

HELLANDBACK KIDS:
BE CAREFUL WHAT YOU WISH FOR

A Middle-Grade Novel

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CHAPTER 1

Eleven-year-old Chris Hellandback suddenly awoke in the middle of the night from an exhausted sleep.

He rubbed his eyes and mumbled, “What’s that noise?”

A crackling and slurping sound came from inside his closet.

It’s got to be a rodent, Chris thought.

His old box springs squeaked as he rolled out of bed. “I guess I’ll have to sleep in Jon’s room.”

His fifteen-year-old brother was in England. He was away at a boarding school. Jon would come home for the holidays; otherwise his room was empty.

Over the years, Chris had worked his mattress into a very comfortable bunk. “Great! I hate Jon’s bed.”

As his eyes adjusted to the dark, he could make out a weird creature. It stood about two feet tall with a huge head and ears. Its eyes seemed to flicker in the dark. Chris rubbed his eyes again. He wanted to make sure he saw something. The last time he went to tell his parents, he was laughed at for weeks by his siblings. There was something standing in his closet. He bolted out the door and ran downstairs to his parents’ room. “Mom! Dad! Wake up!” he shouted as he slammed his parents’ bedroom door into the wall.

Mrs. Hellandback jolted up. “What’s wrong?”

Mr. Hellandback rolled over and muttered, “What time is it?”

Mrs. Hellandback looked at the clock on the bedside table and turned on the light. “It’s almost three thirty.” Chris was pale as a ghost, and you could see his heart beating through his T-shirt. Chris was sweating profusely, and Mrs. Hellandback said with concern in her voice, “Patrick, there is something really wrong with Chris.”

Mr. Hellandback slowly sat up and looked at Chris through his sleepy eyes. He cleared his throat and said, “Chris, what’s wrong?”

Chris grabbed his dad’s pillow and hugged it tightly to his body. “Dad, there is something in my closet.”

Mrs. Hellandback gave her husband a dirty look. “I told you not to let him watch all those scary movies.”

“No, Mom! It doesn’t look like anything I’ve ever seen, and it’s making a slurping, crunching sound.”

Mrs. Hellandback again looked back at her husband. “Go and take a look in his room.”

“Chris, the last time you thought you saw something in your room, you had eaten beans that day, and your room was filled with a mind-altering gas. It was so thick your mother and I thought one of the old pipes broke.”

“Dad, I didn’t eat any beans.”

Mrs. Hellandback gently put her hand on her husband’s arm. “It will only take a minute.”

As Mr. Hellandback got out of bed, his big toe started tingling. With his back turned to Anna—his wife—and Chris, he picked up his right foot and noticed that the tattoo on the bottom of his big toe was glowing.

Mrs. Hellandback asked softly, “What are you waiting for?”

Chris said, “Mom, I think he’s scared?”

Mr. Hellandback just stared at his son. "Chris, you wait here. I'll go check it out."

"No problem, Dad. You go right ahead."

Mr. Hellandback made his way toward Chris's room when he said half out loud, "Why would they appear now?" He rubbed his forehead. "I hope it's not what I think it is. There's got to be a reason for showing up in Chris's room."

As he entered the room, he flicked on the light and went straight to the closet. It was devoid of anything strange, but as he turned, he stepped on something. It was a large, dark fingernail, several inches long, with yellow ear jelly on one end, a telltale sign of a Bundlebob. He picked up the discolored nail and placed it on the top shelf of the closet. He walked back to the bedroom where Chris and Anna were waiting.

"Dad, what did you see? Did it put up much of a fight? I'd have helped, but I thought Mom looked a little scared."

"Chris, I didn't find any creature in your closet, but I did have an epiphany."

"Wait. What! Dad, I'm not sure what you did in my room, but I'm not going back in there."

Patrick rolled his eyes. "Chris, I just meant I think it's time you and your brother and sisters visited your great-grandmother in Scotland."

Anna said, "I don't understand."

"Dad, you got that idea just now? And I thought my brain was messed up."

"Chris, I just think you're old enough now to learn some valuable life lessons."

"Whatever you say, Dad." Chris yanked the comforter off his parents' bed and grabbed a pillow. He threw them on the floor. "If you're going to babble with each other, can you keep it down? I need to get some sleep."

Mrs. Hellandback said as quietly as possible, "Where did this idea come from?"

Before Mr. Hellandback could answer, Chris said, "I can still hear you."

Mr. Hellandback leaned over and gave his wife a peck on the cheek. "We'll talk in the morning."

"Dad, please, I'm in the room."

Mrs. Hellandback reached over and turned off her light. "Night, Chris."

"Night, Mom."

CHAPTER 2

For the next several weeks, Chris checked his closet before going to bed. He also made sure the door was shut and there was a chair in front of it. Chris even found his old night-light and plugged it in by his bed.

“Mom, do you know where my baseball bat is?”

“I think I saw it in Jon’s room. Why do you ask?”

Chris wasn’t about ready to tell his mom that he needed it for protection. Whatever Chris saw in his closet that night would not be scaring him again.

“I think I’ll just hit a few balls.”

Chris looked around Jon’s room, but there was no bat. But, he did see all his brother’s trophies and awards. He was once again reminded not only what a great athlete his brother was, but also of his enormous brainpower. Chris’s friends laughed at him and would say he should take his brother’s spare brain cells, because Chris was missing a few. But, his friends were no better off than Chris.

It’s hard to follow such an accomplished brother your entire life through school. Chris’s teachers expected a lot from him, but good luck on that. He could only give them what he had. Chris thought about how proud his parents were when they talked about Jon and how brilliant he was.

He felt sorry for his brother, though. He was kind of a loner. He didn’t have a girlfriend, or many friends, for that matter. Now Chris, he had more friends than he needed.

Chris went to go look for the bat in his room. He checked under the bed and behind the dresser, but no bat. Chris decided to check his closet. He took his lacrosse stick and ran it along the top shelf. Something fell. It was long and hard and dark in color, with some yellow gunk on the end.

“What the...”

Chris then heard something behind his clothes. Mrs. Hellandback used Chris’s closet as a catchall for everyone’s clothes they outgrew. Chris tightened his grip on his lacrosse stick and pushed the garments back. There he saw several more of the dark, hard objects. He brought one close to his nose and took in a large whiff.

Chris started coughing, and his eyes started watering. “Whoa! That thing is smoking.”

Chris blinked his eyes several times and wiped away the tears. He saw a half a dozen stairs in front of him. Chris debated whether he should go get his fourteen-year-old sister Trisha, but she thought she was Aphrodite reincarnated—Chris didn’t see the resemblance. She hated to get dirty, and the closet was full of dust.

There were two red beams of light coming from the top step. The beams were reflecting off the dust particles illuminating the stairs. Chris climbed the steps slowly and cautiously. With each step, the air grew colder. When he reached the last step, he wished he had worn more than just his shorts.

Chris stood on a small landing area and rubbed his hands along his arms to keep warm. The back wall felt like ice, and the small red lights seemed to come from an opening in the wall. As Chris reached to stick his arm through the opening, he heard his mom calling for him.

“Chris, I found the baseball bat.” She entered Chris’s room. “Chris, are you in here?”

Chris was lucky that his mom had good timing, or he would have been transported through the wall opening at the back of his closet.

Chris stuck his head out of the closet. "Hey Mom, you don't have to yell. I'm right here."

"I didn't see you. I found the bat you were looking for."

"Thanks, Mom. I didn't know there were steps in my closet?"

"I always thought that was a bit odd. When we bought this house, I used to say they were stairs to nowhere. They have been useful over the years, though. I used to hide things from you kids on the landing. You never thought to look in there for any presents I bought early."

"Mom, did you notice how cold it was at the top?"

"No. It was always a little on the hot side."

The phone rang. "Chris, can you get that? I need to put your laundry away."

"Can't someone else in the house get the phone?"

"Yell down to Trisha to get it."

Chris ran to get the phone. "Never mind."

A moment later Chris yelled up at his mom, "Jon's on the phone. I'm going to school to play lacrosse with my friends."

Since this was a long-distance phone call, Mrs. Hellandback ran to get the phone.

"Jon! Jon! Are you there?" Mrs. Hellandback could barely hear her oldest son. "There must be a bad connection. Jon, I can barely hear you." Although she couldn't hear her son very well, she wrote down the flight number and time for his arrival home next week.

It sounded like a party line. She could hear other people talking. A Mr. Little was being yelled at by a boisterous man, and it sounded like her son's voice talking to a Mr. Shark.

Chris was just leaving the house. "Hey Mom, Jon in trouble again?"

"No! Not that I know of. The academy would call me if anything were wrong."

"Yeah, okay, Mom, but you know what happens if Jon gets bored."

Anna changed the subject. "Chris, I want you home before dark tonight."

Chris ran out the front door before his mother could load him up with other instructions to follow. "Bye, Mom."

Mrs. Hellandback went and watched her youngest son run down the street. She said very quietly, "I wish Jon didn't worry so much about money and had more friends like his brother."

CHAPTER 3

The Hellandbacks lived in Boston, Massachusetts. They were all normal, nothing special about any of them. Patrick Hellandback had grown up in Inverness, Scotland, with his parents and his grandparents. He had moved to Boston many years ago, and now he had a thriving law practice in town, or that's what Mr. Hellandback told his children.

But, Chris felt differently about his family's economic situation. "Hey Dad, can I have a new titanium lacrosse stick?"

"Chris, you have plenty of equipment. You don't need any more. Besides, we can't afford it."

"Dad, it's not that my stuff is worn out, but it's old. Everyone else gets new lacrosse equipment every summer. They have a lot of cool new things. I'm only asking for a stick. I suppose you think I should use Jon's old stuff."

"Well, Chris, there's an idea!"

"You have got to be kidding me. His stuff is crap."

"Chris, your mom wants to see you."

Chris slowly walked into the kitchen, "Hey Mom, do you know why Dad is making us visit Great-Grandma in Scotland this summer?"

"He just wanted you to visit your great-grandmother, that's all."

"Well, is she going to show us our inheritance or something? I can't see why we can't just stay here in Boston."

"Chris, your dad said you all will have a great time. He lived there as a boy and loved it."

"You were there once, Mom. What did you think of her place?"

"Okay, that was over eleven years ago, and it was for your grandmother's funeral. She passed away so suddenly. We all stayed at a bed and breakfast; I never saw the house. What are you getting at?"

"Just wanted to know what kind of TV she has or what video games—if any. I need to pack mine if she doesn't have any."

"Your father said not to bring any of that; you will be busy enough. Besides, Chris, when I was a little girl, we didn't have all that stuff. As a matter of fact, we had one small TV in our house, with only a black-and-white picture."

"Yeah, how did that work?"

"The point is that I was much older before we even got a color TV."

"Wow, Mom, stick a finger in my eye. I bet that was painful to watch."

"It was all we knew at the time. And I am sure your father is right—he says your great-grandmother will keep you very busy."

"Yeah, probably have us clean out her garage or something."

"Chris, your brother and sisters aren't complaining. Just once go along and try not to make waves."

"But Mom, how great could it be? Granmama is eighty-three years old, and I bet this trip is going to include a visit to her friend's house for a wild game of gin rummy, a night or two out at an early bird special restaurant, coupon included. Let's see, for a snack before we hit the hay around eight o'clock at night, she will offer us a butterscotch or toffee drop. Like that isn't

exciting enough, she will tell us to keep the TV noise down so she can sleep. Plus, she will wake us up at the crack of dawn to get ‘reacquainted.’

“I think of all the things I could be doing the last week of summer vacation—like sleeping till noon, playing lacrosse with my friends and showing them up, or just watching movies and playing video games. You know, Mom, just hanging out...”

“I guess going to Scotland will impress my friends. The idea of anyone traveling outside the U.S. fascinates them. Most of them don’t even have passports. So I guess it won’t ruin my reputation, as long as I keep who I am staying with on the down low. What do you think?”

When he ran out of steam, she asked, “Was there a question in there you wanted answered?”

“No, I guess not. Are you sure we still have to go?”

“Yes, Chris, everything is already set. Don’t worry about it. Everything will be fine. When she last visited us, your great-grandmother made you keep your TV turned down because she was exhausted from the long flight over here. Don’t take the hard candy when she offers it, and tell her you don’t want to play cards with her. She’ll understand; she’s your great-grandmother, not a mad stalker. Besides, Chris, you are not shy—that much I know—and it doesn’t bother you to be honest to the point of pain, so tell Granmama the truth.”

“It just seems like older people are so sensitive about their rituals and routines. I totally think this trip is gonna be a double case of boredom—a real yawner, if you know what I mean.”

“Chris, I do sympathize with you, but I am afraid you, your brother, and your two sisters are going.”

Chris didn’t like how his older brother was always up for anything different. He was not only a very accomplished athlete in lacrosse and wrestling, but was a brilliant individual. That’s why Jon, at fifteen, was at a boarding school in England. He had taken some national test and come up with such high scores that he blew his competition away. That was one time Chris didn’t mind his brother winning something. He had gotten the entire third floor to himself. Besides, Jon was socially unskilled; he didn’t have many friends, like Chris, who needed the extra bedroom when his friends spent the night.

“Maybe you could call and tell her I got sick. The others can go. Why spoil their time?”

Chris’s sisters Brittany, twelve, and Trisha, fourteen, loved to fly, but Chris, with his ADHD, felt tortured in a confined area.

“Chris, I don’t want to discuss this anymore. You will be going!”

“Fine. What do you have for a snack?”

Mrs. Hellandback looked at her son very seriously and said, “I have a butterscotch drop or a hard piece of toffee.”

“Mom, I’m not in the mood for slapstick.” He leaned back in his chair.

“I have lunch meat, sliced cheese, and enough bread left to make you a couple of sandwiches.”

“One is fine, but I’m still not happy about going.”

“Yes, I understand. You have made that quite clear. Look at it this way—you go for a week in August, and you never have to go again.” “Mom, you don’t understand. I will be going with the three people in the entire universe that hate me the most.” He ran his fingers through his hair and yelled, “Jon, Brittany, and Trisha are going to kill me on this trip!”

Mrs. Hellandback said, “Chris, I know you and your brother and sisters get on each other’s last nerve, but your father assured me that this vacation would make you change your attitude towards each other.”

Chris shook his head like he didn't believe his mother. "Mom, so anyway, what did you want to see me about?"

Mrs. Hellandback rubbed her temples. "Chris, I forgot. I have a headache." So many of Chris's and her talks ended this way, never remembering what she wanted to talk to him about.

She handed Chris his sandwich.

Chris took a bite and closed his eyes.

CHAPTER 4

Trisha walked into the kitchen. “Mom, is there anything to eat?”

Mrs. Hellandback sliced an apple, and poured a glass of milk, and sat down at the table with two of her four children.

Trisha hated sharing a bedroom with Brittany, but she did have one escape. Trisha had fixed up a little room off the kitchen for herself, for times when she had enough of the family—or, mainly, Chris. It wasn’t the pantry, exactly. It must have been the icebox room before refrigerators were invented. It was closed in long ago, and Mrs. Hellandback had put a desk and chair in it so Chris would have a quiet place to study. Then she gave up on telling him to study in there, since Mrs. Hellandback couldn’t tell if Chris was really doing his homework or just examining something he had found on the floor. Chris didn’t do much studying in there. The quiet made his head hurt. He said he could only hear his own annoying thoughts running around in his head. Trisha had taken out the chair and put an inflatable mattress under the built-in desk. She hung Christmas lights and said it was “cozy.” She slept in there sometimes, because it made her feel safe.

Trisha loved anything to do with dancing: prom (“gag,” as Chris would say), dance class, or just being with her friends. Put on some music and she would dance until morning.

Mrs. Hellandback asked, “Do either of you know when Brittany will be home?”

They both shook their head no.

Trisha asked with a mouthful of food, “Mom, have you seen my good pair of jeans?”

“No, Trisha. Look in the laundry in the basement. While you are down there, throw in a load for me.”

Trisha slowly got up and sighed heavily, as if her mother had asked her to do some labor-intensive work.

Trisha flicked on the light in the basement and descended the stairs. The air smelled different, like the rain-soaked earth after a hard downpour. She hated the basement, musty, dark, and unpleasant. Trisha started coughing. The air was thick with something. Trisha saw her jeans on the floor. “Darn, I was hoping they would be clean.”

She picked them up to throw them in the washer.

Suddenly, her jeans started moving in her hand. “Ahhh!” Trisha screamed as she looked down. Hundreds of earthworms crawled all over her jeans, and thousands more covered just about every inch of the floor surrounding her. Trisha was never very athletic, but she took the stairs two at a time like an Olympic athlete.

Mrs. Hellandback was no longer in the kitchen, but there sat her brother Chris, finishing his sandwich.

“Chris, will you go down in the basement and get my jeans? I think I’ll wash them by hand.”

“Why can’t you get them yourself? You just came from down there.” Chris looked at his sister, who was flushed and breathing heavily. “Oh, I see. Something scared you in the basement. I’ll get your jeans if you take the garbage out for me for the next two days.”

Trisha said, “Fine. Now go get my jeans.”

“If I knew you would agree so easily, Trisha, I would’ve asked for a week.”

Chris disappeared through the basement door, and in less than a minute, he was back in the kitchen with Trisha's jeans.

Trisha grabbed her jeans away from her brother. "Did you see anything in the basement?"

"Yeah."

Trisha almost yelled, "What!"

"I think I found some of your courage and pride hanging around the washer, waiting for you to come pick them up."

Trisha stuck her tongue out at her younger brother and marched out of the kitchen.

Trisha looked at her hand as she headed for her bedroom. There were several slimy trails left over from the earthworms. "I don't know how Chris did that, but he probably got some help from those twit friends of his. They must have spent every bit of free time digging up earthworms."

Trisha found her mom putting away clothes in her room. "Mom, Chris left a mess for you in the basement."

"What kind of mess?"

Trisha didn't know how to explain the thousands of earthworms in the basement without sounding like she was exaggerating. Everyone in the family accused her of always overreacting. "You'll see when you go in the basement to do a load of laundry."

"Oh, did you put a load in for me? I see you found your 'good' jeans."

Trisha looked down. She still had her jeans draped over her arm. "Yeah, I found them, but they are dirty." Trisha gave her mother a "help me" look. "Mom, can you wash them for me? I might shrink them in the washer."

Mrs. Hellandback handed Trisha a piece of paper. "I will throw your jeans in the wash if you put on the calendar Jon's flight number and time of arrival."

Trisha took the piece of paper. "Thanks, Mom."

She had just put the information on the calendar when her mom walked through the kitchen with an armful of dirty clothes. "Looks like you're not the only one who doesn't know how to do laundry." She descended the stairs, and there was silence.

Trisha waited for some kind of hysterics from her mom. Nothing. Silence. "Mom, are you okay?"

Mrs. Hellandback was on her way up. "Why wouldn't I be okay, and what about the mess Chris made?"

Trisha mumbled, "Nothing." She went downstairs cautiously, tiptoed over to the washer and dryer, but saw no worms. Things were as they always were, a little messy, but that's all.

Trisha said under her breath, "I'm going to get Chris back for this."

Trisha had no way of knowing, but this would not be the first time she would encounter thousands of slimy things. Would her trip to Scotland prove to be fatal for her?

CHAPTER 5

Mrs. Hellandback was beginning to get worried about twelve-year-old Brittany. When she started to make a phone call, Brittany walked through the front door. She was carrying a small, soft brown leather bag.

Mrs. Hellandback said, "Brittany, what's in the pouch? Did you get a present from one of the patients or a nurse?"

Brittany had been reading to patients on the pediatric unit at the children's hospital for the past six months.

"Sorry I'm late, Mom. The head nurse wanted to give me this." She held up the little brown bag. "The nurse said the little boy in room two-ninety-two appreciated me reading him a story yesterday. So, he left me a present."

"Brittany, that was thoughtful of him. I told you they would enjoy your storytelling."

"The weird thing about it was I didn't go into room two-ninety-two. It was empty."

"I'm sure you just got confused."

Brittany untied the leather strap and showed her mother. Inside the tiny bag were about a dozen brilliantly colored stones.

"Brittany, they are beautiful. You don't remember this little boy at all?"

"No, Mom, I have a feeling this gift belongs to someone else."

"How can you be so sure you didn't read to someone in that room?"

"Because, Mom, it's my locker number, and I always make sure I stop by. Usually there is always someone in there, but yesterday it was empty. I need to find out who deserves this gift. When I go back next week, I will check with the other readers."

"Would you like a snack?"

"No, I had something at the hospital. When is Jon coming home for the summer?"

"He will be home next week."

Brittany was following in her older brother's footsteps. She was brilliant, but did not care for money as her brother did. She loved science and wanted to go to a top university and become a scientist. Brittany loved helping others. Even though she was only twelve, she had the compassion of a much older soul.

"Is Dad going to take Jon out driving with his permit?"

Mother tied the small pouch closed. "I don't know, Brittany. Why are you so interested in Jon driving?"

"Chris and I had a little bet going, that Jon would hit a nonmoving object and Dad would blow up."

"Brittany, you and Chris shouldn't make such a bet. The streets of Boston are overcrowded, and it is very hard for a beginner to navigate the streets."

"Mom, it was more of a bet about Dad blowing up. Chris said Dad would lose it, and I said he wouldn't."

"Brittany, I think I will be taking Jon out for his driving lessons." Mrs. Hellandback knew that, with Jon being a perfectionist, and her husband's controlling, ways the outcome would not be good.

"Oh, Mom, I got an A on my research paper on the bubonic plague for science class."

The phone rang, and Brittany ran to get it. Mrs. Hellandback yelled after her daughter, “Good job, Brittany. I’m proud of you.”

After a few minutes Brittany said, “Mom, that was Linda. She was looking for Jon. Mr. Shark needed to speak with him. Who is Mr. Shark?”

“I don’t know, Brittany. I have gotten several strange phone calls, and I’ve been trying to reach Jon on his phone, but he doesn’t answer.” Mrs. Hellandback wasn’t worried about her son. For all his intellect, he constantly lost things: his phone, wallet, jacket, anything that wasn’t attached to his body.

Brittany ran up to her room and let her mother’s voice trail off. She dumped the polished marbles out. The room filled with light, and things started to look a bit strange, like when you go to a carnival and they have those odd mirrors that distort images. Brittany hung on to the bedpost with one hand and scooped the rocks up with the other. She quickly put them away in their small pouch. She rubbed her eyes. “I need to take a short nap.”

Trisha entered the room. “Brittany, what’s in the bag?”

“Nothing, just a gift that doesn’t belong to me.”

“Can I see? Is it a piece of jewelry or something?”

Brittany opened the small bag, and Trisha looked inside. “Pretty glass marbles or something.”

The room didn’t glow or swirl around like it had earlier.

“Brit, who do they belong to?”

“That I don’t know, but I’m going to take them back to the hospital next Saturday.”

“Hey Brit, can you go get my jeans in the dryer? I don’t want them to shrink too much.”

“Trisha, normally I don’t mind you ordering me around, but I’m tired today. You’ll just have to get them yourself.”

Trisha dreaded going into the basement, but since she wanted to wear her favorite pair of jeans to the movies, she had to go down into the tomb. She dug out her winter boots in her closet and put them on. She’d run down and squish a few worms, get her jeans, and run back upstairs. Besides, her mother didn’t seem to see anything out of place when she went down, and things seemed normal enough when she had gone down the last time.

Trisha clicked on the basement light and slowly descended the stairs. She was truly expecting to see the floor covered with night crawlers, but there were no insects or worms covering the floor. With the exception of a few dead roaches on their backs, the floor was barren of any creepy-crawlies. Trisha saw a shadow over by the old boiler. It looked like a silhouette of something hairy with a huge head.

Trisha got her jeans and ran all the way to her bedroom. *I need to have Mom schedule an eye appointment for me.* The last time she had seen things that weren’t there was when she needed glasses four years ago. She wore contacts now, but maybe they weren’t fitting correctly. Of course, Chris had something to do with the earthworms in the basement. Maybe he had a hand in this too.

Brittany said, “Trisha, could you please try to be a little bit quiet and not turn on so many lights?”

“Sorry, Brittany, but I need to get ready to go out.”

Brittany threw her covers over her head. “Ahhhhgggg!”

Although the Hellandback children tolerated each other, the trip to Scotland would have to be different, or one of them would perish.

CHAPTER 6

The Hellandback household was very busy in the summer months. When the school year ended and summer began, the house went nuts. No one knew their schedules, but all of the Hellandback children had to get to games and practices and camps. It was always chaos, but Mrs. Hellandback kept everything under control.

Chris walked home from lacrosse practice and ran into the house, out of breath, again.

Mrs. Hellandback asked, "What's wrong, Christopher?" She always used his full first name when she was either mad or frightened. Chris figured this time she was mad because she jumped. He must have startled her.

Chris leaned over and caught his breath, then said, "That dog is after me again."

That stupid dog on the corner had been chasing Chris since he could remember. He only chased Chris, no one else. Chris thought the dog would outgrow it, but he never had.

This dog was huge, part Rottweiler and part pit bull, and just plain menacing. On top of that, a dog had bitten Chris on the hand when he was very young. He had gone with his mother to visit friends when he tried to feed the neighbor's dog some scraps from his lunch through the chain-link fence. He put his hand through the fence, and the dog bit into it. So, yeah, Chris still got a bit hysterical every time this dog chased him.

Mrs. Hellandback looked at Chris. "That dog on the corner?"

"Yeah, that one. He was going to take a chunk out of my leg."

Mrs. Hellandback obviously thought Chris was overreacting because she raised one of her eyebrows. "Christopher, that dog may be big, but he would lick you to death before he would take a bite out of you. He is perfectly harmless. Brittany weighs under a hundred pounds and walks by there every day. She swears he is a nice dog. He is just playing a game with you. He wants you to turn and play with him."

"He doesn't want to play with me; he wants to tear me apart. I barely got home alive."

Mrs. Hellandback followed Chris to the front door, where, sure enough, that slobbery big dog sat waiting outside. Chris looked down at the scars on the palm of his hand. All of the reasons for hating this dog flooded his mind. Chris stormed off to his room and slammed the door.

Chris looked out his bedroom window and watched his mom give that overgrown drool factory a snack. Mrs. Hellandback scratched his ear and watched him walk down the street. Chris could hear their miniature schnauzer barking; he was out of control.

Titan truly believed he was a large dog, and he had the attitude to go with that. He was very protective, and Mrs. Hellandback knew that. If she let Chris, he would have had Titan fight that big dog. Titan probably would have won. He was very spirited for a little dog, and he would do anything to protect the family.

Chris came down to the kitchen. "Hey Mom, Titan is acting strange. Why is he sitting by the basement door, scratching to get down?"

"I don't know, Chris, but yesterday when I opened the door, he raced down the steps and started barking and growling at the boiler."

Mr. Hellandback walked into the kitchen. She asked her husband, "Can you take a look behind the boiler? Titan seems to think something is back there. I hope it's not raccoons again. They did a lot of damage to our ductwork on their last uninvited visit."

Mr. Hellandback grabbed the biggest flashlight he could find in the kitchen drawer. Chris handed his dad one of his old lacrosse sticks. “Dad, better take a weapon. They probably outnumber you.”

Mr. Hellandback had gained some weight over the years. The last time he had gone behind the old boiler, he was a lot thinner. As he tried to wedge his girth between the wall and the exceptionally warm boiler, he said, “Chris, I don’t think I can squeeze back there. You’re going to have to do it.”

Chris thought back to the night something was in his closet. “Mom, you’re smaller than Dad.”

Mr. Hellandback lowered his voice. “Chris, this is not a job for your mother. Anything that could fit back there is going to be smaller than yourself.”

That hadn’t convinced Chris to go back there. “Why not call a professional? What if this thing has rabies, or is a mother protecting its young? They can become quite vicious.”

“Chris, you don’t need to make friends with it. I’m not asking you to invite whatever is back there to your next birthday party. Just open the window and let it escape.”

“This is so unfair. Jon is never around for this kind of thing.” Chris grabbed the flashlight and his lacrosse stick.

He slowly went a few steps, letting his flashlight lead the way. “Maybe we can wait until next week when Jon comes home.”

Mr. Hellandback said, “The quicker you open the window, the quicker you can get out of the basement.”

Chris eased back into the confined space. He tried to open the window. “I think it’s stuck, painted shut or something.”

Mr. Hellandback said, “Put your back into it, Chris.”

Mrs. Hellandback said, “Don’t tell him that! You know how fragile his back is. Trying to save money and not call a critter removal service may end up costing you more if Chris hurts his back and has to see a doctor.”

“He’ll be fine. Chris, got the window open yet?”

“Dad, couldn’t you just break the window from the outside and let whatever is down here escape that way?”

Mrs. Hellandback put her head up to the boiler. “Chris, do the best you can. We’ll understand if you can’t open it.”

Just then Chris heard a small pop. He didn’t know if it was his back or the window. The window started to move. “I think I got it, Mom.”

Not only was the window moving, but so was something else around Chris’s feet. “Oh my God...something is attacking me!”

Chris dropped the flashlight on something that cried out in pain. He flew through the thin opening, getting abrasions from the wall in his haste.

Mrs. Hellandback immediately grabbed for Chris as Mr. Hellandback yelled, “What was back there?”

“I don’t know, Dad! I didn’t take the time to introduce myself. I left the flashlight back there. Why don’t you go get it?”

Mrs. Hellandback examined Chris, nothing around his ankles, just a few spots of blood where he had caught his hand on something. “I think we will just leave the flashlight back there.”

Mrs. Hellandback said, “Chris, come into the kitchen. I’ll clean those two small spots on your hand.”

Mr. Hellandback stayed in the basement, listening for some kind of sound, but there was nothing. He became a little unnerved. Was that something that had come from Scotland? He always thought his childhood was so adventurous, but he didn't want any of those creatures to come to his house in Boston. His children were being called to Scotland whether they liked it or not.

CHAPTER 7

Jon had made it home from England. “Hey Dad, can I drive home from the airport? I drove quite a bit with Mrs. Liston in London. All her children drove cars at an early age, due to their economic situation. I’m actually the oldest one to learn.”

“Well, Jon, here in Boston you are exactly the right age for learning.”

Mrs. Hellandback interrupted. “Jon, I will take you out in the next few days. In England, though, you drive on the opposite side. Wasn’t that strange?”

“Not really. Since I’ve never driven before, it was easy.”

Mr. Hellandback said, “Then I guess you’re going to have to unlearn all the things you learned about driving in England.”

“No problem, Dad. The basics are still the same. How’s Titan?”

Mrs. Hellandback said, “He’s found something behind the boiler. Don’t let him in the basement. You won’t get him back upstairs.”

Mr. Hellandback sighed, “We sent Chris behind the boiler, but whatever was back there is still there. Chris opened the window, which makes it hot down there, but that’s about all that he did. Jon, tomorrow I want you to go back there and check things out.”

“Sure, Dad, if someone will take me driving tomorrow.”

Mr. Hellandback looked at Mrs. Hellandback. She said, “Okay, Jon, I will take you tomorrow afternoon before rush-hour traffic.”

Jon entered the house, and Titan went wild. He was so excited he piddled on the floor.

Brittany came in after Jon, and Mr. Hellandback saw the small bag of colored stones, which he recognized. “Brittany, where did you get that?”

“I tried to give them back, but the head nurse insisted that the little boy in room two-ninety-two wanted me to have this.”

“What little boy?”

“I don’t really know, Dad. I don’t remember him.” Brittany went and gave Jon a quick hug. “Nice to see you, Jon. With Chris and Trisha, it’s hard to have an intelligent conversation.”

Mrs. Hellandback said, “Brittany, they just have different interests. That’s all.”

Chris walked by eating a banana. “Brittany, what’s that?”

She handed the pouch over to her younger brother. He poured the stones into his hand. “Hey Dad, don’t you have a few of these in your drawer in the bathroom—the one with your shaving stuff?”

Mr. Hellandback nodded.

Mrs. Hellandback yelled from the kitchen, “Chris, I’ll have dinner ready in thirty minutes. Don’t leave the house.”

“Aw, Mom, I’m going to my friend’s house. Trisha’s not home.”

“Have you eaten anything?”

Chris held up the rest of the banana. “Yeah, can I go?”

“Okay, call me once you get there.”

Chris grabbed his lacrosse stick and headed out the door.

Jon and Mr. Hellandback went into the kitchen to wait for dinner.

The next afternoon, Mrs. Hellandback really didn't want to take Jon driving, but she had told him she would. So she yelled up the stairs, "Jon, it's now or never to go driving. Make sure you have your permit."

Jon came running down the stairs. "Come on, Mom."

Chris came out of the kitchen. "Mom, can you take me to school? The guys are going to have a lacrosse scrimmage this afternoon."

"Well, I'm taking Jon driving, so I think you'll have to walk."

"Hey Jon, you don't mind driving me over to school, do you?"

"No, Chris. Hurry up. We're leaving now."

Mrs. Hellandback slowly grabbed her purse, and Chris threw Jon the keys. Mrs. Hellandback seemed nervous, while Jon wasn't the slightest bit anxious.

Jon got in the car and turned the key, and Chris said, "Let's go, Jon. I'm going to be late."

Mrs. Hellandback said, "Chris, if you're going to be late...Jon, you better let me drive."

"Mom, no way!"

Mrs. Hellandback now wished she had asked Patrick to take the bigger car. Jon came so close to parked cars that she rolled her window down and folded the side mirror in. Jon was driving fairly well, but the streets seemed so much narrower than they usually were.

Jon started to weave over the centerline only once. Mrs. Hellandback yelled, "Jon, watch out!"

"Mom, I'm fine. Close your eyes if you are nervous."

Jon pulled up in front of the lacrosse field and honked. All the lacrosse players looked over. Jon waved. He missed playing lacrosse, but he wanted his teammates to see how well he was driving.

Chris jumped out. "Thanks. I'll be home in a couple of hours."

"Chris, tell the guys I'll start back to practice on Friday."

Chris didn't care when Jon came back—it just meant more practice time for him. In the summer, the middle school and high school all played on the same field together, and Chris and Jon both played the attack position.

Mrs. Hellandback said, "Jon, you're not a bad driver."

"Yeah, relax, Mom. I know what I'm doing."

They drove for about forty-five minutes and then headed home. Jon hit the curb twice trying to park, which was worse with his dad watching him.

Mrs. Hellandback said, "Jon, you're doing a great job. Don't worry about parallel parking."

"Mom, I can do this. I just need to get the logistics of the steering wheel on the opposite side."

Finally, he got the hang of it and parked perfectly.

Mr. Hellandback came up. "How was the first driving lesson?"

"Dad, it was sweet."

"Yes, Jon, I see that."

Mrs. Hellandback said, "It was really okay. Just a little shaky at the end there, when you were watching him park."

"Well, what happened to the mirror?"

"Oh. I did that. I thought the lanes were a little narrow, and the car was a little large, so I put the mirror down."

"Hey Dad, what did you think, I hit something?"

“Jon, I really didn’t know. While your mother makes dinner, are you ready to look behind the boiler?”

“Yeah, sure, no problem. Thanks, Mom.”

Jon went down to the basement. He didn’t wait for his father to change his clothes and join him. He bent down and reached behind the boiler, feeling the floor. Jon felt something, but it felt like plastic. He pulled it out. It was a flashlight. He flicked it on, but it didn’t work. Jon didn’t care. He didn’t know about the strange thing Chris had seen in his closet, and it wouldn’t have mattered anyway. He would have loved to make fun of Chris, though. Jon squeezed through the thin opening. He felt around on the floor for a raccoon or a cat. He didn’t find any furry creatures, but he did feel a few long, hard things.

Jon stood up, bumping his head on the open window. “Ouch.” He quickly shut the window and crawled out from behind the boiler.

Jon looked at what he was carrying in his hand. It smelled terrible. “Whoa! Now that’s deranged, must be part of one of my old casts. I thought Mom threw these out.” He threw the object in the trash and walked upstairs.

“Dad, I hate to disappoint you, but there isn’t anything behind the boiler. Just some dark, hard things that smell bad. Maybe you can get Chris to clean back there for you.”

Mr. Hellandback waved his hand in the air like that would never happen. “Well, whatever was back there, it’s gone now.” He looked at Mrs. Hellandback. “See, dear? I saved us some money not hiring a critter removal.”

“Well, you’re just lucky it worked out for the best this time. Jon, did your dad tell you that Chris thought he saw something in his closet last week?”

“No, but did he sleep in your room on the floor for days after?”

Mrs. Hellandback said, “No, as a matter of fact, it was only one night.”

“Darn, I wish I’d have been here. You know, Mom, he can play practical jokes on the rest of the family, but if someone does it to him, he has a fit. He’s going to have to toughen up now that I’m home.”

Mr. Hellandback said, “Jon, don’t get too crazy. I don’t want him in our room every night.”

Mrs. Hellandback poured her son some herbal tea and sighed, “It’s going to be a very long summer.”

CHAPTER 8

Jon and Chris had lacrosse camp until a day before the trip to Scotland, so Mrs. Hellandback had to pack everything. If she left it up to them, they would pack nothing but their lacrosse equipment, not even a toothbrush. Even Brittany had gotten ready a few days ago.

When Mr. and Mrs. Hellandback saw their four children off to the airport, Chris could tell by his parents' faces that they were a little sad to see them all leaving at the same time. It was only for a week. They would just have to spoil Titan.

As the Hellandback children boarded the plane, they must have made quite a spectacle getting to their seats. Jon couldn't sit next to Chris or Trisha. He just couldn't read or concentrate on anything with Chris fidgeting or with Trisha's nervous tic. She would wiggle her feet the entire trip. Mr. and Mrs. Hellandback made Jon sit next to one of them many times at church, school plays, even at sporting events, without success. Jon swore that, even with his eyes closed, he couldn't think because of the constant motion from Trisha and Chris. So Jon sat next to Brittany, who could not sit next to Trisha, since they just didn't get along. They had to share close quarters in their bedroom; they would never sit next to each other on the plane. So Chris sat next to Brittany, and then Trisha.

The Hellandback children argued a few times during the flight, and the flight attendant finally had to come over. They were not that bad, but some adults complained that they were being too loud.

Chris suggested rock-paper-scissors to handle any disputes on the plane. He lost a lot, though, and yelled, "That's not fair!"

The flight attendant scowled at Chris and put her fingers to her lips like he was five.

Once they landed, they were all tired, but were excited to see Scotland and, of course, their granmama. Mrs. Hellandback said Chris had given her that name when he was three years old.

Chris wanted to beat the other three off the plane, so he pushed past Jon. He mumbled something about immaturity, but he let Chris take the lead.

They spotted Granmama standing by the baggage pickup, waving her arms. She had on a floral dress and a big floppy hat with sunflowers on it. To say their granmama was eccentric was putting it mildly. She might have been brilliant, but some members of the family had always said "crazy" was the right word for her.

The Hellandbacks walked out of the airport and into the parking lot, looking for the new expensive car that their mom had told them Granmama bought. Jon was surprised when she stopped in front of a 1950 Ford Deluxe Tudor Sedan. It was a classic, but not exactly what Mrs. Hellandback had described.

Brittany asked, "Where is your new car?"

"Well, it had too many gadgets on it. I couldn't concentrate on driving with all that stuff. File in, children. We haven't got all day."

They threw their luggage in the trunk. Then, at the same time, Jon and Chris yelled, "Shotgun!"

Granmama said, "I have no earthly idea what you are saying. But, Trisha, since you constantly wiggle, you sit up front."

Chris said loudly, "I can't speak for Jon, but I'm upset."

Jon poked Chris with his lacrosse stick to get in; he wanted a window seat.

Brittany looked for the seat belts. “Mom would be pissed if she knew we were in a car and it didn’t have seat belts.”

Granmama seemed perfectly calm. “We are not going far; you will all be fine. Now, Trisha, turn on the music.”

Trisha looked at the dashboard for anything resembling a radio. She pointed to a few knobs and turned one. She turned it too far, and a blast of scratchy music came out of the radio.

Granmama said, “Now that is more like it.”

Chris put his finger in his mouth as if he was gagging.

“Chris, I can see you in my rearview mirror. Do you have something stuck in your throat?” After a stern look, she changed the subject. “Chris, how do you like your surroundings?”

Chris looked out the window for the first time, noticing green grass as far as he could see. In fact, many shades of green covered the passing landscape. None of the Hellandback children could believe how much open land there was. They all felt they could get lost in the hugeness of it all.

Land was precious in Boston, and nobody had a yard to speak of—at least nobody they knew. Here, there were sheep on every hill, and the longer they drove, the greater the distance between houses.

Jon said, “I thought you didn’t live exceedingly far from the airport, Granmama?”

“Jon, here in my home country, you may call me ‘Ma’am’ if you would like. It will be respectful, but shorter.” All of the Hellandback kids knew Granmama demanded respect. “It is a bit of a drive to my home, but well worth the trip.”

Soon she pulled up to a huge building that didn’t look like a house at all. None of them wanted to say anything. Chris jabbed Jon with his lacrosse stick until he finally spoke.

“Ma’am, what is this place? Is this where you live?”

“Yes, Jon—or do you still go by Jonathan?”

Chris couldn’t stand it. “This conversation isn’t going anywhere. You can call him Jon and me Chris. We have shortened our names since we matured.”

Granmama smiled. “Oh, I see, Chris. Well, to answer your question, Jon—yes, this is where I live. It used to be a hospital many, many years ago. Your dad loved growing up here. There was never a dull moment. He was a very mischievous young lad.”

Brittany asked in a quiet voice, “Dad lived here when he was a little boy?”

“Yes, Brittany, he did, and he loved every minute of it. He never wanted to leave. But enough about old times—we’re going to have some new adventures.”

At this point, they all dragged their tired bodies out of the uncomfortable old seats. Granmama added, “And you will each have your own room.”

Trisha got so excited that she jumped up and down and hit Chris in the eye. Trisha said it was an accident, but Chris wasn’t so sure. Luckily, Granmama stepped between them before Chris could take her down.

“Now, all of you get your bags and come into the kitchen. It’s been a long trip, and you must be hungry.” They all followed her into the kitchen through long hallways that looked like they led into some dark, unknown abyss.

Smart-alecky Chris muttered under his breath, “We are going to need tracking devices.”

Trisha said, “But look on the bright side. There’s enough room that I can play my music and not bother anybody—and no one will bother me.”

Granmama replied, “Trisha, I don’t think you will have time for music. You can listen to music at home, but this trip is all about adventures.”

Brittany said, “What do you mean by that?”

“You’ll see. Now, what kinds of sandwiches would you like? I have all your favorites. I spoke with your mum, and she told me.”

Chris said, “I think I speak for all of us when I say, Ma’am, at this point I will eat cardboard. Okay, that may not be exactly what the rest of you would say, but you know the airlines these days are cheap; they don’t give you much to eat.”

After their sandwiches, Granmama made them some hot cocoa. As they sipped it, she said, “I know it’s getting late, but I’d like to ask you each some questions before I show you to your rooms. I can’t pick out the proper bedroom for each of you until I know what you are interested in these days. Chris, what do you want to be when you grow up?”

Chris thought this was sort of an insult, since he thought he was already grown up. “Well, Ma’am, I don’t plan to go to college anywhere it is hot. Last summer, Mom sent me to summer camp in Texas, and I thought I was going to die from heatstroke. But I would like to be a cardiac surgeon some day. Science is my favorite subject, and I don’t mind a little blood and guts every now and then.”

Jon got a little pale. “Chris, don’t talk about stuff like that after we just ate.”

It didn’t bother Trisha, Brittany, or Chris to talk about gory things. They all laughed at Jon. He was one of the toughest guys in high school, and that had not changed, but if anyone mentioned blood around him, he would practically faint.

Granmama nodded. “Chris, that is a very worthwhile profession. I can’t say that I’m gobsmacked by your choice to become a surgeon. You always did like to see the insides of things. Mostly kitchen appliances, though. There are some very good schools in Texas, so keep an open mind. You might have a change of heart about the hot weather.”

Great-Grandmother couldn’t say why Chris was going to have to change his mind about attending college in a warm climate. She had several years to work on him, though. Her visions, she had found out through the years, always came true. The vision of Chris frozen to death during college wasn’t a sight she would forget, but the decision had to come from Chris. She knew Chris was stubborn, and she was going to have to work on him for half a dozen years or so. If she informed the person of her so-called vision, it would always play out exactly as she saw it. Things couldn’t be changed once it slipped through her lips to the intended.

She changed the subject. “What about you, Trisha?”

“Well, Granmama, I think I will go to college for my MRS degree.”

Granmama looked puzzled. “What is this MRS degree?”

Chris couldn’t hold it in any longer. He thought he’d burst a gut. “Granmama, Trisha wants to go to college to get married.”

Granmama simply looked at Chris. When he calmed down, she turned to Trisha. “I don’t see anything wrong with that. College is a great opportunity to date boys with the same interests that you have. I’m sure you will find a husband, and you’ll leave with a great education. I understand your plan.”

Chris mumbled, “Well, she better have a Plan B.”

Chris thought his granmama was going to stare him down again, but she looked at twelve-year-old Brittany. “What about your future, Brittany?”

“I’d like to be a scientist someday and work with extremely dangerous viruses like Ebola, SARS, or H5N1 Avian virus—you know, the bird flu. I’d like to go to college overseas, maybe

go to school in England and study abroad. I sometimes wish I had been born about a hundred years ago, and England makes it so easy to believe I was.”

Trisha chimed in. “I think I would like that also, Granmama. I’d like to live when the boys acted like gentlemen and a lady didn’t have to worry about getting hurt.”

Granmama smiled. “I’m sure you will get into a college in England if that is where you truly want to go. And how about you, Jon? Have you given much thought to your future?”

Jon grinned confidently. “Granmama, I don’t have to put too much thought into that question. I’ve had my future planned out since I was three years old. I will own my own multimillion-dollar company. I enjoy hard work and long hours; that’s what keeps me going.”

“What about a family and friends, Jon? Do you plan on being alone?”

Chris looked at his older brother for the first time like maybe he wasn’t as lucky as he thought. It was so difficult for Jon to make friends and then keep them.

“I’ll have plenty of time for all that when I make my money.”

“I see. And just how much money will make you happy enough to slow down and connect with others, and perhaps have a family?”

“I don’t know right now, Granmama, but I’ll know when I get there. I’m only fifteen years old.”

“That’s very interesting, Jon. I think you should think about it so you can schedule your high school classes to match what you want to take in college. I do wish you would follow your father and be a lawyer or an inventor, but that’s up to you. Now let me show you to your rooms.”

They all got up and looked for their luggage. But it was gone. Chris asked, “Where’s our luggage?”

“It’s in your individual rooms.”

Jon said, “I didn’t see anyone come into the kitchen. Chris, did you see anyone? You were sitting closest to the door.”

Chris just shook his head.

Granmama said, “So, before I begin this tour, does anyone need to use the loo?”

Brittany and Trisha never passed up an opportunity to use the bathroom, so Granmama showed them to a tiny half bath off of the kitchen.

When they came back into the kitchen, Brittany was saying, “Trisha, did you feel something against your arm?”

“No, nothing. Why?”

“Are you sure you didn’t see or feel anything move past you?”

“No, Brittany. I felt a small gust of air, but this is an old building, like ours—you know, with drafts and things.”

“Yeah, I guess.” They all watched the bathroom door swing slowly shut.

Granmama said, “All right, children, it is time I showed you to your rooms.”

The only thing resembling an old hospital was the building itself.

Brittany asked, “Where did all these things come from?”

The walls and hallways were covered with exotic objects, including old weapons: spears, daggers, hitting rocks, two-sided swords, flintlock pistols, knives of every shape and size, axes, fencing equipment, even several old cannons. There were skulls, skeletons, old birthing pots, Indian artifacts, canvas pictures, very old rugs, armor, shields, helmets, shrunken heads, two-headed beasts, stuffed alligators, and many other things.

Jon was studying the mechanism for the old weapons. “Where did all this come from?”

“Your great-grandfather and I loved traveling and collecting all these items.”

Chris said, "I bet you needed a lot of money to go to all those faraway places?"

Chris was still trying to figure out if his granmama was going to tell them about their inheritance. So far, the trip had been uneventful with the exception of the weird house. There must have been a good reason to interrupt their routine life in Boston.

"Actually, no, Chris, we didn't spend any money. Come now, children, let me show you to your rooms."

"How could you get all this stuff without paying anything? You and great-grandfather have sticky fingers or what?"

"Chris, I can talk about that later. Let's move on."

Chris leaned over and whispered to Brittany, "Looks like we have a fugitive in our family tree."

Brittany said, "Chris, hurry up. We're going to lose Granmama."

CHAPTER 9

Granmama gave them a quick tour of the first floor. Then, pointing in a different direction, she said, “Chris, your bedroom is on the first floor like mine. The other three rooms will be on the second floor.”

Chris mumbled, “Oh, great! She put me closer to her so she can keep an eye on me.”

Jon said, “This place has an interesting odor to it.”

Brittany said, “It smells like the hospital we took you to when you broke your arm playing lacrosse in sixth grade.”

