

Poke It With A Stick

"I am not going to poke it with a stick!" Jerry Bastion said firmly. He was squatted down, a good three feet from the rabbit. He thought it was dead, but wasn't sure.

"Jerry," said his sister, Linda, "Let's get out of here. This is spooky."

"Aw, come on, you two scaredy-cats! Just a dead rabbit. I'm going to poke it with a stick and show you."

Linda rolled her eyes at Jerry when Jerry looked around at Ronnie. "Ronnie, poking something with a stick is not usually a good idea. Haven't you ever seen a monster movie?"

"No. I'm not a geek like you. You and your conspiracy theories and all that talk of being prepared for disasters. It's just a dead rabbit. See?"

With that, Ronnie picked up what he realized a moment later was kind of a short stick, and poked the rabbit. The rabbit simply trembled and opened its eyes. Ronnie poked it again. This time the rabbit fell over, more than a little bloody foam coming from its mouth.

Ronnie never felt nor saw the three tiny bugs scramble up the underside of the stick and onto his hand, and then under the sleeve of his shirt.

To give them credit, had they been looking, Jerry and

Linda might have noticed and warned Ronnie. Who probably wouldn't have believed them anyway. But both were scrambling back, their eyes on the twitching body of the rabbit.

"Aw, man! That wasn't a good idea, Ronnie. Nothing good ever comes of poking something with a stick. Linda is right. This place is spooky. That wasn't natural."

Jerry looked around. "And why is that?" He answered his own question. "Because we're within a mile of a top secret government chemical and biological research station."

"You nerd," Ronnie laughed. "It's a pesticide plant."

"With that many doctors on staff?" Jerry asked.

That diverted Ronnie as the three began to walk away from the location of the rabbit. Ronnie looked back once. The rabbit, which, dead now, made no response.

"Oh, man! And is that one doc hot or what?" Ronnie asked. "Doc Jones. What a name for what a woman. Too bad you don't look that good, Linda. I'd even date you." He looked over at Linda.

Jerry suddenly noticed that he was walking a bit further from Ronnie than they usually travelled in the woods, with Linda on the other side doing much the same. She suddenly crossed around behind Ronnie when he leered at her, and came up on Jerry's other side.

"You're a pig, Ronnie. I wouldn't date you if you were the last guy on Earth. And you know it."

"You know you want to go out with the most popular guy in High School. You just don't think you can handle me."

"Oh, yuck!" Linda said. "Double Eww! You are slime!"

"Knock it off, Ronnie," Jerry said. The tone, more than the words, quieted Ronnie for the moment.

Ronnie might be 'popular' at school, but he didn't really have many friends. Only Jerry, and that was mostly just from being neighbors since the first grade. When Jerry got that tone in his voice it was time for Ronnie to shut up and wait for another opportunity. It was happening a lot now when Ronnie tried to hit on Linda. "Hm," Ronnie thought to himself. "I don't think he thinks I'm good enough for her! I'll teach him to..."

Ronnie was getting mad, talking himself into something he knew would not turn out well. But he suddenly had an itch on his right wrist and reached over with his left hand to scratch. It distracted him enough for him to lose his train of thought.

It went to what Jerry was saying. "I think we'd better report this." Jerry paused and held back the chain link fence for Linda to slide through. It was just off the road and some idiot four-wheeler had tried to ram through it not long after the new owners of the property started keeping the gate locked.

The Jeep hadn't made it through, but it had parted several strands of the metal fabric and someone else had worked them out, leaving just enough gap for someone to get through if someone else pulled the gap open.

The three of them had been coming up to the spring and small creek on the property for years and never really thought about not going that short distance to watch the tiny fish in the pool the spring created.

Suddenly Ronnie, now through the gap too, pointed at the sign on the gate a few feet away. "See. Acme Pesticide."

"Yeah. Acme. Sounds bogus to me," Jerry replied. When he looked over at Ronnie, who was now walking along the edge of the blacktop road behind Linda, he noticed that Ronnie no longer had the stick.

"At least you got rid of the stick," Jerry commented.

"Stick?" Ronnie asked, looking over at Jerry.

Jerry saw the sudden fear in Ronnie's eyes. "The stick! I... I... I guess I dropped it... I can't feel my right hand."

Ronnie was staring down at his right hand. He was holding his arm up slightly, but it seemed to be a struggle.

"Let me see," Linda said. "And if this is a ploy..."

"Wait Linda!" Jerry said, grabbing her hand before she

could take Ronnie's in hers. "Something is wrong with him."

"Yes. And I'm going to see what it is." Linda pulled her hand free from her brother's. She was planning on becoming a doctor, and took medical situations seriously. Even Ronnie's.

