

The Indian Hill Adventure



By John Bonthron

*This story was written for Olivia Angelica
(aged 10) who lives in New Britain,
Connecticut, USA.*

Chapter 1: The L-Girls

My name is Liv, short for Olivia Angelica. My BFF is Lyla. We call ourselves the L-Girls and we love looking for adventures. Having adventures is easy for us because we live in the country, miles from any big cities.

Mostly we ride our ponies around and look for things to investigate. My pony is called Star. He is completely black with a white star on his forehead. Lyla's pony Meera is a Golden Palomino with a white gold mane and long white gold tail that almost reaches the ground.

Meera is seven years old and Star is ten, the same age as Lyla and me. My dog Trek is only two years old. He is a curly coated chocolate Cockapoo with a long and energetic waggity tail that never stops moving, even twitching and wagging while he is asleep. He is a very clever dog, but headstrong and sometimes disobedient.

Lyla and I love watching wildlife, especially birds, and we have notebooks to record our sightings. I am a better spotter than Lyla, because I have special binoculars. They are my Dad's but he lets me use them when we go on field trips.

These are no ordinary binoculars. They are very powerful and although big, they are surprisingly light. They were a gift from an old man Dad knew when he was a boy and lived in New Zealand. Shortly after he gave the binoculars to Dad, Herr Egbert disappeared and was

never seen again. People said that his family had immigrated to New Zealand from Germany a long, long time ago.

Dad said Herr Egbert told him that when used by the right person, these binoculars have magical properties. Perhaps that's why I've spotted spot thirty-three bird species and Lyla only has fourteen. Even when she uses my binoculars, they don't seem to work so well for her. This is annoying for Lyla because she has a huge bird book and knows a lot about birds.

We carry our adventure kit and our lunches and snacks in two identical rucksacks that we got for Christmas. These rucksacks have special reflective edges so that they can be easily seen in the dark months of winter when we walk to school.

The story of the Indian Hill adventure began one Saturday in May.

The weather was perfect.

When we set out I saw a slight puff of cloud swirling around the peak of Indian Hill, which is why we decided to go there . . .

Chapter 2: The Secret Clearing

We set out just after breakfast. At first, we trotted our ponies with Trek running alongside. The idea was to try to tire out Trek, to make him less barky. But it never works, he has too much energy.

As we approached Indian Hill, we slowed to a walk, trying to spot birds and other creatures to add to our notebooks. We always chat to each other, but quietly, so as not to disturb the wild creatures we are looking out for. If we see a bird flitting from bush to bush, we tell Trek to lie down while we watch through our binoculars. Because we are on ponies, most creatures seem to accept us better than if we were walking. The main problem is keeping Trek still and quiet.

Now that we were closer to Indian Hill, we realised that it was surrounded by dense woods, with some trees that were very tall. We stopped to check the nearest trees with our binoculars. Something caught my eyes and made me look up at the top of the hill and I saw puffs of white smoke rising from the peak.

'Look, Lyla, perhaps it's a smoke signal. Perhaps someone needs help.'

'Where, I don't see it!'

'Five puffs. You've missed them, they've blown away on the breeze.'

'It's just not fair, Liv, I always miss these signs. It's because of your binoculars, isn't it?'

'Lyla, have you heard about the legend of Indian Hill?'

'Yeah, I know, I know, it's supposed to be haunted by scary ghosts.'

'Yeah, they screech and wail, especially on dark windy nights.'

'But Liv, that's just nonsense. It's because a Great Grey Owl roosts inside Indian Hill. She's the one that makes the scary screeching noises. Everyone knows that!'

'A Great Grey Owl? Do we get those about here, Lyla? I thought they were much further north.'

'Yeah, Liv, you're right, normally they see. But, hey, think if it was true, we would be the only ones around here to spot her.'

'What if we could find her nest, maybe see her eggs or even her chicks?'

'Would we have to climb trees, Liv? I promised I'd never climb trees again.'

'OK, Lyla, no more tree climbing. But if we could find the secret trail to the top, then we could see over the whole of the treetops, yeah?'

'But how do you know there IS a secret trail?'

'Course there is Lyla. In all the best L-Girls adventures, there's always a secret trail if you look hard enough, right?'

