

Grum!
Robyn Hill
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Smashwords edition

Chapter 1.

At first I wasn't happy with the idea of spending the summer at my Aunt Victoria's house. My dad, and his research partner, would be traveling to Africa to study plants for medicinal purposes. It wasn't that I didn't like my aunt, it's just that I was going into 6th grade and spending the entire summer away from my home, and my friends, was not my idea of a radical summer. It would be the first summer away, and the first summer since my mom had died.

After we arrived at my aunt's house, I realized it was not as bad as I had expected. The house was huge for one thing, and old. It was not old in a bad way, more in an interesting, spooky kind of way. The bricks were covered with stringy moss, and vines reached around the entire house like protective, bony hands. A lovely garden of different colored roses grew to the side, and behind was a wooded area with ponds, frogs, and many curious swamp creatures.

I waved to the car as my dad and his partner drove off. "It will be over before you know it, Carol," Dad's partner said while pushing his wire glasses further upon his nose. "I love you and entertain yourself with books, Sweetheart, lots of books, especially math!" Dad yelled out as he waved back, and then the Volkswagen pulled out of the driveway.

"Really, Carol, time will go by quickly", my aunt said and she picked up my suit case and walked into the house. "Don't fret and make the best out of the situation. When life gives you lemons, why I say make lemonade!" she sang out happily. I remembered my parents and teachers always saying that, but I didn't really like lemonade either.

We walked up a spiral iron staircase and down a dimly lit wooden hall to the room that would be mine for the next couple of months. My aunt opened a tired creaking door. I was pleasantly surprised to find a cozy room with a large brass bed. There were many filled bookshelves and a white fluffy cat. The cat was curled in a ball atop of the thickest down comforter I had ever seen. He had a black spot the shape of a diamond on his head. He looked up at me, stretched his fat paws, then retreated into his curl and fell back to sleep. "That would be Marlin, my cat, and it seems he has already decided to bunk with you while you are here," my aunt said. "Make yourself comfortable and come down and join me for a glass of lemonade when you are finished." Great...I thought to myself, more with the lemonade, and I reached forward to unpack my things.

I had my suitcase, filled with summer clothing, and one large geometry book to unpack. Since my mother had passed away, my grades had slipped and I had received a D in math because I didn't understand geometry. Dad wanted me to study a geometry text book before school started so I would be ready for 6th grade math. I rubbed the top of the book and remembered how my mother would help me with my homework during the evenings. Those were the days when I had straight A's. I grabbed a pillow and began to cry. I can't do anything on my own anymore. It just didn't seem fair that cancer had taken my mother and here I was alone in a huge house with a relative I barely knew. I felt a light tickling on my nose and opened my eyes. There stood Marlin, looking at me with crossed green eyes, gently kissing my cheek with his rough tongue. It was strangely soothing. Marlin made himself cozy underneath my neck as I dozed off into a comfortable sleep.

After I awoke, I emptied my suitcase into a weathered, oak dresser in my room, and then headed downstairs to join my aunt while Marlin followed me. My aunt was out on the patio sitting on a rolled out pad in a funny yoga position. Her legs were sticking straight up in the air like two Popsicle sticks. She was an odd sort of lady with curly red hair, thick black framed glasses, and clothes that looked like they had been in her wardrobe since the 1970's. I walked out onto the patio and breathed in the scent of flowers warming in the sun. "So, now that you are settled, I will tell you about our plans while you are here." My aunt said as she looked up from her mat. "Oh, don't go to any trouble," I said "I am sure I will find plenty to do with the books to read and the woods to investigate." "Well, yes, there is that," my aunt said as she stretched her leg over top of her head, "but you will also need to come with me to work. I don't want to leave you here by yourself, dear." I looked over at my aunt, "I guess I didn't even ask Dad, what it is that you do?" My aunt hesitated, "I am a scientist, and am working on a new invention!"

"What sort of invention are you working on?" I asked her. "Well, I am uncertain of that right now... but when I am certain of what it is, it will be an amazing invention!" My aunt sounded like she was trying to convince herself of this, more than me. "I do have a partner, his name is Doc. but it is strictly business with us, so don't get any silly ideas!" she laughed a little too hard as she said this, "Oh my goodness... the idea of Doc and me!" again, she sounded like she was trying to convince herself of this, more than me. "You will be happy to know that Doc has a granddaughter about your age, 12 I believe. Her name is Jordan. Doc made a special trip to get her so she will be here for the summer too. He will be bringing her to work as well, so you two can entertain yourselves." This was very good news to me since I had noticed there weren't any immediate neighbors. The idea of having someone to hangout with sounded great. "So when will we be going to your work?" I asked, "Well, I was hoping to go tomorrow, that is, if you feel settled enough?" "Tomorrow sounds wonderful!" I told my aunt. I drank the rest of my lemonade and skipped back upstairs, and the lemonade...well, it wasn't half bad.

Chapter 2

When we arrived the next morning, the work shop was not at all what I had imagined. It was a huge brick factory that had several windows boarded up with nails and wood. There were worn out pictures painted on the walls. "Aunt Vick, why are there pictures of bubblegum painted on the outside of this building?" I asked barely making out a painted image. "Funny thing," she said looking up at the crumbled paint, "This used to be a gum factory, and I mean, this place sold every flavor imaginable... Tooty fruity, Banana milkshake, Peanut butter, you name it." I thought that sounded delicious, "That sounds wonderful, why did it shut down?" I asked. "Well, that really is the strange part. You see, the man who owned it just up and disappeared one day! Here he was making so much money and then just up and disappears!" I thought for a moment, "Does anyone have any ideas how or why?" I asked, "No, not really because nothing was missing. His car was still parked here and everything was the same as if he had just vanished into thin air! Too bad really, from what I understand, he was just about to introduce some new fantastic bubblegum, but of course he never did, with disappearing and all. So, with all the lab equipment left behind here, Doc. and I decided it was a perfect purchase to work on our inventions. Anyway, come on inside and I can introduce you to Doc. and Jordan."

The inside of the factory was huge and cluttered. There were contraptions and machines everywhere and rooms that had large metal doors. At the entrance stood an older, balding, man who held the hand of a skinny girl with ragged hair. She was dressed in a blue checkered dress and two ponytails were sticking out of her head. "Oh, you must be Jordan, Luv, Doc has told me so much about you! This is my niece, Carol." Aunt Vick pushed me towards Jordan to introduce myself. "Hi, nice to meet you." I said offering my hand. Jordan shyly put her hand out to greet me. Doc introduced himself and said, "Well now, you two should have plenty to do around

here, just make sure you are careful and don't get into any trouble." He picked up a cardboard box and started unpacking it onto a machine. "And make sure to check in with Vicki and me every so often." My aunt blushed and batted her eyes at Doc. "Yes, check in with us every so often Sweet plumbs." I gave my aunt a strange look, "Sweet plumbs?" I thought to myself. I shuffled my feet a bit and looked up at Jordan, "Well, what do you want to do?" I asked her. A slow grin spread across her face, "What do you think about exploring?" I was sure relieved to hear her say this, at first I thought she was going to be a drag, but she began skipping forward and all I could do was follow after her.

We decided to check out the top of the factory first. When we climbed up the stairs I asked her, "Hey, did you hear what happened to the owner of this place?" Jordan said her Grandpa had told her how the man had disappeared. "Don't you find that strange? I mean I guess the guy was making millions off his gum so why would he just disappear like that?" I asked. Jordan thought about it, "I don't know, maybe he made enough money, and wanted to travel somewhere magnificent and decided to sneak off somewhere." "I suppose." I said. We walked past several metal doors and decided to open a few to see what was inside. Each door seemed to have more of the same equipment, lab tubes, and boxes of colorful gum wrappers. "Hey, we should open some boxes and see if we can find the ingredients to make our own gum!" Jordan suggested, "I don't know if we should snoop around, we might get in trouble." I replied. Jordan looked at me strangely, "Your aunt and my grandpa own the place, we can do whatever we want!" Jordan was turning out to be much braver than I first thought. "What the heck," I said, "Where should we start?"

We walked over to a large metal door that had a rusted lock on its hinges and began pulling on it. "I bet there are all sorts of ingredients in here!" Jordan began tugging harder on the lock. I tried at the lock as well, "Yes, well, the lock appears to be quite stuck so we may need to find something to pry it open." Jordan reached over and pulled a large hammer off of a shelf and began pounding on the lock. After about 5 tough slams, the lock crumbled to the ground and we were able to pull open the metal door.

Once inside, we discovered we were in a storage room of some sort, filled with all sorts of colorful boxes of gum. A fluorescent light flickered and lit up the inside so we could see. Aunt Vick was right, there were so many flavors! We found gum with flavors from Ice-cream sundae, to Blueberry Pie! "Well, since we sort of own the place, I guess it wouldn't hurt to try some of the gum" I said. We tore open a "variety" box and stuffed different flavors in our mouths. "Thif stuff iv amazing" Jordan mumbled with a mouth full of bubblegum. "I know, I think I am chewing on a piece of Peanut Butter and Jelly bubble gum!" I said. We continued to try the different flavors and laughed as we competed to see who could blow the largest bubble. After a few moments of laughter, Jordan looked over at a strange isolated box right in the middle of a metal table. The box was taped shut and there was a note on top of it. "Grum! Do not open!" the note also said, "Not ready for sale" Jordan turned the box over in her hands, "What kind of name is Grum? she asked, "Well," she said to me, "since we are probably heirs to this place, let's go ahead and check it out!"

We tore off the dried yellow tape and carefully leaned forward to peek inside. Inside there was but one pack of bubble gum with one piece missing. "Should we try it?" I asked. "Of course we should try it!" Jordan squealed as she began to tear open a piece. I hesitated, and said "But it's called Grum, not gum, and the note says not to open and that it is not ready to sell yet." I tried to reason. "Look," she said, "We won't know if we don't try, besides it's not like the note said poison or anything." She handed the pack to me and took out one piece of the Grum. She slowly unraveled a blue foiled wrapper, to reveal a purple piece of gum. "Maybe it's just grape gum" she said, "No big deal." I took the piece of gum from Jordan and tore it in half. "You're probably right," I said handing her half a piece,

"What harm can it do?"

Chapter 3

Jordan and I stood staring at each other as we chewed the piece of gum. "Strange, it really doesn't have a particular flavor." I said as I watched Jordan chew her share of the gum. "Yeah," she said with her mouth full, "It is sweet and everything but I can't tell what flavor it is either. Jeesh, no wonder the owner put 'not ready for sale' this gum probably wouldn't sell to anyone!" We began to get bored and started heading back towards the metal door to continue exploring. At that moment, I noticed something rather strange about Jordan. Her pig tails seemed to be shrinking into her head! "Um...Jordan, are you feeling ok?" She turned to look at me, "Yes, I am," she looked down at my feet in confusion, "but why are your shoes so large for your feet suddenly?" she asked. I looked down with horror as I saw my feet shrinking before my very eyes. "What is going on?" I looked at Jordan. Her pigtails had completely disappeared along with the lower half of her body! "Oh my gosh, Jordan, something is happening to us. I knew we shouldn't have eaten that Grum, we are probably dying or something!" Jordan was about to say something back, but she disappeared. Moments later, I could feel myself sinking lower and lower into a dark place, and then I felt myself beginning to faint.

When I started to wake up, everything was fuzzy. I could make out Jordan next to me. It looked like she was asleep. "Jordan, Jordan, wake up! I think that weird gum we chewed made us both pass out!" Jordan mumbled something, began to stir, and slowly sat up. "I told you we shouldn't eat that gum" she said to me. "What?" I said, "I was the one who told you that..." We both looked around. We hadn't just fainted. We weren't even in the factory anymore. Hot sunshine glared down from above. I could feel sand underneath me and two wooden shacks stood a few feet away. We were outside in a strange place that grew out of desert tundra.

