

Ozric's Hole to China

by

Rob Lacy

Chapter 1

Day 1 Sunday

11:47AM Central Park

Jenny Fischer clutched the Frisbee to her chest and gritted her teeth. She turned to face her friend Alexander.

“Come on, Jenny. Give it back and let’s play,” he pleaded.

She shook her head and hugged the yellow disc even more tightly. “I think we should look for him. He never misses a Sunday morning game.”

“Who, Ozric? He’s fine. You know him. Doesn’t he sometimes pet-sit for people in your building?”

“Yeah, but not on Sundays. And he loves Ultimate Frisbee, more than any of us.”

“Not more than you. You are the best one out here.”

Jenny loosened her grip as the tiniest bit of a smile appeared on her face. “I just know something isn’t right. I can feel it. Where *is* he?” The thin brunette turned around and scanned the park. She saw people sunbathing on towels, a boy flying a kite, even a field of impatient Ultimate Frisbee players, but no sign of her friend.

“Listen,” began Alexander in a softer voice. He removed his blue-and-orange Mets baseball cap from his head and looked right at her. “Let’s make a deal. We finish this game and then I’ll help you look for Ozric.”

“Okay,” she said. “It’s a deal. Whose turn is it, anyway?”

“The boys’ team just scored, so it’s our throw, but the girls are winning two to one.”

Jenny nodded and casually flipped the Frisbee to him as she trotted over to her team’s side of the field. Alexander walked back to his own team and handed the disc to his teammate, Jenny’s older brother Ethan. When both teams were ready, Ethan ran a few steps and heaved it as hard as he could toward the girls’ end of the field. The game was back on.

Moments later, the girls extended their lead as Jenny threaded a pass between two defenders to her teammate, a small red-haired girl, waiting in the end zone.

“Score!” yelled Jenny. “Three to one, girls! Two more and we win!”

But the boys staged a miraculous comeback and soon Alexander found himself with a chance to clinch it for his team. He stood near the middle of the field and spotted Ethan running hard down the sideline. He threw the yellow disc with all his might. It lofted over everyone’s head, but started to fall gently to the ground just inside the boys’ end zone. And Ethan was running right underneath it!

Just then a blur of dark brown hair flashed in front of him and the Frisbee took off in the other direction. Jenny!

Despite being only nine and a half, Jenny Fischer stood taller than Alexander and was better than all of their friends at sports. Before anyone had time to react, she had

flipped the disc to the red-haired girl and sprinted ahead to receive the give-and-go pass in the center of the field.

“Alexander!” one of the boys yelled, “stop admiring your throw and play defense!” But the warning came too late. Jenny had caught her teammate’s pass and had quickly forwarded it to another waiting in the end zone. Game over.

“She always does that,” complained Ethan as he walked off the field, but Alexander didn’t seem to hear him. He stood gazing in the other direction.

“Did you see that pass I made? I really thought we had it there – you should have been able to catch that over her, you’re almost two years older than she is!”

“Yeah, yeah, the throw was nice,” he replied. “But I guess it wasn’t good enough. She can really jump!”

“That’s the game,” called Jenny, running toward the pair. “Can we go look for Ozric now? I’m really worried about him.”

Alexander had played enough Ultimate Frisbee anyway, and nodded eagerly. “Yes. Let’s go find him. Nice play, by the way. I thought we had the game there.”

“Sorry to disappoint you.” Jenny smiled and looked down.

Suddenly a loud disturbance at the far end of the field startled them. “What’s that?” said Alexander.

Jenny paused, listening. She said, “It sounds like a dog barking at something. It’s really going crazy.”

Turning toward the commotion, Alexander recognized one of the figures in the distance. The small, thin shape could only be their missing friend. He blurted out, “Ozric!” and began to run.

Chapter 2

Alexander ran across the field, with Jenny on his heels. At the far end, they arrived to find a bizarre scene.

On the sidewalk stood someone the group knew: Officer Fred Harbiter, one of Central Park's mounted police. The overweight officer stood next to his horse, clinging to the reins as the animal strained to break free.

A few feet away, a Doberman pinscher barked and growled at the officer and his horse. Though it did have a collar and tag, with a red and blue emblem on it, the dog appeared as wild as a wolf.

And who stood in the middle of two animals? None other than Alexander's friend and missing Frisbee player: Ozric Tantalus. The thin, nine-year-old boy looked like someone about to become lunch for the angry dog.

Too frightened to come closer, Jenny cried, "Ozric! Look out!"

Alexander then noticed something else strange. Not only was Ozric in the middle of this crazy scene, he also held a shovel in one hand. He stood next to a hole in the ground, and Alexander could only figure that he had been digging it himself. However,

there was no time to ponder that mystery. If something didn't happen quickly, Ozric was bound to have his arm torn off by the crazed Doberman.

Jenny nudged him and said, "Look! Ozric's eyes are *closed!*"

"Ozric!" yelled Alexander. "Open your eyes and watch out!"

But he ignored the warning. Instead, Ozric slowly turned to face the snarling dog. Without looking directly at the dog's eyes, Ozric quickly yelled, "Hey!" He brushed his mop of dark brown hair from his eyes and began to whistle. He made a series of high-pitched tweets as if calling the dog in from a long distance away.

This surprised Alexander. "What's he doing?" he asked Jenny.

"I have no idea," came the reply.

But it seemed to work. The yell and whistles surprised the dog and it turned its attention to Ozric. It continued to snarl, but with slightly less force than before. And once the Doberman lost focus on the horse, Officer Harbiter was able to get it under control. He led it backwards a few steps with the reins gripped in his hands.

For a few moments the growling Doberman and the whistling boy seemed to be at a standstill. They were both focused on each other, but without making direct eye contact.

Suddenly, a voice called from behind, "Atropos, sit!" The dog sat down, and stopped making noise as if a switch had been turned off. A bald man in a silver jogging-suit was hurrying up, accompanied by two more Dobermans on leashes. The dog clearly belonged to this man. Not only did the other two wear identical collars with the red and blue emblem, in the shape of the letter 'O', but the man held a third leash in his hand.

Upon seeing these two additional animals, the horse took several more paces backwards. But the Dobermans remained calm. Their eyes darted from person to person

as if looking for trouble, but they stayed right next to their owner, never even tugging on the leashes.

“I’m terribly sorry about the fuss,” the man said. “He bolted after a squirrel, and I lost my grip.”

Everyone except Ozric took two large steps backward, away from the three dogs. Ozric turned to the strange man. “It’s okay. I could tell that he was as scared of the horse as the horse was of him. All it took was a distraction, but I don’t know what would have happened if you hadn’t arrived when you did.”

“Indeed,” Replied the man, his voice trailing off slightly. For a moment he studied Ozric and then shook his head.

Officer Harbiter had regained his composure. He walked a few steps toward the man, but not too close. “Sir, please do try to keep them under control at all times.”

“I will surely do so, officer,” replied the man with a hint of ice in his voice. Turning to Ozric, he said, “Thank you again, young chap. I must be off now. I’m truly sorry to have caused such a disturbance. I do apologize most sincerely.”

After he had walked off, the mounted policeman turned to the kids, “Wow, that was close. Have you seen that man before?”

“No.” they replied in unison.

“Well, if you see any of those dogs off the leash again, come find me. I’ll be sure to leave Sparky here behind though.” He chuckled, patting the horse.

“There, there, old buddy. It’s over now.” He took the reins and started to lead the horse in the direction opposite where the strange man had gone. He paused and turned around, “Oh, by the way. Ozric, I’m afraid you can’t dig that hole here.”

Ozric's face turned a little red as he replied, "I'm really sorry. I didn't know..."

He took a Twinkie out of his uniform pocket and began to unwrap it. "Well, it's public land and people like the grass to look nice. You know how it is."

"Okay," Ozric said quietly.

"You know, there's a sandy area just over that hill." He pointed to where the man and dogs had disappeared moments earlier. "I wouldn't say anything if you dug your hole there.

Ozric's face lit up, "Thanks, Officer Harbiter!" He picked up the shovel and began to quickly dump dirt back into the hole.

"I'm not finished." He took a bite of his Twinkie and swallowed. "The spot is right next to a construction site that's roped off. You are not to enter it under any conditions."

"I won't. I promise! Thanks!"

"No problem. You earned it with your fast thinking just now. Have a good day, kids!" The police officer put his boot in the stirrup and mounted the horse in one swift motion. The horse stepped sideways, adjusting to the new weight.

"He's quick for such a big man," observed Alexander with a smile as they watched officer and horse trot away.

As Ozric began to un-dig his hole, he asked, "So, how was Ultimate? Did I miss a good game?"

Jenny beamed and said, "The girls won, as usual."

Alexander rolled his eyes, "They wouldn't be so good if you weren't on the team, Jenny."

"But I am, so it's just too bad."

Alexander turned to Ozric, “She had an amazing play to win the last game – you should have seen it! I made a great throw to her brother in the end zone, but she jumped and intercepted it! Then she turned it around and the girls went down the field to score.”

Jenny began to blush, but Alexander continued. “Here’s a list: top five plays Jenny has made at Ultimate Frisbee. I think today’s game-saving interception goes on the list, maybe at number three. And she had an amazing throw to you last week, Ozric. Remember? It must have gone 40 yards right into your hands. That could be number one.”

“Yeah,” replied Ozric, continuing to scoop dirt back into his hole. “Or last month when she ran the whole length of the field and beat that middle-school boy to the end zone for a score. I’d put that at number one or two.”

“Okay, enough,” said Jenny.

A few moments later, Ozric had the hole filled in, somewhat covering it with the few chunks of grass he could find. He grabbed his shovel and began trotting in the direction the policeman had pointed.

“Hey, Ozric, slow down!” called Alexander, hurrying to follow him. “What are you doing?”

“Oh, I’m sorry, Alex. It’s just that I’m already behind and now I have to start over again. I just want to get going!”

“But what are you doing?” asked Jenny as she caught up.

“Oh,” responded Ozric, stopping and turning to face the group. “I’m digging a hole to China.”

Chapter 3

“A what?!” said Jenny.

“I’m digging a hole – well, I guess more of a tunnel – to China.”

“China? Why China?”

Ozric started walking again. “Come on,” he said. “I don’t want to waste any more time.”

The pair hurried to follow him up the hill toward the construction site Officer Harbiter had described.

“It started last week when we ordered takeout from Johnny Chee’s.”

