

# What People are Saying About

## The Salt Mines Mystery

This book has adventure, danger and suspense. A must-read. Can't wait for the next book to come out.

Joshua Potter

The book is an amazing adventure; a whirlwind of exciting action that captured my imagination and kept me enthralled to the very end. It was definitely a page-turner. Couldn't put it down and read the whole thing in two days.

Cindy Burghardt

We found the book a real interest grabber—couldn't wait to see what happened next.

Joan and Ed Hoch

I enjoyed that the main characters were Christians. The family dynamic was a positive one and the brothers had a good relationship—they argued like all siblings do, but they were there for each other. And I liked that Gabe and Alex were always prepared.

Debbie Riddle

Easy to read. Interesting. Realistic. Very relatable story that flows well.

Toby Zeilinski



The Salt  
Mines  
Mystery



# The Salt Mines Mystery

Aaron M. Zook Jr.



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PO Box 2011  
Friendswood, Texas 77549

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# Dedication

I dedicate this book to my excellent wife, Joyce. Her love, encouragement, and support have been incredible throughout thirty-six years of our married life, including 26 years of my military service, three years in full-time ministry, and in particular, during the writing of the Thunder and Lightning book series. She is the joy of my life. May the Lord, to whom all praise is due, bless her abundantly, beyond her greatest dreams.



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# Chapter 1

## - Fight

Hans Becher threw his skateboard onto the sidewalk in front of my feet.

“The skateboard champion is me, not you.” The sixteen-year-old refugee from East Germany strode toward me with determination. “Your words mean nothing.”

“My jump was the best, Becher.” I pushed my chest forward. “You lose.”

Hans’ German friends surrounded us.

Pete, my best friend, and twelve like me, laid a hand on my shoulder. “Gabe, it doesn’t matter if you’re right.” He tugged my shirt. “Don’t argue with that bully. He’s bigger than you. Let’s go.”

“Pete...” My eyes caught his for a second. “I can handle this.”

Hans punched me in the shoulder.

I rocked back to absorb the blow and steadied myself. After Hans threw a couple of jabs, I darted in, fist aimed at his nose, but I missed. I retreated.

“You Americans think you’re number one in all the things.” Hans circled to his right. “But I’m teaching you different.”

Now we were on the grass. Hans' friends dropped their skateboards to form a human wall on the lawn.

Alex, my fourteen-year-old brother, was off to one side, crouching over our dogs, Thunder and Lightning. Both strained at their leashes.

I lunged forward, smashing my fist into Hans' rock hard stomach, and then connected with an uppercut, snapping his head back. While I regrouped for the next blow, Hans muttered a string of German words I hadn't heard before.

He rubbed his jaw, tightened his fists, and circled to his left.

Like a boxer, I bounced away, but he bull-rushed me, knocking me to the ground. I twisted and fell, landing on my hands and chest.

Hans jumped on me, hammering my back to the ground to keep me pinned.

I struggled to breathe. My right cheek felt like it was on fire. My ears rang and I sucked in air and rolled. Or tried to. I didn't move much.

"Polizei." Several boys pointed at a German policeman gazing at us.

Hans let me up. The rest of the boys crowded around us. We brushed ourselves off and adjusted our clothes. The policeman was still on the opposite side of the castle park, looking our way and talking to an elderly couple motioning in our direction.

The circular park sidewalk surrounded a massive grassy area with gardens in the middle divided by smaller wandering paths. Black metal lampposts lining the looping walkway flickered on. The lights' amber glow kept the evening darkness at bay and provided a cheery atmosphere for evening walkers. But not for me.

Alex appeared next to me. "Gabe, check out your right cheek."

I touched the aching area, bringing away red fingertips, which I wiped on the grass. "He scraped me up, no thanks to you."

"You wanted a 'fair fight,' didn't you?" Alex said. "I held the dogs."

“Hans is way older than me. He’s sixteen.”

“Then pick on kids your own age. Or size. Don’t be a twelve-year-old dummy.” Alex brushed past me, his shoulder grazing mine.

Pete hurried over with our skateboards. “Take these. We need to leave now or the Polizei will make us answer questions. Don’t rush or you’ll make it look like we were doing something wrong.”

I dumped my skateboard onto the sidewalk and weaved toward the castle, away from the cop. The policeman eyed Hans and his boys. Pete and I scissored back and forth, passing Alex, who had the dogs pulling him on his skateboard like huskies dragging a sled. Alex’s dog, Thunder, a black Great Dane mixed breed, did most of the pulling. My dog, Lightning, a small, golden-red Shih-Tzu mix, pranced for show.

