



illustration by Colin Moore

# Lost at Devil's Table

By

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Casey glared at himself in the bathroom mirror, and with two fingers pulled each side of his mouth apart.

"Oh man." It was worse than yesterday when he'd looked in the dentist's mirror at his braces for the first time. "I'm Frankenstein's monster." He could already hear the kids when they saw him at school.

Metal Mouth!

Iron Teeth!

It was bad enough being called Chess Geek, but he was used to that, and, since he loved chess, chess geekdom didn't matter so much.

His mom was eating crunchy buttered toast when he came in for breakfast. "How do you feel, honey?" She set a baked apple and a glass of milk in front of him.

He shook his head, eyeing the toast.

"A lot of kids have braces, and you'll be glad to have those teeth straight."

"What difference does it make if my teeth are straight or crooked?" He bit into the soft apple flesh, closing his eyes, trying not to think of his teeth covered in those sharp steel bands. Every time he chewed, his teeth scraped the inside of his mouth and tingled with something like with a small electrical current.

"Dad called. The search isn't going well. He won't be home again today, so I'll pick up some lasagna at the Deli for dinner." She patted his back as she picked up her briefcase. "I've got an early client, so lock up on your way out, okay? See you tonight."

He ate breakfast, brushed his teeth (Ugh!), and hurried out the door to meet Murphy Costa, his best friend. They walked to and from school together. If Murphy's mom was in a good mood, Casey and Murphy hung out and played chess at Murphy's house or practiced guitar.

Murphy wasn't outside yet, so Casey walked across the street to the park. He'd wait at the swings.

As he pumped his legs to make the swing go high, that tingling sensation around his teeth returned, only stronger. He spit, but that didn't help. Then a boy's voice came from behind him.

*We're this way.*

Casey looked over his shoulder. The park was empty.

*Can you hear me?*

He dragged his feet in the dirt, stopped the swing, and stood up.

*Are you still there?*

No matter where he looked, the voice came from the opposite direction.

*Don't leave.*

He turned in a circle.

*Please. I can't come to you.*

He hit his forehead with the heel of his hand. What was going on?

"Yo, Casey!" It was Murphy, running across the street.

Casey looked behind him one more time.

"Whatcha looking at?"

"Nothing. Thought I heard someone."

"My mom made me practice extra this morning," Murphy panted. "She's on a rampage now that Back-to-School Night is only a week away."

Murphy's mom gave guitar lessons to everyone in town. That included Casey who called her the guitar nut, but not out loud. He and Murphy had signed up to do a duet for the Back-to-School program, and Mrs. Costa had turned into mega-nut ever since. 'My reputation's on the line, boys. Practice until that song is perfect.' She'd said that every day since sign-ups.

"Let's seem 'em." Murphy pointed at Casey's mouth.

Casey curled back his lips.

"Wow."

"What's that mean?"

"You got some major wiring in there. How's it feel?"

They were walking side-by-side, Murphy jogging to keep up, Casey with his head down. "Like I'm eating my way through a box of guitar picks."

That day school was worse than Casey had imagined. Whenever Dylan saw him he pointed and laughed. If Casey ducked and went the other way, Dylan shouted, "Hey, Metal Mouth." One of Dylan's friends dubbed Casey, "The Grinder." Another called him Mr. Chomp-Chomp, which by noon Dylan had turned into Mr. Chump-Chump.

At lunch, Murphy joined Casey who slouched at a back table. "Relax, Casey. Dylan's got lunchtime detention."

"How come nobody said anything when Serena got braces?" Casey sipped chocolate milk through a straw

"Serena's not in the chess club." Murphy un-wrapped his peanut butter sandwich and took a huge half-moon chunk out of the center.

Casey wished that annoying electrical charge behind his lips would go away. He wished the day would go away. Staring at Murphy with his mouth full of peanut butter, he wished Murphy would go away.

"Don't bring anything peanut butter tomorrow, okay? Or I'm not eating with you."

"Man, you don't have to grump at me. I'm not calling you names."

"Come on." Casey stood. "I gotta go outside." The throbbing behind his lips was making him crazy.

In last period, Dylan broke his pencil in half, then offered both pieces to Casey. "Snack?"

Everyone laughed until Mr. Tibbits threatened a math test.

When the bell rang, Casey grabbed Murphy's arm and pulled him outside. "Uh oh." He stopped to rummage through his backpack. "I forgot my math book. Go ahead. I'll catch up."

Casey ran back inside and hurried down the deserted hall, his teeth sizzling. He washed out his mouth at the drinking fountain, but the water didn't lessen the feeling. As he reached his room, his teeth felt hot.

*We need help.*

He looked back. The corridor was empty.

*Sometimes you sound like you're coming closer, but then you go away. Just don't leave, okay?*

Again the voice came from the other direction. Casey whipped around. No one was there.

He retrieved his math book and jogged down the hall. At the main entrance he looked back at the row of lockers and closed doors.

At rehearsal that afternoon he couldn't get the fingering right on a chord. Every time he played it, his mouth hummed and the tingling worsened. Mrs. Costa's eyes rolled back so far in her head that Casey was sure they did a one-eighty in her sockets.