“I love that place! They have the best dumplings!” exclaimed Alexander.

“Totally,” agreed Ozric. “Anyway, my fortune cookie read, ‘You will dig deep and discover many secrets.’ I didn’t think anything of it until a couple days later, studying geography in my home-school class.”

“Okay,” said Jenny.

“We are on Asia right now, and when we got to China, my mom said she tried to dig a hole there when she was a little girl. I thought of the fortune and asked if I could do it and she said I could, if I dug at the right angle.”

“What angle is that?” asked Jenny.

“Down,” said Alexander, the brim of his baseball hat pointing to the ground.

“Funny,” responded Jenny with a sneer. “So you are really going to try to dig a hole all the way to China, Ozric?”

“Yep. That’s the plan, anyway.”

“We’d be happy to help you. It sounds like a cool idea!”

“Okay, great! Thanks, guys! I’m sorry I didn’t tell you about it sooner – I’m sorry I missed the Ultimate game. I just got so excited I couldn’t sleep last night, and I raced out here this morning to get started.”

“It’s no problem,” said Alexander

The trio walked over the hill and arrived at a large area of sand in the middle of the park. Yellow tape, like the kind used by police, circled much of the sandy zone. Inside the circle sat piles of wooden beams, tools, and a construction vehicle with a large scoop at the front.

“What is it?” asked Jenny.

Alexander pointed to a white sign with large blue writing that read: SITE OF THE SNIDELY GAZEBO. Beneath it, in smaller letters, was: SPONSORED BY THE CENTRAL PARK BEAUTIFICATION COMMITTEE.

She wrinkled her eyebrows. “What’s a gazebo?”

Ozric answered, "I think it's a building that you find in parks or people's back yards. It's just a place to sit or relax.

"Yeah," agreed Alexander. "It's like a back porch without a house attached."

"Weird," commented Jenny. But she added nothing more. She looked around the area where they stood. She said, "Ozric, where do you want to dig?"

"This spot looks good," replied Ozric, pointing to an area just off the path.

"Okay," she agreed. "Look. There's even a bathroom nearby." She pointed down the path. Not too far away stood a small, brick building that housed a public restroom.

Ozric looked at the two of them and held his shovel up. "What will you two do about shovels?"

"I can get them from my house," offered Alexander. "My father has some left over from a sandcastle contest a few years ago. I'll be right back."

As he hurried away, Ozric drew a circle, about five feet in diameter, in the sand with his shovel.

"This is how big we'll make the hole. We can take dirt from inside this circle and make a pile over there," he said, pointing an empty spot nearby. "The pile from my first hole was too close to the edge and kept pouring back in."

"Sounds good," said Jenny, nodding.

"Cool. Did you know that China has more people than any other country in the world and more than four times as many as the U.S.?"

And with that, he drove his shovel into the ground and tossed a scoopful of dirt out of the circle.

Chapter 4

Alexander returned quickly and handed a shovel to Jenny. They began to dig. After a couple hours, the ground was nearly over Ozric's head as he and Jenny stood in the hole, scooping dirt up to Alexander standing above. Jenny, a bit taller than her friend, could still see out of it, but just barely.

Ozric was talking about China again. "They make almost two thirds of the world's bicycles. I checked and my bike is from China. I bet yours is too, Alexander!"

Jenny interrupted, "It's getting a lot harder to dig, Ozric."

"Yeah. We're through the top layer of loose dirt and sand and into the real earth. I'm hitting a lot of rocks now."

"Me too. But we've made pretty good progress. Think that's enough for one day?"

"I think so. I wanted to get deeper today but I was already working for a long time before you guys showed up and I'm pretty tired. I never thought digging could be so hard!"

"Me neither," chimed in Jenny from above them. "Let's call it a day and go get some drinks! I have to stop at Von Welring's to get a bagel for Tracy, anyway."

2:38PM Von Welring's Bagel Shop

Von Welring's bagel shop occupied a small space on Broadway Avenue. It catered to people who wanted something quick to eat or a cup of coffee on the way to work. Behind the narrow counter, the owner rang up orders and greeted his customers, often by first name.

Jenny sat at one of the few tables, drinking root beer. She tore a piece off of her "everything" bagel – a bagel with sesame and poppy seeds, onion, garlic and salt – and dipped it into a small tub of cream cheese.

Ozric joined her with a glass of half orange soda and half Coke and a cinnamon raisin bagel with butter but no cream cheese. Alexander still stood in line, behind a man wearing dark gray coveralls.

"What's that, Ozric?" she asked.

"The bagel? I always get these."

"No, silly, the drink."

"Oh, my cousin told me about it after he spent a summer in Germany. He said it's popular there, but they don't put ice in it, which I think is dumb."

"It looks gross even *with* ice!" cried Jenny.

"No, it's really good. You should try..." his voice trailed off as the man in the gray coveralls walked past their table and took a seat by the window. He had spiky blond hair and wore thick, black glasses pushed up hard against the bridge of his nose.

"Yes?" said Jenny.

“Uh, you should try it. The drink is like an orange-flavored Coke. In the old days you could get any flavor of Coke you wanted. My grandpa said the soda-shop guy would even make it chocolate if you asked him.”

“Yuck!” she exclaimed.

“What’s going on?” asked Alexander, as he came over with his bagel and bottle of lemon iced tea.

“Nothing. Ozric was just telling me about chocolate Coke.”

“Ooh, that sounds good. It would go well with my chocolate-chip bagel and chocolate cream cheese.”

“Yuck!” was Jenny’s reply.

“Anyway, that man in the gray cut me in line,” said Alexander. “He didn’t even notice I was there. I said something but he ignored me.”

Jenny frowned and said, “I hate when adults don’t pay attention to us kids! They act as if we’re not real people.”

The table was silent for a moment as everyone sipped their drinks. Then Ozric spoke. “You know, I just remembered something that has been bugging me all afternoon.” He lowered his voice and gave a quick, sideways glance toward the man sitting at the window seat. The man was staring through the window into the street. Ozric continued, “The dog that was barking at the horse today – I haven’t seen a dog like that before.”

“It was a Doberman pinscher, wasn’t it?” asked Jenny.

“Yes, but I mean I haven’t seen a dog that *acted* like that before.”

“You, Ozric?” said Alexander. “But you know everything about all kinds of animals, especially dogs. Was that the most ferocious one you’ve seen?”

“No, it wasn’t that. Well, kind of. It was very ferocious, but it wasn’t afraid. Most dogs are like that because they are actually very afraid. But this dog looked calm – no, that’s not the right word. It looked *accustomed* to being that way, as if it had been trained.

“Like an attack dog?” asked Jenny.

“Yes, like an attack dog. And when that man arrived, the dog stopped growling and barking right away. He could have been the friendliest dog in the world. The change was so sudden.”

Just then, the white-haired shop owner walked over and handed Jenny a brown sack. “One plain bagel for your goldfish, Ms. Fischer,” he said, except it sounded more like “feesh” and “feesher” when he pronounced it.

“Thanks, Mr. Von Welring! I would have forgotten.”

“Think nothing of it! You know you are my best customers!”

“Mr. Von Welring, do you know anyone who keeps trained attack dogs?” asked Alexander.

Mr. Von Welring laughed, “Why, no. Of course not! Okay, a watchdog here and there. After all, this is New York City. But attack dogs – and more than one of them? Oh my, no. I don’t know any such people.”

“Okay. Sorry, I was just curious.”

“What’s going on?” he asked the group.

“We don’t know yet. Just a mystery, I guess,” replied Jenny.

“Well, you lot be careful if you see any attack dogs.”

“We will, Mr. V.”

The bagel shop owner returned to the kitchen and they finished their drinks in silence. When Alexander finally finished his Snapple, Jenny cleared the table, putting the empty bottles in the recycling bin.

Alexander led the way through the door but paused in the threshold. He turned around and said, “Ozric, you just said you don’t think the dog was afraid of the horse. But, back in the park, you told the strange man that his dog had been barking out of fear.”

“I know,” replied Ozric. “I was lying. I didn’t want him to know that I suspected anything.”

Chapter 5

Out on the street, Alexander split up from the others to head home. Jenny and Ozric walked on to their building a few blocks away.

As they entered through the revolving door into the lobby, the pair passed the doorway of another bagel place: Spielman's House of Bagels. The father of Jenny's classmate, Paul Spielman, owned it. Paul lived in the building and went to school with her, but the two did not like each other.

"Wow, Spielman's is deserted," said Ozric as they walked past. Rows of tables sat empty.

"I bet it's because of Paul," said Jenny. "He's so nasty at school. Maybe word is getting out and people are boycotting his father's bagels in protest."

"Maybe their bagels just aren't as good as Von Welring's, or the others in the area," suggested Ozric.

She nodded and said, "That could be true. Even Tracy doesn't like them as much, though she'll eat them if she has to."

"You've fed Spielman's bagels to your fish before?" exclaimed Ozric.

“Well, it was cold last winter,” she protested. “I hate to go there, but they have the side door right into the lobby and it *was* a total blizzard out there, you know.”

They said hi to the doorman, Jim, and Jenny pressed the button for the elevator. “Still,” Ozric said, “if Paul had seen you, he would’ve teased you about it at school. You know how he is.”

“I know, I know.” She pushed the number 5 after they were aboard.

The elevator creaked and groaned its way up to the fifth floor and they got out.

“Ozric, do you want to come over and watch TV or play a game?” asked Jenny as she unlocked his front door.

“No thanks. I have to do the next geography unit with my mom soon. We’re covering India tonight. Did you know that there are over 50 species of poisonous snakes in India?”

“Yikes! I would not want to go there!”

“Why? It sounds like a nice country. My mom says that she gets a lot of inspiration from Indian mysticism.”

“No offense, Ozric, but your mom’s a little strange.”

Ozric smiled. “It’s okay. I know she is. Well, anyway, I gotta go. See you tomorrow. We’ll keep digging the hole after you get home from school, right?”

“Definitely. See you tomorrow!”

3:33PM Fischer Residence

Mr. Fischer sat at the kitchen table, reading the New York Times, as Jenny walked in. She opened the refrigerator and took out a carton of orange juice.

“Your mother will be home from her shift at the hospital soon. Did you finish your homework for tomorrow?”

“I have a couple things left. I’ll do them soon.”

“That’s good. Your mom would be upset if you didn’t.”