Chris said, “What about when I broke a bone in my foot?”

Trisha rolled her eyes. “Okay, Chris, we didn’t forget about when you fractured your foot falling off the curb. This place does smell like that.”

Chris was getting irritated. “You have got to be kidding me, Trisha. Don’t you remember? A car slammed into me and ran over my foot. Probably a driver like Jon.”

Granmama looked surprised. “Didn’t I tell you that this used to be a hospital many, many years ago?”

Chris shrugged his shoulders, not remembering if she had told them that or not. “I just thought that you were kidding or that, maybe, over the years, there had been some remodeling, but I can see that’s probably not true.”

Trisha started to fidget since she was a little unnerved, but she was also excited about getting a room to herself.

Granmama said, “I will take you all around to see where each of you will be sleeping, in case you want to find each other in the middle of the night. Oh—I’ve also put flashlights in all your rooms. Sometimes the lights go out. But, when you are sleeping, who needs lights anyway?”

Chris said, “Makes sense to me.”

Trisha said very quietly, “Granmama, Jon and Chris never get scared of anything. I don’t know if all boys are like that or just them. This place is a little scary to me. But, if Dad grew up here, it must be a great place.”

Finally, they walked down to the end of a long, dark corridor. There were two huge doors under a sign that read: OR.

Granmama stopped in front of the doors and said, “Chris, this is your room.”

“What does OR stand for?” Chris asked.

Granmama put her hand on his shoulder. “Chris, it stands for Operating Room. This used to be where all the surgeries were performed.” She pushed the button on the side of the doors, and they swung open, nearly knocking Trisha down. They all looked inside, not wanting to walk through the doors.

When they did step inside, the air felt cool, almost cold. The old operating room held a stainless steel table with a round light over it. Since it was very dark in the room, Granmama grabbed the surgical light over the steel table and gave the handle in the middle a twist; the light blazed on. They all looked around the room.

There was medical equipment everywhere. Two steel tables, which once had probably held surgical instruments, were set up next to the operating table as bedside tables. There were no rugs or curtains or anything to make the room feel like a bedroom. The windows were

completely covered. Chris didn't know if that had been done for the surgeries years ago or if someone had done it later to keep out the light. He just knew that if the light were off and the doors were shut, he wouldn't be able to see his hand in front of his face.

Chris asked, "Granmama, are you sure this is my room? It doesn't look anything like a bedroom."

"Chris, does it not have a bed in it, and a blanket and a pillow?"

Chris looked around the room and saw a small table in the corner with, not a blanket, but a sleeping bag and a pillow.

Trisha picked up the bedding, put the sleeping bag on the stainless steel table, then fluffed the pillow. "Chris, I think you're going to like sleeping here. You've slept on worse."

Brittany said, "Chris, when you have your friends spend the night, it never bothers you to sleep on the hard, cold floor."

"Yeah, I guess it is kind of neat to sleep in an operating room." Chris walked over and opened one of the metal drawers of instruments.

Trisha, right behind him, looked into the drawer also. "Wow! All that shiny stuff—it looks like a drawer filled with jewelry." She picked up a hemostat and watched the light bounce off the handle.

Jon said, "These instruments look brand new."

Brittany said, "Granmama, who dusts this room? It's totally clean."

Chris could almost see his reflection in the floor. "I think you can eat off the floor; it looks freshly polished. And what's this?" There in front of him was a metal box, about eighteen inches by eighteen inches, sitting on the metal counter above the instruments.

Granmama said, "That's an autoclave. It sterilizes the instruments. It hasn't been used in years, but I'm sure it still works." Above the instrument drawers, several drawers contained gauze and bandages, all in perfect condition. An X-ray box, writing board, several large mirrors, and a telephone decorated the walls.

Chris turned and asked his great-grandmother, "Can I wrap the bandages around myself and walk around like a mummy?" Ideas for scaring his sisters roamed around in his head.

Chris thought this was getting boring. He wondered if he had taken his ADHD medications. He couldn't even figure out what day it was, let alone if he was current on his meds. Restless, he started fiddling with a machine on the counter. He picked up two metal defibrillator paddles and pretended to put them on his chest.

Chris yelled, "Clear!"

Trisha jumped into the air, and Jon automatically punched Chris in the shoulder. "I saw that on a medical show."

Brittany said, "Chris, don't yell like that again."

Chris put the paddles down and rubbed his right shoulder. "What a bunch of scaredy-cats." Another machine caught his eye.

"What does EKG stand for, and why is everything abbreviated?"

Brittany said, "Chris, not to go into a lot of detail, but it stands for electrocardiogram, and it measures the electrical signals that control the rhythm of your heartbeat."

She even managed to impress Jon, which was no easy task. He gave Brittany a look of satisfaction.

"I learned that at the hospital when I volunteered."

The round surgical light flickered off and on. It started making a buzzing sound.

Granmama said, "The wiring in this building is very old. You children wait here while I go check something."

Great-Grandmother had just stepped out, and Chris's mind filled with ideas. He took some of the surgical equipment out of the drawers and brought over the defibrillator. He was going to do some pretend surgical procedure. As the lights in the hallway flickered, there seemed to be someone lying on the steel surgical table. The four Hellandback children came close. What or who was on the table?

Trisha said, "Chris, that looks like you."

Chris was very rarely speechless, but he couldn't move his mouth. He picked up his lacrosse stick and tried to poke the vision with his stick. The illusion on the table let out a bloodcurdling scream, and the Hellandbacks all jumped back several feet.

Jon never swore, but he said, "What the hell!"

The vision of Chris on the table sat up and, without a sound, slowly dragged itself out of the room. The next thing they heard was their great-grandmother talking to someone.

Chris's voice cracked. "Who is she talking to?"

Trisha's eyes were bugging out of her head as if they would burst. "I want to go home."

Great-Grandmother walked through the door. "Everything is fine. Just blew a fuse. Children, what's wrong? You all look like you've seen a spirit."

Jon was the only one who could find his voice. "We just saw a vision of Chris on the surgical table, and it looked like he was dead."

The surgical light buzzed and slowly came on. Chris found his voice. "I know I'm pale, but I had no color to my skin at all."

"Children, everything is fine. I know you never met your great-grandfather, but he was a very mystical soul."

Brittany grabbed her chest. "Granmama, what does that have to do with Chris being dead on the table?"

She cleared her throat and hesitated. Great-Grandmother finally said, "He is a very loving man and would never harm you children."

Jon said, "Why are you talking like he is still alive?"

"Children, please don't take this the wrong way, but he still walks the hallways of this hospital. He shares his visions with others."

Trisha started to leave the room. "I want to go home!"

Chris nervously laughed. "He's my kind of guy if he can pull off scaring Jon and me."

Trisha and Brittany looked at each other. Sure, why hadn't they realized it until now?

Trisha said, "Chris, you've really stepped it up a notch. Not only have you recruited those disgusting friends of yours, but now Granmama."

Brittany blew out air through pursed lips. "Chris, how low will you go to scare Trisha and me?"

Jon slapped his little brother on the back. "Way to go, bro. You need to teach me that one."

Granmama winked at Chris and cleared her throat. "Pretty good trick. Children, let's move on to Trisha's room."

"Granmama, I hope my room is warmer than Chris's room. I get cold easily. And please, Granmama, tell Chris no funny stuff in my room."

"I think you'll like your room. We'll go up the stairs at the end of the hall."

Jon said, “Ma’am, doesn’t this place have an elevator? They would have had to have one to get the patients up to the second floor.”

“Yes, Jon, my house has a lift, but I’m a minimalist, and I don’t like to use it. All these stairs keeps me in shape. Besides, it is very old, and we might get stuck between floors, and then who would save us?”

Chris mumbled, “Great-Grandfather could send one of his goons to rescue us.”

“Yes, of course, Chris, but let’s just take the stairs.”

Chris just had to ask his granmama one more time, “Are you sure this is the room that suits me? I could go for an overstuffed mattress and some bed linen. I like the temperature in the room, but the rest has got to go.”

“Yes, Chris, this is the room I prepared for you.”

Granmama turned off the light, and they all walked out of the OR.

What did Great-Grandfather Hellandback really have in mind for his great-grandchildren? Granmama was somewhat eccentric, but her deceased husband was not to be trusted.

CHAPTER 10

They walked through the dark hallways all clumped together, stepping on each other.

Granmama said, "Children, spread out. You're going to hurt one another. This place will become more comfortable after a few days."

Granmama stopped in front of huge double doors. Unlike the OR doors, they were made of thick, heavy, and ornately carved wood. She opened the massive doors with very little effort. A feeling of comfort came over them, and they looked around in amazement.

Standing up front on either side of the church were two wax figures. One was of a handsome man in a tuxedo, and the other was of a young lady.

Chris started laughing. "Trisha, that's you in that wedding dress. I guess that's one way to get a man to marry you."

Trisha was upset. "That manikin doesn't look anything like me!"

Brittany said, "Trisha, the wax statue is identical to you. The only difference is her hair is pulled up in ringlets."

"I would never wear my hair like that."

Trisha went and stood in front of the man in the tux. "He looks older than me, and his clothes are old-fashioned." Trisha touched one of his hands to see if he was real and got a pins-and-needles sensation in her hand. She quickly pulled away.

"I think I got shocked. Granmama, is this man hooked up to electricity?"

Jon interrupted her, as he usually did. "I think the more important issue would be, why is there a coffin on the floor?"

It was a nice enough coffin, bright white and shiny. You could almost see Jon's reflection in it. Chris had to check it out, so he ran over. "Let's see if there is anyone in it."

Jon snorted, "Why would anyone be in the coffin, Chris? This is not a funeral parlor."

Granmama intervened. "Chris, there is no one in the coffin. That is where Trisha will be sleeping."

Chris opened up the top portion of the perfectly glazed rectangular box.

Trisha gasped, "It is absolutely perfect, Granmama!" She ran her hand along the side of the coffin.

Jon said, "Leave it to Trisha to think a coffin is perfect for sleeping."

The coffin was lined with white silk, padded and tufted, with a small pillow and a small white blanket inside.

Granmama said, "Trisha, I know how you like small places. It makes you feel safe. But, the most important reason is your fetish with vampires and men of mystery and everything that goes along with them."

"This kind of surprise I like. When I tell my friends in Boston, they are going to think this was so cool."

Chris said, "Hey Trisha, do you think that wax manikin is some type of vampire?" He walked over to her and opened his mouth and showed his teeth as if he was going to bite her neck. "I want to suck your blood."

Trisha waved her younger brother away as if she was shooing a bee away. "Chris, get away from me."

Trisha took her shoes off and climbed into the coffin, snuggling down into the pillow. For some reason Trisha said, "I feel safe." But then, she liked small spaces. She loved to dance with her friends, but was easily overwhelmed and liked to retreat to a quiet place. She had read every vampire book available and had seen any movie dealing with an unusual relationship with a man of unknown origin. "If this works out, can you tell Dad and Mom to get me a coffin for a bed at home? My friends will be so jealous. I feel like I'm in a cocoon."

Chris said sarcastically, "Trisha, how would you know what a cocoon felt like?"

Brittany looked at her sister. "I can't believe you love all that vampire stuff."

"Brittany, it's better than having a lifelong dream of playing around with deadly viruses. At least my passion looks great in a tux. Besides, you die either way. I'd rather go out with a smile on my face."

Brittany rolled her eyes. "Trisha, why do you think someone biting your neck and draining all your bodily fluids would be a sensual way to die?"

"Brittany, you just don't understand. Look at him."

Brittany went over and looked at the male wax statue, and then over to the young lady that looked like her sister. "Trisha, did you look closely at this manikin?"

"No. Why?"

Jon said, "Trisha, it looks like she's losing volume, as if she's deteriorating right in front of us."

"I'm not going to let Chris ruin this for me."

Chris shrugged his shoulders. "Sorry, sis, I haven't done anything to the dripping wax lady. Maybe Great-Grandfather has something to do with this."

Chris spotted a collection plate on the front bench, ran over, and started examining the coins. Although he didn't know how much money was their due to the fact they were British coins, he already had several visions of what he could purchase when Brittany yelled, "Chris! That is very disrespectful. Put that money down."

She went on more quietly. "Who would leave all this money here?"

Granmama said, "When this was a hospital many years ago, this was the hospital's chapel. Family and friends of patients—and even some patients—would come here and pray. See? Over in the corner are candles that they could light."

Trisha sighed, "The stained glass windows are beautiful. I would love to be married in this chapel. It's small, but very quaint." Light seemed to shine through the stained glass, which was strange because it was nighttime.

Chris started laughing at Trisha. "Don't you have to have a victim first—I mean, a man to marry you?" He looked at the wax manikin. "Hey Trisha, he looks like your type. He can't run away."

Granmama once again stood up for Trisha. "Don't worry, Chris. Trisha will find the perfect husband, without even looking."

Trisha stuck her tongue out at Chris as he circled his finger by his head to let Trisha know that she was crazy.

A large cross-hung on the wall above the altar, and several pictures in elaborate frames hung around the room. One of the pictures caught Trisha's eye. She got out of the coffin and put her shoes on. The portrait showed a woman who looked as if she had lived a hundred years ago. It was painted on canvas. The paint colors looked faded, but still vibrant.

The woman wore a purple satin dress with lace at the neckline and cuffs. She wore a big pin on her chest. Her purple and dark blue hat matched her dark blue sash. Large black feathers

stuck out of the side of the hat, but she looked important, rather than comical, at least according to Trisha.

Chris thought she looked ridiculous, even for that time period. The woman sat straight and tall, as though a string attached her head to the ceiling. Chris expected her to pop up at any moment. Her hands were folded on her lap with her right hand on top, so you couldn't see if she was married. Chris had a strong feeling she had to be single, unless all women back then looked like her—not much for a guy to look at. She had brown hair, with some bouncing curl thing on the right side of her head. Her lips were small and thin, her eyes far apart, and she looked like she was at least in her late thirties or early forties. She was no beauty, that was for sure, but as Chris put it, she wasn't a double bagger either.

Brittany noticed Trisha studying the woman in the portrait and came over.

Trisha said, "It looks like they didn't have makeup back then. Brit, you would fit right in." Brittany rolled her eyes, but Trisha didn't notice. She was too busy studying the portrait more closely. "I think the woman in this painting is looking at me."

Chris said, "Of course she is looking at you; she is looking at all of us."

"No, Chris, I think her eyes are following me."

"Trisha, you think everyone is looking at you."

Granmama quickly changed the subject. "All these paintings are of the administrator's family. I will tell you about them when we come to Jon's room." As they turned to leave the room, the wax figure that looked like Trisha fell to the floor and withered away.

Granmama hurried them out the wooden doors before they could see.

CHAPTER 11

Granmama walked to the end of the hallway and took a left, pointing to the right as she did. “Jon, your room is at the end of this hall, but for now we are going to see Brittany’s room. Brittany, your room is the only one with an attached bathroom. The rest of you can find the nearest lavatory.”

Trisha looked down the hallway toward Jon’s bedroom. “Brittany, did you see that?”

“See what?”

“I thought I saw a child or a small person or something.”

Brittany got excited. “See, Trisha, there is something in this place besides us!”

Chris said, “Why are all of our rooms so far apart?”

Granmama quickened her pace. “Well, I thought you would all want your space. I’m sure the plane trip over was very cramped, and, at home, Brittany and Trisha have to share a room. Besides, I’ve only gotten the beds ready in these rooms.”

Chris muttered under his breath, “A sleeping bag and a coffin—I wouldn’t call those beds.”

Granmama just winked at Chris. She seemed to expect more manners with the other three, but she knew Chris would say the first thing that came to his mind. They stopped in front of a door on the left; a cart stood outside. Brittany looked at the room number and couldn’t believe it. It was room 292, the same as her school locker number!

The sign on the door read: QUARANTINE in bright red letters, and underneath, in smaller handwritten letters: DRESS APPROPRIATELY.

Chris asked, “What does ‘dress appropriately’ mean? Does it mean all this?” Chris pointed to the cart filled with paper gowns, caps, masks, footwear, and latex gloves.

Brittany picked up a glove. “This is modern protective clothing for an isolation room.”

Trisha said, “Granmama, it seems the rooms you picked for us have been updated.”

Chris was done with all this by now. He tried to blow up one of the latex gloves.

Granmama ignored him and continued talking. “Children, do what I do, and then follow me into Brittany’s room. Oh, and don’t touch anything without your gloves on.”

Brittany said, “Granmama, you are scaring me!”

Chris tried to lighten the mood. “Brittany, I always said you were contaminated.” They watched their great-grandmother put on all the isolation gear and quickly followed suit.

Brittany, with her mask in place, breathed in deeply. “It smells like rain.”

Chris looked around the room and couldn’t contain himself. “At least you have a bed, even if it’s a hospital bed.”

“Children, the smell of the rain comes from the recycled air for the isolation room.”

Brittany looked around the room. There was a vibrant wall mural covering the wall facing the bed. The mural depicted women in flowing dresses walking through what looked like a market of some type. Chickens ran around with children chasing them, and the buildings looked like those of old England. Brittany walked up to the mural and ran her hand across the wall. She yanked her hand away.

Jon said, “Brit, what’s wrong?”

She looked at the mural. “I just felt a strange sensation run through my fingers and up my arm. It wasn’t uncomfortable; it just startled me, that’s all. Mostly it was hot.”

Jon came over and felt the wall painting—his version of protecting the family. “It feels normal to me.”

Brittany looked down. “See? That chicken moved! Chris, touch that chicken, the one running from that little boy, the one at the bottom of the mural.”

“Feels like a wall to me, nothing special. Brit, are you okay?” His sister was acting weird.

Trisha put her hand on Brittany’s forehead to see if she was running a fever. “You don’t feel warm. I hope you aren’t coming down with something. Did you catch something on the plane trip over here? Maybe a good night’s sleep will help you feel better.”

Brittany knocked Trisha’s hand off of her forehead and followed the mural around the room, where it became more disturbing. The colors grew darker, the people looked sick, and some even looked dead in the streets. Brittany shivered. She pulled the hospital curtain around her bed to block the disturbing parts of the mural. “That’s better.”

Granmama said, “Brittany, you have a call bell on the handrails of your bed. All you have to do is push the button, and I will come to see what you need throughout the night.”

That was it; Chris couldn’t keep his complaints to himself any longer. “Granmama, I’m beginning to think you like me the least. I think I have the most uncomfortable bed, and I have no call button or bathroom in my room.”

Trisha said, “Chris, I’m sleeping in a coffin!”

“Yes, but your coffin is nice and comfortable. I have a steel table and a sleeping bag.”

“Children, let’s go see Jon’s room. Take off your isolation gear, and put everything in the container just before leaving the room.”

Chris saw an opening to take some latex gloves with him. Granmama must have seen him out of the corner of her eye. “Chris, leave the gloves behind.”

Chris mumbled half to himself, “How did you know I had the gloves? And how else can I make water balloons later?”

As Granmama was conversing with Chris, Brittany took another look at her room and the mural. The people on the mural became lifelike. The sick were dragging themselves toward her, begging for help with their British accents. The streets were covered in filth, and rats ran everywhere. The door to the hallway vanished, so she ran into the bathroom and slammed the door.

She yelled, “Granmama! Jon, Chris!”

No answer. She fumbled to find the door lock. There wasn’t one. Brittany pressed herself hard against the door, but she was only twelve, and the sickened people were trying to get in. Rats started to appear in the bathroom as she yelled for her granmama and siblings, and once again no answer. There was an old, withered hand that pushed the door open and was trying to grab Brittany.

She screamed for her granmama once more and heard a voice.

“Brittany, step away from the door, honey. I’m trying to get in.” It was her granmama. “Brittany, you look a bit strange, dear. Are you all right?”

Brittany’s brothers and sister were staring at her. Trisha said, “I think she’s sick, Granmama. Maybe she’s having one of her migraines.”

This was the first time Great-Grandmother doubted her abilities to keep her great-grandchildren safe. It had been so easy with Patrick, the children’s father. She was over thirty years younger then and had help from her husband. Now that she was eighty-three, Alastair, her

husband, mainly roamed the halls and spent time in a black hole. He created more problems than solutions by far. Great-Grandmother didn't know now if she could handle all four of her great-grandchildren at the same time.

“Brittany, I will get you something if you are feeling ill?”

“No, Granmama, I'm fine. It's just been a long week for me. I'll be fine with a long night's rest.”

Great-Grandmother knew Brittany wouldn't be getting any sleep that night. Maybe Brittany wouldn't be healthy enough to go on an adventure. She would have to wait and see.

CHAPTER 12

They followed Great-Grandmother down the hallway, passing a series of closed doors until they reached a large door with the words “ADMINISTRATIVE OFFICE” stenciled on the glass.

“We’ve come to your room, Jon. The old administrator’s office,” Great-Grandmother said. The whole room was covered with huge stacks of paper. They blanketed the desk, floor, bookcases, and every other surface. Jon immediately started sneezing, his nose started running, and his eyes were itchy, watery, and turning red.

He was digging at his eyes when Granmama said, “Jon, I forgot you are allergic to cats.” Trisha shouted, “Is there a cat in here?” almost rupturing Chris’s eardrum.

Brittany, the animal lover, started hunting through the room. “I love cats. We just can’t have any because Jon is so allergic to them.”

Granmama cleared an office chair of loose paperwork and positioned the chair over to the vent. She quickly climbed on the chair and, as far as Chris could see, did some type of voodoo. She waved her hands in the air and muttered something mysterious.

As Chris’s three siblings looked on in shock, he said, “I think Granmama is having a stroke or something. Does 911 work here in Scotland?”

“Chris, I’m fine.” She turned and adjusted the vent.

As soon as she did, Jon’s symptoms cleared up. They all looked at each other and then shrugged.

Chris looked around the room to see where his older brother would sleep. Seeing nothing, he said with a smile on his face, “Well, Jon, it looks like you have the worst bed.” Chris walked over to the desk, plopped in the chair, leaned back, and propped his feet up on the desk, pushing some papers to the floor.

Granmama said, “Chris, that is just a desk and chair. Go over and pull the rope against the wall.”

He walked over to the wall and pulled hard on the rope attached to a rusty metal loop. He barely got out of the way in time. A Murphy bed came out of the wall and hit the papers on the floor, which went flying into the air.

“Chris, it only takes a gentle pull for the bed to come out of the wall.”

“Why didn’t you tell me that before, Granmama?” Chris did not wait for a response. He was fixated on the expensive-looking burgundy and green bedding and pillows on Jon’s bed.

As he was thinking about the sleeping arrangements and how he got shafted, Great-Grandmother said, “Children, come sit on the bed. I want to tell you about the founder of this hospital.”

They all climbed up on the massive bed and got comfortable, but Chris still couldn’t think straight. How was this fair?

“Chris, are you listening?”

“Yeah, I’m paying attention.” Chris thought, *I’ve had to say that to my teachers so many times over the years that it came out natural.*

“About a hundred years ago, two brothers, who were both doctors, wanted to build the first hospital in town. They had very big egos and inherited a lot of money when their parents had died. Charles, the younger brother, wanted to build the hospital on the north side of town,

and Lawrence, who was the older brother, wanted to build it on the south side of the town. Each brother thought they knew which way the town would expand in the future. After many disagreements, they decided that each would build his own hospital, Charles's on the north and Lawrence's on the south.

"So they built the hospitals. Each did well at the beginning, but, several years later, the town moved toward the north hospital, which was run by Charles. Lawrence tried hard to make his, this hospital, a success, and eventually slept here in the office many nights. When his wife became very sick, she was treated and died in this hospital. The story goes that she became despondent and ill over the death of her raccoon. Her husband had bought her a kitten, but it wasn't the same. Her picture is in Trisha's room; she is the lady in the purple dress, Mrs. Evelyn Toddles."

Chris interrupted. "The ugly woman in the portrait."

Great-Grandmother gave Chris a half nod with her head and continued. "After her death, this truly became Lawrence's home, and his wife's cat, Angel, became his best friend. No one knows if he died here or if he left. Some say he went insane once Angel died. But, after years of struggling, Lawrence had closed his hospital. The hospital remained vacant for many, many years until your great-grandfather and I bought it fifty years ago."

Chris again interrupted. "You mean Great-Grandfather, the one that's a nut?"

Great-Grandmother sighed, "Let's just say he was a little barmy?"

Jon said, "What does that mean?"

"Strange or silly. Now let's see, where was I? Oh, yes, the hospital Charles built on the north side of town still does very well; it is the oldest and best hospital for miles around."

Chris said, "Hey Jon, did you see how the younger brother in the story was the successful one?"

"Yeah, Chris, I made a note of that. I don't think any of us would have captured that thought without your help. Thanks for paying attention."

"No problem, Jon."

Jon said, "Shhh! What's that sound?"

It sounded like a dripping sound, and it was coming from the hallway. Jon got up to see what it was. Trisha and Brittany were trying to find the cat, and Chris was putting in his plea for better accommodations.

Jon looked out into the hallway. He did not see anything at first, but something landed on his arm. It looked like a large drop of blood. He looked up and saw a red stain in the ceiling that was dripping red liquid. Jon looked down, and the blood was dripping into a bucket. It was almost running over. Jon put his hand to his mouth as he felt his meal trying to come up.

In a shaky voice, Jon said, "Granmama, could you come here, please?"

Great-Grandmother got up as quickly as her advanced age would let her. "Jon, what is it?"

Jon pointed to the bucket, which was no longer there. Great-Grandmother put her hand on Jon's arm and felt the drops of blood, but that was all that was out of the ordinary. She took her hankie out of her waistband and wiped the blood from Jon's arm.

Chris yelled, "I smell cookies baking, Granmama."

Great-Grandmother put her hankie back. "Yes, Chris, when I made your sandwiches, I also put some cookies in the oven. It has an automatic shut off, so we don't have to worry about burning the house down. Let's all go down and have a snack, and then you can turn in for the night. I'm sure you're exhausted."

Jon looked down at his arm. “I don’t think I can eat.”

They headed downstairs to the kitchen. Trisha thought she heard something coming from one of the rooms. “Did you hear that, Chris?”

“Hear what? I smell cookies, though.” He ran full speed for the kitchen.

Although Jon’s stomach was a bit weak, he could never resist an opportunity to show Chris up, so he ran past him, of course, and reached the kitchen first. By the time the others came into the kitchen, Jon felt better and was just finishing his victory dance. Chris grabbed a handful of chocolate chip cookies and shoved them into his mouth as fast as he could.

Granmama entered the kitchen last. “Chris, slow down. There are plenty of cookies. You may eat as many as you want.” They did not get to eat cookies, cakes, or candy very often at home—just for birthdays or special occasions. Mom always said they were hyper enough without sugar. Chris figured she was mostly talking about him, though.

They finally headed for their rooms, and Granmama said, “Children, you will now all take charge of your own lives and adventures.”

She looked right at Chris. “Chris, do you understand what I mean by this?”

Chris felt like he did when his teachers asked him, “*Chris, do you understand what I just said, or do you need it explained again?*” Chris usually had no idea what his teachers wanted him to comprehend, and he definitely did not have a clue what his great-grandmother was saying to him now. But, from previous experience, he knew to just say yes. So that is what came out of his mouth.

Chris thought it was like having a huge Rolodex in his mind. His father had one in his office, on his desk, an antique-looking thing that held information on cards and you turned the wheel to find the exact card you wanted. (If you looked in his top desk drawer, Chris thought you would also find his father’s abacus for counting.) At times, Chris frantically searched his mind for the index card he needed. No matter how fast his mind searched for that particular card, he was unable to find it. It has been misfiled, but he knew that, at some later date, when he wouldn’t need that information, it would pop up and be available to him exactly when it would be useless.

Great-Grandmother’s voice brought Chris back to the here and now. Chris shook his head a little bit. “Yes, I understand, Granmama.”

As they were finishing their snack, Great-Grandmother could see a disturbing sight walking by the kitchen window. She could see the backstabbers, the weird-looking Professor Mend, Bundlebobs, Godfrey, and so on.

Brittany said, “I need to use the bathroom.”

Great-grandmother almost yelled, “Brittany, use the one in your room. Get going, children, before the lights go out. I have every light on in this old place, and hopefully we won’t blow a fuse.” She had to get the children out of the kitchen before it was filled with odd goons and ghouls. “Hurry now, children. I left flashlights in your rooms if you should need them.”

CHAPTER 13

Chris took off running toward his room, turning back for just a second to watch his siblings climb the stairs and disappear onto the second floor. As Chris reached his room, the lights suddenly went out.

Chris mumbled, "Must have blown a fuse." He made his way over to the steel surgical table, searching for the flashlight, with his arms stretched out in front of him, feeling nothing but air. He thought the blackness was worse than being blind; it seemed to engulf him. *If my hands weren't attached to my arms, I could lose them in here*, he thought. His foot bumped into something that felt like his luggage, just as his right hand collided with something cold and sleek. He immediately knew it was the stainless steel operating table. Chris felt the sleeping bag and pillow and groped around for the flashlight.

His hand nudged something, and he heard a loud smack. The flashlight hit the floor and rolled, clinking on the ground with every turn. Chris listened so intently that he thought his ears were going to burst. Quickly he got down on his knees and followed the sound. He knew that if he didn't find the flashlight before it came to a complete stop, he would never find it.

The floor felt like ice as Chris crawled around. The flashlight had almost come to a stop when he finally found it. He picked it up, crossed his fingers, and said softly, "I hope I haven't broken it." As he slid his thumb over the button, a blaze of light lit up the room, and he sighed in relief. Chris wondered how blind people could do this every day. His teacher's husband was blind. He came to school with his helper dog to enlighten the class on the daily struggles of his handicap. Chris didn't really get it that day, but he did now. The simplest things turn into a big ordeal.

Chris reached over the steel table and twisted the center handle on the OR light, but nothing happened. Chris said, "Granmama had made it look so easy. Maybe there is some type of trick." After fiddling with the light for a few minutes, he got it to work. Chris turned off his flashlight—he needed to save the batteries for nighttime visits to the bathroom.

Chris put his bag on the steel table and found his T-shirt and wild pineapple boxers that he usually slept in. He didn't know why, but he quickly looked around the room to see if anyone was watching him. The room was empty, but he still dressed as quickly as he could. Chris smoothed the sleeping bag over the steel table and punched the pillow a couple of times before climbing on the table and slipping into the bag.

As Chris reached up to turn out the light, he could hear a faint voice say, "Brush your teeth." Chris thought it must have been in his head—his mother told him at least three to four times every night. But it sounded more like a child than his mother. Obediently he grabbed his toothbrush, toothpaste, and flashlight and headed for the nearest bathroom. Chris had earlier spotted a bathroom several doors down. As he opened the bathroom door, the light spilled out into the hallway, but was quickly eaten up by darkness.

The bathroom was just made for one; it didn't have stalls, just one toilet, shower, and sink. He set his flashlight carefully on the sink and went about his business. This reminded him of when the electricity had gone out at lacrosse camp one summer. That had been fun—playing light tag and hiding in the dorm. This wasn't fun, but then, when you are all by yourself, nothing really is.

He quickly left the bathroom and headed back to his room. On the way, his flashlight repeatedly flickered off and on. "Oh, great! I hope it's just the batteries."

In his room, with the light still on, he dug through his luggage to find some spare batteries in the video games he had brought with him. He put the extra batteries under the pillow for safekeeping and climbed into the sleeping bag. With one hand, he reached up and grabbed the light handle, gave it a firm twist, and the room went dark.

Chris wondered if he would be able to fall asleep. It seemed too calm, and he was used to a lot of noise when he fell asleep. If it ever got too quiet at home, which very rarely happened, he would turn on the TV and soon be out. *I could put the batteries back into the game and play a little. That might help. Or I could lie here and count to one hundred*, he thought.

That reminded him that he didn't have his lacrosse stick. He always kept it close by. He ran his hand around the outside of the steel table, until he felt the metal handle of the stick. It was propped up against the table. He picked it up and began bouncing an imaginary ball against an imaginary wall, then catching it. Jon was always telling him that he needed to practice on "the wall" more.

Jon would say, *"Do this hundreds of times a day, Chris, and you will be a great lacrosse player. Don't hesitate. Just keep throwing and catching as fast as you can."*

Jon had always told him to try it with his eyes closed to get the feel of his stick. Well, now he was trying it with his eyes shut, but he had no ball or wall—just his stick. He must have done it a couple hundred times before he finally fell asleep.

Chris awoke with a jerk. Someone was talking in a very, loud boisterous voice.

"Chris, wake up! You idle lad."

Chris thought he was at home in Boston. It must be the closet creature. He reached for his baseball bat, but only found his lacrosse stick.

An image was standing next to him. Chris swung his lacrosse stick, but it passed right through the image.

The old man laughed. "You think I'm a bit strange, do you?"

The only light in the room was coming from the old man, who was radiating with a warm glow. "Speechless, lad, I know you better than that. I'm your great-grandfather. Now, if you could put down the stick for just a moment, I'll explain things."

Chris had never seen a picture of his great-grandfather, but from what his great-grandmother had said earlier, the old man looked "odd" enough. He looked like a throwback from the hippie era. He was not a prisoner to fashion. That was obvious.

"Can't this wait until tomorrow? The plane trip was long, and I'm a bit worn out."

The old man said in a very dry tone, "Silence!"

Chris was not going to take this rude behavior. "Now, old man, you need to back away. When you wake someone up in the middle of the night, the least you can do is be civil about things."

Chris's great-grandfather rolled his eyes. "This is going to be harder than I thought. Aren't you scared of me?"

"A little at first, but what's there to be afraid of? You know, if you are some type of wizard or something, you are dressed all wrong. The tie-dyed shirt and headband have to go. The long white hair and beard fit the part, though."

"Chris, could we just skip my appearance for now? I thought this was the fashion for the time."

“For my dad’s generation, but not mine. Hey, have you visited my brother and sisters yet?”

Great-Grandfather rubbed his forehead. “No! I’ve come to see you.”

Chris said, “I see. I’m the only one who is losing sleep tonight!”

“I’ll have to send your mum a sympathy card. You are quite a handful.”

“Oh, now you’re a comedian.”

“Let’s start over. My name is Alastair. I have come to take you on an adventure.”

Chris interrupted. “You’re a spirit guide?”

“Yes, something like that. Anyway, I have brought you something.”

Chris held up his lacrosse stick. “Would it be a new stick? I prefer titanium.”

“No! It’s not a new stick.” Chris’s great-grandfather was almost begging Chris at this point. “Please, can I just finish my thoughts?”

“Sure, go right ahead. What’s stopping you?”

He handed Chris a crystal ball. “You will carry this around...”

Chris wouldn’t let him go any further. “Wait right there. I won’t carry any snow globe around with me. It’s girlish, and it’s too big.”

“It’s not a snow globe. It’s a crystal ball.”

Chris held his hand in the air. “Same thing! No way! It’s too big. What do you expect me to do, carry it in a fanny pack around my waist?”

Alastair said, “A wand?”

“Nope.”

“Mirror.”

“Nope.”

“Chris, how’s a pouch sound?”

“Nope.”

“A hat, then.”

“As long as it’s not an ugly hat.”

Alastair held up the wizard-looking hat.

“Nice try.”

“How about a tarot card? It can fit in your pocket.”

Chris pointed to his pineapple boxer shorts. “Don’t have any pockets in these things. Maybe you can suggest that to the underwear manufacturers.”

“A watch, then.”

“I don’t really need a watch, but I see you’re running out of ideas. So what will this watch do for me? Make me a better lacrosse player? Smarter? Taller? Well, it can’t be better looking because I’ve already got that covered.”

Alastair shook his head no.

Chris sat there thinking. “Do I get three wishes? Let’s see, right off the top of my head, I’d like...”

“No! You will know when to use it.”

“Yeah! When I need to see what time it is.”

Alastair pushed the watch into Chris’s hands. “Just take it. Please!”

“Fine, can I go back to sleep now?”

In the hallway, it sounded like a fight.

Alastair was exhausted. “I’ve got to go. It sounds like Eanrik got out, and he’s looking for his next meal.”

Chris mumbled, “Just a watch, not even an expensive one,” then yelled after Alastair, “Thanks for waking me up. I bet I won’t be able to get back to sleep.”

Fortunately, Chris was quickly asleep. Alastair didn’t wish for Chris to hear the commotion in the hallway with Eanrik as he dragged him back down toward the basement.

CHAPTER 14

Trisha said good night to her brother and sister and walked to her room. Trisha was very organized and seemed to be prepared for anything. She found her luggage next to the coffin, and the flashlight Granmama must have left for her on the pillow.

Trisha noticed the male wax manikin was still in the room, but the one that looked like her was gone. She walked over to where it had stood before and found an empty white lace dress lying on the floor in a heap.

Out of the corner of her eye, she noticed a black, shiny baby grand piano that had not been in the room before.

She passed by the piano, running her fingers along the keys. She could only play a few songs by memory, even though she had taken lessons for a few years. "I definitely know this was not here earlier. Chris would have commented on it. I'll see if I can still remember how to play any songs tomorrow."

Fatigue from the long flight began to wear on Trisha, and she suddenly felt very tired. She dug through her luggage and found her overnight bag. She had quite a long walk to the bathroom and wondered if there was a closer bathroom down the hall to the right. She decided to go that way tomorrow and see.

When she finally got to the bathroom, Trisha got ready for bed. She washed her face, brushed her teeth, took her calcium, and put on her favorite pajamas, pink with ballerinas. She looked like a little girl. Trisha was studying herself in the mirror when she felt something go past her and a dusty figure appeared in the mirror behind her. She let out a small scream and then took a deep breath. She knew Chris must be somewhere, laughing himself into stomach pains.

Trisha said quietly, "Hopefully, no one heard that." It was more of a surprised scream than a "help me" scream.

Trisha gathered her things and went back to her room quickly, keeping an eye out for Jon or Chris.

She made it back to her room without a problem, but, when she got there, the piano was playing and the wedding dress was dancing by itself, as if someone were wearing it, but no one was. She pulled a piece of material between her fingers. It was white silk—or it had been white at one time. Now it had just a slight yellow tinge to it. Delicate lace covered the shoulders up to the neck, with lace sleeves to match. It looked to be Trisha's size—a size zero. Suddenly a slight breeze from somewhere blew against Trisha's face.

There must be a vent open in here, she thought. The light lace arms of the dress danced and swayed back and forth.

"Weird!" she breathed. Trisha knew she ought to be scared, but she wasn't. The painting on the wall, the one with Mrs. Toddles in the purple dress, caught her eye. It appeared almost three-dimensional. Trisha rubbed her eyes and walked over to it. Warmth came from the picture, gluing her to the spot. She did not know how long she stood staring at the picture, but she knew she had better get some sleep before she started seeing anything else peculiar.

She took a last look at the male wax figure. "He's sure handsome, too bad he's not real." There in front of Trisha was the man of her dreams. So, she quickly reached up and kissed him on the lips. She got a shock. It was like when you shuffle your feet on the carpet and then touch a

light switch when the air is dry. “Ouch.” She rubbed her lips with her fingers to dissipate the tingling.

She was beginning to get very tired when she climbed into the coffin. Trisha yawned several times, and through hazy eyes she looked at Mrs. Toddles again. Large worms were oozing out around the carved wooden picture frame as the handsome male manikin was scooping the worms up and filling a bucket.

Trisha yelled, “Chris I’m going to tell Great-Grandmother if you don’t quit these terrible, disturbing jokes of yours.” She heard something making its way down the hallway, scraping the wall with something metal. “Chris, I’m not kidding!” If she hadn’t been so tired, she would have gotten up and yelled at Chris face-to-face.

She looked back at Mrs. Toddles, and there was nothing out of place. Trisha smiled to herself when she thought about how much trouble her younger brother was going to be in for trying to scare her. She pulled the soft blanket up to her shoulders. She soon fell asleep.

Trisha had no idea that Eanrik was roaming the hallways looking for his next victim. It was the thing making the noise in the hallway, not Chris. Or that the man of her dreams would soon turn into her nightmare.

CHAPTER 15

Brittany looked at the number outside her room again. It still read 292. Why would Granmama give her the same room as her locker number at school? Maybe Mom had told her what her locker number was.

Brittany did not know if she should wear the isolation gear or not. She was not sick, and, besides, the person in the room did not wear the protective clothing, right? Just the other people entering the room. She opted not to put on any of the cumbersome isolation gear.

She quickly went through her luggage, found her toothbrush and oversized nightshirt, and went to get ready for bed. She turned on a dull overhead light, and when she was done in the bathroom, flicked it off and started toward her bed.

She stepped on something and grabbed the wall to keep from falling. She flipped the light back on, looking for what had just run across her feet. It was a chicken. Brittany ran and jumped into her bed, looking across the room at the wall mural. The chicken—the one that seemed to move earlier—was no longer in the picture. That chicken had taken up residence in her room. She grabbed the call button and frantically pushed it as many times as she could.

Brittany heard her great-grandmother running down the hall, saying, “Brittany, I’m coming. Are you all right?”

Brittany felt a little stupid, waking her granmama and worrying her over a chicken. Granmama looked as if she had been sleeping. Her gray hair was smashed down on one side and sticking out on the other. A few hairpins stuck out, ready to fall to the ground with just a few more steps. Her green robe was not quite on her shoulders, and she struggled to adjust the armholes. She did have both slippers on, but they didn’t match. One green slipper went with her robe, but the other one was fluffy and pink.

Before her great-grandmother could say anything, Brittany gave her a sheepish smile and said, “I guess the call bell works.”

Granmama sat on the side of Brittany’s bed and said, “Are you all right, Brittany?” She felt Brittany’s forehead. “You are a little warm. Let me get you something for your fever.”

Brittany said, “Before you go, did you see that chicken running around the room?”

“Brittany, what chicken are you talking about?”

“The chicken that used to be on the wall mural over there.” As Brittany pointed to the wall, she saw the chicken in the exact same place that it had been earlier.

“Brittany, you rest, dear. I’ll fetch you something for your fever.” Granmama walked into Brittany’s bathroom and came back with some aspirin and a glass of water. Brittany knew there had been nothing in the bathroom but her toiletry bag—no aspirin and certainly no glass. Maybe she felt worse than she thought.

After Brittany took the aspirin, Granmama kissed her on the forehead and said, “You feel cooler already. Can I get you anything else?”

“No. Thank you for the aspirin. Good night, Granmama.” Brittany could hear her walking softly down the hallway. She wondered why her great-grandmother hadn’t put on the isolation gear like she had earlier that evening. Brittany peeked over at the mural, but the chicken was in its place. *I must be tired*, she thought. *I hope I feel better by tomorrow. I don’t want to ruin everyone’s trip to Scotland.*

Brittany didn't think she had fallen asleep or pressed the call button, but she heard her great-grandmother running down the hallway. "I'm coming, Brittany."

When her great-grandmother entered the room, she was wearing the exact same thing. A green robe half on, one green slipper, one fussy pink one. But, there was one big exception—Great-Grandmother was a five-foot-tall rat. "Brittany, what is it, dear?"

"Ahhh, Granmama, is that you?"

"Yes, Brittany. What's wrong?"

"Are you sure you aren't Chris in disguise?"

"No, sweetie. Let me feel your head." The life-sized rat in her granmama's robe put its paw on Brittany's forehead. "You don't feel warm. What's this about Chris in a disguise?"

"Nothing." Brittany slowly reached her hand out and touched the fur on Great-Grandmother's arm. "Yep, it's fur!"

Granmama brought Brittany's hand up and kissed it. She wanted to pull away. She was being kissed by a giant rat.

She said softly, "Granmama, have you looked at yourself lately in a mirror?"

"Why no, dear! I know I'm not as young as I used to be, but my mind is still sharp." Granmama didn't really know if this was true anymore. She had started to forget things.

"Maybe you should go in the bathroom and have a look."

Great-Grandmother got up and walked into the bathroom. The next thing Brittany heard was a scream. She threw the covers off and ran into the bathroom, half expecting to see her granmama on the floor. But, when she entered the small bath, she saw she hadn't fainted as Brittany had thought.

Great-Grandmother said, "Look at my appearance! I look like a street person with no destination or home to speak of. You must think I look terrible!" She took her rat paw and smoothed her hair down and re-pinned any strands that were hanging down.

"Granmama, is that all you see in the mirror?"

"Dear Brittany, if you want me to take a closer look, I'll have to go get my glasses. You know, when you get to be my age, you don't want to look too close, might discover something unpleasant on your face that wasn't there the day before."

"No! You don't need to get your glasses. I guess I'm tired." She started to kiss her great-grandmother good night, but she just couldn't bring herself to kiss the rat.

Granmama reached over and kissed Brittany on the cheek. "I'll see you in the morning, dear. Try to get some sleep."

Brittany watched the rat walk out of the room. "I've got to lie down."

Before going to sleep Brittany heard an unfamiliar sound. Someone was dragging something along the wall in the hallway. She thought it best that she didn't look. Probably another large rat, or it could still be the one dressed like her great-grandmother. This prank was too elaborate for Chris to do by himself. He must have had help from Great-Grandfather. She would have to search out her odd great-grandfather tomorrow and explain to him that she didn't like magic all that much. Even if he was a spirit, she needed to set some boundaries.

Was Brittany delirious with fever, or had she really seen her granmama as a life-sized rat? Was the rat a symbol for something yet to come?

CHAPTER 16

As soon as Jon entered his room, the lights went out. He didn't think he could find the flashlight that Great-Grandmother had left him in the messy room. He fumbled in the dark, stepping around the papers on the floor, looking for the desk lamp, and hoping it would work. Jon heard a cat meowing, and his eyes started swelling and itching. By the time he reached the light, his nose began to drip. He switched the light on and looked around the room, but there was no cat.

He noticed the Murphy bed was back in place and wondered if the cat could be trapped in the bed. He pulled the bed down, but no cat. He could feel his throat closing. When he thought he remembered what Great-Grandmother had done to clear the air, Jon grabbed the nearest chair and pulled it over to the vent. The chair was a little wobbly, but it would hold his weight. He opened the shut the vent several times, but nothing happened. He had not really wanted to do the peculiar dance Granmama had done, but it looked like he would have to try.

Jon's mind worked quickly. He waved his hands in the air, and still nothing happened. He contemplated going to get Great-Grandmother, but he decided to try one more time. Under his breath, he mumbled the words Granmama had used earlier. They did not make sense to him, and he would feel a little foolish for saying them, especially if the vent did not open.

He chanted, "Skinny penny air blow in, fresh and clean before we sneeze." A burst of fresh air blew from the vent, almost knocking Jon off the chair. As before, his throat cleared, his eyes stopped itching, and his nose dried up.

He found his luggage behind the desk and pulled out what he needed. Jon carried the desk lamp as close to the door as he could and looked down the hallway for a bathroom. There was one right next door. The light barely shone in to the bathroom, but Jon didn't plan to be in there very long.

As he finished brushing his teeth, he saw several drops of what looked like dried blood on the floor. His stomach turned, and he started to retch. He could not stand the sight of blood even if it was old and dried. He looked away until he finished, then quickly picked up the lamp and headed back to his room. As soon as he left the bathroom, the blood spatters vanished.

He felt lucky to have such a comfortable bed. He laughed when he thought of the other accommodations that his siblings had.

Jon turned off the light and jumped into bed. He pulled the covers up over his head and went fast to sleep.

Jon was a very light sleeper, and something brought his thoughts to his conscious mind. Something in the hallway was making a scraping sound. He didn't know if his younger brother, Chris, had something to do with this noise, but he was going to find out.

He got out of bed, and the floor was cold. Jon quickly got his socks on and crept into the hallway, where it was completely dark. He turned on the flashlight and put his fingers over the lens to drown out some of the light. Jon stopped and listened for the noise again. There it was. It sounded like it was now on the first floor. "It's got to be Chris."

He stepped on something warm and almost landed on his rear. Jon lifted his foot and checked the bottom of his sock. It looked like blood. He thought about going back, but the noise was loud. It sounded like someone arguing. He continued on, trying to follow the blood spatters.

Jon got mixed up slightly in the long hallways, but soon found the stairs. He knew he was headed in the right direction because of the blood spots on the floor. There was something scraping against the walls of the hallway. As he got closer, he turned off his flashlight. There was only a small amount of light, but once his eyes got adjusted, it was enough to silently make his way down the corridor and surprise his brother, Chris.

The only one getting a surprise was going to be Jon.

He peeked around the corner to see how best to scare his brother, when he saw a gruesome sight. There was an old, bearded man, dressed like a hippie, trying to pull a large man down the hallway.

The old man said, "Eanrik, we need to get you back into the basement."

It wasn't the front of the man that was horrifying; it was his back. Sticking out of his back was a long knife with blood dripping down his shirt and onto the floors. Blood spatters were everywhere. Jon suspected the odd-looking man was his great-grandfather, whom he knew to be dead. The knife sticking out of the giant's back scraped against the wall, which was the sound Jon had heard. It wasn't his brother at all.

