



SAMPLE CHAPTERS

RUN

HOLLY

RUN

WALTER ROUZER

## **Run Holly Run**

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## ***PROLOGUE***

**D**ark clouds and rumblings of thunder brewed into a wicked storm over the small town of Kingston.

Suddenly, without warning, a giant beam of light flashed down from the eye of the storm, leaving in its wake a huge circle of burnt earth in the center of a cornfield. Neither blade of grass nor sprout of weed ever grew back in that spot again.

Everyone in town agreed that the four-hundred-foot wide circle in Bellarouse and Mitchell Haggerty's cornfield was much more than a freak of nature. Some went so far as to say it was out of this world... even supernatural.

\* \* \* \* \*

“Get away from my property!” shouted Bellarouse at the two boys standing on the opposite side of her fence. A moment later, she burst out the back door. “That pig! That gluttonous, potbellied ogre! Button Rouge has been in my vegetable patch again! Hasn't he!”

Mitch and Shane dropped their ball and bat and backed away from the fence.

Just minutes earlier, something strange had happened to their friend, Albert Drusky, after he'd chased his pet pig, Button Rouge, into Bellarouse's cornfield. After they both disappeared amongst the cornstalks, Mitch and Shane called out over and over again for their friend to come out, but there was only silence. Seconds later, they were startled seeing two beams of red light flash out from the midst of the field. At that same instant, they'd heard a scream followed by a loud squeal.

The next moment, Button Rouge exploded out from the field like a cannonball—greased lightning—flying fifteen feet through the air before bouncing on his belly among the cornstalks, not far from where the two boys stood. The pig dove underneath the fence, digging and scrambling to squeeze his way back to the other side. He stopped for a moment, eyes turned inward, staring at its huge nose. He shook its head like he was in shock, then ran up to Mitch and Shane and tugged on their pant legs with his teeth, squealing loudly, trying to tell them what had happened—that he was really Albert, not Button Rouge, the castaway pig. But all they could hear were snorts and squeals.

“Get away, pig!” said Mitch, looking very irritated. Albert the pig raced across the lawn and up the back steps to the Druskys' nearby house,

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then took a flying leap through the screen door.

Just outside, Bellarouse's eyes bulged wide at the two boys. "You! Did you let that pig loose?" she hollered, pointing at her vegetable patch.

Mitch and Shane backed away from the fence, then suddenly ran toward the Druskys' house.

Bellarouse discovered two sets of fresh tracks leading into her cornfield—one human, the other pig. "Trespassers! Filthy pigs!" she snarled, stomping into the field after the intruders.

\* \* \* \* \*

Inside the Druskys' house, Albert stopped just short of the kitchen entrance and listened to the spattering of bacon grease in an iron skillet. He normally liked bacon, but now the smell made him feel squeamish. He could see his mother, Annabel, chopping carrots on the island counter. He slowly walked up to her heels and let out a loud squeal. The noise startled Annabel so much she shot straight up. The next moment, Albert saw her staring back down at him with squinty eyes.

"Button! Button Rouge!" she shouted, wagging her finger at him, "Get out of this kitchen!" She pointed toward the broken back door. "Look what you did. Get out of this house, right now!"

Albert just stood motionless, looking up, wishing by some miracle she would recognize him

as her son, beneath the pig fat. He made snorts and squeals trying in his clearest voice to let her know that he wasn't Button Rouge, the pig, but Albert.

Annabel became distracted a moment, hearing the front door buzzer sound off over and over again. She ignored the doorbell and quickly refocused her attention on Button Rouge.

“What be the matter with you... pig?” she yelled, with a distinct emphasis on the last word.

When Albert heard that, his beady eyes instantly swelled up with tears.

Annabel stormed out of the kitchen, then reappeared seconds later holding a leash.

At that same moment, just outside on the front porch, Mitch and Shane began pounding their fists on the front door. They were worried sick about Albert's disappearance, and Bellarouse's threatening remarks. They didn't even want to think about what might happen if she caught him in her field.

Annabel heard the pounding coming from the front door, but remained focused on the pig. She chased Albert in a game of ring-around-the-kitchen-island. He made a sharp turn out of the kitchen and darted down the hallway.

Annabel chased right after the pig. Suddenly, Albert heard her stop dead in her tracks. She must have remembered that the stovetop was on high—even he could hear grease spattering in the iron skillet. One thing she hated more than a dirty farm

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animal inside her house, he knew, was a kitchen with grease all over the stove and floor. She ran back and turned off the stove, then took a white rag and started wiping grease off the burner and floor.

This gave Albert a chance to think for a moment about what to do next. His pig brain swirled in hyper-drive. How can I convince my mom that I'm really her son? he thought.

He looked upstairs toward his bedroom, then toward the family room and piano. An idea flashed in his mind that might give him a chance to convince his mom that he was at least more than just a run-of-the-mill pig.

He dashed into the family room and took a flying leap onto the piano bench. He pressed all four of his little toes onto the cushion as hard as he could to keep from sliding off the other end. Next, he wiggled onto his pink bottom and nudged the piano cover open with his snout. His legs stuck straight out. Albert used the tips of his front feet to work the keys. With each tap, a note of hope filled his ears.

Just inside the kitchen, Annabel's rag slipped through her fingers to the floor. It sounded as if her son was playing the piano. She stopped what she was doing and quickly headed into the living room, then stared at the pig with her jaw hanging wide open in a mixed state of shock and amusement.

Albert was determined to give his best performance, playing the music as perfectly as he

could. Although he couldn't speak or hum, he could still squeal and snort. His eyes lit up like sparklers, seeing he had his mom's full attention.

He tried to make himself look like Albert, but it just wasn't working out the way he wanted. He could see his mom's eyes narrowing more and more with each passing second. Albert looked back at his mom smiling, trying to sing and tap all the right piano keys with his front feet. His butt wiggled from side to side as he tried his best to play all the right notes. His corkscrew tail twitched up and down, round and about. All of a sudden, his face flushed pink as he noticed dirt flaking off his body, landing on her new carpet. Annabel saw it too, and the sight kindled her temper. She raced right toward him with her leash in hand. Albert took a flying leap off the bench, then took off running toward the stairs. The wood floor had recently been waxed. His feet slipped out from underneath him, and he went sliding across the floor up against the door.

That same moment, out on the front porch, Mitch and Shane heard a loud thud against the door as they continued to press the buzzer, and rap their knuckles against the wood.

Albert scurried upstairs on all fours, keeping his focus on the finish line, which was the safe haven of his bed. His only hope was to go undercover before it was too late.

Albert's sister, Meagan, popped her head out



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of her bedroom door and was shocked to see a pig running up the stairs. She couldn't believe her eyes! "A pig, Mom! A dirty filthy pig is running loose in the house! You know how I hate pigs!"

Albert stopped in front of his room and squinted back at Meagan.

"Filthy, dirty pig!" she yelled down the hallway. Albert let out the loudest squeal he could muster at Meagan before he disappeared inside his room. He quickly backed into the door, slamming it shut. Gazing about the room, he felt so small and isolated, so alone. His heart weighed heavily upon him. A sudden idea flashed in his head. He ran over to a large stuffed bear that was sitting by the side of the room, then grabbed the bear's arm in his teeth and flung it onto the bed. Next, he went to the far corner of his room and ran as fast as he could, making a flying leap onto the bed. He pulled the covers back with his teeth, then covered the bear with the cotton sheet before jumping down and hiding between the bed and wall.

Seconds later, he heard the door open. Annabel saw a large lump under the covers. "How'd you get yourself under the covers like that? You'd better get out of that bed, right now!"

Annabel couldn't understand why he wasn't moving, so she reached down and threw back the covers. "What this?" she screeched, seeing the stuffed bear. She leaned over the side of the bed and

discovered Albert's hiding place.

"So there you are!" she scowled.

Before he had the chance to back out from between the bed, he felt the collar slip over his head, then tighten snugly around his neck. He didn't want to go out without a fight so he sat with his butt to the floor unwilling to move.

"Come on now! Come on! Let's get going!" said Annabel tugging him forward.

Albert grimaced as he felt his butt slide across the hallway floor. On his way downstairs, he heard pounding and knocking by the front door.

"What's all the racket, boys?" asked Annabel when she finally looked outside.

Albert saw his two buddies looking up at his mom, appearing really worried.

"Albert chased Button Rouge into Haggertys' field and never came back out!" said Shane.

Annabel handed him the leash. "You get Button back into his pen while I check on Albert."

Shane pulled and tugged the pig toward the barn. Albert felt like a fugitive being sent to prison—pig row. I've got to make a break for it and get my body back. I've got to! I've got to! He suddenly stopped, refusing to take one more step.

"Come on, Button," coaxed Shane. "Come on!" he said, tugging on the leash.

Albert looked up at his friend with narrowed eyes, then suddenly burst out running in the

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opposite direction. Shane flew sideways and was dragged across the ground a few feet before he let go of the leash. Albert darted out around the house, then suddenly skidded to a stop, seeing Bellarouse stomping around her backyard with an angry look on her face.

# ***CHAPTER 1***

## *Two Weeks Later*

**H**olly Atwood headed south along a dirt road that hugged the Mississippi River. Squinting out into the distance, she spotted the McGuire mansion she and her parents had just moved into; a grey stone castle located on a grassy knoll overlooking the river.

A steamboat suddenly appeared downstream and got close enough that Holly could see it in detail. The captain yelled out, “More fuel! More fuel!” Two men covered with black soot hurriedly shoveled coal into the broiler, sending fire and smoke up through its seventy-foot high stacks. The captain stared out the window with his eyes fixed on the mansion, then suddenly shifted his attention toward Holly— a tom girl wearing baggy jeans and a blue striped shirt. Holly couldn’t help but wonder why the steamer sped up as it neared the mansion,

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then suddenly slowed down once it passed.

Squinting out in the distance, Holly caught sight of a flicker of light coming from the mansion's attic window. The flame grew brighter and brighter until she could make out the stark white faces of two girls. They appeared to be twins, and couldn't have been more than ten or twelve. A haunting whisper arose from the attic window that sounded like cries for help. Holly took a deep swallow. There wasn't supposed to be anyone else living in the mansion besides herself and her parents.

The light in the attic window suddenly disappeared, and the ghostly faces of the twins vanished before her eyes. Everything fell silent. Not even a solitary cricket could be heard. Moments later, the sounds of the crickets once again filled the air. Holly stared intently toward the attic window, but the light didn't return. The eerie cries were gone.

A thick fog rolled in across the river, catching her by surprise. Moments later, she heard what sounded like swift footsteps coming her way.

"Who is it? Who's there?" she shouted. All of a sudden, a young man raced past her wearing a green beret. What's his big hurry? she thought.

When Holly reached the McGuire mansion she stopped and stared up toward the attic. A shaft of moonlight illuminated a rusted lantern sitting on the windowsill.

There must be a way to get up there, she

thought. She shifted her attention toward the front of the mansion and tried to think of a way to get back inside without her parents noticing.

Heading across the grounds, she passed beneath giant oak trees. Their branches arched over the circular driveway that led to the front of the mansion. Holly scurried past a marble cherubim standing by the front steps. The arrow and heart it once held now lay as broken pieces at the base of its feet. She knelt by the front window. The ground beneath her knees felt soggy, the result of a series of thunderstorms passing through earlier in the day.

She peered through a side window and saw her parents, Phyllis and Patrick, sitting together on a black leather couch next to the stone fireplace. A low fire burned in the grate. She saw her mom get up from the couch and head across the front entranceway, then stop and peer inside one of the side rooms. The window was cracked open just enough so she could hear them when they spoke.

“Just perfect,” Phyllis remarked, removing art supplies from a packing box at the base of the stairs.

Holly thought it might be too difficult to sneak back inside through the front door. I’m going to be so busted with extra chores if they catch me, she thought. She made her way around to the back of the mansion, then pulled, tugged, and jiggled all the doors and windows. It was to no avail; they were all secured and locked. She crawled on her hands

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and knees up to the front window again. She saw her dad sitting by the fireplace, leaning forward, with his long thin hands clasped together. His head hung low, as if in deep thought, eyes focused on the flicker of flame. He stretched his open palms toward the heat. The fire was burning low, and the charcoal began to crackle and pop as it cooled. Phyllis walked over to Patrick and gazed up at a large framed photo hanging above the fireplace; a replica of a hundred year old black-and-white photograph taken of the ten-year-old McGuire twins, Stephanie and Agatha. Sitting on either side of the girls were their two Great Danes. The dogs had huge pointy ears and shiny coats. The picture showed one of the dogs with its muzzle pressed softly against the girl's cheek.