I snuck a peek at the Polizei. He left the couple and headed in our direction. I rolled through a park side exit, whizzing under the arch into the busy city side of the castle. I found a bench, stopped, and sat. Pete plopped down next to me.

“Nice going, Gabe,” Alex said. “Now we have Polizei chasing us. You can’t stay here too long or he’ll spot you when he comes out of the park.”

“You didn’t help at all,” I said. “When I beat Hans skateboarding and he shoved me to the ground, you should’ve—”

“What? Come to rescue my poor, little brother? You would have told me to get lost and let you handle it.” He shook his head and narrowed his eyes.

I shoved off the bench and breathed into his face. “Thanks for nothing.” I spun around and wiped my cheek. Only a little smeared blood remained. “Come on, Pete. I’m not heading home with this loser.” I jerked a thumb in Alex’s direction.

“Don’t forget your dog, baby brother.” Alex stretched out Lightning’s leash to me. “And stay on the lighted streets.”

“Who are you? My master?” I snatched Lightning’s leash out of his hand.

Alex marched away, keeping Thunder close. They crossed the street and merged with the evening crowds as darkness fell rapidly.

“Come on, Pete.” I picked up my skateboard. “I’m nobody’s baby. We’re not following him, but we have to hurry to beat him home.” I picked up Lightning and we jogged toward less crowded streets. “There.” I pointed to an alleyway. “We can skateboard on the back streets.”

“Okay,” Pete said. “But I don’t like that part of town. And it’s not well-lit.”

“I don’t want to be on the same street as Alex,” I said. “He thinks he’s a king, ordering me around all the time. Anyway, there are two of us. We’ll be okay. I’m not gonna give in to Alex.”

Five minutes later, we skateboarded into the area where drunks and druggies hung out at night. Lightning, who was off his leash, darted in and out of corners to sniff everything. The cobblestone paths here made skateboarding worthless. We decided to jog again.

The older section of town had brown, stone buildings. Light orange tiles covered steep roofs. Broken tile pieces littered parts of the alleyway. Odd angles, tiny courtyards, and a few clotheslines reminded me of the medieval pictures I had studied in a homeschool history class about the Middle Ages. A few narrow side passages branched off the main road. Few of the lamppost lights worked. One flickered with a greenish tint.

The muscles in the back of my neck tightened. We slowed to a walk.

“You know how to get us through here, right?” I said.

“Like the back of my hand.” Pete stopped, pointed in one direction, shrugged, and motioned another way. “Come on. I know this place during the day. It’s a little trickier in the dark.”

“Go faster.” The tightness spread to my arms and gut. A gate banged behind me. I jumped and looked around. No one was there.

“I have to make sure we’re going down the right alley.”

“It’s been twenty minutes. Shouldn’t we be out?” I wiped sweaty palms on my pants. I remembered what happened six months ago. *I don’t want anyone kidnapping me again.*

A light fog crept into the dim streets, making it harder to see any great distance. Halos of mist shrouded the lights. Garbage

overflowed several trashcans. I plugged my nose. A chill settled between my shoulder blades.

“I may have missed a turn, but we’ll get there.” Pete faced me. His jaw dropped and he stabbed a finger at something behind me.

“Halt,” a deep voice said. A hand slapped onto my shoulder from behind.

I screamed.

## Chapter 2 – Foggy Fright

I jerked out of the vise grip, stumbled forward, and whirled to see the attacker.

A pockmarked face of acne scars stared at me. The man's scraggly hair resembled his body—long, thin, and not much there. His clothes had worn spots on the knees and elbows, but looked clean. He grinned, showing yellow teeth with gaping holes. He jutted his chin and tilted his head.

“Geld?” the man said, sticking out his hand. Though his deep tone went up at the end like a question, the thrust-out hand and the glint of his eye told me I had no choice.

“Money,” Pete translated. “He wants money.”

Lightning raced toward me and growled.

I shuffled next to Pete and checked my pocket. The feel of coins eased my mind. I pulled out a few. “I only have seventy Pfennig—that's not even equal to fifty cents.”

The man reached out to take the money.

“Don't.” Pete blocked my arm. “Next will be your watch.”

The man eased a little closer, bolder now that he had seen cash.

I backed away, still facing the beggar.

Pete followed.

Another step.

Lightning barked, moving toward the man, but I bent down and yanked him by the collar. “Stay here,” I said. My hands tingled and my breathing slowed.

The man leaped forward with speed unlike his broken-down appearance. In three steps, his bony talons clamped onto my hand. He pried open my fingers.