She poured the juice into a glass. “I also have to finish one more experiment for extra credit for Ms. Rance, though.” She opened a cabinet and removed a glass bowl. She filled it with water and placed it in on the table, in front of her father.

“You know, I *am* trying to read here,” Mr. Fischer said with a chuckle, and turned his attention back to the financial section.

Jenny then retrieved a bottle of vinegar and a box of baking soda, setting them next to the bowl.

“What are you doing?” he asked, putting his paper down.

“It’s called the dancing raisins experiment. Would you pass me that box of raisins over there, please?” As she said this, she poured some baking soda into the bowl and stirred it with a spoon until it was dissolved and the water was clear again.

“You are going to make these dance?” Mr. Fischer asked, handing the raisins to his daughter.

“We’ll see,” she replied, placing five raisins into the water. They sank quickly to the bottom of the bowl.

Nothing happened.

“Not very exciting,” he observed.

“Dad! I’m not done yet.”

Jenny unscrewed the cap from the bottle of vinegar and poured some into the bowl. The water instantly fizzed and made a sound like a swarm of angry bees. Mr. Fischer flinched, expecting a huge mess on the table, but it ended as quickly as it had started. The water was clear again.

Jenny peered closely at the raisins in the bottom of the glass bowl. Her father copied her and noticed that a reaction was indeed taking place. Small, clear bubbles formed around each raisin. After a few seconds, one of the raisins slowly floated up to the surface of the water. Then another followed. And another. Just as these raisins had reached the surface, the first raisin began to sink again.

“Wow, that’s actually pretty cool!” exclaimed Jenny. “It does kind of look like they are dancing.” As she watched, the raisins took turns floating to the surface, pausing a moment, then sinking back to the bottom of the bowl.

“Very nice,” agreed Mr. Fischer.

“It’s a chemical reaction,” explained Jenny. “When baking soda and vinegar mix, one of the products is carbon dioxide. That creates the little bubbles you see. They like to stick to things and they grab onto the raisins. When there are enough of them, they cause each raisin to float to the surface.”

“And when they reach the surface, the carbon dioxide escapes into the air?” he asked.

“Exactly. Then the raisins drop back down until more bubbles are able to form, and it starts all over again.”

“And you are getting extra credit for that?” he asked.

Jenny turned on the TV as she started to clean up. “I have to write up a lab report with my observations about what happened.”

“I see,” he said, turning his attention back to the paper.

On the TV, a man in a gray business suit spoke about his new chain of bagel shops opening in Manhattan. “And at Bagelux, we use only the finest spring water shipped directly from Connecticut! That’s right. By using the freshest ingredients, I guarantee that we have the best bagels in all of New York!”

“Connecticut?” said Jenny. “Why would they bring water in from Connecticut, just to make bagels?”

“They wouldn’t,” replied Mr. Fischer, looking up from his paper. “Everyone knows New York bagels are the best because of the water. It’d make no sense to bring in *worse* water from another state! It’s just a gimmick.”

“Well, why are they doing it?”

“That’s a good question. I have no idea.” His voice trailed off. Then he lowered his voice and said, “Oh, by the way, Jenny, can you pick me up a bagel tomorrow?”

“Sure. What kind do you want?”

“The usual. An everything bagel with a fried egg, bacon, tomato and cheddar cheese. Thanks.” He handed her a couple dollar bills from his wallet. “And here’s extra so you can get one for yourself or your fish.”

“That reminds me,” said Jenny. “I have to go feed Tracy. She’s probably getting hungry.”

She finished cleaning up her experiment and left the kitchen. She passed the living room and turned down the hall for her bedroom. She took the bagel from Von

Welring's out of its paper bag and tore off several tiny, crumb-sized pieces. The goldfish, Tracy, was doing lazy circles in her tank. But she quickly darted to the surface and began to gobble up bagel bits as Jenny dropped them into the water.

“Hi Tracy. Here you go,” she said, adding a few more pieces.

“Okay, that's enough,” she said, taking a bite out of the remaining chunk and sitting down at her desk. “I guess I might as well finish that homework now.”

Chapter 6

Day 2 Monday

7:55AM The Higgins School

As he walked into his homeroom, 5 minutes late, Alexander could feel the stares from his classmates. His friend Teddy Small gave him a “what’s going on?” look and Alexander shrugged. As he walked to his desk, he noticed a chubby, curly-haired boy smiling at him from the next seat over. Paul Spielman. And if Paul was smiling, it was never good news.

“Glad you could make it, Copperfield. Were you at another magic show?”

“Nice one, Spielman.” They insisted on calling either other by last name out of fake respect.

“Boys, can we start?” asked the teacher, Mrs. Wellcard.

“Sorry,” said Alexander, but Paul was rummaging around in his desk for something he couldn’t see. He could, however, still see the grin on Paul’s face and it had gotten even bigger. His pudgy cheeks puffed when he grinned and his beady eyes twinkled.

As the teacher began to give the day's announcements, Paul removed an item from his desk. After a sideways glance at Alexander, he sat up straight and made as if to pay close attention to what she was saying.

"One half of the cafeteria will be painted this week," Mrs. Wellcard was saying. "So, extra tables have been placed in the other half and we must make do."

All of a sudden, Alexander's voice rang out loudly, "Mrs. Wellcard is a loser!"

But it wasn't Alexander who said it. Turning slightly red, he looked around to see where the voice had come from. He couldn't see anything. He looked at Teddy, who nodded toward Paul Spielman. Paul! He wasn't sure, but Paul seemed to be holding back laughter. He must have had something to do with it!

"Mr. Copperfield! What did you just say?" asked the teacher, angrily.

"Nothing! I didn't say anything!"

"Well, I think a trip to the principal's office might help you remember."

"But..."

"Just go. And be back for second-period math, please."

Alexander put his books inside his desk and got up. As he left the room, a snicker escaped Paul's lips, but Mrs. Wellcard didn't seem to notice.

At lunch that day, Jenny joined Ethan at a small table crammed in the corner. Their usual table was on the other side of the cafeteria, the side being painted at the moment. As she sat down, he handed her a small envelope with her name written on it.

"What's this?"

"An invitation to my birthday party. I've been handing them out to everybody."

“Oh right,” said Jenny. “I forgot you are turning eleven this weekend. You’ll be the oldest one in our group”

She opened the envelope and read the card inside.

“You are having the party at the Museum of Natural History?”

“Yep. It’s in the Hall of Ocean Life. There are sharks and squid and even a full-size blue whale hanging from the ceiling!”

“Cool! That sounds like fun. You didn’t invite Paul Spielman, did you?”

Alexander scowled, “No way! I hate that Paul!

“Me too. There’s a rumor that he has a tape recorder and has been secretly recording things to use later in pranks. You’re probably his number one target.”

“I know. I heard that too. Stupid Mrs. Wellcard had no clue. There was nothing I could do about it. But the principal didn’t seem to care much. He just told me not to talk out in class again and let me go.”

“Careful what you say, Alexander. Paul might be recording us right now.

He nodded and leaned in. Speaking more quietly, he said, “In my top five reasons to hate Paul Spielman, this one has to go to number one.”

“I agree,” said Jenny, taking a bite from her tuna sandwich. “But, he did push you into the girls bathroom while everyone was lining up for the fire drill last month.”

“Don’t remind me,” groaned Alexander. “That’s number two, at least on my list.”

“And how about when he told me he wanted to be my book report partner, and then never did any work.”

“Right,” said Alexander. “And he secretly teamed up with Anthony Miglio and didn’t tell you. That was pretty bad. We can put that at number seven, but it doesn’t make

the top five because you got an A on that book report, anyway. So, he probably did you a favor by not helping.”

“Good point,” agreed Jenny. “Well, at least you didn’t get detention today or anything.”

Alexander took the lid off his own lunch, a bowl of leftover spaghetti and meatballs. “Yeah. I would’ve been really upset. I don’t want to be stuck in detention while you and Ozric are out at the park. I’m not so sure about this hole that he is digging, but he’s a good guy and I want to help him.”

“Yeah,” she agreed. “It’s too bad he’s home-schooled. It would be fun to have classes with him. You never know what he’s going to do or say next.”

“Totally. Why’s that, anyway? Why doesn’t he go to a normal school?”

Jenny thought a moment and then answered, “His mom is a little different. She’s cool, but she has her own beliefs. I think she feels that a school education would change Ozric, would make him more like everybody else.”

“And she doesn’t want that?”

“No. She thinks it’s important for people to be different from one another. It makes them special.”

“I guess I can understand that,” Alexander concluded. He twirled some spaghetti around his fork and asked, “Did you hear about that new bagel place?”

“Yeah, I think I saw a commercial on TV for it,” replied Jenny. “Why? What’s the big deal?”

“Oh, well, my dad said it’s weird. They are opening 37 locations across Manhattan at the same time and they are advertising that they use water from Connecticut – as if that’s a *good* thing!”

“Yeah, that doesn’t make much sense. Aren’t there enough bagels in the city already?”

“That’s what my dad said. It’s a very strange thing for a company to do, and he thinks they are going to lose a ton of money. He’s into finances and reads the money section of the Times every morning.”

“Yeah, my dad does too,” said Jenny as she took a bite out of her tuna sandwich.

3:12PM Von Welring’s Bagel Shop

Ozric met Alexander and Jenny after school, and they started to walk home. He turned to Alexander and said, “I heard about this morning. Do you think it was Paul Spielman?”

“I’m sure it was him. People have been saying that he carries a tape recorder around with him.”

“I thought so,” he said.

Jenny cut in, saying, “I have to stop at Von Welring’s to get a bagel for Tracy.”

“But,” protested Alexander. “You just got one yesterday.”

“I know, but I ate the rest,” she replied with a shy grin. Jenny wasn’t worried about being a glutton, but she felt bad about eating her pet’s favorite – and only – food source.

When they arrived at the bagel shop, the owner greeted them from behind the counter. “Twice in two days! Ms. Fischer, what a pleasant surprise!”

“Hi Mr. V,” said Jenny. “I just need a plain bagel for Tracy, please, and the usual for my father.”

“What an appetite your fish has! One plain bagel coming up! And one everything with the works for the big Mr. Fischer. Does your mother know about this?”

“I don’t think she knows,” she replied, grinning. “Thanks for the bagels!”

“Mr. Von Welring,” Ozric began. “What do you know about the new bagel chain that is opening up? I saw a commercial on TV last night and people have been wondering what will happen.”