But this time Jerry got a better hold of her, her arm, and pulled her back from Ronnie as he collapsed onto the road and began to convulse. "I knew he shouldn't have poked that thing with a stick! Let's get out of here."

"But Ronnie..." Linda said, backing up on her own now that Ronnie was thrashing around, bloody spittle coming from his lips, just like the rabbit.

"Ronnie is a goner, for sure," Jerry said. Another slight tug and brother and sister were running toward the turn-off that led to the suburban community where they lived.

Jerry saw Officer O'Malley approaching in a squad car and began to wave him down frantically. The car rolled to a stop and the window on the driver's side went down.

"What now, Jerry? Not another hair brained conspiracy accusation, is it?"

"No, Officer O'Malley," Jerry said, breathing heavily. "It's Ronnie! He's dead. We... Well... We were on the plant property, and... and Ronnie poked this rabbit with a stick and the rabbit died and then when we were coming back

to report it, Ronnie started spitting blood and had convulsions and died, just like the rabbit. And..."

"Slow down, Jerry!" Officer O'Malley looked over at Linda. "What is he babbling about?"

"It is true Bradley! Ronnie is dead!" She was catching her breath from the run, but that was allowing her enough to start crying. "It was horrible! Just like the rabbit."

Bradley O'Malley had no like of the Bastion family, rabble rousers all, but he didn't think they would report Ronnie Fisher dead if there wasn't something wrong. Of course, Ronnie Fisher wasn't above playing a dumb trick on his friends. He'd done it before.

"Okay," Bradley said. "I'll go check it out. Where is he?"

"Just up a ways from the turn-off. You have a haz-mat suit? You'd better get someone out here with the proper gear or someone else will die!"

"That's enough, Bastion! You just go home and wait for me to come get you. I'll get to the bottom of this and we'll see just how much trouble you are really in this time."

With that, Bradley gunned the patrol car and headed toward the intersection.

"Aw, man!" Jerry said, "Dollars to donuts he pokes Ronnie with a stick."

Linda gave him a strange look, but when he gave her a little shove she took off running again, with him right behind her. Their house was only three more blocks and they reached it in record time.

"Mom! Dad!" Jerry called out when they ran into the living room.

"There's a note!" Linda said. She was leaning with her hands on the kitchen counter, trying to catch her breath.

Jerry, also breathing hard, walked over and picked up the tented piece of paper. It was a standard form of communication for the family.

"Great! Just great!" Jerry said loudly. He handed the paper to Linda.

In their father's handwriting:

Kids:

Gone for a few days on a supply run. Forgot to tell you we were going. See you in a week or so. Don't forget to run the generator Saturday. I'll be getting an automatic exerciser for it this trip.

We'll be out of cell phone range most of the time. And taking both rigs, so... well... bicycle time for you guys.

And then in their mother's:

And Linda, no more than two guests. You know the rules.

Love you. Mom and Dad.

"Why does she always warn me and not you?" Linda asked, a bit annoyed with her mother.

"Yeah. Okay. I'm glad they aren't in danger, but what are we supposed to do about this?"

"Jerry, you're the genius. You can figure it out."

"Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. Sometimes I don't feel like a genius. Like now. This is scary."

Both were breathing a bit more easily now. Linda looked at Jerry with confidence as he began to look a little more confident himself.

"Much as I hate to, I think I'd better contact the Plant. If it is some of their work they need to know it is out. And they will have haz-mat gear in a place like that, even if it is legitimate. No need for Officer O'Malley to risk things."

Jerry, to Linda's surprise, pulled out his cell phone and began to dial. "You know the number?"

"Yeah. You know. Just in case..."

"In case of what?"

"Something happens up there. Like death and destruction."

"Oh. You would."

"Yeah." Jerry grinned. But he was quickly talking when the phone was answered on the other end.

"My name is Jerry Bastion. I want to report that you've let something get loose and... Hello? Hello?"

Jerry closed the phone. "They hung up on me."

"Well, it wasn't a great salutation."

"Oh. Guess not. So much for genius." Jerry paused, lost in thought for a moment, and then spoke again. "Two choices. Bugging in and bugging out. I'm thinking bugging out. In the other direction."

"I'm with you," Linda said, her faith in her brother absolute.

There were bug out bags for both of them ready, the family being a prepper family for a long time. But the two decided to go for the long term in case the problem escalated, and hooked up the bug out trailers to their bicycles and loaded them down, their packs on their backs.

The garage door was going down when a black Suburban pulled up and stopped on the street, blocking the driveway.