She finally sent Casey home to practice until he got it right. After he finished his homework, he reached for his guitar. He placed the fingers of his left hand on the frets like Mrs. Costa had shown him, and then drew his right thumb down over the strings.

Better. He did it again.

*You're back. I thought you'd given up.*

He let the guitar slip from his hands onto his lap and pressed his fingers against his lips. His teeth jumped with energy. "Wha . . . where are you?"

*In a cave.*

The skin of Casey's arm erupted into a zillion tiny bumps. Chills trickled like water along his spine. The voice was filled with fear and set Casey's mouth to twitching. He touched his teeth and the tingling traveled into his finger.

*It's really bad down here. They won't last long.*

"Who?"

*The two new ones.*

"You're not making any sense. Who are you anyway?"

*Crane Phillips. You're Casey, right? I heard that kid, Murphy, talking to you.*

"How come you're . . . in my head?"

*I don't know that either. I thought you were with a search party when I heard your footsteps. Aren't you looking for us?*

The question came from someone who sounded as if he had no hope. Casey had to do something. "Give me a direction to look. Name a town." He waited. "Are you still there?"

*I'm thinking.* Another pause. *Do you know Mount Carson? That's the only town I remember.*

Casey pulled his road atlas from the shelf. "There's no Mount Carson in Oregon." *Not Oregon. New Mexico.*

"What?" He was hearing someone in a cave in New Mexico while he was in his bedroom in Oregon? Dylan was playing a joke on him. "Get lost, Dylan."

*I'm not Dylan. Please see if you can find that place.*

Casey's hands shook as he thumbed through the atlas until he found New Mexico. "Mount Carson is here. I mean there, but I don't see caves marked on the map. I'll check online."

*Online? You mean the telephone?*

"I'll Google caves and Mount Carson."

*Casey, I'm not hearing right. Talk slower, okay?*

When the sites came up, there were at least fifteen different caves in the Mount Carson area. "So what's the name of the cave? There's tons."

Casey didn't recognize the sound for a moment. Then the sobs became clear.

*I can't remember.*

Casey couldn't sleep after Crane's voice stopped speaking to him. He pulled up every cave within twenty miles of Mount Carson and printed out the maps. The next morning in the park, Murphy sat on a swing while Casey told him about Crane.

When Casey finished, Murphy stared at the maps then looked up. "Are your braces too tight?"

"Give me those." Casey snatched the maps and stuck them in his backpack. "I'm going to the police. You go to school."

"Dang. You're as grumpy as Mom after a bad lesson." Murphy caught up to him. "I'll go with you. If you get suspended for cutting school I'll be alone with my guitar on that stage next week."

Casey had never been inside the police station, and he felt disappointed when it looked like his mom's well-organized law office. He'd expected handcuffed bank robbers. Instead, Marshall Kent, a friend of his dad's, greeted them from behind a polished desk.

"You boys cutting school and turning yourselves in?" Officer Kent laughed.

Murphy shook his head and nudged Casey.

"I've got a, um, strange, uh, well, something to tell you." How was he going to tell Marshall Kent so he'd believe him? "I got a call last night." He waited while the officer picked up a pen and a pad of paper. Casey cleared his throat. "He said he was Crane Phillips and he was stuck in a cave near Mount Carson in New Mexico. He needs help."

Casey wondered if a cell phone worked from inside a cave. He held his breath, but Marshall Kent didn't bring up cell phones.

"How do you know this Crane Phillips, Casey?"

"Ummm. He's a friend . . . sort of."

Officer Kent pulled a keyboard from under his desk. "What's the cave?"

"He doesn't remember. He's not alone and the others are in trouble and it's bad for them." Casey talked fast, hoping he could hand over the maps and get to school—late but that was okay. He'd be done with this crazy business and go back to being called Chess Geek or The Grinder. The voice would go away and he'd only have Mrs. Costa and Back-to-School Night to worry about.

Officer Kent was looking over the computer monitor and the look wasn't friendly. "I won't do anything this time, but before you skip school, and come here to play a prank again, think about it. Next time I'll be on the phone to your dad. A man in his job would not like to hear what you've just done. Got it?"

"But, I—"

"I'm serious. Now, get back to school." He stood and opened the door.

Casey walked out, but turned before the door closed. "I'm sorry. Um . . . what made you think it was a prank?"

Officer Kent shook his head. "Crane Phillips and his dad disappeared in Devil's Cave forty years ago. The rescue attempt was in the news all over the country. You two should be ashamed." He shut the door hard enough to make his point.

"Great! Thanks, Casey. If my mom finds out—"

"I heard that kid. He said he was Crane Phillips. And don't look at me like that."

They got detention. Murphy didn't talk to him the rest of the day, and Dylan dumped a pile of scrap metal on his desk. That night his mom burned the lasagna and they ate micro waved burritos. Dad called to say he wasn't going to get back the next day after all. The search and rescue team had lost two men to flu and he was staying on for another shift. That night when Casey picked up his guitar, he felt like two trucks had run him down. His teeth ached.