'Yeah, Right!'

'HIGH FIVES!'

Before I could tell him to stop, Trek ran off chasing something, barking at the top of his voice.

'Trek, come back here at once, leave that squirrel or rabbit alone. Trek! Tr-e-e-e-ek, come here, you naughty boy. Come back here, Trek, AT ONCE!'

I looped my left leg over Star's neck to the right-hand-side then jumped down to land Indian style.

'Come on let's follow on foot, those branches are too low to ride in there.'

'Look, over there, that's a great place to leave the ponies, isn't it? It's a nice shady spot, and look, there's a little tiny brook for them to drink from.'

'Yeah, good idea. That brook, it could be a sign, let's follow it.'

The horses were happy and so we took off our riding helmets and hitched our explorer rucksacks onto our backs and we were set to go.

The vegetation was thick and we had to force a way through. We soon found a shady clearing in the woods about half the size of a basketball court. The entire space was concealed by high overhead branches and thick bushes all around. At the centre of the clearing there was a large mound with a huge flat rock on top. It was illuminated by a shaft of light glancing through the tree canopy. From one side of the mound a little spring of water bubbled out, forming the stream which we had followed through the undergrowth.

'Lyla, let's climb up and lie on that rock and see if any animals or birds come to drink. Just as well Trek is off on his own adventure.'

'Yeah, Liv, maybe we should try to get Star and Meera in here, this would make a perfect paddock for them, look at the lovely juicy grass.'

'But it's too dense, isn't it? That's exactly what makes it so secret. We would never have found it, except for that little stream. I bet no one in the world has ever been here before, Lyla.'

'Yeah, this is a perfect spot. Our very own secret clearing. Maybe we might even see some deer. Hey, this rock is warm.'

Lying on top of the flat rock with the warm sunshine on our backs, we scanned slowly around with our binoculars.

After a while a Red Fox brought her two cubs out to play. The mother watched as the two youngsters engaged in play fighting, both tugging a huge fallen branch, trying to drag it away from each other.

I carefully opened my rucksack without a sound, and began making quick sketches in my field notebook.

This perfect idyll was shattered by Trek.

'Woof! Woof! Woof!'

The fox mother screeched and disappeared into the thick bushes with her cubs tumbling after her. We watched, expecting Trek to chase after the fox and her cubs, but there was no sign of him.

'Woof! Woof! Woooooof! Wooooooooooof!'

Trek's bark was coming from high above us. We trained our binoculars to the spot where the sound was coming from, but all we could see was a thick mesh of branches and leaves.

'Trek's almost up above us, how could that be?'

'Maybe he chased a squirrel up into that huge tree?'

'No way, Liv, you know fine well he's hopeless at climbing trees!'

'Then he must have learned to fly!' I said, giggling at the idea of Trek with little wings.

We called out together:

'TREK, COME HERE, THERE'S A GOOD BOY!'

'Woof! Woof! Woof!' he replied from high above us.

I shouted again, in my sternest voice, cupping my hands to make the sound carry further:

'TREK, DO YOU HEAR ME? COME HERE AT ONCE!'

There was silence and then a minute later Trek raced out from the low bushes in front of us, barking and licking our hands, pleased to be back with us again.

'Right, Lyla, we have a mystery for the L-Girls to solve,' I said. 'I think Trek has found the secret path for us. Come on Trek, boy, show us where you've been! Good boy!'

The young dog ran ahead, barking. He led us through the bushes to where the ground sloped upwards. We were hard up against Indian Hill.

There was a big chunk of shiny black rock about the size of an elephant in front of us and Trek scabbled in behind it, climbing over some smaller rocks and squeezing into the slot between the vertical face of the hillside and the back of the huge black rock. We couldn't see Trek but we could hear him barking.

'Shoosh, Trek, be quiet, there's a good boy,' I scolded him.

But Trek kept barking and we could hear his claws scabbling, becoming quieter as he disappeared into the inky blackness. The eerie silence was filled by the drip, drip, drip of unseen water.

'Lyla, I think there must be a tunnel in there. Let's put on our head torches and go investigate. I told you there was a secret passage.'

'Yeah, Liv. The L-Girls succeed again!'

'HIGH FIVES!'