Jon was frozen with fright. He wondered if any of his siblings had seen this thing. The thing with the knife in his back was obviously huge, some type of experiment gone wrong. The old man was having a lot of difficulty maneuvering the thing toward the stairs. The giant creature's hands were huge and his fingers short and stubby. His nose was smashed. Jon did not know if that was due to a fight or if that was natural. His lips were big, but not big enough to keep his tongue inside his mouth. Drool fell on his shirt. The old man was working up quite a sweat trying to move this thing down the hallway.

There was no way that Jon was going to help, even if this was his great-grandfather. This was just too weird. Jon was never scared of anything, but this was one time that being cautious just might save his life.

He turned to go back to his room, but not before hitting his toe on one of the old artifacts that lined the hallways. Jon clenched his teeth and put his hands over his mouth until the pain went away. He peeked around the corner, only to see that creature pulling the old man in his direction. How he wished that was his brother making that noise, and not this thing. It must have heard him. Jon ran for the stairs with his flashlight on. He could still hear the thing scraping the knife against the wall as it was trying to get loose from Jon's great-grandfather.

Jon ran down the hallway not caring if he woke his siblings, who had no knowledge of Jon's soon-to-be death. Once he reached his door, he slammed it shut and locked it. The upper part was made out of glass, so that wasn't a lot of protection against something like this. Once his heartbeat and breathing quieted somewhat, he listened with his ear at the doorjamb. There was no noise. Nothing. Not that thing, or his great-grandfather, nor his siblings. Jon ran to his bed and dove under the covers. He wished the Murphy bed would close up into the wall so he could be safe.

What he wouldn't do to change rooms with one of the others. They all had heavy doors, or at least a solid door with a lock on it. He thought about going in search of his brother's or sisters' rooms, but he didn't want to run into that thing. He decided on a very practical situation. He took the comforter off and shoved it under the bed. Jon then crawled under the bed and wrapped the string around his wrist. This would keep the bed on the floor. If someone should enter the room, they would think he had gotten up and gone to the bathroom.

It took Jon a very long time to fall asleep, especially since he was a light sleeper. But eventually he was out.

Was Eanrik just a worthless annoyance, or would he hurt the Hellandback children? When the children's father was young, Granmama and her husband were a lot younger. Had Alastair and Granmama lost their ability to control what went on in their house?

CHAPTER 17

As all four of the Hellandback children slept, things were changing in the house. The mystery rooms were now taking shape.

As Chris slept, he started to get cold. He reached down to pull up his sleeping bag, but could not find it. He fumbled around in the dark. The table felt like ice, and his surprise woke him up. He finally sat up and looked around. He lay on the ice in just his T-shirt and pineapple boxers. There were four small creatures standing around him. Chris's lacrosse stick was half frozen to his hand.

He yelled, "Get back! All of you get back!" He swung his lacrosse stick. At first he thought he was dreaming, but then something about them looked familiar. When the one had shown up in his closet in Boston, Chris had thought he was either a little person—or a very large rodent.

He recognized their big heads, large ears, and red, flickering eyes. They had long, dark, gross fingernails. Chris said in a whisper, "So, that's what those things are, fingernails."

They were only a few feet tall and were covered with green, dirty fur. They did not look that threatening, and Chris figured he could take all of them if he had to.

While he felt chilled, he was not as cold as he should have been sitting partially clothed in the snow. An enormous wall of ice rose in front of Chris, going on as far as he could see. "Where am I?"

One of the small creatures said in a high-pitched, slow-moving voice, "Let me introduce myself and my friends. My name is Tompack." He was the tallest. "That small, funny one is Bihydrant, the one that is darker green is Kaver, and the one with the chunk out of his ear is Quill. We are Bundlebobs."

They held up a lacrosse bag. "Is this yours?" Bihydrant asked.

Chris stretched and yawned. He thought he was still a bit tired and couldn't tell if he was dreaming. "Yeah, that would be mine, or my older brother's. You see, it's Jon's old bag from middle school. He gave it to me when he moved on to high school. Number eleven always brought him good luck."

Tompack said, "I guess you're the one that's come to save us."

Bihydrant felt Chris's muscles, or lack of, and said, "Seems a bit small to be helping us."

As Chris took his lacrosse bag from the Bundlebobs, he said, "Help you with what?"

Tompack said, "Alastair said you would help us get to the other side of that ice wall."

"You mean that hippie?"

The Bundlebobs just looked at each other. Tompack looked at the bag again and said, "This is yours?"

Chris nodded.

Tompack continued. "Then you must be the one who has come to help us."

Chris did not understand. "Help you do what? I can't even get myself out of this mess."

Tompack sighed, "We need to reach the other side of this ice wall and get back to our families. We were banned years ago for a minor infraction. Bihydrant over there"—he pointed to the smallest one in the group—"cut through the ice in the forbidden pond and ate one of our leader's talking fish."

Chris spied a look at the little one who was now trying to dig through Chris's lacrosse bag.

While he spoke, the other three Bundlebobs had begun fighting and poking each other.

Chris said, "Hey fellas, let's save the energy for something constructive." He got in between the Bundlebobs and tried prying their fingers off of each other. He wasn't making any headway. Chris was outnumbered, and the Bundlebobs together had many more hands than he did, all moving at lightning-quick speed.

Chris yelled, "Stop, you overgrown guinea pigs!"

Each Bundlebob immediately let go of each other and covered their ears in pain. The Bundlebobs' ears were very sensitive to any loud noise. The flesh inside their ears actually tore, causing them to cry out in pain.

Chris grabbed his bag from Bihydrant and started going through it. The Bundlebobs played with each item in the bag as it came out.

One of them grabbed Chris's cleats, put them on his ears, and said, "Perfect fit!"

Chris snatched his cleats back, dug his socks out from inside, and put them on. Tompack found a lacrosse ball in the bag, and the four of the Bundlebobs started throwing the ball around. Chris took advantage of their distraction, putting on all the clothes that he found in the bag. When he finished, he must have looked strange in all his mismatched clothes, but he was a lot warmer. He now wore one black sock, one white high-top sock, wild tropical-print shorts—wore them every Friday practice, the wilder the better—and his game shorts, then his practice jersey, game jersey, and sweatshirt. He even found several bandanas in his bag. He tied one around his neck and the other around his head, like he did during practice.

When he looked up, Bihydrant had his helmet on, with his ears flipped over, hanging in his eyes. Though only two feet tall, the Bundlebob's head was huge, so the helmet was almost too tight.

Chris looked at the Bundlebobs' long fingernails. "Tompack, do you know how to dig?"

Tompack shook his head sadly. "We can dig, but not under the wall. It goes down below the surface for miles. I have heard stories about many Bundlebobs who have tried to dig to freedom. They all died from exhaustion." He cleared his throat and said, "You are the one who has come to save us."

"No way! I'm only eleven years old, and I think I'm in a bad dream. I'll wake up soon, and this will all end."

Quill said, "No, Alastair is your great-grandfather, isn't he?"

"Yes, but I doubt if I trust that man with making any decisions. He had a hard enough time picking me out this watch."

Bihydrant came over to examine it and shrugged his shoulders.

Chris said, "My feeling exactly. Not even an expensive watch."

Tompack said, "Nonetheless, you are the savior who has come to help us."

Chris puffed up his chest when he heard the word "savior." Just then Bihydrant threw the ball, hitting Chris in the back of the head.

Tompack said, "Now let's discuss our options."

Chris was still rubbing his head where the ball had hit him. "What options?"

Tompack said, "Let me see the crystal on that watch."

Without taking it off, Chris bent his arm so Tompack could see the face. Tompack picked up a ball and Chris's lacrosse stick. "You know how to use these things?"

“Are you kidding me? I’m an attack man on our team. I’ve had a lacrosse stick in my hand since I was three.”

Bihydrant, Kaver, and Quill were poking each other with Chris’s extra sticks. Tompack put his hand on Quill’s head, and Quill instantly slumped to the ground.

Chris said, “Neat trick! You need to show me that sometime. What do you want me to do, shoot a ball through an opening?”

Tompack said, “Something like that. But, you have to make the hole first—by bouncing your lacrosse ball against the ice wall until the wall is chipped away.”

“Now that’s going to take some serious concentration.” Chris thought about his older brother and how he made everything look so easy. Why hadn’t he listened to him and practiced more?

Kaver, the Bundlebob who had not said anything up to this point, said, “I’m hungry.” He sat down and broke off a piece of his big toenail. “Chris, would you like some?”

Chris looked at the thick, discolored toenail that Kaver was eating and said, “No, I think I will wait until I can eat something that doesn’t grow from my own body.”

“Suit yourself, but we have to be self-sufficient. There isn’t a whole lot of food here.”

Chris said, “Now if these guns will just carry me through.”

Kaver took a bite of his nail and said, “Chris, if you have guns, why don’t you just shoot through the ice?”

The Bundlebobs looked at Chris, waiting for an answer. Tompack eagerly jumped into Chris’s bag, looking for the gun and tossing everything out.

Chris said, “It’s just an expression that my brother and I use when we are talking about our muscles.” Chris pointed to his biceps and laughed a little.

Chris started bouncing the ball against the wall. He had to start over several times, but he finally got into a rhythm. The Bundlebobs were singing some silly song behind him, which actually helped him get into a flow. When he got tired, he switched to the other hand, and the Bundlebobs cheered him on. As he chipped the wall away, light started to shine through. It was only a hole about the size of a dull pencil point, but the light poured through like a thousand flashlights. The light was so bright that it temporarily blinded Chris. He could not see the ball, and he had to throw the ball by sound and feel. Chris could tell he was making progress by the encouraging shouts from the Bundlebobs. As the hole grew bigger, the Bundlebobs crowded around him.

Chris yelled, “Clear!” and they all jumped back, shuddering and covering their ears. The hole was just about the right size for the Bundlebobs to get through, but Chris could never fit.

Chris heard Quill, the one with the chunk out of his ear, say, “Let’s just jump through the hole. He can get through on his own.”

Tompack said, “You are forgetting—we work as a team.”

Chris chimed in. “What team? I’m doing all the work.”

“Chris, you will see at another time, but we all must stick together.”

Bihydrant picked up the other lacrosse stick and said, “Yes, see this stick? We must stick together.”

Chris figured Bihydrant was the funny one of the group. “You four are ruining my concentration, and I still don’t know why I’ve been ‘banished’ to this side.” Chris couldn’t believe it. Just when he was becoming totally exhausted, his cheering section quit. Maybe they had even left, but Chris did not want to turn around and look. Just a few more ball bounces, and he would be out of here.

Suddenly, Chris heard the four Bundlebobs yell, “Three, two, one!” Then Tompack grabbed Chris’s sweatshirt, and the five of them were propelled through the hole, but the lacrosse stick that Kaver was holding was caught on the other side of the wall, jerking the five of them backward. They hung there for a few terrifying seconds, with the hole quickly closing in on Kaver’s hand, until he turned the stick so it could pass through the hole. Just in time they all tumbled out on the other side, landing on top of one another.

Chris spat out a mouthful of green, dirty fur and pushed Bihydrant off of him. The Bundlebobs were dancing around, elated that Chris had gotten them to the other side. Chris cleared his throat, looked around, and wondered why there was not any more snow. It was cold, but not freezing.

Chris said, “Tompack, are you sure this was where we are supposed to be?”

Kaver said, “Maybe we went through the wrong hole?”

“What are you talking about? I only made one hole, and there was no other option.”

Tompack said, “Chris, you are right. We had no other option. We must keep going.”

This was getting old. “Going where? I need to wake up!” Chris knew he was a heavy sleeper and that it took his mother a great deal to get him up in the mornings. He thought quickly and then slammed his lacrosse stick into his foot, hoping the pain would jolt him out of this place. He jumped up, yelled, and quickly sat down to rub his injured foot. Nope, he was still in this strange place with even stranger companions.

Kaver grabbed the stick from Chris and slammed it down on his foot. Chris let out a vibrating scream—the Bundlebobs may have been small, but they had the strength of many men. Chris could barely catch his breath. Quill grabbed the stick and aimed for Chris’s foot.

“What is the name of this game?” Quill asked.

Chris grabbed the stick away from Quill, and as soon as he got over the physical pain, he ran after Kaver. He yelled, “I hate wrestling, but I think I can take you!” He tackled Kaver at the knees, and he went down onto the ground. This time Tompack put his hand on Chris’s head and he went limp.

Tompack spoke quietly. “Kaver thought it was a game; he didn’t mean to hurt you. Now, let me look at your foot.”

Chris took off his cleat. His right foot was developing a huge bruise and was swelling to twice its normal size, which was very painful. Chris thought it might even be broken.

“Great,” he said sarcastically, “now I need ice, and there isn’t any. Bihydrant, can you look through my bag? My mom always puts aspirin in there for aches and pains, and this is definitely a pain.”

Tompack said, “Forget that.” He bent down and put his hand on Chris’s foot, squeezing it.

Chris said, “Hey, you can’t bring it back to normal size by squeezing it.” But it did not hurt like it should have. And the pain was subsiding. When Tompack took his hand away, Chris’s foot looked and felt normal.

“How did you do that? Are you some kind of witch doctor?” Chris stared at the Bundlebob in awe.

Tompack looked at Chris sternly. “We don’t have time to talk about healing. We need to get moving. Let us go in this direction.”

Chris had no plan in mind, so he set out with the four Bundlebobs. When the five of them had walked for over an hour, it was beginning to get dark, and with the sun no longer warming

them, Chris started to feel cold. He felt nothing but relief when Tompack said, “Let’s stop for dinner,” as he plopped down at the base of a large oak tree.

Since Chris had no food, he looked at Tompack expectantly. “What do we eat?”

Quill broke off an extra long toenail and said, “These are rather filling. Care to try one now?”

“Uh, no thanks. I believe I have some power bars in my lacrosse bag.”

Kaver broke off one of his toenails and stuck it in his ear. He brought it back out of his ear, dripping a yellowish substance.

Determined not to let Kaver get to him, Chris said, “I see you can do your hygiene and eat all at the same time.”

Tompack said, “Chris, this is gold jam. It has a lot of nutrients in it. Care to try it? You can put it on one of your power bars.”

Chris turned away and opened up one of his bars. He was starving, but he could barely eat it, thanks to the image of Kaver sticking his toenail into his ear, pulling out some type of syrup, and pretending that was normal. All this was beginning to stress Chris out.

Bihydrant sniffed Chris’s power bar.

Chris yelled, “Clear!” All the Bundlebobs jumped a few feet into the air, impressing Chris with the height of their jumps. The Bundlebobs settled again, massaging their ears.

Feeling slightly guilty, Chris said, “Look—stay away from my food. And I will try and stay away from your toenails.”

Bihydrant seemed hurt. “I wasn’t going to eat that foul-smelling bar; I just wanted to inspect it.”

Tompack finished his meal and began making signals with his hands.

Chris said, “Hey Tompack—you playing an imaginary piano? I do the same with my invisible electric guitar. I play air guitar.”

“I assure you, Chris, I’m not playing. This is serious. I’m trying to reach any other Bundlebobs in this area. This is our secret language, not to be used by furless creatures as you. No one other than a Bundlebob could duplicate it.”

“My brother could just see you doing that once and repeat it correctly.”

“I very much doubt that.” Tompack turned away from Chris anyway and finished what he was doing.

Chris’s wristwatch that his great-grandfather Alastair had given to him was making a buzzing sound. Chris had forgotten about the watch. It took Chris several attempts, but he finally got the noise shut off and could see Alastair in the crystal of the watch.

Alastair was calling out to Chris in a muffled voice. “Chris, have you met the Bundlebobs? Chris, are you there? Over. Chris, have you made it to the other side of the ice wall? Chris! Chris! Are you there? Over.”

“Yeah, I’m here, Great-Grandfather. You need to get some modern communication equipment. Sounds like a six-year-old’s walkie-talkie. Over.” Chris broke out in loud laughter.

Chris could hear Alastair give a heavy sigh. “Chris, have you come to the bridge yet?”

“Uh, that’s a negative. Over.” Chris started to laugh again.

Alastair said with a voice that Chris could barely hear, “Chris, keep in touch. Over.”

“Yeah, sure thing. Over and out.”

Tompack said, “If you are finished poking fun at Alastair, then we’ll be on our way.”

“Tompack, I wasn’t exactly laughing at my great-grandfather. I was making fun of his old-fashioned equipment. With the static, it was hard to hear him. I appreciate his enthusiasm for life, even if he is dead.”

CHAPTER 18

Back in Great-Grandmother's hospital house, Trisha had just fallen asleep when a flood of light woke her. "It can't be morning already."

Trisha sat up in bed, but was not in her coffin. She was in a large carved bed. Antique furniture filled the huge room. She had barely gotten her bearings when the bedroom door burst open and two fairly plain-looking young women came into the room. One carried a beautiful light pink dress, unlike any Trisha had ever seen. The silk gown had darker pink bows midway up the skirt, and the white lace showed where the pink material was gathered at each bow. The second young woman carried dark pink silk shoes and long white gloves.

She said, "Miss Trisha, you need to start your day—the big ball is tonight. You asked us to call you early, miss."

Trisha, still half asleep, asked, "Where am I?"

One of the attendants answered, "In your bed, miss."

"No! What town am I in?" This sounded strange to Trisha. She had meant to ask what city she was in.

"Miss, do you feel all right? You're in Oxford, England." The two young women looked at Trisha. "Should we call a doctor, miss?"

"No! I'm fine, just a little tired."

Trisha began to remember memories that were not hers, but a part of her brain thought this was her life. She lived a blessed life, attending a ball at least once a month. As most wealthy girls did, Trisha visited with friends and relatives for lively weekends that included many extravagant parties. Her relatives and parents were the same, but the time line, location, and everything else was completely different. Unless she fell ill, Trisha attended almost all of the balls and parties. Trisha wanted to find her husband-to-be. So far, she had not found any to her liking—with the exception of Godfrey. She could feel that she would be sure about her husband very soon; maybe it would turn out to be him.

Trisha spent most of the day reading a romance novel. As she finished and looked up, she suddenly wondered where she was. Whose house was she in? Was this really her parents' house, or was this one of the mystery rooms? Everyone seemed to think this was normal. When Trisha was about to leave the study and look for her siblings, she saw something on the desk. She picked up a thick ivory paper adorned with heavy black engraved letters. Trisha ran her fingers over the raised letters of her name, drew in a breath, and smiled to herself. It was an invitation to a ball.

She rang for a light snack. There would be plenty of food at the ball, but it would not do for her to eat too much in public. She did not want to make a pig of herself in front of Godfrey.

As the time to get ready drew closer, Trisha could hardly contain herself. She knew Godfrey would be there. They had recently spent a great deal of time together, and Trisha felt that he might ask for her hand in marriage soon. She was only fourteen, but she thought she was ready for the big step. Trisha did not want to end up an old spinster like her cousin. After all, she would have a long engagement where she would get to know her beloved husband-to-be. Dorothy, who had cared for Trisha since she was a little girl, came to help her dress. When her appearance finally satisfied Dorothy, Trisha put on her long white gloves.

Trisha wished to dance without her gloves, but Dorothy would not hear of it. She would say, "*Trisha, a lady always wears gloves unless she is at the table.*" Trisha yearned to touch a man's hand when she danced, especially Godfrey's. Lately, Godfrey had put his name on her dance card as many times as he dared. They each danced with others, as etiquette demanded, but she only enjoyed dancing with her prince.

When Trisha arrived at the ball, she quickly spotted Godfrey talking to a pretty friend of her sister's. She caught his eye briefly, and he immediately excused himself and crossed the room to her.

Godfrey was very handsome. His masculine face featured a square chin and dark, mysterious eyes, all framed by black hair just a little longer than his shirt collar. He bowed over Trisha's hand. She handed him her dance card, and he filled his name in for the first dance and as many more as he could get away with. As he did, Trisha thought that she must be in love with Godfrey. Why else would she get this strange feeling when he stood near her? His eyes smoldered like coals, with fire behind them, but, through her gloves, she could feel that his hands were ice-cold. Still, her palms always tingled as she danced. It reminded her of being little and playing in the snow until her hands were half frozen. Her mother would put her hands under cool water to warm them, sending tingling sensations from the tips of her fingers and across her palm. She felt that same tingling, between freezing and warming, when she danced with Godfrey.

Trisha danced the night away. At the end of the evening, Godfrey found a private alcove for them. He picked up her hand. "Trisha, I know we have not had a long-standing relationship, but I fear that if I don't ask you something, you will turn away from me."

Trisha's cheeks turned bright pink, and she could feel her palms sweating under her gloves. She was now glad she had worn them. She looked into Godfrey's eyes and got an uneasy feeling. He was so handsome. She wanted someone to pinch her and wake her from her dream. How could she be so lucky? There were a lot of beautiful young women at the ball.

Godfrey brought Trisha close to him. "Would you make me a very happy man and marry me?"

Trisha squeaked out an answer. "Yes. Yes, of course I will."

Godfrey said, "Trisha, I don't believe your father likes me. He showed true hesitation when I asked him for your hand. He thinks you are too young, but I think he simply doesn't care for me."

"Of course he likes you, Godfrey. How could he not?" She glanced down shyly and then peeked up at him. They kissed for the first time. Trisha shivered. From nowhere came the thought that she did not really know Godfrey. She knew he had no family in Oxford, and was very rich, but that was all.

Godfrey said, "Trisha, will you please come to my residence on Sunday for brunch? I'm having a small gathering of friends and would love for you to meet them."

This was going so fast. "I believe that would be fine, Godfrey."

When Sunday finally came, Trisha arrived at Godfrey's, impressed by his huge house. She asked, "Are you the only one who lives here?"

"Yes, at the moment." Beautiful portraits adorned the entire length of the hallway. Trisha froze in front of one of them; she had seen this woman before. Her mind raced—the purple silk dress with lace at the collar and cuffs, the large brooch pinned in the middle, and the hat with feathers. The woman's thin lips, and close-set eyes. Where she had seen her before?

It looked like the woman was saying something to Trisha. Her lips seemed to form the words “Get out before you die.”

Trisha stepped closer to the portrait, but Godfrey hovered by her side, asking, “Trisha, my dear, what is wrong?”

“Nothing at all. Please continue. What were you saying?” Trisha looked at Godfrey, painfully conscious of his tight grip on her arm. He stared at the portrait of the woman as if his glare could kill.

Trisha said, “I know I just arrived, but I’m suddenly feeling unwell. I think it is best if I leave now.”

Godfrey patted Trisha’s hand as they entered the study. “Come, Trisha, don’t be silly. I want you to meet my friends.”

All along one wall in the study stood immense glass jars, resting on the floor. As Trisha walked over to one of the glass jars, she saw that they seemed to be filled with dirt.

She said, “A person could actually fit into one of these. They are enormous.”

Godfrey gave Trisha a sideways glance. “Yes, my dear, they could.”

Trisha thought Godfrey’s voice sounded a little strange—not as composed as it usually was, but electrifying, almost manic. Trisha stepped closer to the jars and ran her hand along the outer glass. It felt very cold. She saw something moving inside the jar, but had to look for a couple of seconds to make out what she saw. She jumped back. There were hundreds—maybe thousands—of night crawlers in the jar. Trisha let out a small scream, and Godfrey laughed.

“Have you not ever seen a night crawler before? You are very sheltered, my dear Trisha.”

“Yes, Godfrey, I have seen many night crawlers as a child, but not in large glass jars in someone’s home. It just surprised me. That’s all.”

Five people waited in the room. Two of the men stood attentively by their wives—the women looked very pale and sick to Trisha—and one sorrowful-looking man stood alone. When Godfrey introduced them, Trisha learned that he had just lost his bride to an illness. Trisha stole a glance at the two women present. They seemed too weak to stand on their own; both leaned heavily on their husbands. She assumed they were all wearing black in mourning for the widower’s dead bride. She did not know for certain, though. Trisha had never seen any of these people before and felt distinctly uneasy.

The widower turned to Trisha and asked, “Do you want to see her?”

Trisha was startled. “See who?” Did he mean his dead wife? She blurted out, “Some other time.” Trisha didn’t even ask when his wife had died, but assumed that, since he had called her his bride, it had been fairly recent. Had his wife been sick—the way these two ladies seemed—or had it been unexpected?

Trisha realized that she, too, had been very tired lately; maybe she was coming down with something. She wanted to go home, away from Godfrey’s odd friends. As Trisha turned to leave the room, out of the corner of her eye she thought she saw a small hand emerge from the dirt in one of the large glass jars. Trisha knew she needed to get some rest. She politely, but quickly, excused herself and walked back down the long hallway with Godfrey following her.

He insisted that she stay. “What must my guests think of your quick departure?” Trisha looked carefully as she walked past the portrait of the lady in the purple dress. The lady now looked pale and lifeless, yet earlier she had looked very much the picture of health. Trisha walked faster, nearly running by the time she reached the door. She could hear a faint voice calling after her, “Get out before you die!”

On the buggy ride home, tears came to Trisha's eyes. What had just happened? Maybe she was overreacting. She needed to get some rest. She told herself she would sort things out in the morning.

When she awoke the next day, she felt well enough to eat, dress, and attend to her correspondence. In her own house with her family, she felt safe. Safe from what, she did not know. But when the maid entered to announce a caller, Trisha began to feel sick again. As she descended the stairs, she saw Godfrey standing there, smiling up at her. She felt foolish.

As charming as ever, he said, "I have a gift for you. You ran out so quickly yesterday that I did not have a chance to give it to you." Godfrey handed Trisha a small box, eagerly saying, "Open it—I'm sure you will love it. It has been in my family for years, and I want you to have it."

Her hand touched his as she reached toward the box. A shiver ran up Trisha's arm. She pulled away, but Godfrey gently handed her the coffer, making sure that she did not touch him this time. She slowly opened the elegant container and almost fainted. The box held the same brooch worn by the woman in the portrait. She dropped the box. "I can't wear that!"

"Trisha, take it. I know it is a bit expensive, but I want you to have it. I can't leave until I see you wear it. It would mean a great deal to me."

Trisha thought wearing the brooch for a short time was a small price to pay to get Godfrey out of the house. She was going to have to slow things down. She needed to find out more about him and his family before getting married. Trisha would never wear the brooch again. She figured that she could just give it to someone less fortunate than she and claim it got lost or stolen. She nodded once.

Godfrey bent down and picked up the box. He took the brooch out and pinned it on Trisha's dress. She immediately felt strange. She grew cold, and her hands felt stiff.

Godfrey watched her closely, then rubbed her hands, saying, "You are as cold as ice; let me warm you up. We need to hurry the wedding, my dear. I was thinking that perhaps this Sunday?"

Trisha could not believe her ears. Her family would never accept this, and neither would she. She knew she had to protest. What would people think if she got married in less than a week? A hasty marriage would shame her family and friends. She knew she must say something, but nothing came out of her mouth. Trisha was thinking of a very long engagement, three to four years even. Frozen, she could not express her ideas. Even her body seemed stiff.

She looked down. The brooch seemed alive now, beaming with colors. The swirling colors looked like oil dropped into water. The colors danced and changed shape.

Godfrey looked into Trisha's eyes. "There, my dear. Everything will work out for the best very soon."

Best for whom? she thought.

He let go of Trisha's hand and walked to the door. "You will be mine very shortly, Trisha." When he had shut the front door, she tore at her dress, trying to remove the mystical brooch, but her hands would not work properly. She used her knuckles, wrists, teeth, but she could not remove the piece of jewelry.

Trisha ran up the stairs and into her bedroom, where Dorothy was straightening out the bed linens. Trisha tried to talk to Dorothy, but could not make a sound. When Dorothy asked her a question, Trisha's mouth seemed to answer on its own accord. Trisha walked closer to

Dorothy. She was sweating by this time. She wanted to ask Dorothy to help take the brooch off, but her mouth formed the words for her.

“Thank you for straightening my room.”

Dorothy turned to Trisha. “You are welcome, my dear. Where did you get that beautiful bauble? Goodness! You seem pale. Let me turn the sheets down for you.”

Could Dorothy not see the streaks of tears running from her eyes and staining her dress? Had this piece of gaudy jewelry put a spell on everyone? Could they not see what was happening? After Dorothy left the room, Trisha fumbled through her dressing table until she found a pair of scissors. She cut the brooch off her dress. Relieved and exhausted, she placed it on her dresser with the material still attached, changed into her nightgown, and slipped under the covers. Trisha only wanted to lie in bed and rest for a while.

When Trisha finally awoke, she did not feel any better. As a matter of fact, she felt much worse. She sat up in bed, but that took all her energy. She knew that she must be coming down with something. Something heavy rested on her chest. She raised her hand to touch it and noticed a grayish tint to her skin. Her hand shook with fear as she placed it on her chest. She had no doubt about what she felt. The brooch was pinned to her nightgown. She desperately tried every means she could think of to remove it, but only succeeded in exhausting herself. Drenched in sweat and unable to remove the brooch, Trisha fell asleep. She was dead tired.

Several hours later she awoke to the sound of a door shutting. A short time after that, she felt someone or something fiddle with the brooch on her nightgown. She tried to scream, but her words could not escape, and no sound came out.

She heard a female voice say, “Advarika, stop!”

Trisha’s eyes began to focus. There was just enough light to make out a lady in her room—and a creature on her bed, trying to remove the piece of jewelry. She did not know which scared her more. Advarika looked like a large raccoon, but the woman—she recognized the woman from the painting at Godfrey’s house and also in the chapel at her great-grandmother’s house: Mrs. Toddles.

The woman said, “I see you now have Godfrey’s mystical brooch pinned to your nightgown.” The raccoon still fidgeted with the pin.

“Advarika, the brooch can’t be removed,” the woman scolded.

Trisha awkwardly pinned the raccoon’s wrists between her stiff hands and moved them away. Advarika let out a strange noise and then sat on the edge of the bed with his arms crossed. The woman winked at him.

“Trisha, follow me. I would like to show you something.”

Advarika grabbed Trisha’s hand, pulling her out of the bed. She tried to pull her hand away, but Advarika held tight. In her state, Trisha was no match for the raccoon. A hidden door opened in the wall as the three of them approached. The brooch on Trisha’s nightgown glowed brightly.

Trisha said, “I wish that I could not wear any clothes, and then this stupid pin couldn’t attach to my clothing.”

The woman looked at her solemnly. “Trisha, that would not be a good idea. The brooch would only attach itself to your skin.”

Trisha cringed at the thought and followed the woman through the open door.

Trisha had no idea that Alastair was keeping an eye on her, as well as the other three Hellandback children.

Great-Grandmother said, “I hope we haven’t gotten too old to keep our great-grandchildren out of harm’s way.”

They were much older now, slower in mind and body. They had been looking forward to their great-grandchildren coming to Scotland for years, and now they may have to end their adventures and life lessons early. Chris’s life lesson was the simplest of all, but very important to his very existence. It was for the very young, something as simple as weather, time, or space—anything that didn’t contain human emotion. Just the same, Chris’s adventure would change his future. The other three Hellandbacks’ adventures would be much more challenging. If things went terribly wrong, Great-Grandmother could always notify the children’s father. Patrick would not let any harm come to his children, but he would never let them visit again.

CHAPTER 19

Brittany had finally dozed off at Great-Grandmother's hospital when she felt something moving on her sheets and woke up. *If this is that stupid chicken, I will deal with it myself. I will not get Granmama up for that*, she thought.

In the dim light, she could see that her standard hospital bedding looked more like thin, dirty sheets. She fumbled for the call button, but the bed seemed different, not the bed she had fallen asleep in. As her eyes adapted, she could make out the details in the room.

Several beds were lined up next to hers. She noticed a dank and musty smell to the room, but the worst part was the large rat resting on her leg. She had no call button, no light, nothing resembling anything she had ever seen before. She let out a scream that bounced off the nearby walls, and the rat went scurrying off the bed and under one of the neighboring beds.

A woman came running in. "Brit, what is wrong?"

Brittany pointed to the rat peeking at them from under the bed. She assumed it was the same rat. For all she knew, this place could be swarming with them.

"Oh, Brit, that's just another one of our little friends. Are you ever going to get used to them?"

Brittany said, "And why should I have to?"

"Enough about the rats! It's time for your shift. I'm beat. I found some bread and a small piece of cheese—which you better hurry up and get before our furry friends help themselves."

Starving, Brittany got out of bed and snatched up the bread and cheese before any rats could. Brittany looked down at the wrinkled and dirty dress that she apparently had been sleeping in.

"Hurry up, Brit! I told them I would get you up and send you to help. I always keep my word. Now go."

Brittany thought, *Go where?*

She stepped out of the room, into a very old hospital of some sort. At least she was still in a hospital, though it was not her great-grandmother's house. This building looked much older, and the people talked with a thick British accent. The hallway smelled terrible; she could tell that there were dead bodies very close.

Brittany's volunteer work at the hospital had been quite interesting the first week. After getting lost many times in the maze of hallways, she made a grave mistake and ended up in the holding morgue. She would never forget that terrible smell of decaying bodies. Brittany wanted to run out of this place, but she wondered from whom? And into what?

Suddenly, a man who had been working in the hallways grabbed Brittany's arm and said, "Come on now. We need you to help on the first floor. What took you so long? You are usually up before dawn."

Brittany's hunger pains had subsided, and she could focus on her surroundings. She heard a man talking about the "black death." Immediately Brittany put it together—she was in England, during the bubonic plague epidemic in the 1400s. She had done a report in school just recently. The plague had wiped out much of the population in London.

The Black Death had moved very quickly from one person to another. Victims of the plague would run a high fever, and their lymph nodes would swell. Red spots would cover their skin, then turn black. Continuous vomiting, headaches, and a swollen tongue made it a horrifying

death. Many of the wealthy went to live in the country in Oxford, while the poor had to stay in London and take their chances living amidst the sick and dying.

Brittany found the stairs and ran out into the streets. She turned slowly around, unable to close her eyes. Dead bodies lay everywhere in the street, on the sidewalk, mixed with dead animals. Some had been there for days; others had just died or were in the process of dying. Rats swarmed all over the dead. They seemed to be the only well-fed things left. The sheer number of rats made it clear that it would be totally impossible to rid the town of them.

Brittany remembered that a victim would die within a few short days of getting the symptoms. She quickly looked at her hand; she had no red swollen areas, and certainly no black spots. She gave just a small sigh of relief. She did not have the disease yet, but she knew it would only be a matter of time before she would contract the bubonic plague.

A snatch of a song drew her attention to an alley, where a group of children chanted “Ring Around the Rosy,” just as she had when she was a child. She had hated that song ever since she found out that it was really about the plague. She had read that the “rosies” were not a ring of roses, like she used to think, but a rosary. The “posies” were flowers used to cover up the stench of the dead and dying bodies. The “ashes” came from the burning of bodies, and “all fall down” referred to the people dying.

Brittany ran to the children and pleaded with them to stop singing that song, but they just continued as if she were not there. Shaking, she decided that she might as well go back to the hospital and try to help the sick.

Brittany raced back inside to talk with the doctors, but they would not listen to her. One of the doctors leaning against the wall said, “I don’t know what is causing these outbreaks of the sick, but I do know that it is contagious. You best keep your distance when examining the sick.”

The younger doctor said, “Does are protective clothing not help with the contaminated patients?”

“Yes, to some degree, but don’t think you are safe from this black death.”

Brittany tried to interrupt the two doctors, “Fleas, it is spread by the fleas on all these rats! Brittany pointed to several in the hallway as they scurried into rooms.

The doctors had too much to do; they had no time to listen to her strange theories on what had caused the epidemic. Most ignored her. A few ordered her out of their way. “Get out of my way, lass. This is no place for you.” One doctor tried to throw her out, but she managed to dodge him in the confusion as several more victims were brought in.

“If you so much as look at me, I will find someone to throw you out. Go play in the streets. This is no place for you.”

Brittany thought back to her science report, the research paper she got the A on. She was so proud of the grade. Now she realized how petty she had been. Living through the bubonic plague was something to get excited about. Getting an A on a paper meant nothing.

Brittany knew that fleas living on rats drank the rat’s bacteria-filled blood. The bacteria multiplied in the flea’s stomach, so, when the flea bit another living thing, it left bacteria in the open wound. The deadly bubonic plague bacteria then infected the lungs, causing coughing—and allowing the disease to spread from person to person, like a cold.

Now Brittany was living this nightmare. She hoped she remembered to do everything to keep the disease at bay.

Frustrated, twelve-year-old Brittany took stock of what she could do. She looked at her filthy frock and tore a strip off the bottom. She tied it around her mouth and nose and checked her skin again for any open sores. Brittany did not want to change the outcome of history, but she

was living it, and more than likely she would die here, taking care of these people. It was almost always fatal.

Brittany was hoping she was dreaming, but everything seemed so vivid. She could reach out and touch the doctors and patients. This had to be real. Brittany thought back about Granmama saying they were all going on an adventure. She said half out loud, “Adventures are supposed to be fun. This is so not fun.”

Great-Grandmother knew that these adventures were going to teach her great-grandchildren something about life. They could quit at any time, which was something she had forgotten to tell them.

Brittany knew the means of transmission of the disease. She knew the symptoms and the lame treatments they had attempted at this time in history. Brittany remembered cringing when she had read the treatments that they tried—bathing in human urine, using leeches, putting the dead animals in their homes, even smearing human excrement on their skin. They believed that vinegar could kill any germ, so they wiped down everything with the smelly liquid.

Well, this was her life right now. She did not know why it was, but she had better do her best with what she had. There must be something she could do to help the people dying all around her.

As she had been thinking, a dying man had crept closer to her. He pulled her skirt and said, “Take my son! He is so small—he needs to have a chance. I can’t go on any further.”

Brittany could only stare at the man. He had black spots all over his arms and face. She could not see the rest of his body, but she did not have to. She knew this man did not have long to live, so she tied her mask tighter, picked up the man’s son, and said a quick prayer. The boy started to cry, but Brittany hugged him close to her. She could feel how skinny he was.

“We need to get some stew inside you.” Brittany smiled at him from behind her mask, then remembered. They called stew something else back then—right, “hotpot.”

“Would you like some hotpot?”

The boy’s face lit up.

Brittany heard her name called. The girl who had awakened her earlier that day yelled for her to hurry. “I need your help. We need to clear off some of these beds for the new arrivals.”

Brittany said, “Why hurry? There is no hope for these people, and the line of sick ones just keeps getting longer.”

The girl gave her a hard look. “Let me tell you a quick story while we pull the dead out of these rooms.” She yelled for another girl to come take the small boy from Brittany. “Give the lad some hotpot, and put him away from the adults.”

Brittany said, “I don’t know your name.”

“My name is Abigail, and I have been here longer than any other nurse here. Actually, I’m a nun. I believe God is watching over me.”

“What story were you going to tell me?”

“Let’s start in this room first.”

The two girls checked pulses to see who was still alive. Brittany checked the pulse on the first patient, who was a middle-aged woman. “Abigail, am I doing this correctly?”

“You have the placement of your fingers correct, inside on the wrist area, but you use your index finger and next finger to take a pulse. You can’t take a pulse with your thumb, you will only be feeling your own pulse, and you will assume all of these sick patients are alive. Even if they are barely breathing, they are still alive—which brings me to my story.” Abigail took in a deep breath.

“You shouldn’t do that!” Brittany interrupted her.

“Do what?” Brittany tore another piece off her skirt, causing Abigail to remark, “You’re not going to have much of a frock left if you keep doing that.”

Softly, so she would not upset the dying, Brittany said, “Put this around your mouth and nose. It will protect you a little from breathing in germs.”

Although she did not know what a germ might be, Abigail understood Brittany’s intention. “Brittany, I have been here for so long that I doubt if I’m in any danger.” Still, Abigail took the material and put it around her neck, saying, “If I need it, I will know where to find it.”

Brittany and Abigail started dragging the bodies out into the hall and down the stairs. Brittany tried to be very careful, but Abigail sighed. “Brittany, they can no longer feel anything. At the rate you are going, we will never clean out these rooms. You never get used to it, but it has to be done.”

To take her mind off the task, Brittany reminded Abigail of the story. As Abigail rolled a large man onto the floor with a thud, she began.

“Just last week, I was extremely tired after a deadly day. I was clearing out a room by myself—the nurse that was helping me died a few days prior—when I reached a young boy. He looked dead. He had the black spots and his skin felt cool, so I thought he was dead. All the sick here feel hot to the touch, so when they feel cool, it usually means they are dead. I started to remove him from the room, but he let out a groan. He became one of the lucky ones. He has been recovering on the third floor. He has a long way to go, but he makes little strides each day. The doctors even think he may provide a cure. They scraped open some of his blackened sores and have rubbed the fluid on other patients. So far nothing has happened, but we all have hope.”

Brittany knew what would help, but she had no antibiotics to give them. She didn’t even know how to explain such a medication, so she said nothing.

“Trust me, Brittany, when I say that if they are not dead when you move them, they will moan or cry out in pain, just as that boy did.”

Unable to think of a reply, Brittany simply nodded and decided to change the subject. “When do we eat and sleep?”

Abigail just shrugged her shoulders.

When Brittany had removed thirteen bodies with Abigail, she told her friend, “I’m going to go check on the young boy I brought in earlier and then lie down for a bit.”

“Lie down for the night—you need to get your rest,” Abigail replied cheerfully. “Oh, Brittany, can I ask you how old you are?”

Brittany yawned, “I’m twelve years old.”

Abigail started to say something, but Brittany interrupted, “I know, Abigail. My language does not fit my small stature. I’m a very old soul living in a young body.”

Brittany went to the third floor, where she found the boy playing with a top and brilliantly colored stones.

These stones looked like the ones the nurse had given to her in the hospital for reading to the little boy in room 292. Brittany had never seen this little boy before, so she knew she hadn’t read to him. One thing she did know was that these were the same stones. She picked up the boy and kissed him. He gave her a hug back. Brittany sat down with him, and the boy offered her the top to spin. She took the top and gave it a quick turn. She watched it twirl among the shiny rocks.

Her smile faded as the top bumped the rocks, causing them to glow. Soon they lit up the entire room. The room began spinning, and Brittany’s body was hurled through the air to the

back wall, where she was pinned, as if in a giant centrifuge. Screaming, Brittany blacked out, only to wake, gasping, in her room at Granmama's house.

CHAPTER 20

Great-Grandmother said, “Alastair, we need to see about Jon’s adventure. It is time to wake him up.”

“Yes, I know. I was just letting him sleep as long as possible before throwing him to the sharks. If you could keep an eye out for the other three, I’ll be back to help you in just a while.”

Great-Grandmother hated overseeing the other three Hellandback children by herself, but Great-Grandfather would be back soon. Or, she hoped he would. “I don’t know if Jon will relate to this adventure.”

Alastair said, “We had to make Jon older in this lesson. He has to set up his AP classes in high school to go along with his future. There is no reason to make him fifteen when the lesson he will learn is in the adult world. I’m sure, my dear, he will take away from this adventure what he needs to.”

Jon slept deeply his first night at Great-Grandmother’s house. Although the night started off frightening with his great-grandfather dragging some creature to the basement, he woke up ready to have a good time in Scotland. He yawned, stretched, and threw off the covers.

Then he saw that the room had changed.

He had gone to sleep under the Murphy bed, but woke on a leather couch in an office. It was a very nice couch, but it was still a couch. The room seemed the type of office a big executive would have, a corner office with a large mahogany desk and top-of-the-line furnishings. Just then, the door swung open, and a petite woman walked in.

Without greeting him, she briskly outlined Jon’s schedule for the day. When she finished, she looked at him for the first time, saying, “I see you spent another night sleeping at the office. Why do you even have your penthouse?”

She went to the closet and pulled out a crisp new shirt, a dark suit, a tie, and a pair of Oxford shoes. She put the items over a chair and said, “You’d better get a move on—the meeting starts in less than twenty minutes.” She pointed to his private bathroom. “This looks like a large coffee day.”

While he showered, some fuzzy memories surfaced. Jon was a CEO-in-training for one of the largest software companies in the world. Recently, they had ventured out into developing and manufacturing new inventions. He had no time for a personal life, no family, no friends, not even a dog. His fish only stayed alive because the housekeeper sprinkled food into the aquarium several times a week at his penthouse.

As Jon came out of the bathroom, his assistant—her name was Linda, he “remembered”—was watching him.

Something was wrong, or different, about Jon today. “Are you all right?”

Startled, Jon snapped, “No, I’m not all right!”

Linda knew that Jon had a lot on his mind, especially as one of the youngest employees in the company and the one who was being groomed for the CEO’s position. He had enormous responsibilities, including overseeing the associates, some of whom were new to the company. Jon looked out the glass door of his office and into the hallway, where a stream of people headed for the conference room. He seemed to hear Linda’s voice describing each person.

“Some of these people are new, and some aren’t, but since we hired a lot of them when you were away on business meetings overseas, let me tell you what I know about each of these individuals, and please keep this to yourself.

“Now, let me see, that man in the black suit is Mr. Rodent. He is somewhat of a weasel, but you know that from your accounts, and when you caught him going through your desk, and when he tried to break into your computer.”

Just as Jon heard the word “weasel,” Mr. Rodent turned into one.

Linda continued. “He likes to get the dirt on people so he can blackmail them at a later date. Most of the information he gets on people is irrelevant to our work, like whether someone is cheating on their spouse. No one knows if he has ever threatened anyone with the information he finds. Word is that if he spent the same amount of time doing his work that he does snooping around, he would own his own company by now.”

Jon watched the large weasel walk by, tearing and devouring a huge turkey leg.

“Next comes Mrs. Devious, a two-faced liar.” Mrs. Devious suddenly grew a second head. “Don’t ever trust her. She will tell you one thing and do completely the opposite. She lies to everyone, about everything; I think she even lies to herself. She is close friends with Mr. Viper, who is a real snake in the grass.”

Mr. Viper walked by Jon, darting his tongue in and out and making a hissing sound. Mr. Viper glared at Mr. Rodent and said, “Let’s do lunch.” The snake could not take his eyes off the weasel.

Linda shuddered when she saw Mr. Blade walk toward them.

Jon asked, “Who is that? He looks normal.”

“That would be Mr. Blade, sir. He looks normal from the front, but he is a backstabber.” Just at that moment, Mr. Blade walked past Linda and Jon, and they could see a huge knife sticking out of his back with blood dripping from the open wound. Jon, still squeamish about blood, had to look away. Jon remembered the giant like figure with the knife protruding from his back, who an old, odd man—he presumed it was his great-grandfather—was dragging down to the basement.

Linda looked at Jon, who seemed pale, “Are you all right, Mr. Hellandback?”

“Yes, I’m fine. Just a little toxic on the blood, though.”

A witch, a pit bull, and even a mole walked down the hallway. “Be careful what you tell Mr. Dirt there. Rumor has it that he is a mole for another software company.”

Jon said, “It doesn’t look like I can trust any of them.”

Linda replied, “You can trust me, and you can trust Mr. Little.” Mr. Little walked by. He was absolutely normal looking. He was somewhat challenged in terms of height, but other than that, he looked like a nice man.

Then a man walked by in a diaper. Jon said, “Linda, please tell me he is on the wrong floor.”

“No, that is Mr. Child. He is a crybaby. If he doesn’t get his way, or convince the others to vote his way, he pouts and whines.”

Jon opened his mouth to comment on Mr. Child, but the hallway filled with a gust of air. Anything not tied down went flying.

A huge man came by, saying, “Jon, get into the meeting now!”

Linda said, “That is your boss. Mr. Windbag always uses his outside voice indoors. When he asks someone to do something, they do it immediately.”

Jon hustled, gathering his things while Linda completed the briefing.

“Here come the employees who always arrive late, like Miss Snail.”

Miss Snail looked like a slug and left a slimy, sticky streak wherever she went. Never on time, she moved slowly, like she had all the time in the world.

“She knows she can’t be fired because she is related to Mr. Windbag. Mr. Burrow acts like a badger; he never lets anything go and stays in people’s faces until they give up. Everyone knows why he’s single—no woman could put up with his constant bullying. He has to win at any cost. Of course, Mr. Rat always comes in late.”

Jon glanced up. Mr. Rat looked like an actual rat.

“He tells everyone about everyone else’s business, he keeps no secrets, and he apologizes for nothing he does. Some say he runs an underground organization of some type. Certainly, he has thousands of connections throughout the world. If you ever need a favor, he is your man, but you will pay dearly for that favor.”

A big pair of lips and a huge nose arrived last, rolling a cart loaded with all types of breakfast food. “They usually arrive before anyone else, but not today,” commented Linda. “Miss Lips is a butt-kisser, and Mr. Nares, a brownnose. Some claim that they were dating, but neither one of them will confirm it. You know that the company maintains a strict policy against employees dating other employees, no matter how high up in the company they might be. Well, Miss Lips and Mr. Nares always sit close to the boss and agree with everything he says. They laugh at his jokes, which usually aren’t funny, and jump at the chance to do him a favor.” Linda’s voice trailed off as she realized the meeting was about to start. “Jon, you had better get in there before he yells again.”