"Going somewhere?" asked the woman that got out of the

front passenger seat of the big SUV.

Jerry couldn't help himself. The woman's skirt was rather short to begin with, and it rode up her thighs when she slid off the seat of the SUV. He whistled slightly. And then looked over at Linda when she punched him in the side.

"What?"

"Okay. She's pretty. And probably evil. But that was rude."

"Yeah." Jerry looked back at Dr. Jones. "Sorry."

"Whatever. So, you're Jerry Bastion. And the sister, Linda. Where's the folks?"

"Out of town," Linda said. She grimaced when Jerry gave her a hard look.

"Okay," said Dr. Jones. "In the Suburban. You won't need the gear. Leave it."

"I don't think we are..." Jerry was protesting when the driver of the Suburban walked around the front of the rig.

Jerry decided the guy was at least six six and three hundred pounds of muscle. Linda figured more like six two and two fifty, some of which was fat, but it was a moot point, not discussed.

Jerry and Linda rolled their bikes and trailers back inside the garage and put their packs on the trailers. They

slipped under the garage door before it closed and walked over to the Suburban. Another man, not quite as big, but just as mean looking, opened the door to the second seat and stepped out.

"In," he said.

Jerry stopped and let Linda slide in first, so he would be between her and the goon.

"Very macho, but unnecessary," the guy said, sliding in against Jerry. "Buckle up."

Another few moments and the driver had the Suburban headed around the cul-de-sac and back to the main street. Three minutes later and they drove by Officer O'Malley's patrol car. There were now two bodies on the ground, both covered, with haz-mat suited workers standing around an ambulance.

"He poked Ronnie with a stick, didn't he?" Jerry asked. Linda elbowed him.

Jerry grunted, but Dr. Jones, her attention having been on the scene outside as well, turned her head and said, "Yes. He did."

"Thirty-six inch Monadnock MP Riot baton," said the driver, drawing looks from everyone.

Dr. Jones's eyes went back to Jerry. "Just what is it you think you were trying to report?"

"A dead rabbit not far from the creek in the woods, and subsequently, a dead person. What I'm not sure is whether it is chemical or biological causes."

The man beside Jerry looked startled and blurted out, "Doc!"

"Shut up, John," replied the doctor. "Think you're pretty smart, huh?" she asked Jerry.

"He's a genius," Linda said proudly.

"Yes. We know. A real genius trouble maker." She turned back around in the seat and put a walky-talky to her lips. "Check along the creek for a rabbit. Might have vectors."

They were through the gate and on the road going past where the creek was a few yards off in the woods. Another team in haz-mat suits was fanning out, headed into the woods.

"Vector, hunh?" Jerry asked. "Then it is biological. I'm a little surprised. Awful quick acting."

"You aren't as smart as you think you are," Dr. Jones said without turning around.

Jerry looked thoughtful during the rest of the short ride to the pesticide plant. He hadn't seen it in years. They'd never gone further than the spring since the ownership changed. Jerry was not that surprised to see a state of the

art facility. There'd been a lot of construction going on right after the takeover.

Linda slid out of the Suburban on the driver's side, but Jerry waited for John to get out on the passenger side and got out that way. Dr. Jones was already walking toward the front doors of the facility.

"So," Jerry said, watching Dr. Jones' long hair sway as she walked, "It's a chemical riding a biological vector. Or a vector that produces a chemical. Sarin? Or probably VX or a derivative."

He was sure he was close when Dr. Jones stumbled and John again said in a rather loud voice, "Doc!"

And the doctor responded again the same way she had the first time. "Shut up, John."

Linda was staring at her brother.

Jerry decided to keep his mouth shut for a while when he saw the look Dr. Jones gave him as they went inside.

Jerry and Linda were led to an office just past reception. The woman working there was ushered out and Dr. Jones pointed at the chairs in front of the desk. "Sit there. And do not get on the computer."

The door closed and Jerry heard the key turn in the lock. The door could easily be opened from the inside, but the psychological effect was still significant.

Linda looked at him a bit expectantly when he sat down as instructed, rather than going to the computer. "There aren't any windows in here," she said.

"There are on the computer. And cameras. I get on there and they'll know."

"Oh." Linda sounded disappointed.

But Jerry grinned. "However..." he said, as he slid his light leather jacket aside and pulled out a tablet computer case. He opened up the leather case and slid the tablet out. "There is this."

"You think you can get in?" Linda asked excitedly.

"Probably not, but you never know just how well security is set up in a closed system."

Jerry was hurriedly working his fingers on the screen as Linda watched him and the door alternately. When the door opened suddenly Linda tried to shield Jerry's activity from Dr. Jones, but she obviously saw Jerry hurriedly try to put the tablet out of sight.