Chapter 3: Inside Indian Hill

It was cool and damp and slightly smelly, like old vegetables. The tunnel was quite low and sloped steeply upwards. In the faraway distance, we could hear Trek barking and growling:

'Woof! Woof! Grrrrr! Grrrrr!'

His barking and growling was answered at once.

'Hooooowoo! Hooooowoo!'

'Lyla, that must be a *Great Grey Owl*. I told you we would find one!'

'Yeah, sounds like Trek and the owl are having an argument. They might even be fighting.'

'Come on, then, we have to stop them.'

'Liv, the barking and hooting has stopped.'

We listened but all we could hear was drip, drip, drip of water and the tinkling of a tiny stream running down the slope in a groove between our feet.

The tunnel started to become steeper and narrower. The roof was much lower and we had to crouch. The sides were wet and gooey with moss. The silence and blackness was scary and now we had to scramble on our hands and knees. It was too much for Lyla, who hates getting wet and dirty.

'Liv, do you think they could have killed each other?'

'No, they'll be alright, you'll see. *Great Grey Owls* only eat mice and rabbits, not dogs. Maybe she has flown away and Trek has decided to run about on the top of Indian Hill.'

'I don't like this, I want to go back.'

'Lyla, I have to go on, whatever has happened up there I don't know, but I've got to go on up and rescue Trek. He's just a puppy still, really.'

'Woof! Woof! Woof! Woof!'

The sound of barking was loud now and filled the tunnel.

It was followed at once by extra-loud and extra-long screechs.

'SCREEEEEEEECH! SCREEEEEECH!'

'GRRRRRRRRRR! WOOF! GRRRRRRRR!'

'Liv, listen, they're fighting again, let's go back, please!'

'OK, Lyla, you go back. I think the owl is annoyed because he's disturbing her nest. You go down and wait in our secret clearing, at the flat rock. Alright? When I get to the top I'll shout down to you, like Trek did.'

'OK, Liv, but don't be too long, I don't like it here. Indian Hill is too scary.'

'Don't worry, Lyla, I won't be long. But just remember, if it is a Great Grey Owl, I'm going to claim it for my list!'

We hugged and I watched as Lyla went back down the tunnel. The reflective edging in her rucksack was flashing back in the light of my head torch. Then it was just me, all alone.

The barking, growling and screeching started again and so I knew that I had to go on.

I was a bit scared so I said a little prayer for help, took a deep breath and made myself go forwards and upwards. The tunnel became narrower and the roof was so low I had to take off my rucksack to squeeze through, with my binoculars in one hand and my rucksack in the other. My tee-shirt and jeans felt wet and gooey with green gunge.

The owl, if it was an owl, was screeching almost continuously. Trek was barking and growling. This was re-assuring because it meant that he was probably all right.

Then I had a horrible thought. Perhaps the animal was not an owl, but a cougar or a mountain lion? Perhaps I should go back and get Lyla and we should go home and get help. I turned to go down the tunnel then the owl hooted:

'Hoooooooooo! Hoooooooooo! Hoooooooooo!'

It sounded real friendly and as I looked toward this sound, a patch of light showed, so I decided to go on towards it.

Chapter 4: The Owl's Den

The last part of the tunnel was wide again.

I hauled myself up into a large dome-shaped cave. At the far end, at the mouth of the cave, I saw a patch of the blue sky and below it a green platform.

Trek was standing on the platform. He cocked his head to one side, as if saying, '*why have you taken so long to get here?*'. He ran to me and nuzzled into my outstretched hand, whining a happy welcome.

I crouched down beside him. He turned to look up and gave a low growl. High in the corner of the cave, in the very darkest part, there was a ledge and on it sat the largest bird I've ever seen.

It looked like a *Great Grey Owl* but it was huge, about the size of a bear.

Its face was a huge round dish, with a sharp yellow beak and bright yellow eyes with black dots at their centres. The black dots glittered in the light from my head torch. The eyes did not blink and I felt a strange fuzzy feeling inside my head.

Trek growled again. 'There, there, Trek, calm down boy, calm down.'

Then the strangest thing happened.

'So, you've come at last *Olivia Angelica*', said the Owl. 'I have waited a long, long time for you to pay me a visit. Did you not understand my smoke signals?'