Most of the associates resented Jon for coming into the firm so young and being in line to take over the most important position. Jon had given up a normal life and settled into a life where he traveled all over the world at moment’s notice. He tried to save some of the spider companies, those that feed into the main company. He had an excellent way with people, and he was a whiz with numbers and figures. He almost always saved the spider companies, thus saving the main company millions, if not billions, of dollars.

As Jon walked into the conference room, Jon took the only chair left, directly across the table from Mr. Windbag. He looked around the table at all of his associates and wondered how they all had gotten to this point. Everyone wanted to make a quick buck. Isn’t that why he started at the company? He had interned one summer and gotten a taste for power. For him, there was no going back. He did not get a paycheck for the long hours he put in as an intern, but he enjoyed hanging out with the CEO. He noticed that employees treated him differently when he was alone as opposed to when he was with the boss. He actually got called “sir” a few times when he was tailing the boss. He was just some smart kid when he walked the halls by himself.

Mr. Windbag cleared his throat and proceeded with the meeting. “Mr. Little, can you please go get those papers I left on my desk, the ones under the paperweight.” Mr. Little excused himself, then turned into a gopher.

At least a gopher is better than the rest of the people in the room. You can trust a gopher, Jon thought.

Miss Lips and Mr. Nares argued back and forth quietly. They each had wanted to go get the papers for Mr. Windbag, who now yelled, “Silence!”

There was a lot of small talk going on, but Jon just sat there—he did not know with whom or about what he should speak. Soon Mr. Little came back with the papers in his hand, and the meeting officially began. At one point Jon, overwhelmed by the constant bickering between the company executives, wished he could leave.

Mr. Windbag said, “Jon, you will fly out to England first thing in the morning. Your assistant has your plane tickets, and I want Mr. Rat to go with you.”

Jon mumbled, “I had planned to visit my parents tomorrow. I haven’t seen them for nearly a year.”

Mr. Windbag roared, “Nonsense, Jon, you do what I ask, and soon you will be running this company.”

Miss Lips stuck her tongue out at Jon, who thought, *Why would I want to be in charge of this circus? I will fire all these lunatics and hire people I can trust when I become CEO.*

Just as they wrapped up the meeting, the door flew open. Jon recognized this individual—even when he was little, people would make jokes about attorneys like his father. In walked a shark wearing an expensive suit and red tie, picking his teeth with something. He flicked the object on the table when he finished. It was a human finger bone. Jon stared as it hit the table and spun around, pointing in his direction.

The shark bellowed, “I have plenty of fingers, Jon. Go ahead and keep that one.” He laughed so loud the table shook, and the finger bounced closer to Jon. “I hope this little meeting is over. I need to talk with Mr. W about some important issues.”

The meeting was, indeed, over. Mr. Rat walked out with Jon and said, “I love going to England. I have many family members there. How about you, Jon, any family members in England?”

“Not that I know of.”

Linda handed Jon a bag as he left the company’s conference room in their enormous New York City office building. “Here are your and Mr. Rat’s plane tickets to England. Once again I will call your family with an excuse for why you can’t come to visit them. I’m sure they will understand.”

“Yes, I’m sure they will.” Jon did not really think his family would understand. They did not understand how important he was to the company. Just a few more years at this hectic pace, and then he would be in charge. Things would change then—he would take some time off.

Alastair reappeared and said to Great-Grandmother, “Jon is all set. I just hope he understands why he is traveling through this section of his life. If he doesn’t change the way he thinks, he will turn into a very lonely old man. And since no one has figured out how to cross their wealth over to the other side, all is for naught.”

CHAPTER 21

Granmama told Alastair, “I’ve done my best watching over the other three, but it’s good to have you back. Chris will see the bridge soon. Don’t you think there is another way we can convince Chris to go somewhere warm for college?”

Alastair said, “You know as well as I do that Chris has to start thinking about his options. We have six years to turn his thoughts around. Chris is stubborn, but once we’re through with him, he will run out of the frigid weather to attend a university down south.”

Great-Grandmother said, “I so wish we didn’t see that image where Chris was lost and frozen in a whiteout when he’s a junior in college.”

“We have to do it this way. We don’t have any other choice. I’m grateful for the powers we have. Just think if we had not seen that vision. We might have lost Chris.”

“Couldn’t we just tell Chris?”

“No! You know the rules. We can’t tell what we have seen.”

Great-Grandmother sighed, “I guess that’s why the children’s adventures have to give them a jolt into thinking about their futures.”

They watched as Chris finished up his power bar and Kaver and Quill dipped their last toenails into their ears. Kaver slurped loudly, enjoying every nibble, while Chris drank a small bottle of water left in his lacrosse bag. “Have some manners. You’re totally grossing me out,” he called out to Kaver.

Chris had seen a bridge when he was finishing his snack. He did not want to cross the rickety bridge that had seen better days. It was put together with thin copper wire and twine. “Hey guys, this might hold you, but I doubt if this flimsy wire is going to hold my weight.”

Tompack looked Chris up and down. “I see there is a problem.”

Quill whispered, “Why don’t we leave him behind? We can always come back for him.”

Chris glared at Quill. “I don’t have the huge ugly ears that you have, but I can still hear you.”

Quill shrugged his shoulders. “Those tiny things on the side of your head aren’t exactly receptors.”

“Maybe not, but I have perfected the ability to hear the tiniest of sounds, learned that when my mom *thought* I was studying. I could hear her coming and pretended to be deep in thought with my homework. So you see, I can hear you. I would watch what I said if I were you.”

Tompack pointed away from the unstable bridge. “Chris, you make a good point. We’ll travel that way for an hour or two.”

Exhausted from their trek, Chris pleaded with Tompack, “Let’s take a rest. I need to sleep for a while or at least take a nap.”

Tompack replied without hesitation, “We Bundlebobs don’t sleep. We don’t even take naps. We can stay awake and still be refreshed. Now let’s move on.”

“That’s excellent for you. I bet my brother who takes AP classes would think that was a great plan—like when he needs to pull an all-nighter—but me, I need my sleep.” Chris dug

through his bag and made sure he had on every piece of clothing, including his lacrosse equipment.

The snow was coming down harder, and it felt like it must be ten degrees below zero. Chris said, "You guys have fur. I don't. I need to find some shelter."

Tompack reluctantly pointed to an overhang several hundred yards ahead. "Fine, Chris, but just until the storm passes." Off to the right of one of the wobbly bridges, there was a rock shelter.

Chris said, "At least we don't have to cross those dilapidated structures you call bridges."

As they crossed the snow, with not another soul in sight, Chris suddenly heard the loud crack of ice fracturing. His lacrosse bag and stick still sat on top of the snow, but Chris was nowhere in sight. Bihydrant, thinking Chris must be playing another game, got excited, clapping his paws together and jumping up and down. Then another loud cracking sound stopped him in midjump.

Tompack yelled, "Bihydrant, stop jumping! You're breaking the ice!"

Just then Quill pointed Chris out beneath the ice as the current carried him away from them. Kaver, completely overwhelmed by the situation, was no help at all. He just spun around in circles, twisting his hands.

Under the freezing ice, it was like Chris was looking at a circus above him. He could not imagine that this was how he was going to die.

Instantly Chris felt a shot of piercing pain from his feet to his head. Just as quickly as the pain came, it faded into numbness. Chris tried to yell for help, but nothing came out. He tried to tread water, but his arms and legs refused to move. His heavy clothes weighted his body down. As he began to sink, he tried to cry out again. Just as before, no words came out. The frigid water crept up his neck. He never imagined he would die in a river. Chris was an excellent swimmer. Nothing the Olympic team would be interested in, but he could out swim his sisters.

Tompack shouted, "We must save him! He is the answer to our problem. If he dies, we will never be found."

That did not make much sense to Bihydrant, but he liked Chris and wanted to be his friend. The four Bundlebobs used their hard, long nails like picks. A lot of their nails broke off as they dug away at the hard ice. The nails grew back immediately, though, so they could keep trying to excavate Chris from his watery grave without interruption. The ice, only an inch or two thick in places, soon gave way. Quill quickly shot his arm through the small opening in the ice and snagged Chris's sweatshirt.

Tompack shouted, "Hold on tight, Quill!" while the rest of the Bundlebobs chipped away at the ice until the hole grew big enough for Chris to fit through. Since he was deadweight and they had to be careful not to crack the ice further, it was almost impossible to lift Chris out. All of his layers of clothing now dragged him to his death. Kaver grabbed Chris's stick and used it as a lever to lift him out.

Chris's pale skin had a bluish tint to it, and his clothes began to freeze solid. The Bundlebobs quickly pulled him over to the overhang that Tompack had found earlier. Kaver removed Chris's clothing, Quill made a fire, and Tompack built a makeshift bed, made from broken, giant Bundlebob toenails and ear jam.

Bihydrant kept rubbing Chris's hand, saying, "You are my friend; you can't leave us," as tears rolled down his furry green face and onto Chris's arm.

Quill said, "Stop crying, Bihydrant. Your tears are freezing on his arm."

Chris was undressed with the exception of his pineapple boxers. He looked dead.

Bihydrant said, "What do we do now?"

Tompack said, "Put Chris on the bed, and find me some sticks and old wire. Take it from that old bridge if you have to. Hurry now." Tompack started chanting in his native tongue. The snow stopped, and the weather took a turn. The wind blew, the trees bent, and rain began to fall in buckets.

Kaver said, "Now he is going to drown for sure."

Tompack said, "No, he won't. Please get me whatever wire you have found."

Quill handed Tompack some wire, but it was not enough. Bihydrant came running with a whole strand of wire. As he handed the wire to Tompack he said, "We may have to fix the bridge later."

Tompack quickly took the wire and cut it with his teeth into several long pieces of equal length. He put one on either side of Chris's head and one in each of his lifeless hands. The wind picked up, and the lightning and thunder became overbearing. The deafening sound kept Tompack from telling the other Bundlebobs what to do. They could not possibly hear him, so he used his sign language to tell Kaver to climb one tree and tie the wire to an outstretched branch. He motioned for Quill to do the same thing in another tree. When they signaled back to Tompack that they had attached the wires to the trees, Tompack chanted again, louder this time. Fear filled the other three Bundlebobs; they had never seen Tompack like this before.

It looked like Tompack had gone insane.

Tompack reached his hand out and put it on Chris's forehead. Bihydrant, thinking that they all should copy Tompack, put his paw on his arm, and a huge bolt of lightning shot down from the sky and pushed a strong electrical current through the copper wires in the trees.

Tompack saw Bihydrant's paw on Chris's arm and yelled, "Clear!" but it was too late. The wires glowed with the energy pulsing through them. Tompack pulled his hand off of Chris's head just as his body started to glow. Bihydrant failed to remove his paw, and it glowed as well, but since he was not in a vegetative state, he felt every bit of the lightning passing through his body.

Tompack was afraid to pull Bihydrant away. The energy would be too strong, and Tompack would die, just as surely as Bihydrant would.

The lightning strike only lasted a second, but it jolted Chris's heart back to life. He made little movements, more like seizures than real motion.

Bihydrant lay on the ground, dazed, but not dead. "Is Chris alive?"

When they saw Bihydrant, the other two, Quill and Kaver, broke out into laughter. All the green hair on his body was fried at the ends. Little curls of smoke rose from his head, and his ears were bright pink. Chris came to, and Quill ran to see if his clothes were dry.

Quill said, "Chris, your clothes are nice and warm."

Chris slowly sat up. "Did I get a nap?"

Tompack said, "Yes, Chris you got quite a nap. Now, if you feel like traveling, we will be going."

Chris brought his clothes up to his face. "These clothes are warm, like when you take them out of the dryer. I think that was the best rest I have ever had."

Bihydrant said, "I hope you don't take too many of those naps, or I won't have any fur left."

Chris stood up and saw Bihydrant. "What happened to you?"

"I will tell you later."

As he handed Chris his lacrosse stick, Tompack waved his hand for the four of them to follow him. Chris quickly put his clothes back on. He examined his hands, which had angry red burns on the palms. His sleeve rubbed his palm as he was careful not to irritate the red burns on the inner portion of his hands.

Chris touched his temples. “Did you try to roast and eat me while I was resting?” He pointed to Bihydrant.

Bihydrant avoided Chris’s eyes. “We don’t eat meat, especially cooked meat.”

Quill dug between his toes, pulling out some thick, brown, smelly substance. “Now, let me see your hands and head. I will smear this on, and the pain will go away.”

Chris started to protest, but Tompack said, “Chris, we don’t have time to argue. I guarantee this will help the pain.”

When Quill applied the dark substance, Chris felt immediate relief. The smell was not all that bad, either. It reminded Chris of the way his lacrosse bag smelled when he forgot to clean it out for a week.

“I need to tell my mom about this home remedy. She won’t believe it.”

Tompack said, “Let’s move quickly now.”

They traveled for hours, across rolling hills and flat terrain, past cliffs and valleys. Tompack tried not to show it, but he was getting worried. They had not come across another living thing.

When it seemed like they would never stop, Chris said, “I need to eat something.” Chris sat down and dug through his bag. He had several more power bars, but how long could they last?

Tompack said, “Chris, you are right. We must sit and refuel.”

Chris decided to save some of the power bars. As he put them back in his bag, he saw something move. He jumped back, startled. It was dark inside his bag. He spotted the dim light of the night sky reflected from two tiny spots. Then he could, just barely, see what was moving in his bag. It was a rat.

Chris called out to the rat, “Tommy, Tommy, is that you?”

Bihydrant said, “Who is Tommy, and why is he in your bag?” This time, Bihydrant did not think Chris was playing a game.

Tompack wondered if Chris was hallucinating, since he had been, essentially, fried a few hours earlier.

“I think that rat is a pet I had when I was ten. It got away when I was cleaning its cage and ran under the stove. It’s lived there for over a year. Our dog, Titan, can sit and look under the stove for hours, just staring at him.”

Kaver said, “How do you know this to be the same rat? There are millions of these ugly little beasts everywhere. They are the lowest of the food chain; we barely like to acknowledge them at all.”

Quill said, “They are quite a nuisance.”

Chris continued. “Tommy’s right ear was badly crumpled, and he had a white spot on his nose, see, just like this rat.” As Chris pointed into his bag, he grabbed another power bar. He could see the rat had already helped himself—there was a tiny hole in the wrapper. Chris broke off a piece and held out his hand. The sneaky rat jolted out of the bag and took the rest of the food from his hand. Just as the rat finished eating the tasty morsel, Chris picked him up by the tail and held him in the air. “Yep, this is Tommy.”

Quill said, “Get rid of the little pest. He will cause us trouble.”

“I will not get rid of him. He can stay in my bag, and you won’t even know he’s around.”

Kaver said, “You always know they are around. There is something evil about rats.”

Chris finished another power bar. He could hear the Bundlebobs breaking off their toenails and dipping them into their ears, but he paid no attention to them.

Tompack said, “We must go now.”

Chris had completely forgotten to ask why Bihydrant’s fur was singed and why he had those burns on his body. He placed Tommy back in his bag and zipped it up. They were headed off again. To where, Chris had no idea.

CHAPTER 22

Great-Grandmother put her arm on Alastair's. "I hope we haven't given Trisha more than she can handle. She's just now getting to the age to go out on dates, and now we are going to scare the living daylights out of her."

"We can always save this for another trip. Maybe when she's sixteen or seventeen, but by then she will already have dated some worthless beasts. It's your call, though."

Granmama let out a long sigh. "All right. I know it has to be done, but I still have my reservations. You need to help me keep a close eye on Trisha's adventure."

Trisha followed the woman and the raccoon, Advarika, through the dark corridors. "May I ask you a question?"

"Certainly, child."

"Where does this corridor lead, Mrs. Toddles?"

"This tunnel was dug many years ago, when this house was built. It goes between your house and Godfrey's."

Meanwhile, Advarika had pinched a fold of Trisha's nightgown and rubbed the material between his fingers and thumb. He liked the feel of the satin gown.

Trisha pulled her nightgown away from Advarika and continued walking down the corridor. The farther they walked, the narrower the makeshift hallway became. Trisha started hearing noises, not voices, but clinks and clatters.

Mrs. Toddles said, "Trisha, don't be frightened. I have come to help you, so please trust in me."

Trisha rubbed her eyes. In the dim light, she was starting to see things that made her skin crawl. The walls seemed to be moving and squirming, full of insects and worms.

Mrs. Toddles stopped quickly in front of a large stainless steel object, and Advarika ran right into Trisha as she stopped. Embedded in the wall, the piece of metal reminded Trisha of Chris's bed in the OR at her great-grandmother's house. The woman turned Trisha toward the polished steel, where Advarika watched images of him and Trisha. Mrs. Toddles, the woman from the portrait, had no reflection.

Advarika gently pushed Trisha aside and started examining his physique. "Not a bad-looking raccoon, if I do say so myself." He flexed his muscles a few times and then checked his teeth for any leftover worm guts that he had eaten earlier.

When the image changed and grew clearer, it no longer reflected reality. Trisha watched as Advarika peered closely at the surface. He was straining to make out...just a little bit clearer and he could see...

All at once, Advarika jumped three feet in the air and ran behind Trisha, pushing her toward the polished surface. The metal sheet showed a skinny image of a very old woman in a wheelchair. By her appearance, time had taken its toll on her body. She was alone and looked very sad.

"Who is that?" Trisha asked. "She looks familiar."

The woman answered sadly, "Trisha, that woman is you, and you are not as old as you think. You've had a hard life with Godfrey."

“I didn’t dance at balls with my husband, laugh, and stay up having fun till early in the morning?”

The woman replied, “No, I’m afraid not. Concentrate on the background, and you will see more.”

Trisha did not have to strain her eyes. Her intended husband, Godfrey, danced with several young ladies, laughing and chatting as if Trisha did not exist. He appeared to be about the same age as he was now.

Trisha looked at the woman and said, “I don’t understand. Why is Godfrey dancing with other girls? Why am I so horribly old, while he looks so young?”

“Trisha, you are both the same age as you are now. Being married to Godfrey will do that to your soul in a very short period of time.”

“I will not marry that man! He has fooled me, and I will not be his wife.”

Mrs. Toddles replied softly, “You do have another choice.” As she continued to walk, Trisha eagerly waited to hear her second alternative. It had to be better than the one she had just seen. Mrs. Toddles stopped just a few feet away in front of a large boulder.

“If you choose not to go through with the wedding, your fate will rest on the other side of this boulder.”

Advarika tried to move the boulder. He put his skinny fingers between the rock and the wall, but the boulder would not budge. Mrs. Toddles rested her hand on the huge rock, and it slowly opened. Advarika examined his nails—all were still clean. He blew on them and then rubbed them on his chest, looking proud, as if he had just opened the entrance. The smug look on his face quickly changed to match Trisha’s horrified stare.

In the tomblike cavern, eight young women in torn and dirty clothes worked relentlessly at one side of the cave, digging holes and passageways. Trisha looked back at Mrs. Toddles.

“Each of these women turned down Godfrey’s proposal of marriage at some point in the last several years.”

Trisha glanced fearfully at the rest of the room. Several large glass jars, filled almost to the top with dirt, housed countless worms and roaches. Every now and then, the insects’ movement would shift the dirt and a human body part would appear, usually a hand or a foot.

“Once a woman dies or becomes ill, Godfrey no longer needs her. He stores them in these gigantic jars.”

Trisha stared at these women, horribly fascinated. They had no sparkle in their eyes. They seemed to be shells of the people they once must have been. She tried to speak to one of them, but the girl quickly turned away—but not before Trisha spotted the same gaudy brooch pinned to her clothing. It was hard to spot on the young woman’s tattered, dirty clothing, but Trisha could see that it was identical to the one she wore. One by one, Trisha looked at all the women; they all wore the same brooch.

Footsteps sounded near the cavern, and the women began to dig relentlessly. Mrs. Toddles motioned for Trisha and Advarika to hide behind a large jar before disappearing. A door swung open, and Godfrey walked in. Advarika, frightened by the sight of him, leaned against Trisha so hard that he nearly pushed her out of their hiding place. Trisha held her nightgown close to her body as Godfrey walked in their direction. She tried to breathe quietly, but began to hyperventilate as Godfrey approached.

He stopped in front of the glass jars and looked around, mumbling to himself. “Something is not right.”

Trisha's brooch glowed, turning red-hot. Despite the tremendous heat, she brought her hand up to conceal the glowing piece of jewelry from Godfrey's gaze. Trisha could see the other women's brooches glowing red as well. Her brooch was burning her skin, but she was more afraid of Godfrey than the pain, so she would not let go of the piece of jewelry.

Godfrey yelled, "Continue with your work, ladies! You may be getting another worker very shortly." He laughed and walked out, leaving the women imprisoned in the tomb.

Trisha, in excruciating pain, ripped her hand away from the brooch, which had now returned to its normal color. The palm of her hand had a burn mark in the exact same shape as the brooch. Advarika hunted around and then offered her a rock. It was round and smooth and cold to the touch. He put it in Trisha's palm, over the burn. The coolness of the rock helped ease the pain somewhat.

Just then, a small black rat emerged from behind a glass jar. He spat in the dirt by Trisha's feet, then mixed the spit and the dirt together with his paw. He took the black mixture and spread a thin coat over the burn on Trisha's hand. Advarika and the other women watched, astonished. A rat had never helped anyone before.

Trisha felt instant relief from the mixture. When she was able to think again, she noticed Mrs. Toddles standing in the corner of the room. How long had she been there? Could the other women see her?

Trisha walked over to Mrs. Toddles and said, "Who are you? You say you are going to help me, but so far you have not done anything to save me or these women. Why did you decide to help? Why now? Isn't it too late?"

Mrs. Toddles said very slowly, "I didn't think I could help before, but when I saw you at Godfrey's house, I knew I had seen you somewhere else. I remembered seeing you at your great-grandmother's house; you were the girl in the coffin, and I knew I had to try."

Trisha shuddered now at the thought of sleeping in a coffin. It had seemed so perfect and cozy at the time.

This was nothing like the sensual books she read on vampires. She looked at the women with their dirty clothes and their filthy fingernails. Hard labor was not in any of the books she read. This was not going to have the ending she had thought.

One of the women, still looking down at the ground, said quietly as she walked, "Coffin? We have no burials down here." She pointed to the large glass jars. "There is our resting place. Some are not even deceased yet. We are put in there for convenience when we are no longer productive."

Trisha sat down hard on a large rock and put her head down on her arms. "This is not what I had in mind when I wanted to marry Godfrey."

Mrs. Toddles tried to seem motherly. "Yes, I know, Trisha. That's why it would've been a good idea to know your suitor, and something about his family, before jumping into such a commitment."

Trisha looked up at Mrs. Toddles, who at this moment looked like her great-grandmother. "I don't know what to say. I just loved the idea of such a handsome man asking for my hand that I lost my better judgment. I'm sure Brittany would think me a fool for such a hasty decision."

"I'm sure Brittany has her own troubles at this moment, my dear. She is in no position to judge you. Perhaps you could rest for an hour or two. You've had a very long and disturbing day."

Trisha put her head down onto her folded arms and quietly thought about things. She wished she was back home in Boston, in her quiet room off of the kitchen. She desperately needed some downtime, but she wasn't going to get any here.

CHAPTER 23

Great-Grandfather entered the room through a space portal. “Did you hold everything together while I was gone?”

She answered him bitterly. “I wish you would stay here and stop popping in and out like that. Anyway, I believe so, but I can’t wait for these adventures to end. It hurts me to see our great-grandchildren suffer like this.”

“How else are they supposed to learn? Its life’s lessons in a controlled environment. What could be better?”

“Alastair, I would have agreed with you twenty, thirty years ago, but I’m not so sure now.”

“Let me take a look at how the children are all doing.”

Great-Grandmother moved over and let Alastair sit at the control panel. “Feast your eyes, my dear.”

Alastair said, “I see right away there seems to be a little glitch with Brittany’s life lesson.”

When Brittany finally woke up, she was back in her hospital bed at her great-grandmother’s house. Five human-sized rats came through the door, wearing lab coats, masks, and gloves. Brittany looked for the call button, but before she could find it, two of the rats came over to her bed. One put his paw on Brittany’s forehead; the other went to the other side of the bed and pushed the first rat’s paw off Brittany’s forehead. The two rats squabbled over putting their paws on Brittany’s head.

The one rat said, “She has a fever.”

The other one said, “No, she doesn’t.” They slapped each other.

Brittany finally found the call button and pushed it as many times as she could until she heard her great-grandmother coming down the hall.

“I’m coming, Brittany.” For the first time, Brittany felt she could relax; Granmama was coming.

Granmama came into the room, her clothing and hair just as messy as before. And, again this time, she was a five-foot-tall rat, just like the doctors. She had on the same green robe, one green slipper, and one fluffy pink one. Her hairpins were falling out, and she was trying to tie the robe around her, but was having trouble without an opposable thumb and with a long tail to contend with.

Granmama walked over on her hind legs and sat on the edge of the bed. “What’s wrong now, Brittany?”

Brittany knew she must be hallucinating again and decided to go along with the illusion. Great-Grandmother felt Brittany’s head. “You are warm. Let me get you a cool rag for your head.” She turned to the five doctors and said, “I can take care of my great-granddaughter. You may leave.” Granmama went into the bathroom, brought back a cold, wet washcloth, and put it on Brittany’s forehead.

Brittany said, “You know how I like science, Great-Grandmother?”

“Yes, I know, Brittany. I believe the first words you said weren’t ‘mama’ and ‘dada,’ they were ‘carbon’ and ‘oxygen.’”

Brittany smiled and fiddled with her long black ponytail. “Well you know I always have to have a plausible explanation for everything.”

Great-Grandmother nodded.

Brittany tried to keep her voice from shaking. “Could you please explain to me why you are a rat? Since I don’t believe in mystical beings, you must be a dream, or I’m terribly sick. There has got to be a scientific reason for what I’m going through.”

Great-Grandmother said, “Brittany, you can believe it’s a dream. That will make it easier on you, but don’t lose the reason for the dream. Acknowledge the fear and emotions you feel when dealing with a highly contagious germ.” Great-Grandmother kissed Brittany and got up to leave. “You seem tired, my dear. Try and get some sleep.”

“Great-Grandmother, will you please tell Chris and Great-Grandfather that I strongly believe in science, but I don’t believe in their sad attempts to scare me? They are overtaxing my mind. Everything has an explanation, but I’m just too tired right now to figure this out.”

The giant rat nodded at Brittany and then left the room, swishing its tail on the floor.

Brittany was starting to feel better, when she looked over at the mural on the wall. This time a small boy caught her eye—the boy she had found in the street! He was playing with his glowing rocks and top. Brittany got out of bed and approached the mural. She ran her hand along the wall until she touched the boy’s shoulder.

She heard a small voice coming from the other bed in the room. “What’s that?”

Brittany spun around and pulled back the curtain. There, behind the curtain, the little boy sat on a hospital bed, the same boy she had befriended at the hospital in England. Brittany ran over and hugged him, tears coming down her cheeks.

“Are you hungry?”

The little boy nodded. Brittany pressed his call button, and Granmama immediately came into the room. She was still in the form of a five-foot-tall rat, but Brittany needed to get some soup for her little friend.

Besides, the little boy clapped his hands and pointed to the rat. He was quite entertained by the large rodent wearing a robe and shuffling along in mismatched slippers.

“Granmama, may we have some soup, and maybe some cheese and crackers?”

“We have plenty of cheese, and I will check on the crackers and soup.”

Granmama was back in a few seconds, Brittany had no idea how she had gotten the food together so fast, but she was grateful. She took the food from her great-grandmother and put it on the boy’s bedside table.

When she turned to thank her great-grandmother, she was gone.

As the little boy ate, Brittany followed the mural around the room. She did not want to look at the dark and depressing part of the mural, but she could not tear her eyes away. One scene at the end of the mural terrified her. Amid stacks of coffins, she saw several small coffins the size of a child. She knew she had to get back to the English hospital and help in any way she could.

She looked over at the little boy. He had finished eating, and she could hear the rat doctors coming down the hall. Brittany said to the little boy, “I think if you are full, it is time to go back to England.”

The little boy jumped into Brittany's lap and spun his top. The top hit the stones, and the room started spinning so hard that she almost lost her hold on the boy, but when they finally came to a stop, she still had him nestled in her arms.

Brittany whispered to the little boy, "You are lucky that you have me and not my dancing fool of a sister. She hates amusement park rides. I think she would have thrown you on you."

Brittany stood up, putting the boy down on the ground with his top. Four strange creatures ran up the hill toward her. They stood about two feet tall, were covered with green fur, and had extremely large ears and close-set eyes.

She heard one of the critters say, "Quill, wait up." Brittany had never seen anything like these animals. She decided not to take a chance on how friendly they might be.

She quickly picked up the thin little boy, and this time she gave his top a spin, saying, "This is not where we want to be."

This time, when they stopped spinning, they were in a dirt corridor. Worms, roaches, and rats scurried all over. Brittany did not know if they could get to the hospital from here, but at least they were not in any immediate danger. The pair walked until the hallway came to a dead end. There, beside a large boulder, they saw a silver tray embedded in the wall. The metal displayed an image of an old woman in a wheelchair. She looked like Trisha, but had to be well into her nineties. The old woman was petite, pale, tapping her foot, probably to some music, and wiggling and fidgeting with her hands.

Brittany did not know what to make of the image, but she did know the corridor would not take them back to the English hospital.

She put the top and colored stones on the ground again. "You spin again."

The little boy picked up the top and twirled it. The colored stones started glowing, and again the two of them were transported to another place.

Alastair said, "I believe the glitch has been corrected and Brittany is back in England." He looked at Great-Grandmother. "See, nothing we can't handle. Let me show you what to watch out for. Don't worry, you will soon get the hang of it. I know I was alive when Patrick was here as a boy, but don't be afraid. I'll guide you through their adventures."

Great-Grandmother's confidence level was not where it should be, but she would learn as quickly as she could for the safety of her great-grandchildren. This trip was for valuable lessons, but she was hoping the next visit could be for fun, depending on what she saw in their future.

CHAPTER 24

Great-Grandmother had a good look at Jon. He would be a handsome young man with a lot of money. Jon's life lesson would take place in his early twenties, right after he graduated from MIT's business school. She said very quietly, "Jon, I hope you realize how important family and friends are, but you may not see the lesson in front of you."

Rat and Jon arrived at the company plane at the same time. Several other company employees were also going to England, but they were not as important as Jon and Mr. Rat. The flight attendant made sure that Mr. Jon Hellandback and Mr. Rat were comfortable in first class, then started boarding the rest of the passengers. Jon watched as they passed his seat.

A wolf in sheep's clothing boarded first, then a skunk—the flight attendant seated him in the back of the plane, by the lavatory. After them came a stone-faced liar, who looked different than Mrs. Devious, the two-faced liar. A two-faced liar will lie about their lies. A stone-faced liar will admit to them without showing any emotion. Sometimes, Mrs. Devious would even cry and become dramatic to prove she was not lying, when everyone knew she was.

Finally, the pilot boarded and approached Mr. Rat and Jon. "Let me introduce myself. I'm Captain Bull—Pit Bull, that is. I will be your pilot on our long trip to England."

Jon reached out and shook his hand. "My name is Jon Hellandback, and this is Mr. Rat."

The captain replied, "I know who you are. You need to remember just one thing about me."

Mr. Rat said, "And what would that be?"

Captain Pit Bull curled his lips in a snarl, showing every tooth he had. "My bite is worse than my bark."

Then he turned and headed toward the cockpit. Jon whispered to Rat, "Shouldn't that be the other way around?"

Rat replied, "Actually, no. I've heard that he once flew a group of clowns to California. Captain Bull had warned them not to try any funny stuff on his plane, but one of the clowns decided to ignore the warning and buzzed him with a toy buzzer when they shook hands. The captain chomped down on the clown's arm, taking a large chunk out of it. It took all the rest of the clowns to pull him off."

The flight attendant caught Jon's eye and said, "We are just waiting for one more passenger, and then we can take off. He's running a tad bit late."

When the last passenger arrived, it was clear he was running late on purpose; he did not want to see the pilot. Mr. Clown himself walked up to Jon and Mr. Rat and put out his hand.

Mr. Rat said, "Move along, Clown. We don't need any tricks today."

Jon saw that he did not have a buzzer on his palm and reached out to shake Mr. Clown's hand. As Mr. Clown reached forward, his sleeve drew back, and Jon saw a jagged old scar. As the two shook hands, water squirted out from the flower on the clown's lapel. Jon just wiped off his face and did not say anything.

Mr. Clown burst out in a high-pitched laugh, grabbing his stomach as he ambled back to his seat.

Mr. Rat looked at Jon, incredulous. “Jon, why didn’t you say something, punch him, or wrestle him to the ground? I have seen you in many fights, and you are a tough guy. I don’t think you have ever started a fight, but you certainly finish them—as a triumphant winner.”

“I believe Mr. Clown has already had his share of fights, even one with Captain Pit Bull.”

A horrible odor filled the small cabin.

Jon signaled the flight attendant. “Has the lavatory malfunctioned, or has Mr. Skunk done something?” Mr. Rat and the flight attendant both turned to look at Mr. Skunk, who sat reading a newspaper.

The flight attendant said, “I will go check. Please stay seated; we are about to take off.”

She returned in just a few short minutes. It seems the odor is not coming from the back of the plane, but from this area.” She indicated the row Jon and Mr. Rat sat in. Rat picked up his briefcase, and the odor almost knocked the stewardess over.

Jon covered his nose. “What do you have in that case, dead body parts?”

Mr. Rat slowly opened his case. Instead of papers, ledgers, or documents, he had a variety of cheeses neatly arranged in his case. He had cheeses from Spain, France, and Italy, “from all over the world” cheese like Roquefort, Munster, Cabrales blue cheese, and Limburger.

Mr. Rat picked up one of the cheeses. “This is my favorite. It comes from France—Vieux Boulogne.” He inhaled the pungent odor. The flight attendant quickly slammed the briefcase closed, but not before the overpowering odor reached everyone on the plane. She took the case to the back of the plane, where Mr. Skunk gave her a thumbs-up. She put the briefcase into ten garbage bags, and still the odor was noticeable. The pilot’s call light came on, and the flight attendant went to find out what he wanted.

As she passed Mr. Rat, she said, “You can collect your briefcase at the end of the flight, when everyone else has left the plane.”

She opened the door to the cockpit, and Jon listened in on the conversation.

Captain Bull snorted, “What the hell is that smell? It smells like a rotten egg! I used to eat garbage in my younger days, when I was in flight school and had no money for food. The Dumpsters made a great buffet, but at times there were surprises, if you know what I mean.”

The flight attendant just gave him a funny look and said, “No, Mr. Rat brought some cheese onto the plane, quite exotic cheese at that, and I’ve done the best I can with the odor problem. If it gets any worse, you have the option to release the air masks.”

Things settled down, and the odor began to dissipate. When the flight was underway, Jon talked to Mr. Rat about his family and how he hadn’t seen any of them for months. “I haven’t seen Trisha and Chris in years. I’m not even sure where they live.”

Mr. Rat said, “I’ll keep my ears open. If anybody can find your siblings, it’s me.”

The rest of the trip went smoothly, and when they landed in England, a single black Lincoln limousine waited for both Jon and Rat.

But Mr. Rat chose not to accompany Jon. “I need to get my briefcase from the back of the plane. Since we are early, I am going to visit some family and friends.”

Jon was delighted. He did not want to share a ride with Mr. Rat’s briefcase. He could still smell the odor, not only on his clothes, but inside his nose. It would take a lot of soap to wash that smell out.

With nothing to do in England, Jon got to the meeting several hours early and decided to stop by the CEO’s office. To his surprise, Mr. Shark, the attorney, already sat there, licking his lips. How had he gotten there so fast?

He said, “Jon, come on in. You should have flown in my private jet.”

Jon discreetly looked at Mr. Shark. Was that blood on his teeth? Mr. Shark picked his teeth with one of his finger toothpicks.

Jon asked, "Where is the CEO?"

Mr. Shark answered, "This is a fast-paced world we live in, my boy. You either get the job done or step aside and let someone qualified do it. The CEO was doing a sloppy job, so I relieved him of his duties."

Jon set his briefcase on Mr. Shark's desk. Mr. Shark opened the case and threw in a half dozen finger bone toothpicks.

"You never know when you might need these."

When would I ever need those? Jon thought as Mr. Shark kept right on talking.

"Come here, Jon. I want to show you something." He motioned for Jon to join him in front of the closet. When he opened it, skeletons came tumbling out. "I'm sure your closet isn't this full yet, but someday it will be. I can hardly close this one anymore."

Jon knew he did not have any skeletons in his closet. He had earned his position with hard work, long hours, a great education, his intellect, and a family who loved him, even when he did not visit them.

Jon said, "I don't have any skeletons. I have nothing to be ashamed about."

"Everyone has things they do or say that they are not proud of. You are no exception." Mr. Shark seemed almost pleased by all the bones that clattered to the floor.

"What's that smell? Oh yes, now I remember. Mr. Rat was going to accompany you." Mr. Shark broke out into laughter. "Use my private bath before the meeting. You can put on one of my suits."

Jon went and cleaned up. It felt good to get a shower, and he was excited to slip into clothes that did not smell like strong cheese. He pulled out one of Mr. Shark's suits and started to put it on. Mr. Shark was much larger than Jon, and a big slit ran down the back, but that was not what bothered him. When he put it on and looked in the mirror to check the fit, his teeth seemed more pointed, and longer. His hands began to morph into fins. His ideas of how to treat others were changing. Jon immediately took off the suit and put on one of his. Even in his suitcase, Jon's clothes smelled of Mr. Rat's choice of cheeses.

As Jon emerged from the private bath, Mr. Shark looked him over. "Was my suit too empowering for you to handle?"

Jon ignored the comment and the roar of laughter coming from Mr. Shark and headed to the conference room.

The large table offered six regular chairs on one side and, on the other, six stools with small buckets behind them. A few minutes before the meeting started, the door opened and in walked six butt-kissers and, behind them, six backstabbers. The butt-kissers sat in the regular office chairs, and the backstabbers sat on the stools. Their blood dripped into the small buckets behind them.

When Mr. Shark sauntered in, he said, "Jon, I see you have met the new team, handpicked by me." He lifted his fin up and started laughing.

Just then, Mr. Rat scurried in, and Mr. Shark yelled, "You're late! There are no extra chairs. You can stand during the meeting."

When Mr. Shark's secretary saw Mr. Rat, she quickly brought him a chair.

"Don't baby him. If he's late, he will stand."

The secretary paid no attention to Mr. Shark's yelling, but smiled and offered the chair to Mr. Rat. Annoyed, he took the chair and sat down.

Mr. Shark continued. “Now, as you can see, I have chosen six butt-kissers and six backstabbers. I feel they balance each other out.” The bucket behind one of the backstabbers overflowed, and Mr. Shark paused to motion for his secretary to empty the bucket.

Mr. Shark pointed his fin at the backstabber. “Must have been a long day, hmm? Now, let’s get started. As you all know, I have some high-ranking government officials in my back pocket. They can help this company if we run into trouble with any of the new regulations.” Mr. Shark stood up, lifted up his suit coat, and pointed to his back pocket, where four tiny men screamed to get out. Mr. Shark then sat back down, muffling their screams.

Mr. Rat mumbled, “So much for government help. I believe Mr. Shark just permanently silenced them.”

Mr. Shark ignored Mr. Rat and continued. “We need to ax ten thousand jobs in the next few months.” He lifted his fin into the air and slammed it onto the conference table, but it wasn’t just his fin that hit the table—it was an ax. The ax quivered, wedged into the table for all to see. One of the backstabbers grinned broadly.

Jon interrupted, “No, we don’t have to let ten thousand employees go—look at my report.”

Jon passed a document to each of them. The butt-kissers nodded as they read, agreeing with Jon, but Mr. Shark and the backstabbers wanted no part of it. They wanted lives destroyed. Jon ignored them and continued. Even Mr. Rat, who rarely paid attention, agreed that it was a good plan.

After much heated debate, Jon would not back down. Finally, Mr. Shark said, “Jon, how about I wrestle you for the final decision?”

Jon looked at Mr. Shark. Jon hated it when someone challenged him to wrestle, but he had never lost. *How long can I keep winning?* he thought, and then said, “Let’s do it.”

Mr. Shark removed his suit coat, shirt, and tie, saying, “This will be over shortly.”

Jon, removing his own coat, shirt, and tie, knew getting Mr. Shark’s shoulders on the ground would be tricky. His fin gave him a unique advantage, but Jon knew how to get around it.

Meanwhile, the backstabbers pulled the table to the side, and Mr. Rat prepared to officiate. As soon as Rat gave the signal to begin, Jon lunged at Mr. Shark’s lower body, knocking him to the ground. Mr. Shark did not know what hit him. He was dazed, and Jon had Mr. Shark’s shoulders pinned, his lower body pointing upward.

Rat hit the carpet with his hand and said, “The winner, and still undefeated—Jon Hellandback.”

Mr. Shark got up, brushed himself off, and said, “I’m hungry. That lunch I had didn’t fill me up. Jon, we will try it your way, but you may want to put on a few pounds, just in case it doesn’t work out.” He took out one of his toothpicks from his pocket and started picking his teeth. “Anyone care to join me for dinner?”

They all declined. Mr. Shark angrily walked out of the conference room, saying, “Darn. Now I have to go find someone—I mean, something—to eat.”

Mr. Rat said, “Jon, I have good news. When I visited my family earlier in the day, one of my relatives told me that he has seen Trisha. I will take you to her if you want.”

Jon didn’t think this made sense. Was Trisha in England? Maybe. He had not seen or heard from any of them in such a long time. He really had drifted away from all of his family.

“I will take you to her if you want,” Mr. Rat repeated.

Jon replied eagerly, “Yes, of course. I can’t believe you know where she is!”

Mr. Rat looked smug. "I told you I have connections." With that, they walked out of the conference room and down the hallway toward the elevator.

When the elevator doors opened, revealing an empty shaft, Mr. Rat said, "Sorry, Jon, but you will soon know why I'm doing this."

Mr. Rat gave Jon a push, and down he went. Mr. Rat watched until Jon vanished. When the elevator doors closed again, Mr. Rat quickly slapped an OUT OF ORDER sign on the doors.

CHAPTER 25

Great-Grandfather changed out of his old-fashioned hippie outfit, as Chris called it, and into a more appropriate outfit. He was going to visit Chris again, and he wanted to impress upon him that he was truly a great mystic, magical sorcerer. He could tell from their last encounter that Chris didn't think much of his abilities.

Great-Grandfather had no idea that his "impressive mystic" outfit was going to be ridiculed by Chris also—the black, pointed leather shoes with the red piping, the hat that was squared off at the top and came down on each side of his face like sideburns, and the loose-fitting robe that looked more like an oversized tent just thrown over him. If he only realized how foolish he looked before Chris got a hold of him. This was not going to be fun for Great-Grandfather.

Chris and the Bundlebobs were finishing their snack when Quill said, "I'm still hungry. I didn't have enough ear jelly for my toenails."

Chris changed the subject. "I miss my sisters and brother. I get under their skin, but I don't mean to. I don't know I'm doing anything wrong until they yell at me."

As Chris was feeling sorry for himself, the black rat, Tommy, formerly Chris's pet, said, "I can get you to see your sisters and brother."

Chris spun around. "How can you do that?"

"I have underground connections, and the word is they are looking for you."

Chris looked over at the Bundlebobs, who sat in a tight circle, picking things out of each other's green fur and eating them.

When Bihydrant saw Chris talking to the black rat, he got suspicious and left the group to follow them.

They stopped in front of a cave. Chris stuck his head inside the entrance and heard thousands of bats flying around. "Tommy, I'm not going in there. What does this have to do with my sister Trisha?"

Tommy said, "I guess you will never know since you won't go in the cave. That's funny, because from what I remember about you when I was your pet, you weren't afraid of anything with the exception of one very large dog."

Chris had an idea. He dug through his lacrosse bag and pulled out his helmet and gloves. "At least they won't get in my hair."

Tommy shook his head. "That's an old wives' tale."

Chris said, "That's fine, Tommy. You go in and get carried off or have a few bats in tangled in your fur. I'm playing it safe."

Bihydrant watched all this from just outside the cave. As Tommy led Chris in deeper, he let out a shrill noise.

"What's the matter with you?" Chris yelled.

Bats flew at Chris from every direction. He could hardly catch his breath, surrounded by flapping wings. The bats seemed to be using all the air. Chris bent down, tucked his head, and formed a little air pocket under his body. Chris felt something pulling at his leg. He had no idea what it could be. His lacrosse stick had been knocked out of his hand. He felt around for it and

found it. Just as Chris brought it up to hit the thing on his leg, he recognized Bihydrant by his green fur.

The bats attacked the small Bundlebob relentlessly. He cried out in pain and grabbed Chris's leg even tighter. Chris attempted to shield his friend with his arms, but one bat was tangled in his fur, biting and scratching the poor Bundlebob, so Chris literally pulled the bat off Bihydrant's furry back and tossed him to the side. Chris hung on to his friend, hoping the bats would grow tired and fly away.

Suddenly, the cave whirled. The sound built, growing louder and more intense, until it sounded like the theme park rides Chris loved so much. Bihydrant stopped crying and lay very still. He hoped he was not dead.

A jolt threw Chris to the hard ground. He could feel Bihydrant lying next to him. Chris caught his breath and looked around. Chris had not a scratch on him, but Bihydrant was not so lucky. Chris hoped that Bundlebobs could not get rabies from a bat attack. There was definitely something wrong with that group of bats. The only thought that came to Chris's mind was that they must be rabid.

They seemed to be in a cell. The walls had been built from rock and looked hundreds of years old. Chris got up and went over to the door. Just as he thought, it was locked. He could see across the circular open space outside his cell. The wall next to his cell held another door, identical to his own, but he could not reach that door. Across the circular space, he could see through two more barred doors, into two similar cells. One of those had a huge door on the back wall with an enormous lock. Each contained an old wooden bed that was falling apart and not much else. The four cells were divided into two on Chris's side and two on the other side, and by a pair of very different doors, facing each other to his right and left.

Chris was looking around when someone in a cape fumbled his way into the room, tripping on a rock. "Chris, I see you have successfully made it down into the dungeon," said Alastair.

Chris looked at his great-grandfather. "What's with the dress and the elf shoes? You have got to get a better tailor. Does Great-Grandmother let you leave the house looking like that? I think you both need a thorough eye exam."

Alastair rubbed his forehead and ignored Chris's questions. "How's the trip been so far?"

"The only good thing I can say about it so far is that I've not been bored."

Alastair sighed, "No lessons learned along the way?"

"I didn't know we were taking a test at the end of this. I've got to warn you I don't exactly do well on exams."

"No, Chris, there is no test at the end of this. I was just wondering if you thought about your future."

"Can't say that I have, Great-Granddad. You don't mind if I call you that?"

Alastair was getting frustrated. "Chris, did you learn a valuable lesson about freezing weather conditions and how easy it is to die from overexposure?"

"Okay, Great-Granddad, you seem to have a spring loose or something. Can I see my brother and sisters?"

Alastair slowly pulled his hat off. "They will be here soon. Chris, all you had to do was press the knobs on your watch and you could've seen your siblings. Why do you think I gave this to you? With you being the youngest and, how should I put this, with less of an ability to straighten things out in your mind, I gave you something to help make your trip more suitable."

"Great! But why am I in this prison cell?"

“You will see soon enough. I believe it is time that the four of you helped one of your own out.”

Chris said, “Help me out! Help me out of what?”

“No, Chris, help your sister Trisha out.”

“Great-Granddad, why would I do that?”

“Oh, I don’t know, Chris. Because she’s your sister?”

“I’m not exactly cut out for helping others; I have a short attention span. Do you know if I took my meds this morning? What day is this?”

Alastair said, “I’ve got to leave now, Chris. I’ve gotten a headache in the last twenty minutes.”

“Before you go, I think I’m running out of power bars. You got anything to eat?”

“No!” He lowered his voice. “Chris, this is just like one of your video games. Only you’re one of the main characters. You will be safe. Play well.”

Chris watched as Alastair stumbled out of the dungeon. “Got to watch that dress, Great-Granddad. Seems to be hindering your ability to walk. If I was a cop, I’d have pulled you over for being under the influence.”

Chris could hear Alastair from behind the door. “How does your mum do it?”

As Bihydrant and Chris found themselves confined to a medieval prison, Trisha felt herself growing horribly sleepy. She looked suspiciously at the paste the rat had applied to her burned palm. As Advarika shoved the rat away, he now patted Trisha’s hand anxiously. She was losing consciousness fast.

Advarika yelled at the rat. “What did you give Trisha? Is she dead? Did Godfrey send you?”

Mrs. Toddles intervened. “Now, Advarika, you must keep your voice down. You wouldn’t want Godfrey to hear you. The rat has just given Trisha something to help her sleep on her long journey to see her siblings.”

“What journey?” Advarika tried to focus, but he felt himself being overcome by sleepiness. He looked down at his hand. He had been patting Trisha’s hand and gotten some of the drugged paste on it. He immediately tried to wipe it off.