Out of the corner of my eye I saw a dark shadow of a person approaching us. As they moved closer, I noticed it was an old lady with long gray hair. She wore an old ragged baseball hat on top of her head and had on a sequined prom dress. She leaned in to grab us both by the wrists. Her bony hand clawed at us and her nails dug into our skin. "Get up you ninnies, this is no time to sleep! You get back to work right now or you will suffer the consequences." I looked up at the woman and tried to explain our situation, "But, Maam, I think you have us confused with someone else. We are supposed to check in with our relatives right now, but we seem to be lost." "Oh, is that right ninny girl? I see, I feed you and give you a place to sleep but here you sit and make up stories! Play time is over, pick up your shovels and get back to work!"

Two strange, dirty, boys stood next to her as if to beckon us to do exactly as she asked. We picked up the shovels, and Jordan quietly asked the woman, "What is it we are digging for?" The old lady looked at Jordan as if she were mad, "What are digging for? Why, you know exactly what it is you ninny! You are digging the tunnel to China!" I tried to reason with the woman. "Maam, there is no way to dig to China. It is just an old wives' tale. Nobody can actually reach China by digging." She looked over at me with anger in her eyes, "Is that right you little urchin? That is ridiculous, You just get busy and quit blabbin and we shall be the very first to arrive in China by tunnel! Now begin digging immediately or you will be sleeping with the slugs tonight!" We did as she told us, picked up the shovels and began digging.

After what seemed to be hours of digging, I looked over at one of the scruffy boys who was standing guard. "Excuse me, but where exactly are we?" The boy looked over at me and wiped his runny nose with his filthy sleeve. "You aint spose to be talkin Ninny girl, you know you is in Crudville. You quit yer yappin or I'll get Gertie back here and she'll put you in with the slugs." I continued to dig into the endless dirt hole. I looked over at Jordan whose blue checkered dress was now

covered in mud stains "Psst, Jordan, what do you suppose they are talking about when they speak of these slugs?"

Suddenly the old lady, Gertie, appeared over top of the hole and said, "Oh, the ninny girls want to visit my dear pet slugs, do they! Well come along then and let's go pay them a visit!" With that, she and the two boys grabbed us and led us to an old wooden shack with black bars on the windows. Gertie opened the door and sang out sweetly "My lovelies, we have guests with us who are dying to meet you! They will be spending the night with you so you can all get to know each other better!" Jordan and I looked beyond the door. Inside the room were piles of giant slugs moving slowly and thickly while beaming up at Gertie. Gertie looked the slugs adoringly and then at us with sharp beady eyes. She slammed the door, "Now, back to work, it isn't bed time yet."

The hours seemed to drag as Jordan and I continued to dig and dig. Slowly the stars began to come out by the hundreds. The two scruffy boys took our shovels and grabbed us by the arms. One of the boys said, "Good work ninnies, now you can have one peanut and a glass of water and then its off to the slugs with ya." Jordan began to speak, "One peanut, that is it?! We have worked all day and that is all we get to eat?!" Although I was starving, I was more concerned about sleeping with the slugs. "You complainin?" asked one of the boys, "Cuz if you is complainin, you can go to bed with no supper at all!" Jordan looked exhausted. "No", she said weakly, "One peanut is just fine."

When we finished one peanut each and drank a small glass of water, the boys grabbed us by the shoulders and began to lead us to the wooden shack where the slugs lived. "Please, I begged, this is a huge mistake, please don't make us go in there." "You just zip yer lip ninny girl, you two should be happy Gertie is even givin you a place to rest!" With that, the two boys shoved us into the room.

As we fell forward, I grabbed a hold of Jordan to prevent her from falling on top of the large wet slugs. "Ooh this is absolutely disgusting!" she cried "How did this happen to us? All we did was chewed on a piece of stupid gum!" There was a shuffle from a dark corner of the room and I could see a crumpled figure writhe about in the moonlight. "What is that!" Jordan screamed. I cautiously inched forward toward the strange shadow, "Whatever you are, reveal yourself!" I shouted over to the moving figure. The figure let out a small moan, "Gum? You mentioned gum?" the figure asked.

It was a man's voice and as I moved closer toward him, I noticed he was frail and withered and sat in the corner wearing an old tattered business suit. "What about the gum?" I asked the man. "Gum is what led me here." he spoke softly with exhaustion in his voice. "I don't understand," I said to the man, "how is it you are here because of gum too?" The man peered out from a small beam of moonlight, "I once was a very happy successful business man. I owned an amazing gum factory and was working on a new revolutionary gum. I called it Grum because of the secret "rare" ingredient I added. Unfortunately, my invention turned out to be my demise. The rare ingredients I put in it mixed with the d.n.a. from my saliva, somehow transferred me here to this place." He let out a sigh, "When I was captured, I was forced to dig during the day, and sleep with the slugs at night and have been here for what seems a very long time.

I couldn't believe what I was hearing. "Sir, I think we chewed the same messed up gum you did!" I crouched closer towards him, "You see, my aunt and Jordan's grandfather bought an old broken down gum factory where the owner had disappeared! We also ate from a package of gum that had the name 'Grum' on the label!" The man was hunched over and slowly looked at us with a gleam of hope in his eyes for the first time. "Do you still have the gum?" he asked. I hadn't even thought about the gum since the whole nightmare began. I slowly reached into my pocket and wrapped my

fingers around what appeared to be an open pack of gum with exactly three pieces left. I took the shiny pack of gum out of my pocket and all three of us stared at it in the light of the moon.

Moments later, the door swung open and the two boys barged forward. "You stupid ninnies, we heard everything, now you hand over that there magical gum!" Jordan stood up to defend us by kicking at the boys and hollered, "No, you can't take it, it is our only hope to return home!" The two dirty boys looked at each other then suddenly one of them lunged toward me and grabbed the gum from my hand. He tossed it over to the other boy who fumbled and dropped it on the back of a giant slug. Another slug wiggled forward and was about to eat it up when suddenly it was snatched up again by the boys. The two hurried out the door and locked it leaving us behind in the room of slugs.

"I am so dreadfully sorry," the man said, "Do try and get some rest and we will come up with a plan in the morning. Now that you girls are here, we can work together to escape this place. As for the slugs, well they may not be pretty to look at but they will not harm you. Just curl up and you will hardly notice they are here." I looked at Jordan and in a tired voice I said, "We really don't have a choice and we are going to need our rest if we are going to get out of here." I turned toward the wall, grabbed my knees in the fetal position, and closed my eyes hoping to catch a bit of sleep.

Chapter 4

I awoke to the sun shining through the barred windows. I glanced over and noticed the man was awake and Jordan was still sound asleep, snoring against the wall. The slugs had pretty much kept to themselves all night and thankfully, I was able to get some rest. "What is your name, sir?" I asked the man who was rubbing his eyes. "My name is Mr. Dooley. I know this is an awful experience for you and your friend but I must admit I am very happy to meet you and quite grateful you and your friend are here." I pushed a slug out of the way with my tennis shoe. "How do you suppose we should get out of here? And even if we do, those awful boys have the Grum now." Mr. Dooley rubbed his chin, "I am not sure yet, but I know, with the three of us, we can escape this place. When we do, we will have to find those boys." Just then, Jordan sat up and rubbed her eyes. "I think I have an idea that might work."

"Well, what is it Jordan, what is your idea?" I asked her. She looked thoughtfully at Mr. Dooley and me and said, "We all know how important it is to Gertie that she is the first to dig a tunnel to China, right? Well, what if one of us, while digging in the hole, acts like we have found something, while the other two push her down and bury her inside of the hole?!" Mr. Dooley thought for a moment, "That is as good an idea as any," he said, "Now we will just have to wait."

After waiting for about an hour, we heard someone fumbling to open the door with a loud, clanking key. Gertie burst through the door, "What have you done with my boys?" she screamed while pointing at us with a dried, pointed, claw of a nail. "We have done nothing, ma'am, they stole something from us and have probably ran away!" Jordan told the woman. "Lies, more lies from you rotten brats!" Gertie screamed. "Now all three of you will work twice as hard today and will not stop until dusk!" She handed us our shovels and we walked out towards the giant hole.

While Gertie was distracted I whispered, "Mr. Dooley, you are probably the strongest, so perhaps you and Jordan should get ready to push Gertie down the hole while I pretend to find something." Mr. Dooley agreed. I pretended to dig for a few moments more than hollered at the top of my lungs, "I can't believe it, Gertie was right, I think I may have just hit a tunnel which leads to China!" Gertie came running up from behind Jordan and Mr. Dooley, "Outta my way, fools, I knew there was a way, I knew there was a way!" Mr. Dooley grabbed at Gertie and went to push her into the hole. Gertie began to struggle. Suddenly, she grabbed a shovel, and

smacked Mr. Dooley in the head. Mr. Dooley's eyes rolled back and he landed with a thud out side of the hole. "Outa my way brat," Gertie shouted to Jordan, "Or you'll get clobbered next!" Gertie turned to face me, "And as for you ninny, say goodbye forever!" With that, Gertie began shoveling mounds and mounds of dirt on top of me. Soon I was covered with dirt and couldn't move an inch.

I had to lay perfectly still in the earth. If I moved at all, dirt would go into my mouth and nose. I did have a small breathing hole but was afraid if I shifted, it would collapse. I lay there thinking about my life. What would Dad do now if both Mom and me were gone? It didn't seem fair that I would die at such a young age. I began to slow my breathing and decided it would be better to go in a calm manner rather than in a state of panic. Just as I started to doze off, I felt a sharp pain in my thigh. "Oh no!," I thought, "Gertie is back to finish me off!" I started kicking as hard as I could and was able to move some dirt. Seconds later, my arms were thrashing about as I tried to protect myself from Gertie's awful wrath. "Carol, Carol, stop moving about!" Jordan stared down at me, "It is me, Jordan, I am here to get you out of this awful hole!"

I stood up and brushed the soil and grime from my clothes. "What has happened? Where is Gertie? Where is Mr. Dooley?" Jordan grabbed my hand and quickly led me to the wooden slug shack where Mr. Dooley stood at the door with a smile on his face and a key in his hand. "After Gertie hit Mr. Dooley over the head, she started to drag me over to throw me back in with the slugs," Jordan told me, "but Mr. Dooley came to, came up behind her, and shoved her inside with her beloved slugs!" Jordan smiled a triumphant smile. "Now she is locked in there and we have the key!" I put my ear up to the door and listened closely. "Let me out of here you rotten, ungracious little ninnies! You will be sorry!" I heard Gertie yell. Jordan, Mr. Dooley and I walked away from the shed. We needed to plan what we were going to do next.

Behind the shed, was a small pebbled path that meandered off into a massive desert area. It was all desert as far as the eye could see. "Well, I have no idea where we are, and don't have any idea where we are going" I admitted to Mr. Dooley and Jordan. Mr. Dooley looked at both Jordan and me, "Our only hope is to find those boys and it looks like this is the only available path that I can see, so, all we can do is journey forward and hope to somehow find them."

Before we left, we looked around a bit and found an old run down house. It was covered with spider webs and we believed it to be Gertie's. We walked inside and opened a few dusted cupboards. We found some stale crackers, a cracked jar full of peanuts and two carrying packs. There was no running water to be found anywhere. Mr. Dooley filled the packs with the supplies and we decided it was time to head up the trail in hopes of finding the two boys.

Chapter 5

Following the trail wasn't too difficult at first. For a couple of hours we talked about the grum, and how Mr. Dooley invented it. Mr. Dooley explained that it was quite by accident that he invented grum. He had been cleaning up the shop and accidentally dangled a dustpan with rubbish from the floor over top of his usual gum recipe. A small amount of it fell in. The recipe suddenly seemed to react. It made a slight hissing sound. He discovered that there was the smallest petal of rhododendron in the dustpan, and it was this that made the grum and its peculiar powers.

After a while the conversation slowed as we all became very thirsty on the dusty trail. Looking around, there seemed to be nothing but desert. There were cacti, lizards and flowers with stripes and zigzags unlike any I had ever seen before, but no water. "I sure am thirsty," Jordan said, "Do you suppose those cactuses have any water like they do in the movies?" Mr. Dooley headed toward a cactus and said,

"It's cacti, and the only way to find out is to break the top off one and look inside." Mr. Dooley carefully reached over and uprooted a cactus. He slowly twisted the top off of it, he did this very gently as to not cut his hands on the quills. He showed us the contents of the cactus. It had liquid in it but instead of water, it was a cool pink liquid. "Do you suppose it is ok?" I asked Mr. Dooley? "To be honest, I don't know, but I would be willing to take the first drink."