“What a happy moment in time that must have been,” said Phyllis, gazing up at the picture. “Patrick, darling?” she said, leaning forward, giving him a big hug. “Honey, can you help me move this photo into my new art studio?”

“Absolutely!” he replied. He got up from the sofa and helped her carry the photo of the twins into her newly set up art studio so she could get started with her painting. She was commissioned by Bret McGuire, grandson to the mansion's original owner, Morgan McGuire, to renovate the black-and-white photo. Phyllis had a special talent for making old photos look come alive with her colorful oil paints.

“Now's my chance,” whispered Holly to herself,

seeing the coast was clear. She opened the front door just enough to slip inside, then tiptoed toward the stairway, all the while hoping the crackle coming from the fire would mask the sound of her footsteps. When she got about halfway up the stairs, the sound of her father's voice rang out from behind.

"Holly! Your mother and I have been worried sick about you! Where have you been?" said Patrick, squinting at her from across the foyer.

I'm so busted, she thought. She looked back into her father's eyes. A blank expression hung on her face in a moment of silence. "Well, Dad, I..."

Phyllis stepped alongside Patrick. They walked up to the foot of the stairs, crossing their arms in front of them in unison.

"Holly, dear, where have you been?" said Phyllis, staring up at her with her pointy nose and black rimmed glasses.

"Oh, just outside, hanging out by the river."

Patrick sighed, "Sometimes you can be so mysterious and secretive. I really get worried about you on occasions like this."

Phyllis took a step forward. "Holly, dear, we just moved here, and don't know what's lurking about by that river, especially at night."

Patrick spoke up, "You know, sweetheart, your disappearing act just cost you a new cleaning job." He pointed toward an unpacked box at the base of the stairs with a toilet plunger sticking halfway out.



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“One of the toilets is in need of a fix. The bathroom in question is just down that hallway to your right.”

Holly shook her head as she pulled out the plunger. She stopped for a moment in front of her mom’s studio and watched her organize tubes of oil paint in neat rows.

“Mom, I’m taking the plunge... I don’t know if I’ll make it back. You know I can’t hold my breath that long.” She pretended to cough.

“I believe in you, Holly darling,” giving her a thumbs-up. “You can accomplish anything in life.”

Holly held the plunger limply at her side. “Yeah...right...the last time I did this kind of work my face got flushed!”

A short time later, after successfully completing her task, Holly headed back upstairs and stopped in front of the chained and padlocked double doors to the master suite. She remembered hearing rumors that the room had been sealed shut for over a hundred years.

The doors were made of black mahogany, kept shiny by several coats of lacquer. Holly got down on her hands and knees, then pressed her ear up against the place where the doors met, listening for any heartbeat of life, sounds of movement—clanking of a chain, burst of wind, or flapping curtains. She sensed a restless force lurking inside and was determined to unlock its secrets.

Holly jumped, hearing her father suddenly call

out to her from downstairs.

“Are you expecting to find something in that room? You know it’s been sealed shut for over a century. There’s nothing in there. Nothing!”

“Dad... how do you know what’s in there if it’s been sealed for a hundred years?” She gripped the iron padlock and gave it a sharp yank.

“Holly!” said Patrick, sounding more irritated. His right hand gripped the wrought iron railing.

“Yes, Dad?” she said, giving him her full attention.

“Perhaps you’ve forgotten that one of the conditions for our staying here is that we never go into that room. Don’t you suppose that’s why it has a huge lock on it.”

“But, Dad... what’s with the big secret?”

“It’s not for us to ask.”

“What would it matter if we knew, and they didn’t?”

Patrick sighed and headed back to his study room.

Holly stepped over to a side window, then leaned out, trying to catch a glimpse of the attic. She was startled to see the rusted lantern on the windowsill spark a flicker of light that quickly grew brighter and brighter, until it beamed like a lighthouse out across the river toward an approaching steamboat. Holly’s eyes bulged wide, seeing the stark white faces of two girls suddenly appear on either side of the lantern.

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They had chestnut hair tied with yellow ribbons and wore red and white plaid dresses with puffy sleeves. They were same twins she remembered seeing in the picture downstairs, but that was impossible, for she was told that they mysteriously disappeared well over a hundred years ago.

The twins gazed down at the strange girl inhabiting their home. Holly was so shaken by their appearance and piercing stare, she lost her sense of balance and slipped over the window's ledge. A frightful nightmare of falling through space enveloped her. She looked straight up as she fell and saw the light of the lantern and the twins' faces blur before her.

She landed on the squishy, rain soaked grass below, softening her otherwise treacherous fall. With the wind knocked out of her, her stomach was in knots. She sucked in a gasp of air as stars danced before her eyes.

She gripped her shoulder and groaned, then touched her hip. Grimacing, she rocked her waist and shoulders from side-to-side, then took a deep sigh of relief, feeling as if nothing was broken. Dazed and unsteady, she stared up toward the attic. It was pitch black, with no signs of the twins, and no flicker of light. Holly tried her best to enter the house again unnoticed. She tiptoed across the front entrance and made it about halfway up the stairs before she heard her dad's voice.

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“Holly!” said Patrick, “How did you get outside again?”

Holly sighed and took a deep breath, “Well Dad... as a matter of fact I...” but she quickly fell silent, knowing all too well that neither of her parents believed in ghostly appearances. She continued upstairs, then down the hallway to her bedroom. There must be another way to get into the attic, she thought. Holly was determined to find a way to meet the twins face-to-face, no matter what dangers might be lurking about within the mansion’s walls.

## **CHAPTER 2**

**A**t dawn, Phyllis slipped out of bed and headed down the hallway to the mansion's floating stairway. It jutted out from the wall and waved like a rollercoaster, going down, leveling off, then down again. The carpet was faded, once crimson red, now a washed-out pink. Phyllis stopped at the bottom of the stairs a moment and yawned. Her slippers dragged across the white marble floor as she crossed the foyer. Upon entering her art studio, she felt an eerie silence. Something just wasn't right. The air smelled musty, stagnant, unlike the day before. She walked over to the far end of the room and opened the shutters. The sunlight lifted her mood from the mansion's gloomy hues of gray and black.

She stared across the room toward the painting of the McGuire twins and their dogs. From a distance, everything she had worked on the day before looked exactly the same as she had left it. Phyllis sat down and squeezed paint onto her palette, blending the colors together to add life to

the flower gardens. She poised her brush over the canvas, ready to make the first strokes when she stopped dead in her tracks. Her brush slipped from her fingers and fell to the floor. She shook her head and rubbed her eyes, then placed a magnifying glass over the images.

“No, it can’t be,” she muttered. The happy expressions she had so tenderly brought to life with vivid color the day before had vanished. She leaned forward to get a closer look. Her fingers began to tremble, moisture building on the palms of her hands.

Gone were her restorative brush strokes depicting soft innocence and youth. The once blushing cheeks of the twins were now grey, and their eyes were encircled by purple smudges. As for the dogs, the rich-textured hues of brown she had painted onto their fur to reflect their shiny coats now appeared dull. Their muscular forms had disappeared, replaced by skin and bone.

Phyllis’s eyes narrowed in anger. Who could have possibly done this horrible thing by changing my painting like this? Certainly not Patrick or Holly. But, if not them, then who? Perhaps someone broke into the house last night and did this. She left her studio and moved from room to room, checking all the doors and windows. They were all secure and locked. She felt relieved, but, at the same, more puzzled. How could this have happened? she

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thought. She tried to pull herself together by taking some deep breaths to relax, then went back to work, restoring the appearance of the twins and the dogs to the way they were the day before.

### *Later That Day*

Holly entered the front gate to the Robinson Estate at 78 Canterbury Drive, located on a high plateau overlooking the Mississippi River. As she made her way across the white cobblestone pathway leading to the front door, she inhaled the sweet fragrance of jasmine and gardenia blossoms. The flowers thrived in the neatly kept garden. Holly pulled back the brass lion's head doorknocker, then released it, making a loud rap. Seconds later, Mr. Burt Robinson opened the door holding his pet pug, Puddles, snugly in his arms. It is said, in some cases, dog owners' faces in some ways resemble their pets, and Burt was no exception.

"Hi, I'm Holly," she said with a wide grin, "Um... may I please speak to Charlie?"

"Regarding?" said Burt, taking notice her large almond shaped eyes and red highlighted shoulder length hair.

"He called me." She leaned sideways and stared curiously around his shoulder.

"You must be one of his new friends. Don't recall seeing you about?"

“We attend the same school and are on the debate team.”

“That “Truth Busters” group?”

“You got it. Guess there aren’t too many secrets around here.”

Burt looked back over his shoulder toward the top of the stairs. “Charlie, your friend, Holly, is here.”

“Great! Tell her I’ll be right down!”

“Well, just don’t stand there,” said Burt, “Come inside.”

Charlie headed downstairs wearing a green beret, blue jeans, and red letterman football jacket. “Can Holly and I have some privacy... in your study?”

“Charlie, really...”

“Seriously, Dad, can we have some privacy, please?”

He hesitated. “Well... all right, since I have to take Puddles to the vet.”

Charlie’s twelve-year-old brother, Kent, appeared down the hallway and walked up to the front door with his mom, Helen, following right behind.

Burt slipped Puddles into his son’s arms. Kent had plump cheeks and thick inch-high brown hair trimmed flat across the top.

“Mom,” said Charlie, “I’d like to introduce you to my new friend, Holly.”



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Helen stepped up to the new guest. "It's a pleasure to meet you, Holly."

"Likewise," she replied, taking note of her tall, thin frame, billowy blond hair and retro looking polka-dot dress.

After the introductions, Burt, Helen, Kent, and Puddles headed out the front door to the car.

With the house now to themselves, Charlie and Holly entered Burt's large office suite and sat next to each other on the leather couch.

"By the way," said Charlie, "what part of Kingston did you move too?"

"East side. We're staying at the McGuire mansion."

"The McGuire's! Hum...I hate to say it, but I think that place might be haunted."

"Haunted?"

Charlie's eyes stretched wide. "You dig dead people?"

"Good one, Charlie," she replied, gazing into his piercing eyes. This guy is kind of funny, she thought. She leaned forward. "A man by the name of Bret McGuire made the arrangements for us to stay there. He commissioned my mom to oil paint a black-and-white photograph that hung above the fireplace."

"Don't want to get you too worried," said Charlie, "but rumor has it that the lady who lived there before you went crazy. They say the paintings did it to her."

“How?”

“The ghosts. They say they communicate by making changes in the painting.”

She shook her head. “Really... very interesting, but hard to believe.”

Charlie noticed Holly kept staring at his hat. “Do you find my hat really interesting?” He tilted his head to one side with a slight grin.

“Why?”

“You haven’t taken your eyes off it since you came in here.”

This guy is really cute, but kind of self-conscious. Holly cleared her throat. “Your hat looks... something... well... very familiar.” Her eyebrows suddenly arched. “Now I remember. A guy came bursting out of the fog and scared the willies out of me last night while I was checking out the river. He went by so fast the only thing I could make out was that he was wearing a green beret that looked just like yours.”

Charlie’s lips curved into a mischievous grin. “I can’t tell a lie. It was me.”

“What?” said Holly, squinting.

“It was me,” he repeated, sliding his hat off.

“It’s okay,” she said, “The night was dark, the mist thick. It happened so fast we didn’t get the chance to recognize each other. That’s OK. Just curious though. Why were you running down that road last night in such a mad rush? Running from what?”

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“I heard some wild screeching coming from inside my Uncle Melvin’s shack located about a mile down river from where I passed you. Nightmare went flying out the window and leapt right at me! Acted like he was trying to keep me out for some reason.”

“Wait, wait, wait. Slow down,” said Holly, raising her palms. “Who’s Nightmare?”

“Uncle Melvin’s cat.”

“Nightmare?” What a weird name for a cat, she thought. “What were you doing out by that shack?”

“I brought some food for the poor creature. He lives there alone now. Still can’t believe Melvin’s gone. He disappeared without a trace.” Charlie fell silent.

Holly noticed his left hand start to twitch nervously. “What about the police... the sheriff?”

“They couldn’t find anything.”

“Tell me more about this cat.”