“You too, Ozric?” interrupted Jenny. “Alexander and I were talking about that at lunch today. What is the big deal about a bagel shop? Uh, no offense, Mr. Von Welring.” her face reddened a little.

“No, no, you are exactly right. The bagel business is small potatoes. I don’t know what a big chain like that is thinking. They must be crazy to open so many new locations at the same time.”

“People seem to be talking about it,” added Jenny.

“Exactly, my dear,” said Mr. Von Welring. “They try to make a splash in the newspapers and on television and, maybe, run the small-time places out of business. But.” He held up the bagel he had gotten for her. “Can they make something as perfect as this with water from Connecticut? I think not.”

“No. We love your bagels the best,” said Alexander.

“And your fish knows, too, doesn’t she, Ms. Fisher?”

“She definitely does! Thanks. See you later!”

“Let’s hurry, guys,” said Ozric. “We need to get to the part for more digging!”

“You don’t have to tell me,” said Jenny. “I’m usually the one trying to get the two of you to move along!”

Chapter 7

3:25PM Central Park

As Jenny neared the construction site, she caught sight of Alexander and Ozric standing by the hole in the ground. They stood still, not seeming to talk or dig or do anything else.

What are they doing? She thought. They don't have to wait for me.

As she came closer, the reason became clear. The hole, on which they had worked for several hours the day before, and which was so deep that Ozric couldn't see out of it, was gone. More correctly, the hole had been *filled in*.

“What happened?” she asked when she reached her friends. She could see the fresh dirt from the pile they had made the previous day. It had simply been scooped back into the ground from where it came. The loosely packed dirt took up more room than before, so there was a slight mound over the spot where the hole had been.

“We don't know,” responded Alexander. “We just got here and found it like this.”

“Who do you think filled it? It couldn't be the police or the park service, could it?”

“Officer Harbiter gave us permission. He *told* us to dig here,” said Ozric.

“I’m going to look for him,” said Jenny, and she raced off before anyone could say a thing.

“What should we do, Ozric?” asked Alexander.

“I don’t know,” came the reply. “I think Jenny did the right thing. We have to find out if we are allowed to dig here before we do anything else. But if it’s just a prank, I want to try again. Maybe whoever did it is gone and won’t come back.”

“Okay. So, I guess we should all try to get the police, then?”

“Let’s try to find Officer Harbiter since he knows about it already. He’s more likely to let us try again if it wasn’t the park service who filled it in.”

But he didn’t have to bother. Jenny was already trotting back over the hill from their Ultimate Frisbee field and she had the mounted policeman and his horse right on her heels. He was finishing up another Twinkie and stuffed the wrapper in his pocket as he approached.

“Hi kids. Ms. Fischer told me what happened...” He caught sight of the now filled-in hole. “My, my. Who could’ve done that? It certainly wasn’t us, or a park employee. This sandy area outside the construction site has no real use. That is, of course, unless you all succeed in tunneling to China.” He laughed. “In which case I bet they will want to build a highway or train tracks through it.”

“So it’s okay if we try again?” asked Ozric.

“Oh, of course it is! Sparky and I will even try to swing by here a couple times each day to make sure nobody’s tampering with it. You go right ahead. But remember,

when the gazebo construction is finished, you have to end your project. They will want to clean up this area, I'm sure."

"When will that be?" asked Jenny.

"Oh, I don't know. Probably in a week or two."

"No problem," said Ozric.

"Good," said the officer. "Best of luck to you!" With that, he turned and led his horse back up the hill.

"Well, let's get to work," said Ozric, and he drove his shovel into the mound of dirt.

"At least it will be easier to get back to where we were before," Alexander pointed out. "The dirt is a lot softer this time."

Ozric began to dig. "When we get to China, I want to see the Great Wall. It's almost 5,000 miles long, and some say you can see it from outer space!"

They worked for a few hours, taking breaks here and there to toss the Frisbee around, get drinks and use the nearby public restroom. At 6:30, the group called it a day and headed home for dinner.

"See you at school tomorrow," called Jenny when Alexander split from them to return to his own building.

6:46PM Fischer Residence

Over dinner that evening, Jenny's mother, Rachel Fischer, said, "Did I tell you that I joined the Gazebo Committee?"

“The what?” asked Jenny’s brother, Ethan.

“They are building a gazebo in Central Park. It’s part of a new campaign, run by the mayor’s wife, to make the park more beautiful.”

Jenny blurted out, “That must be the construction site!”

“The what?” his mother asked.

Not wanting to mention the hole to China, she replied, “Oh. Near where we play Frisbee there’s a new construction site that is roped off. I bet that is where the gazebo will be built.”

“Ah, yes. That must be it. They said it would be fairly close to our side of the park.”

“Where is the mayor getting money for a project like that?” asked Mr. Fischer, setting his newspaper under his chair.

“It was a donation from a local businessman, actually,” she replied. She turned to Jenny and said, “Be careful. Construction is starting, and from what I’ve heard, they’ll be working hard to get it finished quickly.”

“The kids will be fine,” said Mr. Fischer, adjusting his wire-rimmed glasses.

“Well, I don’t know if they will!” she snapped back. Mr. Fischer said nothing.

After a minute of silence, Jenny said, “I think Central Park is pretty enough already.”

“Me too,” agreed Ethan.

Their mother frowned. “Well, this will make it even better. The mayor’s wife is in charge, and I volunteered. Our first meeting is tomorrow night. So don’t mess anything up!”

“What will the committee do?” asked Mr. Fisher, attempting to change the subject.

“The basic construction design is set. But, we’ll choose the colors and decorations, flower arrangements, and the like.”

After dinner, Jenny took the bagel from Von Welring’s to her room to feed Tracy. She tore off some small pieces and dropped them into the water. The fish immediately darted for one and sucked it into her mouth.

A moment later, however, Tracy spat the piece of bagel back out. She swam to another floating bagel bit and nibbled it more carefully. Again, she rejected it.

Puzzled, Jenny tore off another piece and dropped it into the water. The goldfish took even less time to dismiss this piece. Jenny tasted a piece of the bagel, but didn’t notice anything funny about it.

“What’s the matter, Tracy?” she asked. But the fish seemed to have given up on eating and had resumed her lazy circles around the tank. Jenny shrugged and left to watch TV in the living room.

Chapter 8

Day 3 Tuesday

3:11PM Central Park

The children arrived at the construction site only to find the hole filled in again. They immediately suspected Paul Spielman was behind it.

“I know he must have had something to do with it!” exclaimed Alexander.

“Who else could it be?” asked Jenny.

“And who else would bother? It’s just a hole in the ground!” Ozric yelled in the direction of the mound of fresh dirt.

“Let’s go to Spielman’s right now and confront him,” suggested Alexander. They agreed and marched off in that direction.

3:23PM Spielman’s House of Bagels

Unlike the other day, Spielman’s House of Bagels was packed with people. The four children had trouble squeezing in the door. When they did, they found themselves at the back of a long line of customers.

Alexander noticed a man in gray coveralls several spots ahead of them. On the back of his uniform was a logo. It was a red and blue circle, or possibly the letter 'O'. He knew he recognized the man from somewhere, but at the moment, he couldn't remember.

Jenny spotted Paul Spielman. The portly boy with short, curly, brown hair was sitting at a corner table, reading. As she watched, Paul took a bite from a blueberry bagel with plain cream cheese. She turned to let the others know and saw that Alexander had also noticed Paul. He seemed to be staring, not at the boy, but rather at his bagel, for some reason.

"He's over there, in the corner," Jenny said, and pushed her way through the crowd toward Paul. She had to weave through several tables packed with customers.

Paul Spielman sat in the corner of his father's bagel shop catching up on homework. Out of the corner of his eye, he noticed a group of people walking toward him. He looked up to see Jenny leading the way. She was clearly not happy and that made Paul smile. It had been a good day so far – actually, a good week so far – and this only made it better.

"So, you heard, did you?" asked Paul, over the buzz of the people around him.

But Jenny ignored the question. "Why did you do it, Paul?"

This surprised Paul and he paused a moment. Alexander and Ozric joined the two of them in time to hear him reply, "Do what, exactly?"

"Don't play dumb. I saw the way you grinned when you noticed us. You know what I'm talking about," accused Jenny.

"Yes, your little bagel place, Von Welring's, is closed. But I didn't have anything to do with it. Not that I'm very upset, of course." He smiled again.

“Von Welring’s is closed?” asked Alexander.

“Of course it is! Why else would the three of you storm in here like this?” said Paul.

“He’s lying,” said Jenny.

“No, I’m not!” exclaimed Paul. “Go see for yourself. It’s closed. Something about not being able to make bagels. I guess the old man finally went senile.”

“We’ll see for ourselves,” said Ozric. “But first, tell us why you filled in our hole in the park.”

Paul’s face changed from a gloating smile to one of total confusion. “Your what?” he asked.

“Our hole to China.”

Paul remained confused. “Honestly, I have no idea what you are talking about.”

Ozric explained, “We were digging a hole to China and somebody filled it in... twice.”

“A hole to China, eh? That’s actually a pretty cool idea, even if it was you who came up with it. But I swear, I had nothing to do with that.”

“You didn’t?” asked Jenny.

“When would I have? Now that the competition is closed, my father has had me here in the shop day and night to help with the extra customers. I barely have enough time to finish my homework.”

“He could be telling the truth, guys,” said Ozric. “It would be a lot of work for him to fill in the hole alone.”

“You’re right, Ozric,” agreed Jenny. She looked at Paul and added, “He’s not exactly the manual labor type, is he?”

“Funny,” said Paul. “Are we done?”

“Yes,” she admitted, her shoulders slumping.

“Good. Run along now,” Paul demanded as he returned to his homework.

3:41PM Von Welring’s Bagel Shop

The bagel shop was closed, just as Paul had told them it would be. The three of them arrived at Von Welring’s to find the door locked and a CLOSED sign hung in the window.

“What is going on?” asked Jenny.

“I don’t know,” replied Alexander.

Ozric approached the window and put his hands around his face to peer inside.

“Hey! I see Mr. Von Welring inside.”

Alexander, who was standing by the door, began to knock on it loudly.

“He looked up, Alexander! Keep knocking,” called Ozric from inside his cupped hands.

Mr. Von Welring opened the door to greet the children. His white hair was unusually mussed and he had flour and bits of dough all over his apron. He managed a thin smile and said, “Hello, my friends. I’m sorry I cannot sell you any bagels today.”