Mrs. Toddles smiled at him sadly. “Don’t fight it. I need you to go on with Trisha. Just close your eyes. You will be together when you awake.”

Advarika envisioned himself waking up with Trisha in one of those large containers with the earthworms and roaches. He kept trying to stay awake. He sang, chanted, blurted out words, and struggled unsuccessfully to stand up.

He finally lay down beside Trisha and closed his eyes. They were both out cold.

Brittany appeared in her cell with the little boy she was carrying. The little boy clung tight to Brittany, trembling. He began to cry. Brittany took a deep breath and noticed the air smelled fresh. If air could get in, maybe they could get out. She spotted a window, unfortunately too far above her head to reach. She could see now that the walls and floor were made out of stone blocks, and bars blocked the window and door openings.

One of the colored stones slipped from her hands as she tried to comfort the boy, rolling to one of the corners. She knew she needed to get it and get out of this place. As she bent down

to pick up the brightly colored stone, she heard a familiar voice. It sounded like her brother, Chris.

The words came screaming out of her mouth. "Chris, is that you? Can you hear me?"

Before Chris could answer, Jon arrived in his cell with a thud, hitting his head on the dilapidated wooden bed. He said a few choice words while rubbing his head.

As Trisha slowly came out of her drug-induced stupor, Advarika pressed his face against the bars of their cell door. All four of the Hellandbacks began talking, three of them jumping up and down, screaming with joy. Their short-lived celebration came to an end when one of the huge doors that divided Trisha's and Jon's cells from Chris's and Brittany's cells opened. Mrs. Toddles came through the door.

Trisha gazed at her silently, wondering how much she trusted this woman, maybe not so much now.

"I know her from somewhere." Chris sounded puzzled.

Trisha said, "All of you have seen her before. Don't you remember the portrait in my bedroom at Granmama's house?"

Brittany said, "You mean in the chapel?"

"Yes, the painting on the wall. She's the woman I was staring at."

Jon now looked like his ripe old age of fifteen. He did not have to be in the corporate world to help his sister. Jon looked at the woman and said, "Is there a reason that we're incarcerated?"

The woman spoke softly; Jon had to strain to hear.

Chris said, "Speak up. I can't hear you."

Mrs. Toddles ignored Chris. Standing right next to his cell, she continued speaking quietly. "You all need to trust me. I will try to help all of you to escape, but you must not speak loudly."

Chris said in a loud voice, "I heard from our great-grandfather that we need to help Trisha. I don't know if he meant physically help her or emotionally. He's kind of a nut ball."

Jon said, "Chris, when did you talk with Great-Grandfather? And was he dragging something along with him?" He remembered when he thought he saw his great-grandfather: he was dragging a giant with a large knife in its back to the basement.

"Well, he was having a little problem with his dress, but I don't know if he was dragging it."

Just then the opposite door burst open. Jon was half expecting the giant and his great-grandfather, for he thought this had to be the basement. Revealing himself was Godfrey. Jon's gift for seeing people as they really were seemed to have stayed with him; he saw the grim reaper come in.

Trisha almost fainted completely, but she held on to consciousness by a thread. Advarika fanned her with his hands. The brooch, still pinned to her nightgown, glowed brightly.

Although Brittany was only twelve, at times she seemed older than Trisha. She yelled, "Trisha, are you all right? Who is this man?"

Godfrey walked quickly to Trisha's cell and unlocked the door. "Now, dear, I know you want to tell the story, but please, let me do it. I get such joy out of telling about your love for me."

Advarika did his best to ease Trisha to the floor; she just could not stand any longer. Her legs felt like rubber bands. They were not working right.

Jon, the closet to Trisha, looked at her. She looked very pale and tired. He glared at Godfrey. "What have you done to my sister? If you've touched her, I will kill you!"

Godfrey spun around, furious. "That may work in the world you come from, but it won't work here. You will never threaten me again, or I will have you shot before daylight."

Jon knew he meant it. He *was* the grim reaper.

Godfrey turned his attention back to Trisha. "We are to be married soon. You will all attend the wedding. Jon, you can give Trisha away, since her father cannot be present. Trisha, dear, your little brother is obnoxious, but I will use him as my best man."

Chris picked up his lacrosse ball and threw it as hard as he could at Godfrey. The ball stopped just before it hit Godfrey's face, then sailed back toward Chris at a much greater speed. He ducked just in time, and the ball hit the back wall. It hit hard enough to dent the stone.

"Chris, I wouldn't try my patience if I were you. You will come down with a bad case of death," Godfrey said. "Now, where was I? I danced with your sister at several balls, swept her off her feet, and when I asked her to marry me, she couldn't refuse."

Trisha could not say anything. Godfrey walked toward her. "Isn't that right, my love?" He picked up Trisha's hand to kiss it, but Advarika grabbed her hand away. Godfrey gave Advarika a half smile.

"You will be gone soon enough. Trisha, my dear, I think for our wedding dinner we will have baked raccoon." He started laughing and did not stop until he had locked Trisha's cell and left the dungeon.

The woman reappeared from the shadows. She looked at Chris and said, "And now you know why I was speaking softly." Her face softened and seemed kinder. "None of us can do a thing about your escape this evening, so tell me what you would like to eat, and I will bring it to you."

Trisha spoke first. "I can't eat anything. I don't feel well."

Mrs. Toddles responded, "Now, Trisha, you of all of us need to eat. How are you going to outwit Godfrey if you are weak and sick?"

Chris said, "Hey, look, lady, why can't you just pop us out of here? You seemed to make yourself scarce when the leading man came into the room."

"Chris, I can't go against Godfrey's wishes. I don't have that kind of power. But, I can make you as comfortable as I can and help you along the way. Some things you need to discover for yourself."

Chris said sarcastically, "Yeah, like who to believe and who not to believe."

Bihydrant decided he had been quiet long enough. He was starving. He had already checked his ears and found no jam, and his toenails had not grown. Bundlebobs were like their own parasites, and he could not survive in this place by feeding on himself. "I'll have some ear jam and at least a dozen toenails."

Jon said, "Hey Chris, where did you get that canine?"

"Jon, he's not a dog. He's a Bundlebob, and he doesn't eat meat." Chris knew Bihydrant must be hungry. The most he had ever seen the Bundlebob eat was three or four nails.

The woman looked at Bihydrant. "I will do my best."

They all knew they had to keep their strength up.

Jon said, "I'll have a cheeseburger." He hadn't had a cheeseburger in so long he almost forgot what they tasted like.

Chris said, "I'll have two bean tacos, a couple of flour tortillas, and a large soft drink." His mother never let him have soda, something about making him hyper. Now, he figured he needed the extra energy.

Brittany said, "A deep-dish pizza, which I can tear into little pieces to share with my little friend." The boy was still sitting on Brittany's lap.

Trisha said with a soft voice, "A bowl of Mexican rice and one cheese enchilada."

Advarika was the last to order. "I'll have a large plate of cat food with a side bowl of water."

As Mrs. Toddles left to fix their food, they all started examining their cells.

There had to be a way out. Chris pointed to the door in Jon's cell. "Jon, try that door at the back."

Jon tried pushing, pulling, pounding, and pressing on the wall around the door. He shoved against the door with his shoulder until he had a bruise the size of a football. Any more effort and he would dislocate it. Worn out, he had to sit down and rest.

Then Brittany told them about the glowing stones. She held them out through the bars for her siblings to see.

Trisha said, "Brittany, those are beautiful. They look like the ones you received from the hospital nurse in that little bag at home."

Brittany said, "Exactly, Trisha. I really don't know how the stones and top work." She pointed to the little boy. "We are just transported to different places, like here."

Jon said, "So what do you do with these marbles?"

"I put them on the ground, then spin the top, and away we go. I never know where we will land. But I know I can't leave this place without all of you, so let me throw each of you two stones." She kept two stones for herself and carefully tossed each of the stones.

"Now, put them on the ground, and I will spin the top. You may want to grab hold of Advarika and Bihydrant." When they did, she gave the top a spin. Nothing happened, no room spinning, no darkness. They all remained in the dungeon.

"I don't know why it won't work. I've done this a half dozen times, and it always works."

Chris said, "I think you need to put all the rocks together, like you did before." They all gently tossed their rocks back to Brittany. All except Chris, that is. He threw his a little too hard, and one of the stones bounced into a crack in the wall by Trisha.

"Way to go, Chris," Jon said dolefully. But Advarika was already putting his arms through the bars and using his skinny fingers to dig it out of the crack. He got it and gently rolled it over to Brittany's cell. Again Brittany spun the top. After twenty or thirty times, nothing happened.

Taking a new approach, Jon asked, "Chris, how did you get here?"

Chris said, "I was attacked by thousands of bats and ended up here."

Since Chris always kidded if it was at all possible, no one believed him.

Brittany rolled her eyes. "Chris, do you always have to be so dramatic?"

Bihydrant turned around to show them where his fur had been pulled out by the bats, as well as the scratches all over his body. "If it weren't for Chris, those bats would have killed me."

"I'm sorry. I thought he was kidding," Brittany said simply.

Trisha spoke up. "I don't think we can get out of here the way Advarika and I did. I think a rodent drugged us. I don't remember much."

Jon asked Trisha, "While we're on the subject, why does Godfrey want a wife?"

Trisha started crying. "I didn't want to marry him. He tricked me, and now he has some type of control over me with this." She pointed to the brooch. "Whenever it glows red, it means that Godfrey is close or that I'm in some kind of danger."

Chris yelled at his sister, "Why not just take it off!"

"Chris, I have tried. If I was standing here naked, it would just reattach itself to my skin."

Chris said, "Well, let's not go that far. I don't want to go blind."

Brittany struggled to her feet with the little boy still in her arms. "Trisha, I certainly don't want to sound like the old soul you think I am, but you are only fourteen years old. What state are we in?"

"Please, Brittany, don't give me a lecture, at least not now. I'll just tell you the place is England, and the time line is when it was almost acceptable to marry at such a young age.

Godfrey seemed so handsome and charming at the time."

Before Trisha could say anything else, Mrs. Toddles came back with their food.

Chris said, "I hope there isn't any cheese on those bean tacos. I forgot to say that I'm lactose intolerant."

Mrs. Toddles gave Chris a look. "I made each of your meals with the utmost care, and there isn't one shred of cheese on your bean tacos."

As she brought the food to their doors, they all realized how hungry they were. The food tasted better than anything they had ever eaten.

Bihydrant seemed a little disappointed that he did not get ear jam and toenails. Chris looked at his food and even tasted the gold substance; it was honey with a side of tortilla chips. Chris had to laugh when he saw that the chips were in the shape of long toenail. The woman had done the best she could with the odd food order from Bihydrant.

There was a light coming from Chris's watch. He saw his great-grandfather on the crystal talking to him. "Speak up, Great-Granddad. I can't lip-read."

Alastair yelled, "Wind the black knob!"

Chris twisted the knob until he could hear his great-grandfather. "What do you want? So far this doesn't seem like any video game I would want to be the main character in."

"Chris, do you know what a life lesson is?"

"Sure, Great-Granddad, what do you think, I'm stupid or something? I have ADHD. I'm not lacking any brain cells."

Alastair mumbled, "Good Lord, how does your mum do it?"

"Do what?"

"Chris, anyway, you all must continue on your journeys. It will seem hard at times, but all of you will learn a life-changing lesson when you're here in Scotland. Godfrey wants you all here to participate in his wedding to your sister, but you need to ruin his plans and find a way out of this prison."

"Yeah, okay, Great-Granddad, whatever. Over and out."

Mrs. Toddles looked into each cell purposefully. "Now you all must get some sleep."

Bihydrant said, "I don't sleep."

Mrs. Toddles said, "Well, maybe you can just close your eyes and let Chris sleep."

"How can we fall asleep on these old boards that are supposed to be beds?" As Chris turned around to complain some more, he saw an overstuffed white feather mattress, two fluffy pillows, and a thick comforter on his bed. There was even a dog bed for Bihydrant. "Wow! This is so much better than a steel surgical table."

Brittany now had two beds in her cell, one decorated for a small boy and the other looking fit for queen. There were at least six overstuffed pillows on her bed and everything matched: the bed skirt, sheets, and pillowcases. Brittany put the small boy into his bed, gave him a hug and kiss, and lay down on her bed. The small boy immediately climbed into her bed and curled up next to Brittany.

Jon turned around to see a massive sleigh bed decorated with a black-and-beige comforter. The bed almost filled the entire room, except the area by the huge door in the back of his cell. He had slept on a narrow couch in his office for so long that he did not even know if he could fall asleep on a large, comfortable bed. Yet Jon was soon fast asleep.

Trisha fell asleep last. She had eaten very little of her food, and she wondered if the food had been laced with some type of medication to make them sleep. How else could her sister and brothers fall asleep so quickly in such a strange situation? Even Bihydrant, who said he never slept, was fast asleep. Finally, Brittany's familiar, rhythmic snore put Trisha to sleep.

Jon woke up periodically throughout the night because he heard a thumping or knocking noise. He thought it was his brother Chris bouncing his lacrosse ball against his wall. He yelled, "Chris, go back to sleep!"

When morning came, the smell of bacon and eggs filled the room. Mrs. Toddles presided over a buffet table in front of their cells. As each of them got out of bed to look, their beds turned back into the old beds with wooden slats.

Still half asleep, Chris said, "I don't like bacon and eggs." Just as he said that, he saw the variety of food on the table.

Mrs. Toddles said, "Chris, what would you like? You can have anything."

Trisha looked at her suspiciously. "Does the food have anything in it? Will it make us fall asleep?"

The woman walked over to Trisha's cell. "I thought it would help you if you all had a good night's sleep. I didn't mean any harm. And I assure you that this food is drug free."

Trisha did not know why, but she believed her sometime guide. She ate two platefuls of food. Bihydrant turned out to like toast with strawberry jelly. As soon as they finished eating, small doors appeared in their rooms. Each door led to a very small bathroom.

Mrs. Toddles said, "You can all get cleaned up. There is fresh clothing in the bathrooms for each of you."

Jon could not remember the last time that his assistant Linda had not picked out his clothes. He was used to showering and dressing fast, so he finished first. Chris was the last one dressed.

When they returned from changing, Mrs. Toddles and the food had vanished. Godfrey stood in the open space between the prison cells. Trisha's brooch glowed red-hot, and she did not care to touch it.

Bihydrant had been brushing out his green fur with a brush he found in the bathroom, and when he went to put the brush back, the door to the bath had disappeared.

Godfrey yelled, "Enough pampering! We have things to do. Trisha and I will be practicing our wedding vows today."

Jon glowered at him. "You will not be practicing anything with our sister."

Godfrey said, "We will see about that. Chris, why don't you look out your window?"

Chris could not reach the window. "I can't see out." Bihydrant came over and boosted Chris up. When Chris got a clear view, he almost fell. He could not speak.

Brittany finally had to ask. "What do you see?"

"I see four hangmen's nooses."

Brittany said, "Trisha, you look out. Can Advarika lift you up?" Trisha was very petite, but strong for her size. Advarika laced his fingers together for a step, and Trisha hoisted herself up on the sill. She was grossed out by the dirt and dust that covered the windowsill, but she held on.

Trisha said, so quietly that they barely heard her, "Yes. It looks like they are finishing up the gallows now."

Jon said, "That explains the noises I heard last night."

Godfrey said, "If, for any reason, Trisha doesn't go through with this marriage, that will be your fate, all of you." He pointed his long, skinny finger toward the window. "You see, without a young bride, I will turn old and deteriorate back into a slimy corpse."

Trisha now understood the image of herself as an old woman in the metal mirror in the corridor. She looked so much older than Godfrey because he planned to steal her youth. He must take the life from each of his brides. Once he had taken each girl's last breath, he moved on to another victim.

Trisha felt behind her for her bed and sat down. As she took a deep breath, she saw something white out of the corner of her eye. The white wedding dress from the chapel danced beside her, its lace arms moving as if a person wore it. In the safety of her great-grandmother's house, Trisha had thought the dress beautiful. Now the dress looked evil, dancing all by itself.

Godfrey sauntered over to her cell. "You will not need that yet, my dear, but we will all have a rehearsal very soon. I feel my energy slipping away, Trisha. I need to get married by noon tomorrow." He walked through the large door, laughing. "Soon, Trisha. Very soon, my dear."

When he left, Jon immediately started looking for a way out. "We are each in separate, secure cells, so we each need to find our own way out."

Brittany did her best not to whine. Her young age was showing. "I've already tried, and the stones aren't working."

Jon replied, "No, Brittany. You need to rethink the way you and your friend travel. We all got here on our own, and we will all be leaving on our own."

Trisha did not bother thinking about escape. She knew she had to go through with the wedding. At least that way she could save her sister and brothers.

Jon said, "We all need to concentrate. All of us came here with something or someone else. We need to think about how that will get us back to where we started."

Chris said, "Well, if you all came from a place like the one I was in, you wouldn't want to go back." He rubbed the healing burns on his temples and the palms of his hands.

Brittany did not have much patience for that attitude. "Chris, if you didn't die there, you were still better off there than you are here."

Trisha felt terribly guilty. She had gotten herself into this mess. More than anything, she had wanted to go to some dances, find a nice man, and get married.

Her brooch began glowing again; Godfrey must be coming for them. He entered with an armful of leg shackles.

"I brought you each a present." He put a pair of shackles through the bars of each cell. "Put these on. We need to get this over with."

As they filed out of their cells, they heard the ominous sound of their shackles dragging on the stones.

Chris whispered to Jon, "Think of something."

Jon whispered back, "Chris, it wouldn't do us any good to break free. We don't even know where we are. We need to find a way for each of us to retrace our journey here. We need to think outside the box."

Godfrey heard them talking. "*Quiet!*" He poked Jon's back with his walking stick. "Get moving!"

They walked up a flight of stairs in silence. Godfrey led them into a chapel that looked like the one at their great-grandmother's house. Once inside, Godfrey placed each of the Hellandback children in the right place for the wedding.

"Now, tomorrow you will be in these same spots, but I hope we can have the ceremony without these shackles. I would hate to bring a wedding party before the minister in leg restraints. He would have no problem with it; I pay him very well. But the noise does disrupt the ceremony."

Jonathan frantically tried to think of something to gain them more time so they could come up with a plan.

"But you can't marry Trisha! She, uh, doesn't look very healthy. You need to give her time to recover. How are you going to suck the life out of her when she is almost gone now?" Jon hated saying that about Trisha, but he needed to buy time to plan an escape. He knew Trisha looked deathly ill when she was only extremely tired. She easily became pale and lethargic, with dark circles under her eyes. If she got a good night's sleep, she would be back to her old self, but Godfrey did not need to know that.

Godfrey looked at Trisha. "It is too late to get another bride pinned by tomorrow. Hmm. I may have to let Trisha rest for a few days." Godfrey stood close to Trisha. "My love, you don't mind waiting for me just a few more days, do you? I don't want a sick bride."

Trisha did not say a word as she walked slowly toward the dungeon with her chains dragging behind her.

When all four of them were locked back into their cells, Godfrey said, "I will come check on you tomorrow, Trisha. Maybe we can still be married by sunset."

Chris had spent the time in the chapel thinking. He wondered if he could get through the stone wall the same way he made an opening in the ice wall. He started bouncing his lacrosse ball against the rock wall, but after ten minutes, he had not even made a dent. Frustrated, he said, "I'm in such tight quarters that I can't get enough speed on the ball to make a difference. Jon, can you throw it from your cell?"

Jon knew Chris was trying to help, but he did not think the idea would work. Before Chris could pass the ball to Jon, Bihydrant picked it up and fired it at the wall. A large piece of stone fell to the ground. The force of the throw made the ball ricochet off of every wall in the dungeon. They could all see the progress Bihydrant had made, so each time he threw, whoever was near the ball when it stopped would throw it back to him.

Jon said, "I think that is going to work for Chris, but that leaves the rest of us stuck here.

Brittany put the colored stones on the ground and gave the top a spin. She tried this several different ways, but again nothing happened. She gave the top to the little boy, but still nothing happened.

"Brittany, you need to find a different way. The stones aren't going to work." Jon worried that Brittany would waste all her precious time on a dead end.

Advarika was fanning Trisha, who really did not look good. She had finally fallen asleep again. Advarika knew that Trisha's brooch held the key to her escape. If she could only put the brooch in her hand and not let go, even if it burned her, she could get back to the roach-infested corridor. But for now, she needed sleep more.

Jon had no idea how to get back to the boardroom, but he knew that the large door in his cell meant something. If it did not, the other cells would also have doors. Jon needed to concentrate on that, but he wanted to make sure everyone escaped before tomorrow. Godfrey might decide that it did not matter whether Trisha was sick or not and go ahead with the wedding ceremony. Jon would not let his sister go through with this marriage. If he did, Godfrey would take Trisha's life.

Jon turned back to his own escape. Bihydrant was helping Chris, Advarika was supposed to help Trisha, and the little boy would probably help Brittany. That could be the only reason for them to be there. Jon only had his briefcase with him. He picked it up and opened it. It held documents, ledgers, and a half dozen bony finger toothpicks. Something in his briefcase must be able to help him escape, but what?

Meanwhile, Bihydrant already had a small hole in the stonewall. He was making progress and showed no signs of being tired.

The door opened, waking Trisha. Mrs. Toddles came in.

Trisha jumped at the chance to ask the questions burning in her mind. "Why is Godfrey doing this to my family? Why didn't he just marry me? Why is my family involved?"

Chris chimed in, too. "Do you know if we are doing this right? Are we supposed to return to the last place we've been?"

The woman answered them both. "Trisha, I can't help you with your questions. Who knows why a madman does anything? I know he brought your siblings here to be a part of his sick wedding plans. Chris, to answer your question, yes, you all must go back. You can't stay here, or you will die. I will bring you all whatever food you like to take when you escape."

Mrs. Toddles could see that Bihydrant was working in the right direction. She knew Trisha had the power to return, but she was not so sure about Brittany and Jon.

Chris spoke up. "I'd like a couple dozen muffins."

No one else wanted anything.

Mrs. Toddles walked over to Brittany's cell. "Have you not figured it out? What did you have with you when you were transported to all of these places?"

Brittany answered impatiently. "Just the little boy."

Mrs. Toddles just raised one eyebrow and did not say another word.

Brittany blushed, then bent down and said, "What is your name?" She could not believe she had not asked him yet. Things had been a bit busy for her, but she still should have known his name.

The little boy answered, "Chad Carrington, the Third."

Brittany almost fell over. Chad spoke very well.

"Chad, how old are you?"

"I'm five years old."

Brittany sat down next to him on the stone floor. "You are small for five years old." The boy looked down at the floor, but Brittany pulled him into her lap and gave him a hug. "You do not have to be ashamed that you are small."

Chad looked up. "I have a sister. She should be fourteen years old now, and she had bright red hair."

Trisha said, “Why do you say ‘should be fourteen’? Do you know where she is?”

“My mother said Bailey was stolen. We haven’t seen her for a few months.”

Brittany interrupted. “Do you know how to get us back to the hospital where I found you?”

Chad started twisting his fingers. “Yes, but I thought you wanted to stay with your family.”

Brittany hugged the boy. “Thank you, Chad. You are very sweet. Yes, I want to stay, but we have to go back very soon. Will you take us back when I tell you to?”

The boy nodded.

Mrs. Toddles smiled, satisfied. Then she moved on to Jon. “You need to find a keyword.”

Jon said, “What keyword?”

“You need to figure that out for yourself.”

As Mrs. Toddles left, she said, “It won’t be long now.”

Just then, Bihydrant made the hole in the stonewall big enough for Chris and him to get through. Even though Chris could not wait to go, he stopped and looked at Bihydrant. Some of the fur on his back was still missing after the last bat attack. Chris opened his lacrosse bag, took out his extra stick, put on the helmet and gloves, and rearranged his two-dozen muffins. Bihydrant looked sad; he had no equipment to put on.

Chris grinned at him. “Now there is enough room for you. Step inside your travel bag.”

Bihydrant happily got inside the bag. There was plenty of room for him, since he was only about two feet tall. Chris zipped it up, then went back to the cell door, his voice shaking. “I’ll see you on the other side.”

He needed to go, quick, before Jon made fun of his shaking voice. He held his lacrosse stick up in the air, grabbed his lacrosse bag, and went through the hole.

Within seconds, the wall had closed completely.

Jon said, “Trisha, it is time for you to go. I will go after you all escape.”

Trisha started to protest, but she knew how stubborn her older brother could be. With no idea what to do next, she slowly looked around her cell. Advarika put Trisha’s hand on the brooch. It started glowing and became red-hot. Trisha tried to pull her hand away, not because it was burning her—she was too upset to notice—but because she did not want to leave Brittany and Jon behind. For all she knew, Mrs. Toddles and Advarika could be working with Godfrey. Tears rained down on Trisha’s nightgown. She yelled, “I love you!” Then she and Advarika vanished.

Jon and Brittany had always been close, and Brittany always listened to her older brother. She looked up to him, and she did not know if she could go back without him. Jon still had not figured out a way to leave this place. She knew that, of all of her siblings, Jon was the one who could figure anything out. He always thought outside the box, and he always did things a little differently than most people. If he had already made a plan, she would feel better, but he had no plan, no idea, nothing.

Jon said, “Chad Carrington, the Third, I need you to take my sister back now.”

Chad, already sitting on Brittany’s lap, nodded. A gust of air filled the dungeon. Wind came from everywhere, throwing Jon to the back of his cell. Then came silence.

Jon looked around at the empty cells. Daylight began to come in through the windows. He needed to think of a plan, and quickly.

Jon knew that Godfrey had brought the Hellandbacks together for the wedding. It gave him great pleasure to ruin other people's lives. If he found Jon the only one left, he would surely kill him.

He opened his briefcase and saw the half dozen finger bone toothpicks. He held them in his hand and thought. Six fingers and seven door locks in the dungeon. He tried one of the bony fingers in the lock of the huge door in his cell, and as he expected, the lock was too large. The finger just spun in the lock. Of the six smaller doors, four locks were on the cells, and one each on the door the woman used and the door Godfrey used. Maybe these finger bones, were for those doors. What had that woman said to him?

Something about a keyword—maybe she meant a word was the key. All the skeleton fingers had slightly different shapes. He tried the first finger on his door, but nothing happened. He tried the next one, and the cell door opened.

Finally outside his cell, he walked over to Chris's cell and tried the remaining five keys. The last one he tried opened Chris's cell. Jon walked in. Chris's extra lacrosse stick lay on the floor. He picked it up and went to open Trisha's door. He did not know why, but he wanted all the cells open. He unlocked the door and got an empty feeling. He hoped Trisha was all right. He knew they had foiled Godfrey's plan to marry Trisha, but now where was she?

Jon had three keys left. When he opened Brittany's door and stepped on something, he looked down. They had left the eight colored stones and top behind. He picked them up and put them in his pocket. He did not bother trying the other two keys. They were just the doors Godfrey and Mrs. Toddles used to enter the dungeon. He put all the skeleton fingers in the lacrosse stick netting and went back to his cell.

So he could open the cells, but it was a little late for that, and it did not bring him any closer to getting out. He threw the lacrosse stick against his cell wall. He sat down on the bed, his head in his hands, and stared at the floor. For a minute, he thought he imagined it, but it looked like the fingers were inching their way out from under the bed. They pulled themselves along by their fingertips, inching along like worms. As the fingers grew closer to each other, they assembled themselves into some type of configuration. It looked like one was missing. Jon looked under the bed. It was not there. And then he saw it.

The last finger had landed on the side of the bed and gotten caught. Jon picked it up and put it on the floor near the rest of them. The six bone fingers together formed one big skeleton key. This key would fit the huge door on the back wall! Jon picked up his briefcase and Chris's lacrosse stick. He looked around to see if he had left anything behind. Then he put the key in the lock. The door swung open, and darkness swallowed him.

CHAPTER 26

Trisha did not want to leave her sister and brothers, but they all had to leave the prison or they would die. For her at least, she figured hard labor was better than marrying Godfrey and having the life sucked out of her. When he discovered that they had all escaped, he would be enraged. She hoped he wouldn't take it out on the girls in the tomb.

Trisha had an idea she thought might drain Godfrey of his strength. She had noticed that each time she put her hand on the brooch, it lost some of its power over her. Her brooch did not burn nearly as much as the first time now, and with each additional touch, the brooch became weaker.

Trisha asked all the girls to gather in the center of the tomb. When she had their attention, she told them that they needed to put their hands over their brooches and not to let go, no matter how much it hurt. "It can't kill you; it will just be very painful."

The girls did not know if they should believe Trisha, but one girl cut to the heart of the matter. "Who else has a plan?" No one did.

As soon as Godfrey came close and their brooches were glowing, they would all put their hand on the hot piece of jewelry. As soon as those words came out of Trisha's mouth, their brooches started to glow. They could hear footsteps coming.

Trisha yelled, "Hold on tight, and don't let go!"

The girls screamed out in pain. Some collapsed, but they all held on to their brooches. After several minutes, all the brooches had stopped glowing, and the screams faded to moans. Godfrey must have left. Had he heard the commotion? Was he feeling weak? Had their plan worked?

Trisha recovered first. Her brooch had lost almost all of its heat. Trisha noticed a small girl, who looked even younger than the rest of them. She cradled her hand, whimpering, in severe pain. Trisha turned to Advarika.

"You check the rest of the girls. I need to take care of this one." As Trisha bent down, she could see that the girl's hand was badly burned. This girl must have been Godfrey's favorite. Trisha noticed the girl's hair. It was dirty, but you could tell it was red, and she had a thought. "What is your name?"

She moaned a little and said, "My name is Bailey Carrington."

One of the other girls sat up and said quietly, "She came here a few months ago. Godfrey wanted her desperately to be his bride, something about her red, fiery hair. He threatened to inflict some terrible disease on her family if she didn't marry him. She doesn't know what happened to her family—I doubt she ever will."

Another girl said, "Godfrey said he had conjured up the black death for her family, but we don't know if that's true."

Trisha looked at the girl's hand. Most people would have let go in that kind of pain. Trisha knew that she needed to do something, or infection and gangrene would be likely in this filthy environment.

Trisha wished her younger sister Brittany was here. Brittany was always so smart, especially with anything to do with science.

Advarika said that the rest of the girls were fine. No other burns were that bad, and they would all heal soon.

Trisha was relying on her limited knowledge, but she hoped she remembered something she had written a few years ago. Trisha said, "I need about four strong girls to help me tip one of the large glass jars over." Since all the jars held deteriorating corpses, no one volunteered right away. Advarika stepped over to help Trisha, but the jar was too heavy for just the two of them. Half of the girls came over to help then, their hands still throbbing. After several attempts, the glass jar fell over, crashing into pieces as it hit the floor. Despite the horrible smell, Trisha moved toward the spilled contents.

Advarika gasped. "Trisha, have you lost your mind?"

Trisha dug through the dirt, looking for something. It was too late to save the girl in the jar; there was not much left of her. Trisha was not hoping to save the girl. She was looking for maggots. As the dirt fell away from the skeleton, she saw a brooch on the ground between her ribs. It was no longer pinned to her clothes or her skin.

Trisha said softly, "I guess that was her way of getting the brooch off."

After a moment, she picked up the brooch and put it in her pocket. Then she continued picking up maggots. When she had almost a dozen maggots in her hand, all squirming around, she sat down next to Bailey and said, "This is gross, but I learned it while writing a paper for school. The maggots will eat the dead skin that the burn has caused. When they have cleaned up Bailey's wound, we will remove the maggots."

Trisha put the maggots in the open wound in Bailey's hand, then tore a piece of her nightgown and wrapped it around the girl's hand. She wanted to get the wound wrapped before Godfrey came. With the large glass jar broken into hundreds of pieces on the floor, she would have to give Godfrey a good reason for such a mess.

Trisha was proud of herself for remembering about the maggots. Without her two genius siblings around, Trisha realized that some of her ideas were actually pretty inventive.

Everyone in the Hellandback family always thought of Trisha as petite, with a great figure at fourteen years old. She loved to dance and hang out with her friends, but she also needed to have her space. Trisha wasn't even a good dancer, but that never stopped her from dancing. As a matter of fact, she was terrible. Not very coordinated, but she had a great time anyway.

Trisha had passable grades, and she liked going to school, mainly to see the boys. She had never really gone on an actual date yet, group dates, but not a one-on-one date. Trisha loved reading young romance books and would substitute the main female character's name with hers. She had no idea that all boys weren't created equal. She was so naïve about the opposite sex. This adventure was going to be a very hard learning lesson for Trisha Hellandback, but it would prevent her from making serious mistakes in her future.

CHAPTER 27

At the same time that Trisha returned to the tomb of dead and dying girls, she hoped her sister and brothers had gotten back to their destinations safely. She didn't know if Jon was still imprisoned in Godfrey's jail, but Chris had made it back to Bat Cave. Bats flew everywhere, but this time they could not attack Bihydrant. As he emerged from the cave, Chris saw Tompack resting in a hammock. Instead of being attached to trees, the hammock was supported by Quill and Kaver, each holding an end. With their arms raised high above their heads, they argued about whose turn it would be to rest in the hammock next. When Quill and Kaver saw Chris, they dropped the hammock, and Tompack landed with a thud.

Excited to see Chris, Quill and Kaver jumped all over him. It was not until Tompack reached them and said, "Let Chris have some room," that they noticed Chris's lacrosse bag moving.

Kaver picked up a stick and hit the bag.

Chris yelled, "Don't! Bihydrant is in the bag."

Chris unzipped the bag. When Bihydrant saw Kaver holding the stick, he tore off after him. Chris looked at Tompack. "You should probably stop them."

"They'll wear each other out soon enough. Now, tell me where you have been."

Chris put his bag down, and as if from nowhere, Tommy appeared to search it for food. Bihydrant had smashed all the muffins that Chris had packed; all that was left were crumbs.

Chris saw the mess in his lacrosse bag and said to his rat friend, "Help yourself."

A noise came from the cave, loud enough to make Kaver and Bihydrant stop fighting to see who or what it might be. Quill, closest to the mouth of the cave, saw a figure coming out. He got scared and ran. Bihydrant recognized Jon and ran toward the cave. It looked like Jon had been torn up by the bats. He was bleeding from many bites, and walking very slowly. Chris and Tompack reached the opening of the cave in no time.

Chris yelled, "Those bats got him!"

Tompack said, "No, it wasn't the bats. They would never attack Jon."

Chris argued, "They attacked me and Bihydrant." They helped Jon sit down and relieved him of his briefcase and Chris's extra lacrosse stick.

Tompack said, "Chris, the bats attacked you and Bihydrant because they hate Bundlebobs. Didn't Bihydrant tell you that?"

Chris glared at Bihydrant. "No, he forgot to let me in on that little secret."

Jon found his voice. "Chris, the bats didn't bite me. It was rats."

Tommy, stuffing his face with crumbs in Chris's bag, peeked out and said nonchalantly, "Those are some of my relatives. Some say they are mad, but I think they are just diseased."

Chris yelled again, "Diseased? What kind of disease? Do they have rabies? Jon, did you see them foaming at the mouth? I looked up rabies because our neighbor's crazy dog used to try to make me his next meal every day, and it makes them foam at the mouth."

Jon, in pain, still had to laugh a little at his younger brother.

Chris continued. "No, one has ever lived after a rabid animal bite, at least not without the shots."

Tompack said, "I'm sure it's not rabies, but we need to get your brother to a safe place where we can care for him. Kaver, Bihydrant, go get some branches and make a stretcher. Quill, get some fresh water from the Rogot tree."

Quill knew this must be serious. Tompack never used the water from that particular tree unless he feared for someone's life. He did not even use it when Chris had fallen into the water and nearly frozen to death. Quill came back with the water as fast as he could. Bihydrant and Kaver worked steadily on a simple stretcher. Tompack instructed Chris and Quill to clean Jon's wounds with the water.

After a bit, Tompack seemed grim. "Let Jon drink some of the water." Quill just looked at Tompack. No one ever drank the water from the Rogot tree because nobody had ever been as sick as Jon.

Tompack busily tapped out a message in the air. He did not notice Quill's stare or Jon watching him.

Jon felt terrible, but memorizing Tompack's motions distracted him from his misery. Bihydrant brought over their stick contraption, and Jon lay down on it gratefully. Quill covered him with the hammock. One minute Jon had the chills, the next he was boiling. When the first black spot appeared on Jon's arm, he had no idea what it was.

The rat, now finally finished eating half the muffin crumbs, said, "I see my dirty relatives have given you the black plague."

Tompack confirmed softly, "Bubonic plague."

Chris wanted to get a hold of Brittany since she was the only other smart one. He fiddled with the knobs on his watch. Nothing happened, so he tapped the glass and said, "Great-Granddad, are you there? Over."

Nothing happened with the watch. "Cheap watch." Chris yelled, "Mayday! Mayday! SOS! Come in, over."

The watch was making a scratchy buzzing sound. "This is Alastair. Over."

"Do you know anything about bubonic plague?"

"Chris, I believe your best bet would be to ask Jon or Brittany. Over."

Chris was getting upset. "Great-Granddad, Brittany is not here, and Jon is the one who has it."

Alastair said, "Chris, you forgot to say 'over.'"

Chris was pulling his hair. "Ahhhg. Over."

"Chris, since the knobs aren't working for you, I guess one of us was asleep at the wheel when the instructions were being read. Anyway, just tell the watch you want to see Brittany, and it will show you. Over."

"Thanks, Great-Granddad, now clear the airways. This is an emergency. Over." Chris said, "I need to see my sister Brittany." The watch quickly showed Chris Brittany, but that was all it did. He could not communicate with her.

"This is so wicked. Great-Granddad has got to get some updated equipment."

Jon started coughing and reached into his pocket for his handkerchief. He felt something strange in his pocket and pulled out Chad Carrington's colored stones and top. It was the little boy who had transported Brittany, not the stones. Jon's voice was withered. "How can I get a message to Brittany?"

Tommy licked his paws. "You know, I can get a message through my relatives to your sister, but I will need some type of payment."

Chris protested. "Type of payment? You just ate half of the muffins."

“Correction, my dear boy, half of the crumbs.”

Chris got close to the rat and said, “I took good care of you—plenty of rat treats, a cozy bed, and a wheel.”

“Yes, it was so nice that I ran away and hid under the kitchen stove for over a year. Why do you think your dog used to sit for hours looking under the stove? He was after me.”

Chris was gritting his teeth, but he calmly said, “What is it that you want?”

The rat scratched his chin. “How about muffins for a year?”

Chris scooped the rat up with his lacrosse stick. “You can finish the rest of the crumbs in my bag. That’s my last offer.”

Obviously terrified by his new position, the rat said, “It’s a deal, but it’s going to take me a while to eat all this.”

Chris growled, “You go right now. You have no time to eat. If my brother gets worse because you messed around, I will come after you.”

“Now, Chris, I was once your childhood pet.”

Chris sat the rat on the ground and said, “I obviously liked you better than you liked me.”

Thomas took off running. “What did you expect? I’m a rat.”

Watching the rat go, Tompack noticed some signs that other Bundlebobs had been in the area—footprints and the remainders of a meal: bits of leftover toenails and ear jelly.

Tompack said, “We need to keep moving. Your brother isn’t going to get any better if we stay here.”

Chris protested. “The rat will never find us if we leave this spot.”

Tompack said in a soothing voice, “Chris, that old friend of yours can find you anywhere. Trust me when I say that he is more loyal than most rats. He must truly care about you.”

“He has some way of showing his affection—blackmail, holding food over Jon’s life...”

CHAPTER 28

Brittany and Chad emerged from Godfrey's prison, back to the filthy, disease-filled hospital of London. Brittany was only two years younger than her sister, Trisha, but she had no interest in boys. She would tease her older sister about the romance books she read. Now she wished she hadn't done that. Trisha was so caught up with someone liking her she had lost all common sense. Trisha wasn't the brainiest of the Hellandbacks, but she was certainly no fool. Brittany was glad that she did not let her emotions or hormones control the outcome of her life.

Abigail, the nun who was also a nurse, snapped Brittany out of her thoughts. She said in a very weak voice, "There you are. I need your help clearing a few rooms out."

"I will be right there. Let me put Chad down first." Before she went back to work, Brittany gave Chad a hug. She reached for the colored stones and top to give to him, but remembered that they had been forgotten on the floor of her cell.

She put him to bed and kissed his forehead. "I will be back to check on you later." Chad fell asleep before Brittany made it to the door. She felt exhaustion creeping up on her, but she needed to check on the sick patients. Brittany knew her great-grandmother had sent her to this place for a reason. She went in search of Abigail and found her trying to clear a room of dead patients so new ones could come in. Abigail struggled to move the last patient, a very large man. Brittany ran to her side to help her. Abigail's right sleeve pulled up slightly when she lifted the man. Brittany saw the black spots on Abigail's skin. She reached over and felt her forehead. Abigail was burning up; she had the black plague. Brittany grabbed Abigail's hands and looked into her eyes.

"Abigail, you need to go lie down. I will get you something to eat."

Abigail waved her hand. In a very weak voice, she said, "I can't eat anything."

Brittany watched Abigail get weaker by the minute. She did not even have enough energy to argue with Brittany. Brittany took her up to the third floor and put her in a room. Chad woke up and saw Brittany across the hall, struggling to get Abigail into bed. Though only five and small for his age, he helped Brittany get Abigail into bed.

Brittany said, "Chad, you shouldn't touch her. I don't want you exposed to this horrible disease."

"I'm okay. I can't get sick." Chad shrugged.

"Chad, you are too young to understand, but all of us can get sick and die from this disease." Brittany picked up Chad and carried him back to his bedroom. Brittany found the strip of material that she had torn off her clothing earlier and put it around her nose and mouth.

When she had worked for hours and needed a nap, she went to Chad's room. He was not there. She went to Abigail's room, where Chad lay next to Abigail, both sleeping. Brittany knew that Chad had been exposed to the plague many times. If he were going to get the disease, he would have already had it. Brittany's body was sore. Her muscles ached. She stretched out on the other side of the room and quickly fell fast asleep.

She did not know how long she slept, but when she woke, something was pulling at her arm. She tried to focus, but could only see black fur. A rat was pulling at her arm! She flung the rat across the room in one violent wave of her arm. The rat hit the wall and slid down to the floor.

Brittany heard what sounded like the rat talking. She made out the words “Your brother Jon is sick and needs your help.” She shook her head to clear it. *I must be dreaming*, she thought. As the rat came closer, she recognized him. He had to be her brother’s pet rat from years ago—Thomas.

She sat up and focused on what the rat told her. “Your brother Jon has the black plague. Chris said you had written a paper on the subject just recently. He needs your help.” The rat held something in his paw. “Here is proof that I’ve just come from seeing him.”

The rat showed her two of the colored stones that Brittany had left behind in her cell.

“How am I to get to him? I don’t have anything here that will help me. Don’t they have doctors where Jon is?”

The rat came closer and sat on the bed. “I don’t know that. Your brother Chris just wanted me to get you. He said you would know what to do.”

Brittany said, “Jon is with Chris?”

The rat put his paw on Brittany’s hand. “We must go. You are very large.”

Brittany snatched her hand away from the rat, offended. “I’m not large. What are you talking about?”

The rat rubbed his chin. “Well, you are too large to go back the way I came. I could barely fit through some of the passages myself.”

Chad, awake now, said in a very quiet voice, “I can take you, Brittany.”

Brittany felt a surge of hope, but then she looked over at Abigail. “I can’t leave her. She may die if no one takes care of her.”

Chad put his small hand on Abigail’s forehead, and she went into some type of trance. “She will be fine until we get back.”

Shocked, fearing the worst, Brittany scrambled over to her friend’s bed. Abigail breathed steadily, and she looked at peace. She no longer felt feverish, and the black spots seemed to be fading from her skin. Brittany looked at Chad in awe. Who was he?

Brittany did not ponder long—they were wasting time. She picked up Chad, while the rat hung on to Brittany’s smock for dear life. They passed through the dark for just a second. When they stopped, Chris and Jon were nowhere around.

“Where are my brothers? Is this a trick? Has Godfrey put you up to this?”

The rat said, “Calm down. They have moved on. I can find your brother Chris anywhere, especially since he owes me a feast of muffin crumbs.” The rat picked up Chris’s scent and took off. Brittany kept hold of Chad and ran after the rat.

Jon looked worse. He had many more black spots, and he was growing weak. Even the water from the Rogot tree could not help. The Bundlebobs needed to get Jon to their healer. He would know what to do for such a mysterious illness. Finally, they saw a Bundlebob coming toward them in the distance. As the Bundlebob drew closer, Chris could see that he was much larger than Tompack and the others.

Tompack said, “Excellent. He got my message.”

Chris asked, “Message asking for what?”

Tompack continued, “We can’t make much progress going at this speed; we need to go faster. I feared no one had picked up my signal, but here he comes.”

“Here who comes?” Chris thought he might have to scream in frustration.

Tompack pointed to the giant Bundlebob coming toward them. In a few short steps, he stopped right in front of them. This Bundlebob looked identical to the ones Chris knew, except that he stood over twenty feet tall. His smallest toenail looked as big as Chris's legs—what a Bundlebob meal that would be. The giant Bundlebob did not speak; he only grunted and made crude words. He mostly communicated by hand movements.

A large drop of liquid splashed on the ground next to Chris. "What is that?"

Tompack answered calmly. "This particular giant drools, so don't stand too close."

The giant Bundlebob reached down and picked up Jon, sending the twigs that he rested on flying. The hammock that covered him slid to the ground.

Chris protested, "Hey, be careful!"

The giant ignored Chris. He turned and started back the way he had come, carrying Jon in his hand.

"Tompack, do something!" Frantic, Chris picked up his lacrosse stick and fired a lacrosse ball at the giant's head. It hit his right ear, and he gave out a yell that shook the trees. The giant grabbed his ear and turned to stare at Chris.

Tompack knew this must have hurt, because ears were a Bundlebob's most sensitive body part.

Chris still held his lacrosse stick as he watched the giant suspiciously. The Bundlebob bent down and picked up the ball. He held it between his thumb and forefinger, where it looked like a pea. He fired the ball back at Chris. It slammed into Chris's lacrosse stick, dragging him backward twenty or so feet.

"A few more inches, and he would have killed me! Lucky I'm a good catch."

Good catch or not, Chris looked pale.

Tompack sighed, then explained. "Chris, it has nothing to do with your ability to catch a ball. The giant Bundlebobs do two things very well; they transport things, and they protect the village from harm. They have very good aim. If he can throw a rock at a predator a quarter of a mile away and kill it, then he can easily throw a ball into your net."

"So he was playing with me?"

"No, Chris, that was a warning. The next time he will kill you. Consider yourself lucky. They're taking your brother to our village. He will get the care he needs. We can't do anything for him out here. In our village, our chief or Professor Mend can heal him. Our chief is very small, only a few inches high, and Professor Mend is our scientist. Brilliant man."

Chris looked puzzled rather than comforted, so Tompack explained further. "The larger we Bundlebobs grow, the more... intellectually challenged we are. Our small chief not only has much wisdom, but also the knowledge that comes to the Fish King."

Chris nodded, not entirely convinced. "We need to get going. Why didn't they take us with them?"

"They need time to work on Jon without anyone around."

Chris knew what that meant. "You mean, without me around."

"By the time we reach our town in less than a day, your brother will either be dead or he will be healed."

Determined to get to Jon before anything changed, Chris decided he would walk without a break. If the Bundlebobs did not sleep, he would not, either. At that point, he thought he heard someone calling his name from behind him. He turned around, but saw no one. He focused on Tompack again.

“Chris, you need to put on any warm clothing you have in your bag. It will be getting colder, and soon we will run into snow.”

Brittany was still running fast after the rat, but she was beginning to slow.

She wanted to find her brothers, but the weight of Chad was slowing her down. Brittany didn't really know if she could help Jon, but she would try.

The wind had picked up, and it had begun to snow. She said, “Rat, Tommy. I can't go on in this weather, and I know Chad is cold.” She looked down at the boy, whose teeth were chattering. “We need to find some shelter and something to eat.”

“Follow me.” Tommy led them to a cave. Bats lived in the cave, but the rat assured Brittany that the bats would not bother them. “The bats hate Bundlebobs. I'm not sure why, but don't ever go into a bat cave with one. You will be torn up.”

The rat quickly gathered some dry twigs from the entrance, struck sparks from two stones obviously left there for that purpose, and lit a fire. He used bat droppings to keep the fire going.

“It smells terrible, but it will keep you warm. I will go out and scavenge for a few items. I will be back soon.”

Before long, he came back. “Look what I found.” He held up the corner of a hammock that he had dragged into the cave. “You can use this as a blanket, and I found some bark and berries. I had to dig for the berries. They were buried deep under the snow.” Snow covered him from head to toe.

Grateful for the supplies, Brittany picked up some bark and bit a piece off. Immediately she knew she should not have done that. A splinter stuck into her gum. The rat climbed into Brittany's lap and convinced her to open her mouth so he could remove the splinter. “You have to put the bark in the flame to soften it.”