*Casey?* The voice in his head was there again.

"Go away. You and Dylan are creeping me out and getting me in trouble." Casey strummed the guitar hard. He stomped his foot in time and sang in spite of his aching teeth. He'd drown out the voice.

*I'm sorry,* the voice said. *It's . . . I can hear those people who fell. They're hurt and they're out of water.*

Casey's door opened and his mom stuck her head inside. "What's this racket? I can't think with all this stomping and screaming."

Casey dropped his guitar onto his bed. "Can I watch TV? I can't sleep."

His mom looked at her watch. "Half an hour, then bed."

Casey went into the family room and fell onto the couch. He aimed the remote at the TV and the news came on, but before he could click to his favorite channel, the announcer said, "Wilson here, live from Mount Carson, New Mexico. Hope for rescuing Matt Dawson and his son, Greg, grew dimmer today, the fourth day since they disappeared. This is a tragedy that many old-timers here in Mount Carson feel keenly. It was forty years ago this month that another father-son spelunking team fell in a similar Devil's Cave accident. Their bodies were never recovered. And now back to—"

Casey hit the off button, and the voice came clear in his head.

*I remember now. We fell inside Devils Cave at a place called Devil's Table. Please come before it's too late.*

Casey held his head. Now it ached along with his teeth. Devil's Cave. Devil's Table. He wished his dad were here. He—"

"Mom!" Casey ran to his mom's office. "Where's Dad?"

"When did it become okay to race through this house, yelling?"

"This is really important. REEEELY."

"He's at the Devil's Cave site. He's heading up the rescue team for that father and his son."

"I gotta talk to him."

"Are you in trouble?"

"No. I . . ." How was this going to sound? I hear a voice through my teeth and it's telling me where those people fell. "Can I just talk to him?"

“He’d like to hear from you.” She handed him her cell phone. “Keep it short. He’s tired and he’s really worried he won’t reach those people in time. I’ve got some work to do, so bring me the phone when you’re finished. The battery needs re-charging.”

Casey went to his room and made the call, but when his dad answered, his mouth went dry. What if his dad was like Officer Kent? Didn’t listen? Got mad? Hung up?

“How’s it going, Sport?” his dad asked.

“Okay. Ummm.”

*Please, Casey. You’re our only chance.*

“Dad, don’t think I’m nuts, okay?” Casey took a deep breath. “I know where those cavers fell.”

His dad didn’t say anything, but Casey heard his breathing and his tiredness came through the phone.

“Let’s hear your theory. I’ve heard about fifty others today.”

“Devil’s Table.”

“Nobody can go down to Devil’s Table. Access was sealed off fifty years ago.”

“Crane Phillips fell at Devil’s Table. And that was forty years ago.”

The battery flashed “low” and the phone shut down.

“Dang.” Casey closed his eyes. He’d blown it.

Casey waited for Crane to log onto his brain, but all was silent. He fell into bed and slept until his mom woke him the next morning.

“Your dad called. He’s coming home. They saved that father and son. He sounded so relieved.”

Later Murphy met him by the swings in the park. “It was on the news! Man, how did you know? I mean this is humungous!”

“I told Officer Kent and he didn’t believe me.” Casey stared at Murphy. “I told you and you didn’t believe me. At least my dad listened.”

They walked to school in silence. Casey had to gear up for another day of Dylan, and his teeth still were giving him fits. He worked the combination on his locker and stashed books he wouldn’t need until after lunch.

*Thank you.*

Casey froze, but he didn’t look around because he knew where that voice came from. “I was too late. Like about forty years.”

*Too late for us, but you saved the Dawsons. I’m glad they found my dad and me. It’s good not to be under Devil’s Table anymore—good to be free from that place. I’ll pay you back, Casey.*

Casey smiled and rubbed his braces. “Sure.”

Back-to-School night came sooner than Casey wanted. He still hadn’t mastered that tricky chord.

His mom and dad sat in the front row along with Dylan’s folks while Dylan sat on the other side of the stage in the wings, smirking at him.

Casey followed Murphy on stage. On Casey’s seat was a pile of sawdust with a note. “Stop chewing up the furniture.” Casey brushed the sawdust away and glared at Dylan who was holding his sides, pretending to laugh.

“Big shot stage director,” Casey said under his breath.

Murphy sat in the chair next to him and they looked dorkier than ever because

Mrs. Costa had slicked their hair back and made them wear matching tan pants with red shirts.

Casey closed his eyes, promised he'd never ask for any more favors the rest of his life if he could get that chord right, and then he and Murphy began. When they finished they hadn't made any mistakes. Mrs. Costa applauded along with the rest of the audience, and it was when the applause stopped that Dylan, along with his chair, slid onto the stage.

The chair collapsed. He struggled to stand, his feet sliding like he was on ice. At first, the audience thought it was part of the program and laughed. Then they grew bored with Dylan's windmilling arms and slapstick falls. The kids booed him until the principal grabbed him by the shirt and hustled him off stage.

*See you around, Casey. Hope that helps you out.*

"Yep. It sure does. Thanks, Crane."