“What happened, Mr. V?” asked Jenny.

“I don’t know!” he replied. “It’s the strangest thing. This morning, we did everything the same as we always do, but the bagel dough was different, somehow.”

“Different, how?” asked Ozric.

“Come, my friends,” he replied. “I will show you.”

In the bagel shop kitchen, Mr. Von Welring’s assistant was preparing a batch of dough. His white shirtsleeves were rolled up above his elbows and he mixed ingredients with his hands in a large, metal bowl.

“Skinny,” said the shop owner, addressing his helper. “Please tell the children what you’ve done so far with this batch.”

“Sure thing,” the tall, thin man replied. “Well, I always start by putting the yeast into hot water with some honey.”

“What does the yeast do?” asked Alexander. He stood closer than the rest of the group and was intently watching Skinny work.

“Oh, that’s the most important ingredient for any kind of bread. It makes the dough rise and gives it that springy feeling.”

“I see,” responded Alexander.

Jenny chimed in, “In fact, yeast is a living organism and it eats sugar and produces carbon dioxide!”

“That’s right, miss,” agreed Skinny, as he removed the ball of dough from the mixing bowl. He sprinkled some flour on the worktable and set the dough there. As he began kneading it, he continued, “When the yeast is ready, I begin to slowly add flour. Some people mix with a spoon, but I prefer to knead the dough with my hands.”

Ozric asked, “Why do you *need* the dough? You already have it.”

Skinny laughed. “I don’t *need* the dough, son, I *knead* it. K-n-e-a-d. It’s a way of mixing and working the dough with your hands.”

Ozric turned a little red and quietly said, “I see.”

Skinny continued his talk, “I always make sure to wash thoroughly and take off my watch and ring. One time, I lost my wedding band in the dough!”

“How did you find it?” Jenny asked.

“We turned it into a contest. Anyone who ordered one from that batch had to eat very carefully and we gave a free dozen bagels to the person who found the ring!” He paused to chuckle at the memory.

Mr. Von Welring continued the cooking demonstration, “At this point, we must leave the dough in a warm place and let it rise for some time. After that, we form it into circles like those.” He gestured toward a tray of dough loops.

“Cool!” exclaimed Alexander. “How do you make those?”

“We roll balls of dough until they are long and thin like rope. Then we join the ends of the rope and press them together so they stay connected.

“We’ve done that in art class with clay,” offered Jenny.

“It’s exactly like that,” said Mr. Von Welring. “We then boil the circles for a few minutes before baking them.”

Her eyes widened. “Did you say *boil*?”

“Yes. We boil the bagels and then bake them. That’s how bagels are made.

Anyone who does differently is not making a true bagel.”

“Wow!” said Alexander, his eyes darting around the kitchen. “Is that the pot you boil them in?” He pointed to an enormous, metal pot that was sitting on a stove in the corner.

“Yes,” replied the bagel-maker.

“What happened to your bagels today?” asked Ozric.

“It is a bit of a mystery. The dough seems normal enough. Skinny’s hands have been kneading bagel dough for many years and he cannot feel a difference. But when we take the bagels out of the oven, this is what happens.”

Mr. Von Welring removed the lid from a tall garbage can. Inside, the group could see dozens and dozens of discarded bagels. He picked one up and rapped it on the worktable. It was hard as a rock, nothing like the soft, chewy bagels they had grown to love over the years.

“They are all like this after they come out of the oven,” he said, tears welling in his eyes. “If we do not figure out what is wrong soon, I will be ruined! This morning, the customers were lining up and we finally had to give up and tell them we had nothing to sell today. Some bought coffee, but it wasn’t enough to stay open.”

“That’s terrible, Mr. Von Welring. What are you going to do?” asked Jenny.

“I don’t know. In my 43 years as a baker in this city, I’ve never seen anything like it before. We have thrown out all the ingredients and ordered more for tomorrow, but I am not very hopeful. These were the same materials we had been using for several days, with no problems at all.”

“Wow. That doesn’t make any sense,” said Ozric. “Is there anything we can do to help you?”

“You are kind to ask, my friends,” he said, straightening his apron and starting toward the door. “But, I cannot think of anything you can do right now. Thank you for coming and taking the time to see what we are going through. I’m sure you have homework to do and games you’d like to play. Skinny and I will manage.” He escorted the kids back to the sidewalk.

“Let us know if you think of anything,” offered Jenny. “Some strange things are happening and we are going to find answers.”

“Thank you, Ms. Fischer,” said the bagel shop owner. “I will let you know if I think of anything. Take care.” He turned slowly and re-entered the shop.

Chapter 9

Day 4 Wednesday

12:00PM The Higgins School

At noon, Jenny joined Alexander in the cafeteria to decide what they should do next. She set her lunch, a turkey wrap with cottage cheese and grapes, on the table and sat down next to Alexander. To make room for her, he moved his Mets hat, which had been sitting on the table next to him.

“I wish Ozric could be here, but we need to make a plan,” said Jenny, taking a bite from her wrap. “We’ll just have to talk to him about it after school.”

“Agreed,” said Alexander. He removed a tuna sandwich from its plastic bag. “I love tuna, especially with celery and a little pickle juice.”

“Gross!” said Jenny.

“Maybe you will like this better,” he offered, placing something wrapped in tin foil on the table..

“What is it?”

“A chocolate-chip muffin! I baked them myself, last night.”

Jenny unwrapped the tin foil to reveal a small, yellow muffin, crammed with chocolate chips. She did not wait to finish her wrap before digging in.

“This is delicious, Alexander!” she managed to say in a muffled voice. “What’s your secret?”

“Thanks!” he exclaimed. “The secret ingredient is bananas! I have the recipe in my notebook.”

He took a small, green notebook from his pocket and flipped through the pages. When found the muffin page, he set it on the table for the others to see. This is what he had written there:

Banana Chocolate-chip Muffins

2 ripe bananas, mashed

1 cup sugar

1 egg

1 stick soft butter

3 Tbsp. milk

2 cups flour

1 tsp. baking powder

1/2 tsp. baking soda

1/4 tsp. salt

1 cup chocolate chips

Preheat oven to 300 degrees and line a 12-muffin pan with papers. Cream the sugar, egg and butter in a bowl. Sift together flour, baking powder, baking soda and salt. Stir into the sugar mixture. In a separate bowl, mash the bananas with a fork and mix in the milk. Blend banana mixture with other ingredients until just combined. Add chocolate chips. Spoon the batter into muffin cups and bake for 15-20 minutes. Let them cool in the pan for at least 10 minutes before removing.

“So, what are we going to do about the hole to China?” asked Alexander.

Jenny said, “Well, I think we should first make a list of all the strange things that have happened this week. After that, we can see if we have any ideas.”

“Okay,” said Alexander. “I can write the list in my notebook.”

He flipped to a new page and continued, “I know! Someone has been filling in the hole each time we dig it!”

“Okay,” said Jenny, nodding his head. “What else?”

“Hmm...”

“Oh, I have something for the list. It’s not really related to what’s going on in the park, but Von Welring’s is closed, and they don’t know what’s wrong.”

“Should I write that down?” he asked.

“I think so. We should write down everything we can think of that’s out of the ordinary. We’ll sort out the connections later.”

“Okay,” he said and added the bagel shop’s closing to the list. “I added the fact that it’s a problem with the bagel dough.”

“Good. Do we think Paul had anything to do with it? Or was he telling the truth when he said he was innocent?”

“I believe him,” said Alexander. “He likes to do pranks at school, but nothing that serious.”

“What about filling in the hole?” asked Jenny, taking a bite from her wrap.

“No, I believe him on that one, too.”

“He did play that trick on you with the tape recorder,” said Jenny. “Is that an unusual event?”

“No. That’s pretty normal for him, don’t you think?”

Jenny nodded. “What about the dog?” she asked. “That was strange. Even Ozric said he hadn’t seen anything like that before.”

“That’s right,” said Alexander. “Definitely an unusual event.”

“Anything else?”

“I…” began Alexander, sure that there was something they had missed. “Nothing. I can’t remember.”

“It will come to you. Don’t worry about it. How about the new bagel company opening in the city? Everyone has been talking about it, how they use water from Connecticut.”

“Yeah,” he agreed. “And there’s a new gazebo being built in the park. I don’t know if that is mysterious, but I will write it down. My mother is on the committee to decorate that gazebo or something.”

“Mine too,” agreed Jenny. “So, what do we have on the list?”

Here is what Alexander had written down:

[Picture of Alexander's list: hole filled in, bagel shop closed, problem with dough, strange dog barking at horse, new bagel chain coming, parents surprised, Connecticut water, construction site is for gazebo, parents on committee]

“That looks about right,” said Jenny. “Let’s meet Ozric after school and go over it with him.”

3:21PM Spielman's House of Bagels

After school, Alexander rushed with Jenny back to her building to find Ozric. They wanted to tell him about the plan. When they got to their building, they noticed that Spielman's was no longer busy. In fact, there were no customers there at all. Like Von Welring's the day before, a sign hung on the door, saying they was closed. But the bagel shop was not entirely deserted. The two could clearly see a figure seated alone at one of the tables: Paul Spielman.

Paul looked up and noticed the pair of them staring at him through the glass. He walked over and opened the door. “I suppose you want to gloat,” he said, trying to sneer. But his heart wasn't in it.

“What happened?” asked Alexander.

“My father said he couldn't make bagels this morning. Everything was the same as always, but when he took them from the oven, something was wrong. All the bagels were small and hard, as if they had been stale for a week.”

Alexander paused a moment before replying, “Wow, that's weird.”

“You aren’t so smug now, are you? It serves you right for playing tricks on people!” yelled Jenny.

Alexander tried to say something, but Paul cut him off. “Shut up! It’s not my fault! Go away!” he yelled. He shut the door in their faces and ran behind the counter.

“Let’s go,” said Alexander.

“I’m sorry, Alex. He just makes me so mad sometimes.”

“I know. It’s fine. Let’s go get Ozric.”

“Okay. Isn’t that weird that Paul’s dad had exactly the same problem as Mr. Von Welring?”

“Definitely. This is one to add to the list, Jenny. I wonder if we should have told Paul about that. Oh well, I don’t see how that would have helped. And the less Paul knows, the better, as far as I’m concerned.”

“Yeah, totally,” she agreed as they boarded the elevator.