Mr. Dooley slowly brought the upper cactus half to his lips and drank some of the strange cactus juice. "It seems to be ok," Mr. Dooley licked his lips, "It even has a slightly sweet taste to it." Jordan grabbed the cactus out of Mr. Dooley's hands, "Hand it over, I am dying of thirst!" Jordan took a huge gulp from the cactus.

Just moments later, Mr. Dooley suddenly fell to the ground. He clutched his stomach, and began laughing uncontrollably. "You have such funny ears, Carol!" He squeaked through fits of giggles and pointed to my head. I thought this was very strange behavior and not at all like Mr. Dooley. A moment later, Jordan looked at me and then, she too, fell to the ground. She began rolling from side to side, laughing and pointing at my head. "Your ears ARE so, so, so, funny!" she screamed while shaking so hard with laughter that tears began streaming from her eyes. Jordan looked at Mr. Dooley, "You have a strange dose, Mr. Nooley!" Mr. Dooley continued laughing so hard that I could barely make out what he was saying. "Jordan just said I, Mr. Nooley, have a strange dose!" I stood and stared at the two of them rolling around like a couple hyenas on the desert earth. I grabbed the cactus and poked my finger into the liquid. It tasted ok but quite obviously, it was not. Whatever was in the cactus had put both Mr. Dooley and Jordan into a laughing frenzy.

I looked at the two of them and put on my most serious face, "Alright you two, I am not going to be able to drink the cactus right now since I need to be able to watch the both of you! Get up, we don't have time to piddle around. I will be right behind you." Jordan looked at me with a strange smirk on her face, "Did you hear her, Mr. Nooley? Carol just said... she was a behind!" Jordan shrieked to Mr. Dooley, and slapped his shoulder like an old war buddy. "Oh dear me," Mr. Dooley said as he wiped his watering eyes with his dirty shirt sleeve. "She said piddle too!" With that the two of them fell onto the ground into a helpless pile of shaking skin and bones. I gave them both disgusted looks, "I guess I shall have to build a fire for the time being since you two are in no shape to walk anywhere. I will roast up some of those peanuts." Jordan grinned at me "Yes, yes, build a fire," she shouted in between laughs. "We will help you because we... have... gas!" With that, she belched very loudly and they both fell down again, shuttering with fits of more hysterics.

We ate some of the cooked peanuts and after a while the two began to settle down and the giggling subsided. "So, do you two kindergartners feel you can collect yourselves and move forward now?" I asked them. Mr. Dooley looked at me with apology in his eyes, "I am not sure what was in that cactus, but it certainly caused us to break into fits of laughter. We shall have to be much more careful about what we eat and drink, after all, we really have no idea where we are." Jordan looked over at me "Gosh, sorry Carol, I had no idea!" I could tell they were both sorry and ready to move on. "It's ok, it's not your fault. Let's get going. Before we go, fill up a baggie with that laughing liquid and tie a knot in it. You never know, maybe we can use it to our advantage." We gathered our supplies, put out the fire, and started up the path.

Chapter 6

We walked further up the hot, sandy trail and soon the heat was unbearable. I stopped, "We have to find a shaded area to rest or we are going to become too exhausted to move any further." I looked at Mr. Dooley and Jordan, and shrugged my shoulders, "Any suggestions?" Jordan covered her eyes, using her hand as a sun

shield, and looked across the desert. "There" she pointed. We looked over to where she was pointing and there appeared to be a dark hole within the granite rock wall. We walked towards it and Mr. Dooley turned to face us, "It looks like a cave. We will go inside and rest for a bit. We can at least find relief from this blazing sun.

We cautiously entered the cave and began looking around. It appeared to be empty and was quite cool and roomy. Jordan took off her pack and looked at the both of us, "We just must find food and water! We simply cannot survive on only peanuts and crackers and nothing to drink! I don't know how much more of this I can take!" Jordan began sobbing so I reached over and gave her a hug. "We'll be alright Jordan, now that we have found this cave, we can search around a bit for some food."

"Food? did I hear someone mention they needed food?" A sweet little old lady dressed in an apron stepped out from behind a large boulder. Jordan gave a startled jump but then walked over to the lady, "You have food? We are starving! We would love to eat if you could only spare us something." The lady threw up her arms and spoke in a kind voice, "Well yes, come in, come in and have a seat, I am just cooking up some dinner. You kids sit down and I will bring you some plates." Mr. Dooley and Jordan looked around for someplace to sit. We walked behind the boulder and saw a clean tidy room that had been lived in. There were no chairs so we decided to clear a spot on the cave floor. "We just can't thank you enough" Mr. Dooley told her, "We have been walking for hours trying to find two young thieves and we haven't had a thing to eat." The little old lady smiled at us, "Oh dear, well it is a good thing you came here because I have just cooked up a delicious roast with red potatoes and baby carrots and it is almost ready!"

The kind woman handed us all napkins and plates and went over to what looked to be a stove of sorts. It was made with large rocks and a small fire crackled inside of it. She grabbed a large copper kettle from on top of one of the rocks and looked inside. "Mmmm..." she inhaled, "Nothing like the scent of a warm home cooked meal." Her eyes lit up as she brought the kettle towards us. "Now don't be shy, there is more than enough to fill yourselves up." She put a large soup ladle into the pot. "Put out your plates, quickly now, before the roast gets cold." She then began ladling out the contents of the kettle onto our plates. The three of us stared as she scooped a large amount of rocks and sticks onto each of our plates. "Now, this is a secret family recipe so I am afraid I cannot give it out." She gently laughed and waited for us to begin our meal. Nobody said anything for a moment. "Excuse me ma am, but this is nothing more than rocks and sticks?" I said to her. I did not want to hurt her feelings but surely she could see that it wasn't roast. "Oh, it was nothing my dear. I am so glad you are enjoying it. Please eat up, there is plenty to go around." Mr. Dooley looked at me and then slowly lifted his spoon to his mouth pretending to enjoy the meal. "Very kind of you Miss, it is really quite... um, delicious." The lady seemed pleased. "I am so happy to feed the occasional traveler. I offered to feed two young men who were passing through earlier but they were very ungrateful and didn't eat a thing!" Jordan, looking disappointed from the lack of food on her plate, asked the old woman, "Two boys you say? What did they look like?" Jordan pretended to take a bite of rock from her plate. "Well let's see," the lady said, "As I recall they both were filthy dirty, they certainly were, it looked like they hadn't bathed for days!" The three of us wiped our mouths and pretended to be full from dinner. The old woman stood up, "Oh my, I have been so rude, let me get you each a nice tall glass of milk to wash down your dinner." She hobbled over to a pitcher and filled up three glasses. The glasses were full of water rather than milk, but we were so thirsty we were quite happy with the mix up. "Thank-you so much for dinner ma am, but we really should be going. Say, you don't happen to know where those boys were headed do you?" Mr. Dooley asked. "As a matter of fact, I do." she answered.

She stood up and motioned for us to follow her towards the back of the cave. She then folded back an old grey curtain and revealed a large tunnel. "My dears, it is either 2 days to the next town by foot, or 15 minutes by tunnel. I even allowed those two ungracious young boys through my tunnel despite their rudeness." the old lady said. I was very apprehensive after the dinner mix up so I decided to ask her a few questions. "You say this leads to a town? Have you been there ma'am?" She looked at me and giggled, "Why of course I have, I am getting too old to travel by foot, my sweets, I always travel by tunnel. Muttie, which is where it leads, is a nice town too, although the mayor could certainly use a good swat and his mouth washed out with soap!" She looked at us warmly "But don't you worry a bit, just sit down and hold on tight. You will go down quite a long slide, but it is rather a very enjoyable ride." The three of us hesitated, "Well, we certainly won't last a 2 day journey without any food or water." Mr. Dooley said. The lady looked surprised, "Oh my, how rude of me, If you'd rather take the trail, I can pack up some leftover roast for you three to take with you if you like?" Jordan began hastily climbing up to the entrance of the tunnel, "Oh, no, we couldn't" she said, "We are so full as it is and you have been much too kind already. We need to move along quickly so we will just go ahead and take the tunnel."

I helped Jordan to the small tunnel's entrance, "Be careful Jordan, and remember, don't even take a step until Mr. Dooley and I arrive safely at the bottom with you." Jordan squirmed around a bit to get comfortable, "Don't worry about me, of course I will wait for you. Thank you so much for the meal Ma'am." Jordan let go of the side of the giant hole, and with a small push, disappeared into the dark. "Weeeeeeeeeee!" We could hear her voice gradually disappear as she went deeper into the tunnel. "Ok, Mr. Dooley, you go ahead and go next." I helped him up to the top of the entrance, "Well here goes," Mr. Dooley said, "Thank you for everything Ma'am." With that, Mr. Dooley also disappeared into the tunnel's depths. "Well, I guess that leaves me," I said looking nervously at the kind old lady as I climbed to the top of the entrance. "Enjoy the ride, my sweets, and do be leery of hugglers!" She gave me a gentle push and I dropped into the dark black of the tunnel.

Chapter 7

At first I did not like the feel of moving so quickly in the pitch black of the tunnel. I sped rapidly along, feeling the smooth walls of the cave. It wasn't very steep and I was moving along steadily, but then the ride took a large dive and I felt like I was flying. My hair was whipping around slapping at the back of my neck. I could feel the centrifugal force squeeze me to the sides of the tunnel as the ride wrapped me around sharp turns and bends. After about five minutes, I began to relax. I remembered the old lady saying it was an enjoyable ride and once I calmed down, I noticed it rather felt like a ride I had been on at Knott's Berry Farm. As I whipped around one corner, I could hear the roar of an underground waterfall next to me. I yearned to be able to see it but it was too dark. I could feel small splashes every so often as I made my way deeper and deeper into the tunnel. There were several more turns and one very large dip where I was lifted high off the slide. I flew mid-air for several feet until I landed back on the glassy surface. The pitch black, along with the twists and turns, were starting to make me feel sick to my stomach. Suddenly, I noticed a small gleam of light up ahead. The light was very slight and fuzzy at first but as the slide took me closer it began to take the shape of a circle. Suddenly the exit of the tunnel was very bright and I landed with a loud thud onto a soft grassy patch.

I turned to find both Mr. Dooley and Jordan right next to me. Jordan had a huge smile on her face. "That was absolutely the best time I have ever had!" she spoke excitedly as she stood and brushed herself off. Mr. Dooley, on the other hand, looked like a very disheveled version of himself. His thinning hair was sticking up all over the place and his business slacks were pulled up to his calves revealing some unmatching green striped tube socks. "Well, I am quite relieved that is

over," he said as he wobbled back and forth trying to stand up.

After we all gained our composure and stood up, we looked around. There were old wooden buildings surrounding us, and what looked to be an old fashioned school house up ahead. A trail, like the one we had been on earlier, twisted around and eventually led past the school. We decided to head towards the school to see if we could find any people.

As we approached the school, we noticed two people on the playground equipment. The strange thing was that there, on the teeter totter, were two grown-ups rather than children. One was a man and the other a woman. "Excuse me, but could you fine folks tell us where we could get some food and water?" Mr. Dooley asked. The couple stopped teetering and stared over at us. The man began to speak with a childish sneer on his face, "What's it to you?" I looked at the man and tried again, "Um, we are sorry, but we aren't from around here and we are looking for someplace we might find food and water?" Now the woman spoke in a sing songy manner, "I know you are, but what am I?" She asked in a teasing voice. I wasn't sure if I understood her correctly, "Um, I didn't call you a name maam." Suddenly they both began furiously teetering back and forth, shouting "Dumb bells, dumb bells, you three are big fat dumb bells!"

