?”

The names are similar.

Tentatively, Scotty asked, “Is there a tree named Scotty?”

No. A cousin is Scotch or Scot Pine.

Scotty pumped his fist. “All right. There’s a tree named after me too.”

Douglas said, “But your name’s Scotty, not Scot.”

“Not any more. I just changed it.” He stopped, and put his hand on the tree. “But what do we call you?”

I am Ponderosa Pine.

“Well, yeah, but there must be millions of Ponderosa Pine trees. This whole hill is covered with them.”

Yes. They are from my seeds.

“Wow. Talk about having lots of children,” Scot said, shaking his head in awe.

Douglas snapped his fingers. “Hey, what if we call you Grandpa P? That way, your name

will be different than the others.”

You may. I am Ponderosa Pine.

“We know. And we won’t forget. But this way we’ll know each other. Okay? By the way, do you talk to everyone?”

No.

“Oh. Well, do other trees talk to people?”

No.

Scot frowned. “I don’t want to sound ungrateful or anything, because we’re really happy to be in here. But if trees don’t talk to people, why are you talking to us?”

Danger. Help.

“You saw we were in danger, and decided to help us?”

Yes.

Douglas patted the inside of the tree. “We sure appreciate it. I don’t know what would have happened if we hadn’t crawled in here.”

Scot looked around. “Yeah, this is a great shelter. You must be really old to be this big.”

Ponderosa Pine has many dormancies.

The boys gave each other blank looks and then Douglas asked, “What are dormancies?”

When sunlight is low, I become dormant.

“Oh, I get it. Each winter you go to sleep until spring. Did you count the number of times?”

I do not know count.

Scot said, “That makes sense. Why would a tree need to count? Anyway, I’ll bet you had a bunch of dormancies to grow this big. What do you do while you’re awake?”

I make oxygen. I hold soil. I am food and shelter for animals.

“Oh, right. Animals breathe, eat the seeds, and live in hollow places in the trunk,”

Douglas said.

“Yeah and people get the same things from trees,” Scot said. “We breathe the oxygen, get lumber for our houses, and we eat the nuts and apples and peaches. We also get maple syrup from trees. Yum, that’s my favorite.”

“Mine too,” said Douglas. “I’ve always wondered how it’s made. All I know is that it comes from the sap of maple trees. Grandpa P, do you know how maple syrup is made?”

No. Wait.

The boys settled back against the inside of the tree, watching the pouring rain and hail. Every so often, lightning flashed followed by a blast of thunder. They were warm and dry and sitting on a soft bed of decaying wood. In a few minutes, they began to get drowsy and nod off.

Cousin Sugar Maple knows.

Grandpa P’s voice startled the boys awake. Scot said, “You talked to a cousin maple tree. Are you related?”

Yes. All plants are related. Trees are close relatives.

“But how did you talk to him? There aren’t any maple trees near here.”

Roots intertwine. We share memories. Tree to Tree.

“Great,” Douglas said. “Can you tell us how to make maple syrup?”

No.

The boys’ shoulders sagged with disappointment. Scot said, “Well, okay.”

I can give you Sugar Maple’s memories.

“No kidding? How?” Douglas asked.

Sit against me. Rest.

When the boys settled against the tree again, a warm drowsiness covered them. The

sound of the rain faded, and they felt lighter and began to float... drifting...

Chapter Three

Cold breezes blowing across their faces and bright sunlight on their closed eyelids woke the boys. Opening their eyes, they looked around and discovered they were outside and sitting against the trunk of a tree. They scrambled to their feet in surprise because there wasn't a pine tree in sight. The trees scattered over the snow-covered hills all had bare branches. The warm sunshine had melted the snow at the base of the tree making a dark doughnut of bare earth.

Douglas said, "Look at the snow! Where are we? Where's Grandpa P?"

Scot pointed at Douglas. "Forget about the snow! Look at your clothes."

Douglas looked down at how he was dressed and said, "I've never worn anything like this in my whole life."

They wore heavy cloth coats with bold plaid patterns and brightly colored hand-knitted hats. Underneath the coat, they wore flannel shirts, blue jeans, and rubber snow boots that came almost to their knees. Instead of belts, suspenders held their jeans up.

Douglas said, "Well, all the clues say that we're not..."

"...in Montana any more," Scot finished. He grabbed a handful of snow and made a snowball. "And it's definitely not summer."

They heard the bright sound of metal jingling, the flat slap of leather and a man calling in a loud voice, "Get up there, Mike. Come on Ike. We've got work to do." They heard an animal snort and the gentle shushing of something sliding on the snow. The sound was close and getting louder.

"Who's that talking? And who's Mike and Ike?" Scot asked.

Douglas shrugged. "Let's go find out. Maybe one of them can tell us where we are. It's coming from the other side of the tree."

When the boys came around the tree, a man's voice boomed, "Aha! There you two are.

Fall asleep back there? Get the buckets on that tree so we can get this load done.”

