

FROM THE MAGICAL MIND
OF MINDY MUNSON

FROM THE MAGICAL MIND
OF MINDY MUNSON



**FIREDRAKE
BOOKS, LLC**

From the Magical Mind of Mindy Munson

Text copyright © 2014 by Nicole A. Bennett

Cover art copyright © 2014 by Pietro Chiappinelli

Interior illustrations copyright © 2014 by Margaret Rogers

Edited by Marlo Garnsworthy

Published by Firedrake Books, LLC. All rights reserved.

ISBN 10: 1-941036-05-8

ISBN 13: 978-1-941036-05-1

Library of Congress Control Number: 2013956545

No part of this publication may be reproduced, or stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any other means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, without written permission of the publisher.

This book is a work of fiction. Characters, names, places and incidents are products of the author's imagination or are used in a fictitious manner and are not to be constructed as real.

Printed in the United States of America

Dedication

The house described in this book is the house I grew up in. Most of the adventures the kids have, we had too, when we were kids. So even though this isn't a true story, it contains a ton of "true" instances--like skating on the broken pool and playing in the hedge maze. And I still swear, to this day, that Uncle Sam is real.

Having said that, this book is dedicated to my family—especially my sister and brother and cousins—and the Turner kids who lived next door.

And to my late grandfather—James Rogers—who told us stories about the Goony Bird and who always set up "Luke Hunts" for us when we were kids.

A special thanks to my brother, Pete Chiappinelli, and my aunt, Margaret Rogers, for contributing to the artwork in this book.

Finally, I'd like to give special thanks to the following people who contributed to help get this book off the ground:

Julie Savia / Don and Jenna West / Yoko Bennett
Stephanie Correa / Cody Martin / Susan Walker
Shirley Birkhimer / K.C. Rich / Stephen Rogers
Alex Alvarez / JF Garrard



Contents

The House	1
Mrs. Wemberley	6
The Mulberry Dragon	11
Stingers	19
The Bamboo Club	24
Uncle Sam	31
The Climbing Tree	38
The Goony Bird	44
The Maze	53
Luke	58
Spiders and Vampires	66
The Attic	72
Abimal	78
The Broken Pool	83
Tuff Nugie	89
Thumbby's Gang	96
The Basement	100
Runaway	105
The Thing	113
The Wedding	116
About the Author	



Chapter One

The House

My name is Susie Munson, and I live in a haunted house. Most people don't believe me, but *I* know it's haunted. My brothers know too. We know because our little sister Mindy told us so. And Mindy is always right about these things.

My younger brother Tucker, who's nine but thinks he's an adult already, says he doesn't believe in magic hocus-pocus. There's no scientific proof behind it. But even he believes what Mindy says, and she's only five.

My sister Mindy is special. She sees monsters. Ghosts. Spirits. Strange things no one else can see.

Mindy's twin brother Jesse jabbbers on and on all the time like a parrot, but Mindy never talks. Not a word. At least, not a word anyone except Jesse understands. She whispers to Jesse, and he tells us about the monsters and the ghosts. Mindy nods, solemn, but never says a thing.

Our therapist Dr. O'Neal says Mindy acts the way she does because she's been *traumatized*. That's a boring adult answer and makes no sense. Why would Mindy be traumatized more than the rest of us? She hardly knew our parents. She was too young when Mom and Dad died, so why would she miss them now? I mean, Jesse's the same age, and he talks fine.

FROM THE MAGICAL MIND OF MINDY MUNSEN

“You’d be amazed at what young children pick up on,” my Aunt Julie says.

“Then maybe they can pick up on when something’s haunted too,” Tucker says.

That’s usually when Aunt Julie tells me to tell Tucker to stop talking nonsense. I’m the eldest, so she thinks I can tell my brothers and sister what to do and how to behave.

But I can’t tell Tucker how to act. He’s too stubborn.

And I can’t tell the twins *anything*. They only listen to each other.



When we first moved in with Aunt Julie, three years ago, we lived in a cramped apartment in the city. I got my own bedroom, but Tucker had to sleep on the couch in front of the TV. And the twins slept in the same room as Aunt Julie.

But this summer we’ve moved to The House.

The House was cheap even though it has four whole bedrooms, so Aunt Julie bought it and now we all have our privacy. The twins sleep in one room because they’re twins, but nobody else has to share anymore. I sleep in my own room, Tucker has his, and Aunt Julie has hers. And there’s a big living room and a den, and a huge kitchen and a dining room with a real fireplace.

THE HOUSE

There's also a basement with a cistern in it. Aunt Julie says a cistern is something old houses have and we must never go near it. Tucker looked up the word on his computer.

"A cistern's a hole where they stored water in the olden days," he says. "Like a well, only with a concrete bottom."

The House has a broken pool with no water in the backyard, and a creepy cabana (cabana is a fancy word for pool house) with two rooms and a kitchen. We aren't supposed to go in the cabana either, 'cause of the spiders.

And, Aunt Julie told us not to climb out on The House's roof, which we can get onto through Tucker's bedroom window. But sometimes we sneak out there anyway. We're always super quiet because Aunt Julie sleeps under that roof, and if she hears us we'll be grounded until we're a hundred.

You can't see the stars in the city. I never realized how bright they were until we moved out here.

Exploring our huge yard is gonna take all summer. But today is rainy. So we're stuck inside, bored.

"Let's check out the basement," Tucker says. "I bet there's lots of cool stuff down there."

"Yeah, like spiders," I say. But Jesse is jumping up and down, all excited about exploring some place new. So we open the squeaky basement door and peer down. The air down there smells musty and old.

Tucker finds the light switch and turns it on. A faint glow flickers from somewhere in the gloom. We shuffle down the rickety stairs. I reach the bottom first, and step into a dirty, moldy world. My shoes kick up clouds of dust wherever I step. Mindy screws up her nose.

"She don't like it," Jesse says.

"This place is gross," Tucker says, which means (in boy talk) that he thinks it's cool. "Look at all this garbage."

FROM THE MAGICAL MIND OF MINDY MUNSEN

We have to move some stuff around so we can smoosh through the room. Junk is piled all over the place. Old chairs, a record player older than Aunt Julie, and an ancient sewing machine—the kind they used before electricity was invented, when they had to use a foot pedal so the needle would work. Cobwebs cover everything.

Behind the sewing machine, a splintered wooden door hangs off its hinges. Mindy whispers to Jesse. Jesse points to the door.

“Somffin’ scawy lives in dere,” Jesse says.

“What do you mean?” Tucker says.

“A Fing. A Bad Fing.”

“What’s a Fing?” I whisper to Tucker.

“He means *thing*,” Tucker, who understands Jesse’s garbly talk better than me, says.

“Why’s it bad?”

“It eats people,” Jesse says. “Dat’s why nobody lives vewy long in dis House. Dey get eaten or dey wun away.”

Tucker freezes. “Guys, you hear that?”

All of a sudden I feel shivery. I hear something breathe. It’s not Tucker or Jesse or Mindy, it’s something else, and I get the heebie-jeebie shaky-legs. The breathing is raspy, like how Jesse sounded when he was three and got sick with the croup. The wooden door rattles. And then, the flickering light flickers right out and we’re covered in darkness.

I’m *outta* here. I turn and crash into a chair, which freaks me out even more because now I probably have spiders crawling on me. I take off screaming and stumble back up the stairs, towards the comforting hallway light. Tucker and Jesse are screaming too. Aunt Julie comes barreling in from the kitchen, her crazy red hair flying all over the place. She stares at us, eyes wide with fear.

THE HOUSE

“What happened?”

“Mindy says there’s a Thing in the basement that eats people!” Tucker says.

“Oh geez.” Aunt Julie rolls her eyes. “You almost gave me a heart attack. Stay away from the basement, all of you. There’s probably spiders down there. Don’t go down there again until I fumigate it.”

Jesse blinks. “What’s *foom-gate*?”

“It’s where she kills all the spiders,” Tucker says between gasps for air.

“Well anyway, no more screaming,” Aunt Julie says. “Not unless it’s about something serious.”

I think a people eating Thing living in our basement is pretty serious. *And* worth screaming about. But Aunt Julie doesn’t see it that way.

The only one who didn’t scream was Mindy. Mindy never gets scared or upset. She doesn’t even cry. Well, she’s never cried since That Day anyway.

Tucker was the one who first called it That Day. He won’t call it anything else, so the rest of us started calling it That Day, too. Tucker doesn’t like to talk about it.

Dr. O’Neal says Tucker is angry. He blames our parents for leaving him. He doesn’t understand that it wasn’t their fault and they didn’t leave him on purpose. But I think Tucker understands fine. Maybe it’s easier for him to not think about it than to be sad.

After the car crash, Jesse cried for Mom, and Mindy just cried. But they stopped soon after. They’re too young to remember much.

I cried a lot. But that was three years ago. Now I hate having to still visit Dr. O’Neal. I hate how adults say we have to talk to somebody to get better.

How do they know we aren’t better already?

Chapter Two

Mrs. Wemberley

Aunt Julie works in the city. She says we're too young to stay by ourselves all day in the summer, so she's hired a babysitter to watch us.

"Why can't I babysit 'em?" I say. "I'm old enough."

"You're eleven, and we live in the middle of nowhere. What would happen if there was an emergency?" is Aunt Julie's lame response.

She hires this old lady named Mrs. Wemberley, who is a hundred years old, at least. Mrs. Wemberley walks to our house because she doesn't have a car.

"If she can't drive, she's no better in an emergency than I am," I say.

But we get stuck with Mrs. Wemberley anyway.

Mrs. Wemberley knits and watches TV. Her eyesight is terrible, and we have to yell when we want her to hear us. She wears this stinky-sweet perfume that makes me want to barf, and she always says "yeeeah" after every sentence, in a rednecky southern drawl. But she's okay. As long as we don't interrupt her soaps, she lets us do what we want.

Today she's glued to the TV, and we're playing Mashed Potatoes. Tucker invented the Mashed Potatoes game right after we moved in. In Mashed Potatoes, you have to walk through the whole house without touching the icky yellow

carpet that covers the floor in most rooms. The carpet is shaggy in spots and has nubbly patterns in other spots and feels grimy if you walk on it with bare feet, no matter how much Aunt Julie vacuums. I don't know why Tucker decided to call the game "Mashed Potatoes." Mashed Potatoes aren't yellow like the carpet, but they are lumpy like the carpet, so I guess the name fits.

At first we tried to get across the carpet without touching it by climbing over chairs and tables, which worked pretty well until Mindy fell off the sofa and conked her head. So Aunt Julie said we couldn't play Mashed Potatoes by climbing on furniture anymore.

Then I tried throwing a towel down, walking across it, then throwing another towel down, jumping on it, and picking up the first one. If you keep throwing down towels, you can get pretty far without stepping on the carpet.

But Aunt Julie got fed up with us using her towels because we never put them away and she could never find one when she wanted to take a shower.

So Jesse started using his sleeping bag. He crawls into it headfirst and inches along the floor. The problem is that he can never tell where he's going, so he bumps into stuff. But that adds fun to the game. Now we all use our sleeping bags, and whoever gets across The House first without conking their heads into the wall wins.

Usually Tucker wins. He's super-fast. And he can work out where he is and where the walls are, so he never bumps his head. I can never figure out where I am when I'm in my sleeping bag. I'll think I'm halfway across the room, and I'll peek out of the bag and realize I've crawled to the wrong side. Tucker says that's because I've become *discombobulated*.

Today we are having a marathon Mashed Potatoes. We're starting in the kitchen, even though there's no carpet in it,

and ending on the other side of The House, at Aunt Julie's bedroom. The winner gets the last spoonful of peanut butter in the peanut butter jar. The twins are all excited. They love peanut butter more than anything.

We slide across the kitchen's cheap vinyl floor. Next is the dining room, which is hard to get through because the dining room table is blocking most of it. Then we head through the foyer and crawl through the den. Aunt Julie's bedroom comes next.

Aunt Julie says her room is called a *solarium*. A solarium is like a greenhouse, but ours doesn't have any plants. The plant boxes are filled with gravel instead, and Aunt Julie's bed sits on the tiled floor under a roof made of glass.

Tucker reaches Aunt Julie's solarium-bedroom first, so he wins. Mindy is second. She's figured out that if she grabs the back of Tucker's sleeping bag, she won't have to do much except crawl and follow. Tucker lets her tag along because she's the baby. I'm next, and Jesse is last.

"You can have the peanut butter anyway," Tucker, who loves peanut butter, says to the twins. Sometimes Tucker can be nice. Sometimes.

"Oh goody," Jesse says.

That's when we hear the thump.

It's coming from below us, where the basement with the cistern and the bad Thing is. We run back into the living room.

Mrs. Wemberley's knitting is on the floor, and she's snoring. I shake her shoulder. She grunts.

"Pick up yer socks," Mrs. Wemberley mumbles before she falls back asleep.

"Well, she's no help," Tucker says.

Jesse tugs on my sleeve. "It's Fursday."

"He means Thursday," Tucker says.

“So? What about Thursday?”

“On Fursday Da Fing gets cwampy in his hole, so he comes out of it.”

“I bet he tripped over a chair,” Tucker says, grinning.

I look at Mindy. “Is that true?” She stares back at me with her solemn blue eyes and nods.

Tucker shakes his head. “How does she *know* these things?”

Jesse says, “Unca Sam told her, dat’s how.”

“Uncle Sam? Who’s he?”

Jesse shrugs. Mindy shrugs too. They’re both so cute I laugh and don’t bother asking again. I figure Mindy will tell us who Uncle Sam is when she’s good and ready.

On Monday evenings we visit Dr. O’Neal.

We’ve seen Dr. O’Neal almost every week since That Day, three years ago. Aunt Julie says we have a lot of issues to resolve and Dr. O’Neal is supposed to help us resolve them.

I usually go in first, alone. Since I’m the oldest I guess I’m supposed to have the hardest time coping.

Dr. O’Neal asks me how my week went and if I like living out in the country.

“It must be much different than living in the city,” he says. “All that fresh air.” He taps his pencil on his desk, which annoys me like it always does.

“Well, it has pretty stars at night.” I *do* love the stars.

“Do you like your new house?” says Dr. O’Neal, pencil tapping away.

“It’s okay.” I like having my own room, and the big house is quieter than the small apartment in the city.

Dr. O’Neal looks disappointed. I guess I don’t sound as excited about our new home as I’m supposed to sound. But there’s nothing exciting about it. It’s just a house.

Of course, I don't tell Dr. O'Neal it's a Haunted House, a bad Thing lives in the basement, and someone called Uncle Sam has been talking to Mindy. I figure Jesse will tell him all that. And Dr. O'Neal won't believe him. He'll tell Jesse not to worry—we're safe with Aunt Julie. Nothing bad will happen to us.

Adults always say stuff like that. I guess it's easier than explaining how bad things *could* happen.

Chapter Three

The Mulberry Dragon

Mindy says living things are everywhere. Not just bugs and mice and spiders and creatures *everybody* can see. Other creatures live here, too. Adults can't see them. Most kids can't see them either. I know I can't.

But Mindy sees them all.

Next to our house is an old, rickety guest house, and in front of the guest house is a sandbox. Well, it was a sandbox once. Now, weeds grow in it, and the wooden box is gone. All that's left is a sandyish spot in the yard. Tucker and I pull up the weeds so the twins can play in the little sand that's left.

"I don't want them playing out there without an adult watching," Aunt Julie says. "It's too close to the road."

"I'm eleven," I say. "I'm adult enough to make sure the twins don't run out into the road."

"No," Aunt Julie says, "you aren't."

Geez. I mean, hardly any cars use that road, and it's not as if I've ever done anything stupid. I don't know why Aunt Julie doesn't trust me. I am a super-responsible kid, just ask any of my old teachers.

Aunt Julie will watch the twins on the weekends, but on weekdays all we have is old Mrs. Wemberley, and she doesn't like coming outside in the heat if she can help it. "In my

day,” she says, “kids could run around anywhere they liked, yeeeah. Nobody worried ‘bout murderers and kidnappers back then, yeeeah.”

We’ve made a sneaky deal with Mrs. Wemberley. If Aunt Julie asks whether we’ve been near the road by ourselves, we say no, even if we have, and Mrs. Wemberley says she’s watched us all day even if she hasn’t. She lies, and we lie. I guess we shouldn’t, but it’s the only way the twins can play in their sandbox when Aunt Julie is at work. If Mrs. Wemberley doesn’t mind lying, I don’t see why we should mind, either.

A mulberry tree grows over the sandbox.

“Aunt Julie says mulberries taste great in pies and jelly,” I tell the twins. “She says we can pick the mulberries when they start to get ripe in June.”

“Only if da dwagon lets us,” Jesse says.

Tucker grins at him. “What dragon?”

“Da one in da twee.”

I peer up into the leaves. “I don’t see any dragon.”

“Dat’s because it looks like da twee.”

“He means the dragon is *camouflaged*,” Tucker says, “like a chameleon. He’s just too young to know what the word *camouflaged* means.”

“I know it now,” Jesse says. “Cam’fwaged.”

Mindy tells Jesse (and he tells us) that the Dragon looks like a stick and can *camouflage* to any branch it wants, so we’ll never see it. But it’s there.

“What will it do to us if we pick the berries?” Tucker says.

“It’ll send its stingas,” Jesse says.

I frown. “What’s a stinga?”

“Stinger,” Tucker says. “That’s what he means. I think.”

Jesse nods. Then he tells us we can pick the berries if we distract the dragon. It likes things made out of sand, like

THE MULBERRY DRAGON

sandcastles and sand animals and drawings in the sand. If we make those things, the Mulberry Dragon will be too busy looking at them and won't notice if we pick berries. But if we don't, he'll send the stingers.

"You know," Tucker says to me when the twins can't hear, "Mindy's favorite TV show is about a cartoon dragon. You think she might be making this up? I mean, I believe her about The Thing in the basement, because we've heard it stomping around down there, but a dragon living in the mulberry tree? I'm thinking maybe Mindy has an overly-stimulated imagination and the Mulberry Dragon isn't there at all."

"Yeah, but we shouldn't take any chances," I say. "You know she's always right about stuff like this."

"Let's try picking some now, just to *see* if she's right," Tucker says.

I shake my head. "Aunt Julie says they aren't ripe enough."

Earlier in the summer, the mulberries were white, but now they're turning all purplely. "Aunt Julie says when they're red we can pick 'em," I say. "And then I'm gonna help her make mulberry pie." Aunt Julie likes to cook, and I love helping her. Especially with pies and cookies and things.

"Well, I'll help by licking the spoon," Tucker, who hates cooking, says.

"And I'll hep by eatin' da pie," Jesse says.

Boys. They're no help whatsoever.