We stood there watching them for a few minutes, when a small girl in a red dress came from around the corner of the school house. "Mom, Dad, it is time to come home now and eat dinner." The man burst into tears, "I don't wanna go now, I wanna stay here longer, you can't make me go!" The lady began laughing and pointing to the man, "Crybaby, crybaby, you are a big stupid crybaby!" The girl walked over and put her hand on the teeter totter to stop it. "Mom, Dad, you can come play here tomorrow, we need to go home now or you will both end up in your rooms!" The dad slowly climbed off and gave the little girl his hand, "Ok, but she called me a name!" he said as he pointed to the mother, "I don't like her!" The mom shouted back, "I don't like him either!" With that, the mother hurled a sticky lollypop at the man's head and it stuck in his hair. The girl grabbed the mom's hand, "Now listen you two, you are married and you are going to like each other whether you like it or not! Now march." As the three walked off, the parents started giggling and singing a song, "You and me, sitting in a tree, k-i-s-s-i-n-g, first came love, than came marriage, then came the baby in the baby carriage!" they pointed to the little girl and squealed with laughter. "Very funny you two." we heard the girl say as they shuffled towards town.

"Well that was certainly odd." Mr. Dooley commented. "Yes, well nothing surprises me anymore," Jordan said with a hint of panic, "None of it makes any sense! First we meet a lady who is digging a hole to China, then we meet a nice lady, but she thinks rocks and sticks make a good meal, and now we are in a town where the parents act like kids and the kids act like grown ups! I just don't understand any of it!" Mr. Dooley scratched his head. "I have been giving it a lot of thought, and I have a theory as to what may be going on here." Jordan and I waited for him to finish, "I think that the special mixture of gum ingredients, mixed with our dna, has spiraled us into a different sort of dimension. A dimension where our unconscious fears and strange dreams have come to life." I thought about it for a moment, "Mr. Dooley, if this is true, how do we know the gum will work to return us safely home?" Mr. Dooley looked down at the ground, "I am sorry to say, I don't know if that will be the end result, but can only theorize. You see, if the gum had the power to place us in a different dimension, well then, theoretically, when we chew it again it will surely place us somewhere else. I can only hope that somewhere is back home." Jordan kicked at a rock by her shoe, "We need to find those boys who stole the gum, that's for sure. I think we should head into town and see if they are there." We decided that was our best bet, and began to follow the trail that led to town.

Chapter 8

Walking through town, we noticed several houses with colorful swing sets, and sure enough they were filled with adults bickering and laughing while the children chastised them. The trail led us past a few shops but unfortunately, they were all dark with rustic signs hanging up that said they were closed.

As we rounded one corner we noticed a young man, probably around 16 years old, wearing a trench coat and a black cap pulled over his squinty eyes. "Excuse me sir, could you help us?" I asked him, "We are looking for two young boys who might have come through town this way." The teenaged boy peeked out from under his hat, and whispered, " You need some help huh, come a bit closer and I will see what I can do." We walked closer to the boy and noticed there was a cardboard box next to him. He started to reach for it. "I like your shoes." The boy said to Mr. Dooley. "Let's say I help you find these two boys for the trade of your shoes." Mr. Dooley considered the offer and answered back, " I suppose finding the boys is most important. It is a deal, if you help us, I will give you these shoes."

Jordan looked at the boy with uncertainty and asked him, "Have you seen these boys we speak of?" The young man whispered back, "Not exactly, but in this box, I have just the weapons to help you track them down quickly." The boy started to pull something out of the box. "Now what you are about to see is top secret, you mustn't tell a soul." he was about to reveal the object, when his eyes became narrow and he continued speaking in a low husky voice. "It is a secret spy weapon. It is very small and round and easy to hide. It has four small holes in it so you can look for very tiny, almost microscopic clues as to where those boys are." He took the object out of the box. I looked down at it and with a tired voice said, "Um sir, that is a button, it is simply a button and we do not need it. If we needed a button, we could take one from our clothing." The boy grumbled and returned the button to the box. "Fine then," he said as he retrieved the next item.

"This next tool is cutting edge technology. If these two boys happen to shrink, you can use this weapon to attach one end to the criminals and one end to a wall! You can never miss with this beauty!" This time we looked down and the boy was holding a small staple. "Sir, that is a staple and we are not worried about the boys shrinking! This is getting silly, really, you are merely showing us everyday objects and creating new, outlandish ways to use them. If you aren't going to help us, we will be moving along!" I looked at Mr. Dooley and Jordan, "Let's go." I said.

The boy held out his arm and stopped us, "Wait, this, you have to see." He looked around as if to make sure no one could hear him. "What I am about to pull out of this box is completely top secret. It is the lightest weight infra-red blanket ever created. It was designed especially for desert sleep. It will cover you, yet allow the heat to escape as you search for these boys." He reached in and pulled out a small folded piece of something. "All right", Mr. Dooley yelled, "This is ridiculous. What you are holding is nothing but a piece of toilet paper! You have tried to sell us a button, a staple and now a piece of toilet paper! You most certainly are not getting my shoes!" Mr. Dooley was clearly agitated at this point, and did not want to waste any more time. The boy shook his head, picked up his box and started to walk off. "Your loss," he said and he walked down the path.

"What a swindler!" Jordan said as we walked a distance behind the boy. "Not a swindler, a haggler" I said to the both of them, "The old lady warned me about them just before I went down the tunnel." We walked a bit further and saw two small children getting mail from a mailbox. "Excuse me, we are not from around here but we are starving and thirsty and don't know where to go." I looked at them with pleading eyes. The children, one boy and one girl, looked us over and then waved us to come inside of their house.

The house looked ordinary enough but had a delicious smell coming from the kitchen

area. We walked to a cozy kitchen that had yellow butter cup wallpaper. "Thank-you so much for inviting us in, you can't imagine what a rough day it's been." Jordan explained to them both. The boy cleared his throat, " We have finished dinner and put our parents to bed, you are more than welcome to eat some leftovers." We looked over towards the counter and our mouths began to water. There was meatloaf, salad and lightly toasted bread. There were no sticks and stones this time, and we were starving.

As we ate the young boy asked us questions, "So what brings you here to the town of Muttlet?" I spoke first, "It is quite a long story but we are looking for two young boys who stole something from us. Have you noticed any newcomers lately?" The boy thought for a moment, "Actually there were two boys who wandered through here yesterday. I could tell they weren't from around here because they argued and carried on like a couple of adults." Jordan asked with her mouth full, "I don't suppose you know where they were headed?" The boy paused, "They were trying to sell something they claimed had special powers. One of our neighbors explained to them that only hagglers sell things without clearing it with the mayor first." The young girl looked up, "It is against the law to sell anything without clearance from the mayor first, although hagglers do it all the time."

After we finished the most incredible meal I had ever eaten, we stood up to thank the children and to be on our way. "Thank you so much" I said, "Could you do us one more favor and direct us to the Mayor's office? We are hoping to find out something about the two thieves." The girl and boy gave us directions, wished us luck, and we started heading in that direction.

After about 4 blocks, we saw what the two young children had described as the mayor's office. We approached a large wooden door and loudly knocked. Nobody answered at first so we knocked again. This time someone shouted, "Come in, dagnabit!" We slowly walked into a large living room area. There were pizza boxes all over the floor and soda cans piled everywhere. In the middle of the room sat a heavy man playing video games wearing a name tag that said, Mayor Tud. We approached the man and Mr. Dooley whispered, "Remember he is an adult, and we know how they act in this town."

Mr. Dooley cleared his throat, "Hello, Mayor Tud? Would you mind if we asked you a few questions?" "Hmmpfh" the mayor murmured back. Jordan stepped forward, "Sir, could we ask you a few questions please?" Suddenly an explosion sounded from the video game, "Stupid cod picken fruity tootin game!" The mayor yelled, and then threw the controller across the room. He stared into space for a second, then stood up, smiled, and put out his hand, "Pleased to meet you. Now, what can I do for you?" he asked politely.

Mr. Dooley spoke, "Sir we are searching for two boys who stole something very important from us and were wondering if you could help us?" The mayor put his finger on his chin. "Thieves huh?" he said in a low voice, "Now that is very serious business." He leaned a bit closer, "I'll tell you what," he stood quietly and motioned with the crook of his finger for us to lean in closely. As we did, he came right up to our faces. He had a very serious face and looked at us for a second. Suddenly he reached out, trying to tag us, and yelled "Cooties! You're it!" He then went jetting around the room like a chicken with his head cut off.

Moments later he hid behind a brown lumpy chair. His heavy body was bulging out from behind it. "Excuse me sir," I said, "We see you hiding behind the chair." The mayor was still laughing as he came out from behind the chair. "Sorry about that, just having a bit of fun. Now seriously, I think I can help you." The mayor looked thoughtfully as he waved his hand towards something in the room. "I believe you can find the boys you are looking for, under there." The three of us looked around the room. We were unclear as to where he was pointing. Mr. Dooley asked, "Underwear?"

The mayor turned bright red and looked like a laughing turnip that would soon explode, "I made you say underwear!" he shrieked. The three of us watched him as he started running around the room again shouting "Cooties, Cooties, Cooties!". We realized we were not going to get anywhere with Mayor Tud so we started to walk out of the office when a small girl approached us.

Chapter 9

"May I help you with something?" The small girl had black shoulder length hair and one yellow barrette that swept her bangs up to the side of her head. She looked up at us with large brown eyes. "I'm not sure." I said to her, "Who are you?" The girl replied, "My name is Elizabeth. The mayor is my father." Mr. Dooley looked sadly down at the girl, "I am sorry my dear, but your father did not offer us any help whatsoever. He simply acted very childish and we just don't have time to try and reason with him." The little girl replied in a dignified tone, "Yes, well, I take care of the important matters around here. My dad is the mayor but I am his assistant and make most of the decisions." Jordan spoke to the girl, "Maybe you can help us. We are looking for two boys who aren't from these parts. They have taken something from us and we need to get it back." The young child informed us that she had, indeed, seen two boys earlier yesterday. They had asked her if she would be interested in purchasing a strange gum with magical powers for the town. "I told the boys we would not be interested in such a thing and that they should be on their way." she told us. I asked her, "Do you have any idea where they might be?" She thought for a moment, "I saw them earlier when I walked Father to the park near the outskirts of town." Mr. Dooley looked up "Could you point us in that direction please?" he asked. The small girl walked us outside and pointed us to the same path we had traveled on. "If you follow this, it will lead you to the park and then out of town." We thanked her and just as we were leaving, her father, the mayor, yelled out to us from behind a curtain, "Bye bye stinky diaper heads!" He slapped his leg heartily and seemed very pleased with his funny joke.

We started back up the trail. By this time we had food in our stomachs and were ready to continue our search. We walked for about a half an hour and then noticed a large park with a golden colored fence surrounding it just as the girl had described. We looked into the gate and sure enough, Gertie's two boys sat at the bottom of an old rusted slide looking at something small in one of the boy's hands. "What shall we do now?" I asked in a hushed voice. Mr. Dooley wiped his hands on his slacks, "We must very quietly sneak up and circle around the two so they cannot escape."

Very carefully, we crouched down and walked slowly over towards the boys. We used a merry-go-round, painted with circus animals, as a shield to hide behind. All at once, we jumped out and grabbed hands around the two boys so they couldn't get past us. "Ha", Jordan screamed, "We've caught you! Now hand over the Grum!" One of the boys suddenly put a small square of carpet on top of his head. "You must be lookin fer someone else", he said as he changed his voice, "The person yer lookin for didn't have hair like this, did he?" We stared at the strange boy who was trying to trick us into thinking the carpet square was hair. Quickly the boy took the carpet square off his head and handed it to the other boy who placed it over his eye and spoke in a pirate's voice. "Ya, who you is lookin for probably wasn't a pirate like I am!" The two boys were acting very strange. "Look, we know you are Gertie's boys, now where is our Grum?" I asked them.

The boy took the carpet square from his eye. "We don't have yer stupid gum! We traded it for this top-secret disguise that was SPOSE to guarantee we could fool anyone!" The boy held up the carpet square. Mr. Dooley shook his head and looked at the two of them, "Boys, you two have been haggled. That is merely a small square of carpet and not a top secret disguise." The two boys looked very disappointed.