“Did you ever have a really bad nightmare; like when you woke up in the middle of the night in a cold sweat?”

“Sweat? Not like that,” said Holly.

“Look at it another way. Think of your worst nightmare. When you see this cat it will all come back to you.”

“That bad, huh?”

“Yeah. I’m not kidding.” He reached out and placed his hand on her shoulder. “Just to give you a

sneak mental preview, he's a big black tomcat with a freaky scar in the shape of an X on his forehead."

"Wow!" That cat must have got into some wicked fight, she thought.

"For the other details, I'll let you discover them for yourself."

"Can't wait to meet this cat in person."

"You're daring," said Charlie, clearly impressed with her valor.

"Why is Nightmare living out there all by himself? Can't you find a temporary home till they find your Uncle Melvin?"

"I tried to find him a nice place to stay, but he keeps on escaping, then hightails it right back to the cabin. Won't leave. Loves Uncle Melvin to death."

"Is there anything else that's been happening around town that strikes you as being unusual?"

"As a matter of fact, yes. Things started to turn really bizarre around town after my Aunt Bellarouse started her pet-sitting business a few weeks ago. She hired me to take care of some of her client's pets. Lately I've been noticing that when the people have been away for a day or two, and come back, they're not the same. It's like their personalities left. Pretty much, it seems as though they become like strangers. And their pets. They're acting really weird too."

"In what way?"

"They become super smart and do things their

owners liked to do. For example, a resident by the name of Mr. Roth would always play chess with his poodle on his lap. The last time I saw him, his dog had his bottom feet on the chair with his front legs on the table. And get this. He was moving chess pieces around the board with his nose.”

“And Mr. Roth—what was he doing?”

“He was just sitting on the couch staring and smiling at his dog like... like he was being entertained.”

“Sounds like the twilight zone. Tell me more about this aunt. What’s she like?”

“Very big, and very aggressive. And did I mention...mysterious...bizarre? Her husband, Mitchell, just recently disappeared too. I only see her daughter now, Marie. She’s ten. You won’t believe this, but Bellarouse bought her daughter a handmade guillotine for her last birthday. A month later, I saw Marie out in the garden with a shovel digging holes.”

“Holes?”

“She was making a graveyard. Fifty holes for the bodies!”

“Oh my gosh! Whose bodies?”

“Her headless doll collection!”

Holly, eyes stretched wide. “That’s super crazy and spooky.” That moment she wondered what a ten-year-old would look like in a straightjacket. She looked blankly to one side for a moment in silence,

then glanced back into Charlie's piercing, deep set eyes. "Can you remember the approximate time when the people started to disappear and the pets and owners began acting really weird?"

Charlie raised his finger to his broad chin and thought for a moment. "Yes. I think it all started about a month ago, after we had a freaky storm. I was in my bedroom when it struck. I heard the dishes downstairs falling off onto the floor, crashing... shattering. The noise became louder and louder until it almost sounded like a steamroller crashing through the house."

"Wow!" said Holly.

"Yeah, and get this...a giant beam of light flashed down from the eye of the storm and shook the whole town!"

"Was there anything else? Tell-tale signs in the aftermath?"

"Yes, as a matter of fact, it left a huge four-hundred-foot black circle in the middle of my aunt Bellarouse's cornfield."

"I'd like to check that place out. How about five o'clock tomorrow? Can you make it?"

"Are you sure you want to go out there?" said Charlie, casting a worried look. "I already told you what my aunt is like."

"Yep. We can be really stealthy. I can give you some pointers. She'll never know we were there. I'm just really curious about that place."

## *RUN HOLLY RUN*

“You really are daring, aren’t you? And did I mention sneaky?”

“A passion of mine is to bring to light the facts that make interesting mystery cases. As they say, leave no stone unturned. Do you by chance have a map of Kingston?”

Charlie got up from the couch. “Better yet, I have an aerial map of the whole town and surrounding area.” He retrieved his dad’s map from his desk drawer, then laid it out across the glass coffee table. He pointed toward the top left section. “Here’s your place, the McGuire mansion, and over there is where my house is located.”

“That’s interesting,” said Holly, spotting six large mansions on the map. She noticed they were all located on a high four-mile wide arching bluff that ran along the eastern part of town. Each mansion had a beautiful view of the river and surrounding farmland. Holly took note that the McGuire mansion was the one closest to the river.

Charlie slid his finger across to a different section of the map. “This southwest portion of town is mostly farmland,” he said, “comprised of twenty-acres lots, all shaped like piano keys butting up against each other. The eastern end of the farms all face the bank of the Mississippi. From an aerial view looking down, each lot appears a different color, ranging from green to brown depending on whether they’re used for grass crops like alfalfa or

for watermelons, orchards, even livestock, horses, pigs, and other farm animals. All the farms have big barns to shelter their animals and other buildings for storing and processing crops.”

“Can you point out to me where your aunt’s house is? And Melvin’s cabin?”

“Sure.” He slid his finger across the map. “Here’s Bellarouse’s house and farm, four lots down from the others, near the county line. The cornfield is toward the back of her property.” He pointed to a very small structure located on the banks of the Mississippi, about a mile down the road from Bellarouse’s farm. “This is where my Uncle Melvin’s cabin is located.”

“Charlie, do you think your dad would mind if we borrowed his map?”

“Go for it. I never see him use it anyway.”

“Thanks.”

Holly now had two missions. Her first was to help uncover the town’s mysterious disappearances. The second was to uncover the century old secrets lurking inside the McGuire mansion. She was determined not to fail at either task.



## ***CHAPTER 3***

**P**hyllis tossed back and forth in bed in the midst of a frightening dream. She saw herself in her kitchen preparing breakfast when all of a sudden the refrigerator opened all by itself. A milk carton floated out, and up in front of her face having on its one side a partial picture of one of the twins' faces. Next, canned goods and boxes of cereal started to float out of the cupboards, each having a piece of a picture on one side. The sight reminded her of a giant jigsaw puzzle. All the items started to rearrange themselves in front of her, each one going into its proper place till she could make out a solid image—a collage... a Picasso-like abstract that resembled in some ways the painting she was working on, but it was terribly different. It showed the twins with their arms extended out in front them, looking as if they

were reaching out for help. There their dogs sat up on their hind legs, front paws raised, appearing as if they were begging for something. The scary image jolted Phyllis awake. She sat straight up in bed, feeling her heart pounding. She tried to convince herself that this dream and the changes to her painting were just figments of her imagination.

When Phyllis entered the kitchen, she was surprised to see Patrick and Holly already seated, eating cold cereal. “Next time you find me sleeping in, please wake me up so I can serve you something warm to eat.”

In no time flat, she found herself in front of the stove preparing a fresh breakfast of sunny-side-up eggs and bacon. She smiled at them having a pale complexion and puffy eyes.

“Is anything wrong, dear?” said Patrick, leaning across the table, casting an expression of concern.

Phyllis shrugged her shoulders. “Everything’s fine.” She was eager to see them off so she could get back to her painting, but still fearful of what she may discover on the canvas.

“Well now, don’t hesitate in letting us know if we can help with anything,” said Patrick.

Holly and Patrick gave her a loving kiss before heading out of the house.

Phyllis entered her studio and slowly approached her painting with nerves about as steady as a house of cards ready to collapse at a moment’s

## *RUN HOLLY RUN*

breath. As Phyllis neared the painting, she hid her face behind her hands. The instant she lowered them, her head made wide sweeping motions side to side. She couldn't believe her eyes. There were tears dripping from the twins' eyes! The corners of their mouths sagged open, appearing as if they were crying and calling out for someone. The dogs' ears drooped straight down, almost covering their eyes, left paws raised, reaching out, as if they were hurt, whimpering, calling for help.

### *That Afternoon*

Holly waited at the corner of Roosevelt and Grand for Charlie to show up so they could go on their planned visit to Bellarouse's cornfield. It wasn't long before she spotted him coming around the corner.

"Sorry, for being late," said Charlie.

"It's OK. Well, which way to your aunt's house?"

He pointed down a dirt road that followed the riverbank. After traveling for about thirty minutes, they finally reached Bellarouse's house. Holly saw the front garden for the very first time, and was really amazed at what she saw. "Wow! Just look at that." There were plants and flowers arranged and trimmed to look like food items. Holly walked up to a cluster of plants that resembled a three-foot donut, planted with sugary white alyssum on the

outside, and filled with clumps of purple lobelia at the center for a grape jelly look. Miniature hedges lined both sides of the walkway, trimmed and shaped to resemble loaves of bread.

Holly and Charlie hunched down and scurried from bush to bush, tree to tree, making their way around the side of the house, being careful not to make their presence known. Holly stopped and stared in disbelief at a deathly sight; the fifty holes Charlie described to her earlier, but they were all turned into small gravesites. The headstones spread across the lawn, all arranged in neat rows. On some of the newer plots had canning jars fill with freshly cut flowers. Holly knelt next to one of the graves. She could tell it was recently made, because it was covered with newly laid sod.

“I can’t believe it. It’s true. Everything you said was true,” said Holly.

“Believe it or not,” said Charlie, “What you are just witnessing is Marie’s headless doll collection graveyard.”

Holly glanced down and read the inscription on one of the headstones. It read, “Mary White, born December 2, 1999, died December 14, 1999, *WHAT A DOLL!*”

“I told you, Holly,” said Charlie, “Marie’s mind is spinning somewhere in outer space.”

“I had doubts about what you told me before, but not anymore.”

## *RUN HOLLY RUN*

Dusk succumbed to night, and a blanket of stars rolled across the sky. Charlie and Holly crouched beneath a half way open window. They inhaled deeply, smelling freshly baked apple cinnamon pie. Charlie's stomach started to grumble. He leaned toward Holly and whispered into her ear, "She's always cooking... always."

Holly and Charlie peered through the window, catching a glimpse of the living room. The walls were decorated with blue ribbons and first-place trophies from every food contest imaginable: best dessert, fruit pie, Thanksgiving turkey, best-tasting chocolate Easter egg and many others.

The night's silence was suddenly shattered by the sound of Far Eastern music and the intermittent clanging of what sounded like brass cymbals. Bellarouse enter the room dressed as a belly dancer with her dog; a full-grown Saint Bernard. She was a large, round woman, with unnatural snow-white hair highlighted with streaks of purple. A large black mole, the size of a quarter, was visible, high on her right cheek. She smiled through a pink silk veil that draped low across her face. Her large legs were partially covered with a flowing blue silk skirt, speckled with gold glitter. She danced around her dog, rolling her hips, arching her back, and swaying her body from side to side, all the while making clanging sounds with her zills—brass finger cymbals—in her right hand.

Bellarouse suddenly stopped dancing and sashayed up to her dog. “Mitchell, my sugar pie honey bun. You know what I want... don’t you?” she said, blowing him a kiss. Mitchell shook his head.

“Mitchell is her husband’s name,” said Charlie, “I wonder why she would be calling her dog by her husband’s name?”

Inside the living room, Bellarouse continued to prod her dog on. “Come on. Open wide. Open those choppers for me.”

He shook his head and clamped his jaws shut.

“You know I can’t dance with just one pair of clickers. Give them to me. Give them to me now!”

“Marmalade butterscotch ice cream for you, baby,” she said, whispering into his ear.

The dog’s eyes suddenly stretched wide. His head nodded up and down. The sides of his muzzle flopped about in all directions, sending gobs of saliva dive-bombing onto the knotty pine floor.

Bellarouse smiled through her silk veil, nodding in unison with Mitchell. “Yes, yes. That’s right! You know that’s your favorite dessert, don’t you?” She put her face close to his, dropped the silk veil from her face and gave him a big grin. “Open wide now. Come on. Come on. Open up. Open up.”

The moment Mitchell dropped his mouth open, Bellarouse reached inside and removed his false teeth, then resumed her dancing, clanging her brass zills in one hand while snapping Mitchell’s teeth in

## *RUN HOLLY RUN*

the other. She headed toward the doorway. "Getting your sweets now, you sugar pie honey dog."

Just outside the window, a small twig snapped beneath Holly's foot. The noise caught Mitchell's keen hearing. He headed over to the window, plopped his front legs onto the windowsill and looked out. Just then, Bellarouse re-entered the room carrying a gold platter with a domed top.

"Mitchell, what are you doing with your head stuck out the window like that?"

Mitchell caught sight of Charlie and Holly crouched beneath the window.

"Well, Mitchell? What's the matter with you? Is anything the matter? See anything boy?" she said, taking a few steps toward the window.