"I see one or two red ones up there," Tucker says, peering at the tree. "We could try to pick 'em."



“We’d better get something to make drawings with then,” I say. “I don’t want to take any chances with those stingers, whatever they are.”

“We can use the garden tools in the kitchen.” Tucker jumps up and runs back to the House.

In the kitchen is a box where Aunt Julie grows plants. Windows surround the box and let the sun in. Aunt Julie calls the area her conservatory, which is a fancy way of saying greenhouse, which is a place where you grow plants. The conservatory is a lot like the solarium, only way smaller. Aunt Julie has planted basil and parsley and thyme there because they taste good in food.

She let us kids have a spot where we can plant too. Tucker and I each have a cactus. I don’t know why we decided to plant cacti, because they’re full of prickles. You don’t even need to get near them to get the prickles in your hand—if you look at them you’ll get all owie. Tucker’s cactus is shiny and flat and has big spikes, but mine is smaller and rounder and has lots of prickles. If you touch my cactus, you’ll end up with hundreds of prickles in your hand instead of one or two.

The twins wanted flowers. Mindy planted petunias, and Jesse planted daisies. They have to water their flowers at least twice a week, but Tucker and I hardly ever water our cacti. They’re desert plants and only need a teeny bit of water every once in a while. So even though they’ve got the prickles, they’re much easier to take care of. And they won’t die out like the flowers. They’ll keep on growing and prickling.

Next to the plants is a whole shelf full of gardening tools, which are great to use in the sandbox. We use the trowel to dig and the little rake to make patterns, and if we fill the watering pot with sand and tip it upside down, we can make sandcastles. As long as they’re back on their shelf before Aunt Julie comes home, we’re allowed to play with the tools.

THE MULBERRY DRAGON

The twins like to dig, so they get the trowel. Tucker wants the watering pot to build castles, so I take the little rake and make all sorts of patterns in the sand—a smiley face and letters and wavy lines like the sea.

Mindy whispers something to Jesse, and Jesse says, “Da dwagon is watching us.”

I put down the rake. “Is he looking at our sandcastles? Is it safe for me to pick a mulberry now?”

Mindy nods. I reach up and pluck a couple of red-dish-purple berries off the tree, but I don’t take any more than that. Most of the berries hanging from the tree are still white or half-white. Aunt Julie says we’ll get stomachaches if we eat the berries when they aren’t ripe.

Tucker pops his berry into his mouth, makes a face, and spits it out.

“Uck. It’s sour. I guess they need to turn really red before they’re ripe.”

We throw our berries away. We’ll have to wait until they’re a little riper.

Pretty soon we’ll have enough mulberries to make a whole pie.

It gets *super* hot here. Before That Day we lived up north, and summers weren’t so sticky. After three years of living down south, we should be used to the heat. But I still don’t like it much.

At least the air-conditioning at Aunt Julie’s old apartment worked. Here it doesn’t. The House is so old, back when it was built I bet they didn’t even know what air-conditioning was.

“If I can find the money, I’ll get us a nice new system that blows cold air instead of this cruddy warm wind,” Aunt Julie says as she fans herself.

Aunt Julie bought us paper fans to use since the air-conditioning is out. My fan has flowers and lace on it. She gave Tucker a fan painted with ninjas, but he won't use it.

"I'm a boy," he says, holding the fan like it's a dead rat.

"So? You wanna stay cool, don't you?" Aunt Julie says.

"I don't care, only girls use fans. I wouldn't use that thing even if I was on the brink of death."

"Fine," Aunt Julie says, She gives it to Jesse instead. He loves it because it's got ninjas.

Sometimes, outside is cooler than inside. At least outside we get a little breeze to cool us. And we can turn on the hose and spray each other if we want to get wet, although Aunt Julie hates it when we use the hose. We always forget to turn the water off when we're done.

Today a little breeze is blowing. It's the middle of June and plenty of mulberries are ripe. Definitely enough to make a pie. Aunt Julie is home for once so she is coming out to help us pick. She can get the berries we can't reach.

"Did you know," Aunt Julie says, "that this red mulberry tree is the only mulberry tree native to North America?"

"Where do the other types come from?" I say.

"Different countries."

Tucker nods. "Like Asia where silkworms eat mulberry leaves 'clusively 'cause they don't like to eat anything else."

"Yup," Aunt Julie says. "Ready to pick?"

Jesse tugs on her shirt. "We gotta make da pictures first."

Aunt Julie makes a face, kind of a cross between an annoyed frown and an amused smile. She doesn't think the dragon is real. But we draw some funny pictures in the sand before we start picking, just in case.

"Aunt Julie, why don't you believe in the Mulberry Dragon?" Tucker says.

THE MULBERRY DRAGON

“Because there are no such things as dragons, you know that—you’re Mr. Einstein.”

“Yeah, but Mindy says it’s there.”

Aunt Julie shakes her head. “Mindy doesn’t say *anything*.”

“She does too,” Tucker gets all pouty, and Aunt Julie sighs.

“Look, I love it that you kids have such great imaginations. But it’s crazy hot out, so can we please get on with this? I want to get back inside before I melt.”

“The house isn’t any cooler,” Tucker says.

When Mindy gives us the all-clear—the dragon is looking at the sand drawings and we can now pick mulberries—we start. We pick and we pick and we pick. Picking enough berries to fill a pail takes a super-long time. I turn to Jesse.

“Is the dragon still looking at the drawings?”

“Yup,” Jesse says.

“What if he’s tired of looking at the same drawings? He might send out his stingers soon, if he gets bored.”

Aunt Julie laughs. “Oh come on, that isn’t going to happen.” But the twins are tired of picking anyway, so they make a new patterns in the sand to keep the dragon busy.

Finally we have a whole pail of squishy mulberries. Aunt Julie hauls the pail back up to The House to make the pie. We scuff through all the drawings so they’re gone before we head up the driveway.

“Why don’t we leave the drawings there for the next time?” Tucker says. “Then we won’t have to make new ones every time we want to pick mulberries.”

“Nope,” Jesse says. “It don’t work dat way.”

As we tromp up the kitchen steps, we hear a weird sound. A creaking, moaning, super-freaky sound.

“What’s dat?” Jesse says.

“It’s coming from under The House,” Tucker says.

“Do you tink it’s Da Fing?” Jesse says. Mindy nods.

“It’s not Thursday,” Tucker says. “What’s The Thing doing out of his hole?”

Mindy shakes her head. She doesn’t know.

By the time we get in the kitchen we can’t hear the creaks and moans any more. But I look down at the old vinyl floor, all yellow and cracked with age, and wonder: is The Thing under my feet right now? Is it looking up, thinking about busting through the floor and grabbing me? Tucker is staring at the floor too.

“We have to do something about The Thing,” he says. “Before *it* does something to us.”

Chapter Four

Stingers

Aunt Julie never had kids. She never married, either. I asked her once why, and she said she didn't want to be "tied down." It took a while before I understood what that meant. She's tied down now, though. She's stuck with all of us. Sometimes I think she's mad at us for taking away her freedom. But mostly we get along.

I remember Aunt Julie as always being the Cool Aunt. She never acted like an adult. She taught us how to fish and how to paint, and she took us camping and exploring caves, even when we were little. We liked spending the night at Aunt Julie's more than with our cousins even. I think we liked spending the night with her even more than staying at home with our own parents.

On the night of That Day, Tucker and I were sleeping at Aunt Julie's. Mindy and Jesse were with our parents in the car. After That Day we never left Aunt Julie's. And Mindy and Jesse, once they were out of the hospital, never left Aunt Julie again, either.

Aunt Julie isn't the Cool Aunt anymore. She says she can't be the Cool Aunt since she's our parent and we have to see her every day.

We still like her though. She's still pretty fun. Right now, she's showing me how to roll pie dough. Tucker is picking through the mulberries, making sure we don't cook any white

ones. Both Tucker and I have our feet curled up beneath us on our stools. We're still nervous about The Thing, but Jesse and Mindy have forgotten. They've crawled under the kitchen table and are playing a weird hand-clapping game they made up. They aren't worried about The Thing at all.

"Do you really think there's a dragon in the mulberry tree?" Tucker whispers to me.

"Mindy says there is."

"But we haven't heard or seen anything. I mean, there's definitely something creepy in the basement. But the mulberry tree? I'm a scientist. I don't believe in fantasy mumbo-jumbo like dragons."

"Well, neither would I, if anyone else told me a dragon lived in that tree."

"Whatever. I'm getting too old to believe in this kind of stuff."

"I'm older than you. By two whole years. And *I* believe it."

"I think we need to test her theory," Tucker says.

"You should try testing The Thing theory too, and go down into the basement. See if you get eaten."

Tucker gulps and glances at the floor. "Heck no. I'm not getting near that basement. But I'm going to try to pick mulberries without making any sand pictures for the dragon. I want to see if anything happens."

"Okay, you go right ahead. I'm not convinced, and I don't want to know what Mindy meant by 'stingers.' That sounds too...stingy."

"I'll do it," Tucker says, looking resolute. "I'll do it tomorrow."

We finish making the pie and get to eat it for dessert. It is delicious, all sweet and messy. The twins' faces are covered with purple stains by the time they finish their slices.

The Pink Monster lives in the living room. But Mindy didn't have to tell us that. We can *all* see it.

STINGERS

It came with The House. I guess the people who lived here before us didn't want it, because it was sitting in the empty living room when we moved in. It's a huge piece of furniture with tons of drawers and a big mirror. Two curly columns that look like unicorn horns run up the sides of the mirror, and two carved lions sit on top of the columns, looking ferocious.

Aunt Julie says the Pink Monster probably was a pretty piece of furniture once, but somebody went and painted it this icky salmon color. So that's why we named it the Pink Monster.

When we first moved in, we spent a whole afternoon getting all the dirt and junk out of its drawers. Some of the junk was neat. Tucker found some fancy looking pens. I opened a drawer and found a bunch of dead bugs lying on a silver mirror. Aunt Julie said whatever we found we could keep. So Tucker has the pens, and I cleaned up the mirror and even though it's cracked and I can't see myself much in it, I love it. It's an antique.

Aunt Julie said we could each have a drawer in the Pink Monster. The twins share a bottom drawer, and they put their blocks in it. My drawer is in the top left corner and I keep my mirror in it. Tucker's drawer has the old pens and his all-important journal. He calls it a "scientific journal," and I tease him that it's actually a "diary."

"Shut up, Susie. Diaries are what girls have," he says, slugging me in the shoulder with a fist. "Boys like me have journals. And we don't write sappy stuff, like how we feel or what girl we want to kiss, like you do."

"I don't write that I want to kiss a girl." I grin as he tries to slug me again, but misses.

"My journal has a bunch of facts in it," he says. "Like the scientific names of our cacti. And the mulberry tree. It's *Morus rubra*, by the way, in case you're interested."

“I’m not, and speaking of mulberry trees, weren’t you going to prove ours doesn’t have a dragon in it?”

He gulps and nods. Now that he has to do it, he doesn’t want to. He’d better do it though, if he doesn’t want me calling him a weenie wuss for the rest of his life.

Tucker’s journal is a school notebook, but I have a fancy diary with pink roses on the front, and a lock. I don’t write sappy stuff in it like Tucker thinks, but I am starting a list of all the weird creatures we’re finding at The House. I have The Thing in the basement and Uncle Sam written down already, although I still don’t know who or what Uncle Sam is, so I can’t write much about him yet.

But I *can* write about the Mulberry Dragon, so I do. I write how he looks like part of the tree so you can’t see him, and how to keep him distracted while you’re picking mulberries.

I look out the window. Tucker is sneaking toward the tree. The twins are busy watching their morning TV show and don’t notice.

I keep writing, and then I draw a sketch of the tree and the sandbox and what I think the dragon looks like, and then I see Tucker running back up the driveway.

He’s crying.

He comes in screaming, with tears streaming down his face, and Mrs. Wemberley gets up out of her chair and hobbles over to see what the matter is.

“Look at what happened,” Tucker blubbers, holding out his hand. It’s all red and puffy.

Mrs. Wemberley shakes her head and tsks and says, “What were you doing playing around bees?”

“I wasn’t,” Tucker says. “I was picking mulberries.”

“Well you’ve got a bee sting now, yeeeah, you sure do,” Mrs. Wemberley says, and she hobbles off to get some witch-hazel, which she swears cures everything.

STINGERS

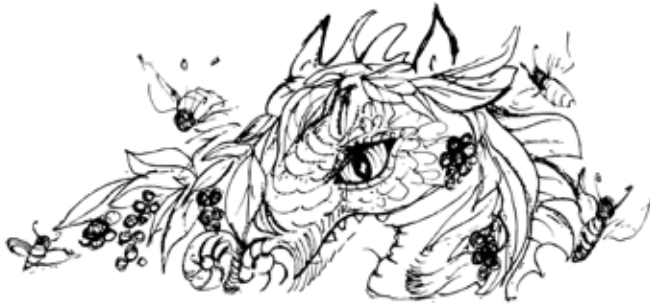
Jesse looks at Tucker with big blue eyes and says, “Did you dwaw pictures for da dwagon?”

Tucker shakes his head. He’s still crying, the big baby.

Mindy whispers to Jesse. Jesse says (very sternly), “If you don’t dwaw pictures, da dwagon will send his stingas.”

Tucker nods, sniffing.

I bet he’ll never doubt the twins again.



Chapter Five

The Bamboo Club

Do you remember Mommy?" I ask Jesse.

We're sitting outside in Aunt Julie's hammock. Almost as soon as we moved in, Aunt Julie rigged the hammock between a couple of trees and she'd lie in it every chance she got. But now it's steamy hot out, and Aunt Julie hates steamy hot. So she won't come outside and we can swing on the hammock as much as we want.

"I 'member," Jesse says

"What do you remember?"

Jesse thinks, then he says, "Mommy had wed hair."

I nod. "Like Aunt Julie and Tucker. Does Mindy remember Mommy?"

Jesse shakes his head. "She 'members Daddy. She says Daddy had a bwown beawd. Like you."

"I don't have a brown beard," I say, "but my hair is brown."

Jesse laughs, but I don't. I remember Daddy's beard and how it always tickled when he'd hug me.

"And she says Daddy had a faiwy that flew awound his head. Like Tinkabell, but he was a man faiwy."

I don't remember that part. But that's what Mindy says. So it must be true.

Aunt Julie's room—the solarium—is right over the part of the basement where The Thing's hole is. She's an adult so

THE BAMBOO CLUB

she isn't afraid to sleep above The Thing, but we are. Even Jesse, who always used to get in bed with Aunt Julie when he was scared, won't sleep in the solarium. In the daytime it's okay. Sunlight streams through the glass ceiling, and we play on the warm tiles and don't worry about The Thing. But now at night, when Jesse is scared, he crawls into my bed.

"Why can't you sleep with Aunt Julie?" I say.

"Da Fing. What if it comes up da steps at night?"

He's right. A set of creepy stone steps lead from the solarium's glass door down to the brick pathway running behind The House. If The Thing sneaks outside at night, it could creep up those steps and bust right through the flimsy glass door.

The solarium and steps are on the left side of The House, and at the end of the pathway, behind the cabana, is a barbed-wire fence. The fence separates our yard from a field full of goats. A grove of bamboo grows next to the fence. Tucker says bamboo isn't *indigenous* to North America, which is his scientific-fancy way of saying it came from somewhere else. Like Asia or Africa or something. He says it's an *invasive species* because it's not supposed to grow here. But there it is, a whole stand of it, sprouting out of the ground. The bamboo shades us from the hot summer sun, so we've made a clubhouse in the grove.

Tucker peers between the bamboo leaves. "There aren't any weird things living in here, are there?"

"Dunno," Jesse says. "Mindy'll look."

Mindy nods and crawls away, searching. Then she comes back and whispers to Jesse.



Jesse points towards the barbed-wire fence. “Mindy sees kids.”

“*Real* kids?” Tucker says. You can never be sure with Mindy.

Jesse nods.

The kids are peering over the fence. They’re surround by goats. A black goat and a whitish goat and a goat that looks like somebody shaved all its hair off.

The boy is about my age. He has short blond hair and big round eyes. He looks scared, as if he’s seen a ghost.

The girl has scraggly brown hair and is as thin as a strand of spaghetti. She’s Tucker’s age or a year younger. She looks scared, too.

They both look like they’re ready to run away. Tucker grins at them.

“Hi!”

I smile. Mindy crawls up, followed by Jesse, and the new kids smile too.

“I’m Danny, and this is my sister Anna,” the boy says. “We live next door.”

“I didn’t know we had neighbors,” Tucker says. “You can’t see any house from here. All we can see is the field with the goats.”

Anna nods. “Our house is in the woods *behind* the field. That’s why you can’t see it.”

“Why do you have so many goats?” I say. They’re super-cute, but sort of stinky.

“We’ve got ‘em cause Mom says we need to live *sustainably*,” Danny says, scratching one of the goats behind its ears.

“Huh?”

Tucker gives me one of his why-don’t-you-know-anything sighs. “It means that they grow their own vegetables instead of buying food at the grocery store.”

THE BAMBOO CLUB

“Why?”

Danny leans forward. “Grocery store food is *poisoned*.”

Jesse’s eyes get wide. “*Weally* poisoned?”

Tucker pats Jesse’s head. “No, not really.”

“Well, not exactly poisoned,” Danny says, “but the grocery store people put chemicals on everything, which is bad. So Mom planted this big garden where she grows all our vegetables. And we milk the goats and make cheese out of the milk, and we get eggs from our chickens. All we buy at the grocery store now is flour and sugar and baking soda.”

Okay, I know what baking soda is for. I give Tucker a smug stare. “For baking.”

“Well, duh,” Tucker says.

“You can use baking soda for anything,” Danny says. “You can wash your hair with it and brush your teeth with it and use it to clean dishes. And you can put it in food, too.”

Wow. Putting it in food is the only thing I thought you used baking soda for. Well, like Aunt Julie says, you learn something new every day.

“What about that poor goat with no hair?” Tucker says.

Anna grins. “It’s an Angora goat. Mom shaved it so she could make yarn out of its hair.”

“Geez, your mom must not have to work like our Aunt Julie,” I say. “She’d never have time to do all that stuff.”

“You live with your aunt?” Anna says.

Oh no, here it comes. The Question. I nod.

“Why?”

I hate it when people ask The Question. Tucker comes to the rescue and answers.

“Our parents died in a car crash.”

“Oh.” Anna’s face gets all red and she looks away. I look away, too. I mean, what are you supposed to say after that?

Danny looks at my expression and changes the subject. "Aren't you scared? Living in that house, I mean?"

"No," Tucker says, "why?"

"Well, it's haunted. Why do you think nobody's lived in it forever and it's all falling apart?"