"Dagnabit, I told you not to listen to them two hagglers Blake!" one boy yelled to

the other. "Shut up you stupid dummy, this disguise is way better than that gum any day!" Jordan started to get angry, "You mean to tell me you have swapped our Grum for a square of carpet? You two are coming with us to find the hagglers you traded with!" The boy named Blake shifted on the slide, "I aint goin anywhere except home to Gertie!" The other boy picked up a stick and began doodling in the dirt. "Well," Jordan said, "One of you is coming with us so what about you?" She pointed over to the other boy. "What is your name?" she asked. The boy wiped dirty sweat from his eyes, "Larry, and I'll go with you cuz I told Blake not to trade for that stupid carpet and he didn't listen!" He paused for a moment, "What you gonna give me if I take you?" Jordan gave the boy a mean glare, "Well, I will start by NOT giving you a beating, and if you help us, well, we will think of some sort of reward for you later."

Larry quickly explained that he thought the two hagglers might be headed to a market that was located miles up the trail. We helped him up and began heading back up the path that would lead us out of town. As we were walking away Blake yelled out, "Yer such a dope head Larry, yer stupid fer goin with them!" Larry shrugged his shoulders and waved good bye to his companion.

It seems we had walked for hours on the trail and were getting nowhere. We passed sagebrush and a few broken wooden wheels, but nothing else appeared before us. I spoke up, "There seems to be nothing out here but more desert. What if we are heading nowhere?" Larry kicked some sand with his tennis shoe and said with a gleam in his eye, "Don't you folks worry. I know these parts. I know what I am talkin bout, trust me, my dad was a plumber!" We stopped and stared at Larry, "Um...Larry, plumbing actually has nothing to do with knowing your way around." I informed him gently. Jordan just shook her head and rolled her eyes. We continued walking. "If you know these parts so well, where exactly is it we are going?" Jordan asked Larry. Larry looked ahead at the trail and answered, "There use to be a bridge up the trail a ways that leads into a market. The hagglers always meet there tryin to trade their stuff." Jordan turned to him and sneered, "Well they had better be there or I'm gonna have to clobber you!" Larry turned quickly to face her and said "Oh yeah, well listen here little lady, if you think you is gonna clobber me...than...I will do..... something, I don't know what yet, but it'll be something all right!" We all stared at Larry, "Um, yah" I said, "Great comeback Larry." I murmured this under my breath. Mr. Dooley looked over and said softly, "Yes, your comebacks really could use a bit of work, son, perhaps just a bit of work."

We started to get hungrier the further we walked, and had very few peanuts or crackers left. I stopped walking and said to the three of them, "We have hardly any food left. We need to find something to eat around here." Larry gave us a sly look and said, "I have an idear." Jordan looked impatiently at him, "What exactly is your plan, genius?" Larry pointed over to a tattered, grey, beehive on a nearby post and whispered, "I got a pair of gloves and matches in my pocket. I will light the tips of the fingers on the gloves and reach in and grab the honey from that hive!" Jordan shook here head. Mr. Dooley looked at Larry and said, "Son, that is a foolish idea. You will surely burn yourself." Larry answered back to Mr. Dooley in a confident voice and said, "It's like my granddad use to say, 'Sticks n stones might break my bones but flames...they will never hurt me!" and with that, he took off in the direction of the hive. "Larry"! I yelled after him, "That is not how the rhyme goes...it's NAMES that will never hurt you!" but before we could stop him, Larry had lit the tips of his gloves and raced over to put his hands inside of the hive. All we could do was stand there and watch him.

It wasn't but a few seconds later when we heard Larry let out a great big painful "Yooooooooooooowwwwwwwwwwwlllll!" His eyes were huge and wild. He started running around the desert, sucking his burnt fingers on one hand and waving the flamed glove in the air from his other. All the while, a swarm of angered bees followed behind him.

"Well," I said calmly staring at Larry as he ran far out to the desert screaming, "Looks like we'll be here a while, might as well take a load off and rest." "Yes", Mr. Dooley said as he watched the far off figure of Larry running into the sunlit horizon, "I do believe the boy will be busy for a while. Kindly pass me some peanuts if you would please."

While Larry continued running in circles for quite some time, we decided to hunker down and catch some sleep for the evening. I found a soft spot in the sand and wiggled my body to get comfortable. We were certainly hungry but also very tired. Shortly before we all fell asleep, Larry returned to camp with bulging blisters on his fingers and red bee stings on his face. I looked up at him and whispered, "Larry, why don't you lay down and get some rest. You have had a pretty rough day." He found a place to lay down, " Ohhhh,I am fine, just fine, I think those bees was mighty scared of me, that's who I'd be worried about if I was you." He stretched out his swollen arms and yawned. "A little shut-eye would be nice though." "Yeah," I said to him as i looked up in the clouded sky, "Just rest and enjoy the desert sky. Too bad there are hardly any stars out tonight though." Larry bedded down and just as he was drifting off to sleep whispered, "It's like my granddaddy use to say, Better safe than starry." I laid there for a second rolling my eyes. "Ummmmm, Larry, it's sorry, better safe than sorry." Larry let out a large snore. "Goodnight Larry, sleep tight." I spoke softly and breathed out a long sigh.

Chapter 10

The next day, I awoke to a blood curdling scream. "Laaarrrrrry! Get your dirty, stinking, foot OUT OF MY FACE immediately!" Jordan shrieked as she lay within inches of Larry's scabby, crusted, foot. "Why don't you just move yer dirty stinkin face away from my foot!" Larry yelled back. I watched the two of them bicker back and forth. About that same time, I noticed Mr. Dooley walking around the campsite. In his hands, he held a good size slab of honey comb. "Well, after all that pain and suffering, Larry, I was able to retrieve a bit of honey from the hive you emptied out. Good job my boy!" Mr. Dooley commended him. Larry looked up and smiled broadly, "I told you guys to trust me, my uncle was a refrigerator repair man!" Jordan stared at Larry for a moment and then, when she couldn't stand it any longer, she abruptly yelled, "That's it, Larry, Don't you know how dumb that sounds? Your uncle fixing refrigerators has absolutely nothing to do with you getting into beehives. Nor, does your father being a plumber have anything to do with you helping us find our way! It's random, you hear me, random, and very annoying too!" Mr. Dooley looked over at Jordan and patted her lightly on top of her head, "Never mind, dear, just never mind." Larry glared over at her while he cleaned sand from his toes and said, "Oh yeah, well let me tell you something Jordan, you're random too, whatever that means!" I looked at Larry, " Um,Larry, I'm sorry but you really need to work on your comebacks." Mr. Dooley agreed, "They are perhaps a bit weak, my boy, maybe just a tad- bit- weak."

We tidied up our campsite and ate a breakfast of peanuts and honey and decided to get started on the trail while it was still cool and the sun was not as hot. "Larry," Mr. Dooley said, "How far do you suppose this bridge is from here?" Larry slung his pack on his back and answered, "I remember it's a few hours a way but I also remember somethin else." He continued walking without saying a word. Jordan gave him a small smack upside the head and said, "Well, spit it out Larry, what else is it that you remember?" Larry gave her the evil eye and continued talking. "There is this crazy pizza place half way between here and the bridge." Mr. Dooley scratched his head, " A pizza place you say, right out in the middle of the desert? Larry shrugged his shoulders, "That's right, my uncle took me there when I was a youngun and it is just sittin there out in the middle of nowhere. It has the best pizza I ever eaten though." I couldn't believe what I was hearing. "Well, I don't care if it's in the middle of Timbuktu, I am starving and pizza sounds incredible!" I said. Mr. Dooley clapped his hands together, "Well then, what are we waiting for?"

We walked for quite a ways feeling lighter than usual with visions of pizzas dancing in our heads. "So Larry, can you remember what the hagglers look like?" Mr. Dooley asked him as we walked. Larry thought for a moment, "Well, one of em had brown hair and if I remember correctly, his teeth was kinda yellor." I looked over at Larry, "Ok, Larry, how about the other one. What did he look like?" Larry looked like he was struggling to remember. "I just know the one fella had yellor teeth." Jordan stopped and kicked some sand in the air. "We know the one guy has yellow teeth, Larry, but what about the other one!?" Larry shook his head, "I wasn't lookin at the other one cuz the one guy's teeth was so yellor, I couldn't quit staren at em!" Just as Jordan was about to lose all patience, Mr. Dooley lit up with a great big smile. We stopped. "What is it, Mr. Dooley?" I asked. "Look, there, up ahead." I shaded my eyes and looked up the trail. A few hundred feet up the trail stood a shiny building with a flashing sign that said "Welcome to Tony's Pizzeria!"

"Hurry," I shouted to the others as I raced towards the building. We all ran as fast as we could laughing as we tripped over one another to reach the place. We wheezed and panted when we arrived at the outside of the door. "I can't believe we are actually standing outside of a pizza joint!" Jordan said excitedly. We stood gawking at a most magnificent place. The outside of the building had bright red and white stripes painted on the walls and a picture of Little Italy hung above the entrance. Mr. Dooley suddenly looked worried, "What is it?" I asked him. He looked at Larry, "Larry, we have no money to purchase the pizza." Larry reached inside his pockets and pulled out a few coins. "Don't worry Mr. Dooley, let me do the talkin, my sister was an opera singer." Jordan sighed heavily and rolled her eyes. Mr. Dooley just smiled and ruffled Larry's hair as he swung open the shining glass door.

Once inside we could smell warm dough and pepperoni in the air. "There's something I didn't tell you guys about this place," Larry said with a smirk on his face. "What is it, Larry?" Jordan asked impatiently. "Oh, you'll see," he chuckled. We walked up to the counter and a large Italian man with a bushy black mustache took our order. "Welcoma to Tony's Pizzaria! Whata can I geta for youse?" He asked in an Italian accent. We were starving. "We don't have much, sir, so how about a medium pepperoni pizza and a large pitcher of water." Mr. Dooley said. "Excellento, Excellento," the man said waving us over to a booth.

We sat down in a shining red vinyl booth. Air conditioning caused the napkins to flutter and cooled the sweat from our brows. "This place is incredible, Larry!" I said while looking around at the red and white striped walls. Jordan looked suspiciously over at Larry, "What were you going to tell us?" she asked him with even more impatience in her voice. Larry smiled again, "Oh you'll see soon enough."

The pizza arrived moments later and we all dove in to the piping hot dish. I hungrily ate a bite, while cheese dripped off the sides. We were so hungry, that no one spoke for several minutes. Then Jordan, wiping red sauce off her chin, said "Thisa pizza tasta greata!" she looked shocked and quickly covered her mouth in horror. We stared at her for a moment and she spoke again, "Whya ama I a talkinga like thisa?" She cried. Larry started laughing, "Thatsa whata I wasa trying to tella you guysa." he said. I spoke up. "Whata doa you meana?" I too covered my mouth and started laughing. "Wea are a talking ina Italiano accents a nowa!" I said cracking up. Mr. Dooley looked at us like we were crazy but opened his mouth to speak. "Whata doa you meana we talka witha accents?" He too slapped his mouth with his hands and burst out laughing. Larry looked at us and giggled with his mouth full, "Thatsa whata I was gonna tella yousa, the pizza makesa usa talka like a thisa!" Soon we were all laughing and enjoying the conversation except Jordan. She had a grouchy look on her face and asked, "Whena doesa thisa accent weara offa?" she angrily wiped cheese from her chin. "I don'ta thinka itsa tooa funnya!" She

gave us all dirty looks, "Make a ita stopa RIGHTA NOWA!" she screamed. We silently stared at her and then burst out laughing again. "Justa relaxa and enjoya yera pizza." Mr. Dooley chuckled gently and gave her a wink.