'Duh! Duh! I mean, did you just speak, Mrs Owl? I'm sure I heard you speak. Did you?'

'Yes, but not Mrs Owl. Oh no, no, no, no. No, my name is Herr Egbert. I believe you may have heard of me, since you have my binoculars dangling around your neck. I do hope they are undamaged. Why did you insist on coming to my cave by the awkward route? Did you not see the rope ladder dangling down beside the Mound of Dreams?'

'Duh! You did speak! But you're an owl. Are you a Great Grey Owl?'

'No, no, no, no. No, I'm not just ANY Great Grey Owl. I am THE Great Grey Owl. My forefathers have lived in these lands for centuries. About a hundred years ago, my White Father took me with him to New Zealand, but after a while, I decided to return to my native land. And now, at long last Olivia Angelica, you have come to visit me.'

'Are you a human and an owl at the same time?'

'That is one way to think of me, yes. It is my spirit which moves from body to body. Sometimes I am a fox, or a frog and sometimes a stallion, running free across the hills and valleys. One time I was a bison, another, a great grizzly bear. These last years I have been, as you see, THE Great Grey Owl of Indian Hill. But I'd rather you call me by the name by which I was known to your father, Herr Egbert.'

'How did you get here from New Zealand, Herr Egbert?'

'Aha, a good question. I became a hump-backed whale. Did you know that the oceans are filled with spirits like me? We are called: "Die guten Arbeiter", or in your language: "The Do-Gooders", people whose spirits are dedicated to helping others.'

'Herr Egbert, could you make me into a "Do-Gooder", I like to help people whenever I can.'

'Olivia Angelica, don't you know that you are already a Do-Gooder, one of us. The secret is in your name, my child, is it not?'

'Oh, yeah, I get it, the Angelica bit, that I'm like an Angel.'

'Yes, exactly. Now come with me, child, but first give those specs of yours a good clean in the little spring of water in the corner. Clean the binoculars too.'

Chapter 5: The Viewing Platform

Herr Egbert swooped low across the cave and flew out through the opening. There was no sound as he flew, just the breeze caused by his huge wings. I put my hand down to stop Trek from leaping up to snap at Herr Egbert, but Trek had disappeared.

A stream of crystal clear water was gushing from the rock below Herr Egbert's ledge. This was the source of the stream that went down into the tunnel, the stream that had led us to the Secret Clearing, and then to Herr Egbert. I washed my specs and binoculars then took a tiny sip. The water was sweet, icy cold and very refreshing. I cupped my hands and took a proper drink. It was delicious.

'Come, Olivia Angelica, do as you are bid. Come, my child.'

I moved to the mouth of the cave to find it extended outwards onto a huge platform made of finely woven branches and leaves, meshed so closely that it was impossible to see through.

Herr Egbert spoke from a branch above me.

'Come, stand on the Viewing Platform. Be assured, it is quite strong enough to support you.'

He was right, the platform was well made and very strong. In the centre of it was a downward tube with an eyepiece, but I did not realise what it was for.

'Now, Olivia Angelica, use that periscope. Look down and observe your friend and your dog. See! They are fast asleep on the Mound of Dreams. When Lyla awakes, she will remember nothing of the tunnel.'

Your visit to the Owl's Den and to the Viewing Platform must remain our secret alone.'

'Herr Egbert, are you able to cast spells? Can you teach me to cast spells, to help people?

'My child, I only use spells when absolutely necessary. Casting spells can frighten people, or make them lazy. Mostly I try to encourage people to help themselves. But that is for you to discover, as you unleash your powers. Now, Olivia Angelica, we have work to do, my child. Look out using those binoculars which I gave to your Dad, all those years ago. Tell me what you see.'

I looked back towards my house. Everything was normal. Mum and Dad were working in the garden. My little brother Jordan was playing with his bike, and the foster baby Eva was sleeping in her pram under the shade tree.

I swung the binoculars slowly along the row of houses. A little boy in the house three along was standing at his bedroom window. His face looked sad.

Herr Egbert said: 'That little boy is Tomasz Polanski. He has newly arrived from Warsaw in Poland to live with his grandparents. Six months ago, his mother and father were killed in a train crash. His grandparents are very strict with him and are reluctant to let him go out to play in case he might hurt himself. Tomasz is only four years old. He would make a good friend for Jordan.'