Tucker shrugs. "Mindy says something bad lives in the basement, and we found a dragon in the mulberry tree. But that's all so far."

Jesse pokes him in the arm. "Unca Sam."

"And Uncle Sam, but we haven't met him yet," Tucker says.

Anna and Danny look at each other. They must think we're nuts. I feel kind of stupid and hope Jesse and Tucker stop talking about the weird things that happen here. I switch topics as fast as I can.

"You guys wanna be in our Bamboo Club?"

"Your what?"

"Bamboo Club. I'm President 'cause I'm the oldest and I know all about running clubs."

"Yeah, she was President of the stupid Art Club at our last school, and she'll never let anybody forget it," Tucker says. "So she gets to be President here too. I'm Vice President, and Jesse is Treasurer, except he can't count yet, and Mindy is Secretary, except she can't write yet."

"Yeah, but you guys can be General Members if you want, since we don't have any of those yet," I say.

"Okay," Anna says, "but we'll have to ask our parents first."

They run off to ask, and Mindy whispers to Jesse.

Jesse nods and points to a plant with a stem almost as round as my arm. "Dere's sumffin in dat baboo."

There he goes again. Talking gibberish. "In what?"

"In the bamboo," Tucker says. "What's in it, Jesse?"

Jesse shrugs. "Dunno. But Mindy says sumffin is stuck inside da baboo and wants to get out."

THE BAMBOO CLUB

“Bamboo plants are hollow on the inside,” Tucker says. “So there *could* be something trapped in one.”

He puts his ear up to the bamboo.

“Hear anything?”

“Nope.”

Mindy puts her ear to the bamboo, too, and so does Jesse. “I heaw it,” Jesse says.

“What *is* it?”

Jesse shrugs. “I dunno. But it wants to come out.”

Anna pokes her head back over the fence, an angry frown on her face. “We can’t come over today. We promised we’d help Mom weed the garden.”

“Stupid garden. We’ll come over tomorrow,” Danny says. They run back across the field, the goats scampering after them. One tackles Danny’s legs and head-butts him to the ground. Tucker starts laughing like a hyena. I punch his arm.

“That’s not funny. He could’ve been hurt.”

Tucker snorts. “Susie’s got a crush on Dannyyy...”

“Shut up!”

Geez, boys are stupid. Okay, so Danny’s cute. He has blue eyes and dimples when he smiles. And he’s my age. But come on, we just met the kid. He could be a big fat dweeb-butt for all I know. I change the subject before Tucker can start his usual *Susie and so-and-so kissing in a tree* routine.

“How can we free the thing from the bamboo?”

Tucker shrugs. “We can chop the bamboo down.”

Mindy shakes her head so hard, her long blond hair flips over every which-way.

“Uh-uh,” Jesse says, shaking his head, too. “You’ll hurt it.”

“The bamboo?”

“No, da fing in it.”

“Well, how are we going to get it out then?”

FROM THE MAGICAL MIND OF MINDY MUNSEN

Mindy whispers to Jesse, and Jesse says, “We need to find Unca Sam. He’ll know.”

Chapter Six

Uncle Sam

It's nice to have more members in our Bamboo Club. Tucker brings his journal so he can write down the minutes, and we meet Danny and Anna in the bamboo grove after breakfast.

"So the last people living in The House left three years ago," Danny says. "Their names were Mr. and Mrs. Peabody and they were old—even older than Mrs. Wemberley. Mr. Peabody died, and Mrs. Peabody went to live in a retirement home."

"How'd Mr. Peabody die?" Tucker says. Boys always want to know the gory details.

"Dunno. But he died in your house."

"Probably from a heart attack or something," Tucker says. "That's what old people usually die from."

"Unca Sam'll know," Jesse says. "Unca Sam knows evvyfing."

Anna says, "Who's Uncle Sam?"

Jesse shrugs. "Mindy says he lives in da pump house."

So we head to the pump house. The pump house is in the woods behind the pool. Back when the pool worked, the pumps kept the water moving and the pool stayed clean. Everything's broken now, and Aunt Julie says we should never, *ever* go in the pump house. It's always flooded with about a foot of stinky, dirty water.

Tucker puts his eye to a slit in the rotting door. "I bet snakes live in there."

Gross. Snakes.

Tucker pushes on the door and we peer in. An ugly orange sofa, full of holes and half-green from mold, sits in the stinky water. We've been three times now to the pump house, and that icky orange sofa is never in the same spot.

"It must float around whenever it feels like it," I say.

Tucker snorts at the idea. "A heavy sofa can't float in only a foot of water."

"Yeah, but look at it. It's in a totally different spot than the last time we looked."

Anna peers over Tucker's shoulder. "Is Uncle Sam in there now?"

Jesse nods. "He's on da sofa."

"I don't see him."

"Me neither," Danny says.

"Yeah, but he's there if Mindy says so," Tucker says. "Mindy is always right about stuff like this."

He's definitely changed his tune since the Stinger Incident.

"What does he look like then?" Danny says.

"Wed and blue hat," Jesse says, squinting.

"Can you see him, too?"

"Mhm. He's all squiggwy."

"All what?" Anna says.

"Squiggly," Tucker says.

"He's weawing a taw hat."

"A tall hat? Like a top hat?" Tucker says. Jesse nods.

"Mhm. Top hat."

"Like pictures of Uncle Sam on old war posters," Anna says. "You know, 'I Want You for the U.S. Army.'"

"Like dat," Jesse (who has never seen an old war poster) says, nodding.

Mindy asks Uncle Sam about the thing living in the bamboo. Her mouth doesn't move when she asks. She just

UNCLE SAM

leans halfway into the room and stares real hard at the sofa. I guess Uncle Sam must answer her question because she turns to Jesse and whispers in his ear.

“What’d she say?” Anna says.

“She says da Hewo Man bwrought da fing in da baboo.”

“The Hero Man?”

“Yup. Da Hewo Man. He came fwom faw away and planted da baboo fowest, and he left da fing to guawd it. Den it got stuck in da baboo and now it can’t get out.”

“Who’s the Hero Man?” I say. Jesse shrugs.

“Okay, so the Hero Man planted the bamboo, but what’s the thing in it? Is it a bad thing? Should we let it out? What if it’s mean like the Mulberry Dragon and sends stingers whenever we want to use the bamboo clubhouse?”

Jesse shakes his head. “No stingas.”

That’s a relief.

“It dwops on your head.”

Not as good. “It *what?*”

“It likes to dwop on people’s heads.”

“Ew,” I say. “I don’t want anything dropping on my head.”

“Yeah, like a big spider,” Tucker says grinning at me. He *knows* I hate spiders.

I shake my head. “Forget it. Let’s leave it in the bamboo.”

Uncle Sam doesn’t tell us much about Mr. and Mrs. Peabody, or how Mr. Peabody died, so Anna and Danny go home to ask their parents, who have lived next-door for almost fifteen years and might know more about the Peabody’s.

Mindy says the thing in the bamboo has a name but it’s too hard to say. So Uncle Sam calls it Ruby. She also says whatever type of creature Ruby is, it’s a baby Ruby and won’t grow up for another thousand years. The adult Rubys not only drop on people’s head, they eat people too, but all

the baby Ruby will do is jump about in our hair until it gets tired and falls asleep.

I don't care if it's a baby or not, I don't want *anything* dropping on my head. "Is the Ruby like the jewel-type ruby?"

"No it's not," Jesse says. "It's a living fing, not a wock."

Then Jesse tells us why Uncle Sam lives in the pump house. He tells it all garbled, so I'll tell it—otherwise nobody will understand.

A long time ago, a little girl lived in The House. She was five years old and was proud that she could read. and write her full name. So one day she wrote her name and phone number on a form she found in a magazine.

The form had a picture of Uncle Sam, and you could mail the card in to get information on joining the Army.

Well, once the girl filled out all the information, she started thinking that now somebody was going to come get her and take her away and make her join the Army. She was so scared that she wouldn't eat or sleep until she got rid of the postcard. So she crept down to the pump house, tore the card into little shreds, and threw it into the water.

And somehow, because of that, the ghost of Uncle Sam ended up here and now he floats around in our pump house.

"But they couldn't make her join the Army could they?" Anna says. "She never put the postcard in the mail. How would they know?"

"They wouldn't," I say, "plus a five-year-old is too young to join the Army."

But that's why Uncle Sam lives in the pump house. And a little girl lived here once, too. I wonder what her name was. And what ever happened to her.

The Bamboo Club meets again on the Fourth of July. Aunt Julie has invited Danny and Anna's parents over for a cookout,

and they're busy getting the grill going. They're talking about boring adult stuff, so we sneak off to our clubhouse. I call roll. Mindy should do it since she's Secretary, but she can't talk yet, so as President I do it. Everybody's here, including the two General Members from next-door.

"First up on the agenda: what'd you guys find out?" I say to Danny.

"Okay," Danny says. "So Mr. Peabody *did* die of a heart attack. He was trying to clean out the basement when he keeled over, dead. That's what Dad says."

Tucker gives me a knowing look. The basement.

"And get this—the Peabody's had this old gardener who took care of their lawn. His name was Hiro. Not Hero with an 'e' but Hiro with an 'i'. It's a Japanese name."

"Cool," Tucker says.

"So this Hiro guy came over from Japan and brought a lot of different plants with him. That's why you have bamboo in your yard."

"Must've been before they knew how bad *invasive* species were for the environment," Tucker says. Oh geez, here he goes with his scientific mumbo-jumbo again. But Danny nods in agreement. That's right, I forgot—his mom is Ms. Nature-Freak.

"So how long did the Peabodys live in our house then?"

"About twenty years, according to Mom," Danny says.

So now we know what happened to the Peabody's, and who the Hero Man is. Next on the agenda is what to do about Ruby. I still don't want to let it out. I don't want weird creatures dropping into my hair.

"Well, it doesn't matter anyway since we don't know *how* to let it out," Tucker says.

Mindy taps Jesse on the shoulder and whispers into his ear.

“What’d she say?” Anna says.

“Hit da baboo wif a stick.”

“Any old stick?” I say. Mindy nods.

“If that’s all we need to do to let it out, why didn’t you tell us that in the first place?”

Jesse shrugs. “She didn’t know ’till now.”

Tucker whacks the bamboo with a stick. The bamboo is way too thick to break with such a puny stick, but that doesn’t seem to matter.

“It’s out,” Jesse says.

The baby Ruby is loose and free to drop on people’s heads anytime it wants.

“Motion to move our clubhouse *away* from the bamboo forest now the baby Ruby is loose,” I say, raising my hand.

Anna’s arm shoots up into the air. “I second the motion.”

Mindy nods her head and raises her hand, too.

“Mindy thirds it. That makes a *majority*. Motion carried.”

Tucker looks at Danny and rolls his eyes. “Girls. Sometimes they’re no fun.”

Now that business is done, we head to the back yard for lunch. The grill is near The House, and from where we sit, I can see into the dusty basement windows. I chomp on my corn on the cob and squat in front of a window.

“Can you see anything?” Danny says, squatting next to me.

“Nope. Can you?”

Danny presses his nose up to the window. “I just see piles of junk.”

“You’d better stay away from the window. What if The Thing smashes through it and grabs you?”

Danny pulls his head back. “You know, I don’t think there’s anything down there.”

Tucker flops down next to us. “Dare ya to go in then.”

UNCLE SAM

Danny looks at Tucker, then at me. I give him a Dare-Stare. I like Danny and don't want him to get eaten, but he was the one dumb enough to say he doesn't think The Thing exists.

"Okay," Danny says, looking a little green. "I'll do it."

He asks Aunt Julie if he can use the bathroom and heads inside, giving us one last pleading stare before he disappears. But we aren't budging. He's gonna have to do it alone. Anyway, he'll be safe if he doesn't get too close to that creaky door behind the sewing machine.

We peer into the windows, waiting. Jesse sits down beside me.

"It's Fursday."

Oh geez, he's right. On Thursday, The Thing comes out of its hole.

Danny bolts down the kitchen steps and falls next to us, gasping.

"Didja see it?" Tucker says.

Danny shakes his head. "I didn't go down. You win."

"You chickened out?"

Danny sits up and nods. "The second I opened the basement door I heard it. All groany and creaking. I'm not going down there. No way."

I give Tucker a smug smile. Yup, The Thing is alive and well in our basement.

We decide to get away from the windows. Mindy says The Thing doesn't like to leave the basement, but you can never be too sure of what a monster might do, especially if it sees a bunch of nice juicy kids in pouncing distance. I want to *eat* my Fourth of July lunch, not *be* a Fourth of July lunch.

Chapter Seven

The Climbing Tree

You kids ready for school to start?" Aunt Julie says as she makes us lunch.

"I'm ready," Tucker says.

I make a face. "Course you are, Mr. Braniac."

"I'm weady too," Jesse, who will be in kindergarten this year, says. "So's Mindy."

Aunt Julie plunks my peanut butter and jelly sandwich down on the table. "How 'bout you, Susie?"

I shake my head. I *was* getting excited about school. But now I'm not so sure. What if I don't make any friends? What if nobody likes me?

I eat my sandwich, but I hardly taste it. School starts next week. It'll be a new school with new teachers and new kids. At least Danny will be there, but I won't know anybody else. They'll all be new.

"Are you worried?" Dr. O'Neal asked when we saw him last. He was tapping his pencil so hard I thought it might snap in two. I didn't want to say anything. If I admitted I was worried, I knew he'd make me talk about it.

So I said: "Nope."

But I *am* a little worried. This is my second new school in three years. The first new school happened after That Day. I didn't make any good friends there. I wasn't in the mood for friends. That Day wasn't as long ago then.

THE CLIMBING TREE

Now I'm feeling better about things. Now I want friends. Not Tucker and the twins, but real friends my own age.

Tucker is excited. He likes school. He's one of those weirdos who enjoys learning.

Jesse and Mindy are excited. They'll be in real school for the first time. Aunt Julie says Mindy may have to go to special classes since she isn't talking yet. That gets me mad.

"Mindy isn't stupid. She's probably smarter than all of us."

"Of course she's smart, but she still needs help. She babbles, but doesn't talk so everybody can understand her."

"Jesse understands her."

"Jesse *thinks* he does."

Here we go again. Aunt Julie won't believe that Mindy's told us things she couldn't possibly know, but they came true anyway. She'll keep insisting that Mindy has a problem.

That's how adults are, though. Well, most adults. Dad used to believe everything we would tell him.

We're all at the kitchen table, sorting out school supplies when Jesse says, "Do you know what a goony biwd is?"

I shake my head. "Nope. What's a goony bird?"

"Goony biwds have long legs and long necks that look like a big S. Oh, and a body shaped like a twiangle."

"A triangle body?"

"Yup. And dey don't have any wings so dey can't fly, but dey can wun *weally* fast when they want to. Dey have pink eyes and blue beaks and wed fevas on top of der heads."

"Red feathers?"

"Mhm." Jesse bites into his sandwich, and jelly squirts down his chin.

"Did Mindy say there's a goony bird running around our yard?" I say.

Jesse nods. "It's a vewy old goony biwd, and it's been here since da waw."

“The waw?”

“He means war,” Tucker, who’s doodling in his new notebook, says.

“Jesse, do you even know what a war is?” I ask.

Jesse shakes his head.

“Nope. What is it?”

How do you explain war to a five-year-old? Tucker tries.

“War is when you send people away to fight and they might not come back.”

“Fight what?”

“Fight other people.”

“Why?”

Tucker says, “I don’t know.”

“War is also a card game,” I say.

“Okay,” Jesse says. “I like dat betta.”

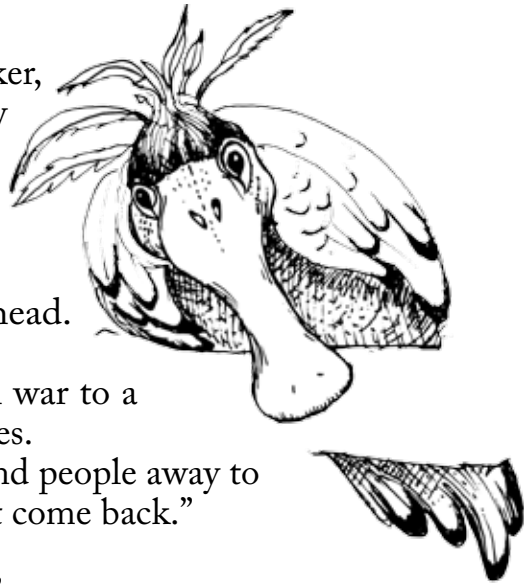
Tucker laughs. “So which war has the goony bird been here since?”

“Dunno,” Jesse says. “Maybe da goony biwd knows.”

Jesse says that goony birds like to sit in tall trees. They can’t fly, but if they sit in a tall tree they feel more like a real flying bird, since they’re so high up. The tallest tree we have is the big pine tree in the front yard. We’ve been climbing the tree all summer, but we haven’t reached the top yet. The top is a long way up and we get too scared before we get there.

“Dat’s where da goony biwd is, though,” Jesse says. “At da tippy top of da twee, where he can see for miles and miles.”

“How will we know if he’s up there if we can’t see him?” Tucker says. “If he’s like every other thing around here, the



THE CLIMBING TREE

only person who will see him is Mindy, and there's no way she can climb all the way up."

Mindy babbles to Jesse, and Jesse says, "You'll know he's dere if da tippy-top bwanch is bent into an upside-down L. Dat means da goony biwd is sitting on it. Goony biwds are heavy."

"An upside-down L is the same as a ninety-degree angle," Tucker says.

"Huh?"

"He doesn't understand that," I say. "He doesn't know what an angle is."

"Can't hurt for him to learn," Mr. Einstein says.

"So what do we do if we *do* find a branch bent into an upside-down L?"

"Tell da goony biwd to climb down and talk to Mindy. Den she can tell us what he says."

"We'd better climb the tree tomorrow then," Tucker says. "Tomorrow is the last day Mrs. Wemberley'll be here."

That's true. Next week we'll be in school so Mrs. Wemberley won't need to babysit us anymore. Aunt Julie is home today, and she'll never let us climb to the top, but Mrs. Wemberley won't know what we're doing if she's watching TV.

When Mrs. Wemberley shows up, we scoot outside and meet Anna and Danny under the tree.

I look up into the tree's endless branches. "I'm not sure if I can get to the top of that."

"Me 'n Danny are great climbers," Anna says. "If you can't make it, I bet we can."

We leave Jesse and Mindy playing with pine cones at the bottom of the tree and we start climbing to the top.

It's easy at first. The tree is a huge pine, and the low branches are big and thick and so close together it's almost like climbing up steps. After a while, the trunk thins and

the branches shrink, and when a good breeze starts up the whole tree bends back and forth and makes me seasick.