Soon we finished all the pizza and our accents began wearing off. We thanked Tony and went outside. "That was ridiculous!" Jordan said, "I have never felt so foolish in my life talking in that silly accent." Larry started laughing again, "Yah, you was lookin pretty foolish and silly too!" He slapped his knee and began leading the way back up the trail.

chapter 11

We walked for what seemed a very long time. The trail looked endless and besides a small amount of desert flora, the view was nothing more than continuous sandy hills that led into an empty horizon. "It aint much longer til we git to that bridge." Larry told us while he marched forward with a steady pace. "Win we get to the bridge, there is a grumpy ole hermit who doesn't much like folks passin over, but I'll handle him, don't ya'll worry none." Jordan mumbled sarcastically, "We know, we know, you can handle him because your mom was an opera singer." She rolled her eyes. Larry turned and looked at her with his hands on his hips, "No smarty pants, it was my SISTER who was an opera singer, jeesh, get it straight." and he continued to lead the way.

After hiking over a sandy hill, we noticed the plants were becoming more abundant which meant a river was nearby. Mr. Dooley said excitedly, "We must be quite close." The trail twisted up through a few trees and soon we heard the rushing sound of a nearby river. The river sparkled and raced through the dried cracking desert. Jordan was becoming increasingly excited the closer we got, "We can jump in and clean ourselves up when we go over the bridge." she said as she looked down at her filthy dress. Mr. Dooley also seemed excited but said in a calm voice, "All in good time children, all in good time."

Just as we neared the bridge, we saw the hermit down below. He was pacing back and forth in front of where the bridge should be, with his hands entwined behind his back. He wore a blue shirt and his white hair was topped off with a red stocking hat. We stopped underneath a giant oak tree to get a better look. While we peeked through the branches, Larry said, "Now you three listen. I'm gonna sneak up on this guy and tackle him down so we can all git across the bridge." I looked at him and asked, "Are you sure that is the best plan?" Larry seemed very certain of himself and told us to wait until he had the man on the ground before approaching the bridge.

Larry brushed himself off and started running down the trail with tremendous speed. His lanky legs looked like a windmill as he ran towards the man. He sprang to the air avoiding boulders that were poking out sporadically from the trails surface. His face was bright red, his cheeks were inflated, and his eyes grew narrow with determination. Just before he reached the hermit he leapt high in the air like an antelope, trying to hurdle over one last remaining rock. Suddenly, the tip of his worn tennis shoe caught a jagged lip in the stone, and he plummeted forward, face first, right in front of the hermit. Larry slowly looked up with a scraped nose and a mouth full of dirt and warned in a low raspy voice, "Don't you make a move old hermit man."

We stood there in shock wondering what would happen next when suddenly the hermit leaned over offering his plump hand and said, "Goodness gracious lad, what is all the hurry?" The hermit very gently helped Larry up. Larry looked up and yelled to us, "I got him now guys, come on down. Everything is under control!"

We quickly stumbled down the trail and stood before a very kind hermit man. Larry whispered to us, " I'll be ready if this ferocious hermit tries anything." We were

all very embarrassed and offered our hands to introduce ourselves. Mr. Dooley spoke first, " We are sorry for the trouble kind sir, but we need to cross this bridge in order to find two hagglers who have something that belongs to us." The hermit shook hands with us and said, "While I would certainly like to help you, I am afraid we have had a problem that has wiped out most of the bridge and I am not sure how to fix it." he pointed over to a pile of various shaped wooden pieces that were scattered on the ground. Mr. Dooley stood silently thinking and then spoke again, "Sir, if we were to help you fix this bridge, would you be so kind to allow us across?" The hermit gave us a gentle smile "By all means, please, I could use the help and would be happy to let you cross." We walked over to the pile of wooden bridge scraps and Jordan whispered to Larry, "Really ferocious hermit, Larry, just terrifying!" Larry, looking rather sheepish, didn't say a word as he followed us over to the scrap pile.

The wooden pieces were very strange. They were all sorts of shapes including octagons, triangles and squares. "These are very odd wooden pieces of wood," Mr. Dooley said as he picked up a triangular shape from the ground and turned it over in his hands, "It is almost like they are wooden puzzle pieces. I looked at the shapes and suddenly they seemed very familiar to me. "Wait a minute," I said, " I recognize these shapes from a math lesson we had in school last year!" Mr. Dooley fumbled with an octagon shape and said, " We're listening Carol, what do you mean?" I pieced the octagon together with the triangle and then added a square to the shape I had created. I continued to work and soon, the pieces started to fit together, "They are tessellating!" I said with excitement, "If you have any glue or cement, we can fit these pieces together in no time," I said remembering what my teacher had said about tessellations." And since they tessellate, the bridge will have no gaping spaces!" Larry looked as confused as ever, "What's tessellate?" I laughed, "No Larry, it's tessellate, and it means the pieces will create a pattern that will continue to the rest of the bridge with no spaces left over. That way, people can cross without falling in!" Mr. Dooley and the hermit congratulated me for such brilliant thinking. The hermit left to gather a bucket of oak tree sap, which he assured was better than any glue or cement, and when he returned, we all worked together piecing the bridge back together.

Chapter 12

While we all worked side by side, the hermit told us a little about himself. "My name is Tock, I have been the gate keeper of this bridge for nearly 30 years now, and this is the first time it has ever needed mending. I looked over and asked "What happened Tock, why did the bridge suddenly crumble?" Tock scratched his chin and looked far away, "All was fine and this bridge was as solid as rock until one day, a different species was discovered inhabiting the river below." Mr. Dooley stared at him quizzedly, "What would that have to do with the collapse of the bridge, if I may ask, Tock?" "Well, that really is the crazy part about it, you see, at fist we noticed these strange creatures and thought they were harmless. They are quite small actually, about the size of a goldfish. They have tiny beady eyes, long lashes, and large lips if I do say so. The strangest thing is that whenever one of us walked over the bridge, these strange creatures threw themselves upon it, staring lovingly into the eyes of whoever was crossing it, and in little tiny voices screamed their undying messages of love to whoever was on the bridge." Carol stared at Tock. "Let me get this straight, you are telling us there are crazy little underwater creatures who fall in love with whoever crosses this bridge?" "That is correct." answered Tock. Mr. Dooley still looked confused and asked, "Forgive me for inquiring further, Tock, but what exactly does that have to do with the collapse of the bridge?" Tock struggled with the wooden pieces and answered, "When each body crosses this bridge, these love sick creatures pile on top making it heavier and heavier. You see, they don't leave. They wait and wait until the return of the object of their desires. Well, when many have crossed over, the weight became too much and so the bridge finally collapsed." Carol asked "So

exactly how many did it take to cross over before the bridge did collapse?" Tock sat quietly and then looked at us with disappointment in his eyes. "I am afraid it was only 3. 3 passers traveled across this bridge over the course of 2 months and that was enough, when the 3rd body crossed over, the bridge was just too heavy with colonies of these love sick creatures, and it fell apart, the boy who was crossing barely made it out of the river alive." Larry looked upset, he tossed the wooden pieces down on the ground with a thud and looked at us all with a shrug of his shoulders. "Well this just isn't gonna work then! There is four of us, and I aint going in that river with these crazy, smoochey lipped, rascals. Even if they is just the size of a goldfish! No, sir, I guess it is time for me to head back to my family. I will see you all later." With that, Larry began to brush himself off and attempted to start walking back the way we came. "Just you hold on right there!" Jordan yelled loudly enough to stop every flea in its tracks. "You are not going anywhere Larry, I don't care if your dad is the pope of Rome, you made a deal with us and you will be leading the way until we get our grum back!" She grabbed ahold of his collar, squinted her eyes, and spoke calmly with just a touch of craziness in her voice, "Do you understand me Larry?" He just stared at her in terror. She calmly got a little closer and whispered in his ear, "I said, do we understand each other Larry?" Larry gulped, and whispered back, "I recon we do." Jordan released Larry's collar, smoothed it out with her hands and ruffled Larry's hair, "I thought so Larry", she said with a content smile, "Now then, pick up these wooden pieces, Sport, and let's finish putting together this bridge.

While we slowly continued to put the bridge together using the pine sap, we all discussed possible ways to cross the bridge without getting hurt. "Well we are merely finished putting together all these pieces, and while they are tessalating very nicely, I must admit, I've no idea what to do about our current unfortunate situation of the love sick water creatures." I thought for a moment, "Is there any way we can cross over without the bridge?" I asked. "The water is terribly swift, and I just can't imagine you making it to the other side," Tock said "I am afraid it is just not a safe idea, and even if one of you made it across, there are 4 of you to worry about. I am afraid I can't bare to think of it." Carol spoke up, "Don't worry Tock, we will come up with an idea, there must be some way to cross over." We all sat there putting the final tessalating pieces of the bridge together, it looked very beautiful, and now it would just be a matter of sliding the bridge across to the other bank. It was an exciting moment but we were all silent, still trying to figure out a possible way to cross the rough waters. Suddenly, Larry jumped to his feet, "I got it! We just need to scare the little critters! We can make crazy faces at them!" Jordan sat staring at Larry while she put the final wooden shape on the bridge. "That is absolutely the most ridiculous idea I think I have ever heard, Larry, and you have had some very ridiculous ones." "Hold on a minute, Jordan, I believe Larry may be on to something." said Mr. Dooley, "Tock when the others have crossed over, what did they do when the love sick creatures began screaming messages of love to them?" "Well," Tock thought for a moment, "I suppose they said nothing and just ran to the other side." "I see" said Mr. Dooley, "Suppose we answer them." I looked over at Mr. Dooley, "What do you mean? How exactly would that help?" Mr. Dooley motioned for us to help him slide the bridge over top of the bank as he revealed his idea, " Suppose, as we are crossing, and the little critters are yelling up at us, we tell them we don't love them back!" We stopped working for a moment and considered this idea. After a while Tock spoke up, "Well, I cannot guarantee it will work, but there is no harm in trying." We slid the final part of the bridge to the opposite bank and sat back relaxing for a moment. "I will give it a try" Larry said, "You all know I am the bravest, smartest, fella in these parts, I will be the one to cross over first." "Fine then," I said "You shall be the first to try Larry." Tock stood up wiping his small pudgy hands on his pants, "Not until you have all enjoyed a nice meal of mushroom stew and had a good night's rest in my home." We were all extremely hungry and tired, I asked Tock, "Tock, where is it you live?" Tock pointed back into the woods, "Only about a half mile into the wilderness there, I live in the bottom of a

beautiful large oak tree. I have 2 extra rooms with spare beds, the girls may share one and there will be one for you Mr. Dooley, and Larry, I have a cot for you my boy." We all stood up, "Why that sounds just wonderful." Mr. Dooley said, and with that we all walked over to Tock's home in the tree.

Chapter 13

After a delicious dinner and a good night's rest, we awoke the next morning to the scent of huckleberry pancakes and sausage cooking over a roasting fire. I looked around Tock's home. It was very tidy with pictures of his family strung on the wall. The wooded walls were sturdy even though pieces of moss crept through the cracks. In front of the fire a round wooden table was set with lovely clay dishware and a pitcher of freshly squeezed raspberry juice. I sank into a green velvet chair placed at the table and served up a large pile of cakes and sausage. "This looks so delicious, Tock, thank-you so much for your hospitality." Mr. Dooley, Larry and Jordan soon joined us. As we ate our breakfast, we began discussing the plans of how to cross over the bridge. Tock spoke up, " I certainly hope this plan of talking to the water creatures will work. We worked so hard at repairing the bridge." Mr. Dooley looked up from his plate and muffled with his mouth full, "It certainly iv worf a try, I cannot fink of a better plan." We all finished a scrumptious breakfast and helped clear the dishes and were back on the trail to the bridge in no time.

When we arrived, we decided to go ahead and let Larry cross first because he seemed confident he could carry out the plan. "Don't worry at all" Larry said assuredly, "I will make sure those goofy creatures figure out for once and for all, we don't love em, in fact I will be so cranky, they will never want to jump on this bridge again!" Jordan sighed and looked at Larry, "Larry, I have seen you attempt your plans before, and it does not often turn out the way you say it will." I looked over at the bridge, the water was rapidly flowing underneath it and splashed upon the wooden surface with hissing spit. "Well, if we are going to try this, we need to get started. We don't know how far it is to the Haggler's market, or how much sunlight we will need to reach it." We all stared at the bridge and Mr. Dooley spoke up, "Alright, Larry, you will go first, and if all succeeds, I will follow and then the girls."