Mitchell focused his attention on the platter containing the mouthwatering sweets he was about to partake. Just the slightest thought of food caused his salivary glands to go into overdrive.

"Well Mitchell," Bellarouse repeated, "Do you see anything out there?"

Charlie glanced up at Mitchell and put his index finger to his lips, gesturing for him not to give away their presence.

Mitchell looked back at Bellarouse, shaking his head.

"Well, then, come to your better half," she said smiling, "Your dessert is starting to get soft."

Bellarouse knelt down and placed the serving

tray on the floor, then raised the domed top, revealing three large scoops of butterscotch ice cream. Mitchell raised his muzzle and exposed his pink gums, eyes focused on Bellarouse's lips.

"One..." said Bellarouse, starting the countdown. Mitchell lowered his head closer to the ice cream.

"Two..."

Mitchell moved his saliva-dripping mouth six inches above the treat.

"Three!"

The moment finally arrived and Mitchell dove in, inhaling one ball of ice cream at a time. After swallowing the last one, he shook his head back and forth.

"Mitchell, you giant hot dog, you," said Bellarouse, "Did you get brain freeze again?"

Mitchell pitifully nodded.

Bellarouse's daughter, Marie, stomped into the living room carrying six empty containers of strawberry yogurt. Her pitch black hair was highlighted with streaks of pink. She was wearing a black dress patterned with tiny red hearts with arrows pierced through. "Mother!" Marie shouted. A web of hair like veins spread across her white cheeks.

"Yes, honey chucks?"

"Don't call me honey chucks!" She gave her a mean look. "I wanted seven. There are only six... you



## *RUN HOLLY RUN*

promised seven containers of yogurt for bedtime!”

“But, cream puff, the store only had six left in your flavor.”

“Don’t call me cream puff!” She dropped to her knees and pounded her fists on the floor. “I don’t care if you have to go to the North Pole and mix strawberries with ice by hand. I want one more strawberry yogurt, and I want it now!”

“Oh, my baby strawberry cheesecake. But too much sugar isn’t good for your teeth, and besides, how am I going to get to the North Pole without any flying reindeer?”

“Don’t call me cheesecake! If you can’t figure out how to fly and get it, I’ll... I’ll turn into the most terrible monster in the world and make everyone serve me hand and foot!”

“Why, angel cake...”

“Don’t call me angel cake! I’m not an angel!” she hollered, pounding the floor.

Just outside the window, Holly gazed at Charlie. “At least she’s honest, saying she’s not an angel. I think we’ve both heard enough complaining for one lifetime. That little brat!” Holly gazed toward Bellarouse’s cornfield. “It’s too dark to search her field tonight.”

Charlie nodded. “We best be coming back another time when we can get an earlier start.”

“Let’s check out your uncle’s shack instead,” said Holly.

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“You’re not serious?”

“You said the place is deserted. Right? I’d just like to see if I could help find some clue that might shed some light on the reason why your Uncle Melvin disappeared.”

“You must be pretty brave to venture there in the dead of night. You’re not going to get spooked by Nightmare... are you?”

“Hey... you can be my bodyguard. Right?”

Charlie sighed. “Sure,” he said, gazing down at his skimpy muscles. “OK, let’s go check it out.”

\* \* \* \* \*

About twenty minutes later, they reached Melvin’s cabin. Holly noticed that it was heavily splintered and cracked. Four log posts propped up the backside to keep it from sliding down the hill and into the river.

As Holly reached out to open the front door, she felt the tips of Charlie’s shoes press against the back of her heels.

He gripped her shoulder. “Are you sure you want to go inside?”

Holly nodded, then slowly creaked the door open. The noise spooked an owl perched on an overhead branch. It took flight, screeching through the night sky.

Holly and Charlie stepped into the living room

## *RUN HOLLY RUN*

and saw tattered curtains and a ripped sofa. Upon entering the kitchen, they saw paint peeling off the walls and cupboards. Charlie stood next to the dining table and placed his hand on a wobbly chair. If it weren't for the moonlight shining through the windows, it would be pitch-black inside.

Holly cringed her nose, smelling sour milk. "It really stinks in here," said Holly. "I think if we put a canary in here it would be singing the blues as its last performance, then drop dead for an encore."

Charlie nodded. "I totally agree."

Neither of them were able to escape the odor, but their curiosity kept them inching forward, hoping to discover some new clue.

Holly squinted through the shadows. "Do you think that wicked cat is somewhere in here?"

He shrugged his shoulders. "Never can tell. Could be anywhere. Even outside, perhaps enjoying a three course mouse dinner."

All of a sudden, they heard a hissing growl, followed by flaming yellow eyes glaring back down at them from the overhead cabinet shelf.

Before Holly or Charlie had the chance to react, the creature leaped into the air, landing on the table behind them.

"Nightmare," said Charlie, "I should have figured you'd be lurking about in some dark corner."

Melvin's cat, nightmare of nightmares, looked exactly like how Charlie described it to Holly before.

It even had a nasty looking “X” scar on its forehead.

The cat looked up at Holly with a twitching left eye, then started to purr the instant she stroked its back. His hairless tail whipped back and forth against her shirt, while his pink tongue kept licking her arm. “Oh Nightmare, you cuddly prowler of the night. Are you trying to make up for scaring the daylights out of us?” Holly chuckled. “His tongue feels ticklish, like wet sandpaper.”

“Looks as if Nightmare has taken an instant liking to you. It’s very unusual for that cat to make friends with anyone except my uncle Melvin. You must have a way with wild cats. Perhaps you might consider adopting Nightmare. What do you think?”

Holly grinned. “No insult intended for the cat, but every morning I’d wake up with him staring back at me from my pillow I would be thinking I was having double nightmares.”

Charlie chuckled. “Yeah... I know what you mean.”

Nightmare’s eye continued to twitch. Charlie saw what looked like tears beading down the corner of his eyes. “I think Nightmare might be crying.”

“Hope it wasn’t anything I said. I wouldn’t want to give him a worse nightmare than he already is.”

Nightmare leaped onto the kitchen counter and knocked over a rusted half-gallon container, spilling white flour across the floor. Next, the cat leaped down and started to roll back and forth on

## ***RUN HOLLY RUN***

top of it until he spread an even layer across the floor.

Charlie looked puzzled. "What's that cat up to?"

Holly pointed at the floor. "Look!"

Nightmare was scratching out letters in the flour with his right paw.

Charlie read out each letter as it appeared.

**"D-A-N-G-E-R!"**

Nightmare looked up at them and screeched.

Holly peered out the kitchen window. "He's warning us about something. But what?"

Nightmare scratched out more letters.

**"R-U-N!"**

When they didn't move, Nightmare leaped onto Charlie's back and screeched into his ear.

Charlie decided it was a good time to take the cat's advice and:

**"R-U-N!"**

He sprinted out the front door while trying to shake the cat off his back. Holly came up from behind and pulled him off.

Next, they ran flat out down the road. Glancing back over their shoulder, they caught a glimpse of

two bodily forms in the distance that looked human, but were not, for they could see right through them. The glowing figures suddenly took aim at them with what looked like some kind of weapon.

Holly shouted, "Get down!"

They both flew flat on the grass. Glancing up, they saw two red laser beams flash directly overhead where they would have been standing.

Holly pointed down the embankment toward the Mississippi. "The river!"

They crawled through knee-high grass on their bellies, slid down a muddy slope, and into the river.

The surrounding countryside was completely silent as the river's current carried them downstream past Melvin's shack. Gone were the usual sounds of crickets and frogs. The Mississippi's cool water helped to calm their nerves as they floated down about half a mile. Minutes later, the welcoming sounds of the crickets and bullfrogs once again filled the air.

Holly pointed at a deer drinking from the shallow water. "It's probably safe to make it back to shore now. If there was anything unusual lurking around that deer it would be long gone."

Holly and Charlie dragged themselves out of the Mississippi, shivering and totally exhausted.

"This is a job for the sheriff," said Charlie.

"Problem is...who's going to believe us? What are we going to say? A cat used its paw to scratch

## ***RUN HOLLY RUN***

out the word “danger” in flour, and a couple of alien looking creatures shot at us with ray guns?”

“I know where you’re coming from, but what else to do?” said Charlie. “We nearly got shot at by something. Somebody!”

Holly took a deep breath. “Like I said, who’s going to believe us? We need some real proof before going to the law.”

“I guess you’re right. Let’s meet up again tomorrow.”

Holly grinned. “Sounds good.”

After giving each other a reassuring hug, they headed back to their homes.

## ***CHAPTER 4***

**T**he moment Holly returned home she headed up the spiraling stairway and down the hallway. She suddenly stopped in front of Morgan's suite, thinking she heard something coming from just inside. She got down flat on the floor and peered through the narrow slit at the base of the door. Squinting into the darkness, she heard what sounded like the faint ticking of a grandfather clock with its pendulum swinging back and forth. The clock couldn't have been operating by itself for over a hundred years. There must be a force, something keeping it going, she thought. The ticking lulled Holly's mind back in time to a place where she dreamed of seeing Morgan sitting inside, looking out the window, with his two Great Danes sitting at his side.

Holly suddenly jolted her head back, feeling



## *RUN HOLLY RUN*

a puff of air blow against her eye. At that same moment, she heard sniffing sounds coming from the other side of the door.

Next, she heard scratching noises, lasting for about fifteen seconds, followed by complete silence. Even the ticking had stopped. Holly placed her head flush with the floor. Peering into the darkness, she felt another puff of air. But this time, a white feather blew out through the crack and floated about two feet into the air. Before it reached the floor, another burst of air came seemingly out of nowhere and whisked it back up again, propelling it toward the stairs that once led to the twins' attic, but was now blocked off by the solid wall. When the feather reached the stairs, the air stopped and the feather floated down, settling on the third step up. Holly noticed that the stair tread the feather landed on was sitting crooked from the others. She ran her hand across its surface and felt it move. After getting a pocketknife from her room she placed the blade between the boards and was able lift it out of place. It moved easily, and she was able to remove it completely. Inside the cavity, covered with cobwebs, was a small metal box. Gently, carefully, she raised the lid. To her surprise and delight, she discovered an old skeleton key.

Just then, Holly was startled by the sound of her father's voice calling out to her from the base of the stairs.

“Holly!” said Patrick.

She looked down the stairs and gave her dad a sweet smile, “Yes, dad,” she said, wondering if he could detect a guilty look on her face, as if she was up to something.

“Holly, are you all right? You’ve been awful quiet lately.”

“Um.. I’m OK, Dad. Thanks for checking on me,” she said, slipping the key into her side pocket. The moment Patrick disappeared into his study she quickly replaced the box and shoved the stair tread back in place.

I wonder where this key goes too? she thought. Holly peeped outside her bedroom and down the hallway. She could hear her parents having a conversation in the kitchen area. Now’s my chance to try out this key. She tiptoed down the hallway to Morgan’s suite, then slipped the key into its large padlock. It rotated a quarter turn, then froze. She sighed. Where, where else could this key possibly go too? She remembered that the only other room in the mansion that was locked and didn’t have a key was the basement door. “Maybe... quite possibly...” she whispered to herself, quickly heading downstairs. The basement door was near the kitchen, but, fortunately, out of her parents’ line of sight. She held her breath as she slipped the key into the lock and turned it, hoping it wouldn’t make any noise. She felt a sudden rush when she heard it click to the

## ***RUN HOLLY RUN***

open position. “Yes. Yes!” she whispered.

After retrieving her flashlight, she entered the basement. The steps leading down were old and rotten, creaking and bowing beneath her feet as she went down. The sound reminded her of the music she made during her first violin lesson. She stopped for a moment, then looked back upstairs toward the door, hoping that her parents didn’t hear the creaking sounds. After reaching the bottom, she grabbed an old curtain rod and started to slice away the cobwebs that draped before her. On the west wall, she saw sagging wood plank shelves filled with canning jars. One glass container had a crinkled label attached with the handwritten words, *Apricot Preserves*.

Squinting through the shadows, Holly caught sight of a solid wall of wooden apple crates stacked all the way up to the ceiling. She beamed her flashlight between them and noticed that they were all wired together. How odd. Why would anyone go to so much trouble? What seemed even more peculiar was that someone had attached wheels to the bottom of the crates. She reached out and grabbed one of the cartons and was able to pull the entire wall of crates back like a giant door. “Yes!” she whispered excitedly. On the opposite side, she discovered another hidden door. Upon opening it, she discovered a secret stone stairway that spiraled up as it ascended. Looking about, she saw rotting

pieces of cloth tapestry clinging to the stone walls.