We race each other up the tree. Anna is in front. She's small and fast. Tucker is right behind her. Danny is following Tucker, and I'm last. The higher up I get the more my legs turn to shaky goo. And my hands won't let go of the nubby, sap-encrusted branch they're gripping unless I concentrate and make them unclench.

About two-thirds of the way up, I stop. I know when I'm beaten. The roof where Tucker and I sometimes sit at night is below me now. I decide I'd better look at the tree trunk and not look anywhere else, or I'll get dizzy and fall.

"Anna's almost at the top!" Tucker says.

I don't look up. Now I'm scared Anna will slip and fall, and the ground is fifty feet below, and it will be all my fault if she gets hurt because I'm the oldest and I let them do this.

I focus on the bark in front of me. A green caterpillar is crawling across it. I stare at the caterpillar and try not to think about anything else.

"Wow!" Anna says. "The branch—it's an upside-down L, like Mindy said."

"Ask the goony bird to come down!" *And hurry up*, I think, *so I can climb down, too*. Then I get scared that I *won't* be able to climb down. My legs won't move and my hands won't let go of the branch and I'll have to stay here forever, or at least until Aunt Julie comes home and grounds me for the rest of my life.

Danny's sneakers pass my head. "You can go down now," he says, and he clammers past me, like a monkey.

If he can do it, so can I.

The closer I get to the bottom, the easier I can move. I breathe a sigh of relief when my feet land on the soft pine needles covering the ground.

THE CLIMBING TREE

“What war is it?” I say to Mindy between deep breaths. Jesse shrugs. “Da goony biwd didn’t know which waw it was.”

“Great. That means we climbed the tree for nothing.”

“But he does say he’s fwom an island called Lady.”

Tucker runs into The House to find an island called Lady on his computer.

Danny and Anna go home. They have goats to milk.

I sit with my back to the tree and wonder what would have happened if I had fallen out of it. Am I getting too old to climb trees? I never used to worry about falling when I was younger. But I worry about it now. I wonder if that’s the first sign of growing up.

Chapter Eight

The Goony Bird

For our last dinner before school starts, Aunt Julie makes us fried chicken and key lime pie. She also makes peas. I don't mind, but Tucker hates peas. He grins and winks at me, then says, "Aunt Julie, may I have another glass of water please?"

She should know something is up when Tucker uses the words "may" and "please," but Aunt Julie smiles at him—impressed, I guess, that he's being so polite—and gets up to pour him another glass. As soon as she heads into the kitchen, Tucker stuffs every pea on his plate into his socks.

I stare at his lumpy socks. "That never worked with Mom and Dad. Aunt Julie is *so* going to notice that."

Tucker glares at me. "Aunt Julie isn't *half* as observant as Mom and Dad were."

"What'll you do with 'em though? You can't keep walking around with peas in your socks."

"I'll go upstairs after dinner, dump the peas in the toilet, and flush 'em. It'll work, trust me."

"Why don't you like peas?" Jesse says. "I like peas. So does Mindy."

Mindy nods her head in solemn agreement.

"They're icky," Tucker says, "and even though peas start with a P, they're still not part of my Three P system. I go by the Three P food groups. Pizza, peanut butter, and pie."

THE GOONY BIRD

“Okay, Mr. Braniac, what if you have chicken pot pie with peas in it? Would you eat them then, since they’re in a pie?”

“I’d eat the chicken parts and pick the peas out. Peas are *definitely* in one of the icky food groups.”

Jesse says, “I *hate* pea lime pie.”

“It’s key lime pie, silly,” Tucker says, laughing, “and it doesn’t even have peas in it.”

“Den what makes the pie gween?”

“The limes, dummy.”

After dinner Tucker starts to creep up the stairs with his bulging socks.

“Hold it right there!” Aunt Julie yells from the kitchen. “You think I don’t know what you’re up to, boy?”

Tucker stomps back to his seat. His grin is gone and he’s scowling. “Mom and Dad would’ve let me.”

Aunt Julie comes into the dining room. “Tuck,” she says, “I loved your mom. We were sisters and best friends. But don’t con me into thinking she’d let you get away with not eating your peas. We tried the exact same stupid trick when we were kids. It’s as old as the hills.”

“How’d she see me?” Tucker says as Aunt Julie heads back into the kitchen. “Do you think she’s got video cameras hidden in here?”

“She doesn’t need ‘em,” I say. “She’s a parent.”

“She’s not *really* a parent,” Tucker says, loud enough so Aunt Julie can hear.

Tucker is determined to find out when the goony bird came here.

“Why’s it so important?” I say.

“It just is. If we know when he came here, we can figure out who he came with. Jesse says that Mindy says that all the weird creatures around here had to come with somebody.”

“Who do you think The Thing came with?”

Tucker shrugs. “We don’t know enough about The Thing to guess. But we could figure out the goony bird, if I could find some information on Lady Island.”

But no matter how hard he looks, he can’t find anything. So he starts going back through all the wars America has fought in and looking at all the battles.

“I figure there must have been a battle on Lady Island in some war,” he says.

Jesse nods. “It was a big battle. Da goony biwd hated all the noises so he snuck on one of da ships and came home wif a sailor.”

“Did the sailor live in our house?” I say.

“Yup.”

Tucker gets on his computer but doesn’t find anything about a battle on a Lady Island until he gets to World War II. That was in the 1940s. That was a super-long time ago.

We’re sitting in the living room—I’m reading a book, the twins are playing with their blocks, and Tucker is clicking away on the computer when he yells, “Yes! I’ve found it.”

“Lady Island?”

“No, Leyte Island. *Leyte*. Not Lady. It’s an island in the Philippines.”

“Where’s dat?” Jesse says.

“It’s on the other side of the world somewhere. The goony bird must’ve come from there.”

“Are you sure?”

“No, but, I’m tired of looking for a Lady Island, and Leyte sounds close enough to me.”

“Hey aren’t you a scientist?” I say. “Don’t you have to have concrete proof or something? Saying you’re tired of looking doesn’t sound scientific to me, Einstein.”

THE GOONY BIRD

“Stop calling me Einstein.”

“Okay, Mr. Braniac.”

Tucker glares at me. “Jesse, the goony bird is from Leyte Island. End of story.”

“Okay,” Jesse says. He doesn’t get what a war is anyway, but he *does* like playing the card game since we taught it to him. So he’s happy.

Eight small pine trees grow along the broken pool’s fence. The trees are easy to climb, and one game we started over the summer was Bird House. In the Bird House game, everyone climbs their own tree and pretends they’re a bird taking care of their nest.

We looked through Aunt Julie’s big book of bird pictures to decide which birds we wanted to be. I like the indigo bunting best because it’s a pretty blue, so whenever we play Bird House I’m an indigo bunting. Tucker’s always a blue jay, Jesse is a chickadee, and Mindy is a robin. And Anna and Danny, when they have time to play with us, are a swan (even though swans don’t live in trees) and a crow.

That’s six trees. Usually, we pretend birds live in the other trees, too, but today Mindy says we can only pretend a bird lives in one tree. The goony bird is sitting in the last one.

“Isn’t that too low for him?” I say. “Doesn’t he like tall trees?”

“Yup, but he likes watching us play Bird House, too,” Jesse says.

I ask Mindy to ask the goony bird if he’s from Leyte Island in the Philippines, and she asks and says to Jesse that yes, he is.

“Do you think he’s lonely here, being the only goony bird in the yard?” Tucker says.

Mindy nods. Jesse says, “He’d go home if he could, ‘cause his famwy is pwobably wondewing where he is by now.”

“Why can’t he go home?” I say.

Jesse shrugs. “He don’t ‘member how.”

“And goony birds can’t fly,” Tucker reminds me.

“What if he climbed on an airplane?” Anna says. “If he climbed on one flying to the Philippines, then he could ride it back—if he didn’t fall off.”

Tucker looks up airplane flights on his computer. He finds one that leaves next Tuesday and flies all the way to the Philippines with only two stops. Jesse says that Mindy says that goony birds have great memories, so if Tucker reads off all the information, he’ll remember. So that’s what Tucker does.

Danny frowns. “How will he get to the airport?”

“Goony biwds are fast walkas,” Jesse says.

Tucker looks up directions to the airport, and he tells the goony bird (or at least the tree that Mindy says the goony bird is in) how to get to the airport.

Mindy nods and babbles to Jesse.

“Da goony biwd says fanks.”

“What?” Danny says.

“Thanks,” Tucker says.

“When he gets home he’ll send us a pwesent.”

“That’s nice of him,” Anna says.

It is nice, but I’m wondering: if after over seventy years the goony bird can’t figure out how to get back home, how is he going to figure out how to send us a present?

We’ve all had a bad first day at the new school.

When we get home Tucker stomps into his room, yells “Everybody better leave me alone!”, and slams the door. When Tucker gets mad, he gets super-mad.

Jesse throws himself down on the couch and snuffles. “I don’t wanna go back to school. Dey’re mean to Mindy dere.”

THE GOONY BIRD

“I’m sure they didn’t mean it,” Aunt Julie says, which we all know is something adults say but isn’t really true. Of *course* they mean it. Jesse starts crying. Mindy doesn’t look too upset, but Mindy never looks upset. Or excited. Or anything. She’s just...there. Jesse does all the crying or laughing or complaining for both of them.

Me, I’ve already been labeled Teacher’s Pet because I answered all the questions the teacher asked. I can’t help it if I knew them all.

“Doesn’t matter,” Danny had said on the bus ride home. “You shouldn’t let everybody know you know.”

I’ve also been nicknamed “Oozy Susie” by Aaron Murphy, the big bully. And when I told him it was a stupid name and didn’t make any sense—well, that made things worse.

So we’re all grumpy when we get home. Aunt Julie says we have to get used to it; it will get easier soon.

I wish summertime was still here.

The goony bird left today. Jesse says he left early in the morning. That’s good, he’ll be glad to get home.

Tucker picks at his scrambled eggs. “It’s all a load of hooley.”

“I thought you believed in the goony bird,” I say.

Aunt Julie stomps in. She’s dressed in a suit and heels, which means she has an important meeting today. I’m not exactly sure what Aunt Julie does, but she goes to important meetings a lot, and she looks like she might be late for one if we don’t get out the door soon.

“Hurry up and finish, all of you. We’re running late.”

Tucker stares at his eggs and doesn’t move. “I don’t wanna go to school.”

“Tough toodles. You’re going.” Aunt Julie stomps back out to find her keys.

Tucker puts down his fork. “How do we know the goony bird was even in that tree? We didn’t see him, feel him, hear him, nothing.”

“But the top of the tree was bent into an upside-down L like Mindy said,” I say.

“Could’ve been caused by the wind.”

“And Mindy knew about Leyte Island. How would a five-year-old know about something like that?”

“She didn’t say it was Leyte, she said it was Lady Island. I interpreted that to mean Leyte Island because I found it in some online dictionary. That’s a coincidence. It doesn’t prove anything.”

It’s amazing how his mind has completely switched now school has started. Before, he believed in the goony bird. Now he doesn’t. Just like that.

Aunt Julie is right, kind of. School get a little better. By the end of the week, Aaron Murphy has gotten tired of picking on me, and I’ve made one or two friends.

Everyone stopped picking on Mindy too. As sweet as she is, it’s hard to make fun of her, even if you are a bully. She doesn’t talk, but she’s still made some friends.

I don’t know about Tucker. He’s not as grumpy as he first was, but he doesn’t want to talk about the goony bird. Danny, Anna, Jesse, Mindy, and I talk about him, though. We wonder if he’s gotten to the Philippines yet and if he’s found his family.

I’m glad when Saturday gets here. It’s nice out and still warm, although Aunt Julie says the cold weather will be here soon. Anna and Danny come over after they finish their chores. Even Tucker manages to come out of his room and be sociable.

Our new clubhouse, since we moved it from the bamboo forest, is under the climbing tree. We all sit on

THE GOONY BIRD

branches as I read the roll. Then I open up the floor for any new business.

Mindy raises her hand.

“The Secretary has the floor,” I say, and so Mindy whispers to Jesse, and Jesse stands up to make an announcement.

“The pwesent is here.”

Anna’s forgotten already. “The present from who?”

“Fwom da goony biwd. It’s at the top of da twee.”

Oh geez, no. Not again.

“I’ll climb it,” Anna says, “if Danny will follow me, just in case.”

Danny stands up. “Okay.”

I nod. “That’s a good job for the General Members to do.”

They begin climbing, and I turn to Tucker. “What do you think the present is?”

Tucker shakes his head. He’s still pretending that the goony bird isn’t real.

“You know, after the whole Mulberry Dragon incident, you should have a little more faith in these things.”

“I bet that was coincidence, too,” Tucker says, but he doesn’t sound as sure as he sounded during the weekdays when we were in school.

“If there’s something on top of the tree, will you believe then?”

Tucker sighs. “Okay, but I’m not going to tell anybody at school about this.”

That’s why he’s been mopey all week. He told kids at school about the goony bird, and they made fun of him for believing in Mindy’s fantasies.

And that made him feel stupid. Like a little kid who doesn’t know any better.

Anna climbs down. Jesse hops around in excitement.

“What did da goony biwd give us?”

Anna grins. She holds up a feather.

It's not like a feather from a bird you'd find around here. It's long and curled at the end and covered in soft, fluffy fuzz. And it's bright, bright red. Tucker's eyes get round as dishes. Jesse says, "Oooh."

"That's so cool," Danny says. "What should we do with it?"

Mindy whispers to Jesse, and Jesse says, "Tucka gets to keep it."

"Why does Tucker get it?" I say. Geez, he's the one who doesn't even *believe* in the goony bird.

Tucker takes the feather from Anna's hand and stares at it with wide, shining eyes.

"So he 'members dat da goony biwd is weaw," Jesse says.

"Is what?" Anna says.

Tucker smiles. "Is real."

I don't think he'll doubt the goony bird again.

Chapter Nine

The Maze

I asked Jesse once why Mindy doesn't talk. Not her and Jesse's secret talk, but real talk. Jesse says Mindy doesn't know why. She can hear the words in her brain, but she can't say them. But when she talks to Jesse, he understands.

I think it's because they're twins. Twins can think and feel and speak the same way sometimes.

Sometimes Mindy doesn't even have to say anything and Jesse knows what she's thinking. But sometimes he doesn't know and she has to tell him. Like all the weird creatures she sees around The House. Jesse says he can't see any of them until Mindy tells him how to find them.

If he wants to see the Mulberry Dragon, Mindy will point to a branch and tell him to stare at it. And if he stares long enough, he says the branch will move.

If he wants to see Uncle Sam, Mindy will point to a spot and tell him to squint. And then Jesse says he can see the blue and red top hat and Uncle Sam's blue eyes.

Tucker and I can't see any of them. Jesse says we're too old.

"Does that mean you won't see them when you get older?"

Jesse shrugs. "Or we're special and will always see 'em. Dat's what Mindy says."

We've had a long morning picking out our Halloween costumes at the store, and are about to eat lunch when Aunt

Julie makes an announcement. "I'm going to fix up the guest house."

"Why?" Tucker says.

"Cause it's falling apart. If we fix it up, we can rent it out."

"Why? Do we need money?"

"It's always nice to have extra money," Aunt Julie says.

"How 'bout fixing up *our* house first? It's freezing in here. Somebody might call the child welfare people on you for making us live in a freezing house, if you aren't careful."

Aunt Julie straightens up and glares at Tucker. "Don't *ever* joke about things like that." She walks out of the room.

"You made her mad," Jesse says.

I think it's worse than that. When I walk by the solarium, I can hear Aunt Julie crying.

Tucker doesn't care that he's made Aunt Julie cry. He's upset because The House is so cold. The heat doesn't work right and we're starting to use electric blankets on our beds.

"If she really loved us," he says, "she'd fix up this place first."

Every morning we get out from under our warm blankets and run downstairs. The whole house is freezing, except the kitchen. Aunt Julie has set up a little electric space heater in there. We sit on the floor in front of it to eat our breakfast.

The rest of The House is cold, cold, cold. When we take a hot bath, we don't want to get out of the tub. We stay in until the water loses most of its heat. Then we drain the tub slowly and try to keep our bodies in the water until it all drains away, and then we *have* to get out.

I can't believe any place that gets so hot in the summer can get so cold so fast. Halloween isn't even here yet and it's freezing out there.

Aunt Julie says it's *unseasonably* cold. Jesse says he hopes it snows.

THE MAZE

Tucker says he just want to feel warmer in this house.

Jesse and Mindy are always bugging us to play in the hedge maze. The hedge maze is behind the guest house, and although it isn't a big maze, like the kind they have at castles, it's still pretty cool.

The twins like it when Tucker and I play Horses and get on our hands and knees. They climb on our backs and we gallop around the hedges. It's fun in the summer when the soil is warm, but not much fun now, when we smack our knees on frozen ground.

"If Aunt Julie rents the guest house," Tucker says, "we won't be able to play in the maze anymore since it's in the guest house's backyard. So we'd better play now, while we can."

When we play Horses, I'm always Mindy's horse, and Tucker is always Jesse's. My name is Kelso and I am a palomino. Tucker's name is Buck and he is all black except for the white blaze on his nose.

We either play like we're jousting or running a race. Tucker and Jesse always win the races. My knees get tired of galloping quicker than Tucker's knees, and I always stop before he does.

But Mindy and I always win the jousts. Jesse will *never* push Mindy off my back and besides, he likes falling off. So we're about even.

The hedge maze is made up of four circles of hedges. A little gap is in each hedge so you can get into the middle of the circle. We pretend these circles are horse paddocks. If we aren't racing or jousting, we play in the paddocks. When Mindy gets off my back and puts me in my paddock she becomes a horse, too (her name is Thunder), and we both gallop around our little corral. Jesse and Tucker use one of the other circles as their paddock.

Today Mindy and I are rolling around in our paddock. The grass is getting brown, and the ground is as hard as rocks. Tucker and Jesse poke their heads through the gap in the hedge.

“Jesse doesn’t want to play Horses anymore, he wants to play Dinosaurs,” Tucker says.

“Dinosaurs don’t have paddocks,” I say.

“Horses are no fun,” Jesse says. “I wanna be a *Tywanno-sauwus wex*.” And he stands up and stomps into the nearest hedge, trying to smash it down.

“You’re going to hurt the hedge,” I say.

Jesse is already whimpering. “The bwanches are owie.”

Tucker laughs. “You shouldn’t try to walk through them. But okay. I’ll be an allosaurus.”

Boys always want to be man-eating dinosaurs. I want to be a stegosaurus. They’re nicer and eat plants, but they have spikes on their tails so the bigger dinosaurs won’t mess with them.

“What dinosaur does Mindy want to be?” I say.

“A twicewatops,” Jesse says. “Cause one lived here once.”