“Won't it catch fire and burn up?”

“Watch me.” Tom took a long piece of bark and rested it in the fire. Soon it looked more like jerky. He blew on the hot bark and took a big bite. “Not bad, though I'm sure my muffin crumbs would taste better.”

Chad did not like the bark much, but he loved the berries, so Tommy went out in the cold to get two more armfuls. Soon Brittany and the little boy were full enough to sleep. Tommy pulled the hammock up under their chins and then found a corner to curl up in.

Tommy saw this odd-looking man at the cave's entrance. Alastair did not wish to wake Brittany or the little boy, so he quietly tiptoed past them. Tommy hopped up on a boulder waiting for the man to say something. His hat was pulled way down to protect him from the weather. He had gloves on, but it looked like they were sewn to his coat. Tommy thought, *Idiot mittens.*

Alastair said, “I won't take up much of your time, but I seem to be lost. I was looking for Jon Hellandback.”

Tommy pointed to Brittany. “That's his sister, Brittany Hellandback, but I'm afraid you're too late for Jon.”

“He has passed away!”

Rat looked at Alastair. “No! He has been taken by the Bundlebobs to some professor or someone.”

“Ah, that would be Professor Mend. Good man. Perhaps I’ve not caused too big of a blunder. He can still bring the professor’s invention back to his corporate world. It will just take a little longer than I thought.”

Rat yawned. “And the point is?”

“Jon was not supposed to go through Bat Cave and get attacked by rats. He ended up in the wrong place.” Alastair started drawing imaginary lines in the air. “You see, he was supposed to go here, not over there.”

Rat said, “Hey Professor, I’m no rocket scientist or anything, but your dress is on fire.”

Alastair pulled his cloak out of the small fire and stamped on it several times with his elf-like shoes. “I’m not a professor. I’m a mystical, magical sorcerer.”

Rat went back to his resting place. “Well if that’s the case, you should have seen that fire thing coming. Night, Professor.”

Rat stretched and closed his eyes. “I’m starting to sound like Chris. I guess the time I spent with him has rubbed off on me.”

CHAPTER 29

Bailey, the pretty red-haired girl who had burned her hand severely while holding her brooch, was trying to rest. Although the maggots would keep out the infection, the pain was overwhelming.

Trisha searched the tomb, calling the rat that had made the ointment for her hand. “Please come out, rat! I will not hurt you. I’m not mad at you. I want you to make the same ointment for Bailey—just leave out the hallucinating part.” Trisha meant it about no hallucinations. She still did not know if she really had spent time with her siblings.

Finally, she spotted the rat. He scurried over to Bailey, keeping one eye on Trisha, and made some ointment. Trisha thought Mrs. Toddles must have something to do with this helpful rat. The only things they usually cared about were themselves. He used his teeth to snip off the bandage around Bailey’s hand, then gently applied the salve. Bailey quickly went to sleep, just as the noise in the corridor grew louder and the brooches glowed red. The huge, thick door slid sideways, and Godfrey walked into the room. He saw the large glass jar on the floor and frowned. Dirt, worms, flies, maggots, and the deteriorating remains of a girl lay scattered on the floor.

Trisha said, “It was an accident.”

Godfrey sat down on a boulder and replied, “You girls are not going to get me in a bad mood today. Clean this mess up. I have great news. I have found a bride. We are to be married tomorrow. Trisha, since you refused me once again, as well as all the other girls here, I had to find someone new.”

As he spoke, the girls watched their tormentor from the corners of their eyes. Godfrey seemed to have a hard time catching his breath. The girls knew that Trisha’s plan must be working—but if he got married tomorrow, that would give him new energy.

Godfrey slowly walked over to Trisha. “You see, my dear, I don’t need you anymore. I was going about it all wrong. I tried to marry girls with loving families, strong-willed girls. I thought they would give me the most energy, but instead, managing them has become a constant battle. This time, I found my bride-to-be on the seedy side of town. I offered her family just a small amount of money and promised the girl a roof over her head, food, and a caring husband. She will be dead soon, and no one will come looking for her. I will bring my wife by tomorrow after the ceremony.”

He looked suspiciously at Bailey. “What happened to her?”

Trisha said, “The large glass jar almost fell on her; I guess the ground shifted. A piece of glass cut her hand. She lost a lot of blood, so she is resting now.”

Godfrey got a half grin on his face “I’m so sorry I missed the festivities. Girls, you all may want to catch a nap. Tomorrow night is the yearly bonfire, and you have a lot of work to do before then.”

Trisha could hear lighter footsteps coming down the corridor. A petite little woman entered. She wore the exact same brooch as the rest of them.

Godfrey snapped at the girl. “I told you to wait up above. Now go.”

The tears welled up in the girl’s eyes as she looked around the room. In a small voice, she asked, “Is this my fate?”

Godfrey turned on her. “No, my dear, yours will be much worse.”

The new girl buried her face in her hands. Her brooch glowed, and she cried hysterically. Godfrey gripped her arm firmly and walked her out of the room. After the door slid shut, they heard the girl crying for a just a moment before all got quiet.

Trisha took a deep breath. She asked her fellow prisoners, "What is the big bonfire?"

One of the girls explained, "It is when all the girls who have died over the past year are cremated." She pointed to the remains spilled from the broken jar. "We put all the boxes in the burn pile, and Godfrey lights it. He calls it a party. He looks forward to it every year."

Trisha asked, "How many caskets are there?"

"With the one on the floor, that makes twenty-one."

The other girls fell asleep, but Trisha could not stop thinking. She had to stop Godfrey's madness.

The next day Godfrey introduced the girls to his new wife. She entered the room, and the girls let out a gasp. Already looking ill, she had aged tremendously in the few short hours she had been married to Godfrey. She was skin and bones, with sunken eyes and cracked and bleeding lips.

Godfrey looked at his wife and said, "I don't think she will be dead by tonight, but we can store her for next year's festivities. You should have seen her at the ceremony—she was breathtaking, but now I have taken her breath away." He started laughing. "It is good to be young again. Come, dear, you may need a wheelchair for tonight's party."

When he left, Trisha sat down next to Bailey, who seemed to be waking up. Bailey looked much better, which was a relief. Now Trisha had to think of a way to save Godfrey's new wife.

Mrs. Toddles appeared and said, "Trisha, you will think of something. Have you checked your pockets lately?"

Trisha gave the woman a puzzled look, but she checked her pocket anyway. She found the brooch she had taken from the girl's skeleton. She held it in her hand. It did not glow and did not have any powers to it.

"What good is this brooch?"

The woman replied, "Trisha, the brooch can't tell if you are a man or a woman. So, if it's pinned on to someone, such as a particular man, the brooch will do what it always does. The power works on either sex."

Trisha realized that she had to get close enough to Godfrey at the bonfire to pin the brooch on him. She turned to ask the woman if it mattered where she pinned it. "Can I pin the brooch anywhere?"

The woman had vanished again.

It was time to start the long, tedious process of loading up the wagon with the caskets. Trisha looked at the girls. They worked at this task as if it were nothing out of the ordinary. She did not know how long these girls had been imprisoned, but they had lost all emotional attachment to other human beings. Disturbed, Trisha walked over to the skeleton in the dirt. Several girls shuffled over to help her pick up the glass.

Trisha said very softly, "I will take care of this girl, and the broken glass."

The other girls barely heard her, but Trisha waved her hand in the air as if she was waving away a bunch of birds. The girls busied themselves with the caskets, which had to be loaded just right. Godfrey wanted the first to die to be loaded onto the wagon first so that when it came time to unload the caskets tomorrow, the most recently dead would go into the fire first. Godfrey wanted to hear their bones pop and snap. He took great satisfaction listening to their

corpses sizzle and burn. The ones who had been dead for a long time did not make as many sounds when they burned.

Trisha bent over the unidentified girl and brushed back what little hair she had left. It was a gruesome sight, but somehow Trisha's motivation to give this girl a funeral won out over her horror. After she had cleaned up the dirt, maggots, and worms, she asked the girls to bring over a casket. They tried to find the best box, one with smooth wood, not warped or splintered. It was big enough to put her whole body in without taking her lower limbs off. Trisha and several of the girls picked her up gently. She was very light, literally nothing but bones.

One of the girls said, "Where is her pin? Does she need to be buried with it?"

Trisha pulled the brooch out of her pocket and said, "I have a better use for her brooch."

Each girl said some nice things about the deceased. Trisha was the only one who had never known her. From what the girls said, she had been a kind, hardworking person. She had always thought she would get out of this alive, until she got sick and never recovered. Trisha cried. She did not know this girl, but that was no way to die. They put the lid on and put her wood box on the very top. She would be the first one on the bonfire the next day.

Godfrey would not allow any other jewelry. The girls wore only their brooches, but one girl had managed to keep her wristwatch hidden, so they knew when it was five o'clock, almost time for the bonfire. Godfrey would be coming soon. When Trisha heard Godfrey's footsteps coming down the corridor, she put her hand in her pocket to make sure the brooch was still there. All the brooches started glowing with heat, including the one in Trisha's pocket. As Godfrey entered, each girl gripped her glowing brooch tightly, hiding their action from Godfrey. Trisha held on to two brooches.

Godfrey said, "Well, ladies, I think it's time for the party. Is everything ready?"

Trisha did not know it, but Godfrey had noticed the slight glow in her pocket. He knew she had an extra brooch.

Wheels squeaked in the corridor. Godfrey's new wife was coming in a wheelchair. Godfrey pushed a button in the outer corridor. A huge door opened. And since Godfrey could control the girls by fear—and the brooches—he needed very few employees. He took advantage of that.

"Now, ladies, push the wagon out to the bonfire." He laughed hysterically.

CHAPTER 30

Jon had been taken to Professor Mend, while Chris and the Bundlebobs set off by foot. They wanted to get to Jon as quickly as they could. Chris didn't have a good feeling about his brother's health. He didn't look well, and Chris was not used to seeing his fifteen-year-old brother sick.

Great-Grandfather showed up as the Bundlebobs and Chris were making good time.

Tompack got startled when Alastair walked out behind a tree. Being only about two feet tall, the Bundlebobs weren't into violence.

Chris said, "Hey Great-Granddad, good to see you. You got any type of transportation for us? I need to get to Jon and supervise this great healer."

"I guess I could help you since I'm here."

"What are you doing here if you didn't come here to help?"

Alastair looked around. "I got a little confused, but I think I know where I am. Chris, what can I do for you?"

Chris knew his great-grandfather was inept, but he was basically harmless, just floating around in a netherworld and then popping up every so often. "I don't want to put you out, but what do you have for *quick* transportation?" Alastair slipped off his elf-looking shoes and handed them to him. "Chris, just wear these."

"Okay, that's not going to happen, Great-Granddad. What else you got?"

"I don't have anything else, but you do. Look at your watch."

"I can never get this thing to work."

Tompack said, "Chris, we need to get going."

Alastair put his hand up. "Chris, have you ever heard of time travel?"

"Yeah. What about it?"

"Just set your watch hours ahead, and you will arrive in just a few minutes instead of hours. The whole lot of you can go at once. After you set the time, just hit the silver-and-black button."

"It beats wearing those stupid-looking shoes."

"Oh, Chris, just one more thing, when you get there, you may be a little cloudy-headed for several hours."

"Can't be any worse than my mind is already. Let's get going."

Chris and Tompack fiddled with the watch until they had just the exact time they wanted. Chris pushed the button, and they were swept through a black hole.

They all landed hard on the ground in front of Professor Mend's laboratory. The door read:

PROFESSOR MEND LAB
KEEP OUT

Chris said, "Is my brother in there?"

Just then the professor stepped outside. "What's the commotion out here?"

"Is my brother in there?"

"You must be Chris. I was warned about you."

“By who? And warned you about what?”

“You may not be able to communicate with the giant Bundlebobs with the exception of hitting them with a lacrosse ball, but I can. Sign language, you know, comes in very handy. You should learn it.”

Chris yelled, “Where’s my brother?” He was afraid the professor was going to say his brother Jon had passed away.

“Your brother is at rest. If you will let me finish what I started, he will recover a lot faster. I will let you see him as soon as I’m finished. In the meantime, do you know how to read?”

“Yes, I know how to read. I’m eleven, not three.”

“Well, what does the sign on my door say?”

Chris yelled, “It says to keep out. Don’t worry, I have ADHD, but I’m not inept like my great-granddad.”

Professor Mend shrugged his shoulders as he walked back into his lab. He mumbled, “Could have fooled me.”

Professor Mend came back to the doorway and stuck his head out. “Chris, perhaps you could go on the search party for your sister Brittany? You will just be in the way here.”

Chris said, “Not getting rid of me that easily, Professor. I’m staying right outside this door, and no funny stuff.”

Quill got things ready for the search party for Brittany. Kaver and Bihydrant would also be going; Tompack would stay behind. They had a good idea where to look, thanks to the sightings that had been relayed back to Tompack

Tompack said, “They have been sighted by Bat Cave.”

Bihydrant gave out a moan. Chris dug through his lacrosse bag. He got his helmet, gloves, and even his game jersey out and gave them to Bihydrant.

Chris said, “Now, if any of you need to go into the cave, Bihydrant can do it. He will be well protected with my equipment.”

Bihydrant quickly put on the jersey, which hung to the ground, then the helmet. The helmet fit his large Bundlebob head perfectly, as long as he bent down his ears. His ears, very sensitive to loud noises and assault with a lacrosse ball, were also very flexible. Kaver and Quill brought a wooden sleigh around to wait for a transporter.

Chris said, “Wow. Now we’re ready for the twenty-first century. Where did you get that old thing? It looks like some kind of dogsled. Where are the dogs?”

Quill pointed to the three of them. “The transporter will drop us off at the cave. When we find your sister, we will bring her back on the sled.”

Chris said, “Why can’t the transporter bring her back? That would be so much quicker.”

Bihydrant attempted to answer while trying on the mouth guard attached to the front of Chris’s helmet. “Becuz the tranpoter needz to go make oter drop-offz.”

Quill said, “We have a limited number of transporters, and they also serve as protectors against the giant flying animals, so they are very busy.”

Chris said, “What are the giant flying things?”

Tompack said, “Actually they are large birds about a foot tall.”

Bihydrant interrupted, “They are not all that menacing to us, but our king is only six inches tall. A good, tasty meal for the flying birds.”

Chris thought, *About the size of a hawk.* “I guess.”

Tompack said, “Chris, what about your watch?”

Chris looked at his watch, but the silver-and-black button was no longer there. Chris started pushing and twisting all the knobs and buttons; nothing happened. “This is a piece of junk.”

Kaver said, “It is urgent that we find your sister, but with all these supplies, we don’t have to hurry back. If you want to know our progress, just ask Tompack.”

Chris wanted to go, but he knew he should stay behind with Jon. The healer had promised he could see his brother soon.

The Bundlebobs loaded up the wooden sled with supplies and waited for the next transporter to arrive. When the ground started to shake, they knew one was getting close. Chris almost laughed his head off when he saw the giant transporter. He was a just another enormous Bundlebob. In each hand he had about ten Bundlebobs of various sizes, and, attached to the fur on his back, he had all their sleds hanging. He looked like a Christmas tree hung with ornaments.

Chris noticed that the giant Bundlebob had tufts of fur missing from his back. “Why does he have bald spots on his back?”

Quill said, “We are only supposed to tie our sled ropes to his fur with one knot. But some Bundlebobs lost everything when that knot came undone and their stuff crashed to the ground. So now some of them tie their sled on with two or more knots. When they reach their destination, the giant can’t untie the sled so he has to pull his fur out. No one has thought up the right punishment for these double-knot Bundlebobs.”

Chris would have laughed if the giant’s back did not look so bad. He actually felt sorry for the giant. He decided that, when his brother got better, he would ask Jon to invent a better way for the transporters to carry their cargo.

As Bihydrant, Quill, and Kaver boarded the transporter, Chris could hear Bihydrant saying, “Oh, great. We have the one that drools.”

The giant made good time. There were several other stops along the way, but at the fourth stop, the giant stopped right in front of the cave. Bihydrant adjusted his helmet, and the giant untied the single knot and put their sled on the ground. Liquid drool hit the hardened, snow-covered ground and made a pool of slimy clear gel. Kaver got out of the way just in time, but some of it splashed up on him. As he made a face and wiped it off, he heard some noise coming from the cave.

Brittany and Chad had slept for several hours as Tommy was getting something to eat for their long journey. Brittany heard something outside of the cave. She used the cave wall to pull herself up; the sharp rock cut her hand in two places. Brittany cautiously walked toward the mouth of the cave, peering out carefully until she spotted a strange creature in her brother’s lacrosse uniform.

She screamed.

Bihydrant screamed and started to run.

Chad yelled, “Bihydrant!”

Quill introduced himself. “My name is Quill. We have come to rescue you. Your brother loaned us his uniform so that if Bihydrant had to go inside the cave he couldn’t be attacked by the bats.”

Kaver put out his paw to shake Brittany’s hand. “You must be Brittany.” As she extended her hand, Kaver saw the blood on her palm from the two cuts.

Brittany looked down. "I'd better clean that." She dipped a piece of her smock into the clear gel and dabbed at the wounds on her hand. "Did it rain? I don't think that puddle was here earlier."

Bihydrant yelled, "Don't do that!"

He startled Brittany, who asked, "Why not?"

Bihydrant continued more calmly. "That is not water. It's drool from one of our giant Bundlebobs." He pointed in the direction the giant had taken. They could still see the massive outline of his figure on the horizon.

Brittany said, "Do you come in different sizes, or are you three babies?"

Bihydrant was insulted. "We are not babies."

Quill said quietly, "We are born all the same size, but then we are given a number. And a Bundlebob with a number ending in zero will grow up to be our leader."

Bihydrant said, "Our leader is a full six inches. The smaller we are, the smarter we are. So you can see that the giants are not exactly brilliant."

Kaver said, "Very few numbers end with a zero. If your number ends in nine, then you grow up to be a giant. The rest of us come in sizes between the zero and nine."

Chad came out of from where he'd been hiding behind Brittany. He liked Bihydrant, and the other two Bundlebobs seemed nice.

Brittany patted him on the head. As she glanced at her hand, she noticed the two large cuts were healed. She said, "I think your giant's drool is magical." She showed the Bundlebobs her hand. By the time Bihydrant examined her hand, there was not even a scar.

Bihydrant said, "I guess we don't understand the giant's full potential. It is hard to examine them, and they talk very little. When we get back, I'll have Professor Mend get a sample of their drool and test it for any healing properties."

Quill said, "We need to get going, but you need to eat first."

Thomas was out scavenging for something the three of them could eat. He would be delighted to find breakfast already there. It would be a lot better than berries and bark.

The Bundlebobs took out two large jars of yellow liquid. Bihydrant said, "This is golden ear jelly."

"What is it made out of?" Brittany hoped it was not what she thought she heard them say.

Bihydrant looked at the jar thoughtfully. "With such a large amount, I would say that this came from one of our giant Bundlebob's ears."

Brittany said, "I thought that is what I heard you say."

Bihydrant pulled out some huge, hard curved things. "The giant who dropped us off here kindly gave us a few of his smaller toenails."

Brittany said, "And what do you do with those?"

"Let me show you." Kaver broke off one of his toenails and dipped it into his ear. He quickly licked the ear jelly off and then ate the toenail. Just then Thomas showed up, carrying berries and bark. Brittany had never been so glad to see the rat.

She did not want to hurt the Bundlebobs' feelings, so she said, "We have grown very fond of the berries, and the bark is quite tasty."

Meanwhile, Chad laughed at the Bundlebobs' eating. He went up to Brittany and tried to look in her ear. "You have tiny ears."

Brittany said, "I have to empty the yellow jam out of these two glass jars."

Bihydrant corrected her. "Golden ear jelly."

Brittany poured the thick yellow gel out of the jars and dipped the containers into the drool the giant had left behind. She filled both containers to the very top.

Kaver said, "We need to go back to Jon and Chris." He handed Brittany and Chad some outer clothing to keep them warm. Brittany quickly got into the sled with Chad in her lap. The Bundlebobs harnessed themselves to the sled, and they were off. The sled glided along smoothly. Brittany thought they needed to slow down a bit, but Chad was laughing. The Bundlebobs seemed to bring out the best in Chad. She had not heard him laugh until today.

Professor Mend was strictly the scientist of the Bundlebobs; he was not their leader. Nevertheless, he had a lot of power, especially in how his lab was run and who he would let into his lab.

Professor Mend was a small man, four and a half feet tall, with close-set eyes and big ears like the Bundlebobs, but the similarities ended there. He had no fur, just the gray hair on his head, which looked odd with his huge ears sticking up. He had a fairly long, pointed nose and very long, skinny fingers. On his right hand, he had an extra finger.

Professor Mend walked over to Jon. "That was your brother Chris. He is worried about you. Let me finish my examination. Then I can treat you and let your brother in."

Jon looked at Professor Mend intently, waiting to see what he turned into. He must have been exactly what he claimed to be... unless Jon's intuition was not working in this realm. When Jon focused on the professor again, he was reciting Jon's complete medical history. Jon knew he had not told the professor. He had not said a word.

"Let's see. You had chicken pox when you were two, the flu when you were twelve, broke your arm in sixth grade."

Jon said, "How do you know all this?"

Professor Mend replied, "Your body tells me these things."

"I must have been talking in my sleep. I do that sometimes."

"Well then, ask me something not even you would know the answer to, and you can check it at a later date."

Jon thought for a moment. "How much did I weigh when I was born, and how long was I?" Jon had no idea what the answer was, but he could ask one of his sisters. They always knew that kind of stuff.

Professor Mend said, "Very well, Jon. You were eight pounds and one ounce and twenty and a half inches long."

"I don't have a clue. You could have made that up." Exhausted from just this short conversation, he laid his head back down and closed his eyes. Jon mumbled, "No one could ever feel this sick and feel normal again."

"That is exactly what you said when you had that really bad flu. You wanted your mother to make your funeral arrangements."

Jon was surprised. He knew that statement was true. Jon rested while Professor Mend talked and wrote things down.

"Jon, I know what you have. It is called the black plague, or bubonic plague."

Jon said weakly, "I could have told you that."

Professor Mend continued. "Now that I know what you have, relief will be coming shortly." A huge silver wall opened up, and a gigantic blue-and-white globe floated into the

room, glowing. “Jon, you will go into the Sporbit here, and when you come out, you will no longer have the black plague.”

Jon wanted to believe the professor. He looked down at his arm. He had the black spots all over now, and he felt like he would die very soon. He did not have any ideas, and he was too weak to argue. Professor Mend did not see Jon’s hesitation. He continued getting the machine ready, programming all of Jon’s medical history into it.

“This is my invention, the Sporbit. It took me years to work out the problems, but now I believe it to be perfect.” The Sporbit opened up, and Professor Mend rolled Jon into the sphere. “Don’t worry, the brightness will subside in a few minutes. You may even fall asleep.”

Jon did not know if he was dreaming, but when he closed his eyes, it felt like the life was being sucked right out of him. His mind flipped through memories of his whole life. But after only a few minutes, all was quiet in the sphere. The sphere opened, and Professor Mend rolled Jon back out.

Jon looked down at his arms. The black spots were gone, along with the nausea and fever. He had grown fresh skin in place of the black spots, and it itched a bit. He rubbed his arms and said, “The black plague was so much worse than the flu.”

Chris, beyond impatient, burst through the door. He looked at Jon and then looked at Professor Mend again. “Jon, how do you feel? You look like hell.”

Professor Mend said, “Jon, your brother has an uncanny ability to know when to come into a room. Chris, your brother is fine. He may be a little tired, but otherwise he is healthy.”

Jon said, “I don’t know about the uncanny ability. He just has no patience.”

“Hey, what’s that?” Chris walked over to the sphere and saw a glass jar with greenish-yellow smoke in it and black spots stuck to the inside of the jar. He picked up the jar and started shaking it.

Professor Mend yelled, “Stop that! Do you have any idea what that is?” He took the jar carefully out of Chris’s hands. “This is the bubonic plague that the Sporbit extracted out of your brother.”

As Chris asked, “What is a Sporbit?” Jon pointed to the glowing blue-and-white sphere. Chris did not skip a beat. “If that glass jar is so fragile, why don’t you put it in a plastic jar?”

Professor Mend said, “Good question. The bubonic plague will deteriorate the plastic in a hundred years, give or take a few years.”

Chris rolled his eyes. “You got to be kidding me. You won’t even be alive then. Besides, can’t the next person, say, put it in another plastic jar, ninety-five years from now?”

Professor Mend rubbed his forehead. “No, Chris, we bury these jars in the ground in metal containers. We have all kinds of diseases buried underground, and we wouldn’t want any of them getting out. The Bundlebobs don’t have immunity to any of these diseases. I will have to give all the Bundlebobs, and anyone else who had contact with your brother, a shot.” The professor pulled out a large syringe with a needle that must have been ten inches long.

Chris said, “I’ll pass. I think I’ll take my chances with the black plague.”

Startled, the professor looked at him, then chuckled. “This is not for you. This needle is for the giant Bundlebob that carried Jon here. I will give you the first shot, though.”

Chris made a face. “I don’t see any need for getting the shot. I feel fine. I wonder if the Bundlebobs have found Brittany.”

Chris further distracted Professor Mend by asking him to contact Bihydrant, but the professor could not. “I don’t know how to communicate with them. They use some kind of invisible language, typing their messages out on what appears to be thin air. With my large ears,

I'm able to hear the messages, but I don't know how to send them. That is why I have a secretary. Besides, they bother me enough. Why would I want to get in touch with them?"

Jon said, "I think I know how to get a message to Bihydrant. I watched Tompack do it once. It's fairly simple if you know anything about a keyboard." Jon slowly sat up and typed in the air. He lay back down when he was finished. "We'll see if he gets the message."

No more than a few seconds later, Professor Mend said, "I think Bihydrant is sending you a message."

Chris said, "I don't hear anything."

Professor Mend pointed to his oversized ears and said, "They have found Brittany and a small boy. They are on their way to the village. We can expect them anytime now."

Chris started for the door, but Jon stopped him. "Where are you going? You are not going to meet Brittany without me. Get me that wheelchair."

Chris looked around the room. "What wheelchair?"

Jon pointed to the corner, where a rickety, rusty old wheelchair waited with a high back, large wheels, and a thin seat.

Chris said, "Looks like it was left over from last century!"

Jon wondered why, with all the knowledge that Professor Mend had, everything in his lab was so primitive—with the exception of the sphere. It surpassed anything that the twenty-first century could have produced.

Chris rolled the squeaking, rattling old wheelchair over to Jon. "I don't think this old chair will make it to the unloading dock."

"Let's see how far this will go, Chris. If I have to, I'll crawl, or you can pull me by my arms the rest of the way. I want to see Brittany."

Jon and Chris were glad they would be seeing their youngest sister, Brittany shortly, but they thought about their older sister. Poor Trisha had the least amount of moxie. She was easily scared. They hoped she was handling her adventure on her own. Maybe it was easier than theirs. They didn't think so, not with Godfrey wanting her for his bride. They hoped she wasn't as gullible as she used to be.

CHAPTER 31

Great-Grandfather sat talking with Great-Grandmother. She said, “Alastair, do you think it’s time to end Trisha’s adventure?”

“I don’t know. She seems to be handling it all right. Has she learned that all males are not equal? She needs to make a dream list of her ideal date and stick to it.”

Great-Grandmother said, “I know there are worse things than being alone, although I’ve always had you to rely on, even after your death. Being with someone rude or abusive is not worth being with that person at all.”

Alastair said, “Let’s give her a little bit more time for things to sink in—if you could keep a close eye on her. I really have my hands full with Chris.”

Trisha and the girls had loaded up the wagon with the caskets for the big bonfire. They threw a large tarp over the caskets and started pushing the wagon out the huge doors. The bonfire site included a large pit in the ground and actual stone bleachers. Godfrey really did think this was a party of some sort.

He barked out orders. “Take a few of the caskets and put them in the pit. Then I will light the fire.” The smell of kerosene was thick in the air; this was going to be an enormous blaze.

Godfrey lit the fire before all of the girls got out of the pit. The last few were nearly burned. He laughed, “Let the festivities begin.”

Some of the girls had survived since last year’s bonfire and knew what to expect, but the sight horrified the new ones, including Trisha.

Godfrey, ignoring his new wife—who did not want to be close to him anyway—yelled, “Put the next five caskets on.” This was going much too fast. Trisha knew she would only have time to do one thing. Either she could save Godfrey’s wife or she could try to pin the brooch on him.

Godfrey was almost manic. “Throw five more caskets into the pit.”

When Trisha snuck up behind Godfrey’s wife, she was crying silently.

Trisha said, “Can you walk at all?”

The girl shook her head. “Godfrey broke my ankles.”

Trisha looked down at the girl’s legs. She had no time to spare. She told Advarika to go get some reeds at the swamp.

Godfrey yelled, “Throw in the last caskets!”

Trisha scooped up Godfrey’s wife and carried her to the wagon. She and several other girls gently put the bride in the back and covered her with the large tarp.

When all the caskets had burned down to a large pile of ashes, Godfrey said, “Ladies, the party is over. Get the wagon back. We need to start stacking it for next year. My current wife should be the next one. She may have already expired.” He looked toward his wife’s wheelchair. She was no longer there. “Fool! She must have crawled away. I’ll find her, and I’ll not allow her to ruin a perfectly wonderful evening.”

Trisha and the girls got the wagon back to the underground cave. They uncovered his bride and put her in one of the large jars. They carefully put the dirt around her, after making sure no worms or maggots lived in it. Advarika poked a half dozen of the reeds that he had

gotten from the swamp into the dirt. The girl could breathe out of these until it was safe to come out.

Just as Godfrey started down the corridor, yelling, everyone noticed that the reeds stuck out of the dirt. Godfrey would surely see them. Advarika took his long nails and sliced through the reeds so they were no longer visible. He then put the stopper on top of the jar very loosely. The door opened, and Godfrey came in. He took several deep breaths, as if to calm himself. Then he began to search—everything. He looked behind things; he searched the wagon.

All the girls' brooches started glowing...including his new wife's. Godfrey went over to the jar. He thought he had seen something, a glow from inside the jar, but, no, no one could last very long in the jar without air.

Trisha had seen the glow as well. She walked over to Godfrey. "It's just the reflection of my brooch. See?"

Godfrey had had a long night. He hoped his wife was already dead somewhere, and he was just too tired to look for her. He needed a new wife fast, so he decided to turn on his charm.

Godfrey said softly, "Trisha, my dear, I know how you love to dance. I'm having a ball tomorrow night, and I want you to attend."

Trisha opened her mouth to refuse, then stopped herself. This could be her chance to put the brooch on Godfrey. She did not even know if it would really have the same power over him as it did on the girls. Would it change anything? Would they all be free of Godfrey if she could pin him? Trisha did not know the answer, but Mrs. Toddles had encouraged her to do it, and she had no other ideas.

Trisha said, "I would love to go to the ball with you and dance the night away." The other girls glared at Trisha in disapproval, but they had no idea what Trisha's plans were.

Godfrey said, "That is wonderful, my dear. I will have a bath waiting for you tomorrow, with an elegant gown and shoes to match." Godfrey looked at the glass jar one more time and then turned and left the room.

Bailey said, "Trisha! What are you thinking? Godfrey is going to make you his next bride."

The other girls busily dug out Godfrey's present wife. She was dirty, but otherwise no worse for hiding. The girls tore stripes of canvas from the tarp and mixed them with crushed maggots. They wrapped the girl's ankles.

Bailey said, "When this becomes hard in a few hours, it will be like a cast."

Trisha explained her plan to Bailey, who sounded doubtful. "Doesn't sound like much of a plan, Trisha. You're going to go to Godfrey's ball, and you think he will let you pin this brooch on him?"

Trisha said, "If I get caught, he will kill me, and if I marry him, he will kill me, and if I stay here, I'll die of utter exhaustion. My fate comes out the same no matter what."

Bailey wished she could be as brave as Trisha.

Trisha slept well that night. She knew she could pin the brooch on Godfrey. She would dance several dances with him, and then, later in the evening, when he was thinking about nothing but enjoying himself, she would pin it to his suit coat.

Trisha had no way of knowing that Godfrey did not want Trisha as his next bride. He wanted to get that second brooch from her. No one had ever thought of removing any of the dead girl's brooches before, but he had a plan to separate Trisha from the one she had taken. He did not know what she intended to do with it, but it would not end up pinned to him. When he had created the spell years and years ago, he did not stipulate which sex it would affect; it worked the

same on men and women. But he had created this method of staying young and alive by taking life from the girls, and he would not allow it be used against him.

As it grew later and later the next day, Trisha wondered if Godfrey had changed his mind. The girls heard someone coming down the corridor, but it did not sound like Godfrey. They quickly hid his wife, who still could not walk, but was getting a little color back in her skin. Their brooches started glowing, the door opened, and it was Godfrey.

Dressed for the ball, he breathed heavily and had to sit down. "My wife must not have expired. I don't feel the energy that I'm accustomed to."

He looked at Trisha. "Sorry, my dear, but it has taken me a long time to get ready today, so you will only have an hour to prepare. Follow me." Advarika followed Trisha out the door. Still out of breath, Godfrey asked, "Where is that rodent going?"

Trisha thought fast. "Since I only have an hour, Advarika will help me dress. You don't want me to be late, do you?"

Godfrey looked at Advarika. "He's not permitted to go to the ball, and he must stay in your room. If I see him out of the room, I will throw him back in the cave with the girls...or make some delicious stew out of him."

Trisha said, "He'll do as I say. He'll not leave my room."

Godfrey glared at Advarika, who scurried to Trisha's far side.

Godfrey walked in silence to a room and opened the door for Trisha. "I'll be back in an hour for you. There is a hot bath drawn and a gown waiting. Just leave your dirty clothes out here, and they will be cleaned."

When Godfrey closed the door, Trisha ran over and locked it. She gratefully removed her dirty clothes, but left her undergarments on. Trisha did not want the brooch to pin itself to her skin. The hot water felt wonderful against her skin. She made thorough use of a bar of sweet-smelling soap and clean towels.

Advarika sat on the edge of the tub, swirling the water around with one of his fingernails. He loved his baths that Mrs. Toddles gave him, swimming around in the tub that was just deep enough for him. He envied Trisha right now. After a while, he went to the dressing room and climbed up on the dresser. If he stood on the dresser, he could see his entire body in the enormous mirror.

In the bathroom, Trisha's brooch glowed slightly; she figured Godfrey was standing in the hallway waiting for her.

On the dressing table, Advarika picked up a brush and brushed his fur out. He smelled all the powders and perfumes on the dresser, choosing one to try on. His eyes started watering—that one was too strong. Just as he started enjoying this pampering thing, he heard a sound from the other room. Trisha could not be done with her bath yet. He peeked around the doorframe.

In the main bedroom, Godfrey took something out of the pocket of Trisha's dirty clothes, which lay on the floor. Godfrey had the brooch in his hand and was crawling toward the open door. He looked like a snake slithering around on the floor. Advarika ran and jumped on him, pulled his hair, and beat him on the head.

Trisha heard the commotion, grabbed a towel, and came running.

Godfrey leaped to his feet and lunged for the hall, slamming the door behind him. Trisha glimpsed Godfrey as the door shut, and then she turned to see if Advarika was all right. As the

raccoon picked up the brooch from the floor, Trisha noticed a cut on his arm. She took him into the bathroom to wash it off. Her bath was still very warm.

Advarika pointed to the water and asked, "Can I have a hot bath?"

It had not occurred to Trisha that Advarika liked baths. She picked him up and helped him into the water. He let out a sigh and swam around the tub. He could not do laps, but Advarika obviously enjoyed himself.

Trisha began dressing, wondering if she should continue with this charade. Godfrey knew she had the second brooch. What could she do now?

Advarika dried himself off while Trisha got dressed. She had to admit it was a beautiful gown—all white except for small blue bows along the hemline and a light blue sash. Very fine lace made up the almost nonexistent sleeves. The bodice, much too low for Trisha, showed off her perfect figure. She found several lace handkerchiefs on the bedside table and placed two along her neckline, across her bodice. The lace matched the lace of the dress, so the handkerchiefs looked like they belonged there. As she finished pinning them in place, someone knocked on the sitting room door. She knew it could not be Godfrey; he would not knock.

Advarika said, "I'll get it." He opened the door to a heavysset woman with two trays of food. She brought them in and set them on a table. She left without saying a word. Advarika, entranced by the grand aroma, fingered some of the meats and muffins.

Trisha called, "Advarika, who was at the door?" After repeating this a few times with no answer, she grew concerned. She stepped into the sitting room and found Advarika stuffing his face with all kinds of food. "Where did this food come from?"

Advarika, mouth too full to speak, just shrugged his shoulders.

The food smelled wonderful, but it could be a trick. "You know, Advarika, the food could have been poisoned. Maybe that would be Godfrey's way of getting rid of me." Trisha picked up a half-eaten chicken leg and grimaced.

Advarika had just swallowed a mouthful and was licking his fingers. "That is why I tasted everything on both trays. I don't want you to die. All of it seems good, Trisha. Help yourself."

Trisha found a muffin that only had a small bite taken out of it. She barely had time to eat the muffin before there was a knock at the door.

The same heavysset lady waited there. "Godfrey would like you to come and join the ball."

The brooch had already found its place on her new gown, looking very expensive. Outside the ballroom, Trisha checked in the mirror to her right to make sure she did not have crumbs all down the front of her dress. Horrified, she stared at her reflection. She looked old and wrinkled, with white hair, sitting in a wheelchair. It looked like the same wheelchair that Godfrey's last wife used on the day of the bonfire.

Someone touched her shoulder and whispered, "Everything will turn out all right, Trisha."

When Trisha turned, she saw a vanishing mist that resembled Mrs. Toddles. Trisha looked in the mirror again, and she looked like she had upstairs. She had not noticed, but, if not for the blue bows and sash, the dress would look like a wedding dress. Trisha wondered if she was making a big mistake, but then Godfrey left the girl he had been dancing with and came toward her.

"My dear Trisha, you look beautiful."

After dancing with Godfrey, Trisha felt in her waistband for the other brooch, but it was not there. Trisha started to panic until Advarika peeked into the ballroom. Trisha excused herself and headed for the hallway. Advarika held out the brooch with the clasp open to make it easier for Trisha to pin it on Godfrey. She reached down for it and stuck herself, hard. Blood dripped from her hand. A girl screamed, and Advarika bolted, running down the hallway and up the stairs, still carrying the brooch.

Godfrey headed toward Trisha. How could she explain the blood? She snatched a discarded wineglass from the table under the mirror and, hiding her actions behind her skirt, slammed the glass on the edge of the table. Bits of glass went everywhere. One of the small shards cut the palm of her hand.

Just before Godfrey reached her, Trisha hissed at the girl, who had just screamed, to leave. “There is danger for you if you stay in this house any longer.” The girl began backing away from Trisha just as Godfrey got to her.

Godfrey grabbed Trisha’s elbow roughly. “What are you trying to do—kill yourself before I have the chance? Get back to the cavern.” He instructed the heavysset woman to take Trisha and her little rodent back to the underground cave.

When Godfrey turned his attention back to his quests, he could no longer see his next target, the girl Trisha had warned. She had left the party.

Meanwhile, Godfrey’s henchwoman grabbed Trisha’s arm roughly and yanked her up to the bedroom, where Advarika was curled on the bed, hugging a pillow. The woman reached the bed in just a few steps and grabbed Advarika by the back of the neck. He let out a small cry, and Trisha tried to comfort him, but the woman acted crazed. She had the strength of several men and carried Trisha and Advarika down the stairs without their feet touching a single step.

When she had deposited Advarika and Trisha in the tomb, the woman left. Advarika gave Trisha a weak raccoon smile. “Trisha, all is not lost.” He opened the pillowcase that he still clutched. It was full of food. Advarika rubbed the scruff of his neck where the woman had dug in her fingernails. “She had quite a grip.”

The girls all crowded around and started devouring the food.

“I think you saved that girl’s life.”

Trisha nodded in agreement with her raccoon friend. “But there will be others.”

CHAPTER 32

Brittany and Chad were now on their way to see Jon. She hoped she could help her older brother, but she really did not see how.

Jon was still very weak from Professor Mend extracting the Black Death from his body, but he wanted to go to the unloading dock with Chris to pick up Brittany.

Brittany thought the Bundlebobs were traveling in the old dogsled a little too fast for her comfort, but Chad was laughing and having a good time. So, she hung on tight and prayed the old contraption would hold up. As the Bundlebobs pulled to a stop, Brittany didn't know if she was more grateful to be in one piece or that her brothers were standing in front of her.

Chad jumped out. "Brittany, that was fun."

Brittany got out slowly, as if she was coming off a roller coaster. She said with a shaky voice, "Yeah, that was fun."

Chris ran to his sister and hugged her. He could not remember the last time he had done that. Jon was trying to get there as quickly as he could, but his weak body had overcome. Brittany came running. She hugged her older brother, while Chris picked up Chad.

She pulled away to look at his arms and put her hand on his forehead. "Where are your black spots? You don't feel like you have a fever, but you don't look normal either. You are moving slow and seem very weak."

Jon said, "I'll be fine, Brittany. I just need to rest a bit."

Brittany looked around at the place where her brothers had been. While she was enclosed in a hospital, a filthy one at that, this was open land. A lot of it was covered with snow, and it was very cold. There were a few fruit trees, but most of the woody plants held small, dark globes. They did not look like something she could eat. The unloading dock was primitive, almost childlike. It did not look stable enough to hold anything substantial. There were Bundlebobs of all sizes milling around the loading dock, ready to be transported to another destination.

Chris went to get the wheelchair. As Jon eased himself into it, he said, "Brittany, you like science. I have got to show you something."

"What is it? Don't you think you should concentrate on getting your strength back?"

"Yes, but this machine will revolutionize the medical world."

Brittany said, "I hardly think they have any type of invention here that will revolutionize the world, Jon. Have you looked around? Besides opening up a ski resort, I don't see any potential here at making a living."

Chris said, "Brittany, the Bundlebobs don't sleep, and they feed off of themselves. What do they really need?"

Chris put Chad on Jon's lap and pushed him to Professor Mend's lab. The three of them talked all the way back.

They found Professor Mend deep in thought. He had taken the Sporbit motor apart.

Jon said, "Professor Mend, I would like to introduce my sister Brittany."

Professor Mend stopped working and shook Brittany's hand. He said, "You have recently cut your hand." He peered intently at her hand, now completely healed.

Brittany rubbed her hand where she had two large cuts earlier and said, "I have discovered something quite interesting."

Jon interrupted her, as he always did when he thought what he had to say was more important than his siblings. Jon wanted to show Brittany how the Sporbit worked, but the professor had quite a mess on his hands with the wires all pulled out. “How long will it be, Professor, before you can use the Sporbit again?”

“At least a few days, maybe even a week to get it working right. I think there is a glitch in the motor; it should have run more smoothly when you were in it.”

Jon asked, “Do you have a separate set of plans that I may have? This looks like it could help a lot of people where I come from.”

Professor Mend scratched his head. “Yes, I do, somewhere in this lab. I just have to think about it a bit. Feel free to help yourself to anything you see in the lab.” He checked several places before he found an extra set behind the counter. “I wedged these plans in there to fix the counter. It was uneven.”

The plans were on brown paper, like a paper grocery bag, but much thicker. Professor Mend said, “I make my own paper. It’s the best there is.” He took the Sporbit plans and laid them out in the sphere.

Then they heard a crash. It sounded like glass breaking.

Brittany ran out to discover that Chris had broken the jar with the black plague in it. The gas in the jar was dissipating throughout the lab, and black spots crawled away in all different directions. Jon grabbed a jar on the counter and started picking up the spots. One had already attached itself to Chris’s arm. Chad put the lid to the broken glass jar over a few of them, but a lot remained on the loose. Chris tried to peel the black shape off his arm, but it seemed to have arms and hung on tight.

Brittany picked Chad up. When he squirmed to get out of her arms, she said, “I don’t want you getting sick.” Brittany felt sorry enough that Chris would have to experience all the symptoms of the bubonic plague. Chad got free of Brittany and went to help Jon pick up the black spots.

Chad had fun picking up the spots. When he saw Brittany’s anxious look, he said, “I won’t get sick.”

After a few hours, they thought they had gotten all of the black spots, but they were not one hundred percent sure. Professor Mend did not know what became of the gas, but he needed to start work on the Sporbit should the Bundlebobs become ill. He had a vaccine, but he did not know if it would work once the black spots appeared.

Now Chris really wished he had gotten the shot. “Is it too late, Professor, for the antidote to work?”

“I don’t know, Chris. We can try it.”

Chris rolled up his sleeve, saying, “Use the clean arm, not the one with the black spot on it.”

The professor said, “Not in the arm—drop your pants.”

“This just keeps getting better and better.” Chris thought the medication looked like some type of red gas, and it burned as it went in. He yelped. “Hey, I think there’s a barb on that needle! Are you sure it’s not defective? Do you know what you are doing?”

Professor Mend said, “I hope the rest of the patients aren’t as vocal.”

Chad went over to the backpack and tried to get something out of it. Brittany came over to help him. He tried to pick up one of the large glass jars with the drool from the giant Bundlebob.

Brittany said, “I don’t know if this stuff will work, but it healed my hand earlier today.”

Jon said, "What is it? It looks like some kind of thick water."

"It's drool from the giant Bundlebob."

Chris, already starting to run a fever, felt sick to his stomach. Obviously the shot that the professor had given him had not worked, or he just had not gotten it soon enough. Brittany quickly poured some of the drool over the black spot on Chris's arm, then got a glass and filled it to the top with the gel.

She told Chris, "Drink this. I'm hoping it will kill the illness that is inside you."

Chris looked at the glass full of drool. "I can't drink that. I'm going to get sick just thinking about it."

Jon spoke up. "Chris, you have two choices. One, you drink that on your own, or, two, I will pour it down your throat."

Chris knew his older brother was not kidding. He held his nose and drank the liquid in three swallows. He made a face as if he were going to get sick, but then he was fine.

Jon thought Chris had a lot of guts. He did not know if he could drink the drool, even if he had an older brother threatening him.

After a few minutes, nothing had changed. Brittany tried not to show her disappointment. They all were trying to think of other treatments, when suddenly the black spot on Chris's arm started moving.

It twisted and turned; it tried to hold tighter and stay on Chris, but it seemed too weak. The spot finally fell to the floor, curled up, and did not move again. Jon quickly brought the jar, picked up the spot, and dropped it in with the rest.

Impressed by the gel that Brittany had collected, the professor wondered if all the Bundlebob saliva was a healing drug. Maybe only the giant Bundlebobs, or perhaps just this one giant who drooled, made healing saliva. This giant was not very popular. Maybe this would be his one redeeming quality.

Professor Mend sent Jon, Brittany, and Chris—who felt a lot better—to go get samples from the Bundlebobs. The three of them came back to the lab with eighty-eight samples of saliva. While Professor Mend tested these samples on the remaining black spots, Chris worked on inventing a way for the transporters to carry the sleds.

Chris wanted to invent a simple device so the giant Bundlebobs would not lose their hair when their cargo was pulled from their backs. Chris worked on some sketches while Jon studied the Sporbit plans, and Brittany put the Sporbit motor back together with the help of her older brother.

Brittany sighed heavily. "I wish Trisha was here. I don't even know how we could reach her."

Before she could say another word, Thomas popped up out of the blue.

She picked him up. "Tom, how did you get here?"

"Never mind that, Brit. I can help you. I can locate Trisha and help bring her to you."

Chris felt a little jealous. "Why are you so nice to Brittany? I was your owner, and I had to pay you off with muffins to go get Brittany."

"When I lived in a cage at your house, you only fed me rat food."

"I gave you treats, too."

Tommy shook his head. "Yes, but they were rat treats. You see, Chris, every time Brittany walked by my cage, she gave me a piece of whatever she was eating—a piece of apple, a carrot, some cake, even a bite of her sandwich. She never once walked by without giving me something. Even when she wasn't eating anything for herself, she would always remember me."

Rats have existed off of human garbage for years, and the store-bought food was dry and bland. I liked what Brittany gave me.”

Chris said, “Well, if I had known that, I could have saved myself a lot of money. I think I could be a pretty good Dumpster diver and find you special treats.”

Thomas said, “That is no longer your concern. Now, where were we?”

As Thomas conversed with Brittany, the one and only black spot they had not found came creeping out of its hiding place. The black spot saw a chance to survive. It climbed up Thomas’s tail, knowing that, although a rat would not make a good host for the black spot, a human would. Due to the thick fur, the black spot would hide out and wait. Surely this would lead to an acceptable victim. The black spot inched its way up Thomas’s tail and buried itself in his black fur. A person would have to look very close to see the black spot, since it blended in so well. Rats were great hosts for fleas, but not for the black spots themselves.

Thomas scratched his backside. “Chris, can you see if I have a flea or something on me? I’m really itchy.”

