

Chapter 21

Chapter 21 begins with Will reflecting on the old pine-plank boardwalk located behind his house, a piece of history that had been carefully preserved by his grandfather. This boardwalk, which stood proudly amidst the modern landscape of concrete sidewalks, had become a symbol of the past. Through the years, it had withstood the elements—the scorching heat of summer, the torrential rains, and the cold of winter. Despite the harsh conditions, it remained sturdy, holding memories of a time long gone, when the world was simpler and less concerned with the rapid pace of change. The boardwalk was more than just a physical structure; it represented a connection to Will's childhood, to his grandfather, and to a past that seemed to grow increasingly distant with each passing day. It stood firm, a timeless reminder that some things, like memories and places, can endure, even when everything else around them changes.

As Will lay in bed that night, the quiet of the house surrounding him, his thoughts turned to this cherished relic of his childhood. It wasn't just a boardwalk—it was a part of his history, one that had witnessed countless moments of youthful mischief and adventure. Boys like Will and Jim didn't follow the conventional paths; instead of ringing doorbells, they engaged in playful pranks, such as tossing dirt at houses or leaving cryptic notes for others to find. It was on nights like these that Will and Jim would sneak out under the cover of darkness, making their way to the boardwalk that had become their own secret playground. Over time, they had learned to create their own music with the boardwalk, with each step producing a unique melody. They had even perfected this ritual, knowing that certain tunes signified certain adventures. A melody resembling "Way Down Upon the Swanee River" meant a trip to the river caves, while a tune like "Marching Through Georgia" indicated that ripe fruits awaited them beyond the town. The boardwalk wasn't just wood beneath their feet; it was a part of their language, their unspoken connection.

On this particular evening, Will's anticipation grew as he lay there, waiting for the familiar sounds of the boardwalk. He wondered what kind of melody Jim would play tonight, especially with the lingering thoughts of the unsettling carnival still fresh in his mind. The atmosphere seemed charged, as if the world itself was holding its breath. Will was eager for the night's adventure, but there was also a gnawing unease in him, a sense that something was different this time. The clock struck ten-thirty, but there was no sound. The absence of music made Will uneasy, and his mind began to race. He became troubled by the thought that Jim might be facing darker, more troubling thoughts on his own, especially without the comforting presence of a father figure and the overbearing attention of his mother. Will was used to being Jim's confidant, but tonight felt different, and the silence stretched on longer than he liked.

At exactly ten-thirty-five, the silence was broken, but it was not the tune Will had expected. For a brief moment, he thought it was Jim playing, but then he realized that it was just his imagination, filling in the gaps with sound. His sense of restlessness grew, the tension in the air palpable. Will wondered if he had just imagined the whole thing, but the feeling of being left in the dark was unsettling. Suddenly, Jim's window creaked open, and without a word, he began to climb down the drainpipe. Will's heart skipped a beat as he rushed to follow, his pulse quickening. He didn't want to be left behind, to lose sight of his best friend. In that instant, Jim reminded him of their deep bond—together, they had always seen the world differently, noticing what others overlooked. But now, Jim was moving away, retreating into the night without him, and Will couldn't bear to be left in the quiet, wondering what might unfold without him by Jim's side.

Determined to stay close, Will followed Jim, his feet pounding against the ground as he hurried after him. They passed by Miss Foley's house, a familiar landmark in their quiet town, and Will couldn't shake the feeling that something had shifted tonight. The sense of adventure that always accompanied their nighttime escapades now felt tinged with uncertainty. As they walked, the cool night air seemed to hold a sense of mystery, as if the world was watching them closely. With each step, Will felt as though they were venturing further into a place where the boundaries of reality were more

fluid, and the consequences of their actions were more serious. Tonight, the adventure was different; it was no longer just about mischief and fun. There was something more at stake, something deeper, as the boys moved closer to the unknown. The night, and their journey, was just beginning, and Will couldn't help but wonder what would happen next.