“Really?” I try to sound amazed, but I’m not. After the last three experiences I’ll believe anything Mindy says.

“The twicewatops belonged to a boy who lived here.”

Tucker scoffs at this. “Dinosaurs and humans did *not* live at the same time. That’s impossible.”

“Well, it wasn’t a *wéal* twicewatops. It was a toy one. The boy buried it here. Its name was Toppy.”

“Was he the brother of the little girl who thought the US Army was going to come and take her away?”

Jesse shakes his head. “It was a diffewent boy. He lived here before Unca Sam.”

“Well, let’s look for it then,” Tucker says. “We could dig for it, and it would be like a treasure hunt.”

THE MAZE

So I go back to the conservatory and get the trowel.

“Where should we dig?”

Mindy points to a spot.

“How does she know the triceratops is buried right here?”

Tucker says.

“Because da Lepwechaun said so,” Jesse says.

Chapter Ten

Luke

Luke the Leprechaun likes hunting for buried treasure. Mindy says he knows where everything is buried—toys hidden by kids so no one would find them, keys adults dropped and lost, bones that dogs hid in the dirt with their paws. Luke might tell us where they're all hidden, but mostly he talks in rhymes so it's hard to figure out where to dig. But he tells Mindy where to find the triceratops.

Luke has lived in the hedge maze for a long time. He hides in it when he wants to be alone. He doesn't like people much, but he *does* like Mindy. So he doesn't mind if we play in the maze.

"But he's not happy about new people moving into da guest house," Jesse says. "Dat's *his* house."

"Did the boy with the triceratops live in the guest house?" I ask.

Jesse nods. "Mhm. A long, long time ago. He buried da twicewatops so his sista wouldn't find it."

Typical boy.

"And he told Luke to guawd it. But if Mindy wants it, she can have it."

"*Everybody* likes Mindy." Tucker gives her golden head a pat. Mindy giggles. She hardly ever laughs, so we're happy to hear it. She almost sounds like a normal kid.

“Boy, I feel sorry for whoever moves into the guest house,” Tucker says. “Leprechauns like to play tricks on people. They aren’t gonna be happy there, if Luke decides to play tricks on ‘em.”

“If Luke lives in the guest house yard, how come he never visits us when we play in the sandbox?” I ask Mindy.

Mindy whispers to Jesse. “He can’t go dere,” Jesse says. “Da dwagon lives dere.”

“So?”

“So, dwagons and lepwechauns don’t like each other vewy much.”

Tucker shakes his head and digs. He doesn’t get too far before Aunt Julie yells at us to come in for dinner. He throws the trowel down.

“We’ll have to finish digging after school tomorrow. Stupid Aunt Julie, spoiling our fun.”

“Tucker’s nickname is now the Loony Bird,” Anna tells me as we milk goats at her house after school. I’m getting better and better about milking—it’s hard work but goat milk tastes yummy.

“How’d you find that out?”

“I heard some kids calling him that in gym,” she says. “He was dumb enough to blab about the goony bird. I told him something like this would happen, but he did it anyway. He’s shut up about it now, but the bullies haven’t forgotten. They call him Loony for short.”

“That stinks.”

“Yeah, but he’s dealing with it okay now. Kids’ll still laugh and say, ‘Have you met Bigfoot yet?’ or something stupid like that, and Tucker’ll laugh back and say it was a joke and he doesn’t really believe in that stuff.”

Boy, Tucker can be stupid that way sometimes. He always says what he thinks. I mean, Danny and Anna believe in

all the weirdness that happens here, but they aren't goofy enough to say so. I'm sure not dumb enough to say anything, either. I already have enough stupid nicknames.

We finish the milking. Tucker is helping Danny brush the Angora goat's short, silky hair. After they're done, Danny straps a little blanket on its back so it'll stay warm, and it scampers off, bleating.

"I sure hope poor Wookie's hair grows back before winter," I say.

"It will," Anna says. "Have you found the triceratops yet?"

"No, but we promised the twins we'd dig again today. Wanna come help?"

"As long as the chores are done, Mom'll say yes."

We all tromp back through the pasture, crowd into my front door, and tear the twins away from the TV.

"Half an hour," Aunt Julie says. "Then it'll be dark and you kids better be back inside."

"Okay, okay," Tucker says.

With Anna and Danny's help, the excavating goes fast. We haven't dug long before Tucker says, "I think I've got something."

Danny crawls closer. "Cool."

The boys both scrape at the object with their fingers. Tucker finally yanks it out of the ground—a dirt-encrusted toy triceratops, exactly where Mindy said we'd find it.

I stare at the dinosaur. "Whaddya think ol' Dr. O'Neal would say about *this*?"

Tucker shrugs. "He'd say it was coincidence. Adults would never, ever believe this, not in a million years. They're all too dumb."

Danny looks up. "Why're you so mad at adults?"

Anna kicks him. Tucker doesn't see the kick but I do, and now I'm kind of angry too. I hate sympathy. I hate it when

people tiptoe around us because they don't want to get us upset. Why can't they come right out and say it? Tucker's mad because we lost our parents and he doesn't want Aunt Julie acting like one. He was okay with it for a while, but now he's mad about it. He'll get through it. He always does. It's not anyone else's business but ours.

Jesse keeps the dinosaur. He puts it in his Pink Monster drawer, with his toy cars and blocks.

"We're getting a collection," I say. "The red feather and now this."

"Two things isn't a collection," Tucker says. "We'd need more stuff than that."



On Halloween, Anna and Danny come over so we can go trick-or-treating. Anna is dressed like a hobo, with dirt on her face and a bandana tied to a stick. The bandana is stuffed with rags to look like she's carrying clothes. Danny has a sheet over his head with eyes cut out—he's a ghost, but he didn't have a white sheet so he had to use a black one. I can't help laughing.

“I’ve never heard of a black ghost.”

“Well, if you think about it, it’d make a lot more sense for ghosts to be black, not white. Then they blend in with the dark. Better for scaring people.”

“Don’t your parents let you buy costumes? Aunt Julie bought us ours.”

“Mom says buying costumes isn’t *creative*. We have to make our own.”

I look down at my costume. I’m a girl from the 1950s, with a poodle skirt, and my hair in a ponytail. Tucker’s a pirate. He says you can’t go wrong with being a pirate, even though he had to put the eye patch over his glasses. Mindy is a princess because she always wants to be a princess, and Jesse is a cowboy.

Aunt Julie drives us all to a subdivision up the street to do the trick-or-treating. We are all having fun until somebody walks by and says, “Hey Loony,” to Tucker. Tucker is mad, but can’t do anything because the kid is a lot bigger than he is. The kid isn’t wearing a costume. He’s laughing at mine.

“Aren’t you too old for trick-or-treating?” the kid says.

“Aren’t you?”

“Do I look like I’m trick-or-treating? Trick-or-treating is for babies.”

“Don’t listen to him,” Tucker says, but now I can’t stop thinking about what that stupid kid said. He could be right. What if I am too old? I’m eleven, I’m not a little kid. I should be going to Halloween parties, not trick-or-treating.

By the time we get back in the car, I’ve decided. This is the last year I’ll go trick-or-treating.

“But you’ll miss out on all the candy,” Tucker says.

“I don’t care. I’m too old.”

“What about you, Danny?” Tucker says. “You’re Susie’s age—are you too old?”

Danny shakes his head. “No way. This is the only day of the year I get free candy. I’m not messing that up. I’ll trick-or-treat until I’m thirty.”

“So how much candy did you all get?” Aunt Julie says as she drives us home.

“A whole pillowcase full,” Tucker says. “So did Susie.”

“I don’t want mine. Candy makes you fat anyway.”

“You’re not fat,” Aunt Julie says. “If anything, you’re getting too skinny. How about the twins?”

I look behind me. The twins tired of trick-or-treating a while ago and are already fast asleep in their car seats.

“They didn’t get as much as we did.”

We drop Anna and Danny off at their house. When we get home, Tucker is so droopy he barely can crawl into The House and up the stairs to his room. Aunt Julie puts the twins to bed. I sort through my candy. I eat some of the chocolate, but it’s no fun sorting candy by myself. It’s more fun when Tucker does it, too. We usually play poker with the candy, and I always end up with a lot of his, because Tucker stinks at poker. I can always tell when he’s bluffing because he starts giggling.

After a couple of candy bars, I put the rest in the freezer and go to bed. My last ever Halloween was fun, I guess.

The workers finish the guest house the day before Thanksgiving.

Aunt Julie lets us go in, once the workers leave. The house smells like new paint and sawdust. It has a little living room and a kitchen and two bedrooms in the back. I wonder which bedroom the boy with the triceratops had.

Mindy points to the smallest one.

“I hope somebody with kids moves in,” Tucker says. “Then we’ll have lots of kids around here—us, Danny and Anna, and the new kids.”

But of course that doesn't happen.

A big, gruffy man with a beard moves in instead. His name is Adam and he works in construction. In fact, he was one of the guys Aunt Julie hired to fix the guest house. Aunt Julie says we can't play in his yard anymore, unless Adam says it's okay. That means we can't play in the sandbox or in the hedge maze unless we ask, and we're too afraid to ask. Adam is huge and scary looking.

I wonder if we'll meet up with Luke again.

Jesse says we will. Luke sometimes visits other parts of the yard, except where the dragon lives and wherever Uncle Sam happens to be. Uncle Sam doesn't like Luke because Luke has played too many pranks on him.

"Is Luke afraid of The Thing?"

"Evvybody's 'fraid of Da Fing."

Today is rainy and we're all inside, in the living room. The twins are watching TV. Tucker is on the computer. I open my drawer in the Pink Monster and take out my journal.

It's getting pretty full. I've done some research on the people who have lived in The House, mostly by talking to Mrs. Wemberley who has lived across the street since she was a little girl and remembers everything about everybody. It's funny how most of the strange creatures we've found match up with people that have lived here.

We're guessing the goony bird came with Lieutenant Jim Rogers. He lived here with his parents before and right after World War II. Mrs. Wemberley says he was stationed in the Philippines.

The Ruby came with the Japanese gardener Hiro, who worked for the Peabodys.

Uncle Sam began living here after the Peabodys' granddaughter had her little incident with the "I WANT YOU" Army brochure.

LUKE

And Luke the Leprechaun came here with Ernie Everett and his family, who moved into the guest house from Ireland back in the 1960s. Back then the guest house was a servant's house, and the Everetts tended the gardens and made sure the pool was clean and cut the grass and things. They planted the hedge maze, too. I found that out from Mrs. Wemberley when she came to babysit one afternoon when Aunt Julie had to work late.

I still don't know who brought the dragon or The Thing in the basement. But I'm sure they came here with somebody.

I wonder: did we bring anything when we moved in?

Chapter Eleven

Spiders and Vampires

Nighttime is scawy,” Jesse says, as we’re getting ready to go to bed.

The Christmas holidays are starting, and Tucker wants to stay up late but Aunt Julie won’t let him. They had a big screaming fight, and got so mad at each other that Tucker finally huffed off to his room and Aunt Julie yelled that she was taking a hot bath and could I put the twins to bed.

Jesse sleeps with a nightlight on his side of the room, but Mindy doesn’t need one on hers. She isn’t scared of the dark. Mindy says their room doesn’t have any monsters. They have the good room.

I say, “Does that mean monsters live in some of the other rooms?”

Jesse nods. “Dey might. But dey aren’t in our woom.”

“So you don’t need the nightlight then.”

“Yes I do.”

Mindy whispers to Jesse. His face goes a sickly green.

“What’d she say?”

“She says da light might ‘twact monstas.”

I nod. “Like light bulbs attract moths.”

“I don’t want da nightlight now,” Jesse says.

Aunt Julie sticks her head in the room. Her hair is all bundled up in a big towel and she looks a bit calmer. “Where’s Tuck?”

“In his room,” I say.

Aunt Julie sighs then heads to Tucker’s room. Jesse tugs on my sleeve. “Are dey gonna yell some more?”

“No, kiddo. Aunt Julie’ll talk to Tucker and everything will be better.”

“Okay.” Jesse snuggles under his covers. I tuck him in, hoping what I said isn’t a lie.

Tucker’s better the next day, so whatever he and Aunt Julie talked about has helped. We sit out on the roof that night, bundled in blankets. It’s super cold out, but the stars are so clear in the winter. I can see the Big Dipper.

“Aunt Julie is only trying to help us,” I say.

“I know. But sometimes I wish she wouldn’t. She’s not Mom and Dad.”

“No, she’s not. But she loves us just as much.”

Tucker shakes his head. “No she doesn’t. Remember how she always said she didn’t want to be tied down? She used to tell us that when we were younger and Mom and Dad were alive and she was single. Now we’re tying her down. She hates us.”

“If she hates us, why does she treat us so good?”

Tucker doesn’t answer. He shivers. “I’m cold. Let’s go inside.”

Tucker has the warmest bedroom. The furnace runs right up through his wall, and we put our hands on it to warm them when we’re cold. The wall feels nice and hot, when the furnace is working right.

We move from the roof to Tucker’s bed. Jesse and Mindy stumble into the room and lean up against the warm wall.

“It isn’t fair,” I say. “How come you get the warm room?”

“I’ll switch rooms with you, if you want.”

“Really?” There’s *got* to be a catch to this.

“Yup. I don’t like my room—spiders and a vampire live in it.”

There's the catch. Spiders—yuck. But vampires too? I shake my head.

"I'm serious," Tucker says. "You know the long closet with the bookshelves?"

I nod. Jesse and Mindy like to climb the shelves and hide in the top one, which runs the whole length of Tucker's closet. Above the top shelf is a trap door that we've never opened, but we figure it must lead into the attic.

The closet doesn't have any doors. It probably used to once, but now it stays wide open. "It's creepy at night," Tucker says. "All I can think of, when I see that open closet, is vampires. Like there's a vampire hiding behind the clothes. A vampire that hangs on a clothes hanger during the day, like a bat hangs when it's sleeping. And at night the vampire wakes up and slides out of the closet, and I'm scared some night it'll bite me."

"What about the spiders?"

"Okay, you know how my room is kinda small, right? So the bed is almost pushed up to the wall. There's a little space in between the wall and the bed, and that's where the purple spiders live."

"Purple spiders? Have you actually seen one?"

"No, but I dream about 'em. In my dream they're purple. Not only that, they multiply at night so there's a whole wriggling pile in that small space."

"And have you seen the vampire?"

"No, but what difference does that make? I haven't seen *any* of the weird creatures that live around here, but they've gotta be real. Mindy says so. Anyway, every night I can't decide if I should lie facing the closet with the vampire or the crack with the purple spiders, and so I can't get a good sleep at night. Can I *please* have your room and you can take mine?"

SPIDERS AND VAMPIRES

“Why don’t we ask Mindy if vampires and spiders live in the room? She’ll tell us. If there aren’t any, I’ll trade, but if there are, you’re stuck with the room because I won’t want it either.”

“Fair enough,” Tucker says.

Mindy peers through the closet and crawls under Tucker’s bed. She doesn’t see anything.

“Maybe nighttime is the only time you can see the vampire or spiders,” Tucker says.

Mindy doesn’t mind spending the night in Tucker’s room, but Jesse doesn’t want to sleep in his room alone. Tucker says he’ll sleep with him, but Jesse wants to be with Mindy so he decides to sleep in Tucker’s room, too.

This doesn’t go over well with Aunt Julie. “Why is everybody switching rooms all of a sudden?”

We tell her why. And she gives us this incredulous look, throws her hands up in the air, and walks away, shaking her head.

We take that to mean that Tucker and the twins can swap rooms. She didn’t say they *couldn’t*. She didn’t say anything at all.

So Mindy and Jesse sleep in Tucker’s room. At breakfast Jesse tells us yes, a purple spider *does* live in the crack between the bed and the wall. But only one. It doesn’t multiply like Tucker thought.

“Da spida’s name is Tinky,” Jesse says.

I think that’s a cute name for a spider, and even Tucker looks happy. He’s excited because he guessed right (partly anyway), but then he frowns.

“Are you sure there’s only one?”

Mindy nods.

“Is he a bad spider?”

Jesse shakes his head. “No, he’s a non-pois’nous spida. He’s fuwwy and puwple and is scawed of da dark, so he hides under da bed at night.”

“Wow,” Tucker says. “I got the color right and everything.”

Tucker feels braver now. He says he doesn’t mind a spider if it’s a scared purple spider, especially if it’s fuzzy, because then it’s a cute scared purple spider. So I don’t get his nice, warm room after all. Drat.

“What about the vampire?” I say.

Mindy shakes her head. There is no vampire.

“But sumffin’s in da attic,” Jesse says.

Tucker gulps. “The attic above my closet?”

Jesse nods. “Mindy heard it twying to get out.”

Tucker shudders and looks at me. “Still want my room? You can have it.”

I shake my head. “No way. If something’s in the attic, it could be bad, like *The Thing* in the basement. You can keep your room now.”



Christmas will be here soon. I’m excited, and Tucker is excited, and Jesse, and even Mindy smiles when we mention Santa Claus. We’re doubly excited this year because our cousins are coming to spend Christmas with us. We haven’t seen them since we moved to *The House*.

We have two cousins—Sara is sixteen, and her brother Andy is my age, only a few months older. Tucker says he can’t wait to show them all the weird creatures around here.

SPIDERS AND VAMPIRES

“I don’t think that’s a good idea,” I say.

“Why not? You don’t think they’ll believe us?”

“Of course they won’t. Sara is almost an adult. And Andy *thinks* he’s an adult. He didn’t even put out a stocking for Santa Claus last year, remember?”

“The dummy,” Tucker says. “He missed out on some good candy. I’ll always put out a stocking for Santa.”

“Yeah, but every year Santa puts coal in your stocking ‘cause you’re bad.”

“He only puts a little in. Aunt Julie says it’s so I remember not to get so angry.”

“You’re not doing such a good job this year,” I say.

Tucker looks mad, then he looks thoughtful, then worried. “You think all I’ll get is coal this year?”

I shrug.

“Maybe he’ll feel sorry for me,” Tucker says. “Cause I lost my parents.”

“We *all* lost our parents!” I say. “Not just you.”

Chapter Twelve

The Attic

Sara and Andy and their parents get here two days before Christmas. Andy sleeps in Tucker's room, and Sara bunks in mine. She has to make do with my sleeping bag on the floor. Andy sleeps on Tucker's floor, too. We don't tell him about Tinky, in case he's scared of spiders. But I don't think he'd believe us anyway.

Andy and Tucker are both scientific nerds, so they get along okay. The only difference is that Tucker believes in all the monsters and ghosts and spirits around here and Andy definitely won't. So it's best not to say anything.