Down a slope from the tree, bearded man wearing clothes like theirs stood on a heavy sled in front of a huge metal tank. Pulling the sled were a pair of the biggest horses the boys had ever seen.

He roared with laughter at their confused looks and slapped his thigh. “Your parents said you wanted to learn how to make maple sugar from your Uncle Orville and Aunt Thelma when they sent you up here from the city. You can’t do that sleeping behind a tree. Aunt Thelma’s waiting for this load of sap so she can start the first boil of the season.”

Grinning, he slapped the horses’ rumps with flat leather reins to get them to move ahead. “Let’s go, we’ve only got a few more pails to collect, then we can go to the sugarhouse.”

Douglas and Scot looked at each other and grinned. They said together, “We did ask.” They waded through the snow to the sled, staying well away from the horses.

“You boys don’t have to be shy around Mike and Ike. They’re big, but they’re gentle. Go on up and pat them. They won’t mind. I’ll get the buckets on the next tree.”

Scot grinned at Douglas and pointed toward the horses. “Go ahead and get acquainted. You always said you wanted a horse.”

“Yeah, I did, but this isn’t what I had in mind. I never knew horses got this big.” He stared at the horses shuffling his feet with indecision. Finally, he said, “Okay, here goes.”

He eased up to the nearest horse until he could put his hand on its rear leg. When Scot saw that the horse didn’t react to Douglas’ touch, he followed. The boys admired the team while they stroked the horse. They were gray-blue in color and had white spots spattered here and there. They weren’t tall, but they were broad and each massive leg was as large as both boys put together.

Scot asked Douglas, “What kind of horses are these? I never knew they got so big.”

Douglas just shook his head.

Carrying a bucket back to the tank on the sled, Uncle Orville overheard Scot's question. "They're Percherons," he said as he emptied his pail into the tank on the sled. "Ever read about King Arthur and the Round Table?" Douglas and Scot nodded. "Knights used to ride horses like these. Weren't very fast, but they could carry a load for a long ways. I imagine those knights with all their armor and swords and things were pretty heavy.

"Some neighbors have Clydesdales and Belgiums, but I like Percherons. They aren't as flashy as Clydesdales, but they have a nice even temper."

He set his pail down and slapped one horse on the thigh making a loud smack. The horse looked back, snorted, and shook his head while Uncle Orville roared with laughter.

"This one here's Ike and that's Mike over there. They weigh about a ton each, but Mike's maybe a couple of hundred pounds lighter. They're a little cranky today because they've had the whole winter off. They'd rather be in the nice warm barn rather than out here pullin' the gatherin' tank. Few more days and they'll get back into shape." He slapped the horse on the thigh again.

Douglas was feeling more comfortable with the horses, but there was no way he was going haul off and smack one on the butt. "Well, er... Uncle Orville, what should we do?"

"Nothing to it." He handed each boy a metal bucket with a flared rim. "This is your gathering pail. All you do is visit each tree, pour the sap from the buckets hanging on the tree into your gathering pail until it's full and bring the gathering pail back to the tank on the sled."

Douglas took his bucket. "That sounds easy enough."

Scot looked up the bank at the tree they had been sitting behind. He pointed at the tree. "Uh... Uncle Orville, why doesn't that tree have any buckets on it?"

He glanced up the bank and shook his head. "Too old. Probably cut it down this summer and use it for firewood next year. That's how I keep the sugarbush clean."

Scot said, "Sugarbush? What's that?"

Uncle Orville looked surprised and waved his arm in a circle over his head. "Sugarbush? Why, that's this here. You're lookin' at it. It's all around you. Each year we cut out anything that isn't a sugar maple tree. Easier to gather sap that way. Family's been workin' this sugarbush for over a hundred and fifty years. All the way back to my great-great-grandpa."

Douglas pointed at another, smaller tree. "How about that one? It's not old and it doesn't have a bucket."

"Too young. They have to be at least eighteen inches in diameter. Boys your size, if you can reach your arms all the way around, it's too small. I can put two buckets on one that's twenty-four inches and three on one thirty-six inches or bigger."

The boys turned to scan the trees in the sugarbush. There were buckets hanging from trees as far as they could see. Douglas said, "Man, look at all the buckets!"

Scot asked, "How many buckets do you have?"

"Put out more than a thousand this year. And they ain't gonna get emptied if we stand around talkin' about 'em. Let's gather sap. I'll show you what to do."

Scot and Douglas picked up their gathering pails and followed Uncle Orville to a tree that had two buckets hanging from it. "Now watch what I do. Take the hat off the bucket and set it upside down on the ground. That way you don't get dirt on it. Lift the sap bucket off the hook and pour it into your gatherin' pail. Then hang him back up and put his hat back on. Make sure you get it on right so it keeps out the snow and dirt and sticks. Clean sap makes good syrup."

The boys and Uncle Orville gathered sap from five more trees before all three gathering pails were full. As they struggled to the sled carrying the heavy buckets, Scot asked, "Why's the gathering pail shaped so funny?"