3:36 Fischer Residence

Jenny, Ozric and Alexander sat in Jenny’s living room. The TV was on, but none of them paid any attention. Jenny and Alexander were telling Ozric about their list.

“It’s a good idea, guys,” said Ozric.”

Alexander nodded and said, “Thanks.” Then he asked, “But what can we do about it? How can we learn more?”

Ozric looked up and rubbed his chin for a moment. “I think I have an idea.”

“What is it?” asked Jenny

“Well, I don’t know what we can do about the bagel shop, but maybe we can figure out who is sabotaging our hole every night.”

“Okay,” she nodded agreement.

“We should go back to the park and dig again. We should try to get as far as we got the other day. The culprit will come back tonight to fill it in again. When he or she does that, we will be there watching!” Ozric smiled and leaned back in his chair.

“That’s a great idea!” said Alexander. “I can tell my parents that we are working on a school project and I am sleeping at Jenny’s place. They’ve let me do that in the past.”

“Okay. I think we can sneak out of my apartment,” added Jenny. “I hope my older brother doesn’t tell on us.”

“I don’t think he will,” said Alexander. “He’s pretty cool.”

“Great!” exclaimed Ozric. “Let’s get going and put the plan into action!”

“Let’s do it!” said Alexander, clapping his hands. “But we have to stop at my place on the way, to get the shovels.”

Chapter 10

3:55PM Central Park

Alexander, Jenny and Ozric arrived at the construction site a few minutes later to find it deserted.

“I wonder when they’ll start building the gazebo,” said Jenny.

“I think pretty soon,” replied Ozric, who immediately began digging.

The three friends worked in silence for a while, until the hole was two feet deep. At that point, it was too deep for them to keep digging without getting inside the hole. Ozric and Alexander were the first to hop in and continue digging. Jenny had the job of lugging dirt from the edge of the hole to the pile a few feet away.

“Ozric, tell us something else about China,” said Jenny.

“Well,” he replied. “Did you know that ice cream was invented there?”

“No!” she exclaimed. “I didn’t even think the Chinese ate ice cream at all! You never see it on the menu at Chinese restaurants.”

“That’s true,” agreed Alexander. “I’ve never seen any kind of dessert at all. Except fortune cookies!”

Ozric went on, “Well, they invented it thousands of years ago. They took a mixture of milk and rice and put it out in the snow to freeze. It was the first form of ice cream.”

Alexander took off his baseball hat and wiped his forehead with the back of his hand. “I want to find out who is filling in the hole, but I also kind of don’t want them to come. I hate having to dig the same dirt every day. It’s hard!”

“I know,” agreed Ozric. “I’m starting to realize why nobody ever finishes a hole to China after they start it.” He laughed.

They continued to dig for two more hours until they were again as deep as before.

“Now what?” asked Jenny, putting down her shovel.

“I think that’s good,” replied Ozric. “Tonight, the three of us will return to try to see who fills it back in.”

“What will we do if we see them?” she asked.

“That’s a good question,” said Alexander. “What will we do?”

“I don’t know,” answered Ozric. “I honestly don’t know. But I want to find out, and maybe something will come to us then.”

Alexander took back his shovels and the group of kids headed for home.

10:55PM Fischer Residence

When they were sure her parents had fallen asleep, Jenny and Alexander put on dark jackets and quietly crept toward the front door. Ethan caught up with them in the kitchen.

“Where are you guys going?” he asked.

Jenny whispered, “We’re going to find out who keeps filling in our hole every night.”

Ethan smiled. “What if I tell mom and dad?”

“You wouldn’t!” Her voice rose a little.

“Careful, Jenny,” whispered Alexander. “We don’t want to wake them up.”

Ethan put his hand on her shoulder. “Don’t worry, sis. I was just kidding. But you guys be careful out there, especially in the park.”

“We will,” she replied, opening the front door. She and Alexander stepped softly through the door and closed it behind them.

“We told Ozric we’d meet him at 11:00,” said Jenny. She walked up to the door across the hall and scratched it gently with a fingernail.

For a moment, there was silence. Then the two could just barely hear a similar scratching sound coming from the other side of the door. It was Ozric. The door opened slowly and their friend emerged, wearing a blue sweatshirt with the hood pulled up over his head.

“Hi, guys,” he said, pulling the door closed behind him. “Are you ready? Let’s go! I brought a flashlight.”

“Good thinking,” replied Jenny, walking toward the elevator.

Alexander said, “Let’s take the stairs. It won’t make as much noise.”

“Okay,” agreed Ozric. “And the stairs lead to a side door where the doorman won’t see us leave.”

The three tiptoed down through the stairwell and slipped out into the night.

11:17PM Central Park

When they reached the Ultimate Frisbee field, the trio became silent and moved more slowly.

“Let’s go to the hill between the field and the construction site. There are some bushes at the top, along the right side,” suggested Jenny.

The other two agreed and they crept toward the far end of the field. When they reached the hill, they dropped to their knees and crawled to the top of the slope.

“Over there,” said Jenny, pointing to a small cluster of bushes at the top.

“That’s good,” agreed Ozric. “We should have a good view from there.”

Settling in among the bushes on their stomachs, the group scanned the area for any signs of movement.

“Can you see if the hole is still there?” asked Alexander.

“I think I can still see the pile of dirt,” replied Jenny, squinting into the darkness.

“But, I can’t be sure.”

“Me neither,” added Ozric.

“I think one of us needs to go down and check it out. What if they’ve already come and gone?” worried Alexander.

“I don’t think they would have had time to fill in the hole already,” said Jenny.

“But you’re right. I can go.”

She inched forward and emerged from the bushes on the downward slope of the hill, heading to the construction site. She paused at the bottom and looked around. She glanced back up to the bushes where she knew his friends remained, hidden.

Jenny heard a voice that whispered, “Go ahead. We don’t see anyone.”

She got up and ran in a low crouch to the hole. She didn't have to go far. After a few feet, she could clearly see that the hole hadn't been touched. It remained around four feet deep and the pile of dirt and sand was still there also. She turned and hurried back to join her friends.

"It's still there," she said.

Ozric replied, "It's a hole. You should say, 'It's still *not* there.'"

Alexander laughed.

"And also," continued Jenny. "I couldn't see or hear you guys at all from down there. This is a perfect hiding spot."

"Will we be able to see people when they arrive?" asked Ozric.

"I think so," replied Jenny. She pointed in the direction she had just come from. "See that sort of grayish shape, there?"

Ozric answered, "Yeah. I see it."

"That's the pile of dirt, just as I thought. We should have no trouble seeing anyone who comes to fill the hole in."

Day 5 Thursday

1:21AM Central Park

But Jenny was wrong. More than two hours later, she found herself the only one of the trio still awake. Her eyes drooped and she worried that she would soon fall asleep. Suddenly, two dark shapes appeared on the path from the direction of the public restroom. She shook the two boys awake.

“Look!” she whispered, pointing toward the figures. As they came closer, they could see it was two men. They carried shovels and walked straight to the hole. One was saying something to the other.

“Can you hear what they’re saying?” asked Alexander.

“No,” replied Jenny.

“I can’t either,” added Ozric.

The men began to work, carrying scoops of dirt to the edge of the hole and tossing them in.

Alexander propped up on his elbows and asked, “Should we try to get closer?”

“I’m not sure,” replied Ozric. “Where would we go?”

They were in a difficult situation. The clump of bushes opened up to grass on this slope of this hill. There was not much cover between them and the mysterious figures.

“I have an idea,” said Jenny. “There are only two of them so it will take a while. We can go back down and sneak around to the other side of the construction site.” She pointed to a group of trees on the far side of the site.

“Okay. Let’s do it,” said Alexander, and he began to inch back, out of the clump of bushes.

The three kids crept around the construction site. As they rounded the circular area, they entered the cluster of trees Jenny had pointed to. From there, they were able to get closer to the hole and the two figures.

Jenny paused at a large oak tree and peered around it. Something rustled the leaves above her head and she looked up. But she couldn’t see anything in the darkness, so she focused back on the hole.

“It’s definitely two men. I can hear their voices, though I can’t quite tell what they’re saying.”

“Keep going. I think we can get closer,” said Ozric.

Five minutes later, they had sneaked as close as they dared to the busy men. The tree they hid behind was just 20 feet from the edge of the quickly shrinking hole. “Ugh,” Ozric grunted. “We’re never going to get to China!”

“I know. I’m sorry, Ozric,” consoled Alexander.

“Shh!” whispered Jenny, harshly. “They’re speaking!”

The shorter of the two men stopped shoveling for a moment and said, “How many times we gotta do this?”

“Don’t worry,” the other replied. “This will be the last time. Construction starts tomorrow and whoever keeps doing it won’t be able to dig anymore. This place will be crawling with workers during the day.”

“Is that what the boss said?”

“Yeah. You know how he is. He yelled at the foreman to expand the boundary rope to include this spot.”

“Good, because I ain’t digging another hole!”

“Me neither,” agreed the second man. “I never thought digging could be so hard!”

“Wait,” said the first. “If that’s going to happen tomorrow, why are we doing this tonight? Can’t some of those guys fill in the hole?”

“I agree. But boss says we have to fill it in, so we fill it in. The construction team is just from some contracting company. Maybe he doesn’t want any attention on the hole. That is why we’ve been filling it in, after all.”

“Good point,” agreed the shorter man. He picked up his shovel and resumed filling in the hole with dirt.

The men worked more quickly than the smaller children had been able to, and soon they had finished the job. As they left the construction site, heading away from the hill and the Ultimate Frisbee field, the three boys followed.

Without a word, the two men walked to the public restroom not far from the site of the digging. It was the very restroom that Ozric and Alexander had been using for bathroom breaks during the day.

“Are they going to the bathroom?” asked Jenny.

“That’s weird,” replied Ozric. “I didn’t even know it was open at night.”

“Me neither.”

The three kids stopped several yards back and watched as the two men approached the men’s-room door without a pause. When the taller man opened the door, the light from inside shone briefly on his face. Alexander let out a gasp.

“That’s him!” he whispered as the second man disappeared inside the door.

“Who?” asked Jenny and Ozric, at the same time.

“What I couldn’t think of at lunch today, for the list.”

“Go on,” urged Ozric.

“The taller man, the one who went into the bathroom first, *he was at the bagel shop!*”

“Which one? Von Welring’s or Spielman’s?”

“Both of them!”

“That’s right,” agreed Jenny. “He was the man in the gray coveralls. I remember now. He was at both bagel places the day before they shut down!”