Dr. Jones looked at John, who had come in behind her. "No way he can get on our system," John said firmly.

"He's right. I couldn't get in," Jerry admitted. He handed the computer and case to Dr. Jones. She didn't bother to look at it, just handing it on to John.

"Yes. Well. What are we going to do with you?"

"Turn us loose, shut down the project, get yourself reassigned, and start up another one somewhere else. I'm not naïve enough to believe you'll get into any real trouble. I just hope you're getting a handle on this before it kills too many more people."

"You are one self-assured young man," Dr. Jones said. "Nothing much to keep you and your sister from becoming another pair of unfortunates that messed around an area that proved toxic to the intruders."

"Won't work with us," Jerry said. He could tell Linda was getting a bit scared.

"You think your parents will be able to cause any trouble?" Dr. Jones barked a laugh. "You'll be dead, and we'll be shut down, just like you said. This will just be another pesticide plant. Just the regular R&D department."

"Naw. The cavalry will be here before you figure out how to get by with it. It is in your favor that you won't be able to kill us. That might not go down quite as well as just a big security breach and two actual accidental deaths. Murder still means something to some people. Doesn't it, John?"

Dr. Jones cut a quick look over at John. John was staring at Jerry. For a moment. Rather reluctantly, it looked to Jerry and Linda, John pulled out a sleek semi-auto pistol

and pointed it at Dr. Jones.

"Yes," John said. "How do you know this stuff?"

Jerry just smiled. When Dr. Jones made a movement, John's attention was back to her. She stood still and John lifted a walky-talky. "Emergency alert. Go to lock down. This is a Priority One Alert. Go to lock down."

John set the radio aside as alarms sounded. He motioned with the gun. Dr. Jones sat down in the desk chair, looking dejected. She looked over at Jerry finally. "How? How did you know? About the chemical the vector exudes? And that John would turn on me?" She glared at John.

"And what made you think I could stop it, anyway? Or even that I would?" John added his own questions to the list.

Jerry managed not to grin. "Nothing, really," he said. "Just speculation on my part until someone admitted to something out of surprise."

"You!" said John, glaring at Dr. Jones.

"You!" said Dr. Jones, glaring at John.

"Uh... Jerry?" asked Linda. "That doesn't sound too reassuring. What if John changes his mind?"

"Oh, I know. But these two have self-preservation instincts. There is other cavalry coming, too." Jerry

glanced at John and then Dr. Jones. "I didn't get into the research computers. But I did get into the computer system and on the internet. Sent out an SOS for help. Everyone and their brother should be showing up in just a few minutes."

"Who did you contact?" Linda asked.

Jerry did let the grin show this time. "Everybody. Big fire at the Pesticide Plant mostly. Fire department; Department of Forestry; police, with officer down; DEA for a fire at a meth plant; DHS for fire at a WMD plant. Three or four more."

Linda grinned back at her brother.

Jerry and Linda turned to look at John and Dr. Jones. Suddenly both bolted for the door and left the room. They were nowhere in sight a few minutes later when half a dozen officials of several agencies came storming in.

Jerry had just stepped away from the office computer he'd clambered to get on when John and Dr. Jones hightailed it. "Okay. Can you tell me what is going on?" asked the DHS agent.

He was holding up his ID, momentarily, as the others also flashed badges and IDs. "Someone out there said you were in charge." The man looked at Jerry. "You can't possibly be in charge of this place."

"No, sir. I'm not. But I am the closest thing you are going

to get to an explanation until what they were doing here is investigated."

The DHS agent looked around. "About that, actually..." He paused for a moment, but then called to someone on the radio headset. "Get everyone out of here."

"Make sure they know there really is a very dangerous situation out there until it is contained," Jerry said. "The employees here are wearing environmental suits for a reason."

"Yeah. I know," said the agent. There were some protests, especially from DEA, when other DHS agents began to usher them out of the office.

"Now, about what was going on here... This is highly classified. How do you possibly know anything about it?"

Jerry, Linda silent in the other chair, explained up to the point where John and Dr. Jones had split.

"Okay. That's the two we caught leaving just as we were entering. They are not talking. At all. Except to warn us the same way you did."

"Well, that is in their favor. Maybe not too many people will die over this," Jerry said.

"Okay. You explained what you are doing here and what happened. What else do you know that I need to know? I think there is something you aren't being quite up front

about."

"He told you we knew we shouldn't come through the fence," Linda said firmly. "But if we hadn't, there is no telling how many people might have died."

"I'm aware of that, Miss," said the agent. He looked back at Jerry.