"Keeps the sap from sloshing out and makes it easier to pour into the tank. If it sloshes,

we lose sugar. We have to gather every drop. Since the crash three years ago, things have been hard and sugar's about the only income we got."

"Crash? What crash?" Douglas asked.

His question startled Uncle Orville. "The '29 stock market crash, of course. Even living in the city you must know about that."

Scot quickly said, "Oh, sure. Um... I guess we never heard it called the crash before." As Uncle Orville took his pail to the sled, Scot leaned close to Douglas so Uncle Orville couldn't hear him. "If he's right, it's 1932! Can that be possible?"

Douglas struggled with his heavy bucket and said, "Must be. Look at the clues. Our clothes, the horses and the sled. I don't know what's going on, but we're about to learn how maple syrup is made no matter what year it is."

"I guess you're right, but this is sure strange."

Uncle Orville poured his pail into the gathering tank. "Bring your pails over and I'll dump 'em in."

The boys climbed up on the tank and looked in at the sap filling the tank. Douglas said, "Uncle Orville, can we taste it? It doesn't look much like maple syrup to me."

Uncle Orville slapped the tank and laughed. "Sure, just a minute." He opened a large wooden box on the back of the sled and pulled out a glass jar. He dipped it in the sap and held it out to Douglas. "Here, try it. See what you think."

When Douglas held the jar up to the sun and said, "It looks like plain water. He took a swallow and handed the jar to Scot. "Well, it tastes like water, but I think I can taste just a little bit of sweetness in it."

Scot took a swallow. "You're right, but there's something else." He took another sip. "Well, I wouldn't say it's sweet, but it's nice. It tastes lighter and fresher than regular water."

Scot closed his eyes to concentrate while he took a big mouthful and swallowed. “HmMMM. It tastes like... like you’d think a tree would taste like I think. I don’t know how to describe it, but I like it.”

Uncle Orville beamed. “You’ve got it, Scot. You can taste the maple tree in the sap. Not everyone can do that. You’ll be a fine syrup maker. You’re both right about it lookin’ like water because it only has a tiny bit of maple sugar in it. We have to boil off thirty-five to forty gallons of sap to get one gallon of maple syrup.”

Scot asked, “That’s a lot. How much maple syrup do you make in a season?”

“Well, that depends on the weather and the trees. This year we’d like to get at least 350 gallons of syrup.”

Scot, who was proud of his math skills, did some quick arithmetic in his head, and didn’t believe the answer. He frowned, and put his hands on his hips. “You mean you have to collect about 14,000 gallons of sap this spring? *Fourteen thousand?*”

“Yep, that sounds about right. This gathering tank here holds about 200 gallons and I can fill it and haul it back to the sugarhouse two-three times per day depending on the weather.”

Scot did another quick calculation. “So you have to make about seventy trips to get that much sap. That’s amazing.”

“Never count the trips. Long as good sap runs, I collect it. Let’s keep goin’. We got a ways to go and the tank ain’t gonna filled with us standin’ around figuring how many times we got to empty it.”

For the next hour, the boys worked with Uncle Orville collecting sap and filling the tank on the sled. When Scot tried to hang an empty sap bucket back on a tree, the bucket fell to the ground. He examined the tree carefully, and called “Uncle Orville, the little spout, or whatever you call that thing in the tree, came out.”

Uncle Orville came to where Scot was standing. He looked at the tree trunk and traced the location of the hole with his finger. “Well, now, I guess I drilled the hole for the spile too close to where it was before.”

“Spile? What’s that?”

Uncle Orville pointed to the object in Scot’s hand. “A spile’s that thing there. I just have to drill a new hole and tap it back in. Be right back and I’ll show you how.”

He walked to the sled and dug around in the box on the back. When Uncle Orville got back to the tree, he was carrying a hammer and a brace with an auger drill bit in it. “Now, all we have to do is take this brace and bit and drill another hole. Then we tap in the spile. Scot, since it’s your tree, you can make the new hole.” He handed Scot the tools.

Scot stared at the brace and bit in his hands. He had seen pictures of one before, but he had no idea how to use it. Seeing his blank look, Uncle Orville put Scot’s hands on it correctly and set the bit against the bark. “Now you have to drill upward and about an inch and a half into the tree. Hold the top and turn the handle clockwise.”

Scot turned the handle and the bit chewed into the tree. “Hey, this is easy. Tell me when to stop.”

“That’s enough. Pull the bit out and Douglas, you put the spile back in.” He handed the hammer and spile to Douglas. “Just tap it into the hole. You don’t have to hit it very hard.”

Douglas set the spile in the hole and tapped it in. “I don’t get it. If the sap is rising, why is the spile pointing upward into the tree?”

“Good question. We say the sap is rising, but it’s actually moving all through the tree. It rises and falls and goes sideways. All last summer the tree made sugar and stored it in the wood. As the sun warms the tree, it starts to run all over. The south side of the tree gets the most sun so I put the first spile in on that side. The next ones go on the east, west, and north in that order. The

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