Something immediately caught her attention on the fourth step up. It was a large, tightly wadded ball of newspaper. She picked it up and rolled it in her palms, observing it from all sides. She carefully unfolded the edges until she was able to see the entire page. Her heart skipped a beat as she read the front headlines. In large bold letters it read, **“Morgan McGuire’s Twins Mysteriously Disappear.”** The small print to the story was too faded to read, however, she was able to make out the image of Morgan holding two photos of his twin daughters in front of him. Sitting on either side of him were his two Great Danes. They appeared to be skinny and looked very unhappy. One might even think, by looking at their faces, that they were very angry about something.

All of a sudden, a numbing wind whirled down the passageway carrying with it the sound of a pipe organ’s funeral note stuck on its lowest pitch. Holly bravely proceeded up the steps. She felt the wind blow against her shirt and pants as she continued upward. Her hair floated back, whisked first to one side, then the other. A cobweb covered with dust suddenly took flight and landed squarely across her face. She raised her hand up and quickly wiped it off, then sneezed and twitched her nose to get rid of the dust.

The stairs seemed to never end as they twisted

## *RUN HOLLY RUN*

upward. She came to a landing and stood before a splintered oak door with the image of two large dogs carved into its surface. The cast-iron doorknob was in the shape of a bulldog's head. Holly was fairly certain on the other side of the door was the back entrance to Morgan's master suite. The instant she gripped the doorknob, the wind ceased, leaving in its place an eerie silence. She reached into her shorts and tried the skeleton key, but couldn't get it to open the door. She turned and refocused her attention toward the top of the stairs. The attic might be up there, she thought. Holly hadn't taken more than two steps up when the wind started to blow again, but this time from the opposite direction, against her back, as if something or someone wanted her to continue up the stairs. To her surprise, with each step forward the wind felt warmer and more inviting.

As Holly made the last turn up the passageway, her eyes stretched wide with excitement seeing another door at the very top. It appeared to be made of stained oak. Stepping closer, she noticed something very disturbing about it. The elegantly carved images of flowers and gardens on the door's surface were damaged, as if someone had taken a hatchet to the surface. Strips of wood had been chopped out and lay rotting at her feet. She reached out for the doorknob and turned it slowly, but it was locked. She tried the skeleton key, and to her

***WALTER ROUZER***

surprise, and delight, it worked! Her flashlight suddenly dimmed. She tapped it against her side to get it working, but it went out completely. Taking a deep breath, she reached out and creaked the door open, then leaned forward and squinted inside a room deep in shadow.

## ***CHAPTER 5***

**T**he moment Holly entered the room, the clouds parted and moonlight beamed through the window, exposing its shadowy secrets. Her attention was drawn to a big lump covered with a moth eaten blanket on the bottom bunk bed.

“I just have to know what’s under there,” she thought. Her feet inched closer to the bed. “Okay... On the count of three.” She took a deep breath and started counting, “One... two... three!” then reached out and flung back the cover. Her eyes stretched wide in shock seeing a skeleton lying on the mattress with its head resting upon a pillow of feathers. They weren’t just ordinary feathers. They were the exact same size, shape and color as the feather she saw back inside the mansion that helped guide her to the key that unlocked the basement and attic door.

Holly heard the whistle from an approaching steamboat. That same instant, the lantern on the

windowsill sparked a small flame within its glass casing that grew brighter by the second.

Holly felt her heart start to beat fast, catching sight of a ghostly image peering down at her from the top bunk. Another bodily form appeared to float up from the lower bed. Holly was fairly certain they were the same two girls she had seen just prior to her falling out the window that one night.

The twins had matching yellow ribbons tied to their chestnut hair, and were dressed in red-and-white plaid dresses with shoulder sleeves puffed out around the edges. A moment later, they disappeared before her eyes. Where...? Where did they go? Holly spun in a circle. The door slammed shut behind her, and one of the twins appeared directly in front of it, blocking her way out. Are they trying to trap me in here? Holly was frantic. She peered back over her shoulder and saw the second twin standing in front of the lantern by the window. Holly took a deep breath. My only two ways out are blocked. She peered right through the twin by the window and saw the flame of the lantern glow brightly behind her. An icy chill passed through her body. "What was that?" she said, seeing a white mist float out in front of her. She blinked to clear her vision. Both twins stood by the window and stared back at her with large doll-like eyes. A sudden gust of wind blew through the window, and their ghostly bodies rippled like flapping white sheets.



## *RUN HOLLY RUN*

Holly retreated toward the door, not knowing for sure if they were friendly or not. With each step back, they took one step forward. Holly backed up against the door, then reached behind her and grasped the knob. Right then she had to make a quick decision: confront the ghosts, or run! After a moment's hesitation, she decided to take a brazen step forward. "I... I'm Holly. I'm here to try and help you."

They continued to stare at her in silence with wide-stretched eyes. Holly was about to make a quick exit, when she noticed faint smiles suddenly blossom upon their faces that kept getting bigger until their expressions flamed with warmth.

"I'm Stephanie, Miss Holly," said the twin on the left.

"I'm Agatha," said the other.

Their ghostly hands stretched out to her.

Holly reached out to shake their hands but felt nothing to hold onto.

"Miss Holly, we know who you are. We're glad you're here," said Stephanie, "they didn't mean to do us harm."

"Yes, yes, they didn't mean to do us harm, you see, you see," said Agatha, casting a sad expression, with her eyebrows sinking low.

Their voices seemed to resonate like an eerie echo. Holly saw tears swell up, then roll down the sides of their cheeks.

“Who didn’t mean to do you harm?” she asked, looking puzzled.

Agatha raised her arm and pressed her palm over her heart. “Papa was sick. Really, he was... he was,” she said. “He was the one who told them to do it.”

Holly stepped closer. “Told who to do what?”

Stephanie’s eyes narrowed. “Miss Holly, it was Papa, you know.” She moved closer, staring into her face. “You see, Papa thought our dogs, Spitz and Mitra, stole away our love.”

“The Great Danes?” she said with raised eyebrows.

They nodded, staring at her stone-faced.

“Really, Miss Holly, Papa became insanely jealous. He turned them against us.”

“Yes, yes... against us,” said Agatha, appearing very sad. She glanced first at her sister, then at Holly.

“Miss Holly, Papa put our picture in front of the dogs when they ate. When we looked a moment later, we knew Papa had taken their food away. It was gone.”

“Yes... gone, gone,” said Agatha.

“Later, the dogs began to growl at our picture, Miss Holly. Later they began to growl at us. The dogs became skinnier and thinner.”

Agatha stepped up to Holly, eyes stretched wide, “Yes, skinny, skinny.”

“You mean the dogs learned to associate you

two with someone taking away their food?”

Stephanie nodded. “Papa was sick.”

“He had ways... ways,” said Agatha.

“Did you raise the dogs from puppies?”

“Yes, Miss Holly. They were special gifts to us. Close friends of Papa brought them here all the way from Germany. Papa trained them to be kind.”

Holly could see tears drip down their faces.

Stephanie reached out and placed her hand upon Holly’s shoulder, “The dogs became mean—hunters again!”

Holly saw fear in their eyes.

“Our dogs, Mitra and Spitz are still here... are here,” said Agatha, gazing toward the door leading down the hallway.

“You mean in the room below us?”

They both nodded.

Okay, now this is getting a little scary, she thought. Holly took a deep breath and stared blankly ahead in deep thought for a moment, then suddenly turned and faced the twins with a smile. “Yes, it might possibly work,” she said. Looking about the room, she spied three photographs hanging on the wall taken of the twins with their Great Danes at a time when they were happy and playing together.

“Can I borrow these three pictures?”

They nodded, but appeared a little confused.

“Yes, but what for... what for?” said Agatha. She took one of the silver framed photos off the wall and

placed it firmly over her heart.

“I can’t explain everything at this moment. I have an idea...a crazy one, but it’s worth a try. Do you have a way of unlocking the back door to the master suite... the one off the stone stairway?”

The twins looked at each other for a couple seconds, then shifted their attention back to Holly and nodded.

“Great,” she said, snapping her fingers. She gathered all the pictures into her arms. “I’ll be back. Have the door to the master suite unlocked. I’ll be there in about twenty minutes.”

Agatha reached out toward Holly. “Be careful. Please, you promise... promise?”

Holly looked back, nodding. “Yes, you can be sure of that. I’ll be careful. Don’t worry.”

Tears of new-found hope welled up in the corners of Stephanie and Agatha’s eyes as they watched Holly head out the door.

## ***CHAPTER 6***

**H**olly headed across the foyer and into the dining room. Just like clockwork, about five minutes into dinnertime, Phyllis and Patrick became actively engaged in chatting about the latest news events. While they were busy talking, Holly seated herself at the table and started sneaking small portions of meatloaf off her plate and into a plastic bag on her lap.

Phyllis gazed over at Holly's plate. "You sure have a hearty appetite this evening."

Holly tilted her head to one side and grinned. "You outdid yourself. This meatloaf looks great!"

Phyllis leaned forward and smiled. "I hope it tastes great too."

Holly gave her a thumbs-up sign of approval. "All your cooking is wonderful, Mom."

As soon as her parents resumed their conversation, she slipped the bag of meatloaf underneath her sweater. The meat felt warm against her skin.

“Mom... I’m stuffed, literally.” Holly gazed nervously across the table. “Can I please be excused?”

Phyllis smiled. “Of course.”

Holly made her way out of the dining room, being careful to keep her bulging side containing the bag of food out of her parents’ line of vision.

Next, she reentered the basement and headed up the secret stone passageway. A moment later, she found herself in front of the back door to Morgan’s master suite. Taking a deep breath, she grasped the iron doorknob. “Yes! Yes!” she whispered to herself, hearing the door click open. She felt happy, but at the same time somewhat fearful of what she might find lurking about inside the suite.

Holly creaked the door open, exposing the room to its first breath of fresh air in over a hundred years. The moment she poked her head inside, she noticed a strange, musty, stagnant odor, like one might find in a sealed tomb.

She panned her flashlight around the room, then suddenly froze, seeing what appeared to be the skeletons of two large dogs sitting on either side of a large leather chair. The frightful sight made her feel very uneasy, but she remained firm and unmovable, focusing all her thoughts on helping her two friends

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upstairs. She was determined not to let them down, no matter what she came up against.

The dogs and chair faced the draped windows. If the curtains were drawn back, there would be a beautiful view overlooking the Mississippi river. Holly emptied her bag of meatloaf onto the floor, then placed one of the pictures of the twins next to the food. She whistled and called out the dogs' names, "Spitz! Mitra!"

Holly was shocked to see the dogs' heads start to creak and turn back. Suddenly, without warning, they sprung onto their feet and charged right at her. She fled the room, slamming the door tightly shut behind her. She placed her ear to the door, and heard what sounded like chewing and chomping sounds. Two minutes later, the noise stopped, and was followed by complete silence.

Holly creaked the door open, just enough to peep inside. She took notice that the dogs were back on either side of the leather chair and faced the curtains, but something seemingly unbelievable happened to them. There appeared to be new skin, hair, and flesh halfway up their bodies, starting from the tip of their tail to their midsection.

Looking down, she noticed that the twins' photo had been knocked face down on the floor. She picked up the frame and discovered the glass had been shattered into a hundred pieces. Holly was deeply disturbed at the sight of the picture, but the

miraculous improvement in the dogs' appearance made her think she might be onto something.

She raised her finger to her chin and wondered if there might be a chance to get the dogs to connect the food offering with the picture of the twins. She hoped with all her heart she could help restore the love that once existed between the children and the dogs.

Minutes later, she reappeared in the mansion's kitchen. After checking to make sure the coast was clear, she raided the refrigerator. She packed two more bags with various food items, including canned salmon, tuna, and even vanilla ice cream.

She hurried back to the basement and retraced her steps up the stairway to Morgan's suite, then slowly opened the door and placed the second of three pictures she borrowed from the twins inside the room, together with some salmon and ice cream. The instant she whistled, the dogs charged back at her with their glowing eyes and snapping teeth. Without a second to lose Holly slammed the door shut behind her. The next moment, she heard gobbling noises. As soon it became silent, she peeked inside. To her surprise, she discovered the dogs' skeletons almost entirely covered with flesh, from their tails up to their necks. She looked down at the second picture of the twins and noticed that the frame had been knocked over, but it had landed face up. The glass was cracked slightly, but not



violently broken as the one before it.