Since it's so close to Christmas, we don't have to visit Dr. O'Neal. He's on vacation. So instead, Aunt Julie takes us to drive around and see the Christmas lights. Then we make wreaths using holly from our holly tree. We use old metal coat hangers we find in one of the closets, and bend the coat hangers into circles. We tie holly to the hangers with string. The holly has prickles, so it's delicate work.

While we're making the wreaths, I ask Aunt Julie why we don't put any Christmas lights up on our house. My dad used to spend hours rigging lights around the house, trees, bushes, anything that got in his line of sight.

"Too much of a hassle," Aunt Julie says. "You gotta put 'em all up, then two weeks later, take 'em all down."

THE ATTIC

“You could leave ‘em up forever if you want,” Tucker says, smiling at her. “Then it’d be Christmas all year.”

Aunt Julie smiles back at Tucker, looking relieved. I’m a bit suspicious. I’m not sure if Tucker is sincerely trying to get along with Aunt Julie or if he’s getting nervous about the contents of his Christmas stocking.

“It’d be nice to have lights on The House though,” I say.

Jesse shakes his head. “Da fing in da attic won’t like it.”

“Why not?”

“It don’t like lights at night. Dat’s what Mindy says.”

“We should go see what’s up there,” Tucker says.

I shake my head. “Not a good idea. What if whatever’s up there is bad, like The Thing in the basement?”

“What thing in the basement?” Andy, who overhears us, says.

Now we have to tell him. He looks at us like we’re nuts. Aunt Julie and Sara give the exact same grownup sigh. They think we’re nuts, too, but they’re dismissing it as kid stuff.

But Andy wants to know why we’d believe something so crazy. “There’s no such thing as monsters,” he says.

“There is in this house,” I say.

“Prove it,” Andy says. “Show me The Thing.”

Tucker stares at me with wide eyes. I look back at him. No way are we going into the basement.

“You’re *not* going into the basement,” Aunt Julie says, much to my relief. “I haven’t fumigated it yet.”

“We can show him da fing in da attic,” Jesse whispers so Aunt Julie can’t hear. “Mindy says it isn’t a vevy bad fing.”

I nod. If Mindy says it’s okay, that’s what we’ll do.

After we finish with the wreaths, we head up to Tucker’s room. We don’t make a sound when we’re opening the attic trapdoor—we don’t want Aunt Julie to hear us. I’m pretty sure Aunt Julie will get mad if she knows we’re climbing

Tucker's shelves and trying to sneak into the attic. We can't let Sara hear us either. She's basically an adult, so she'd tell.

Mindy climbs up on the top shelf, followed by Jesse. Andy and Tucker are making their way up the other shelves, and I stand at the bottom, biting my nails and praying the shelves won't break. That's way too many kids tottering on them.

"I'm not going up there," I say. "If I do, the whole thing'll come down and then we'll really get into trouble. I'll stay on the ground and be the lookout."

Jesse can't get the trapdoor open. Andy scoots onto the top shelf and helps push. The door slides open and a cloud of dust covers Andy's hair. He coughs, pokes his head into the attic, and turns on his flashlight.

"It's a super small space," he says. "There's nothing up here but dirt. And..."

And then he comes back down so fast, he almost falls off the shelf.

"What?" Tucker says.

Andy's face is white, like a ghost. "There's footprints up there," he says. "All over the place, in the dust."

"What kind of footprints?" I say, glad I'm down on the safe ground.

"Little ones," Andy says. "And they lead right up to the trapdoor. It's probably a mouse."

Tucker and I look at each other. *We* know it's not a mouse.

Jesse looks down at me and says, "Da fing has 'scaped."

"When?" Tucker says, staring around. I jump on Tucker's bed, just in case.

"When Andy opened da twap door."

Tucker gulps. "And now it's running around my room?"

From the top shelf, Mindy nods.

Oh great. As if we didn't have enough crazy creatures in this house already.

THE ATTIC

On Christmas morning, Jesse wakes us up at four so we can sneak downstairs and look at our presents before the adults get up. Our house has a real fireplace where we hung our stockings last night. I've never lived in a house with a real fireplace until now.

The fireplace is in the dining room and it's made of brick. A long brick hearth runs in front of it. We like to get up on the hearth and pretend it's a stage. Sometimes we get tennis rackets and pretend like they're guitars and we're a band. I'm always lead guitar, Tucker's bass guitar, and we let Mindy and Jesse bang on pots for drums.

Today we run to the hearth to check out the stockings. The presents are all under the tree, but the stockings are missing.

"Luke was here," Jesse says. "He's hidden our stockings."

"Luke?" Andy says.

"Luke," I say. "He's a leprechaun."

"You've *got* to be kidding," Sara says. "You think a leprechaun hid your stockings?"

"Yup," I say. Sara isn't buying a word of this. Andy looks thoughtful and doesn't say anything.

"You don't think Aunt Julie hid the stockings?"

"Nope," I wish she'd stop asking such stupid questions.

We let Mindy lead the hunt for our stockings. Luke leaves clues, but of course none of us can see the clues except Mindy. She finds the bulging stockings hidden in the clothes dryer. I can feel an orange in the toe of mine.

"Ha!" Tucker says, prodding his stocking. "Just a small bag of coal, I think."

The laundry room is right next to Aunt Julie's bedroom, so of course she wakes up with all our noise. So do Aunt Betsy and Uncle Jeff, who are sleeping on the living room sofa. They get up and make us breakfast.

Breakfast on Christmas Day is always the same thing—French toast, oranges, and cappuccino. Mom used to make French toast and cappuccino, and Aunt Julie has kept up the tradition. She says Grandma used to make the same thing when she, Mom and Aunt Betsy were kids.

The cappuccino isn't adult cappuccino; it's warm milk with a little bit of instant coffee and lots of sugar. But we like it. We feel Christmasy when we drink cappuccino. Christmas morning is the only day of the year when Aunt Julie makes it for us.

"Thanks for hiding the stockings, Aunt Julie," Sara says. "That was fun."

Aunt Julie shakes her head. "Sara, I have no idea what you're talking about."

"Of course she has to say that," Sara whispers. "She doesn't want to let on that she did it."

But between the thing in the attic and Luke's prank, Andy is looking doubtful.

I wonder if Santa Claus knows about Luke. Does Luke get coal in his stocking for being such a bad, mischievous leprechaun?

We *know* Santa was here. There's a big boot print in the fireplace, and the milk and cookies are all gone. Andy says his father might have eaten the cookies. But we know better.

It turns out that the thing in the attic is another purple spider—Tinky's brother Binky. Binky has been stuck in the attic forever. But unlike Tinky, Binky loves the dark and hates the light. So after a couple days living in Tucker's room, Mindy says Binky has had enough. He wants to go back in the attic where it's nice and dark and not half as noisy.

I open the attic door since Andy has gone back home. Mindy says Binky is now back in the attic and happy.

THE ATTIC

That's fine with me. One purple spider running around is enough.

"That takes care of Binky," I say, "but we still have to deal with The Thing."

"We should ask Adam to get rid of it," Tucker says.

"Who?"

"Adam. The guy living in the guest house."

"Why would he help us?"

"He's a nice guy. He gave Mindy a doll for Christmas," Tucker says.

"When did he do that?"

"Yesterday. He came over with the doll and that box of candy we ate last night."

"Adam did that?"

"Yeah. He even said Mindy and Jesse could still play in the sandbox."

Hmm. Well, Adam might have been nice to all of them, but he hasn't said one word to me yet. Not even a "hello" when we wait for the school bus. Why's he being so friendly to everyone all of a sudden, but not to me?

Chapter Thirteen

Abimal

I love snow.

My favorite thing to do in it is make snow angels. You fall backward into the snow and move your arms up and down and your legs out and in, and then you get up slowly so you don't mess up the angel you've made.

I'm good at not messing up my snow angels when I stand. So is Tucker. The twins haven't gotten the hang of it yet. By the time they get up, their snow angels looks like they have two heads and an extra arm.

"It don't matter," Jesse says. "Even if we make perfect snow angels, da snowman'll mess 'em up anyway."

"The snowman?" I say.

Jesse nods. "Dat's what Mindy says."

We don't get a good snow until February, but when the storm hits, it gives us almost two feet. The snow is so deep that the twins can barely walk through it. We all have enough snow to make our own snowman.

Tucker makes his snowman the traditional way—he rolls three balls of snow and stacks them. He puts a hat and scarf on his snowman, finds two rocks for eyes, and makes a carrot nose. He uses twigs for arms.

Jesse and Mindy make a snowman, but they get tired after two balls, so Tucker says theirs is a snowkid. We put a baseball cap on the snowkid and mittens on his twiggy arms.

I decide to make a snowdog. Making a snowdog is easier because you don't need to stack big snowballs. You make one ball and put a tiny ball on one end for a head. I use a stick for the tail and a purple handkerchief for the snowdog's collar. Jesse and Mindy climb on the big snowball and pretend it's a snowhorse.

But I know it's a snowdog.

After we make our snow family, we head down to the broken swimming pool with no water. The pool does have a little water in the deep end. Not enough to swim in, but in the wintertime the water freezes and makes a shiny ice rink.

"We should skate on it," Tucker says, staring over the rusty chain link fence surrounding the pool.

"Aunt Julie said not to," I say.

Actually, Aunt Julie's wording was more like "*Set one toe on that ice and I'll ground you until you're fifty.*"

"Aunt Julie is at work," Tucker says. "She'll never know if nobody tells."

He's got a point. There's so much snow on the ground that school keeps closing, but Aunt Julie still has to go to work. So Mrs. Wemberley is babysitting, and she can't see as far as the broken pool. She's always kicking us out of The House anyway.

"Playing in the snow is good for kids," she says. "You get good and cold and when you finish playing, I'll fix you some hot cocoa, yeeeah."

I decide I should try the ice first. I'm the biggest, so if it holds my weight, then it will hold the others too.

"I'm as big as you are," Tucker says, standing on his toes to stress the point.

"Yeah, but I'm the oldest, so I still get to go first."

"It was *my* idea," Tucker says, crossing his arms and putting on a pout.

The ice is nice and hard, and even though I don't have proper ice skates, my boots slide over the surface, which is fun. Tucker steps on, and then the twins. We laugh and slide on the ice, and try to see who can stay up the longest without falling down. The twins decide they like sliding on their butts more than on their feet, so they lose.

Jesse says, "Da Abimal Snowman likes to skate, too."

"What's an Abimal Snowman?" I say.

"He means Abominable Snowman," Tucker says.

"Dat's too hard to say," Jesse says, "so we call him Abimal."

I look at Mindy. "Does an Abimal Snowman live here?"

She whispers to Jesse, and he says, "Only when it snows."

"Where does Abimal live when there isn't any snow?"

"In da pump house," Jesse says. "He melts 'n turns into da water dat floats the orange sofa awound."

"That's pretty cool," Tucker says.

"But when it's snowing, Abimal comes out so he can play," Jesse says.

"Is the Abimal Snowman bad?" Tucker says.

"He's not bad," Jesse says. "But he doesn't have any mannas."

"Any what?" I say.

"Manners," Tucker says. "He doesn't have any manners."

"He stomps on fings," Jesse says.

"What kind of things?"

"Anyfing he can stomp. He's a Stomping Abimal Snowman. Yesterday he stomped our snow angels."

"I hope he doesn't stomp our snowmen," I say. "And my snowdog."

"Abimal would *love* to stomp snowmen," Jesse says.

"Well, that stinks," Tucker says. "I spent a lot of time making my snowman. I don't want him stomped."

Mindy whispers to Jesse and Jesse says, "Missy'll pwo-
tect 'em."

Missy is the doll Adam gave Mindy for Christmas. She hauls that doll around wherever she goes. “How’s a doll gonna protect the snowmen from Abimal?” Tucker says.

“Yeah,” I say. “Poor Missy’ll get cold if you leave her outside.”

Mindy gives me a pointed look with her serious blue eyes, and Jesse says, “She’s not weal. She’s a doll. Dolls don’t get cold.”

Oh, they grow up so fast.

“Anyway, Missy can guawd da snowmen.”

“But she’s a doll,” Tucker says. “If she’s not real, how can she guard the snowman?”

“Abimal don’t like dolls,” Jesse says. “He finks dolls are people, and Abimal is scawed of people.”

So Missy guards the snowmen from Abimal. And Abimal doesn’t stomp on them. He stays away. Even after the snow melts, and Abimal returns to float around the pump house, the snowmen last for another week. Then they melt away, too.

Adam is taking Aunt Julie out to a fancy restaurant for Valentine’s Day. She drops this doozy on us when we’re eating breakfast. I think I might puke, but Tucker grins at Aunt Julie and says, “Is it like a date?”

Aunt Julie’s face turns almost as red as her hair and she looks down at the pan with scrambled eggs when she says, “Well, yes it is.”

Holy cow. Aunt Julie and Adam? She’s so small and tidy and he’s so big and burly. He has a tangly beard and wears flannel shirts. Not the kind of guy I thought Aunt Julie would ever fall for.

“Are you in love?” Jesse says.

“Don’t be silly,” Aunt Julie says, smiling. “We’re going on a dinner date, that’s all.”

But when she leaves the room, Tucker says, “I think she is in love with Adam. She gets all giggly whenever she talks to him.”

“But he’s so hairy. And he’s got so many muscles,” I say, sticking out my tongue and gagging.

“Maybe Aunt Julie fell in love with da muscles,” Jesse says.

I’m not sure if there’s anything to love about Adam, and I tell this to Dr. O’Neal on our next visit.

Dr. O’Neal looks concerned. “Does he treat you badly?”

“That’s not the problem at all,” I say. “He mostly acts as if I don’t even exist. I mean, half the time when we’re outside playing, he doesn’t even come out to say hello. The only good thing he’s done for us so far is promise to help us clean out the cabana in the spring, so we can use it as a clubhouse. But how do we even know he’ll keep that promise? What if he and Aunt Julie break up before then? What if he moves out and finds another place to live?”

Dr. O’Neal shakes his head and says, “Well, your Aunt Julie needs to live her life, too. You need to be more understanding.”

See, this is *exactly* why I don’t like talking to him.

Mindy and Jesse both like Adam. Mindy says Luke the Leprechaun likes him, too. Adam mostly ignores me, but Tucker talks to him sometimes, and he *does* pay attention to the twins. I guess he isn’t too bad.

Chapter Fourteen

The Broken Pool

We get another snowstorm right at the end of February—two whole more feet. Aunt Julie says it is *unusually* snowy this year. All I know is we get more snow days. Tucker says we'll have to make those days up in the summer, but who cares? We get them off now, and we can play in the snow all we want. Mrs. Wemberley babysits a lot since Aunt Julie still has to work. So we get to slide on our ice rink, and when we come in all wet and shivery, Mrs. Wemberley smiles and makes us hot chocolate with marshmallows.

Anna and Danny skate with us whenever they're finished with their chores. We tell them about Abimal.

"D'ya think Abimal was at our house, too?" Anna says. "We made snow angels yesterday, and this morning the angels were all messed up."

"Yeah, it was either Abimal or the goats," Danny says.

"The only way to find out," I say, "is to leave a doll in the snow angel. That's what Mindy says. If Abimal sees the doll, he won't stomp on the angels, but if the goats see the doll, they'll probably try to eat it. Then you'll know who messed up your angel."

Danny comes up close to me so the twins can't hear. "Do you really think that'll work?"

“It *has* to,” I say. “Mindy says so.”

“How do you think Abimal got here?”

I shrug. I’ve discovered how some of these creatures got here, but about others I’m still clueless. Like the Mulberry Dragon. And the purple spiders. And Abimal.

“Maybe they’re not all brought here by someone,” I say. “Maybe some of ‘em find their way here on their own.”

“Uh-uh,” Jesse says. “Dey all come wif somebody.”

Mindy nods. “Tuff Nugie,” she says.

Wow. Mindy spoke! All I can do is stare at her.

It doesn’t even matter that nobody knows who or what Tuff Nugie is. We don’t even ask. We’re so excited that words came out of Mindy’s mouth. Jesse beams. Tucker pats Mindy on the head. Danny and Anna smile.

“We should tell Aunt Julie about this,” I say.

“No,” Tucker says. “Aunt Julie will tell Dr. O’Neal and then we’ll have to talk about it. Let’s keep this our secret.”

“Mindy,” Danny says, “what’s a Tuff Nugie?”

Mindy doesn’t talk anymore though. She looks happy but embarrassed, so she whispers to Jesse instead.

“Adam bwrought Tuff Nugie,” Jesse says.

“But what *is* a Tuff Nugie?” Danny asks.

Jesse shakes his head. “Dunno.”

I don’t care *who* Tuff Nugie is. Mindy *said* something. Something all of us could understand, even if we don’t know what it means. When Aunt Julie gets home and sees us all so happy, she asks why. But we don’t say. What if it was a fluke? We don’t want Aunt Julie getting too excited. Plus, Mindy talked to us. That was *our* special moment. We don’t want to share it with an adult, even if the adult is Aunt Julie. Not yet.

We try not to get too excited about Mindy, although we keep waiting for her to talk again. Tucker says it’s best not

THE BROKEN POOL

to put too much pressure on her or all we'll probably ever hear from her lips were the two words "Tuff Nugie." But it's hard. Whenever we ask Mindy a question, Tucker looks at her with a hopeful glint in his eye, and I wait holding my breath. Mindy knows this. It's too much for her. She doesn't say anything else, except what she whispers to Jesse.



It's early March now, and the last snowfall is almost a memory. It's getting warmer out. Ice still fills our skating rink though, and a little snow lingers on the ground. Jesse says Abimal is still out and lurking around, trying to play in the last bit of remaining snow.

"He's gettin' sleepy," Jesse says. "He's gonna ibanate soon."

"He's gonna what?" I say.

"Hibernate," Tucker says. "That's what he means."

Jesse nods. "Yeah, ibanate."

I draw a picture of Abimal in my journal. Jesse watches over my shoulder.

"No," he says, "Abimal don't look like dat."

I study my drawing. I drew a big fat monster with scary eyes and teeth and large feet. "What's wrong with it?"

"Abimal don't have teef like dat. Why would a Snowman need teef?"

“No teeth?”

“And he has tiny feet, not big feet like dat. Dat’s why he likes to stomp fings. He needs to comp’sate for his tiny feet.”

That sounds like a word Jesse picked up from Dr. O’Neal. Compensate. I sigh, erase the big feet, and draw in dainty ones.

“Dat’s betta,” Jesse says. “Now dwaw da bunny slippas.”

Tucker starts laughing. “Bunny slippers? You serious?”

Jesse nods. “Bunny slippas.”

“That’s silly,” I say. “Why would an abominable snowman need to keep his feet warm? Wouldn’t they melt?”

Jesse puckers his lips into a pout and stomps off. Mindy tries to imitate his pout, but she looks so cute doing it, it doesn’t have the same effect. She stomps off after him anyway.