'Yeah, Herr Egbert, I'll do it. The L-Girls will make cookies and take them along and try to make friends with him. We'll take Jordan and Trek too!'

'Good for you, Olivia Angelica. Keep looking.'

I looked through the binoculars again. Moving to the next street I saw a garden that was very scruffy. Sitting near the back door on a rocker were two old ladies, dressed in long black dresses with black

shawls over their heads. They were staring ahead. I zoomed in on their faces. The smaller old lady had been crying. The taller one wearing specs, was staring down at a letter in her hands, and shaking her head.

'Aha, Olivia Angelica, I see that you have found the Fonsecci sisters. They have just received news from Milan in Italy that their younger brother Sergio has died. He had been ill for a long time. The sisters are too poor and too frail now to travel home. Perhaps your Mum would let you use her mobile phone to SKYPE to their other sister in Milan? I'm sure they would appreciate some help too with their garden. They used to be famous in your village for growing vegetables and fruit. It is such a waste to see their garden overgrown because they are too stiff and sore to tend it nowadays.'

'Yeah, I'll do it. I'll borrow Mum's phone and make a SKYPE call for them. I'll ask Dad to come. We can help clear up their garden.'

'Good for you, Olivia Angelica. Now, keep looking and tell me what you see....'

Over and over Herr Egbert told me where to look, then explained about the people I saw, telling me what their problems were and suggesting ways I could help.

I lost track of track of time.

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After a while, Herr Egbert sighed:

'Well, well, well, Olivia Angelica, I think that's enough to be going on with for the moment. And look how high the sun is, it's almost lunchtime. I must be off, I'm feeling peckish. Write your list first and then make your way back to the Mound of Dreams. Use the rope ladder and remember, this is our secret.'

Herr Egbert flew off with a soft melodic:

'Whoooooo! Whoooooo! Whoooooo!'

I watched as the THE Great Grey Owl circled above me three times, closed his wings, dived like a stone and twisted down to disappear into a gap between two trees.

I turned to look for the entrance to the Owl's Den but it had vanished. Instead, where the entrance to the cave had been, there was a faint outline of Herr Egbert carved into the rock face. His bright yellow and black eyes were staring at me, unblinking.

I kneeled and made a quick sketch of him. Then I did as he had said and made a careful note of the twenty-three people I had agreed to help. Only then did I realise that every one of them lived within a few minutes' walk from our house.

I grabbed the rope ladder and dared to look down to the Mound of Dreams.

It was a long, long way.

Lyla and Trek looked tiny.

Just before I started climbing down I looked again at the rock face but the image of Herr Egbert had faded. All that was left was his yellow and black eyes.

'Bye-Bye, Herr Egbert.'

Both eyes blinked and then faded and the rock was smooth and grey, ordinary.

Although I was scared, I made my feet and hands do it, and started to climb downwards.

Chapter 6: The Mound of Dreams

I dangled above the Mound of Dreams and looked down at Lyla and Trek who were curled up together, sound asleep on the flat rock. Trek's tail was waving like mad and I knew he must be dreaming.

'Hi guys, look at me!'

Then the rope ladder melted away into thin air and I felt myself falling, falling, falling. . . .

The oddest thing was that I seemed to float down and land beside them like a feather.

Lyla sat up, stretched her arms wide and yawned. Trek jumped up and barked and raced around in mad circles, chasing his tail.

'Hey, Liv, did you sleep too. I just couldn't keep my eyes open. One minute I was watching the Red Fox cubs and the next minute I was having an amazing dream.'

'No wonder, did you know this hillock is called the Mound of Dreams?'

'Is it? How do you know that?'

'Eh, eh, THE Great Grey Owl told me.'

'You're saying you actually saw a Great Grey Owl? Did you really?'

'Yeah, I made a sketch of him, look!'

However, when I opened my notebook to show her, the pages were covered with strange symbols and weird circles that looked like piercing, staring eyes.

'Duh! What's happened to my drawing?'

'Liv, what do all these squiggles mean? Have you invented a new language? Is it a secret code? Can you teach me to use it? Please, please!'