She decided to repeat the same procedure one more time. She placed the third serving of food with a little leftover ice cream for good luck, together with the last picture inside the room. When the chewing sounds stopped and there was complete silence, she checked to see the results.

The dogs appeared to be resting once again on either side of the leather chair, but this time with their bodies appeared to be whole and healthy. Even their coats looked shiny.

A smile broke upon Holly's face as she gazed down at the third picture. It was still standing, There appeared to be saliva dripping down the glass, as if the dogs had been licking it. The dogs remained on either side of the chair and showed no signs of aggression. She exited the room, making sure the door was securely shut, before heading up the stairway.

## ***CHAPTER 7***

**W**hen Holly reentered the attic, she saw Agatha and Stephanie standing by the window, staring back at her with blank expressions.

Holly's face broke out into a big smile. "I want you to come with me," she said, gesturing with her hands for them to follow her.

Agatha tilted her head to one side and gave her a curious look. "But where... where?"

"Downstairs... inside the master suite... where your dogs are."

Holly's words had the twins terrified. They shook their heads and backed up against the wall.

Stephanie took a deep breath and a short step forward, "But, Miss Holly, they hate us, really."

She waved them forward. "Please... come. Trust me. I believe they've changed. I believe they

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wanted to love you all along, and now have every reason too.”

The twins looked at each other in silence with blank expressions, then glanced back at Holly.

I wonder if they will trust me enough so that they can meet the dogs face to face, she thought.

After some hesitation, the twins’ expressions grew hopeful.

Holly kept waving them forward. “Come... trust me... let’s go.”

They slowly followed Holly’s lead downstairs and into the master suite. When their dogs, Spitz and Mitra, first saw the twins, they stared at them squinty-eyed, and showed their teeth. They could hear deep-throated growls. The twins clasped their hands tightly together for fear of what might happen next. The dogs headed across the room, then suddenly stopped and stared down at the pictures on the floor: the shattered frame, the frame knocked down, and lastly, the one still standing. The dogs’ teeth were no longer visible and their stubby tails began to twitch back and forth. Instead of pouncing on the twins, they approached in puppyish leaps and bounds, and began to lick their faces. Holly felt so happy for them.

The twins looked back at Holly with glowing faces and happy smiles.

“How can we ever repay you?” said Agatha.

Holly thought for a moment, then spoke up.

“Well, there is just one thing. I believe that the town of Kingston could be in some kind of danger.”

“From what?” asked Agatha, casting a worried expression.

“Well... this may be hard to grasp, but...”

“Yes, Miss Holly, tell us?” said Stephanie.

“Foreign beings. Possibly from another galaxy!”

The twins raised their hands to their mouths and started to giggle.

“Aliens from the stars, Miss Holly?” said Stephanie.

Holly nodded, with a very serious look about her. Their giggling and smiles stopped, and were replaced with expressions of concern. The twins looked at each other for a moment in silence, then stared back into Holly’s eyes.

“Yes, we will help you. We will... we will,” said Agatha, with a firm nod.

“Yes, Miss Holly, really, just tell us what we must do,” said Stephanie.

Holly confided everything she knew about the aliens, and how they could possibly use their invisible powers spy out Bellarouse’s house, and gather important information to help her. She said that they must be extra careful, as she didn’t know if their invisible nature would work against the aliens. Moments later, the twins and their dogs disappeared before Holly’s eyes, leaving her alone in the room to ponder her next plan of action.

\* \* \* \* \*

Holly reappeared inside the front entranceway to the mansion, then headed across the foyer. She heard her parents talking within the art studio, and took a peek inside. She saw them standing side-by-side staring in silence at the painting of the twins and their dogs. Holly walked up to them and peered around her dad's shoulder. "What's going on?"

"How? How can it be?" said Phyllis. The painting of Agatha and Stephanie showed them having vibrant, happy faces. Pink hues blossomed like roses upon their cheeks. Even Mitra and Spitz appeared full-bodied, super healthy, and smiling. They had pointy ears, sparkling eyes, and their coats appeared to glow from the reflection of sunlight off the canvas.

Patrick leaned forward for a closer look, "What on Earth did you do to the dogs' faces, Honey?"

Phyllis gazed back with a puzzled look. "Patrick, whatever do you mean?"

Holly took a quick look. Her nose almost touched the painting as she peered at the dogs, "Oh... my... gosh," she said, looking very surprised.

Holly stepped aside, as Phyllis moved in front, placing her magnifying glass over the dogs' faces. "I can't believe it. It can't be," she said, seeing what looked like small pieces of food stuck around the

dogs' lips. "Patrick, honey, there appears to be bits of meat loaf and vanilla ice cream on the dogs' faces. Exactly the same foods I served up for supper tonight. How is that possible? Is this some sort of joke?"

The three of them exchanged glances for a moment, then stared back at the painting, looking very puzzled.

Phyllis slowly looked over at Holly, squinty eyed. "Holly darling, would you know anything about how this might have happened?"

"Now Mom...what are you thinking? Could you imagine in your wildest dreams me sneaking bits of food off my dinner plate, and then figure out a way to get it on the dogs' faces?"

"Well, I guess that would be a bit hard to imagine. After all, you were a hearty eater tonight and didn't leave anything on your plate."

Moments later, Holly phoned Charlie and told him everything that had happened, but he kept interrupting, telling her she must have been dreaming.

## ***CHAPTER 8***

**H**olly met up with Charlie for their planned visit to Bellarouse's cornfield.

"Sorry I'm late," said Holly.

Charlie glanced at her as they headed down the dirt road. "I have an interesting story for you," he said.

Holly gave him her full attention. "Okay... let's hear it."

"I overheard my mom talking with Annabel Drusky, Bellarouse's next door neighbor. She said Annabel has been calling everyone in town!" Charlie stood in front of Holly for a moment and stared into her eyes. "She sounded freaked!"

"About what?"

"She was crying because her son, Albert. He

somehow disappeared after he chased his pet pig, Button Rouge, into Bellarouse's cornfield."

Holly's eyes widened. "Button Rouge... Bellarouse... cornfield?"

"Yeah, Annabel told my mom her son was out back playing baseball with his buds, Mitch and Shane, when they noticed Button Rouge having an all-you-can-eat pig-buffet in Bellarouse's vegetable patch. Albert climbed over the fence and chased his pig into the field."

"And?" said Holly, breathing deeper as they walked faster down the dirt road leading to Bellarouse's house and farm.

"Shane told Annabel that he and Mitch had called out over and over again for Albert, but he never came back out. Mitch said they saw two beams of red light flash out from the midst of the field. At that same instant they heard a scream followed by a loud squeal. They said the scream sounded like Albert!"

She looked at Charlie with wide stretched eyes. "Albert? Oh No! Poor kid! Could we pay the Drusky's a short visit on the way to Bellarouse's field? Is that possible?"

"Why would you want to stop there?"

"I would love to help find out what happened to their son and get him back. Perhaps we could pick up on something that was overlooked."

"Well...Albert's mom and family are still pretty



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shook up right now, but maybe... a short visit wouldn't hurt."

\* \* \* \* \*

On their way to Druskey's farm, Charlie stopped by a white picket fence to Dr. Spencer's residence, a newly renovated three story, white farmhouse complete with a chicken coop on one side and horse training arena on the other.

"The family that lives in that house just recently moved there from the big city," said Charlie, "The kids are clueless about farm life. They only know the basics, like cats, dogs, and zoo animals."

Holly gave him a puzzled look. "Zoo animals?"

"Dr. Spencer is a veterinarian. His specialty is exotic zoo animals."

"In Kingston? I didn't know they had a zoo here?"

"It just happens that the city council voted to build one. It will be opening soon! Aren't you excited?"

"Uh...Yeah. I couldn't think of a happier place to spend my day!" She reached into her back pocket and pulled out their map. "Can you show me on your dad's map where the zoo is located?"

Charlie pointed to a seventy-acre plot of land on the north side of town. "It doesn't show on this map because the zoo is so new and this map is old.

But the zoo and a new park are located right here. I believe the grand opening will take place in about a week from now. The land was donated to the city by my Uncle Waldo.”

Holly gave Charlie a curious look. “Where is your Uncle Waldo?”

“That’s a good question. He’s always traveling, so it’s hard to know exactly where Uncle Waldo is most of the time. It’s almost like playing a game, like, trying to figure out where he is.”

As they approached Dr. Spencer’s home, his five-year old daughter, Jenny Spencer, ran around the side of the house ringing a bell in her hand while chasing a red rooster. Charlie called Jenny over to the front gate. “Jenny, what are you up to?”

“Three foot six,” she said, leaning upwards, balancing herself on the tips of her toes. Charlie and Holly tried to keep a straight face.

“No, I mean, what are you doing?” said Charlie.

Jenny put her hand to her mouth and giggled. “My dad said in order to get the chicken ready for dinner I had to go outside and ring its neck.”

Charlie chuckled. “You’re a total jokester. I didn’t see you as usual out playing basketball at the Boys and Girls Club last week.”

Jenny coughed and sniffled. “I was sick and my nose was double dribbling.”

Holly grinned. “That’s foul.”

Jenny looked back at the rooster. “See yah,” she

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said, waving goodbye, "I've got to get this chicken ready for dinner." That being said, she started to chase the rooster while ringing her bell.

Charlie spotted Patricia Burkhart step out onto the front porch of the Spencer residence. She tipped her white cowboy hat at Charlie and Holly.

Charlie waved back, then turned toward Holly. "That's Jenny's cousin visiting from Montana. My brother Kent has a crush on her."

"She looks kind of hip country. Maybe she can give the family a few pointers on preparing chicken."

Charlie nodded. "Right. Country fresh chicken with a nice ring to it."

\* \* \* \* \*

Holly and Charlie continued down the road for about another mile before they reached the Drusky's farm, located on the east side of Bellarouse's property. The main house was shaped like a giant red barn, and had white trim around the windows and doors. A stiff wind suddenly kicked up. Holly saw the propeller of the seventy-five-foot-high windmill turn and pump well water into a large oval shaped pond located about eighty feet away from the house. The pond water was surrounded by bare dirt, with the exception of a giant willow tree growing by the water's edge. Its droopy foliage draped fifteen feet out over the pond. The tips of

several branches dipped into the water, rippling a reflection of tree and sky.

A hundred feet from the pond was a large barn, having the unmistakable aroma of pigs, over sixty of them to be exact, Button Rouge being the odd lot. Their distinctive smell spread through every crack of the building. Even from sixty feet away, one could easily detect the sweet aroma...well, sweet from a pig's sense of smell.

Inside the barn were five rows of connected pens, each six by eight feet in diameter. Button Rouge had a special enclosure all to himself by the barn door. A hayloft ran along the east side of the barn. Piggish activity abounded—eating, drinking, playing chase, and, of course making snorting and squealing noises, which could be heard all the way out to the road.

“Well,” said Charlie as they headed toward the front door to the Druskys’ house, taking in the sights, sounds, and smells. “Do you still want to see Button Rouge?”

“You bet I do.”

The wind suddenly shifted, carrying with it the smell from the barn. Holly stopped and faced Charlie. “Is there anything else you can tell me about the Druskys that might be helpful in finding more clues before talking to them?”

“Well... Albert’s dad, Frank Drusky, is an airfreight delivery pilot turned part-time pig

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farmer. He works out of Brookdale Airport— that’s about three miles east of here. He also used to work as a fulltime weatherman for “KDZ” TV station out of Jackson. He always had his head in the clouds.” Charlie gazed toward the sky, then back toward the farm. “Now he’s down here...” He shifted his attention toward the barn, “Raising pigs.”

“Do the Druskys and Bellarouse get along?”

“Not at all. They’re always at each other’s throat, mostly because their pigs can’t stay clear of her vegetable garden.”

“Sounds like Bellarouse really has it out for them.”

Charlie reached out and buzzed the doorbell.

Annabel rushed to the front door. “Have you seen... seen my Albert?” she said nervously, eyes darting back and forth between the two of them.

Before they could answer, Frank Drusky stepped up to his wife and placed his arm around her shoulder. Holly looked up and noticed he was wearing a pilot’s hat with a shiny brass-winged emblem pinned to the front.