“Wow,” exclaimed Ozric. “But what does it mean?”

“I don’t know,” said Alexander. “But we should get away from the path. They’ll probably be coming back out any time.”

The trio scurried off the path and crouched behind a park bench. They were in a gap between lights and concealed in almost total darkness.

They waited.

Chapter 11

2:25AM Central Park

Ozric yawned. “How long have they been in there?”

Alexander looked at his watch and said, “About fifteen minutes. I wonder what’s taking so long.”

While they waited, Alexander came up with another list. “Top five things you never thought you’d be doing on a Wednesday night. This is number one for sure. And I can’t really even think of another.”

“You’re right,” agreed Jenny. “I guess this one will have to be a top *one* list instead of top five or top ten.

Ten more minutes went by and Ozric couldn’t take it any more. “Something is fishy here. I’m going to try to peek inside.”

“Are you sure?” asked Jenny.

“How could they possibly take this long to go to the bathroom?” Ozric asked, though it really wasn’t a question. He got up from behind the bench and sneaked toward the men’s-room door, carefully keeping to the shadows and bushes wherever possible.

Outside the door, Ozric stopped. He put his head against it to listen. He then turned around and shrugged in Jenny's and Alexander's direction. Slowly, he pulled the handle and peered through the narrow opening.

The bathroom appeared to be empty. What's more, he didn't hear a sound coming from inside. How could two grownups be that silent? He opened the door a few inches and slipped inside.

Watching all this from behind the bench, Jenny and Alexander didn't know what to do. A few seconds went by, but nothing happened. They became worried. Ozric had just been with them moments earlier, but now they wondered what he might be facing.

"What should we do, Alexander?"

"I don't know. I think we have to follow him."

"What about the men we saw?"

"He's our friend. We should help if he's in trouble. I'll go inside and you can wait at the door. If there's a problem, I'll yell and you can run to get help."

"Okay," agreed Jenny.

The two of them walked quickly to the door. When they reached it, Alexander put his hand on the knob and signaled to Jenny. "Ready?"

"Go for it."

Alexander pulled the door open and stepped inside. His eyes took a moment to adjust to the light as he moved two paces farther in. What he saw surprised him. It was Ozric. There were no men, no other people at all in the cramped restroom. The thin boy was standing in its center, looking around.

"Where are they?" asked Alexander.

“I have no idea,” replied Ozric.

Alexander returned to the door and pushed it open. “Jenny, come on in. They’re gone.”

“Gone?” said Jenny as she entered the room, squinting at the light. “I feel kind of weird being inside a men’s room.”

“It’s okay,” said Alexander. “Nobody will be coming in here this late at night. Where did they go, Ozric?”

“It was like this when I came in,” said Ozric. “They seem to have just disappeared.”

Jenny protested, “That’s impossible. Everyone has to be somewhere.”

“Maybe there’s a secret door in here,” offered Alexander with a laugh.

“Ha ha!” exclaimed Jenny. “A secret door? Good one!”

But Ozric didn’t laugh. “Actually, I think he’s right. Let’s take a look around.”

They split up and started examining different parts of the room. Ozric knelt under a sink while Alexander ran his fingers along the wall next to the door. Jenny stood in the middle of the room for a minute. Then she shrugged and went into one of the stalls to look for evidence of where the two men might have gone.

“What are we looking for, exactly?” she asked.

“Something out of the ordinary,” replied Ozric. “Secret doors are usually not very secret at all, once you know they are there. Instead of looking for a handle, look for something like a strange line in the wall that shouldn’t be there.”

“I never really thought about that before,” Jenny said, getting into the spirit. “But it makes sense. After all, they are still doors.”

“Exactly,” agreed Ozric, walking into a different stall.

After a few minutes, Alexander called to the others, "I think I found something!"

Jenny and Ozric rushed over to see. Alexander stood by the sink, pointing at a metal unit built into the wall. It doubled as a garbage can and paper towel dispenser. The stainless steel stretched from the floor to a few inches over the boys' heads.

Alexander pointed to one side of the unit. "It has a seam all the way around, just as Ozric said. But look at the left side."

"I don't see it," said Ozric, peering closely at the wall.

"I do!" cried Jenny. "Hinges!"

"What does a garbage can need hinges for?" asked Alexander.

"Good catch!" said Ozric. He put his hands inside the lip of the garbage can and pulled.

The metal unit swung open.

"Wow! It wasn't even locked!" said Alexander, perhaps a bit too loudly.

"They call it hiding in plain sight," said Ozric. "A good secret door rarely has to be locked because nobody ever suspects it's there in the first place."

Behind the door, where a wall should have been, an opening revealed cement stairs, spiraling down into darkness.

"We've come this far," said Ozric, and he stepped through the doorway and began to descend.

Alexander quickly followed, but Jenny paused. Alexander looked back over his shoulder to see his friend still standing outside the secret door. "What's wrong?" he asked.

"I'm scared. We don't know what's down there. Do you think it's safe?"

But by then, Ozric had reached the bottom and called up to his friends, “It’s okay! I’m in a hallway now and there’s nobody here.”

Alexander and Jenny quickly followed his voice, the latter gently pulling the hidden door closed behind him. There was no handle on the inside so it was hard to get it completely shut. Maybe there was another handle that she couldn’t see. But it was too late to find out, she could hear Ozric beginning to walk away.

She hurried down a narrow cement stairway. The walls were smooth and hard, curving to form a tight spiral. She continued down only a few feet before reaching the bottom to rejoin her friends.

The three stood at the end of a long passageway. It stretched into the distance, farther than the light of Ozric’s flashlight could shine.

“We’re probably only ten feet below ground level,” observed Ozric.

The kids inched forward until they could no longer see the stairs behind them. In front of them, the walls stretched into darkness.

“Should we keep going?” asked Alexander.

“We’ve come this far,” Ozric said again, and led the way farther into the gloom.

After a few more minutes of slow going, the three finally approached the end of the passageway. A wooden door came into sight. Ozric put his ear against the door as the other two came to a halt behind him

“I don’t hear anything,” he whispered. He put his hand on the knob and slowly turned the handle.

Beyond the door lay a small room, also with a cement floor and walls. On the opposite wall, just a few feet from the three of them, a second door led on into the unknown. But, in the middle of the room, blocking the way, lay three sleeping dogs. Dobermans.

“Those are the dogs from the park!” exclaimed Alexander, just a bit too loudly.

The dog closest to them opened its eyes and began to lift its head.

Thinking quickly, Ozric pulled the door shut, careful not to let it slam. He motioned for the other two to be silent and listened for any noises.

“It looks like we got out of there just in time,” he whispered. “Dogs wake up much more quickly than people, but there is still some delay. We surprised it, but not enough for it to start barking.”

“Sorry about that, Ozric.” said Alexander.

“No problem. Even if we’d been quiet and kept the flashlight off, they would have woken up from the new scent in the air. We better get out of here.”

The three kids started back down the hallway toward the spiral stairs. Ozric kept his flashlight off as they felt their way along the wall. It was because of this that they noticed the light from the stairwell ahead of them was brighter than it should have been.

“Someone’s coming!” exclaimed Jenny.

Just as she said this, she heard footsteps on the stairs, slowly descending toward the trio.

“What do we do?”

They were trapped.

Chapter 12

2:48AM Underground Passageway

Jenny, Alexander and Ozric stopped several feet short of the spiral staircase and waited in the dark. The glow from a flashlight danced on the walls as the unknown person descended. As this late arrival turned onto the last stair, the beam of light fell on the three boys, huddled against the cold cement. The glare prevented them from seeing who it was.

Then a voice they recognized spoke, “Jenny? Alexander?”

There was a brief silence before Jenny answered, “Paul? Is that you?”

It was Paul Spielman. He turned the flashlight on himself for a moment. The upturned light gave his face an eerie glow and his chubby cheeks cast deep shadows over his eyes. Despite that, the sight was a welcome relief for the other three.

“Paul, I can honestly say I’ve never been happier to see you.”

“Me too, Jenny,” agreed Paul.

Having recovered his wits, Alexander was not so sure. “What are *you* doing here, Spielman? Come to play another prank on us?”

“No!” he replied. “All right, I followed you. But it wasn’t to trick you, I swear!”

“Why did you follow us?” asked Ozric.

“I heard you talking in the cafeteria. Something strange is going on. You saw what happened at my father’s restaurant.”

“You mean bagel shop?” corrected Jenny.

“Yeah. Anyway, he’ll be ruined if we don’t figure out what’s wrong with the bagels. It seemed like you guys had an idea about it so I followed you.”

“Mr. Von Welring is having the same problem as your father.”

“I know. I’m sorry about that, too.”

“You didn’t make it sound that way yesterday!” growled Alexander.

“You’re right. That was wrong of me. And they really aren’t even our competitors because they’re out on the main avenue. That’s more of the business crowd while our customers are local area residents.”

Alexander continued to stare at Paul but said nothing.

Paul paused before continuing, “Look, I know we’ve had our differences. This time I’m telling the truth. I want to help. Seriously.”

“Okay,” said Jenny, shooting Alexander a quick look. “The first thing we need to do is get out of here! There are attack dogs behind a door at the other end of this hallway. We nearly woke them up just a minute ago!”

The group of four wasted no more time. They climbed the stairs and burst into the men’s room. Ethan shut the secret door firmly behind him. Alexander led the way out into the Central Park night.

Day 5 Thursday

11:47AM The Higgins School

The group, minus Ozric, met the following day at lunch. Ignoring looks from several classmates, especially Anthony Miglio, Paul sat down with Alexander and Jenny in the corner of the cafeteria.

“Hi, guys,” he said.

“Hi, Paul,” they responded.

“So, tell me more about the mystery. What do you know so far?”

“Well,” said Alexander, “Jenny and I started a list of strange events that have happened in the last few days.”

He took his notebook from his pocket and showed it to Paul before continuing. “We noted the strange dogs in the park, the problems at Von Welring’s bagel shop and the fact that someone kept filling in our hole to China!”

Paul studied the list. “So that’s why you went out there last night, to see who was filling in your hole?”

“Yeah,” said Jenny. “And it turned out one of them was the man in the gray overalls!”

Paul looked confused. “I don’t understand.”

Alexander smiled. “We saw him at Von Welring’s the day before it closed! And that’s not all. Then we saw him at your bagel shop the day before *it* shut down too!”

