

**YOUNG  
WHIT**  
— & —  
*the  
Traitor's Treasure*



FOCUS ON THE FAMILY PRESENTS



# YOUNG WHIT

&

## *the Traitor's Treasure*

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*Young Whit and the Traitor's Treasure*

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*For  
John Colorado*



## Prologue



**T**he dream had returned.

He was falling, backward, through a clear, blue sky—so blue, the blueness seemed to wash over, in, and through him. Had he been flying? He didn't know, but if he had been, the weird tickling sensation he now felt in his stomach, and the air rushing through his ears and between his fingers, told him he wasn't anymore. He was now falling, but he wasn't scared. If anything, he was excited. If this was falling, he wanted to fall forever.

Then a new sound, faint at first but growing louder. It was strange and unpleasant (though there was something familiar about it), growing more and more unpleasant by

the second. And suddenly it was very loud, and it shattered everything—the sky, the blueness, the falling, the tickling sensation, the rushing wind. And he knew what it was and why it was familiar.

Screams.

His mother's screams.

He had never heard her scream before, but he knew this was what it sounded like. The painful cry was horrible, the most horrible thing he had ever heard. Was someone hurting her? He had to help her, to let her know he would fix things, that he would somehow get them both back into the blue sky where everything would be all right again. But he didn't know where she was. He needed to find her! He tried to look around for her—

Pain.

Intense, stabbing pain seemed to start in his leg and sear through his whole body. He couldn't look for her; he couldn't move. The slightest effort, muscle twitch, or breath brought on new waves of agony. He couldn't even speak. All he could do was remain still and silent and hope someone would help his mother so she would stop screaming. Where was his grandpa? And that's when he realized his mother's screams were not for herself.

They were for him.

Other sounds and images tumbled rapidly at him, hollow, fuzzy, and dark. His mother's face appeared, crying, hovering over him like an angel. He heard yelling and confusion and running about, and then his grandfather's voice, barking orders he couldn't understand. He sensed he was being lifted, carried, and laid down, setting off another torrent of pain, so unbearable it shut out everything but his own heartbeat ... all other senses growing more and more distant until he sank into blackness.

And then, his senses jarred awake at the pleasantest smell, the loveliest sound, the gentlest touch, the sweetest taste, the most soothing light ... and an overwhelming sensation he could not name that made him feel warmer, safer, and stronger than he had ever felt before. And just when he knew, really *knew*, beyond all doubt, that things would always stay that way—forever secure, forever safe, forever protected, forever at peace—stronger images rushed at him. His mother laughing joyfully—and then collapsing.

Sickness.

A doctor.

Foul-smelling medicine.

Hushed conversations.

Separation and isolation.

His grandfather's grim face.

His father's anguished one.

His mother's weak, lovely, loving smile at him from another room.

A door closing.

A wail of grief.

A cold, harsh, black coffin with his mother's lifeless body inside, so still ... so still.

He awoke with a start, shaking uncontrollably, lying in a sleeping bag on a cot in a dark, bare, unfamiliar room. It took a moment for him to remember that this was his new room in his new home in his new town. The dream had come several times in his life, and it always returned when they moved. He tried with all his might to stop the shaking and calm the tide of emotions churning inside him, to remember only the beautiful, smiling face of his mother, but it was no good. The image of her lying lifeless in that black coffin was too strong. He rolled over on his side, buried his face in his pillow, and quietly sobbed.

He missed her.

And he hated coffins.

## Chapter One



**“W**hen God handed out curiosity, he gave you a second helping, Johnny! And a third helping of mischief!”

John Avery Whittaker heard his stepmother’s words in his mind as clearly as if she were sitting next to him. *Fiona wouldn’t like being here with me now, though*, he thought with a smile, but he knew she had a point.

In his nearly 10 years of existence on planet Earth, he had experienced more than his share of curiosity and seen much more than his share of mischief—and this misty early morning was a great example of both. Though the skies were threatening to storm, he was holding a metal rod while sitting atop an old, wooden water tower near the center of

Provenance, the small town in North Carolina his family had just moved to, near the university where his father was about to start a new job.