I draw the bunny slippers.

Tucker thinks we can skate on the ice one last time before it melts. “Let’s go, before Aunt Julie gets home,” he says.

The twins don’t want to go outside, they’re too busy watching their cartoons. Mrs. Wemberley is snoozing on the couch, so we put on our coats and hats and our best sliding boots and sneak outside. It is still cold, but sunny. A couple of purple crocuses are pushing their way up through the small patches of snow.

“I think Abimal has been here,” I say. “The ice looks a little cracked.”

“He wanted one last skate, too,” Tucker says, stepping onto the ice.

“Do you think it’ll hold?” I’m not sure I like the cracks.

“Sure it will,” Tucker says, and he jumps up and down a couple of times to show me how strong the ice still is.

It isn’t.

Tucker goes down with a splash, screaming. I scream, too, but the water only comes up to Tucker’s knees. He

THE BROKEN POOL

scrambles toward the edge and falls, plopping face forward into the cold water. Now he is *completely* soaked.

We have to tell Mrs. Wemberley what happened. How else could Tucker be so covered in water? His teeth are chattering, and he is shivering.

“Well, no harm done,” Mrs. Wemberley says, rubbing a towel through Tucker’s hair.

Tucker changes clothes, and Mrs. Wemberley makes him a big mug of hot chocolate, which he drinks in front of the electric heater in the kitchen. She makes me a cup, too.

“We won’t tell your aunt, yeeeah?” Mrs. Wemberley says. “She won’t be happy if she knows I let you skate on the pool.”

Mrs. Wemberley didn’t *let* us. We always made sure she never saw us when we snuck out to go skating.

But Mrs. Wemberley gives me a wink. And I start to wonder if she hasn’t kept more of an eye on us than we thought. She’s smart, Mrs. Wemberley. And even though she’s probably as old as Uncle Sam, she’s pretty cool, too.

“You know,” Tucker says as we sit on the roof and watch our breath rise in the air, “we haven’t heard much from The Thing in the basement lately.”

“It’s been awfully quiet,” I say, nodding. “I wonder if it’s still living down there.”

Tucker yawns. “I haven’t heard it almost for a month now. Not even on Thursdays. But I’ll bet it’s still there. I mean, where else would it go?”

“You don’t think it’s moved do you?”

We head back inside and ask Mindy. She shakes her head.

“She don’t know,” Jesse says.

“So it might not be down in the basement anymore?”

Mindy shrugs. Weird. Mindy is always so sure about these things, and if she doesn’t know, well...

“If it’s not in the basement, that might mean that The Thing could be lurking around here somewhere else,” Tucker says. “Couldn’t it?”

I nod, not liking *that* idea one bit.

Chapter Fifteen

Tuff Nugie

Adam is my favowite pewson in da whole wowd.” Jesse announces this as we’re coloring eggs for Easter. We’re at Anna and Danny’s house because they have lots of chickens and so they also have tons of eggs. Some of the chickens lay brown eggs, which don’t color well. A few hens lay eggs with black spots, so when we color them, they end up blue or green or yellow or red with black spots. One or two hens lay white eggs, and we all fight over those because they’re the best to color.

“Is Adam your favorite person even more than Aunt Julie?” Tucker says.

“Maybe not Aunt Julie,” Jesse says.

“Even more than me? Or Susie and Mindy?”

“No, not any of you. But out of all da otha people, Adam is my favowite.”

“How come?” I say. I don’t see what’s so great about Adam. He’s big and hairy.

“Cause he gave Mindy her doll. And he bwrought Tuff Nugie.”

“So when do we get to meet this Tuff Nugie?” I say to Mindy, hoping she’ll answer. She stares at me with her huge, solemn eyes.

“Soon,” Jesse says. “He lives in da cave.”

Close to the main road, on the guest house side, grow two rows of trees. They’re big fir trees, and we think that

long ago a skinny road ran between the rows. Now there's nothing but pine needles and a hole. The hole isn't deep, but it's too dark to see the bottom. It isn't big enough to crawl into, but Mindy calls it a cave anyway. Tuff Nugie lives down there.

After we bring our Easter eggs back to The House, we show Adam and Aunt Julie the cave. Adam peers into it.

"It's probably just a broken pipe covered with dirt," Aunt Julie says.

"Mhm," Adam says in his deep voice. "It can't be a real cave."

"Why not?" Jesse says.

"Because real caves need something called karst."

"What's that?" I say.

"I know," Tucker says. "Karst is a kind of rock, right?"

"Right," Adam says. "Limestone. This area doesn't have any limestone, so we probably don't have any caves."

"I'm gonna call it a cave anyway," Tucker says. "Sounds more exciting than calling it a hole."

Adam and Aunt Julie go back inside. Adam is making us hot cross buns for tomorrow morning—he says that's traditional Easter breakfast food. I don't care about eating breakfast on Easter morning, all I want to do is find the eggs and get my chocolate bunny.

At least Adam is a little more sociable now. He talks to Tucker a lot. Aunt Julie says it's good that Tucker has a man to talk to.

He still doesn't talk to me much though. Tucker says Adam's scared of me because I always look so mad when he's around. I can't believe Adam would be scared of anybody, especially a girl like me.

Tucker stares in the hole then turns to Jesse. "You really think something is in there?"

TUFF NUGIE

“Uh-huh. Tuff Nugie.”

“*Who* is Tuff Nugie?”

“Mindy says he’s a mountain man, but now he’s a miner. Dat’s why he lives in da cave.”

“Is he looking for gold?” I say.

Jesse nods. Mindy whispers in his ear and he says, “Gold and jools.”

“We have jewels in our yard?” I get down on my hands and knees and stare in the dark hole.

Tucker shakes his head. “You might find jewels deep in a mountain,” he says, “but not in an old abandoned pipe.”

“Unless it *isn’t* a pipe,” I say.

Tucker wants to know why Tuff Nugie came with Adam. Jesse says that Adam is the type of person a mountain man/miner would want to hang around—big, beardy, wears a flannel shirt and work boots.

“What does Tuff Nugie look like?” I ask.

“He has a white beawd. And he has a cowboy hat. And he only has one leg.”



“Must be hard to work in a mine if you only have one leg,” Tucker says.

“Well, he made a new leg out of wood.”

“What happened to his real leg?”

“A gwizzly beaw ate it. Dat’s why he decided to live in da cave. Beaws don’t like caves.”

“Sure they do,” Tucker says. “They hibernate in ‘em.”

Jesse turns to Mindy with a puzzled look on his face. Mindy whispers into his ear. Jesse nods.

“The hole is too small for a gwizzly to fit in.”

“He’s got you there,” I say, grinning.

“Okay. But mining is pretty dangerous, too. The cave could collapse.”

“Tuff Nugie has a pickaxe so he can pick his way out, in case da cave collapses,” Jesse says.

Tucker shrugs. “Okay.”

We peer into the cave. “What does Tuff Nugie do?” I say. “The Leprechaun looks for buried treasure, the Dragon guards the mulberries, and the Ruby protects the Bamboo Forest. Does Tuff Nugie do anything?”

Jesse shakes his head. “He just mines. If you put your eaw to da cave, you can heaw him mining.”

So I put my ear close to the hole, but not for long. What if a spider crawls into my hair? Anyway, I don’t hear anything. I didn’t expect I would.

Tucker doesn’t hear anything either. But Jesse says he hears a *thump*, like somebody stomping on a wooden leg.

Tuff Nugie is searching for his gold.

I march straight into the kitchen and throw my backpack onto the kitchen table. This first day of school after Spring Break has been terrible. I grab the jar of peanut butter from the cupboard. This is a Peanut Butter Eating kind of day.

“You’ll spoil your dinner,” Adam says. He’s making tacos for everybody. He does that sometimes. Comes over and makes tacos. I’ve gotta admit, the tacos are good. But it always feels weird to walk in the kitchen and see Adam standing there.

“I don’t care,” I say. “I want to eat peanut butter.”

“What’s wrong?”

“You don’t want to hear about my problems,” I say, shoving a big spoonful of gooey peanut butter into my mouth.

“Sure I do.”

Since when? “You’ll tell Aunt Julie.”

“What’s wrong with telling Aunt Julie? You should talk to her about your problems. She might understand.”

I shake my head. “She’ll tell me I should talk to Dr. O’Neal about it. And I don’t want to talk to Dr. O’Neal about this.”

“Maybe she won’t,” Adam says.

“Oh yes, she will.”

Adam puts down his spoon, crosses his heart with one salsa-covered finger, and says, “Okay. I promise I won’t tell Aunt Julie.”

Well, he’ll be better than talking to Dr. O’Neal. And this *is* the first time he’s really tried to talk to me. “The kids at school teased me today.”

“All of ‘em?”

“No. This big stupid bully called Aaron Murphy. He said...”

“Said what?”

Oh, I *hate* Aaron Murphy. Calling me Oozy Susie was annoying and childish. But this...

“He said...he said, *you’re so ugly your parents probably died from looking at your face.*” I grab a big spoonful of peanut butter, shove it into my mouth, and wipe my eyes. I am *not* going to cry in front of Adam. He picks up his spoon and starts stirring the salsa again.

“That’s a horrible thing for him to say.”

“Ya think?” I dig out another scoop of peanut butter. “He’s the biggest jerk on this planet.”

“Either that, or he likes you,” Adam says. I almost spit the peanut butter out.

“*What?*”

“Boys do stupid things. They’re doubly mean to girls they like, for some weird reason. I guess ‘cause they’re scared of their feelings.”

“He called me *ugly*. And he...he...”

“I know. He should’ve never brought up your parents. That was totally uncalled for. Did you tell your teacher?”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“That’d be telling.”

“So? You should let your teacher know. Stop the bullying. Or at least, tell an adult.”

“I’m telling you,” I say.

Adam sighs. “Can I tell Aunt Julie?”

I shake my head. “No. And I think you’re wrong that Aaron likes me.”

“Okay,” Adam says. “If it’s between us, that’s fine. But you *aren’t* ugly. So don’t believe what he says.”

“I’d *never* believe what that idiot says.”

He smiles at me. At least I *think* he’s smiling—it’s kinda hard to tell with the beard in the way.

I take one last scoop of peanut butter and put the lid back on the jar. “Tucker says you were scared to talk with me,” I say.

Adam’s grin gets even bigger. “He was right.”

“Why?”

Adam shrugs. “I guess I thought it would be better if you started talking to me first.”

TUFF NUGIE

He turns his attention back to the salsa. As I eat my last spoonful of peanut butter, I think about what he said. Why are some kids so mean? And why would they be so mean to girls they might like?

Sometimes I wish I were older already. If I were older, I'd have an easier time figuring things out.

Chapter Sixteen

Thumbby's Gang

Adam starts cleaning out the creepy cabana before the spiders move back in. He lets us help.

The cabana has three rooms and a big covered porch. The middle room was a kitchen—an old fridge and a sink are still in there. The two side rooms are long and skinny and have benches built in. Those were the changing rooms, Adam says—one for the boys and one for the girls. That's where they'd change into their swimsuits so they could swim in the pool, way back when it had enough water to swim in.

Our house was once a fancy house. Whoever built it must have been a billionaire. Once, crystal-clear water filled the broken pool, and kids swam all summer. They could go into the cabana and eat snacks from the fridge. Once, the azalea bushes running along the fence were neat and trimmed; now they're overgrown but still have the most beautiful flowers. Once, our house was the most awesome house around.

Now the creepy cabana is falling apart, but it's not so creepy anymore since we've brushed out the cobwebs and cleaned out all of the junk. Now the spiders have nowhere to live. Adam paints the rooms for us, and even though the electricity doesn't work and we can't use the fridge, the cabana makes an awesome clubhouse.

THUMBY'S GANG

Jesse has made up a new game called "Thumbby's Gang." Basically, he's named all his fingers. (Thumbby is the leader of the gang, then Finger, then Middly, then Ringy, then Pinky who is the littlest and always gets teased by the other fingers.) Jesse made up a song for Thumbby's Gang, and he and Mindy sit in the cabana and wave their hands around and make stories up about their fingers.

Mindy likes to hum the Thumbby's Gang song, which gets Aunt Julie all excited because Mindy has never hummed anything.

"She talked a couple of weeks ago too," Tucker says. "She said 'Tuff Nugie'."

"What? Why didn't you tell me?"

Tucker gives me a guilty look and I start to feel guilty too. We should have told Aunt Julie, but we thought it might be a fluke. "I dunno," Tucker says, "we just didn't."

I know the reason I didn't want to tell Aunt Julie. I was afraid she'd tell Dr. O'Neal and we'd have to talk about that too. And I was right. Dr. O'Neal gets all excited and tells Aunt Julie that Mindy might break out of her shell soon and start talking.

"But we shouldn't push her," Aunt Julie tells us. "We should act normal so she won't be afraid to talk. Guys, I'm so happy. Mindy is starting to cope with things."



I hope so. It would be nice for Mindy to talk to us, instead of having Jesse translate everything she says.

It's getting hot out. School will be over soon. The now un-creepy cabana is getting a little stuffy, so Adam pounds on the old window sills until they squeak open and fresh air pours in.

"Close the windows when you leave, or the spiders'll move back in," Adam says.

After he leaves, I call for New Business. Jesse raises his hand.

"Tuff Nugie has moved into da kitchen," he says.

"In the cabana kitchen?" Anna says. "Why?"

"He comes here when he's not working in da cave. He uses da cabana window as a lookout."

"Lookout for what?" I say.

"For people twying to steal his gold. Piwates. Bank wobbas. Fings like dat."

"Do we have pirates and bank robbers in our yard now, too?" Tucker says.

"No, but you never know when one might show up. But Luke the Lepwechaun *loves* gold."

"Would Luke steal from Tuff Nugie?" I ask.

Jesse nods. We have *so* much drama going on in our yard.

Jesse says Tuff Nugie plans to hide his gold (when he finds some) in our cabana, because the cabana is close to the pool, which is Uncle Sam's territory. Luke won't come here.

"Isn't he worried about *us* stealing his gold?" Anna says.

"No, because we can't see it, except Mindy, so we wouldn't know where to find it. It's not gold for kids."

That makes sense. I guess.

All Tuff Nugie does is work. He never plays. I feel kind of sorry for him. He works and works and never finds any gold. He's persistent, but not too lucky.

THUMBY'S GANG

Jesse says the one thing Tuff Nugie *does* like to do, besides mining for gold, is sing.

“What does he like to sing?” Tucker says.

“Fumby’s Gang.’ Dat’s why he first came to da cabana—he heawd me singing and Mindy humming it.”

“If we all sing Thumbby’s Gang, Tuff Nugie might join in,” Anna says, giving the twins an encouraging smile. She’ll make a great babysitter someday. The twins eat up this kind of stuff. Jesse nods his head so hard, I’m surprised it doesn’t pop off.

“Let’s all sing it,” Anna says, “so Tuff Nugie might sing too, and not worry about mining for gold so much.”

Tucker makes a face. “Do we have to?”

“Oh geez, let’s do it already,” I say. “It’ll make the twins happy.”

So we all sing the Thumbby’s Gang song. It’s pretty stupid, because five-year-olds made it up, but it goes like this:

My name is Thumbby and...

My name is Finger and...

My name is Middly and...

My name is Ringy and...

My name is Pinky and...

WE’RE THUMBY’S GAAAAANG!

We all scream the last line, even Mindy. She slurs the words since she’s not used to talking yet, but she says them, which makes us happy. And it must make Tuff Nugie happy, too.

Thump, thump, thump!

Like a little wooden leg beating on the floor, in time to the music.

And I know, even though I can’t hear him, Tuff Nugie is singing along.

Chapter Seventeen

The Basement

We're having a big picnic for Memorial Day. Adam is cooking hamburgers and hotdogs, Anna and Danny's parents are bringing the mac 'n cheese (made with goat cheese, of course), and we're busy making fruit salad in the kitchen. I get to chop the apples because I'm the oldest. Tucker peels the oranges, and Jesse and Mindy help Aunt Julie scoop the watermelon into little balls.

I'm glad summer vacation is almost here. I like school okay, I guess. But it'll be nice to not have to deal with some of those kids for a while. A whole summer without Aaron Murphy and his mean friends. Next year I'll make some new friends. That would be nice.

Mindy is talking more and more. Not in long sentences or anything, but every once in a while, when you least expect it, she blurts something out. Like yesterday, when Mrs. Wemberley came over. Mindy ran up to her and said "Hi Miss Wembwy!" and gave the old lady a big hug. Mrs. Wemberley was so surprised, she started crying.

Adam says, "Now that we've cleaned out the cabana and it's no longer creepy, we ought to clean out the basement. Then it won't be creepy either."

None of us are excited about this. "There's a Thing in the basement," Tucker tries to explain to him. "It's a bad Thing."

THE BASEMENT

Adam grins. I can tell when he's smiling now because his whole beard lifts up and the skin around his eyes gets all crinkly. "I'm not scared of any Thing that lives down there," he says.

"That's 'cause you're an adult and you don't even believe in The Thing," I say. "But it's there."

"Well," Adam says, "we need to clean the basement, whether there's a Thing down there or not."

Mindy raises her hand. "I hep."

"I help, too," Jesse says.

"Aren't you afraid of The Thing?" I say. Mindy shakes her head.

Jesse says, "If Adam comes wif us, we're not 'fwaid. And Mindy says it's time for Da Fing to go."

"Is The Thing still down there?" I say. "We haven't heard it for a while now."

"It's dere," Mindy says.

"But we can get wid of it," Jesse says, nodding.

"How?" Tucker asks.

"We clean da basement," Jesse says. "Da Fing won't like to live there if it's clean. It likes mess."

The basement is musty and dusty, and we huddle close to Adam at first. But he puts a new light bulb in, and now the basement has lots of light and doesn't look half as scary.

Well, until Adam flips over a chair and a bunch of spiders run out.

The spiders have long black legs and shiny black butts. Adam says they're black widow spiders, and black widow spiders are poisonous. He catches one in a jar and shows us the red dot on its belly.

"That's how you know it's a black widow," Adam says. "Because it has a shiny black butt with a big red dot."

When Aunt Julie sees the black widow, she almost faints. “That’s *it*,” she says. “Don’t go back down there until I get the place fumigated.”

“You’ve been saying all year you’re gonna fumigate,” I say, “and you haven’t done it yet.”

But Aunt Julie is serious this time. Seeing an actual spider with her own eyes does the trick. While the basement is being fumigated we sleep over at Adam’s house, on the floor in sleeping bags, so we won’t breathe in any poisonous gas. And when the gas is all gone, the spiders are dead and we start cleaning the basement again without worrying about getting poisoned, by either the gas or the spiders.

“You think the gas killed The Thing in the basement, too?” Tucker says.