Chris came over to look, and the black spot shrank as much as it could.

“Nope, don’t see anything. Maybe you should take a bath every now and then.”

Everyone in Chris’s family knew he could not find anything, even if it was right in front of him. He could be looking right at his lacrosse uniform, and, at the same time, yelling for his mom to help him find it.

The black spot was going to get away with hitchhiking on Thomas to find its next victim.

CHAPTER 33

Thomas was now in the process of informing Brittany and Chris that he could find Trisha. Brittany wanted to make sure Trisha was all right and had not married Godfrey. Trisha was only fourteen years old. That was illegal in today's world, but she didn't know the legal age for marriage several hundred years ago in England. Besides, she knew her sister Trisha would expect a lengthy engagement, no less than three to four years.

Trisha walked slowly over to Bailey. She was deep in thought, and she was trying to think of a way to free herself and the other girls from Godfrey's spell. The dance was a total disaster, but at least Advarika had gotten some food for the girls. Trisha rubbed her arm and neck where the Neanderthal woman had dragged her down the stairs. She was sore, but she wanted to change Bailey's dressing on her hand. As Trisha unwrapped the cloth and started taking the maggots out of the burned skin, the wound emitted a colorless gas. It had a pungent odor to it.

Bailey yelled at Trisha, but she was out. Trisha knew nothing of what was happening to her.

Great-Grandmother said, "Alastair, this is best. I believe Trisha was getting overwhelmed. She was trying to take on too much responsibility. This will give her the much-needed rest."

Alastair stretched. "You do what you think is best. I've still got my eyes on the other three. Besides, she can always return once her mind has cleared and she has time to rest."

Great-Grandmother said, "I almost hate to ask, but how is Chris doing?"

"Actually, I think he is improving. Don't go thinking he's changed completely, but I do feel he has made some progress. Just keep a close eye on Trisha. When she's ready, you can send her back. Just use your best judgment. I trust you."

Great-Grandmother did not know if she trusted her own judgment. How could Alastair trust her? She tapped her finger on her lips. "I don't think I'm as sharp as I used to be."

"Nonsense! It was you who wanted the children here. Everything is fine. You'll know when to send Trisha back."

Trisha could not open her eyes. Her head felt like a bowling ball, and she could not turn her head or raise her arms. The blackness in her head engulfed her mind, but she did feel a presence beside her. As she slowly came to, she realized that Advarika sat on the pillow next to her, running his fingers through her hair and talking to someone.

Advarika pulled his hand away from Trisha and yelled, "Don't come one step closer! I have been trained well in the art of self-defense. I even took a couple of courses in karate." He made a few moves, slicing the air with his hands.

Trisha struggled to get one eye open. She looked down at the bottom of her bed, where she saw Tommy, her brother's old pet. Tommy still had his crumpled right ear and the white spot on his nose. Otherwise he was all black. He sat at the bottom of the bed, yawning in response to

Advarika's threats. It took Trisha several more minutes to feel better, but the heaviness was lifting. Trisha did not know exactly where she was, but it seemed like some type of hospital. She looked around.

The black spot seized its chance to move in on its victim. It inched off of Thomas's tail, worked its way along the bedcovers, then attached itself to Trisha's calf. Trisha had no idea that the black spot was now using her for nourishment.

When a large man walked into her room, Thomas skittered away and hid under the bed. The man greeted Trisha with, "You are not very big, but we need all the help we can get."

Trisha whispered, "Help with what?"

The man replied, "You must be hallucinating, but you're not dead yet, and you have two arms and legs. Gather your thoughts, pretty lady, and come help drag the dead bodies out. There is plenty of work to do."

When the man left the room, Trisha slowly sat up. The room spun; she grabbed Advarika to stabilize herself. Trisha slowly made it to the door and looked out.

The smell was terrible, like vinegar and death. The hospital was filthy, and it had to be at least ninety degrees. Even the walls had a caked-on film of some kind. There was very little light coming in from the old windows, so everything was very dark. She could hear moaning, and crying out. At first she thought this was some type of asylum for the crazy, but when she saw several dead bodies sprawled out along the hallway, she knew this was worse than where she had come from.

The big man dragged a body past her. It had a sheet over it, so she could not tell if it was a man or a woman. Advarika held on to Trisha's right hand as she supported herself on the dirty wall with her other hand. She heard the big man coming back, so she went into the nearest room. There, on the bed, lay a woman. She was not moving, but she did not look dead. Trisha noticed a large cross on a chain around her neck. Trisha picked it up and turned it over. It read: Abigail, we love you, Mom and Dad.

Trisha watched a tear roll down from the outer corner of Abigail's eye. Trisha wiped the tear away. She had no idea that Abigail was fighting an internal battle against the virus raging through her body.

The large man came up behind Trisha silently. "That one dead?"

Trisha jumped, startled by his presence, as well as the question.

"No! She is not dead."

The man said, "I've seen a lot of dead bodies, and she looks dead to me. This plague is taking its toll on this town—on all of England."

He took a few steps toward Abigail, and Trisha yelled, "No! She's not dead! She's still warm."

Trisha did not know how long this woman had left to live, but she was not dead yet. Trisha had thought that no place could possibly be worse than at Godfrey's house, but this was much worse. She could plan an attack against a human, but a virus was a different matter. You could not even see it coming. How could you defend yourself?

Trisha sat on the bed next to Abigail, picked up her hand, and wondered if Abigail's parents knew where she was. She rubbed her throbbing head, then reached down and scratched her calf.

As she did, Thomas saw the black spot. There was no denying that Trisha now had the bubonic plague.

Thomas said, "Trisha, you don't look well. Come lie down."

She replied in a very faint voice, “I don’t have time to rest, but I’m so tired—maybe just a nap.”

Thomas pulled Advarika aside. “You need to watch over Trisha and Abigail. Make sure that man doesn’t think they are dead. If you have to use your martial arts, do so.” The rat did not know if Advarika really could defend himself or the girls, but he had no choice.

Thomas went on. “Trisha is very sick. I need to go find her sister Brittany or someone who can help. I don’t know how we ended up here. I must have miscalculated when I tried to bring Trisha to the rest of her siblings.”

Thomas looked at Advarika. “Perhaps I misjudged the weight that would be traveling. You see, my rat friend said he put enough pungent gas into Bailey’s wound to have Trisha travel safely to Professor Mend’s lab, but I see there was no weight calculated for Trisha’s traveling companion. I won’t be placing the blame on you, Advarika. Just guard these two with your life.”

The rat hopped off the bed, completely unaware that he had carried the dreaded disease to Trisha. Advarika sat vigilantly at the bottom of Trisha’s bed. Naturally nocturnal, he could see in the dark. He would keep watch.

CHAPTER 34

Thomas had messed up big this time. He had transported Trisha to the old, diseased hospital in London with the bubonic plague outbreak.

As Jon helped Brittany put the Sporbit motor back together, Chris tinkered with a large clip to attach to the giant Bundlebobs' backs to carry the sleds. Chris loved dissecting things and putting them back together. Sometimes his mother got mad at him because he would take something like the radio or his father's razor apart and then not be able to put them back together.

This time, Chris had cut two large pieces of metal and was in the process of making a spring to put between the metal sheets. He could use Professor Mend's soldering gun to attach both pieces of metal to the spring. He had just gotten the coil the way he wanted it, and he walked across the room to get the metal pieces. When he walked back, Bihydrant was stuck in the coil, calling out for help. Chris ran to Bihydrant and, with the help of Quill, pulled him out of the coil. The Bundlebob rubbed his ears. When they pulled the metal over his head, it had crushed them.

Chris chastised Bihydrant. "Not everything is a game."

Suddenly he remembered how many times his mother had said that to him. He shook off the distraction and focused on what he was doing. He had quickly made two large clips connected by a heavy rope. The Cliphopper was not fancy, but he thought it would work.

They went out to find the giant Bundlebob who had volunteered to try out the Cliphopper. As the transporter turned around, Chris saw the bald spots all over his back. It was hard to find a patch of green fur that had not been pulled off his back by a double knot.

The first sled they clipped on fell to the ground, but, with a small adjustment to the coil, it worked great. The Cliphopper stayed in place on the giant's back, and the clip at the other end of the rope held the sled. It was a crude invention, but it served its purpose. Hopefully the Bundlebob's green fur would grow back with time.

Chris said, "Tompack, you and your three helpers can easily make these Cliphoppers. You will become the first entrepreneur."

Tompack said, "What's an entrepreneur?"

Chris said, "Never mind. I have another invention I need to concentrate on."

Bihydrant said, "What is it?"

"Some type of freezer for the deadly viruses. I'm going to ask the professor to help me."

All day, he had been thinking about a better way to store the virus that the Sporbit extracted. He knew that, buried underground, the virus would still be alive. A container could easily be broken or opened. Freezing could be a safer method of storage.

As Chris was planning the freezer out in his head, Thomas came running in, out of breath. "Where's Brittany?"

Chris pointed to the Sporbit. "What's up, Thomas? Did you find Trisha?"

Thomas ignored Chris and ran over to Brittany. "Brittany, you need to go back to the hospital," he panted.

Brittany said, "I would give anything for all of us to be back in Granmama's home."

Thomas had caught his breath. "No, not that hospital—the one where the black plague is running rampant."

“Why would I ever go back there? It’s a horrible place. Death and dying all around, and if you don’t have the disease, you’ll soon catch it. Abigail is probably dead already.”

Thomas said, “Abigail is not dead, but she soon will be—along with your sister. You see, I tried to bring Trisha to you, but I failed, and we ended up at the hospital in England where you were working. Trisha is too weak now to make the journey here, so you will have to go there.”

Brittany said, “How did Trisha end up there?”

Thomas said, “Let’s not worry about blaming anyone right now.”

“But, Thomas, I don’t have any medicine or supplies.”

Chad ran over to the backpacks and pulled the other jar halfway out.

Brittany looked at Chad. “Of course! I will try that. Professor, can I take a bunch of syringes filled with the red gas? With the gas and the healing drool, I think I can help.”

Professor Mend said, “I wish you could, Brittany, but the minute you leave this place and travel to England, the gas will have dissipated, and you will end up with a bunch of empty syringes.”

Chris said, “Why don’t we fill a bunch of the syringes with the giant’s drool, and she can give the patients a shot? It has to be better than drinking the stuff.”

The professor did not know if the gel would even be able to make it through the time travel, but he saw no harm in trying.

They all dropped what they were doing to fill the syringes. In less than twenty minutes, Brittany had all the syringes that the professor could spare filled and ready to go.

Jon asked his sister, “Do you know how to give a shot, Brittany?”

“No! But I’ll try to find a nurse.”

Thomas said, “Brittany, follow me. We must hurry.”

She quickly gave her brothers hugs. She was getting worn out traveling to her siblings back and forth and trying to deal with their black plague.

Jon wanted to come. “Chris and I have already been exposed. We need to help Trisha.”

Thomas said, “The opening into that time and place is too small. As it is, Brittany will have to let go of her backpacks, or she will not fit through.” Thomas was starting to doubt his abilities as a travel guide anyway.

All the transporters were too far from the village to take the three of them back to Bat Cave. But Bihydrant, Quill, and Kaver had the sled ready, so off they went.

This ride was just as wild as the first one, and twelve-year-old Brittany hung on tight to Chad and the backpacks. The scenery was beautiful, and the Bundlebobs were able to maneuver around the trees without hitting any of them. The fruit trees were weird because there was snow covering everything, and it looked like they held large eight-inch orange dates. There were trees that looked like weeping willows, but they looked like giant green beans hanging down, scraping the ground. The black wax globes that hung from trees were glowing. The larger treetops had different-colored snow. The colors were fresh, as if they had just been created. Brittany was used to seeing things with a slight cast of darkness from the pollution in Boston. Nothing you would notice when living there, but now the colors were jumping at her, demanding her attention.

In all too short of a time, they were in front of Bat Cave.

“You don’t have to go any further.” Brittany gave each of the Bundlebobs a quick hug, while Thomas ran past her into the cave. Brittany had a hard time carrying the two backpacks and Chad, but she did not have far to go—she hoped. As they moved away from the entrance, it grew darker. Brittany got out the flashlight that the professor had given to her. He had said to use it sparingly, but this seemed like a good time. They went deeper into the cave, and for a minute,

Brittany wondered if Thomas had gotten some bad information. Thomas began to wonder himself. Brittany's flashlight was fading.

The rat stopped at a small opening in the floor of the cave. "Chad, you go first."

Chad was not scared of anything, so he jumped into the hole and disappeared. Brittany put the backpacks down, intending to ask Thomas how she would get the bags to travel with her. She was sucked through the hole, and Thomas put her bags into the hole behind her.

Thomas softly said, "I hope they all end up together. I hadn't exactly gotten Trisha to the right place, but I had assurance from a close family friend that this was the way for Brittany and Chad to go." He looked down the hole and saw nothing but blackness.

CHAPTER 35

Chris wanted to keep busy and keep his mind off his sisters. He did not have any idea what kind of hell his sisters were going through. It seemed like Brittany and Trisha had ended up with the worst adventures. He wanted everything to be all right. If he didn't put his idle mind to work, he would worry himself to death about Trisha and Brittany.

Brittany could hopefully help Trisha with the horrible disease. She did not exactly help her brother, Jon. Professor Mend had extracted the plague out of him, but with the help of the syringes filled with the giant Bundlebobs' drool, she prayed she could pull this off. Maybe Trisha did not have the bubonic plague. *What does a rat know about such things?* she thought. Brittany liked Thomas, and he would not lie, but this was way over his head.

Meanwhile, Chris asked Tompack and Professor Mend to help make the freezer. Tompack had never attempted anything this complex, but he had built several small gadgets. He eagerly showed Chris all his prototypes.

Tompack had made a pencil that had a lid with a sharpener in it. The pencil, much too thick for Chris's fingers, was perfect for a Bundlebob's. He had invented hard plastic pliers to remove broken light bulbs. They did not last long, but since they were all plastic, no one would be shocked.

Tompack had electrical currents running through his body, but the other Bundlebobs could get severely injured or die from shock. Tompack was born with the number five and a half. He was the only one, a fluke of nature. Bundlebobs only came in whole numbers. The day the Bundlebobs discovered Tompack was five and a half, they also discovered he had electrical powers that no other Bundlebobs had. Not that many light bulbs broke, but Tompack thought every Bundlebob should have the pliers just in case.

He had invented enormous nail clippers to make mealtime easier and quicker. Unfortunately, he discovered that most Bundlebobs would rather break off their toenails. He had also made several hundred copper blankets. Packaged smaller than an average man's wallet, they opened to the size of a regular blanket, just super thin.

Chris said, "I used a blanket sort of like this when I was on a camping trip, but it was silver. It was freezing outside, and no one brought anything warm. Our scout leader gave these little packets out, and they kept us warm. Except for when a pen I had in my pocket ripped a huge tear in it and no one would share their blanket."

Chris and Tompack worked all day. Tompack was a great asset. He even used his copper blankets to insulate the freezer. It sat in the corner of Professor Mend's lab. About ten feet by ten feet, it had a huge door with a double-paned window. Professor Mend was highly intelligent, and could have built the freezer with his eyes closed, but he let Chris be in charge. He just guided Chris and Tompack when they ran into trouble. Now, the freezer was almost finished. Chris wanted to keep working and secure the shelves so the glass jars would not fall and break, releasing the viruses.

Professor Mend and Tompack left just as Bihydrant, Quill, and Kaver came into the lab.

Bihydrant asked, "Can we help?"

Chris gave Bihydrant a screwdriver and said, "You can tighten the door handle."

Kaver said, "Aren't you finished? Let's go throw the ball around."

Chris's lacrosse bag sat by the freezer door. Bihydrant went to the bag and pulled everything out. He picked out one lacrosse stick and threw one of them to Kaver.

Thomas jumped up on the lacrosse helmet. "Do I smell muffins?" He looked in the lacrosse bag and saw the other half of the crumbs that Chris had promised him. He had almost forgotten those.

Kaver and Bihydrant tossed the ball back and forth. After one long toss, Bihydrant backed into the freezer door, and the door slammed shut.

Bihydrant ran and opened the door. Chris sighed. "Guys, go throw the ball outside. I'll be out when I get done."

I sound more like my mother than an eleven-year-old, Chris thought. He took back one of his lacrosse sticks and used it to prop the door open. He felt cold working in the freezer. He used to love the cold, but since he had nearly frozen to death under the ice, he could not handle it anymore. Chris rubbed his temples and the palms of his hands. He remembered going under the ice, but waking up with a deep tingling sensation in his temples and palms. He did not want to know the reason he had been dressed only in his boxers on a makeshift table with Bihydrant standing over him with his green fur singed.

The three Bundlebobs went outside with the ball, and Chris kept working on the shelves. He was proud of himself. The freezer had turned out better than he expected. He had outdone himself.

In the lacrosse bag, Thomas busily ate his reward. The crumbs were stale and dry—crunchy, the way he liked it. The lacrosse bag started inching its way toward the freezer door. Thomas had no idea that he was eating with so much enthusiasm that the bag moved the lacrosse stick out of the way and the door slammed shut on Chris, inside.

Chris ran over to open the door, but the handle fell off in his hand. "Bihydrant was supposed to tighten that." Chris put a screwdriver into the hole where the handle had been—no luck. He tried several more things, but none of them worked.

Chris ended up pounding on the freezer window with his fist and kicking the door repeatedly. On the last kick, he let out a yell. He knew he had broken his toe. It felt exactly like when he had broken it in elementary school.

Thomas, having finished his meal, lay curled up in the lacrosse bag, fast asleep. He had no idea that Chris was now locked in the freezer.

Chris sat down against the back wall, wrapping his arms around his legs. He told himself that the situation might not be so bad. Some of the cold air must be escaping through the hole in the door where the handle fell off. He would only have to be in the freezer until Bihydrant or one of the other Bundlebobs came looking for him to play lacrosse. Chris tried to stay awake, but he shortly drifted off to sleep.

Outside, Professor Mend approached Jon, who watched the Bundlebobs playing lacrosse with just one of Chris's sticks.

The professor looked Jon in the eyes. "It is time for you to return to your home."

Jon returned the professor's strange look. "Why do I have to go back? I'm perfectly comfortable here."

Professor Mend handed Jon a stack of thick brown paper—the Sporbit plans. "Here. Take these plans with you. They may come in handy. Now follow me. You may want to say good-bye to your brother."

Jon really did not want to go back to the corporate world, but Professor Mend insisted that he return. “Jon, you need to finish what you have started.”

“I’m not sure I know what that is.”

“Once you come to the end, you will know the reason. Now it is time for you to go.”

Back inside, Jon looked everywhere for Chris. He peeked into the lab, where he had seen Chris last, and could not find him. Before Jon could really worry, Professor Mend came up behind Jon and gave him a shot. Jon could hear himself slurring his words and talking funny. He remembered smiling, and then he hit the ground—or at least he thought it was the ground.

Jon was now once again about nine years older than his actual age. He was back in the corporate world, but to Jon this was no different than being at school. There was always someone ready to take down a smarter student. It did not matter if you wrote a better English paper or made a better invention in robotics, someone was always trying to challenge another student for their honored position at the school. It was the same on the lacrosse field. Even his younger brother would give anything to take over Jon’s attack position on the summer league.

He knew that life’s lessons began at an early age and followed a person until they died. Figuring out another person’s intent was the name of the game.

Jon woke in his office. He had fallen out of his chair and hit the floor. Jon shook his head. “That was some dream.” As he slowly stood up, the room started spinning, but he did manage to see something on his desk.

It had not been a dream after all. There, on his desk, lay the plans for the Sporbit on the thick brown paper. The paper looked a little wrinkled and torn from the trip, but the plans were still legible.

Linda, his assistant, came into the room. “I see you spent another night at the office. You have an early morning appointment, so you’d best get presentable.”

Jon rubbed his eyes. “With whom do I have this meeting?”

“You not only look terrible, but you have lost a portion of your mind. Let me get you some aspirin while you get showered and changed.”

Jon went and took a shower, and for some reason that shower felt better than any he had ever taken. After changing into a fresh suit, he went back to his desk. A large cup of black coffee, a few warm rolls, some aspirin, and a glass of water waited for him.

Just as Jon finished his coffee, Linda returned. “Your eight o’clock is here.”

Jon said, “Linda, can you restore my memory about this meeting?”

“Of course. You are meeting with a gentleman about the Sporbit.” She pointed to Jon’s desk

“Linda, give me a few minutes and then show him in.” Jon did not know why, but he picked up the plans and put them behind the door to his lavatory.

A tall man walked in, shook Jon’s hand, and then sat down. He did not waste any time starting his pitch about a partnership with Jon to produce the Sporbit. “You see, Jon, I have the capital to back this decision, and I have others willing to invest if need be. If this Sporbit does everything you say it can, everyone will come out with a hefty purse.”

After about half an hour, the man asked to use the lavatory. Jon offered him his private bathroom. The man spent an exceptionally long time in there. Jon walked near the door and heard some clicking—the sound of a camera shutter.

How could I be so stupid? The Sporbit plans are in there. Jon knocked on the door and said, as humorously as he could, “Did you drown?”

“No.” Jon heard nothing else from the man. When he finally came out of the bathroom, the man smiled.

“I don’t feel well. I’ll reschedule the rest of our meeting on another day—perhaps next week.”

If he’s sick, why is he smiling? Jon shook his hand and noticed a trail of blood on the floor. He had seen that before. This man was a backstabber. He quickly glanced at the floor, and, sure enough, the trail of blood led to the lavatory.

The man backed his way out of Jon’s office. Jon showed him to the door, saying, “I don’t think you will be needing this.” He deftly pulled the camera out of the man’s pocket. The man protested, but could not deny that he was a backstabber. Jon retrieved the Sporbit plans from the bathroom and put them back on his desk.

The door burst open. Jon, thinking it was the backstabber, quickly put the plans under his desk. When he looked up, he was shocked to see his brother, Chris, on the other side of the desk.

“Hey. That man who just left your office seems like a nice guy.”

Chris has a lot to learn about people, thought Jon. Chris and Jon hugged.

Jon said, “I tried to find you to say good-bye. Where were you?” Jon noticed Chris was very cold and pale. Even his eyelashes were tinted white. Jon called Linda. “Can you get a large hot coffee for Chris?”

Jon had no way of knowing that Chris was having an out-of-body experience. He was freezing to death in the freezer that he had built in Professor Mend’s lab.

Linda popped her head in and said, “Cream or sugar?”

Chris said, “I would prefer a large hot chocolate, if you have it.”

“Yes, I think I can find that.”

Chris said, “What’s up, big brother? I see you need to have your carpet cleaned. I just stepped in some red paint or something.”

Linda came back into the office with a large cup of hot chocolate, which she handed to Chris. He thanked her and immediately drank most of it.

Linda said, “Your nine o’clock conference is about to start. Should I get another chair for Chris?”

Chris really did not want to stay for a conference meeting, but he did not know where else, in his frozen state, he should be right then.

Jon said, “Yes, Linda. I want Chris to see the business world I work in every day. It looks glamorous to the outside world, but it really isn’t.” Chris followed Linda out the door, while Jon sat back in his chair and closed his eyes.

Linda pointed down the hall to the conference room. “Chris, I think you can find your way. It’s just down the hall, and I will go dig up an extra chair for you. I also need to get some sustenance for the meeting, or they will have my head.”

Jon did not know if he had fallen asleep—he had only closed his eyes for a couple of seconds—but a woman now stood in front of his desk. He jerked himself forward and blinked his eyes several times. Jon recognized the woman from the dungeon. It was Mrs. Toddles, with the brooch and the narrow lips.

“Jon, are you ready?” she asked.

Jon cleared his throat. “Yes. Let me get my papers for the meeting. I already sent Chris in there.”

She looked at Jon with sorrowful eyes, then placed her hand on his. “No, Jon. I need to show you what will become of your life.”

Jon had no idea of what Mrs. Toddles meant, but he followed her to the conference room. As Jon and Mrs. Toddles hovered in one corner in the spirit world, they could see Mr. W talking with Jon.

Mr. Windbag greeted him warmly. “Jon, glad you are here. You’re like my son. Linda, give Jon his plane tickets for the next few days.”

Linda handed Jon several plane tickets. Jon just looked at them. Linda mouthed the word “sorry.” This grueling itinerary included four destinations in just a few days. He would have to sleep on the plane, as he had done so many times.

So far the woman who wore the brooch had not shown him anything new or disturbing. This was his life. Jon had worked for Mr. Windbag for a while now, and any day Mr. Windbag would retire and Jon would be in charge. Jon had enough money—four million dollars in savings. That figure did not include his penthouse apartment, which he had bought outright.

The next thing Jon and Mrs. Toddles heard was Mr. Windbag say, “I hated losing Jon. He was a great employee. Terrible he died so young. Linda tells me it was a heart attack—he should’ve made time to see a doctor about his chest pains. Now, on with today’s report. Mr. Little, you can fill us in until Jon’s replacement comes later today.”

Mr. Little swallowed hard. He could barely speak.

Linda said in a soft voice, “Is anyone going to Jon’s funeral?”

As Jon hovered in the corner of the room with Mrs. Toddles, he grabbed at his chest. Sure, his chest had been hurting him lately, but he was too young for a heart attack.

Mr. Windbag filled the whole room with his response. “Anyone wanting to go to Jon’s funeral can go during their lunch hour—that is, if you are lucky enough to have a lunch hour.”

Jon still clutched his chest.

The woman took Jon by the arm and led him out the door and, somehow, into the cemetery. Linda, the only person present, cried and kept looking at her watch. She had to get back to the office, or she would be fired.

Linda had worked for two other executives at the company before Jon, and they had both turned into backstabbers. Jon stayed true to form. His word meant something, and he always treated Linda with respect. Now Jon regretted not keeping in contact with his family. His job had been more important, more urgent. He figured he would have plenty of time to mend feelings later.

Jon did not realize how he got back to the conference room, but he saw Linda wiping the tears away and handing the new executive who had taken Jon’s place a handful of airline tickets. Mr. Windbag told Linda to give the new man a key to Jon’s penthouse.

“It’s a good thing I had Jon sign power of attorney over to me, in case anything should happen to him.” He pointed to the new executive and said, “You can use Jon’s place until you find one of your own. Welcome to the company. In just a year, you will be ready to take my place as president.” He looked at Mr. Little and winked. “That is, if he can outlive me.”

Jon now knew that Mr. Windbag had never intended to retire and make him president of the company, but rather to use him for everything he could. Jon never asked what happened to the previous executive when he had so eagerly taken the man’s place. Now he knew anyone who had held his job was more than likely dead of exhaustion and the stress of having changed their moral compass. Mr. Windbag had told Jon that, in accordance with company policy, he had purchased a cemetery plot and funeral arrangements for all their employees. Now Jon understood why.

Jon thought of himself as rich and powerful, yet only one person attended his funeral—Linda.

He remembered his mother saying, years ago, “If anyone can figure out a way to take their wealth with them to the other side, it will be you, Jon.” How these words ripped through his heart as he stood alone, the only other person attending his own funeral.

At the same time Jon searched his soul for the answers to such an empty life, Chris was stunned by the parade of people making their way to the conference room. He had never seen anything like this. The Bundlebobs were one thing, small, odd-looking things, with such a simplistic lifestyle, never wanting more than they had, but these people had an air about them. They passed by Chris as if he did not exist. For a moment Chris thought that perhaps they could not see him, but a two-faced woman almost knocked him down. She looked at Chris with one set of eyes, her other set of eyes still facing forward.

She snarled at Chris. “You need to get out of the way, you ankle-biter.”

Chris mouthed the word. Ankle-biter? He was not sure why this woman had just called him an ankle-biter. Maybe she was not talking to him.

The woman, who had barely passed Chris at this point, turned around. One set of her eyes still focused on the conference room, while the other pair drilled holes right through him. She stopped just inches away from Chris and poked him in the chest with her long nails. “I was talking to you.”

Trying not to shake, Chris said in his most respectful voice, “I’m as close to the wall as humanly possible without disappearing into the woodwork, ma’am.” Chris pressed himself even flatter against the wall. He felt like a paper doll.

She brought her finger up under Chris’s nose, irate. “Don’t you ever call me ‘ma’am’ again. I’m not old enough to be a senior citizen, nor am I your mother. Although I could be your older sister.” The other face said, “Come on, we will be late for the meeting. Don’t waste your time on that youngster.”

The face that had been scolding Chris turned and walked toward the conference room, talking with some other two-faced employees who came down the hall. A shark walked by, tearing into and eating something.

One small man introduced himself to Chris. “Hello, my name is Mr. Little. Can I get you anything or help you find someone?”

Chris replied, “I’m Jon’s brother, and I’m going to sit in on the conference today.”

Mr. Little patted Chris’s shoulder a couple of times. “Whatever happens in there, I’ll do my best to save you.”

He left Chris to wonder what he had been talking about. Several others pushed past Chris and slammed the door shut behind them. As quietly as he could, Chris opened the door slightly and slipped in.

He stood pressed against the wall, wishing his older brother would hurry and get to the meeting. He heard the doorknob turn and hoped it was Jon, but it was Linda. With one hand, she pushed the chair for Chris and, with the other hand, dragged a cart with all types of rolls, fruit, tacos, bagels, and coffee.

Linda smiled at Chris and pushed the chair to the only free space left, wedged between Jon’s chair and a stool occupied by a backstabber. Linda knew that this particular backstabber was one of the worst. Linda checked the bucket on the floor by his stool, and, sure enough, he had filled it. Without hesitation, Linda reached down, picked it up, got a new bucket from the cabinet, and put it in place—all before one drop of blood hit the floor.

Chris had been seriously hungry, but now he had lost his appetite. He mumbled under his breath, "Where is Jon?"

Mr. Windbag hollered, "What's that you're saying, young man? Speak up. If you have an idea, don't keep it to yourself."

Chris said, "I just said the food looks good."

Mr. Windbag snorted. "Well, eat up and don't interrupt unless you have an idea for us." Chris reached back to the cart and grabbed a plate, putting a bacon-and-egg taco on it. He could not possibly eat with the sound of blood dripping into a bucket right next to him. He just sat there, waiting to be devoured like a mouse by a snake. He had never wanted to see his brother more than he did right now. How could Jon stand to be around these people? Had he changed?

Jon had reentered the present world and thanked Mrs. Toddles for showing him what would be his inevitable future if he did not change things. As he watched Mrs. Toddles turn the corner and disappear, Linda was standing in the doorway to his office.

"Jon, Mr. Windbag is getting vocal, and he wants you in the meeting now."

Jon said, "Linda take the rest of the day off; then meet me at noon tomorrow at my penthouse. I want to discuss you working for me."

"Jon, I can't do that. I'll get fired. Besides, I wouldn't know what to do with all that free time."

"Don't you have an ailing mother?"

Linda nodded. When was the last time she had seen her mother?

"Linda, I'll cover for you." Jon picked up the Sporbit plans and headed for the conference room. Mr. Windbag stopped the meeting just to tell Jon he was late.

Jon replied, "I'm not late. I don't work here anymore." Jon looked around the table and saw his brother Chris, who looked pale and pasty.

The backstabber sitting next to Chris said, "Where's Linda? I need a fresh bucket." His bucket started to spill onto the floor.

Jon said, "She doesn't work here anymore." He hoped Linda would accept his job offer, because he just quit for her. "Be careful when you stand up. You might slip on the wet floor."

Mr. Windbag said, "Jon, I have no idea what you are talking about. What do you have in your hand? It looks like a set of plans. They'd better be for something good, since you're wasting our time this morning."

Jon looked at Mr. Windbag. "You're all talk, but when it comes right down to life, you couldn't care less about any of us in this room. Chris, are you ready to start a company with your older brother?"

Chris did not know what to say; he just nodded.

Jon continued. "Mr. Windbag, I hope you have a very enlightening funeral. You may be the only one in attendance."

Jon pulled out Chris's chair, then walked out of the room with Chris following close behind. When he reached the elevator, Jon looked back to check on him. He was nowhere in sight, just a few icicles on the carpet. The elevator opened, and someone pushed Jon from behind.

As he fell into the shaft, he heard Linda yell, "Sorry, Jon, but everything will work out. Just don't be fooled by money!"

So, Chris had caught a glimpse of his brother's world. Chris was no longer jealous of his brother's life—always wanting something more and never being satisfied once he reached his goals. He had been out of his body for too long. He needed to return to the freezer in Professor Mend's lab. He hoped one of the Bundlebobs would come soon to let him out of the freezer.

CHAPTER 36

Back in the dreaded hospital, Brittany focused first on Chad, who was somewhere in the room. She felt around in the dark and found him, then picked him up and gave him a hug. The black tunnel that Thomas had chosen for them to travel in was very narrow, Probable made by rats.

“That ride was fun. Can we go again?”

Brittany said, “I don’t know if we will ever go on that ride again, but I’m glad you weren’t scared.” Had the backpacks made the trip with them? She patted the floor around them until she found one, but she could not find the other one. She quickly opened the pack. As far as she could tell, all the syringes were in good shape. Now she needed to find Trisha and Abigail.

As Chad and Brittany stepped out into the hall, they saw the large man coming toward them. “Like I told the pretty little thing down the hall in room 292, we need help in carrying the dead bodies out.”

Trisha had to be in that room, and Brittany hoped that room would bring her luck.

Brittany said, “You talked to a petite girl? Was she sick?”

The large man seemed irritated. “Why does everyone want to talk? There is so much work to do, and there are not enough people to do it. Yes, she was either a petite woman or a girl. I couldn’t tell; I didn’t get very close. I think I might have a fever and hallucinations—it seemed like she had some large rodent guarding her, swinging his hands in the air.”

Brittany hurried past the man, speaking over her shoulder. “I’ll come back to help you, but I have to take care of something first.” Chad and Brittany ran down the hall to room 292. When she reached the door, Brittany paused. She did not want to look in. If it was Trisha, could she save her? Was Abigail dead?

She slowly walked into the room. Two still bodies lay in hospital beds. Advarika sat at the bottom of Trisha’s bed. He started swinging his arms and almost knocked himself out.

Brittany said very quietly, “Advarika, it’s me—Brittany. Everything will be all right now.” She opened up the backpack and took out one of the syringes, since she knew Trisha and Abigail were too sick to drink the giant Bundlebob’s drool. Brittany did not want Trisha to be scared if she could still hear, so she whispered, “Trisha, you need a shot.”

Just then, it occurred to Brittany that she needed to look for a nurse. She stuck her head out into the hallway, but she saw no one. The halls were empty, and she was wasting precious time. She had really hoped Trisha could still drink the liquid, but that was not an option now. Brittany had watched Professor Mend give shots, after all. She could do this.

Chad pushed Brittany toward Trisha’s bed. As she sat on the edge of the bed, she said, “Trisha, I hope I don’t hurt you. If there was any other way, I would do it, but there isn’t.” Her sister was thin all over, and her hips seemed very bony. Brittany decided to give the shot in Trisha’s thigh. As she pulled up Trisha’s dress, she saw several black spots on her legs. She took the cover off the needle, her hands shaking, and looked at Trisha. She plunged the needle into Trisha’s thigh, and Trisha’s body jumped a little. Advarika and Chad moved to hold Trisha down as Brittany pushed the plunger down on the syringe. The gel was very thick, and it took quite a while to push it all in. Brittany was sweating profusely. She did not know if she had given Trisha too much or not enough. She hoped the giant Bundlebob’s drool would heal her sister.

Trisha started to wake up almost immediately, and the black spots on Trisha's legs struggled to stay. They appeared to have several hands that tried to dig into Trisha's skin, but they were losing the battle. The spots shriveled up, then fell onto the sheets. Brittany said a quick prayer, then went to Abigail's bedside.

At first she thought Abigail was dead, but when Brittany put her head on Abigail's chest, she heard a faint heartbeat. She put her hand in front of Abigail's nostrils and felt a slight bit of air when she exhaled. Chad stood by the bed, offering Brittany a syringe. She took the syringe and plunged the needle into Abigail's thigh. She decided to give the shot the same way she had with Trisha, since it seemed to have worked. She pushed the thick liquid into Abigail's thigh and then removed the syringe. Nothing happened.

Then Abigail started having a seizure. Brittany's mind raced. Had she given Abigail too much? Brittany had given the same amount to Trisha, who was now sitting up in bed. Abigail stopped moving all together. At that very moment, the large man entered the room.

"What is this? A social function? There is work to be done." He walked over to Abigail. "She is dead."

Brittany's eyes filled with tears. She had neglected her friend. She just could not let her go now, but what could she do? Brittany remembered her CPR class this past summer, and she started doing compressions on Abigail's chest. She counted, then did two breaths. She had the basics down, but she was shaking so badly she could barely do the compressions.

The man, who obviously had never seen anyone do CPR, thought Brittany had gone mad. "You stupid girl! You are going to get the plague. You can't breathe life back into her, nor beat her to live. You must let her go." He left the room muttering, "Crazy girl. She's going to die along with her friend."

Brittany felt tired. She knew Abigail was probably dead, but she asked Trisha to get another syringe out and give Abigail another dose.

Trisha could hardly stand up, but she knew Brittany could not stop the CPR to give Abigail a shot.

Brittany did not see the harm in giving another dose to Abigail, since she was, in all likelihood, already dead.

Trisha hesitated for just a moment, then plunged the second dose of drool into Abigail. Advarika helped her depress the plunger. Within seconds Abigail was breathing. Her breaths were very shallow, but at least Brittany could stop breathing for her. Brittany put her ear on Abigail's chest. The faint heartbeat had returned.

It made sense to Brittany that the longer you had the virus in your body, the more liquid you would need to win the war against it. Abigail blinked her eyes, but she was still too weak to move.

Chad and Advarika had gone to get some stew. They returned with a tray. Chad carried one side and Advarika the other side, but the tray was almost too heavy for them. Steam rose from the bowls, and there was bread as well.

Brittany said, "Thank you. This looks good." She ate so fast she burned the roof of her mouth. She grabbed some bread and the backpack and ran out of the room.

Trisha slowly got up to follow Brittany, but she realized she had to lie back down.

Chad investigated a funny shape he had seen out of the corner of his eye and found the other backpack with the syringes behind the bed. He said, "Advarika, help me!"

They raced down the hallway after Brittany. She had already entered a room and begun the injections. She wanted everyone to have a dose of the liquid drool, but she did not know if

she would have enough. She thought that she would have to limit it to only those not in a coma yet.

When Chad and Advarika barged into the room with the other backpack, Brittany felt so relieved. "Thank you. I believe I'll have enough now for all the patients." The three of them went from room to room, administering the medication and hoping for the best. "We have no time to watch the results. We need to keep moving."

Chad understood and shook his head.

Brittany pushed the plunger down on yet another syringe, her arms tired and sore. Someone tapped her shoulder. It was the same large man who had decided earlier that Brittany and her friends were lazy. He thought they needed a constant reminder that there was work to be done. "If you teach me, I will help you. I'm a fast learner."

Brittany showed the man how she gave the injection. It wasn't perfect, but it got the medication into the patients. The man helped her finish injecting every patient. He even gave himself a shot.

As they came out of the last room, a woman stood in a doorway down the hall, screaming something. It was very dark in the hallway, and the only reason Brittany knew it was a woman was because of her high-pitched screams. She thought one of the patients had gone mad. Brittany could not understand what she said, but she ran and picked Chad up.

Chad yelled, "Mama!"

The woman caught her breath. "Thank goodness you are all right!" She turned her happy face toward Brittany. "Chad was taken several days ago, and I didn't think I would ever see him again."

Brittany got a good look at the lady as she fussed over Chad. She looked like some type of gypsy, with dark, weathered skin, as though she had been in the sun for years. She wore large hoop earrings and many strands of jewelry around her neck. Her blouse must have been white at one time, but it now looked grayish. The colors on her skirt, though faded, still caught the eye. Her skirt looked as if it were made of scraps, all different colors and patterns. The lady had perfectly straight teeth, and her long black hair was pulled back in a ponytail.

Even at five, Chad seemed the complete opposite of his mother. Quiet, he never spoke unless he needed to. His unassuming clothes and pale coloring made him easy to overlook. Regardless, Brittany could see the love they had for each other. Chad clung tightly to his mother, his arms around her neck. She kissed his cheeks over and over as tears rolled down her face.

Chad pointed to Brittany. "She's been taking care of me, Mama." Brittany reached out to shake the woman's hand, but the woman hugged Brittany to her chest with her free arm.

She whispered in Brittany's ear, "Thank you! I don't know what I would've done if something bad had happened to my son. I walked and ran through the city for days, searching for Chad. Today, I stopped for a second only to rest by the hospital. A big man asked me why I hurried. I told him I was looking for my son and described him. The man said a boy like that was in the hospital. I knew Chad couldn't be sick, so I didn't understand why he would be in a hospital."

After a moment, Brittany asked, "Why would Chad not be sick?"

The woman transferred Chad to her other arm. Brittany could tell she was weak. "He is special. The man who kidnapped him wanted him to heal people for a price."

Brittany said to the woman, "What do you mean by special?"

"Chad was born on a holy day five years ago. He was so small that I didn't think he would live. My husband had died when I was halfway through my pregnancy. I'm sure that is

why Chad is so small. I ate very little after my husband died. I was severely depressed and couldn't keep up with the daily schedule by myself.

“So I took Chad to a faith healer many miles away. The trip took several days, and a few times Chad nearly died. I didn't know if he would live, but this was his chance. There was just something about him—when I looked into his eyes, it gave me a sense of peace. Chad and I stayed at the faith healer's house for months. Chad never ate much, and I was worried about taking him home.

“Chad got better, and he gained some weight. His eyes seemed brighter, more magical. The faith healer said Chad could see right down to a person's soul.

“I never had to worry about food or shelter. Eventually we became husband and wife—not in the sense that we got a traditional wedding, but he had his great-grandfather perform a ceremony. Since then, we have lived together as a family.

“My husband stayed behind in our small town to try to save as many of the sick as he could. I-I have spent days looking for Chad. I never thought I would see him again. I thank you from the depths of my soul.” She gave Chad a kiss on his cheek. “Chad can heal the sick. Not all people respond to him, but everyone believes he can cure them. That is why the man stole him to make a profit.”

Brittany spoke very quietly. “The man who I found Chad with is dead. He died of the black plague. I assumed he was Chad's father.”

Chad's mother shook her head. “Is there anyone Chad can help? He is so young that he doesn't fully understand how and when to use his powers. I'm trying to teach him, but at times it's like trying to capture a butterfly with a string.”

Advarika left to get Chad's mother some soup. Brittany said, “If Chad could just look at my sister Trisha, I would be grateful.”

Brittany had not known that the answer to so much suffering had been so close to her for so long. Why had she not seen that Chad had powers? She had seen glimpses of something special in Chad, but she had not known the extent of his abilities. Advarika returned with the soup, and Chad's mother drank it from the bowl, still holding on to her son.

When she had finished, they all went to Trisha's and Abigail's room. She put Chad on the ground and spoke to him very quietly.

Chad went over to Trisha and held her hand.

He no longer looked like a small boy. His demeanor had changed. He focused intently, his eyes turned a smoky gray, and a stress line went across his forehead. Chad's lips became thin and almost disappeared as he clutched Trisha's hand to his chest. Trisha awoke, but was very weak. She did not pull away. She looked directly into his eyes. Chad's calming gaze affected her, too. In his eyes, Trisha saw images of herself, only younger. She felt as though she was watching a movie about her life. Just as Trisha saw the image of herself and her siblings getting off the plane and meeting their great-grandmother, Chad closed his eyes.

When he reopened his eyes, Chad was a little boy again.

His mother did not wait for Trisha to get out of bed; she knew she would be fine. Instead, she took Chad by the hand and sat next to Abigail.

Suddenly, she gasped and picked up the cross around Abigail's neck. A tear rolled down Chad's mother's face. She said, “I haven't seen a cross in a long time.” Chad picked up Abigail's hand and brought it to his chest. This time, the healing took a toll on Chad; he broke out into a cold sweat. Yet, by the time he closed his eyes and became a small boy again, Abigail was sitting up in bed.

Great-Grandmother had a worried look on her face. “How did things go so wrong? Trisha wasn’t supposed to get the black plague. She wasn’t supposed to end up there at all. She was supposed to have a nice little visit with her sister and brothers to rest her overtaxed mind.”

Alastair patted his wife’s hand. “Everything turned out all right. Don’t beat yourself up over a small mistake. Besides, look at me. I’ve made several blunders just with Chris alone. Of course, that child could distract anyone without even trying.”

A woman entered the hospital room where Trisha, Abigail, and the others rested, talking quietly.

Abigail said, “May we help you?”

Abigail and Chad’s mother did not recognize this woman, but Trisha, Brittany, and Chad did. It was Mrs. Toddles, with her silk dress, her thin lips, and the brooch pinned to her lace bodice.

She said very quietly, “Trisha, you have to return and help the other girls. You’ll gain strength during your trip through time.” No one in the room moved. Mrs. Toddles drifted across the floor, graceful and smooth, mesmerizing them. She reached Trisha’s bed and picked up her hand. “Say a quick good-bye. You are needed elsewhere.”

Trisha did not even have time to get out of bed. “Brittany, I love you.” She winked at Chad, and then her bed was empty. Advarika vanished also. Brittany ran over and felt the warmth of the sheets where her older sister had been just a few seconds earlier. She smoothed the dingy white linen with her hand. She knew she would see Trisha again, but she had left so quickly.

Mrs. Toddles remained for a few seconds longer. Before she vanished, she looked at Chad’s mother. “Trisha will save your stepdaughter, Bailey.”

At the sound of Bailey’s name, Chad’s mother began to cry. “What do you mean?”

Mrs. Toddles was fading. “Bailey is with Trisha. She will be returned to you when all is right.” Then Mrs. Toddles was gone.

Why had no one found Chris in the freezer? Brittany and Trisha were a little preoccupied by their situation, but where were the Bundlebobs? They usually couldn’t leave Chris alone, even if it was just to annoy him with their slurping and crunching of their toenails. He would be frozen solid soon. Someone needed to find him. If Alastair had not been traveling through a netherworld of his own, he could have seen Chris frozen like a rock.

CHAPTER 37

Trisha and Advarika were being transported back to the tomb. The air was clean and crisp, and for a moment she did not think they were going back to that horrible place. But, when the air smelled stale and heavy, she knew they had almost arrived. The two of them landed in the exact location they had left. Trisha came to rest very softly next to Bailey, while Advarika landed with a thud a few feet away.

Advarika got up and dusted himself off. "I don't think I'll pay for that trip."

Trisha picked up Bailey's hand. Someone had removed the maggots in her wound, and it no longer smelled pungent. A strip of clean linen lay beside Bailey, so Trisha picked up the material and bandaged Bailey's hand.

Trisha wore the white dress with the blue sash. It seemed like weeks since she had danced with Godfrey and tried to pin the extra brooch on him. She looked down at her own hand, at the wounds on her palm from the brooch and the glass shard. Trisha tore a strip from the bottom of her petticoat, wrapped her hand, and went over to the other girls, who were finishing the food Advarika had brought from the dance. She took a large roll and an apple to Bailey, who ate as if she were starved.

Trisha turned the extra brooch over and over in her hand, then put it in her pocket. She started to doubt her ability to ever change the outcome for any young lady Godfrey preyed on. Any female coming into contact with Godfrey faced certain death, or imprisonment for the rest of their short, miserable lives.

Trisha, deep in thought, did not notice at first when the door to the cave opened. Godfrey stood there, grinning, which seemed odd after what had happened at the dance. Trisha stood up and walked toward Godfrey—if she could not help any new victims, she could still try to protect the girls in the cave.

As Trisha came within a few feet of him, Godfrey said, "That is close enough, Trisha. I want you at least an arm's length away from me. I know you tried to kill me. You are lucky you failed. With my death, comes your death. No one will let you out of this cave. It will become your tomb."

Godfrey looked around the room. "I don't know the details of your plan to eliminate me, but I do know that you are not going to get rid of me."

Trisha looked around. Had one of the girls in the cave told Godfrey of her plan? Godfrey's words brought Trisha's attention back to him.

"I'm going to get married in an hour. Trisha, I just thought you might want to know. Wish me a long, healthy marriage." He burst into laughter.

Advarika, who had been standing in front of Trisha, now clung to her dress, working his way behind her. He held on so tightly that he was pulling her down to the ground. Trisha yanked her dress out of Advarika's hands, and he went tumbling backward. For just a moment, Trisha wondered if her friend Advarika had given information to Godfrey. The thought only lasted a split second. Advarika ran back over to Trisha and held on to her dress again, more gently. Advarika always acted tough, but he was really very sweet and timid. Trisha knew he would do anything for her.

When Godfrey left, Advarika let go of Trisha. He said, "It's a good thing he left when he did, or I would've had to hurt him."

Trisha thought frantically about how to get out of this cave. There were no electronic doors, and yet Trisha never saw Godfrey use a key. Besides, he would never carry a key into the tomb, where the girls could overpower him and take it. The door must work on a wheel and pulley system.