“Have you seen our son?” he said in a deep voice.

“I’ve been doing my best to keep a lookout for him,” said Charlie. “This is my friend, Holly. She recently moved to Kingston, and is really eager to help join the search to find your son.”

Albert’s sister, Meagan, popped her head out

from her upstairs bedroom. "Mom. Who is it? Did they find Albert?"

Annabel looked upstairs. "Sorry, not yet. We have some guests now who are going to help in the search."

Holly stepped forward. "Could we see Button Rouge? I know it sounds weird, but it may help us in discovering a new clue to your son's whereabouts."

Annabel and Frank looked at each other in a moment in silence, then looked back and nodded. "Well, okay, but... um... I don't know what good it will do," said Frank, sighing.

Annabel spoke up, "Button Rouge is in his pen, in the barn, doing time for being a bad piggy." She looked up at Frank with a puzzled expression. "I just can't understand why Button all of a sudden has taken a liking to be gettin' in the house."

Holly and Charlie stared at each other for a moment, then looked back at Annabel.

"Now there's one more thing," said Annabel, "Button Rouge can act a bit aggressive when Bernie's Ham-It-Up truck comes to take the other pigs."

"Ham-It-Up?" said Holly, looking confused.

"The pig buyer," said Frank. "He's due to be comin' around in the not too distant future."

Annabel pointed at Charlie and Holly. "Now you two be careful, or you might get nipped." That being said, she suddenly broke out into tears.

Frank put his arm around her. "Try to keep

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your spirits up. We'll find him. I'm taking the truck into town now. Lance and I are going to search north of here."

Annabel waved Frank and Lance off as Holly and Charlie headed toward the barn.

## ***CHAPTER 9***

**T**he moment Charlie and Holly entered Drusky's barn, Button Rouge start to snort and squeal like crazy to get their attention.

Holly stepped up to his pen and looked down, "Button, do you know where Albert is?"

Charlie chuckled. "Do you think you're taking to Button Einstein?"

Holly gestured with her hand for Charlie to keep quiet. "Do you know where Albert is?" she said, staring down into Button's beady eyes.

Button looked up and nodded.

Holly smiled at Charlie. "I think he can lead us to Albert. "I think we should let him out and try to follow."

Charlie looked down at Button. "Just what if he decides to go into the vegetable patch again?" he said, gazing toward the open barn door. "Are you



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prepared to chase him into the cornfield... just in case?”

Holly pointed at the tears rolling down Button's face. "Look at him. Let him try. OK?"

Charlie sighed. "Well, don't say I didn't warn you."

As soon as Holly unlatched the pen, Button took off running straight toward the house. Holly raced right behind, but couldn't keep up.

"Oh, no! No!" said Holly, watching Button take a flying leap through the back screen door.

After Holly made formal apologies to Annabel for everything that had happened, Charlie helped her get Button back into his pen.

As Holly and Charlie continued down the dirt road toward Bellarouse's cornfield, they heard a vehicle approach from behind. Looking back, they saw a police car slowly heading their way.

"It's Sheriff Gary," said Charlie.

The sheriff stopped his car beside them.

"Hey...any of you come across any signs of Albert?" said the sheriff, gazing out the car window.

Charlie spoke up, "I'm sorry Sheriff Gary, no signs of him yet."

Sheriff Gary looked over his shoulder toward the backseat. "I'm here with Sergeant Rex, trying to sniff out more clues that might have been overlooked inside Bellarouse's cornfield."

Holly whispered to Charlie with a puzzled

expression on her face. "Sergeant Rex? Sniff out clues? I don't see anyone else in the car... do you?"

Charlie and Sheriff Gary smiled at each other. They knew something Holly didn't.

Out of sheer curiosity, she stepped up to the sheriff's car and peered in through the back window. All she could see was a large lump under a brown blanket spread across the seat. Sheriff Gary grinned. All of a sudden the blanket seemed to come alive, and flew up toward the ceiling. Holly jumped back and stumbled to the ground.

A large basset hound with big droopy ears leaped halfway out the side window and stared down at her with bloodshot eyes. Its head and tail teeter-tottered over the edge. Holly feared that at any moment the hound dog might slip out the window and land right on top of her.

Sheriff Gary looked out the side window at Holly. "Sorry about that, Miss," he said with a chuckle, watching her get back up.

"Sergeant Rex can be quite a stealthy dog," Charlie remarked.

Holly brushed dirt off her pants. "Yeah... he's also great at going undercover to find a good nap, don't you think?" Holly replied.

"That's Rex's top security blanket," said Sheriff Gary. "Very protective of it, he is."

Holly grinned. "I bet he hates dog-nappers. Except when it comes to himself, of course."

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Sheriff Gary squinted at Holly. “Huh?” he said, not sure if she was insulting his best friend or not. “Remember, Rex here never totally sleeps. He’s always at least partly on duty, twenty-four/seven, even if it’s only his nose working. Anyway, I’m going to have him sniff out Bellarouse’s cornfield now and retrace Albert’s tracks. Now the two you keep safe.” He left the pair on the side of the road, and continued toward the Bellarouse’s farm.”

Holly squinted through the dust as the sheriff drove off. “I think it’s important we see what happens when Sheriff Gary confronts Bellarouse and tries to convince her to have another look-around her farm.”

“Right,” said Charlie, “Let’s go.”

### ***Minutes Later***

Holly and Charlie arrived just in time to see the sheriff head up Bellarouse’s front steps. They hid behind a nearby hedge and kept a watchful eye on what was happening.

Before the sheriff had the chance to knock on the door, Bellarouse suddenly swung it open in front of him. “Yes... Sheriff... Gary?” said Bellarouse, squinting at him from behind the screen door. Sheriff Gary couldn’t help but notice the large rolling pin in her right hand.

“Can I be helping you with somethin’?” she

said in a deep womanly voice.

“Ma’am, I... uh... have reason to believe that the neighbors’ boy, Albert, may still be somewhere abouts nearby. I... uh... need to check your field again—with my partner, Sergeant Rex. Any objections?”

“Albert... corn? He hates corn,” she said stepping out onto the front porch. “Hah...I know for a sure fact that boy hates corn. Is this search you be askin’ some kind of bad recipe?” She gave him a sharp slap on the side of his shoulder.

“Huh, not at all, ma’am,” he replied with a straight face. He tried not to show any sign of pain left from the sting she left on his arm. “If you want, I... ah... can come back with a search warrant...” he said, with his eyes narrowing.

Bellarouse peered around his shoulder. “Who... who is this Sergeant Rex you have with you? I don’t see no one.”

Sheriff Gary looked back toward his patrol car and whistled. Rex jumped up from under his blanket and popped his head out the back window. Bellarouse chuckled seeing part of the dog’s blanket hanging over the side of his head.

“That’s a pretty hot bojangle pooch you have there, Mr. Sheriff,” she said. Her sneer suddenly changed into a wide grin. “Why, of course you can do some searchin’. You and that four-legged cadet of yours just go right ahead into my field and have one

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good corn lookin' time."

"Huh, thanks for your cooperation, man, I mean, ma'am."

Charlie peered over at Holly from behind the hedge. "I can't believe Bellarouse would let anyone onto her property without a fight."

Holly nodded. "I was a little worried when I saw that oversize rolling pin in her fist."

They watched Sheriff Gary and his dog head out toward the cornfield. About twenty feet away from the field, Rex suddenly stopped and raised his nose. He sniffed repeatedly, then let out a long drawn-out howl. Holly and Charlie watched Rex take off running into the cornfield with the Sheriff following close behind.

Minutes felt like hours. Charlie and Holly patiently remained crouched behind the hedge wishing that Sheriff Gary, Rex and Albert would come out all together, safe and sound.

Suddenly, Sergeant Rex burst out of the cornfield all by himself and ran like a scared rabbit out across the field. He made a beeline right for the police car, then took a giant leap inside. He sat up on the driver's seat and put his paws onto the steering wheel.

Holly watched Rex rock the steering wheel back and forth and honk the horn over and over again. "What's going on?"

Charlie blinked, not believing what he

was seeing before his eyes. “Wow! This can’t be happening.”

Holly motioned for Charlie to look through an opening in the hedge. He saw Bellarouse stare out her second story window with a big smile on her face watching Rex race back toward town with his tail tucked between his legs.

Holly gazed back toward the cornfield. “Now, where’s Sheriff Gary?”

“One thing’s for sure... he’s not out there chuckin’ corn,” said Charlie, “We need to get help.”

“Wait, who are we going to get? We just saw Sheriff Gary disappear and his dog run for his life. Let’s check out the perimeter of the field to see if we can find the sheriff.”

Charlie grabbed her arm and held her back. “No, that’s way too dangerous.”

“Hey, if we don’t help out...”

“Let’s lay low here for awhile and see if Bellarouse makes another move.”

Holly nodded. “OK.”

## ***CHAPTER 10***

**H**olly peered out from behind the bushes and saw Bellarouse slip out the back door of her house and head toward her cornfield. “There! There she goes!” she said.

Bellarouse stopped just short of the field, then turned and looked back toward the house.

Holly knelt lower behind the hedge and whispered into Charlie’s ear, “Do you think she saw us?”

“Nope, from what I know about her, if that was the case, she’d be all over us by now.”

Bellarouse reached out and parted the stalks of corn before her, then disappeared inside. Moments later, she reached the inner four-hundred-foot burnt circle of the cornfield. The entire area was void of any signs of plant or animal life. There wasn’t even a solitary weed, insect or rodent to be seen anywhere. The cornstalks around the entire inner circle were

scorched black. A stiff breeze suddenly kicked up and started to sway the cornstalks from side to side. Bellarouse reached into her apron pocket and removed a six-inch crystal. It was no ordinary mineral, for it possessed the clarity of the finest diamond, and was composed of a compound harder than any substance known on earth. The instant she raised the crystal up in front of her, beams of purple light shot forth, exposing a flying saucer nearly the same size as the inner diameter of the burnt circle.

The alien ship was translucent, like the skin of a giant bubble. Bellarouse gazed right through it, and could see the cornstalks on the opposite side of the field—only they looked blurred. A boarding ramp suddenly lowered in front of her. White sparks, like static electricity, buzzed around the edges of her shoes as she made her way up the ramp. She headed down a six-foot-wide corridor. The floor and walls appeared as opaque glass. A narrow channel ran down the center floor of the seventy-foot-long hallway, filled with a bluish liquid that sparked hair-like strands of electricity. As Bellarouse stepped forward, she heard faint popping and buzzing sounds about her feet. Continuing on, she gazed up through a two-foot-wide opening in the ceiling that ran down the entire length of the hallway. Her eyes stretched wide in awe seeing black space magnified millions of times. Shooting stars, planets, and glistening white clusters of far-away galaxies lay



visible before her eyes.

At the end of the corridor, she made her way up three glass steps that led to a domed room a hundred feet in diameter, the apex being thirty feet high. It was made of seamless, highly reflective glass. In the center was a twenty-foot-diameter circular crystal, a foot high, on which were three glowing glass seats. The middle seat was two steps higher than the others. On both sides of the seat were four, six-inch-diameter crystals of different colors that rose from the floor up to the height of the armrest.

Supreme Commander Zork entered the room his two chancellors. They were from the dying planet, Triton, located in a galaxy just outside our Milky Way. Zork took the center seat with his chancellors taking their places on either side of him.

In physical form, they were nearly transparent, ghostly in appearance, glowing blue. Thread-like veins sparked white electricity through their bodies. Their physical form resembled that of humans: they had arms, legs, chests, and even possessed facial characteristics similar to those of humans. If it weren't for their transparent, ghost-like appearance and white veins, by human standards, they would be thought to be quite attractive in appearance.

Supreme Commander Zork motioned with his hand for Bellarouse to step forward.

“Earthling,” he said.

Bellarouse shook her head, looking sorely

displeased for him missing her supreme name. “Master Cook, my name is Master Cook! Not “Earthling”... Supreme Dork!” she replied, placing emphasis on the word “dork.”

“Zork, Supreme Zork!” said the commander. Elevated levels of electricity sparked through his body. He flashed his finger at Bellarouse and sent a jagged beam of electricity, resembling a miniature lightning bolt, at the base of her feet. She jumped. He smiled, then put his finger out and sparked another bolt of electricity at her. She jumped again, then started to dance.

“A million light year pardons for missing your prime ingredient right name, Supreme Zork,” said Bellarouse, dancing her breath away.

