

CHAPTER 1: THE ADVENTURE BEGINS

Crazy Uncle Cecil

Twelve-year-old twins, Blaine and Tracey Sassafras, sat in sulking silence on the very back row of the bouncy bus. It was the first day of summer break. Instead of being on their way to Camp Zip-Fire with all of their friends, they were on this bus headed to their crazy Uncle Cecil's house for the entire summer. Blaine and Tracey had done pretty well in school, especially the last semester. They had good grades in every subject, except for one. Blaine and Tracey had both failed science.

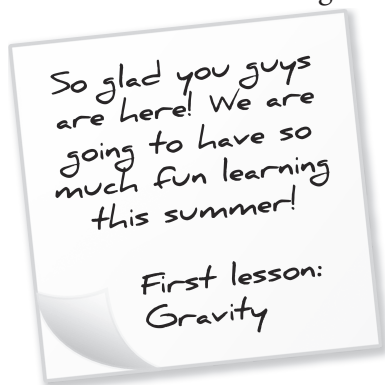
Their parents had warned them in the middle of the semester about their grades. They could still hear their father's loving but stern voice saying, "You two had better get those science grades up by semester's end or you will be sorry." As the two sat there, bouncing around on the hot and shaky bus, they were definitely sorry they hadn't worked harder in science class. All they knew was that their Uncle Cecil was some sort of scientist. Since Blaine and Tracey had failed the subject, their parents had thought it would be a good idea for them to spend the summer with him, improving their science skills instead of going to their favorite place in the entire world.

After several miserable hours on the rattling bus, Blaine and Tracey were finally at their stop. They found themselves at 1104 North Pecan Street standing on the front porch of their Uncle Cecil's house. It was an old two-story house covered in plain brown siding with a steeply pitched roof. There were a few bushes attempting to decorate the front porch, but they were mostly dead. By the looks of the cobwebs hanging in the top corners of the front porch windows, Uncle Cecil wasn't much for housekeeping.

The twins had only met Uncle Cecil one time, and that had been at a Sassafras family reunion when they were only eight-

years-old. The only thing they remembered about Cecil, other than his crazy red hair, was that he had called them “Train and Blaisey” and that he had spilled fruit salad all over himself. Now they were supposed to spend the summer with him.

Blaine, who acted very much like an older brother even though he was only older by five minutes and fourteen seconds, spotted the handwritten note attached to the front door first. It was Tracey who stepped forward to read it though.



The last sentence caught Blaine by surprise, who was now stepping up to look over his sister's shoulder. "First lesson is gravity? What is that supposed to mean?" Suddenly, a section of the porch dropped away and Blaine and Tracey found themselves falling through a trap door. Almost immediately, they landed on a smooth, wide metal slide, which carried them briskly down a dark tunnel. As they flew quickly through the tunnel toward a growing light, they braced themselves for impact. Slick metal gave way to soft cushions as they landed with a quiet thud on a pile of old pillows.

Blaine and Tracey, somewhat dazed, looked around at their surroundings. They were now in what looked like a basement. The room was filled with all kinds of interesting looking things. There were beakers full of different colored fluids, taxidermy animals of all sorts, bugs pinned to corkboards, a wide variety of plants sitting under lights, and a jumble of electrical wires, magnets, mirrors, and lots of other stuff that just looked like plain junk. And there,

in the far corner at a cluttered desk, they saw Uncle Cecil's head of red hair. He was wearing a white lab coat and had headphones on. Whatever he was listening to, he must have the volume turned up very loud because he was unaware that they had arrived. Blaine and Tracey picked themselves up off the mound of pillows and approached their uncle. From behind, Blaine gently tapped Cecil on the shoulder. Caught off guard by the presence of someone in his basement, Uncle Cecil jumped out of his chair a few feet into the air and landed on his desk, smashing the uneaten portion of spaghetti. The surprise on his face turned to happiness as he recognized his nephew and niece. He pulled off his headphones and slid off the top of his desk. "Train! Blaisey! You guys are finally here! Welcome!" He then gave Blaine and Tracey a big bear hug, getting spaghetti all over them.

Uncle Cecil proceeded to give the twins a spirited tour of his house; their residence for the summer. Though they were still bummed about being there, it was hard not to get caught up in his excitement. He talked a mile a minute as he showed them their rooms, the kitchen, the bathroom and the living room.

"Oh, I almost forgot to ask. How did you guys like the slide down into the basement?" Uncle Cecil asked, laughing.

"Well, it certainly caught us by surprise!" Tracey answered.

"Yeah, a really nice lesson in gravity," Blaine added.

"Oh I thought you guys would like that," Cecil said, wringing his hands in delight. "That was President Lincoln's idea!"

"President Lincoln?" the twins asked in unison. "You mean the sixteenth president of the United States?"

"No, not that President Lincoln," Cecil informed as he pointed to a hole in the wall. "President Lincoln is my lab assistant. He's a very good one even though he happens to be a *Cynomys ludovicianus*."