Doubts interrupted her. Was someone in that cave giving information to Godfrey? Trisha looked around the room. Perhaps she was imagining an evil presence, but why had she blacked out when she smelled Bailey's wound? Why had one girl, one of those here the longest, not eaten a thing when Advarika brought food? Trisha was not hungry, but she had just eaten a large bowl of stew in the hospital with Brittany. Frustrated by trying to make sense of everything that was happening, Trisha decided to concentrate on one thing at a time. Right now, she needed to get the enormous door opened.

Trisha heard footsteps coming, but not Godfrey's. It sounded like the large woman who had taken Trisha and Advarika from the party. Through the gap at the bottom of the door, Trisha could see feet. She remembered those boots; they looked like a man's brown boots, dusty and dirty. This must be the same woman—there could not be two pairs of those boots.

The door slid open. Even looking closely, Trisha could barely make out the pulley system. As the door slowly slid open, Trisha spotted the large wheels turning the rope to open the door. Then the figure on the other side of the door captured her attention completely.

Godfrey's assistant, a large, ugly woman, looked more like a man than a woman. Trisha remembered how her brother Jon would wrestle in high school; this woman out bulked any of the wrestlers she had seen at meets. The woman looked more like the professional wrestlers Chris used to watch on television. Her hair was pulled back in a bun, and her eyes of steel pierced the air as if her gaze had been shot from a gun. She wore brightly colored mismatched clothes. Her arms were bigger than Trisha's thighs. When she spoke, she displayed a big gap between her teeth. She had painted her face with garish shades of blue on her eyelids and red on her cheeks and lips. Trisha sensed that she had no emotional attachment to anyone, or sympathy for anyone's plight. She acted fanatically loyal to Godfrey.

The woman approached Trisha, leaned in, and said, "Trisha, Godfrey wanted you to know that he is happily married. Not much can be said for the bride, though."

Trisha knew that, at this very moment, Godfrey was stealing another girl's life.

The woman turned and clomped up the narrow hallway. The door began to shut. Trisha quickly took the brooch and threw it at the mechanism. It hit one of the large wheels and fell to the ground. While the door was still sliding shut, Advarika picked up the brooch, scurried up Trisha's dress, planted his feet on her shoulders, and steadied himself to throw the brooch between the wheels. She thought they must have looked comical—if a cloak had been tied around Advarika's neck, they would have looked like an enormously tall person with a small head.

Advarika remained focused on his task. Naturally nocturnal, he used his excellent night vision to aim for the wheels that slowly moved the door closed. He threw the brooch between the two wooden wheels. It made a crunching sound, then a large squeal, followed by silence. The door stopped, leaving an opening only about ten inches wide, but the girls were all very thin—they had room to spare.

Before Trisha walked through the opening, she took a last look at the underground tomb. She shivered, not from the cold, but from the thought of what had happened there.

The girls made their way up the dark and musty hallway. Trisha did not have any idea where to go; she was just relieved that they were out of the tomb. They reached the end of the

hallway, and Trisha felt cool, fresh air coming from a small opening at the threshold of the door at the end of the hall. Advarika bent down to drag in the wonderful air through his nose. Suddenly light-headed, he almost passed out. Trisha checked her friend, but her attention focused on the door that stood between them and freedom. Trisha turned the knob. The door opened, exposing her eyes to bright light.

She shut the door.

After a minute or two, Bailey asked, "Is there someone out there? Is it Godfrey?"

All the girls huddled closer together. Trisha blinked her eyes a few times, then said, "No, there is no one. It is safe, but the light is so bright that we will need to shade our eyes until we get used to it."

It felt as though the light blistered the girls' eyes as they made their way out of the prison. Trisha looked at the girls. "Stay together, and don't wonder off. We have a better chance of surviving and remaining free if we all stick together."

One of the girls smelled food and wanted to go to the kitchen, but the rest of the girls swarmed around her and dragged her along with them. Trisha wondered if this girl could be the spy. Maybe they had better keep closer tabs on her. Or she might just truly have been hungry.

They went through several elaborately decorated rooms. Trisha remembered seeing furniture like this when her mother would take her out for a day of looking at antiques. This furniture, in pristine condition, had just been built. It belonged in this time period. In the entryway, Trisha remembered the massive stairs and the long hallway with all the portraits. As Trisha and the girls ascended the stairs, Trisha noticed that one of the canvas paintings had no portrait in it, just a grayish background encased in a carved gold frame. Halfway up the staircase, she leaned over to see if she could identify the missing portrait. There could be no doubt—the woman with the brooch, Mrs. Toddles, was no longer visible. Had she died, or was she still lurking around to help Trisha? Deep in thought, Trisha would have fallen over the railing if Advarika had not grabbed her dress.

Trisha headed quietly up the stairs to join the other girls. The girls could not decide which way to go, but Trisha pointed to the left. She remembered getting ready for the party in a room to the right, and she thought Godfrey's room was in the same direction. Trisha herded the girls into one of the empty bedrooms.

"Stay put, and once I'm gone, slide a dresser in front of the door."

Bailey said, "Trisha, I want to go with you."

Trisha only trusted Advarika. Anyone else could be Godfrey's spy. "Bailey, you need to stay here with the other girls. If I don't come back, you'll be in charge."

Trisha whispered, half to herself, "Where is Mrs. Toddles? I need her help."

As Advarika and Trisha left the room, they heard the girls slowly pushing the dresser into place. The two of them listened intently to the sounds behind the door. The tap on Trisha's shoulder almost sent her five feet into the air. Advarika jumped nearly that high, and now clung to Trisha's neck. They turned, expecting to see Godfrey behind them.

It was Mrs. Toddles.

She no longer wore the brooch. Trisha found it strange not to see the large piece of jewelry on the woman's dress. Mrs. Toddles did not say a word, but just handed Trisha something. The object almost fell to the ground, since Advarika was in the process of climbing down from around Trisha's neck. Trisha was perspiring so much that it nearly slipped from her fingers, and Advarika's climbing blocked her view and jiggled every bit of her.

The woman clasped her hands tightly around Trisha's small hand, saying, "You will need this now." Trisha could tell, without even looking, that she held the woman's brooch. As she opened her hand slowly, the brooch glowed bright green. Mrs. Toddles was a good person. As she looked up, the woman melted into the woodwork. The hallway seemed exceptionally quiet. The silence almost hurt Trisha's ears as they made their way down the passage.

Trisha came to the bedroom that she had occupied at one time. She turned the knob and looked in. The room was empty, so she continued down the hallway. Behind the third door on the left, she found Godfrey's new bride, so thin and pale that Trisha did not see her in the bed at first. Trisha's eye had been caught by the bedcovers, which were turned down, and the decorative pillows placed on a nearby chair. The woman's complexion and colorless hair blended right in with the sheets. Trisha pulled the covers back. The girl's chest rose and fell, so she still lived. This young woman looked as close to death as she could without actually being dead.

Trisha heard footsteps coming from outside the door. She knew the girls would walk silently, so it must be Godfrey.

Advarika made it under the bed first, and Trisha followed as quickly as she could. The door swung open.

Godfrey said, "I believe it's time to end your life, my dear. I'll put you out of your misery." Then Godfrey saw the covers pulled down. *My wife was too weak to have done this*, he thought. Godfrey did not know who, but with very few places to hide, he would soon find the intruder.

He walked over to the armoire and, for just a moment, glanced at the mirror on the door. He liked what he saw. "Believe I look ten years younger." He really did not expect to find anyone in the armoire. Almost empty, it held only a few dresses. He closed the door and knelt down beside the bed. Trisha's heart pounded out of her chest. She could feel Advarika's chest also, and she thought for sure that Godfrey could feel the floor vibrating to the beat of their hearts. As Godfrey leaned over and looked under the bed, Trisha felt her heart stop.

In one quick instant, Godfrey saw Trisha and grabbed her. He pulled her out from under the bed with a jerk, twisting her wrist. Trisha clawed and hit Godfrey with her free hand, but he held on to her wrist, squeezing it even tighter. The two of them landed on the floor, with Advarika on top of Godfrey, doing his best to inflict pain. When they hit the floor, the brooch fell out of Trisha's hand and landed a few feet away from her. As Trisha struggled to inch her way toward the brooch so she could pin it to Godfrey, someone walked into the room.

This person did not float like Mrs. Toddles; she just walked in and picked up the brooch. Trisha stopped fighting with Godfrey, though Advarika continued hitting and biting him, oblivious. Her vision clear now, Trisha recognized Bailey. Was Bailey there to help Trisha or Godfrey? Bailey knelt down beside Godfrey, brooch in hand. Trisha feared that she and the other girls would be put back in the tomb forever. Everything moved in slow motion.

Bailey pinned the brooch on Godfrey. Trisha took a deep breath. The room glowed bright green and spun. Advarika scrambled over to Trisha and hung on tight.

When the spinning stopped, Trisha found herself alone in the same beautiful bedroom, wearing a silk dress. She no longer wore the brooch, and Advarika was nowhere to be found. Trisha missed him dreadfully. She would have to find out what happened to him, but right now she heard someone calling her name.

A soft voice called, "Trisha, where are you?" The owner of the voice knocked and came in. "I thought maybe you had gotten lost. Godfrey and his intended are downstairs."

Trisha knew this girl—she had been in the bed, thin, pale and weak, just a few moments before. Godfrey had planned to suck the last bit of life out of her, but now she looked healthy and happy.

“Trisha, are you all right? You look ill. Should I get Godfrey?”

Trisha almost yelled, “No!”

The girl gasped, pointing to a wedding dress hanging in the corner. “Is that beautiful dress the one Godfrey’s bride will wear?”

Trisha recognized the dress. She had first seen it in the chapel at her great-grandmother’s house.

Trisha’s voice quivered. “Am I Godfrey’s intended?”

“No, silly. Are you sure you feel well?” The girl linked arms with Trisha. “Come, now. The party will be fun, and you look lovely.”

Trisha looked at herself in the armoire mirror—the same one that Godfrey had admired himself in earlier. Trisha wondered how she came to be in this dress, a light pink silk one with matching shoes. Her hair was twisted up in an elaborate arrangement, with just a few ringlets coming down past her shoulders. Arm in arm, the two girls walked out of the room, toward the laughter coming from the first floor.

Trisha’s companion said, “Godfrey is so anxious for you to meet his bride-to-be. He respects your opinion, especially since he hasn’t known her for very long.”

Trisha, still believing herself in some horrible adventure, thought that it would all play out in front of her again. As they descended the stairs and started down the long hallway, Trisha noticed the woman with the brooch, back in the portrait—without her brooch, but with a raccoon sitting in her lap. Trisha had to laugh. The raccoon was Advarika.

Her companion noticed Trisha’s amusement. “The story goes that Godfrey’s great-great-great aunt, Mrs. Toddles, loved a raccoon and treated it like her child. She had found the abandoned raccoon when it was a baby, and since she had no children of her own, she treated the furry little creature as family. She took him everywhere with her, until he finally died of old age. Legend says that she was never the same after her beloved Advarika died.”

A tear rolled down Trisha’s cheek. She could see how Mrs. Toddles could love him like a child. He was a very loving and protective friend. Trisha kissed her fingers, then reached up and placed the kiss on Advarika’s cheek. The laughter grew louder, and the girl escorting Trisha did not want to miss the festivities. They entered the room.

At the center of everyone’s attention, Bailey and Godfrey stood arm in arm, smiling and having a good time. Despite the roomful of people, Godfrey noticed when Trisha came into the room. He immediately excused himself from Bailey and greeted Trisha, now standing alone.

“My dear Trisha, I want you to meet my fiancée, Bailey Carrington. I know the two of you will like each other.”

At first, Trisha had to force herself not to pull away from Godfrey’s hand, but he was different. His eyes no longer looked dark and empty as they had before. His touch was gentle as he guided her elegantly and gracefully through the other guests. As Godfrey introduced her to Bailey, he released her hand, and Trisha felt her wrist throbbing—the same wrist that Godfrey had twisted when he had pulled her out from under the bed.

Bailey said, “Trisha, I have heard so much about you. After the way Godfrey speaks of you, I’m surprised that he asked for my hand in marriage and not yours. I want you to meet my parents and my younger brother.”

Bailey led Trisha to another group. Trisha could only stare.

Chad, all dressed up, squirmed in his mother's arms. He wanted to get down and play with his colored stones and his top. Trisha talked quietly to him for a few minutes, and then she slowly walked away.

Chad ran after Trisha, holding out one of the stones. "You may need this sometime."

Trisha thanked him. When he ran off to his mother, she gazed around the room full of well-dressed people—and empty of oversized jars filled with dirt and skeletons. She wondered how much of her recent adventure she had dreamed.

Bailey broke Trisha's thoughts, smiling graciously as she approached. "So, Trisha, you live in America?"

Trisha, caught unprepared, had no idea how to answer that simple question. She mumbled something vague, then excused herself from Bailey. Trisha did not know where she lived—Boston or Iverson, Scotland, or Oxford, England. She walked across the floor where the enormous jars had been on her last visit to this room. On the floor, in an alcove, she spied a small pile of dirt and part of a large round water stain.

Trisha rubbed her wrist and looked down at the floor. Godfrey came up behind her. "May I ask what you are thinking?"

Trisha stammered, "Nothing! I'm not thinking about anything."

Godfrey smiled. "Well, Trisha, I didn't bring my friend all the way from America just to say nothing about my fiancée."

"I believe she is very courageous, and I think you have chosen an excellent woman to become your wife."

"You can tell this just by talking with her for a few moments?"

"Yes, Godfrey. She will make you very happy. There isn't anything she wouldn't do for you."

"Trisha, if Bailey doesn't object, may I have this dance?"

Trisha looked over at Bailey, deep in conversation with some other ladies, and she waved to them. Godfrey gently took Trisha's hand, barely bothering her tender wrist, and they danced. They had a pleasant dance, but one was enough for Trisha. She danced the rest of the dances with other eligible men.

At the end of the night, she went to bed, exhausted, and fell into a deep sleep. Trisha dreamed about her siblings and wondered where they were and what they were doing. She had seen Brittany in that filthy hospital in London, but she hadn't seen her brothers. Jon she did not worry about. He was quite capable of taking care of himself, but her younger brother, Chris, she wasn't so sure.

CHAPTER 38

Chris had grown up a lot since this adventure started. Now he thought maybe nothing was funny. What was there to make jokes about? He was still in the freezer, frozen nearly into a giant ice cube. He had tried many knobs on that stupid watch his great-grandfather had given to him, but nothing worked. It was frozen just like he was.

The next day, Tompack came into the laboratory, looking for Chris. He could not find him anywhere. He was just going to leave when he spotted Chris's lacrosse bag sitting by the freezer. Tompack went over to pick up the bag, thinking Chris must have left it behind. That was strange because Chris never went anywhere without his bag. As Tompack got closer to the freezer, he could see cold air coming from the small hole where the door handle belonged. The handle lay on the floor next to Chris's lacrosse bag.

Thomas popped his head out of the bag. "What's for breakfast?"

Tompack ignored the rat's greed. "Have you seen Chris?"

Thomas yawned and stretched. "Haven't seen him since last night, when he was working in the freezer."

Tompack got a very sick feeling.

Bihydrant ran in. "Where is Chris? Let's get his other lacrosse stick and play a game—I think I have enough players. Of course, whichever side has the giant Bundlebob will win, but we can switch off."

Tompack did not hear a word Bihydrant said. He slowly pulled a chair over to the freezer window and looked inside. Chris sat there, frozen, with his knees curled up tight against his chest. Tompack yelled for Bihydrant to go get the professor. When Quill and Kaver saw Bihydrant springing out of the lab, they came running in to see what had happened.

It did not take Bihydrant long to bring Dr. Mend to the lab. "We must get Chris into the Sporbit," the professor said.

As Bihydrant reached down to pick up Chris's legs, Professor Mend said, "Wait! We have to do this right, or we could snap off a leg or arm, and then there would be no way to reconnect his limbs."

Tompack instructed the others to lift Chris up in one smooth motion and not to drop him, while Professor Mend prepared the Sporbit. He did not know if this would work. He had only tried it on diseases, not extreme hypothermia. The Bundlebobs gently put Chris on the table, but he rocked back and forth since he had frozen with his back curved. Finally, they laid Chris on his side.

Professor Mend said, "Quickly, everyone out of the Sporbit." As soon as they all scrambled out, he turned on his machine. He had to keep increasing the amount of power to the Sporbit. The lights flickered, and then everything was quiet. He could hear the Bundlebobs breathing. Inside the Sporbit, Chris's limbs had uncurled, but he was still a whitish-gray color.

Professor Mend looked anguished. "There isn't anything else we can do for Chris. I'm afraid we have all failed him."

The Bundlebobs surrounded Chris as he lay flat on his back on the table, not breathing.

Their quiet moment was broken by a loud sound from above. Something was ripping off the roof of the laboratory.

The giant Bundlebob, the one who drooled, reached his hand in and picked up Chris. The giant Bundlebob still had the clips Chris had invented on his back. His green fur had already started to grow back in the area where the ropes had pulled his fur out. He felt enormous gratitude to Chris for his simple invention.

So, when he had heard that Chris was frozen, he had immediately dropped his passengers off. Now, he put his friend in the palm of his hand and covered him tightly with his other hand. He then put his lips to the small opening between his hands and blew warm, then hot.

It felt like Chris was in an oven, but he still could not move or talk. He wanted to tell the giant that he was being cooked alive, but nothing came out of his mouth. Then Chris thought it was raining, but it was not rain. Giant Bundlebob's saliva covered him from head to toe.

How much can my body take? To go from frozen to baked to drowning all within a matter of a few minutes seems a bit much, thought Chris. He started coughing and spitting, his lungs burned, and his body felt like needles were sticking him. When he tried to bring his hand up to his face, his arm moved in slow motion. His skin had a mottled appearance to it, with pink and white areas alternating all over his body. The giant gently put Chris on the ground, allowing Professor Mend, Thomas, and the Bundlebobs in the lab to hover over him. The giant broke off one of his nails and dipped it in his ear, covering it with yellow jam.

He offered it to Chris, who managed to whisper, "Not really hungry at this time—maybe later." Chris had forgotten what the Bundlebobs' daily diet consisted of. What he would not do for an apple!

Meanwhile, Tompack was deep in thought. Was this the giant Bundlebob who had abandoned him and the other three behind the ice wall? Once Chris was feeling better, Tompack asked the giant, "Can I see the bottom of your foot.?"

The giant lifted his left foot. Kaver wanted to know why Tompack was asking the giant Bundlebob these questions. Tompack gestured for him to wait.

Tompack's entire body shook, but he had to ask. "Now the other foot."

The giant lifted his right foot, revealing a picture of a fish on his big toe. Quill almost fainted. This giant Bundlebob had left them to die, all because Bihydrant had cut through the forbidden ice pond and ate one of the talking fish. Quill ran and hid behind Tompack. The Bundlebobs wondered if the giant recognized them and whether he would send them back behind the wall.

Tompack asked the giant, "Do you know who we are?" He pointed to himself, Quill, Kaver, and Bihydrant, who was now trying to hide behind Chris. The giant nodded, then pointed to a vehicle coming in the distance. It progressed at a high rate of speed, seeming to float on air.

Chris thought this seemed strange to him—besides Professor Mend's laboratory, he had not seen any signs of advanced physics here. The vehicle stopped just inches from Chris. It looked like a large fish. The mouth of the fish opened, and out walked a very small Bundlebob.

Tompack's legs were shaking. The last time he had seen the king of the Bundlebobs, the king had sentenced the four Bundlebobs to exile behind the ice wall.

The king's face showed no sign that he remembered the last meeting. He said, "Tompack, it's good to see you, and your friends who were exiled. I never thought I would see you again."

The king turned to Chris. "Thanks to you getting Tompack and the others through the ice wall, they will now have a second chance. Chris, I hope they have been treating you well?"

Chris looked at the Bundlebob a few feet away and said, “Besides being frozen to death a couple of times, I think I’m in pretty good shape.”

Bihydrant stepped forward. His voice trembled. “Your majesty, I would like to tell you something about the talking fish I was accused of killing and eating.”

The king sighed. “I know what you are going to say. You cut through the ice on the pond, but found the talking fish already dead. Because we didn’t find the dead fish in the pond, we thought you ate him, but, since then, one of the Bundlebobs found a grave. We unearthed its contents; it was the talking fish that we accused you of eating.”

Tompack said, “Bihydrant had never explained the details of the incident that had exiled us. I just assumed Bihydrant was guilty.”

The king continued. “Each talking fish in that pond has a partner in the two-legged community, with whom he communicates. When a two-legged individual dies in their world, the fish also dies here, but stays in the pond. I, as the king, retrieve the dead fish and place them in the communal burial ground. When we caught Bihydrant that day, it seemed clear that he had eaten one of the fish.”

Bihydrant felt a little better now. “I found the fish dead and I thought I was doing the right thing by burying it.”

Tompack, relieved that his friend had not killed and eaten one of the talking fish, still had a question. “Why didn’t you send one of the giants to retrieve us from behind the ice wall when you found this out?”

The king looked tired. “Would you not have run from the giant? Especially one who put you behind the ice wall when you were exiled?”

None of the Bundlebobs answered. They would not have gone with the giant.

“That is why I sent Chris to you. He got you out from behind the great wall of ice, and here you are at home.”

Chris’s legs felt stiff from sitting. He stood up and stretched his arms high in the air. They could all hear his joints pop and crack.

The king said, “Chris, you have been through a lot, and you showed courage along the way. I would like to make you one of my chosen fish representatives.”

Chris was not sure he wanted to be a fish person. It did not sound like much of an honor. “What exactly would being a fish representative entail?”

“Very few have the privilege of being initiated into the fish association, but you will be introduced to the talking fish.”

Chris mumbled under his breath, “What could fish possibly say that was important?”

The king seemed not to hear Chris. “No matter how old you are or what circumstances you are in, you can always contact the fish for help. They will relay the message to another fish representative, whichever one is qualified to help you.”

Chris replied, “How would I contact the fish?”

Chris’s head filled with plans to have the Bundlebobs help him. One of the giant Bundlebobs could scare that dog that always chased him home, or perhaps one of the smarter Bundlebobs could help him with his homework.

The king said, “Chris, you can’t abuse your power. You can only call on the fish in a life-or-death situation.”

Chris did not think it sounded as cool as he originally thought, but he might need help one day, so why turn down this opportunity? Kind of like a magic genie—with gills. Chris sighed. “So how would I get in contact with the fish?”

“All you have to do is rub your big toe and say, ‘I need the fish of hope.’”

Chris started laughing. “You must be kidding, right?”

The king glared at Chris. “No, I’m very serious. Do you wish to become one of the few chosen ones, or will you decline my offer?”

Chris decided he had to join their club of fish people, if only to avoid hurting the king’s feelings. It was not likely that anyone would ever call on him to come save any of the Bundlebobs again.

Chris sat down so he could be closer to the king’s eye level and said, “I would consider it an honor to be in your elite club.”

As he spoke, the king took his unusual stick and touched the sole of Chris’s right cleat, where his big toe was. Chris jumped. His toe tingled, so he quickly removed his shoe and looked at it. A picture of a fish adorned the bottom of his big toe, just like the one on the giant Bundlebob’s toe. Chris thought it looked like a tattoo. He rubbed his thumb across the marking to see if it would come off.

The king saw his attempt. “Chris, you can never remove that marking. It now forms a part of your being. The Bundlebobs will always come to your rescue, so don’t hesitate to call on them.”

Chris could only think about how his mother would kill him for having a tattoo. The king returned to his vehicle and traveled halfway to the horizon before Chris looked up from his daze.

Tompack said, “Chris, it’s time for us to take you back to the ice wall. This time, one of the giants will transport you.”

Chris looked at Tompack. “I’m not going to freeze again, am I?”

Tompack reassured him, “No, this time you are going back to your great-grandmother’s house in Scotland.”

Thomas tried to drag Chris’s lacrosse bag out of the laboratory. Chris ran over to get his bag and started putting on all the clothes he had.

“Chris, you don’t need to do that. The giant will take good care of you. You are fish brothers now. He’ll not let you freeze or drown. If he has to, he will even give up his life for you.”

Chris said, “Cool.”

Thomas stayed close to Chris. He wanted to be back in Boston, well fed and rested in his warm cage.

Before long, they reached the ice wall. Bihydrant worried that the giant would abandon them again on the wrong side of the wall, but he didn’t.

On his first visit, Chris remembered the ice wall had seemed to reach the sky, but the giant reached his arm over and put Chris on the snow. Quill and the others stayed on the giant Bundlebob’s palm, but Quill broke off one of his toenails and threw it to Chris.

“Just a little snack to eat on your journey.”

Chris didn’t refuse this time. He put the toenail in his lacrosse bag. The giant pointed to Chris’s right foot in farewell, and then they were gone.

Thomas and Chris now stood alone on the other side of the ice wall. Chris thought he had gone back in time to the exact same place he had started in, days earlier. Thomas was with him now, but it did not take long for the winds to pick up and the snow to be blinding. He unzipped his lacrosse bag and told Thomas to get in. Then he hung on to the bag.

The force of the wind slammed him against the ice wall. Chris hit his head and wished that he had worn his helmet. He could feel himself traveling through a tunnel, but not a dark

tunnel. The passageway seemed bright white, maybe a snow tunnel of some type, and it was beginning to get cold. Just as the coolness on his skin turned uncomfortable, everything stopped.

He opened his eyes to find himself on the cold steel OR table in Great-Grandmother's home.

CHAPTER 39

Brittany bent down and kissed Abigail's forehead. Abigail said weakly, "I don't know how you did it, Brittany, but I appreciate you saving my life."

As Brittany said her good-byes, she stepped out into the hallway. She stepped on something. It felt like a small stone. She went down and hit the floor. As her head hit the ground, she saw a bright light, and then everything went dark.

As she sluggishly came to, she knew exactly where she was the moment she could focus on the room. She had returned to her great-grandmother's house in Scotland. Brittany hoped Abigail had lived, but she just didn't know. She got out of bed and looked at the mural on the wall. It didn't frighten her as much now. The little boy chasing the chicken was her friend Chad, and, although the mural turned dark and dismal in the middle, the end focused on recovering.

There wiping the dirt from her forehead was Abigail. She was toward the end of the mural, and although things still looked filthy, the sun was shining, and Abigail looked somewhat better. She had color in her face and had put on just a slight bit of weight. Brittany felt stronger knowing that, despite overwhelming and horrendous events, eventually things tried to right themselves.

Since Brittany had her own bathroom in her room, she packed quickly, then took an even quicker shower. She put on a pair of jeans and a fitted T-shirt. By the sink, she found a small bag tied closed. She undid the knot and saw the brightly colored stones. It did not take her long to tuck those in her bag.

Then she ran down to the kitchen. She was hungry, and something smelled delicious. Brittany saw what she thought was a cousin to the Bundlebobs making breakfast and gave them all a hug. Then she sat down to a feast.

Jon had tumbled down a long and lonely elevator shaft until he came to a soft landing. Jon had landed on his Murphy bed at his great-grandmother's house. Though a cat lay comfortably on his bed, he was not sneezing. He did not know if he was no longer allergic to cats or just not this particular one. Jon petted the cat, making it purr. He had never been able to touch a cat before!

Eventually the cat jumped off the bed and scratched at something on the floor. Papers still covered every inch of the room. Jon looked to see what the cat had found. It was sharpening its claws on some thick brown paper. Jon petted the cat, then picked up the brown paper. When he turned it over, he saw the plans for the Sporbit. The room held no backstabbers, butt-kissers, sharks, or two-faced people—just him, the cat, and the plans.

Jon was still wondering about the giant backstabber that his odd great-grandfather was dragging to the basement. *He kept calling him Eanrik*, Jon thought.

Jon could hear his great-grandmother's voice, sounding soft and far away. "Time to get up, your ride will be here within the hour to take you to the airport."

He found his luggage by the door and quickly changed into street clothes, putting the Sporbit plans in his suitcase with his suit. As he left to go find a bathroom and brush his teeth, the cat ambled out of his room and down the hall.

Chris got up next. Thomas had wandered out into the hallway and met up with the cat coming from Jon's room. The cat hissed at Thomas and chased him back into the OR, where he ran over to the steel table and back into Chris's lacrosse bag. Thomas stayed in the bag, but Chris jumped off the steel table and got ready. He headed for the kitchen as fast as humanly possible. In the kitchen, he found his great-grandmother and a big surprise.

Granmama said, "Chris, I believe you know Tompack, Bihydrant, Kaver, and Quill. I don't know how I could keep this place up without their help."

Chris looked closely at the Bundlebobs. *Why didn't I see it before?* he thought. The Bundlebobs must have been the "small children" that he and his siblings had seen darting around the house when their great-grandmother had first shown them their rooms.

When her great-grandmother's voice called her to come down for breakfast, Trisha's head was resting on something deliciously soft. She sat up in the coffin and looked around the room. The wedding dress was no longer in the corner, but Mrs. Toddles was in her portrait, with Advarika on her lap. He had not been in the picture before, and Trisha noticed the woman's brooch was now gone.

She wanted a picture of Advarika, so she dug through her belongings and got her cell phone out. But she could not take the picture—her phone was not charged. How long had she been asleep? She looked around for the wax manikins, but they were no longer there. She saw a small grease spot where each of the wax statues had stood, but nothing else.

Trisha had a cheap disposable camera in her bag as a backup, so she opened the package and snapped a picture. The room turned bright green, then went dark. Only a faint glow from the portrait enabled Trisha to see her belongings. She quickly got her things together and went downstairs.

As Trisha entered the kitchen, Tompack said, "Let me introduce myself. My name is Tompack, and I'm a Bundlebob." He introduced the other three, then guided Trisha to her chair.

Trisha said, "I know Bihydrant, and I'm pleased to meet the rest of you."

Chris chimed in. "You see, Trisha, you would have known the Bundlebobs, but for some reason, Thomas got sidetracked or something, and you never made it to Professor Mend's laboratory."

"Never made it where?" Trisha asked.

Thomas was trying to get out of the lacrosse bag, but the zipper was stuck. Chris bent down and opened the bag. Thomas popped out and said, "Now, in my defense, I had a lot going on. Besides, I got some faulty information from one of my distant relatives." Then Thomas smelled the food and did not say another word.

Trisha looked at all the wonderful food.

Bihydrant asked Chris, "Would you like some yellow jam on your toast?"

Chris grabbed his toast. "No, I'll just eat it plain and dry."

Jon said, "Chris, why are you so jumpy? It's just honey." Jon squeezed the honey bottle, pouring golden yellow syrup until it dripped down the sides of his toast. Chris almost got sick.

Granmama said, "Let's finish up. I've called for a car to take you to the airport. I drive very slowly, and you might miss your flight."

Brittany said, "What day is this? I don't remember how many days have gone by."

Granmama smiled. “Brittany, the days just flew by with never a dull moment. You can come back next summer, or maybe even at Christmastime.”

Chris said, “Where’s the odd old man?”

“I’m afraid your great-grandfather had a lot of things to clean up. He told me he’d see you all at Christmas. That is, if you want to come for another visit?”

Trisha said, “I’d like to come back. I learned a lot about myself, but it was a bit intense.” She pointed to her siblings. “Maybe we could do something together next time.”

Great-Grandmother winked at Trisha. “Wonderful idea, Trisha.” *I’ll be able to keep track of all of them at the same time*, she thought.

Chris said, “Ditto to that. I think I’m changing my attitude toward the heat, though. Maybe I’ll go to Texas for lacrosse camp.”

Brittany said, “I need to reevaluate my future and working with highly dangerous viruses. I may leave that up to some other scientists. I don’t mind the viruses; it’s the sick and dying I wouldn’t want to work with. You know, Great-Grandmother, for every disease, there are people who actually get the illness, and more than likely, they die right along with the viruses.”

Great-Grandmother just nodded. “And Jon, did you learn anything?”

“Granmama, I’m not sure if I learned anything.”

Great-Grandmother said, “Jon, you didn’t learn anything?”

“Well, I still want to be wealthy, but I don’t want to work for anyone else. I want to be my own boss.”

Jon heard a noise. It sounded like metal scraping against a wall. Jon pointed to the basement door. “Granmama is there something down there?”

“I don’t think so. Would you like to take a quick look before you go home?”

“No! I’m fine. Just wondering. Chris can go down there next time we visit. Dad says he’s great with raccoons and things.”

Chris said, “Jon, I’m not looking in any basement. I can’t even stand our basement, and I don’t plan on fighting any rabid raccoons. Granmama, where’s our ride?”

Without waiting for an answer, Chris changed the subject. “Trisha, can Thomas travel in your carrying case after we pass the X-ray machine?”

Trisha had never really liked Thomas when he lived with them, but she knew how sad Chris was when he thought Thomas had died. She could not see why Thomas should not ride in her case—besides the fact that he would get her stuff all dirty. But she would have to wash everything when she got home anyway.

Trisha opened her carry-on, put a few muffins and an apple in it, and rearranged her socks so Thomas would have a nice place to rest. The minute Trisha put her small bag on the floor, one of the Bundlebobs whisked it away.

Chris leaned over to Thomas. “Once everything is clear, you can ride in style in Trisha’s overnight bag, but until then, keep a low profile.”

Chris’s hands were still a bit stiff from being frozen, and he looked at them. Then he remembered the fish tattoo on his toe. Did it really exist? He pulled his shoe and sock off, and sure enough, it did exist. Thoughts overwhelmed his mind. His siblings seemed to feel the same.

No one heard Granmama ask any more questions. They were too involved in trying to make sense out of the past week.

Granmama said, “Well! There’s your lift.” The luggage was already outside the front door. Granmama gave each of the children a bear hug, almost as if she did not want to let go.

They had all grown up so much in just a few days. Finally the children grabbed their luggage and walked toward the car.

Granmama said, "Brittany, don't forget your bag of stones." Brittany took the small bag her great-grandmother gave her and put it in the pocket of her jeans, wiping a tear from her eye.

Trisha had trouble with the handle on her luggage. Holding it made her sore wrist hurt. Jon could see she was having trouble and took her luggage. No one yelled for shotgun, fought, or pushed. When they had stowed the luggage in the trunk, Jon sat in the front seat; then Brittany slid across the back seat and helped Trisha in. Trisha was still rubbing her wrist.

Before Chris got in, Granmama yelled, "Chris!"

As he looked up, she fired a snowball right at his head. He quickly put his lacrosse stick up and caught the ball of ice. He was surprised that his great-grandmother could throw so fast.

She yelled, "Nice catch!"

The bits of snow hit the ground and vanished, not even leaving a trace of water. Had the snowball really been there?

A week before their visit to Scotland, that would have seemed very strange, but today seemed normal. They all waved to their granmama and hoped they could come back to visit. They had never had an adventure like this before.

Great-Grandmother waved and then turned as she heard Alastair yell, "Granmama, I need your help!" Great-Grandmother looked down the hallway and could see the Bundlebobs and Alastair trying to get Eanrik back to the basement. Granmama ran down the hallway to help put the beast into the basement, where it belonged.

CHAPTER 40

They all missed their great-grandmother before they even got to the airport.

Jon helped Trisha with her luggage, and Chris carried Thomas inside his windbreaker. As Thomas jumped out of Chris's jacket and ran by the guard's feet, the dog stationed by the X-ray machine lunged at him. The guard thought the dog had detected something on the teens or their luggage. After a thorough check of everything, the guard let them go. He had found nothing illegal, except some smashed muffins and an apple in Trisha's carry-on.

"Sorry, miss, no fruit." The guard threw away the apple, and Thomas jumped into his accommodations just as Trisha closed her case.

They all slept on the long flight home. It seemed like no time had passed at all when the stewardess tapped Brittany on the shoulder. "We're back in Boston. You all slept for the entire flight."

As the Hellandbacks left the gate, they saw their parents waiting for them. Their mom jumped up and down, waving her arms. She would never admit it, but she was bored and lonely when they were gone.

On the ride home, their mom said, "You all must be tired—you're so quiet."

Patrick smiled to himself. "I think their brains are full of questions and ideas."

None of them knew how to explain their adventure to the others, so they just said nothing. They did not really know if any of it had been real or not.

Mom saw Trisha rubbing her wrist. "Trisha, did you hurt your wrist?" She did not wait for an answer. "I'll wrap it at home and give you an aspirin."

After some quiet goodnights, all the Hellandback kids went right to their rooms without talking. They got ready for bed while their mom got them a light snack.

In the kitchen, Anna said, "I think they may be sick, but none of them have a fever."

Patrick watched as she wrapped Trisha's wrist, and gave her a glass of water with some aspirin.

He only said, "They are fine. It's nothing a good day or two of sleep won't cure. I was the same way as a boy. I would collapse of exhaustion after long trips."

Chris ran to his room with Trisha's carry-on. He dug through his closet and brought out Thomas's old cage. He put one of his old shirts in the bottom; he would go for some shavings tomorrow. Thomas had not eaten any of the muffins, so he must have been tired. Chris always thought Thomas liked eating better than anything else in the world. Chris put the muffin crumbs into the cage. And this time he left the cage open, so Thomas could have free range of the entire house.

Mom tucked Brittany and Trisha into bed, picking up Brittany's jeans as she did. A small bag fell out of one of the one of the pockets. This was the bag that Brittany had gotten from a small boy at the hospital for reading to him. She put the bag of stones on Brittany's dresser, then went to Chris's room.

Chris was already fast asleep, so his mom removed his shoes and socks and pulled the covers up under his chin. As she reached for the light switch, she saw Chris's foot hanging out of the covers. There was a fish tattoo on his right big toe. She gently covered his foot and said, "Your great-grandmother has gotten you a tattoo exactly like your father's. What was she thinking?"

Just then, Patrick stuck his head in. Anna lifted the covers so he could see the tattoo. Patrick shrugged. "He can cover it with a Band-Aid while he's at school."

Anna said, "What must go on in that woman's house! I know she means well, but I don't know if we should send them anymore."

Patrick gave her a hug. "She was a big part of my life when I was growing up, and I turned out all right."

Anna smiled. "You go on to bed. I want to check in on Jon."

Before she turned out the light in Chris's room, she saw something out of the corner of her eye. Thomas's old cage sat on the floor on the other side of the bed, and she could see something in it. At first she thought Chris had brought some disgusting thing home from Great-Grandmother's house. But when she looked into the cage, it looked like Thomas. How could that be? The rat lay on his back on top of Chris's old shirt. He had the same white marking on his nose, and the crumpled right ear.

Anna knew that Thomas's cage had not been out earlier, because she had checked each room to make sure it was clean and ready for the children. She would have to ask Chris about Thomas the next day, but she wanted to go see Jon before he fell asleep.

She sat on the edge of Jon's bed. He was already asleep. Jon seemed so grown up, but he needed to learn so many things. She wanted him to be happy, but it seemed like that would only happen if he was wealthy. How could she explain to him that family and friends have to be a part of his life or he would become very lonely? She did not see him ever getting married or having a family.

She leaned down to kiss his cheek. He opened one eye. "Hi, Mom, it's good to be home. How much did I weigh when I was born?"

"You weighed eight pounds, one ounce, and you were twenty and a half inches long. Why do you ask?"

"No reason—just curious." She tucked him in as if he were five and left his room.

It took a few days for the Hellandback family to get back to normal. In the morning, Trisha still complained about her wrist, so her mom took her to the doctor for an X-ray.

Chris had to comment on that. "Trisha, you should have just put your wrist through the X-ray machine at the airport. Would have saved a lot of time and money."

Trisha's wrist was broken. The doctor said that type of break comes from a twisting motion. Trisha told the doctor that she had had trouble with her luggage handle. It twisted her wrist when she brought her bags downstairs at her great-grandmother's house. She knew it had really happened when Godfrey dragged her out from under the bed, but how could she tell her mother and the doctor that?

When they got back from the doctor's, Trisha started sorting through her luggage to do her laundry. In her bag, she came upon a silver box. Had Granmama put that in there? Anna walked in as Trisha opened the box to reveal the brooch.

Mom said, "Trisha, what a beautiful piece of jewelry! It looks like an heirloom."

Trisha rubbed her cast. "It has a lot of history behind it."

Her mother noticed her arm was bothering her. "Trisha, would you like something for pain?" Anna felt terrible that she had not taken Trisha in the night before, but she had never dreamed her wrist was broken.

“My wrist is fine. I’m just a little tired, so I think I’ll lie down for a nap.” Trisha carefully placed the brooch on the pillow beside her.

Her mother thought that was odd. “Be careful not to get stuck with the pin Trisha.”

Trisha had already looked on the back. The clasp had been removed, so now the brooch could only be worn on a chain. If she fell asleep, Trisha did not know if she would wake up in Scotland, in Godfrey’s house, or home in Boston. She could not keep her eyes open any longer.

Anna went downstairs, and the phone rang. None of her children attempted to get the phone, so she ran to get it. A nice woman named Linda insisted on talking with Jon. Anna did not want to wake him, but he did need to eat. This woman’s call sounded important, although Linda had not told Anna what she needed to speak with him about.

Half asleep, Jon answered the phone, instantly recognizing the voice on the line.

“Jon! This is Linda. I believe we have a bad connection. I can hardly hear you. I see you have found another secretary.” Jon looked at his mom, glad she had not heard that one. Then he thought, *Bad connection? We are in two different realities. I think that the connection is pretty good.*

Linda continued. “I wanted to thank you, when I left that day after seeing you to the elevator.”

Jon said, “You mean pushing me down the elevator shaft?”

Linda said, “What? I can’t hear you.”

“I’m sorry for interrupting you, Linda. Please continue.”

Jon’s mom was saying, “Is that a young lady you met in Scotland? Maybe she could come visit you here in Boston.”

Jon gave his mother the okay sign while he listened to Linda.

“Anyway, Jon, I left that day. As I was leaving the building, Mr. Little asked if I needed a job. He had quit working for Mr. Windbag. Anyway, to make a long story short, Mr. Little and I are getting married. I wanted to call and thank you. I know it’s been a while since we last spoke, but I wanted you to know. It took a long time for me to find you. It’s as if you fell off the face of the earth.”

Jon could not figure out the time thing—he thought he had just left Linda a few days ago.

“I’m very happy for you, Linda. You were my best assistant.” Actually, she was the only assistant he ever had.

Mom gave Jon a strange look and mouthed “assistant?”

“Please keep in touch. I would like to hear from you from time to time.” Jon did not know if that would even be possible, but Linda and Mr. Little were two very nice people, and he hoped he would work with people like them in the future.

Anna closed the door quietly and left him to his phone call. She went to see what Brittany was doing.

For the first time, Brittany felt eager to get back to school and study hard. She could not wait for her science classes. She thought about what she had learned in the past week, her feet dangling over the edge of her bed. When she got tired of that, she walked over to her dresser and found the bag with the colored rocks from Chad. She poured the stones out into her hand and watched as they lit up the room. Trisha almost woke up, so Brittany quickly put the stones back into the small bag. She did not know if she would ever need to use them, or if she would ever see Chad again. How would she ever get in a situation where she needed the stones? She did not know the answer to that question, either. She did know that summer was over, school was about to begin, and she had better get her laundry done. She got up.

Mom was standing at the door to Brittany's bedroom, looking excited. "You got a letter from Johns Hopkins University, and it's down on the kitchen table."

Brittany raced her mom downstairs and quickly opened the letter. The letter stated that her science project that had been submitted by her science teacher was the winner of a twenty-five-thousand-dollar scholarship to their university. The letter went on to say that they hoped she remained interested in the field of bacteria and viruses and how to kill them. Brittany did not really know if she would continue being interested in that field, but she still liked science.

Chris was up now, eating a bowl of cereal. Anna came into the kitchen. "Chris can I get you something else to eat?"

"No, Mom, I'm fine."

Titan came running into the kitchen, barking and trying to tear through the screen door. He wanted to take on the big dog that was invading his territory.

Anna laughed, "Titan, maybe you need to go visit Granmama for a week?"

Chris gave the big dog some lunchmeat. "Yeah, Mom, that would be great. I think Titan would love it."

As Anna shut the door, the dog slowly walked back down the street. She thought she heard someone say, "Until tomorrow, Chris."

Anna finally went to wake Trisha up. "You're going to sleep your whole day away."

"I'm getting up now, Mom. I want to go to the corner store and get some photos developed."

Trisha looked around her room at her vampire posters. She now felt differently about them. The human form was still eye candy, but she no longer thought about the dark side of vampires. Sometimes dark and dangerous guys are just that. They are great to look at, but hell on a relationship.

Anna yelled up the stairs, "Trisha, do you want a bite to eat before heading out?"

Trisha came running down the stairs with her camera. "No, Mom, I'll get something at the store. I'm going to wait around for my pictures."

Trisha ran to the store and handed her disposable camera to the clerk. "I'll just wait in the store for my pictures."

Trisha thought it was taking forever. Finally, she heard "Trisha, your photos are ready" over the loudspeaker. She could hardly pay the woman behind the counter fast enough. Trisha wanted to open the envelope at home. She did not want to cry in front of people when she saw Advarika. She ran all the way home and up to her room. Relieved that Brittany was gone, Trisha slowly opened the photo envelope and looked at the pictures. She had taken only one picture, but a whole roll of pictures had been developed. She could not believe what she saw—they were all of Advarika and Mrs. Toddles. Some showed Advarika as just a baby raccoon, and others showed different stages of development. The last picture was the one she had taken of the portrait at their great-grandmother's house.

Trisha looked at the pictures for hours. Eventually, her mother called her. "Trisha, it's time to go to your doctor's appointment. The doctor wants another X-ray, just to make sure it's healing properly." Trisha tucked the pictures in her dresser, under her socks, and went to the doctor's.

It was slow going in the Hellandback household for a few days, but once everyone adjusted, things became routine. At dinner one night, Dad asked if they wanted to go back to

visit their great-grandmother in Scotland next year or perhaps even at Christmas time. Patrick was not aware of the difficulty his grandmother was having keeping things straight. If he knew, he would not have sent them again.

All four of the Hellandback children yelled, "Yes!"

Anna did not understand the children's enthusiasm, but Patrick did. "Best life education you will ever get."

And with that, everyone's life was back to the daily race of just living life in Boston.

One day, Anna looked out the front door to see Chris walking home from a friend's house with the big dog that used to torment him walking right beside him. As Chris climbed the front steps, he said, "I guess the dog and I have come to an understanding. Do we have any lunch meat?" Chris walked toward the kitchen to get a dog treat for his new friend.

Anna looked at the big dog. He was smiling a doggie smile, and it looked like he even winked at her.

Anna noticed that Thomas roamed the house, though he went up to Chris's room at night to sleep. She did not mind. He was a very clean rat and never bothered anyone, except for Titan. Titan would sit for hours trying to look under the stove or refrigerator. Or he would jump up, trying to look high on top of the bookcase. Everyone knew that he was looking for Thomas. Titan was a good dog, but he had a strict one-animal-per-household policy. He wanted no other pets in his house or on his walkway. Anna seriously considered sending Titan to visit Granmama in Scotland. She seemed to have done wonders with the children, and Anna wondered what she could do with a four-legged child.

With life truly back to normal, the constant noise in the Hellandback household would be deafening to some, but Anna liked it. She did not know if she could part with all four of her children at the same time again.

Anna's morning quiet ended as the children came down the stairs for the first day back to school. Titan barked, Trisha could not find her phone, Chris was looking for his other lacrosse glove, Brittany misplaced her calculator, and Jon couldn't find his wallet. He wanted to show his friends his driver's permit. Anna sighed, smiled, and began her busy day.

Chris ran by his mother and into the kitchen. "Chris, you are going to be late."

"I'm fine, Mom. I just wanted to get a piece of lunchmeat for that dog. He's waiting for me just outside our door." Chris grabbed some meat, and out the door he went, walking to school with his new four-legged friend.

Things were getting better all the time for the Hellandbacks. Anna thought that they could all go to Scotland for Christmas. It would truly be another great adventure.

The End

BIO

I live in San Antonio, Texas with my husband and two grown sons'. The eldest graduated from MIT Cambridge 2007, and our youngest is a junior at TCU Fort Worth. My twin sister and niece also live in San Antonio. I'm a Registered Nurse by education, and a writer by passion. I started off writing Historical/Romance/Fiction and then made a huge jump to juvenile/fiction from the suggestion of my twin sister. The four main characters are based off of real individuals. Chris is really like that, and he does have ADHD and is funny. Jon is brilliant and very serious about the world and making money, and he's a great athlete. Chris and Jon both have a love for lacrosse. Trisha is petite, and pretty, and she was born with two left feet-LOL. Brittany is more of a Tomboy and drives herself hard.

Update: I have a new ebook coming out soon, Redwine Hill: The Secrets at Primevil Asylum. I'm grateful for my friends and of course my editor Susanne Lakin. Susanne is not only my editor, but also my friend. My favorite movie is Pride and Prejudice, favorite food, sunflower seeds. Favorite musician: Josh Groban, Tracy Chapman, and Luke Bryan's song: Don't want this night to end.