"Okay. I think I figured out what they were after here. Don't know where the original idea might have come from, but they were developing a nerve toxin producing bug. About the size of bedbugs. Or smaller. Maybe even a genetically altered variety of bedbug. Produces just a tiny amount of the toxin each, but with repeated exposure or exposure to several of the bugs, it is enough to kill in just a few minutes."

The agent held up his hand to stop Jerry. He was obviously listening to his radio earpiece. After a few moments he said, "Okay. They found the release point. Some goofball let a lab rabbit out of its cage to clean and someone else had left a door open. Lousy security. Now go on."

"So it was just the one? And you've contained everything from Ronnie and Officer O'Malley? The danger is past?" Jerry asked.

"We believe so, yes."

Jerry breathed a sigh of relief. "Good. I was hoping... Anyway, back to my conjecture."

Linda gave Jerry a bit of a questioning look, but the agent didn't see it and Jerry ignored it.

"I think that as long as the bugs were kept in appropriate containers and fed regularly, they would continue to breed and reproduce. For a while. I think they hit a snag. That after a few generations they bred out and reverted to plain bugs without the ability to produce the nerve toxin. And they got a little careless because it didn't seem to be a very big risk any more. I think they may have been considering shutting down the project."

"You figured all this out from what you've heard and seen here? That is an awful long stretch."

Linda protested. "He is a genius, after all."

"Yeah. Okay." The agent looked back at Jerry. "You say you couldn't get into the computer system here on your tablet?"

"No. Just the external interface. Nothing internal. All the research was protected. Just not the internet from the facility systems. Book keeping, accounting, pay roll, that sort of thing."

"Now. What am I going to do with you two? This is a serious security breach."

Linda looked a little startled. But Jerry smiled.

"It's all speculation on my part. Who's going to believe me if I say anything? I already have a reputation for being a tin foil hat wearing conspiracy... enthusiast. And we do understand about national security and all that. We simply won't say anything about our part in this mess. As long as we are left alone, I won't say anything and Linda won't either."

Both looked at Linda. She shook her head. "Nope. Never."

"It'll be up to you to do whatever cover story you want about Ronnie and O'Malley. It's too bad about them, but nothing can be done that will in any way remotely correct the situation."

"You're awful cavalier about this," the agent said, studying Jerry's face for long moments. "Ronnie Fisher was your friend."

"I'm not stupid," Jerry said. "I have no doubts you could disappear us just like that." He snapped his fingers. "But it is a complication you don't really want. And don't really need. This has scared me. There are weapons being developed that will be next to impossible to stop or avoid. The only thing that will come of this is a word to our parents..."

The agent looked less than pleased.

"We can't keep this from them," Jerry said insistently. "But they won't do anything either, out of fear for us. All we will do is up our prep levels for toxic substances and protection

from all sorts of vectors down to bedbug and smaller size.

"I don't think The Powers That Be will use this facility again, but they could quite possibly pick up the research somewhere else. Even with the same people. In a place we'd never run across in a million years."

The agent studied the two again for an uncomfortable two minutes this time. But finally he stood and said, "I'll have someone take you home. I'm going to take this to my superior and get her take on it. But I think you're out of the woods. And about that. I think I'd stay out, no matter who puts in what out here."

"You can count on that!" Linda said.

"Ditto for me," added Jerry.

Jerry grabbed his tablet and the case and let Linda precede him out of the office as the agent spoke on the radio again.

One of the other agents came up to the one in charge, who was still in the office, looking over at the computer monitor on the desk. "You think everything is copacetic?"

The lead DHS agent looked around at his subordinate. "Either that is the smartest high school kid I've ever known, or the best scammer that ever lived. He had everything down to the crossed T's and dotted I's. If he ever becomes a lawyer and gets into politics, the old school better watch out."

Once home, and locked in the basement shelter, just because, Linda handed Jerry a dish of ice cream. "Why did you play dumb? Well, sort of. You were in that office computer in seconds."

"Yeah. The password list." Jerry held up the telephone number sheet that had been on the desk beside the keyboard.

"That's just telephone numbers," Linda said.

"Coded passwords. Same way I do them. And I didn't want them to know I'd been in the computer system. There was a lot of other stuff on there that you are better off not knowing," Jerry said.

"If they even thought I might have seen some of it, I'm not sure we would be sitting here eating ice cream."

"Sure is too bad about Ronnie," Linda said with a sigh.

"Even if he was a slug. No one should die like that. Without a chance."

"I told him. And I told him. 'Don't poke that with a stick!' But would he listen? Oh, no. He had to go poke it with a stick."

End *****

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