Larry turned and thanked Tock for everything. He then wiped his chin with his sleeve and began to walk slowly across the bridge. At first, nothing unusual happened. The bridge creaked a bit, but Larry continued to the walk to center of it. "Maybe those creatures see me, and realize how strong I am, and don't want to mess with me." Larry yelled this to us as he smirked and showed us his arm muscles. No sooner had he spoken, when suddenly, there were small splashes all around and on top of the bridge. I couldn't believe it, never before had I witnessed such a sight. Tiny jelly creatures, that looked like giant gumdrops with little suction cups were landing on the bridge. More fascinating were their tiny precious faces. They had large beautiful eyes, with long weepy eyelashes, and sweet puckered smiles that stretched across their wee cheeks. One of the yelled in a darling little voice, "Oh sir, please, stay here with us, we love you so, we need a strong leader like you!" The other creatures began shouting out too, "We love you so much, stay here with us and keep us safe please!" They were batting their eyelashes at Larry. Larry looked back at us, gave us a wink and shouted "Watch this Mr. Dooley, I will take care of these rascals and we will be on our way in no time!" With that, Larry looked down at the creatures and began to stutter, "Now you listen here, you, you, little sweet...adorable... creatures!" He then just stood there staring down at them while they batted their lashes at him. Jordan yelled out, "Well don't just stand there Larry, ya nincompoop, start insulting them so we can be on our way!" Larry looked down again and said very softly, "Listen you little critters, it's just that, that... well" then he turned to us, "I just can't do it, doggone it, they are just so cute and they are looking up at me with love in their cute teeny eyes!" Jordan took a step forward, "Larry, if I have to come out there, I will give you that clobbering I have been promising you, now tell them you don't love them!"

Larry frowned at us and then looked down again, "Ya see, the truth is little fellas, we have to be on our way, and we don't love you. We need to find our own families so you need to jump back in the water and be strong now." The little creatures all looked up at Larry with giant tears in their eyes and one said, "You mean you won't stay with us and lead us?" Larry hesitated, and finally said, "No, now darn it, you have to jump back in that there river!" The little creature began crying an awful cry but slowly began jumping back into the water. "I think it's working!" Tock said to us all. Sure enough, soon all the creatures were back in the river except one. "Please stay with us?" it said to Larry with pleading eyes. By this time Larry was balling like a baby, "Oh, you cute little critter, maybe you could come with me?" Mr. Dooley yelled out to Larry, "Larry, absolutely not, now say your goodbyes, so we can be on our way!" Larry looked down once again, and said " You gotta go now little guy". The creature jumped back into the river with a splash and Larry stood alone.

"By goodness," Larry said wiping the tears from his face, "That was the hardest thing I ever had to do!" He shrugged his shoulders, "I think I really loved those little guys." and he walked to the other side. With Larry over the other side of the bridge, we all took our turns pleading with the creatures to jump back in the water as they jumped out at us one by one. We didn't have nearly the difficult time that Larry did. When we all reached the other side, we turned and waved at a distant figure of Tock across the bank. Jordan turned to Larry and said, "Oh come on you softie, let's get going and forget about the little creatures. Maybe you can get a kitty or something when you get home." We all began moving on the path once again, this time, much closer to the Haggler's market. As we walked, Larry had his head hung low and Mr. Dooley kindly put his arm around his shoulder, "Nothing to be ashamed of son, you are a kind hearted boy and there is never any shame in that." Larry smiled up at Mr. Dooley, and began walking down the trail, this time, with a bounce in his step.

Chapter 14.

We walked for about an hour and Jordan finally asked, "Larry, how much longer do you suppose it will be until we reach the Haggler's Market?" Larry looked up the branch covered trail as far as he could see. "I reckon it isn't that far away. I remember goin here with my uncle a couple of years ago and it was a couple of hours away from the bridge." We continued to kick up dust as we walked forward. "So," Mr. Dooley said, "When we arrive we must make sure to stay together. These hagglers are sneaky fellas and I don't want any of us to get tricked by them." I was curious about the market so I asked "Larry, what exactly is a Haggler's Market?" Larry smiled a huge smile, "It is the most amazing market in the world, you can git all kinds a cool stuff there, from magic bugs to hairspray that makes your hair disappear! It is the coolest, darndest place ever!" Mr. Dooley seemed concerned, "You do realize that usually hagglers are simply tricksters trying to take your money, don't you Larry?" Larry looked a little hurt and became defensive, "Hagglers aint all bad! They got some really amazing stuff here, you'll see!"

After a few miles down the trail, we started seeing small wooden shacks set up. "We're gettin close!" Larry shouted with excitement, the market is right around the bend in the trail up ahead!" We started walking faster while looking around at the shacks. Several of the shacks had booths set up in front with people trying to sell strange food items. One had chocolate dipped caterpillars dangling from strings. Another was selling frozen root beer pops dipped in whipped cream and rolled in candy coated froot loops. "These snacks sound very strange!" Jordan said. "Don't block em til you try em, that's what my uncle always said." Larry exclaimed as he looked with large eyes and his mouth watering, at the many shacks we passed. We soon came to a large beaten sign that said "Haggler's Market". Many people were walking by and entering into the huge festive area. People who were old and young were running past with coins in their hands while the hagglers were shouting out, "Step right up and get the deal of the century!" We all stopped to take in the sights.

"Well" Mr. Dooley said, "Where should we begin?" We looked around at the hundreds of colorful tables and booths that were set up as far as the eye could see. "I know exactly where to start." Larry said, "We need to go over to the psychic booth. Once we git there, I will give the reader a coin and find out where those grum hagglers are just as soon as I git my psychic reading!" Mr. Dooley stared at Larry, "Larry, you can't possibly believe that a psychic haggler would tell you any form of the truth, my boy?" Larry grabbed at our hands, "Come with me, you won't believe how good they are!" he said as he pulled us over to a nearby table. "Now" Larry whispered, "Let me do the talking and you three don't say a word. We don't want anyone to get susfishious." Jordan whispered back "You mean suspicious, Larry, we don't want anyone to get suspicious." Larry patted her hand gently, "That is just what I said Jordan, we don't want anyone gettin susfishious, so just you quit yer squakin and settle down."

Larry walked over and began speaking to a strange man with an emerald green and silver bandana wrapped around his head. "Scuse me sir, ahem, I would like you to give me a psychic reading if you would please." The man looked us over and asked, "Do you have a gold coin then?" Larry reached in the pocket of his worn pants and pulled out his last gold coin. "Yes sir!" he tossed the coin down on the table. The man then reached down and pulled out a clear glass globe and set it in front of him and motioned for Larry to sit as the rest of us stood quietly watching. Next, the man began massaging the glass ball as if it were a tender head on the table. "Ahhh, your name is Larry and you are a boy in his teen years, correct?" he asked, Larry smiled a large smile, turned and winked at us, "Yup, I sure am, you are right on target so far!" Jordan whispered to us, "He just heard us say Larry's name." The man continued rubbing the ball while his eyes rolled up to the sky. "You, young man, have a mother and a father, correct?" Larry began to get excited, "Yes!! Right again!" The psychic smiled and said, "The globe never lies." Mr. Dooley leaned in towards us, "This is ridiculous, the odds are of course a boy has a mother and father." The man continued, "Ahhh, let me see, sometimes your mom and dad get angry with you, is this true? Answer me!" Larry looked shocked but delighted at the accuracy of what the man was saying, "Yes, I recon you are right, it is true, I do get into trouble sometimes!" Larry turned to us with joy in his eyes, "I told you this guy would be amazin!" The man looked further into the globe, "I see you live in a place with walls and windows, a house I believe, am I correct?" With that Larry, slapped the table, "You are amazin sir, my friends wouldn't believe me!" Larry looked at us with disappointed, knowing eyes, "I told y'all he knewed what he was talking about!"

Mr. Dooley interrupted, "Excuse me sir, but as much as we are enjoying this profound reading, what we really would like to know, is if you could help us locate two hagglers here who are trying to sell magic bubble gum?" The man looked at us, took off his bandana, swiped the globe off the table and said, "Oh, that? Why didn't you just say so? They are located towards the very edge of the market. You can't miss them. They are a scruffy couple of kids at a small metal table with a bunch of junk including that useless gum." Jordan started to speak, "That gum happens to have very special powers, and we..." I kicked Jordan lightly, grabbed Larry's arm and said "Thank-you so much sir, we appreciate your service." I grabbed Larry, and Mr. Dooley and Jordan followed us as we walked away. "Dagnab it Carol," Larry said looking at me, "Just when my reading was gittin good too!" He kicked up sand and put a scowl on his face. We walked for a while and passed many more tables. We saw hagglers selling magic frogs, supposed boots that could hike up hills on their own, water that could wash away wrinkles and boxes that if you sat in long enough, would carry you to distant planets. We were almost near the end of the market when I saw them. "Look!" I whispered loudly to the others. I pointed over to two scruffy boys with old metal coils and springs on a table and right in the middle sat the shiny packed of opened grum. We all stared for a moment, realizing that the answer to our prayers, hopefully, lay just within our reach.

Chapter 15

We walked slowly over to the table where the two scruffy hagglers stood. One had choppy black hair and wore a fish hook in each ear. The other was wearing a snakeskin cowboy hat and an old ratty jean jacket. Mr. Dooley whispered to us as we approached the two of them. "Let me do the talking this time kids. I got us into this mess and I hope to be the one who gets us out." Larry started to talk, "But Mr. Dooley, I know how to work these guys, my great grandfather was a shoe sales man." Mr. Dooley smiled adoringly at Larry, "Son, you truly have been a blessing on this journey but I must handle this situation on my own, if you please." Larry looked a little disappointed but said, "If you say so, Mr. Dooley."

As we approached, the boy with the fish hooks grabbed a spring off the table and said, "Welcome, fellow travelers! May I interest you in the greatest flying mechanism ever invented?" Mr. Dooley looked at the spring for a moment and then pointed at the grum. "Actually, it is that strange package of opened gum you have there. That is what I am truly interested in." The snakeskin hat boy picked up the grum and twirled it around in his pasty hands, "This gum? This magical amazing gum I hold in my hands at this very moment?" He said with a weasely smile on his face. "This gum aint cheap, no siree, I would only be willing to sell it for 10 gold coins, and then you got yourselves a deal." Mr. Dooley looked startled, "Ten gold coins? Why it surely isn't worth that much, and we couldn't possibly come up with that much money!" The boy shrugged and stuffed the grum into his dirty shirt pocket. "Well then, I guess ya don't want it then!" The two boys started laughing together. I was getting very upset and was about to say something when Jordan lost her temper. "Listen here you two fleabags, that gum was stolen from us and you will give it to us or else I will knock your heads together!" The two boys stared at her for a moment, and then just started laughing again.

Mr. Dooley huddled the four of us together and walked us over to a nearby shady tree. "Listen, getting angry simply will not help, we must think of a plan. We all stood dumbfounded for a few minutes and then I had an idea. " Follow my lead, you guys, I have an idea I think might just work." We all walked back over to the table. "Well, we don't have the money you want, so we are just going to be on our way. Before we go would you be so kind as to loan us a few cups? We have just enough lemonade for a quick refresher before our long trek ahead." The others looked at me with puzzled expressions. I reached in and grabbed the remaining cactus juice out of our dusty travel bag. The two hagglers looked at each other and then one of them grinned and said, "We might just lend you a cup, but we wants some of that fine pink lemonade too!" I smiled, Mr. Dooley, Jordan and Larry smiled too. "I would be perfectly glad to share with you." I said kindly.