"What's a cyno . . . ludo . . . cianus?" asked Blaine.

“*Cynomys ludovicianus* is Latin for ‘Prairie Dog,’ but he never answers to that. He much prefers being called ‘President Lincoln.’” A prairie dog gingerly poked his head out of the hole.

Blaine whispered under his breath to Tracey, “Uncle Cecil really is crazy!”

The twins followed Uncle Cecil back down to the basement (using the stairs this time instead of the slide) for an introduction of what they would be learning over the summer.

“Are we really going to spend our entire summer cooped up in this basement?” Tracey asked.

“Not just cooped up, but cooped up doing science. It is the most boring subject in the whole world,” Blaine added.

Completely unaffected by the children’s pessimism, Uncle Cecil continued. “Now, when I last talked to your father, he told me about your disposition toward science and your none-too-stellar grades in science. He also told me all the things you needed to learn about by summer’s end. And golly, golly goodness, I think we can have you two loving science by the time you head back home!”

Somehow the twins didn’t think so. Suddenly, the prairie dog they had seen upstairs poked his head out a hole in the wall. “Where did he . . . how did he . . .” Blaine mumbled.

“Oh, there is a network of tunnels throughout the house that President Lincoln uses to get around,” Uncle Cecil responded, as if it was totally normal. Blaine, on the other hand, was still wondering why the prairie dog was called President Lincoln.

Uncle Cecil made big motions with his hands as he began to cover all that they were going to learn. “We are going to learn about the five kingdoms of living things: that is, bacteria, single-cell organisms, fungi, plants, and animals. Oh yes! We are going to cover migration, which is animals making their annual journeys over land, air, or water to find better living conditions. We are going to study defense methods and food webs! We are going—”



"I don't mean to interrupt you Uncle Cecil," Blaine apologized, "but why... I mean, how, are we going to do all of this?" The twins' heads were spinning at the thought of all the science they were about to get blasted with.

"Oh, I thought you would never ask!" Cecil exclaimed, as he bounded over to a table and scooped up what looked like two rock climbing harnesses. "You see these harnesses? President Lincoln and I are excited about these! Using these harnesses and special carabiners, the two of you will be able to travel all over the planet this summer and encounter science face to face."

Blaine and Tracey just looked at him dumbfounded.

"Now, I'm a scientist, but President Lincoln fancies himself as more of an inventor. We did work together on this, but it was more his idea than mine." The prairie dog clambered up on a table. "We invented invisible lines that can go anywhere on the planet. Africa, South America, Asia, you name it, and these lines can take you there! You simply get cinched up in your harness, attach it to your correctly calibrated carabineer, clip onto one of the lines, and zip bang--at the speed of light you arrive at your destination!"

Now the twins' mouths hung open in disbelief. Invisible lines? Special carabiners? A prairie dog inventor? Speed of light? Science face to face? Were Blaine and Tracey really supposed to believe this? It was Blaine who first managed to say something, but all he could sputter out was, "What?"

"Oh, yes! It works like a charm," answered Uncle Cecil, laughing giddily. "We tested it on several of President Lincoln's relatives."

The twins looked at the prairie dog, who was sitting quietly on the table, sniffing an apple core. Why hadn't they tried harder in science class?

"Now I know the two of you were originally hoping to go to camp Zip-Fire again this summer, and I know they have all kinds of fun activities there including zip lines. But you two have already gone to that camp three summers in a row. These invisible lines that President Lincoln and I have invented for you are not too different than Camp Zip-Fire. Ours, however, travel at the speed of light," Uncle Cecil said.

The first glimmers of interest flashed through the twins' eyes. Sure, all their friends were at Camp Zip-Fire, while they were stuck here with their uncle. However, if they could return to school after summer break with stories of world travel, that would still be cool, wouldn't it? But was all of this possible, or was Uncle Cecil just plain crazy?

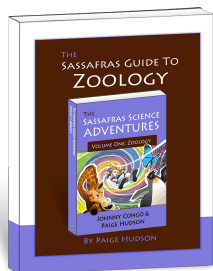
With a sudden surge of adventure pulsing through his veins and a definite readiness to call Uncle Cecil's bluff, Blaine stepped up and grabbed one of the harnesses out of his uncle's hand. "Let's try this out, right now!" Blaine declared. Uncle Cecil leapt for joy, while President Lincoln just continued sniffing the apple core.

Zip Lines and Smartphones

A few minutes later, Blaine had his harness on, as did Tracey. She had decided she couldn't let her twin brother take off on this

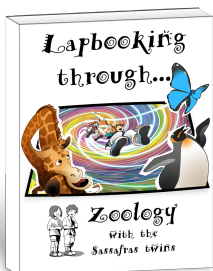
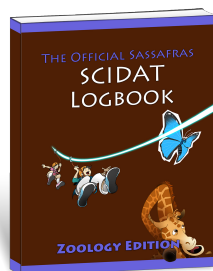
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