“Stop.” I tried to tug his hands off mine, but he was too strong. I prepared to drop the coins and take a defensive stance.

But before I adjusted my footing, the man’s face changed. He cringed, hands dropping mine as he watched something behind me. His eyes widened. He pushed himself away and scampered into the darkness.

I turned around and dashed right into a man’s chest. He loomed over me, the clean smell of aftershave drifting from his jaw.

The hum of a weak, electric light filled the speechless void. My coins clinked on the cobblestones.

The man laughed. He had barely moved when I bounced off him. Over six-feet tall, he had a crew cut, dark slacks, and a light, collared shirt. His face showed no fat. *Two hundred pounds, maybe.* Rock-hard muscle defined the upper body.

A second man, shorter than first, stood next to the guy. Shorty was still a little taller than my five-foot, two-inches, and he smelled like unwashed clothes. He made quick, nervous moves. The guy wore baggy work-pants, black leather combat boots, and a brown jacket.

In a flash, Shorty’s hand slapped over Pete’s mouth and shoved him against the wall, a fistful of shirt in the other hand. “That’s the kid,” he said in English. He tilted his head in my direction. “He fits the description.”

The tall muscular man cracked his knuckles. “Nice.”

“What do you want?” I took a step back.

Muscle man slid his hand into a side pocket, retrieving a six-inch black object. He pressed a button—a blade sprung out, gleaming in the foggy night.

I gulped as the man twirled the blade in his hand. *He's an expert with that thing.* I jerked my head to the rear and mouthed the word, "Run."

Pete's hand chopped Shorty's wrist, loosening his grip. He bolted right.

The man leaped after him, latching onto his belt. He flung him against the wall, pulled out a boot knife and scraped the skin under Pete's quivering chin. "Scared?"

Lightning, yapping and snarling, launched at the attacker who kicked him away. Jerking Pete's ear to his mouth, Shorty whispered something.

"Call him off." Pete's pink skin looked pale. He gulped air. "Quick, or the man says the knife will slip."

"Come here, boy." I patted my leg. "Now."

Lightning skittered over, throat rumbling.

"Don't move," I said.

Muscle man cleaned his fingernails using the switchblade, eying the sweaty man with the boot knife. "Let the kid go," he told his partner.

"But I want to cut him."

"He's not the target. But the other..." Muscle man flashed a smile at me.

Shorty yanked Pete away from the wall, tracing a line from chin to collarbone with his blade. "Walk when you leave or you'll get hurt." He showed his teeth in a big grin. "This is a throwing knife." His lips widened even further as he let go.

Released, Pete massaged his throat and took a few tentative steps.

"Go on," I said with more bravery than I felt. "I'll be okay."

Pete nodded, glanced at his attacker and shuffled the way we had come.

"Faster," Shorty said.

Pete's pace quickened.

"Schnell, schnell," Shorty yelled. In one fluid motion, brown jacket blurring, the creep hurled something at Pete.

*Thunk.*

The knife's blade sank into a wooden door a foot away from my buddy.

Pete broke into a dash and disappeared.

The two men laughed.

I gritted my teeth and made a fist.

The muscular guy strolled over.

I crouched near a wall.

"Stay." The keyword dog training worked like a charm. Lightning scrambled a little to my right, but kept his body poised for action.

Shorty scooted past us to pull his knife out of the door. His smell made my nose itch.

"You cost me lots of money," muscle man said.

"How?" I balanced with a slight shift, preparing for an attack.

"Don't be stupid. You put Polizei on our trail last year. For that you pay."

"You deserve it, creep." I altered my stance.

Muscle man's jaw tightened. His eyes narrowed at me.

Shorty returned, boot knife sheathed, and stood by his partner's side.

Muscle man's switchblade flipped into a fighting position. "This is no joke. I teach you and your father a lesson. Machete hasn't forgotten you."

His knees bent, eyes inventorying me. He paused before lunging at me, slashing across my belly.

I fell back and sucked in my breath and stomach. The knife shredded my best skateboarding T-shirt. Twirling, I shoved off the wall to the center of the street, side-stepping Lightning in the move. "Jerk." I fingered the tear. The fog made the cobblestones slippery. I repositioned for the next cut.

"Sic 'em," I said.

Lightning leaped, snarling at Shorty, who charged in to help.

Deep barking sounded behind the men. They turned to the noise.

Thunder bounded toward them. Pounding footsteps and Alex's voice echoed in the air.

Muscle man kicked Lightning away from Shorty. He clamped on to his partner's jacket and shoved him into a side passage. Thunder arrived as the gate clicked shut. Lightning barked at the escaping thugs sprinting into the shadows.