“Hear now,” said Zork, with a very serious look about him, as he continued to throw fits of lightning, “What are you doing?”

“I’m dancing the lightning bolt two-step, a recipe dance of mine. I just dreamed it up from the Milky Way for you, Supreme Zork.”

“Well, now, I do like to be entertained,” he said nodding, revealing a hint of a grin.

The sparking in his body started to go away once he’d heard Master Cook’s apology and saw her entertaining dance steps.

“Never a dull taste bud with Master Cook at your service,” she said, quickly running out of steam. “That’s my motto.” She suddenly found herself

completely out of breath and had to stop dancing. “I can only last so long. A million light year pardons again, Supreme Zork.” She bowed before him, then slowly looked up, all the while hoping he would stop sparking so much electricity. It was really starting to make her feel overly zingy.

Zork took a deep breath, leaned forward, and stared deeply into Bellarouse’s eyes. “Well now, what is this Dork, as you mentioned?”

Bellarouse smiled. “Dork is a toasty buttered title of supreme earth intelligence,” she said, pointing her fingertip at the side of her head. “They don’t blend like cream and sugar. They stand out, special!”

Zork scratched his chin in a moment of silence. “Hum, interesting.” His eyes narrowed. “Now then, Master Cook, what progress has been made in finding surrogate bodies for my people, and pets for entertainment?”

Bellarouse cleared her throat. “Everyday I have my pet caretaker find new sweet bodies and pets for your supreme recipe takeover,” she said, rubbing her hands together.

He nodded and smiled, “Good, Master Cook. Now then, if this test proves successful and we find Earth to our liking,” he waved his hand in a long sweeping motion before her, “I will signal for all our other fleets to land and occupy every major city on this planet.” He clenched his hand in a tight fist.

“Then, we will take it over and claim it as our own.”

Bellarouse took two steps forward, having a concerned look about her. “What about me, your Master Cook, and my sweet cake daughter? How do I know you won’t take our bodies and soup out our intelligence into some pet for your entertainment too?”

Zork leaned forward in his chair. “Well now, we will still need some earthlings intact, in their own bodies to teach us so much more about your planet than what we have learned by studying you from space. Now then, prove yourself useful, and live.”

“What happens if there aren’t enough animals for you to put human intelligence into?”

“Well then, we possess a substance that can turn people into animals according to how they are in character—pigs, goats, dogs, even lions, but this is not the time for that.”

Her eyes stretched wide. “If you don’t act fast, this town is going hog wild.”

“What does this mean, hog wild?” said Zork, leaning forward, squinting deeply into her eyes.

“In simple recipe talk, the whole planet will soon be stewing mad if you don’t have the bodies you took over reappear back in town. Where’s Albert and Sheriff Gary?”

Zork passed his palm over a blue crystal. In response, a ten foot-wide section of dome illuminated the bodies of Albert and Sheriff Gary

lying motionless on crystal platforms in a state of suspended animation.

Zork continued, “Well now, my people have yet to decide which of them will adopt these bodies as their own.”

Bellarouse took two steps forward. “The dough is rising fast.” “You’d better act now, Supreme Zork.”

Zork grinned. “Your primitive civilization has no hope in defeating us!”

Bellarouse bowed before Zork, then slowly raised her head. “No, Supreme Zork, but unless you want a world war—a scrambled egg planet, whipped into a useless mess of mass destruction, you must make sure your new human body counterparts blend in with all the others. Learning to copy their personalities is so very important if you want to keep your secret from being canned.”

“Well then, can you help us... blend in, as you say?” he said, leaning forward in his seat, eyes narrowing.

“Help you?” said Bellarouse, grinning. “Why, with my Master Cook recipes, I’ll make your stay here on planet earth a gravy train delight.”

Zork narrowed his eyes. “Now then. How do we accomplish this?”

Bellarouse waved her hands about. “I know every two-bit, pea-body personality in this town, and how their supposed to act.” She put her hand over her heart. “I was in cooking theatrics during

my tender basting years. I will make and send out training videos on how each one of your new adopted bodies should behave in order to blend in.”

Zork nodded. “Good. My subjects will be awaiting these videos of yours.”

A sentry entered the room and whispered something into his ear.

“Well now, Master Cook,” said Zork. “It appears that two young humans are outside this very moment spying your house.”

“Oh...is that so!” Bellarouse rubbed her hands together. “Let’s have a look-see!”

Zork passed his palm over a red crystal. A view of her back lot appeared through a section of the dome wall showing a young man and woman crouched behind her hedge.

“Well then.” He closed his hand into a tight fist. “Snare those two, and put their bodies in with the others!”

Bellarouse flashed her hand up. “Wait, Supreme Zork,” she said, recognizing one of them. “That young man is a relative fruit of mine. His name is Charlie. He’s assisting me with the pet sitting operation. As for the girl, I don’t know if she’s a rotten apple or not.” She turned toward Zork. “Don’t take them yet,” she said. “He’s still very much a useful ingredient to my recipe, and for your supreme takeover plan. Since she is with him, let me investigate first to find out if they know anything before toasting her.”

## *RUN HOLLY RUN*

“Very well, Master Cook, let your Charlie continue to help find new bodies and pets, but just a short time longer.”

“Supreme Zork... Charlie has a lunch appointment with me this next Saturday. I will make sure his friend comes along, then I will discover for myself if those two peas out there know anything about your sweet pod of a plan.”

“Very well...agreed.”

“Just one more thing, Supreme Zork,” she said, “What if one of your soldiers mistakes me or my daughter for someone else? What will keep our minds from being sandwiched into some animal, and our beautiful bodies taken over as well?”

Zork motioned for one of his men to give her a case of crystal vials, each one filled with a glowing pink powder.

“Now then, swallow a pinch once a day. It will keep you both safe from harm.”

Bellarouse bowed before him. “Thank you, Supreme Zork.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Bellarouse crept up behind Charlie and Holly as they spied her cornfield. “What are you doing here! Charlie!” she shouted.

Charlie and Holly looked back in shock, seeing Bellarouse standing right behind them. Charlie was

so stunned by her sudden appearance he found himself unable to think of anything to say.

Bellarouse stretched her mouth open again, “And who’s this?” she shouted, pointing at the girl crouched beside him.

Before Charlie or Holly had the chance to utter a word, Bellarouse sounded off again, “I’m asking you! Answer me!” Her eyes darted back and forth between the two of them. “What are you two doing here?”

Charlie finally found his voice. “Uh... Aunt Bellarouse. After telling my good friend here, Holly, about all your cooking trophies and blue ribbons, she said she just had to see them and you in person.”

Bellarouse placed her hands firmly on her hips. “Oh...is that so?”

“I told her she might even be lucky enough to get your autograph. If that might be possible?”

“What? Oh my autograph is it!” Bellarouse looked pleasantly surprised. “You say she wants my autograph?” That moment her chest broadened, shoulders arched back, arms flexed big.

Holly heard her neck crack as she snapped her head to one side. *Does this lady lift weights or what?* she thought.

Bellarouse faced them dead on. “Now whereabouts did this friend of yours come from?”

“She just moved to Kingston,” said Charlie. “We attend the same high school, and are on the



same debate team too.”

“High school? Woo...and the debate team. How impressive! Well, I must insist then you bring your debating friend along for this Saturday brunch. Then...we’ll talk autographs.”

Charlie looked over at Holly. “Can you make it?”

“Why...pass up an invitation to visit the greatest culinary cook in the world! Of course I can make it! I wouldn’t miss it for anything! As a matter of fact, I’ll probably be dreaming about getting a taste of your aunt’s blue-ribbon cooking every night.”

Bellarouse grinned. “Well then. It’s settled. And don’t be late!”

## ***CHAPTER 11***

**T**he following week, Holly and Charlie headed down the dirt road that led to Bellarouse's house for their Saturday afternoon luncheon. All of sudden, a black speck appeared down the road, just over the hill in front of them.

"I wonder what's that?" said Holly, squinting. "Can't make it out."

Charlie kept both eyes focused on the fast-approaching object until it became recognizable; a mixed-breed dog with matted fur. Charlie smiled at Holly. "That's Dumpster."

"Dumpster?" she said looking amused. "Who's Dumpster?"

"The town's garbage moocher," he said, chuckling.

No sooner had he finished those words, Dumpster raced by, leaving a cloud of dust behind him.

Charlie fanned the dust away from his face. "I

## *RUN HOLLY RUN*

never saw that dog move that fast before. Something must have really spooked him, or else he got wind of some super good food someone just took out to the garbage. People around town know that if they take some fresh leftover pizza out to the trash Dumpster will pick up the scent and be in front of their place in forty minutes or less, depending on where he is at the moment.”

“Gee. Talk about quick garbage disposal. Dumpster sounds pretty efficient.”

Twenty minutes later, Holly and Charlie arrived at Bellarouse’s house just in time to keep their lunch appointment.

Charlie turned and faced Holly, “Remember, try to include as many food words as you can while talking with my aunt. Eating and cooking is her whole life. As you know, she has a food vocabulary all her own.”

Holly smiled, “Oh, I get it. You want me to show off my fruitcake personality to get on her sweet side.”

“Well....yes.” he said. “I think that would help.”

Right as Charlie was about to knock on the front door, it suddenly opened in front of him. Bellarouse smiled at them from behind the screen door. “Well, well, how scrumptious of you to show up. Welcome! Welcome! Come right inside.”

The floorboards in Bellarouse’s living room creaked beneath their feet as they followed her

lead toward the dining area. Heading down the hallway, they observed a wide assortment of gold framed photographs showing off a variety of award-winning dishes. Bellarouse was in the center of all the pictures, holding a blue ribbon or trophy over her head. The frames were kept so clean that Holly had to squint as she walked past to keep from being blinded by the reflection of the ceiling lights off the glass covers.

When Holly entered the dining room, she couldn't hardly imagine the depths of Bellarouse's cooking world. From every direction were photographs of her holding trophies and first place blue ribbons. She gazed down at the placemats and tablecloth, taking note that everything was silk-screened with images of first-place awards. There were six, gold leafed ceramic mugs on the table that said, "I'm Number One" in large bold letters.

In the middle of the black mahogany dining table was a huge gold-plated chicken trophy. Bellarouse came up behind Holly and placed her hand firmly on her shoulder. "That, my dear woman, is my pride and joy. The Pulitzer Prize for the world's best chicken stew recipe. Isn't it just amazing?"

"Yes... very, very impressive," said Holly.

Holly stepped over to Charlie and whispered into his ear. "She sure has lots of first place cooking plaques. The only plaque I have is on my teeth."

Bellarouse gave Holly a quick sneer. "Oh, Holly,

it's not polite to whisper. Especially in front of your host!"

Holly nodded, looking a little embarrassed.

"Sit up straight, Charlie!" said Bellarouse, "You know I don't like slackers at the table!" Her face suddenly flashed between Holly and Charlie. "Do you two like taking night walks, out in the field?" she said in a whispery tone of voice.

"I'm not the night owl type, really," said Holly, "if that's what you're hinting at."

Bellarouse stepped over to the kitchen table and served them two plates of her favorite dish.

"Aunt Bellarouse," said Charlie, "you really out did yourself. This looks and smells delicious."

Right, looking good!" said Holly, giving her a thumbs up. "Shepherd's pie. I love shepherd pie!"

"Good. Good." Bellarouse brought over two large bowls of her famous clam chowder. After they finished all the food, Bellarouse leaned close to Holly and whispered into her ear, "Tell me truthfully now, are you a corn stalker?"

"Uh...stalker?" she said, "Uh, what's that suppose to...?"

"You know what I mean. Like going into people personal crops and stalk for things?"

"Things? Me? Absolutely not!"

Charlie cleared his throat to get his aunts attention. "This was the most awesome brunch ever, Auntie. I totally forgot. One of your clients asked

me if I could do some pet sitting for them an hour earlier than normal.”

“Well now Charlie. It’s a shame to hear that you and your friend have to leave so early.” Bellarouse walked up to Holly and pinched her cheek, “Be sure to join us again soon?”

Holly gave Bellarouse a big smile. “I would love to experience more of your awesome cooking!”

“Well good,” she said, “Here’s my autograph you asked for.”

Holly gave an extra big smile for Bellarouse. “Wow! Thanks so much! I must have this framed so I can hang it in my room!”

Moments later, Charlie and Holly headed out the front door and back down the dirt road toward town

**End of Sample Chapters**