As I stared at the writing, the first line of symbols changed into English:

"Do-Gooders always keep their secret promises."

Then the words became squiggles again.

It was only then that I remembered what Herr Egbert had said, that everything that had happened in the Owl Cave and on the Viewing Platform must be kept a secret. Although Trek had been there, he could not divulge my secret.

While Lyla was looking at the squiggles, I glanced up and saw that where the Viewing Platform had been. There was a clear patch of blue sky. Then, just for a few seconds, a huge grey bird hovered, then flapped lazily away out of sight.

'Yeah, Lyla maybe I was asleep too. Maybe the three of us all had different strange dreams. How about you, what did you dream?'

'I dreamed that I was in a horse race with ten other riders and that I came first!'

'Was I in your dream?'

'Yeah, actually you were! You were first too, because you were my horse! You were a huge black stallion called Nero!'

'No way I was a horse!'

'Yes you were! You really were, Liv. Nero was definitely you because he talked exactly like you and he wore specs, just like yours.'

Then I remembered that Herr Egbert had told me he had been a frog and even a whale. So maybe I really was a horse called Nero, I thought.

'OK, Lyla, I was a horse called Nero. So, the L-Girls won the race, yeah?'

'Yeah, we won by twenty lengths. Everyone was cheering, it was amazing!'

'Yeah, just as we should expect, the L-Girls win again!'

"HIGH FIVES!"

Chapter 6: Shoosh!

We were sitting together on the flat rock on the Mound of Dreams.

'Do you want to know something, Lyla? Something really, really amazing?'

'What?'

'I don't feel hungry. Not even a little bit.'

'Yeah, I don't either.'

'Lyla, in my dream I saw this little boy, his name is Tomasz. He lives near us. He's about Jordan's age. He's very lonely. I think we should ride home and try to cheer him up. Perhaps we could invite him round to my house and have a picnic in our garden.'

'Yeah, that would be cool, Liv. We would be like the Good Samaritan, right.'

'Yeah, Lyla. But remember, the Good Samaritan didn't boast about his good deeds, he kept them a secret.'

'Yeah, you're right. We need a name for ourselves. The Good Samaritan name has been taken, hasn't it. What about the New Britain Society?'

'No, Lyla, that sounds like we're working for the Government or something. Look, I've got it! What if we called ourselves "The Secret Helpers' Society"?''

'Yeah, cool. Only it's a bit long, isn't it?'

'Yeah, I suppose so. And whenever we mention it or write it down then it won't be a secret anymore, will it?'

'Yeah, but Liv, it is a really good name because describes what it does.'

'Grrrrrrrrr! Woof! Woof! Woof! Woof! Woof!'

Lyla grabbed at Trek: 'Shoosh! Trek, come here for a tickle and stop that barking!'

'Yeah, that's it! Lyla, don't you see? We should call ourselves "Shoosh", then no one will ever guess who we are or what we are doing to help others. Good boy, Trek! Good boy!'

And that was how "Shoosh!" got its name.

Shoosh! is our code word for The Secret Helpers' Society.

Only three of us know what Shoosh! really means.

And Trek cannot tell!

Chapter 7: Secret Code Writing

That all happened about six weeks ago.

Since that first day Shoosh! has been very busy helping people.

About once a week, whenever I get a chance to slip away unnoticed, I trot Star and Trek out to the Mound of Dreams. Standing together with Trek on the flat rock, he barks and the rope ladder drops down.

Herr Egbert, THE Great Grey Owl, sits on the branch above the Viewing Platform and we discuss how our Shoosh! projects are doing.

Herr Egbert listens to everything I say, then tells me where to look with the binoculars to find new people in need of help.

Even though I have a very good memory, he insists that I write down all their details in my notebook.

I always write everything carefully and very neatly in English, but later, when I check my notebook the words look like squiggles.

It's real cool being able to write in code, because I can still read it, though no one else can, not even Lyla.

The Indian Hill Adventure is a story about two girls who have an adventure at Indian Hill.

Near the base of Indian Hill, they find a Secret Clearing and the Mound of Dreams.

Their dog Trek finds a tunnel which leads up inside Indian Hill.

What happens next is quite scary, but Liv's trusty binoculars are put to good use.