Mindy says, “Nope.”

Jesse says, “You can’t get wid of Da Fing dat way.”

Dr. O’Neal is so wrapped up with Mindy that he hardly listen to me when it’s my turn to talk. I’m not sure if this is a good thing or a bad thing. In one way, it’s nice not to have to talk about my problems, especially on days when I don’t feel like it, which would be most days. But on days when I *do* want to talk, Dr. O’Neal doesn’t pay much attention.

Today I want to talk. Today I’m feeling a little low.

I don’t know why. Aunt Julie says I’m getting to that age when my hormones are changing and I’ll get all moody. I don’t feel moody. I feel sad. But I’m not sure why.

As much as I want to talk to Dr. O’Neal, I watch him tapping his pencil and staring around as if he’s not even listening to me, and I get mad.

I stand up. “If you’re not going to listen to me, I’m outta here,” I say. Dr. O’Neal looks up, like he’s finally seeing me there, but it’s too late. I’m leaving.

THE BASEMENT

I march out. Tucker looks up from his magazine. "Is it time for me already?" he says.

Aunt Julie looks concerned. "Sweetie, what's wrong?"

"I don't have anything else to say to Dr. O'Neal. And I don't want to come back," I say. "Three years of therapy is enough. Why do we have to keep coming here?"

Aunt Julie says, "I want to make sure you kids adjust okay."

"We *are* adjusted. Even Mindy is talking again."

Mindy looks up at me with her big blue eyes. "I miss Mommy and Daddy," she says.

And my entire mood switches, and instead of being mad, I start to cry. If this is how growing up feels, I don't want any part of it.

Mindy cries, too. That makes Tucker and Jesse cry, because Mindy *never* cries.

By the time Dr. O'Neal comes into the waiting room, we're all blubbering like babies. Including Aunt Julie.

I know what Dr. O'Neal will say about this. He'll say it's a breakthrough.

I say it means we don't need therapy anymore.

We've started cleaning the basement from the front and we're working our way to the back, where *The Thing* lives. We want to get it clean before summer vacation starts so we can use it as our clubhouse. The basement is so much cooler than any other part of the hot, stuffy House.

We've found a lot of cool junk in the basement. An old record player. The sewing machine. A box full of rock and roll magazines from the 1970s. Aunt Julie says they might be worth something, except they're all moldy and covered with rat poo.

There's an old bedstead and a pile of dirty rags and a couple of ugly lamps. Some stuff we throw out, some

we give away. I find a cool horse statue and get to keep it. The twins uncover a box of toys. Tucker claims a stack of botany books.

Pretty soon the entire basement is cleaned out. Adam enters the dark room with the cistern, but we don't want to go in.

"Da Fing is still in dere," Mindy says.

"What do you think The Thing will do to you?" Adam says, smiling.

"He eats kids," Tucker says. "Mindy said so."

Mindy nods her head, but looks at the ground.

"Is that true Mindy?" Adam says. "Does The Thing *really* eat kids?"

Mindy keeps her eyes on the floor. She shakes her head.

Tucker whispers, "I never believed it anyway."

"Yes you did," I say, feeling kind of stupid. "We *all* did."

Jesse says to Mindy, "But dere is a Fing in there, wight?"

Mindy nods. "Wight."

"And now it's time for it to leave, wight?"

"Wight."

"So how do we get rid of it?" I say. "We cleaned the basement."

"Is there anything else we need to do?" Tucker says.

"Unca Sam," Mindy says.

Jesse nods. "He'll tell us how to get wid of it."

"Well, we'd better go find Uncle Sam," Adam says, giving Jesse a grin.

Chapter Eighteen

Runaway

Adam is okay. He doesn't roll his eyes like Aunt Julie does when we tell him about Uncle Sam, or the Mulberry Dragon, or the Ruby or Abimal or Luke, or any of the other crazy creatures living in our yard. He nods solemnly.

We know he's pretending. Adults never actually believe kids. But it's nice when they pretend they do.

But when we tell him about Tuff Nugie, he looks at Mindy hard.

"How do you know about Tuff Nugie?"

Mindy stares back at him with her innocent blue eyes and shrugs.

Adam goes off to talk to Aunt Julie. Tucker whispers, "Do you think there *is* a Tuff Nugie? I think Adam might know about him."

I think Adam might know about Tuff Nugie, too. But how?

"You're going to *what*?"

We're sitting at the dining room table and all I can do is stare at Aunt Julie. What she said *can't* be true.

"We're getting married. Not right away, so please don't worry. But we love each other and I think Adam will make a good addition to this family."

“How will he make a good addition?”

“You don’t like Adam?”

Oh geez. I can’t say that I hate Adam, because I don’t. But married? When we’re finally getting back to normal? Mindy is almost talking, Tucker isn’t super moody anymore, and I’ve accepted Adam as a kind of uncle I guess, but *married*?

I stomp into the twins’ room. They’re playing with blocks on the floor. Tucker is on Jesse’s bed, typing away on his laptop. “Did you hear?” I say.

“About Aunt Julie and Adam? Mhm,” Tucker says, not looking up from the computer screen.

“And?”

“And what? She says she loves him, whaddya gonna do?”

He doesn’t care. The twins play with their blocks—they don’t care either. Am I the only one who sees how this will change things? I’ve gotta do something. Something drastic. I’ll run away in protest. *That’s* what I’ll do.

Aunt Julie is being unreasonable. Marry Adam? Sure, I like him okay now, but that’s because he lives next door. And he makes us tacos. And he helps us build and clean stuff.

But why do they have to get married? Then Adam can tell us what to do, too, and one adult is enough.

Nobody else will run away with me. Mindy and Jesse both like Adam, and Tucker acts all resigned as if it doesn’t matter. Adam is a guy, and Tucker is a guy, and they get along. Tucker says things are going to change anyway, whether we like it or not.

That sounds like something Dr. O’Neal would say.

I’m tired of change. We’re finally settled here, and we’re happy, and now things are about to change again. How do we know we’ll stay happy? What if Adam and Aunt Julie getting married will make us all *unhappy*?

RUNAWAY

I think Aunt Julie is selfish to think about herself and not us.

If you follow the driveway to the back road, where the sandbox and the Mulberry Dragon are, you can see a little gravel road cutting into a weedy meadow. I'll have to cross the back road to get to it, which Aunt Julie won't like. She says the back road is full of speeding cars that don't pay attention when people are crossing it, and I shouldn't cross without an adult. But since I'm running away, I can break this rule. And I'll be twelve next week. I can cross a stupid road by myself, busy or not.

The gravel road runs past Mrs. Wemberley's. She lives in an old house even more rundown than ours. The porch sags and the roof sags and the front yard is a patch of dirt with some weeds growing in it. Mrs. Wemberley has lived there ever since she was born.

The house is painted a light blue, although most of the blue has faded to gray, and is all one story. It's a teeny-tiny house, but since Mrs. Wemberley lives alone, it's probably nice enough. She says she had six brothers and sisters, and they all lived in the little house growing up. She had to share her tiny room with three other girls. I can't imagine that.

I decide to take my journal, some sandwiches, a couple cans of soda and all the money I've got—about ten bucks. Ten bucks might last me a day or two, and that should be enough time for Aunt Julie to call off this wedding business. I wonder where the gravel road leads. We've never gone all the way to the end of it—it could lead all the way to South America for all I know.

Tucker says the road ends at the train tracks. Sometimes, on a quiet day, we can hear the train go by, if we're listening hard enough.

Tucker and the twins walk down the driveway with me to see me off.

“Don’t get hit by a car when you cross the street,” Tucker says. “Look both ways.”

“Yes Mom,” I say, and then I’m kinda sorry for saying that. Tucker looks sad. Whether he is sad because he’s now thinking of Mom or because I’m leaving, I’m not sure.

Mindy says, “Wuke wants to go, too.”

Jesse nods. “He’s always wanted to go ‘sploring and finks it’ll be fun.”

“I’m not sure if I want a leprechaun who likes to play tricks coming with me,” I say. “I’d rather have Tuff Nugie. He can protect me from any wild animals with his pickaxe.”

“No,” Mindy says.

“Tuff Nugie bewongs to Adam,” Jesse says.

“What about us?” I say to Mindy. “Did we bring any weird creatures with us when we moved into The House? If we did, *that* one should come with me.”

Mindy nods.

“Da Fing,” Jesse says, “Da Fing came wif us.”

“It did?”

“Yup. But you don’t weally want to wun away with *dat*.”

“No, I guess not,” I say, shivering. “But what about Mr. Peabody? He had a heart attack in the basement. Wasn’t that ‘cause of The Thing?”

Mindy shakes her head. “No,” Jesse says. “Dat was kwinsident.”

“What?”

“Coincidence,” Tucker says.

“Yeah, dat.”

I shake my head, cross the street, and manage not to get hit by a speeding car. I wave to the others. “Did Luke follow me across the street?”

“Yup,” Mindy says.

Jesse nods. “He’s wight behind you.”

“Ok.” I wave again and start my hike down the gravel road.

Mrs. Wemberley always has something good to eat, so I stop at her house, even though I haven’t been walking long. She isn’t surprised to see me, and gives me chocolate milk and cookies, which I’m not about to refuse.

“Where are you off to today?” Mrs. Wemberley says.

“I’m running away. Aunt Julie is gonna marry Adam, and even though I like Adam, I don’t want them marrying.”

“Change is hard, yeeeah,” Mrs. Wemberley says. I nod and eat my cookies.

If it were up to me, change wouldn’t happen at all.

I’m not ready to go after I eat my cookies, so I ask Mrs. Wemberley about other people who lived in our house. I still haven’t figured out who the Mulberry Dragon and Abimal belong to.

Mrs. Wemberley looks thoughtful. Most adults stare at us like we’re nuts when we mention creatures like the Mulberry Dragon, but Mrs. Wemberley has always taken my questions seriously.

“Well, let’s see,” she says. “The first people who lived in your house were the Smiths. They were members of the Foreign Service. They could’ve been stationed somewhere in the Himalayas, and they could’ve brought Abimal back with ‘em. Yeeeah.”

“That makes sense. But what about the dragon?”



Mrs. Wemberley doesn't know. She's told me about all the people she can remember. Somebody knocks at the door, and she gets up to answer it.

Adam strides into the room. He's so big, he takes up most of the front foyer. My stomach sinks. He's come after me. Tucker must've broken down and blabbed. I brace myself to get yelled at, but Adam sits down and Mrs. Wemberley gives him a cookie.

"You know," he says, "I ran away once when I was a kid, but didn't get half as far as you got."

"Really?"

"Yup. I got as far as the neighbor's house. My neighbor's son, he was a couple of years older than me, and he came after me with his BB gun and told me he'd shoot me in the butt if I didn't get home to my mom."

I laugh. "He did? Why'd you run away?"

Adam shrugs. "I don't remember. It was important to me then, whatever it was." He looks at me and smiles. For a big, muscly, bearded, biker-type guy, he has kind eyes.

"I know this is hard for you kids," he says. "I promise, I'm not trying to take the place of your dad. But I'd like to be your friend."

He sticks out his hand, and I stare at it, not sure if I should shake it or not.

"Alright, too soon," he says, dropping his hand. "How about we head back home? We can all talk about it later. We could even ask Dr. O'Neal."

"Oh, no please!" I say, before I look up and see that his eyes are twinkling. I shake my head. "That is *so* not funny."

I guess I should be glad he's not mad, even though he doesn't have any right to get mad, since I'm not his kid. But I'm glad he came after me instead of Aunt Julie. She *would* be mad.

RUNAWAY

As we walk home I say, “How do *you* know about Tuff Nugie?”

“I made up Tuff Nugie,” Adam says. “He’s in a play I’m writing about a mountain man in the Old West.”

I start laughing.

“What’s so funny?” Adam says, looking down and smiling.

“You don’t look like the type who would write a play. You looks more like the type who would play pool in bars.”

“Well, I guess this proves that you shouldn’t judge people on how they look. Now, how did *you* know about Tuff Nugie?”

“Mindy says he lives in the cave. He was a mountain man, but lost his leg to a grizzly bear, and now he mines for gold instead.”

Adam stares at me. “Lost his leg to a grizzly bear,” he says, looking thoughtful.

“Does that happen in your play?”

“No,” Adam says.

I think now it might.

“But how did you know about Tuff Nugie if you didn’t read the play?” Adam says.

I shrug. “Ask Mindy. *She* told us about Tuff Nugie.”

“I must have talked to her once about it,” Adam says, which makes him feel better, because now he *thinks* he knows how we found out about Tuff Nugie. I can tell he doesn’t believe Tuff Nugie lives in the cave. That’s okay. *We* know.

“Tell you what,” Adam says as we reach the back road. “We won’t tell your aunt about this. She’ll get all worried, and no harm was done. We got our exercise, and Mrs. Wemberley gave us some cookies.”

Aunt Julie doesn’t know. Tucker must have told Adam because he knew Adam wouldn’t get as mad and wouldn’t tell.

I guess I’ll never know why the Mulberry Dragon or Tinky and Binky came to our house. But that’s okay. Some-

FROM THE MAGICAL MIND OF MINDY MUNSEN

times it isn't good to know everything. Then there wouldn't be any mystery left.

Chapter Nineteen

The Thing

Mindy says Uncle Sam is happy. He never liked Luke the Leprechaun, and now Luke is gone.

“He is?” I say.

Jesse says, “He followed you, but never came back.”

“He went ‘splorin’,” Mindy says.

“That’s too bad,” I say. “I thought it was kind of fun how he hid our stockings at Christmas.”

“He still might,” Adam says as he serves us pancakes for our first Summer Vacation breakfast. They’re Mickey Mouse pancakes—Mindy’s favorite. Adam spoons one big round pancake in the middle of the griddle for Mickey’s face and two smaller pancakes for his ears. Then, when they’re done, he squirts eyes and a smile on with syrup.

I don’t think Luke the Leprechaun will come back.

Anyway, since we got rid of Luke, Uncle Sam is ready to help us get rid of The Thing in the basement. Jesse says The Thing is already unhappy.

“It ain’t junky enough for him down dere now. Dat’s why Da Fing is stompy,” Jesse says.

“Stompy?” I say. Mindy nods.

“Didn’t you hear Da Fing last night?” Jesse says. “It was stomping all over da place.”

I remember hearing it now. It woke me up from an awesome dream. The Thing was creaking around like it used to.

“I think you were hearing the pipes creaking,” Adam says. “They’re pretty old, we need to replace ‘em.”

Aunt Julie rolls her eyes. “Yet another thing to fix.”

“No,” Mindy says, “it was Da Fing.”

“Okay,” Adam says. “The Thing it was.”

He gives me a wink. I look away when I smile, so he won’t see it. It’s hard not to like somebody who’s so good with Mindy.

Jesse says that ever since we cleaned the basement, The Thing has been stomping around, getting restless, ready to leave. We need to lure it out to get rid of it for good.

“How do we do that?” I say.

“We need to give sumffin’ up,” Jesse says. “I’ll give up my toy cars.”

“No,” Mindy says. “Give up sumffin’ sad.”

“Like an unhappy thought?” Tucker says. Mindy nods.

“I’ll stop being sad dat I can’t watch TV after seven,” Jesse says, which is about the most unhappy thought a five-year-old can have, I guess.

Tucker sighs. “I’ll stop being so mad at Aunt Julie all the time. Well, I’ll try anyway.”

What unhappy thought will I give up? I have lots of unhappy thoughts—about Aaron Murphy bullying me, about growing up. About change. I look over at Adam.

“I’ll give up unhappy thoughts about you,” I say, which gets Adam smiling and Aunt Julie sniffing.

I turn to Mindy. “What about you?”

She smiles. “I won’t be unhappy about Mommy and Daddy.” It’s the longest sentence she’s ever said. Adam smiles at her and gives her an extra Mickey Mouse pancake. Aunt Julie breaks down completely and starts blubbering like a baby.

THE THING

“Do you remember Mommy now?” I say.

Mindy nods and looks out the window. “Dere he goes.”

“Who?”

“Da Fing. Dere he goes. He can fwy.”

I look out the window too. I don't see anything except a wispy white cloud moving fast, high in the sky.

“I make a motion,” Tucker says, “that we move our clubhouse to the Thing-free basement.”

“I second it,” I say.

Mindy and Jesse agree, and that makes it a *majority*.

Chapter Twenty

The Wedding

Aunt Julie and Adam get married on a pretty fall day. They marry in the backyard.

Lots of people come to the wedding, but Mindy says lots of other things are watching too.

Uncle Sam is standing next to the preacher. He still wears a top hat, but now it's a black top hat, since this is a special occasion.

The Goony Bird is here. He caught an airplane back from Leyte Island and brought his family with him. They have all decided they like riding airplanes. They sit in the pine trees where we play Bird House. Mindy says they can see the whole ceremony from that height.

Luke the Leprechaun has come back from his big adventure to see the wedding, but he is hiding in the azalea bushes so Uncle Sam won't spot him.

The Dragon has slithered from the mulberry tree and is hiding in the grass so he can watch.

The Ruby is sitting in the bushes near The House. Mindy says it's glowing red, like a real ruby.

The Purple Spiders peer out Tucker's window.

Abimal is stuck in the ice sculpture that's shaped like a heart and two doves. Mindy says that he's facing the wrong way and can't see the service because he's frozen and can't turn around.

THE WEDDING

The only thing missing is The Thing in the basement. It won't come back to watch.

It won't watch me walk up the aisle as Maid of Honor or see Jesse carrying the rings on a fluffy white pillow. It won't see Mindy as flower girl, throwing flowers into the aisle (most land on the people in the chairs instead) or Tucker, who's Best Man and is standing next to Adam under an archway covered with flowers. It won't see Anna, Danny, Andy, Sara, and Mrs. Wemberley sitting in the wobbly outdoor chairs.

That sort of Thing can only come here to watch if we're sad.

And we're not. Not sad at all.

That's what Mindy says, so it must be true.

And that's what I say, too.

About the Author

Nikki Bennett grew up in Virginia, in a house just like this one. In fact, the house in this book is Nikki's childhood home. Instead of two kids and a bunch of goats, she and her brother and sister lived next to a house with *twelve* kids. But the house did have a broken pool and a cabana, a hedge maze, and guest house--and Nikki and her family and friends had so many adventures there--even more than what she put into this book.

Now, as an adult, Nikki lives in the beautiful country of Japan. She travels and writes. So far, Nikki has published three books. Mindy Munson is her third, her other books (Four Fiends and Mukade Island) can be found at:

www.firedrakebooks.com

If you want to find out more about this book, visit Nikki's website at:

www.worldofnikki.com

More awesome books by Nikki:

Four Fiends
Mukade Island
and the upcoming Three Treasures