Johnny brushed his strawberry blond hair back from his eyes with a grimy hand, smudging his freckled face in the process. He looked around. He could have seen for miles from way up here if it weren't so cloudy and murky. Through the mist, he could still see the spires of the ancient mansion on the grounds next to the water tower. But he could barely make out the shape of the old town hall clock tower a few blocks away, even though it was built on a rise and taller than the water tower.

When the Whittaker family first drove through Provenance a few days ago, Johnny had noticed that the clock's hands seemed stuck at 12:30. He'd made a mental note to explore both the mansion and the clock tower someday soon. For now, though, he was happy that the grounds around the water tower were deserted. At this hour, there weren't even any cars on the streets. Perfect.

Johnny pulled a piece of paper from his pocket and examined it. Across the top was written, "Attempt to Store Electrical Energy from Lightning Bolts in Dead Battery Cells." Under that, he had drawn a diagram of his experiment. It was simple. Set up a lightning rod, wrap two wires around it, and attach the other end of the wires to the ter-

minals of a dead car battery. *Ben Franklin would be proud*, Johnny thought, smiling again.

He removed a hammer and nails from his backpack and skillfully nailed the rod in place on the water tank's wooden roof. He then used a pair of pliers to twist the ends of two long, coiled strands of heavy-duty wire to the rod. After securing the connections, he crawled to the edge of the roof and, one at a time, tossed the coils of wire over the side. He peered over the edge, checking to see that the wires were untangled all the way to the ground. All he had to do now was climb down the ladder attached to one of the tower's legs, hook up the other ends to the battery, and wait for the storm to start.

But as he swung his leg over the edge to begin his descent, a sudden wind gust blew the diagram out of his hand. Johnny watched as the paper fluttered to the ground and skittered across the lawn, flattening against a high, wrought iron fence that bordered the water tower property. The fence ran the entire distance between the tower land and the unkempt grounds of the ancient, abandoned mansion. The barrier was overgrown with shrubbery in places on the mansion side.

"Rats," Johnny muttered as he swung his other leg over the roof's edge. Then suddenly he saw something that made his heart skip a beat.

Through a gap in the overgrown bushes and trees lining the fence, Johnny saw a boy about his own age standing in the mansion's knee-high, weed-filled yard, watching his every move.

The boy had large, brown eyes and hair to match. He was barefoot, dirty, and dressed in a threadbare shirt and raggedy overalls. During the drive to Provenance, Johnny had seen similar kids in the surrounding farm country, from the back seat of his father's black Ford Victoria Model 18. The Great Depression, which had been going on for nearly six years now, had ravaged the country, but it had hit farmers and farm families the hardest.

The raggedy boy and Johnny stared at each other, and for a moment time seemed to stand still. Then Johnny smiled and waved, and the boy smiled and waved back. Johnny was about to signal for the boy to meet him at the fence when he saw something that nearly made his heart stop.

A tall man in a hooded cloak emerged from a small thicket of trees behind the boy. The hood covered the man's face. His right hand wielded a long, wicked-looking dagger, while his left gripped a coil of rope.

He was slinking straight toward the boy.

Johnny swallowed hard, yelled, "Hey!" and pointed frantically behind the boy at the man in the cloak. The boy's

smile faded. He turned, let out a yelp, and ran off, disappearing into the shabby bushes. The man in the cloak slunk after him.

Johnny grabbed the rungs of the ladder and started down rapidly. This was the first person his age he had seen since moving to Provenance two days ago, and he wasn't about to let him get away—or get murdered!

He zipped down the ladder but stepped down too hard on one of the old, wooden rungs. It snapped in two. Fortunately, his hands were still on the rungs in front of him. If they hadn't been, he would have plummeted to the bottom of the tower. *Plummeting may be inevitable, though*, he thought, as he was still dangling a considerable distance from the ground.

The next lower rung was too far for him to reach. Johnny fought his panic and tried to pull himself up, but the added weight of his backpack sapped his strength.

To make matters worse, his hands, already greasy from the rod and the wire, started to sweat. He was quickly losing his grip.

Just when he thought he couldn't hold on a moment longer, he felt a strong arm around his waist. "Don't worry, son," a deep voice drawled. "I gotcha."

Johnny and his rescuer moved carefully down the

remaining rungs of the ladder. When they were finally on the ground, Johnny turned and found himself face-to-chest with a sheriff's deputy.