Alex ran through the dimness and wrenched the latch. It rattled and banged, but wouldn't open. He shook the gate a few more times, then hurried over to me.

"What happened to your shirt?" He raised both eyebrows.

"Knife cut," I said. "Oh. And I'm glad to see you too."

"We're gonna get nuked when we get home." Alex blew out a deep breath. "Let's go."

## Chapter 3 – Family Fallout

Boys, you're late," Mom said through the open second story window. "Get up here right now." She slammed the window shut.

"Great," I said. "She sounds steamed."

Alex nodded.

We raced the dogs up the stairs and into the apartment.

"What have you boys been doing?" Mom's voice floated out of the kitchen.

"It's a long story," I said. "I'll tell you at dinner."

Mom appeared at the kitchen doorway, wiping her hands on a dishtowel.

"Your dad and I already ate. You're more than half-an-hour late. That's unacceptable. How can you..." She focused on my face. "What is that on your cheek?"

"I got hit in a fight."

"What did you say?" Dad, still in his U.S. Army uniform, stepped out into the hall. "What kind of fight?" He tilted my head, looking at the scraped skin.

"Defensive. Hans Becher, the 'Goeppingen Skateboard Champ,' swung first."

“What did you do to make him want to punch you?”

“I beat him in a skateboard competition.”

Dad nodded.

“My scores were better than his. He gathered his buddies and shoved me around.”

Dad released my head. “Your scrape needs alcohol and a bandage. Not too bad. What’s this?” His hand slipped into my slashed T-shirt and tugged.

“The second thing that happened.”

“Are you hurt?”

“No, the switchblade...”

Mom dropped her towel and rushed over. She inspected my blood-smearing cheek and looked at my shirt. “I didn’t even notice. What knife?” Her eyebrows drew in, jaw line set firm.

“Dad, can we get something to eat?” Alex covered his face with one hand. “This might take a while.”



After saying the blessing for the meal, we ate and told our stories.

Dad nodded during the part about the skateboard fight, but his neck went red when I told about the alleyway scare. He made a fist, his knuckles white.

Mom’s olive face drained to a lighter color.

“Okay, boys. I’ve heard enough.” Dad opened his fist and put both palms flat on the table. He pushed to a standing position. “I’m not happy about this.”

“Dad, it was self-defense.” I raised my hands, palms up, in a helpless gesture. “What...”

“We’ve told you before, no fighting,” he said. “You’re mother and I will decide what to do. Now go wash the dishes and get ready for bed.” Dad reached for Mom’s hand as she stood. He pulled her close and walked her around the corner.

“Looks like we’re in hot water again,” I said while we walked into the kitchen.

“We?” Alex looked at me. “*You’re* in trouble for that shortcut you took. And for not walking away from Hans. I did the right thing by looking for you.”

“You think you’re an *angel*, never doing anything wrong.” I scooped soapsuds from the sink and flung them at his head.

Alex slapped a cupboard shut and chased me into the Great Room, our huge entryway into the apartment. He gave my head a soapsuds bath. I wrestled his hand away and paused.

“Alex, wait. Listen to Mom and Dad.” I sat up, straightening my hair.

A muffled conversation came from around the corner.

“I don’t care,” Mom said. “Our family is in danger. You have got to make this stop. Your special projects at work are the reason.”

I made shushing motions and tugged Alex’s shirt. We crept close to their bedroom door.

Dad spoke lower, softer. “Hon, calm down. The police are still investigating, clearing the town of anyone connected to Machete. Gabe went into the wrong part of town.”

*Machete. The terrorist group that kidnapped us at Neuschwanstein castle last year.* I knelt next to the open keyhole to hear the details.

“First, it’s the wrong part of town, next it will be in the playground, or at the Schloss Park when they are out by themselves. It’s too dangerous.”

“Okay, okay. I’ll see the police chief. And we’ll leave until they say the town is safe.”

Alex pushed me away, peeping through the keyhole. Then, he stumbled to his feet and sprinted down the hall, waving me to follow. Thunder and Lightning galloped after him.

We flew into our room as the click of Mom and Dad’s latch sounded.

Seconds later, Dad poked his head into the room. Alex and I lay on our single beds reading, dogs at our feet.

“Let’s go. You’re going to tell your story to the Polizei Chief. Afterward, you’re coming home to pack. We’re going on a vacation.”



After telling the Polizei Chief our story, we arrived home and found a note taped to our mailbox from our German landlord. Alex grabbed it and read the broken English out loud.

*April 16, 1990.*  
*You have new package.*  
*Pick up in morning. Klaus.*