The two hagglers walked off and borrowed a few cups from nearby hagglers. When they returned, I slowly poured the pink liquid into the cups on the table. We all picked up a cup and Mr. Dooley held his up, "Cheers to happy travels." he said as he rose his cup out to us all. "Cheers" we all exclaimed. The two hagglers greedily drank the liquid up while we simply watched. "Hey, how come youse aint drinkin none of your lemonade?" Fishhook ears asked. Snakeskin snatched at my cup, "If you aint gonna drink it, I will!" he said and he poured my cup right down his throat. "Yeah, I want yours too!" said Fish hook ears, and he grabbed at the other cups and drank them down. The hagglers looked at each other and one of them said, "Awww, we're so sorry, now you don't have no lemonade for your long journey! We are so sorry!" He slapped the other on the back, started laughing, and fell to the ground in fits of laughter. For a moment the other boy just stared at him. Then, suddenly, he too, hit the ground laughing. "Yeah, sorry we drank it all down to our funny tummies!" He wiggled and laughed on the ground. The rest of us watched them for a moment and then Mr. Dooley spoke up while looking down on the boys, "So you two won't mind if we take the gum now will you?" Fish hook ears looked up and roared with laughter, "No not at all, take the gubble bum!" The other boy was shrieking, "You said gubble bum!" They continued to laugh ridiculously on the ground while Mr. Dooley calmly took the grum from the haggler's pocket, and patted him on the head. The haggler

looked up and pointed at the grum, " Pretty, shiny gubble bum!" He then burst into giggles and pounded the ground with both fists as he laughed his head off. Mr. Dooley put the grum safely in his pant pocket and beckoned us to follow him away from the market, back into the desert area.

Chapter 16

We walked along quietly and Mr Dooley stopped us near an old broken wagon wheel just off the trail. He took the grum from his pocket and turned it over in his hands. Then he spoke, "Well, I am not sure if the Grum will return us home, but we really don't have any other choice now do we?" He looked sadly at all of who now stood in a small huddled circle around him looking down at the Grum. I looked over at Larry and realized we had nothing to reward him with even though he had traveled so far to help us. "Larry," I said, "I am so sorry, we really have no reward for all your troubles except these old travel packs and some stale peanuts." Larry looked at all of us and a smile stretched across his face. "Shucks," he said, "I had a monkey barrel of fun with you. Y'all are the kindest people I ever knew, even you, Jordan." Jordan stared at Larry and then huge tears welled in her eyes. She suddenly grabbed Larry and hugged him with all her might and burst into tears. "Larry, you really are so brave. I am going to miss you so much! I am going to miss all your funny stories and your bravery too!" She gave Larry a big smooch on the side of his face. Larry blushed a crimson red, and smiled at the same time. Mr. Dooley turned to Larry, "Well, son, what do you think you will do now? Will you return to Gertie's shack to continue working there?" Larry looked down and kicked some sand forward. "No" he said, "After spending time with y'all, I miss my family, my ma and my pa, I recon I better head home and take care of them. They need me cuz of my muscles and all." Larry held up his arms for us to see his muscles. I reached out and hugged Larry with all my might. "You are so brave Larry. We couldn't have made it this far without your help. Good luck to you my friend." We all stood quietly for a moment and then Mr. Dooley spoke, "I believe I should perhaps be the first to chew the grum so I can be waiting for you girls where ever it takes us." I thought that was as good an idea as any. "Ok, Mr. Dooley, you go first, then Jordan, and I will be the last." Mr. Dooley looked down at the three pieces of Grum that were left. He slowly grabbed at the next piece in the pack and began unraveling it from the crispy white wrapper. When it was unwrapped, he took the purple smooth cube and tore it in half and handed half of it to Jordan. Mr. Dooley looked at us and shook our hands, "Well, here goes...Good luck to us all and I shall hope to see you girls on the other side." With that, Mr. Dooley ruffled Larry's hair one last time, and put the half torn gum in his mouth and slowly began chewing. The three of us stared at him, waiting for something to happen. Suddenly, Mr. Dooley's balding head began to shrink down, then his shoes became to large for his feet. "It is working Mr. Dooley." Jordan shouted, "It is really working!" About a minute later, Mr. Dooley had completely disappeared. I looked at Jordan and asked her, "Well, are you ready to try the Grum?" Jordan was so excited she could barely chew the gum fast enough. "You bet I am" she said as she chewed the purple mass as quickly as she could. Jordan too, began disappearing just as she had before, pigtails first, and then the rest of her. Soon she was gone completely. It was just Larry and me left on the trail and two pieces of gum. "Well Larry, I guess this is goodbye." I said as I slowly unwrapped the next piece of grum, tore it in half, and put the rest of the grum in my pant pocket. "It sure is Carol, and remember as you look at me right now, There is no face like home. My Granny use to tell me that." I just grinned and said, "That's right Larry, and I will never forget your face." I gave Larry one last hug, put the grum in my mouth and slowly chewed on it. I watched Larry wave at me, his figure becoming dimmer and dimmer.

Chapter 17

When I awoke, I couldn't remember what had happened. I slowly opened my eyes and did not recognize the images before me. I saw bright metal lights above my head. Suddenly, Jordan's face appeared above me. She had a giant grin that spread from ear to ear. "It worked!" she shouted to me even though she was right next to my

face, "We are back!" she yelled again, "We are back in the gum factory!" I felt stirring next to me and looked over to see Mr. Dooley slowly sitting up. "My goodness," he exclaimed, "I can't believe it" he said as he looked around the factory with large eyes, "We are back, indeed, what an amazing, most beautiful miracle." I sat up too, and looked around the room. We were back in the small room with the original metal table where the empty Grum box now sat. We all shuffled around, stretched our legs, and stood up around the table. "We have one and a half pieces of Grum left," Mr. Dooley said, "It is time to return it to the box, and I shall put it away where no hands shall discover it or its maddening ventures, ever again." Mr. Dooley took the remaining gum from me, slowly put it back in the box, and placed it on a nearby shelf to be dealt with later.

We all ran to the metal door and pushed it open. "Aunt Vicki!" I yelled as loudly as I could. There was no sound. We continued walking through the factory, opening doors, and yelling out for Aunt Vicki and Doc. We heard no sounds, just the echo of an empty factory and our voices bouncing off the metal tables and cement walls. Just a few moments later, I heard a sound coming from a nearby staircase. Suddenly, a large metal door flew open, and there stood my aunt and Doc. "Oh my goodness!" shouted Aunt Vicki, "Praise the Lord, you two get over here and let me feel that you are truly alive! What, on earth happened to you? Where have you been? Oh my heavens, you're father is sick with worry Carol, you have been missing for nearly a week!" I hugged my aunt while Jordan hugged her grandfather, and Mr. Dooley just stood there, still unable to believe he was safely back in his beloved gum factory. "You just won't believe it Aunt Vicki." I said to my aunt, "We ate this magical gum and were transported to this strange place! There were giant slugs, hagglers, Gertie, crazy mayors, oh...and Mr. Dooley, wonderful Mr. Dooley! He was the owner of this gum factory Aunt Vicki, the one who disappeared!" My aunt looked at me like I was out of my mind but reached out to shake Mr. Dooley's hand. "Is this true? Are you really the owner who disappeared from this factory a couple of years ago?" Mr. Dooley shook his head, "I know it sounds crazy, but your niece speaks the truth. She and Jordan helped save my life, and for that, I am eternally grateful." Doc turned and gave me a hug, and even hugged Mr. Dooley. "Well, let's all collect ourselves and discuss this crazy event over dinner at my place. You must be exhausted and in need of a shower and a hot meal. We agreed that cleaning up, fresh clothing, and a hot meal was the best idea we had heard in a long time. We piled into the two cars and headed up to Doc's house.

Chapter 18

Doc fixed us a delicious dinner of lamb chops with apricot jelly, mashed potatoes, and fresh garden green beans. We ate it up like we had never had a homemade meal before. We also had a chance to shower and Doc and Jordan lent us fresh, clean clothing until we had a chance to get into our own. Everyone was so excited and talking at once, and suddenly the phone rang. It was my father. "Dad, Dad I am ok, you will never believe the adventures we had, Dad! I was able to work out so many problems, and Dad, I even used a trick from Geometry to help fix a bridge!" My dad was so proud of me and told me he would be returning in a few days to take me home. As we all sat around a crackling fire later that evening, we began to discuss future events and how My Aunt, Doc and Mr. Dooley would work out the factory business since it really belonged to Mr. Dooley, but my aunt and Doc had since purchased it. "We must simply return it to you, Mr. Dooley, it is, after all, yours." My aunt said. Doc asked, "Perhaps you could reimburse us the money we left to your accountants for the sale of the factory?" Mr. Dooley rubbed his chin. "Maybe we could work out a deal that would suit us all?" He suggested. "Vicki, you and Doc are both inventors. I could certainly use your expertise since I am always in need of the latest technologically advanced equipment for the factory. I am also always trying to come up with a better bubble gum, and could really use your help." Aunt Carol looked as if she would cry, "That would be so kind of you, Mr. Dooley. I think I can speak for us both when I say, we really were going nowhere with our past inventions. This would give us an opportunity to work towards something substantial, and we would be just thrilled." She beamed at both Doc and Mr. Dooley.

"Well, I can certainly pay you handsomely, as you both know I made quite a large sum when the factory was up and running in the past." Doc smiled and agreed gratefully to Mr. Dooley's generous offer.

When my dad picked me up 4 days later, I had to say my goodbyes to everyone. I hugged Mr. Dooley, Aunt Carol, Doc. and Merlin, and thanked them all for a summer I would never forget. I went to give Jordan a hug goodbye too. Mr. Dooley winked at us both and said, "How would you two like to work summer jobs at the factory from now on? It won't be glamorous, just mainly clean-up, but I will pay you well, and most importantly, you two will be able to spend time together." Jordan and I screamed with glee, and hugged each other tightly. We then ran up and hugged Mr. Dooley once again. Jordan said, "Thank-you so much Mr. Dooley, we will be the best workers ever! We will keep the factory so clean, you will be able to eat off the floor if you want to!" Jordan and I were so excited, we could barely wait to get through a school year so we could be together again, working at the factory. The school year did pass quickly and I had received better grades on my report card, than I had since before Mom passed...even in geometry. I packed my bags and Dad drove me back to Aunt Vickie's house ready to begin work at the gum factory. It was so good to see everyone, and Jordan and I couldn't wait to begin exploring and cleaning out the factory for Mr. Dooley.

On our first day of work, Jordan and I gathered all of our supplies. We had buckets of soapy water, brooms, and window cleaner. We tied bandanas around our heads to keep the hair out of our eyes. We scrubbed the old cement walls and metal tables downstairs until they sparkled. We had so much fun. As we cleaned we threw soapy water at each other and then laughed while we cleaned it up. We carried our supplies upstairs. We both stopped and looked quietly at the door where our crazy adventures had begun only the year before. Jordan looked at me, "Well, that room needs cleaning too. Besides, we have nothing to worry about, Mr. Dooley has taken care of that grum so nobody will ever get their hands on it again. We opened the large metal door. It was pretty dirty, I don't think anyone had been in there since we had the summer before. I took out a sponge and started cleaning off the table with foamy warm water. Carol picked up the broom and began sweeping piles of dirt together. I reached up and began to clean off the filthy metal shelves above and something caught my eye. There, covered in cobwebs, sat the last amount of Grum. Mr. Dooley had forgotten to dispose of it last summer! "Jordan" I whispered, "Get over here! You are never going to believe what I just found!" Jordan quickly joined me and her eyes were as large as saucers. "I can't believe Mr. Dooley forgot to put it away!" she said. I sat quietly staring at the Grum. Jordan reached over and cautiously grabbed the last remaining whole piece of gum from the pack. "Jordan!" I said loudly, "What do you think you are doing? We shouldn't even be handling that crazy stuff!" Jordan slowly unraveled the piece of gum, tore it in half and handed me the other half. She smiled as she put the piece in her mouth and chewed slowly. "Crazy huh? Well let's have ourselves the craziest summer ever Carol!" She slowly began to disappear. "Jordan!" I screamed, "This is unbelievably crazy!" I yelled after her. Then I felt a slow grin cross my face, I carefully put the half piece of grum in my mouth, and slowly began chewing.



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