"You all right?" asked the deputy.

Johnny nodded. "Yes, thanks, but—"

"You wanna tell me what you were doing up there?"

"I was conducting an experiment, but that's not important right now. There's a man in a cloak with a dagger on that property over there, chasing after a kid!"

The deputy's brow furrowed. "Where, the old Granville House property?"

"Yes!" Johnny almost screamed, pointing. "Right over there!"

The deputy looked over, then back at Johnny, and smirked. "Okay, that's a good one. But ol' Deputy Miller wasn't born yesterday. I know when someone's makin' up a tale to get outta trouble."

Johnny grabbed the deputy's sleeve. "I'm not making it up, sir! I promise! The man in the cloak is chasing after the kid! He has a dagger and rope! I think he wants to kill him!"

Deputy Miller's smirk faded. "You're serious?"

Johnny fairly jumped up and down. "Yes! Completely!"

The deputy took a deep breath, swallowed, and nodded. "All right, all right. Let's go."

They made their way to the street, past the deputy's

Ford Model A police car, and around to the front gates of the Granville House property. The gates sat ajar. “See?” said Johnny. “Someone is in there!”

“That don’t mean anything,” the deputy replied. “Them gates have been that way since I was a kid—before that, even.”

Johnny couldn’t believe the deputy was being so casual about this. “Please, we need to hurry!”

They slid through the opening and crossed the dried-up, weed-infested lawn. The trees were so overgrown they made the already dank day seem even gloomier, casting hazy shadows across their path. The statues of people and animals were slimy with moss at their bases and covered with bird droppings at their tops.

“There!” Johnny pointed. “That’s the spot!” He recognized the thicket of trees and the weedy clearing beyond. He and Deputy Miller ran to the clearing. It was definitely the right place. Johnny could see the water tower from it, clear as a bell.

But there was nothing there. No footprints or cloak prints. “Well?” asked Deputy Miller.

“The dew from the trees must have covered up the prints,” said Johnny. “I’m telling you, they were here!”

At his urging, they searched the thicket of trees and the nearby bushes, but there was still no sign that anyone but

them had been on the grounds that morning. "Okay," said the deputy, "that's enough. Joke's over."

"It wasn't a joke! Honest!" Johnny insisted. He scratched his head. "I ... I don't understand it."

Deputy Miller smiled. "Well, whatever it was, there's nothin' here now." He put a hand on Johnny's shoulder. "Let's go."

The two walked back to the gates in silence, Johnny lost in thought. Just before they reached the street, Deputy Miller asked, "What was the experiment?"

Johnny jolted out of his contemplation. "Hmm?"

"Before we came over here, you said you were on the water tower conducting an experiment." He slipped through the gap between the gates. "So, what was it?"

Johnny followed him and said, "I was attempting to store electrical energy from lightning bolts in dead battery cells."

Deputy Miller's eyebrows rose, and he whistled. "You don't say! And just how's it supposed to happen?"

As they walked, Johnny explained the details of the experiment, finishing up just as they reached the deputy's patrol car. "Hmm," the deputy grunted. "Think it'll work?"

Johnny shrugged, distracted. "I dunno, I didn't finish setting it up." Then in a small voice he asked, "Are you gonna arrest me?"

Deputy Miller considered him for a moment, scratching his chin. “Weeeell,” he drawled, “seein’ as how you’re new here ... and how you’re a scientist ... and how no real harm was done ... and how you took me on a nice little adventure to break up the morning doldrums ... I figure I can let you slide—this time.”

Johnny heaved a sigh of relief. “Oh, thank you! Thank you very much!”

Deputy Miller’s eyes narrowed. “Just make sure you get permission before you go climbing around on the tower again.”

Johnny smiled. “Yes, sir.” He then nodded toward the Granville House. “And I really did see a boy and a man in there.”

Deputy Miller nodded. “Yeah, well, if you see ’em again—and can prove it—let me know.” He spat on the ground and said, “Now, where do you live?”

“Uh, live?”

“Sure. If I’m not gonna take you to the sheriff’s station, then I’ve gotta take you home.”

Johnny’s heart sank. *Home. To face Father.*

He would almost rather go to jail.