“Wow,” said Paul. “I don’t even know what to say.”

“Yeah, he was with a shorter guy. They were talking about their boss, but we don’t know who that is.”

“I remember,” said Paul. “Remember, I was there too.”

“Oh yeah,” said Alexander. “Where were you hiding, Paul?”

“Remember when the three of you moved from the bushes to that stand of trees to get closer to the two men?”

“Yeah.”

“You probably won’t believe this, but I was right above you. I was in the tree!”

The whole table laughed, including Paul.

“You climbed up a tree to spy on us?” asked Jenny. But she went on without waiting for an answer. “That’s actually a really good idea. Why didn’t we think of that, Alexander?”

Alexander shrugged.

“Yes,” continued Paul. “It was a great spot to watch the three of you and the two men that showed up later. When you followed them to the bathroom, I was right behind you on the path. If one of you had turned around you’d have seen me easily.”

Alexander yawned. “Wow, I am *so* tired!”

“Me too,” agreed Jenny, suddenly yawning herself, as if she caught it from her friend.

Alexander said, “Can you believe those were the same dogs from the other day in the park?”

“I know!” exclaimed Jenny.

“What’s that?” asked Paul.

Jenny explained to him about the man in the park the previous day, how he owned the three Dobermans and one of them almost attacked Officer Harbiter’s horse.

“Wow, that’s quite a coincidence,” concluded Paul. The table was silent for a minute before he spoke again. “How long do you guys think that underground hallway ran?”

Alexander shrugged. “Ozric’s flashlight wasn’t strong enough. We could only see a few feet in front of us, but it was pretty long.”

“Yeah,” said Paul. “Oh, and in your notebook you had written something about a new chain of bagel stores opening?”

“Oh, that,” said Jenny. “We weren’t sure if it was important, but we wrote it down anyway. There’s a new chain of bagel shops opening up all over the city. Since Von Welring’s suddenly had to shut down, we decided to add it to the list.”

“Definitely,” agreed Paul. He closed his eyes, but didn’t ask anything further.

Jenny said, “We have a lot to think about now.” She tapped Alexander’s notebook. “I think we should meet after school, with Ozric, and make a plan.”

“That sounds like a good idea,” agreed Alexander. “In fact, let’s go to the new bagel place. There’s one near our building.”

Chapter 13

2:57PM Bagelux

“This used to be a shoe repair store,” said Paul.

“Yeah, it was a mom and pop operation,” agreed Jenny. “They fixed my inline skates last summer. I wonder what happened to them.”

They stood in front of a brand-new bagel shop, just around the corner from their building. The red and blue sign, in the shape of a bagel, read “Bagelux Bagels”.

“Does anyone else think it’s funny that this new place opened up right after the other two in the area closed down?” asked Alexander.

“That’s a good point,” said Jenny. “And this location is about halfway between Von Welring’s and Spielman’s, isn’t it?”

“Perfect spot to take all of our former customers,” said Paul.

“Shall we?” asked Alexander.

“You guys go inside,” suggested Jenny. “I’m going to run back to get Ozric. We’ll meet you here in five minutes.”

The other two entered Bagelux as she disappeared around the corner.

As Spielman's had been the other day, Bagelux was crowded with customers. Some stood in a long line behind a velvet rope, while others sat in plush armchairs or on stools along a narrow wooden table in front of the window. This last group faced out, watching people pass by on the sidewalk.

"I don't see anywhere to sit," observed Paul.

"We'll just have to stand here and wait for a table to open up."

"Or a couch," added Paul, smirking. He waved his arm across the room and said, "Look at that. We'll never find an open spot for all of us."

At first, Alexander didn't get what he was talking about. Then he saw it. About three quarters of the seated customers were working on laptop computers that sat next to empty coffee cups and crumpled paper bags.

"At my father's restaurant, you can usually find a table, even when it's busy."

"Well, yeah," agreed Alexander. "I assume people don't order one thing and then sit there for 3 hours working on a laptop."

"That's true. But people do sit for a while to chat."

"I guess you're right. Where we go, Von Welring's, is more for take-out customers so we never have a problem finding a seat."

"Right. And at our place, the tables and chairs are set up better than this. We don't have loveseats for people to eat a bagel!"

Alexander nodded. "That *is* kind of ridiculous."

Paul noticed a family of four at one of the few normal tables. The father gathered trash and empty cups. He took a partially eaten bagel from his toddler's hands and

walked quickly to the garbage can. The young child began to cry and the mother scooped him up into her arms.

Paul pointed to the table and said, "Look. We'll have to move quickly."

The two boys walked over and stood by the table, guarding it.

Paul asked the mother, "Are you leaving?"

She nodded. The family was gone a moment later. Alexander watched them walk into the street as he sat down. Paul remained standing. "I'll go get in line. What kind of bagel do you want?"

"I'll have a chocolate chip bagel if they have them. And chocolate cream cheese, please."

"Coming right up!"

"Thanks! You know, I like the new Paul."

Paul smiled and walked over to the end of the fairly long line of customers.

A few minutes later, Jenny and Ozric entered the bagel shop.

Alexander yelled, "Guys, over here!"

"Wow! This place is a lot bigger than the bagel shops I'm used to," said Jenny.

"Yeah," agreed Ozric. "And what's with all the couches and weird chairs?"

"We were just talking about that," said Alexander. "It's probably twice as big as Paul's shop, but holds half as many customers."

"I don't see a kitchen, either," said Ozric.

"Wow! I hadn't thought of that," said Alexander. "That means they must have their bagels delivered from a central location. By the way, Paul is in line. You should go tell him what kind of bagels you want."

A few minutes later, Paul returned to the table with everyone's order. "They didn't have the same kinds of bagel as I'm used to," he lamented. "So I did my best. Ozric, here's a cinnamon-raisin with butter."

"Great! That's exactly what I wanted! Thanks!"

"No problem. Alexander, here is a chocolate chunk bagel with mocha cream cheese. They didn't have chocolate flavor. It was either this or Nutella."

"That's fine," said Alexander. "Thanks."

"Jenny, here is your everything bagel with cream cheese on the side."

"Thanks, Paul. What did you get?"

"I got my usual, a blueberry bagel with plain cream cheese."

"Did you have any trouble getting blueberry?"

"No, just the opposite. They have three varieties of blueberry, Grand Haven Bluecrop, and the one I got, Little Giant."

The kids occupied themselves with their bagels until Jenny broke the silence.

"Okay, let's get down to business. We have a lot of things to talk about. Alexander, can you get out your notebook and read what we put down last time?"

"Sure thing."

"Thanks."

Alexander opened his notebook on the table and read the list aloud.

Jenny asked, "Now, what can we add to it? I'll start. Two men filled in the hole. They disappeared into an underground tunnel guarded by attack dogs."

"And the attack dogs were the same ones we saw in the park on Sunday," added Ozric.

Alexander started to scribble madly in his notebook, trying to keep up.

“That’s right,” continued Jenny. “And one of the two men was the man in gray coveralls.”

This was the first Ozric had heard of it. “Who’s that?”

She quickly explained about the man in the coveralls that Alexander had originally spotted.

Ozric replied, “Do you think there’s a connection? I mean, he could have just been there to eat a bagel.”

“We don’t have enough to go on, yet,” said Jenny. “Let’s continue with the list.”

“My father’s bagel shop is closed, too,” offered Paul. Alexander wrote it down.

Jenny added, “Yes, and you’re having the same mysterious problem with the bagels.”

“That’s right. They seem fine, but when they come out of the oven, they are always small and hard. We don’t know what’s wrong.”

Alexander remembered something else from the previous night. “When the two men were filling in the hole, they said this would be the last time.”

“Oh yeah. Why was that?” asked Jenny.

“They said construction on the gazebo is going to begin today so we won’t be able to dig there any more. They’re moving that yellow tape to surround the place where we were digging.”

Ozric sighed.

“I’m sorry, Ozric,” said Alexander.

“That’s okay.” He paused and then added, “Not only did they say construction was going to begin, but they said something about their boss not wanting construction workers to find the hole. Whatever the reason is for filling it in, they don’t want anyone to know about it.”

“Should I write that down?” asked Alexander.

“I think so,” said Jenny. “Can you think of anything else?”

The others thought a few moments before shrugging their shoulders.

“That’s all I can remember,” said Ozric.

“Me too,” agreed Jenny. “By the time we moved close enough to hear them, they were almost finished.”

Alexander read the new list back to them. Here’s what it read:

[Picture of Alexander’s list: hole filled in, bagel shop closed, problem with dough, strange dog barking at horse, new bagel chain coming, parents surprised, Connecticut water, construction site is for gazebo, parents on committee. NEW ITEMS: two men, attack dogs = dogs from park, gray coveralls, Spielman’s closed, bagels turn out like rocks, want to keep hole a secret]

“Okay,” said Jenny. “What do we do next?”

“I think we should tell someone,” suggested Alexander.

“I agree,” she said, letting the second word trail off. “But, what do we tell them? All we have is a list of strange events. Some of them seem to be connected, but we still don’t know exactly how or why.”

“I hate to say it, but she’s right,” groaned Paul.

“We have to go back underground. I’m sure whatever is going on, the answer is there,” said Alexander.

“That means we have to get past the dogs,” said Paul.

“I’ve been thinking about that,” chimed in Ozric. “You all know that I’ve worked with dogs and know a little about them.”

“Of course you know about them!” exclaimed Jenny. A woman at the next table turned her head and Jenny stared at her until she turned back around.

“I think I have an idea about how to get past the Dobermans, but it’ll take some time. Can someone go back there with me this afternoon?”

“What if the men are there?” asked Paul.

“Someone can keep watch outside while I go in.”

“And what if they’re already inside?”

Ozric thought a moment and said, “Well, I can always run. If they *are* down there, I don’t think they’ll be in the room with the dogs. They will be in the room behind that second door. That’s where we need to go, but we have to solve the problem of the dogs first.”

Jenny said, “I think we should all go with you. Some of us can keep watch and one or two can go down there with you in case anything happens.”

“That sounds good.”

Paul then asked the group, “Does anyone have a compass?”

“No. Why?” asked Alexander.

“I am not sure yet, but I have a hunch about something. I want Ozric to take a compass with him when he goes into the underground hallway.”

Ozric said, “I have one and will bring it. I need to stop at home, though.”

“That’s fine,” agreed Jenny. “I have to go home, too. I need to feed Tracy, which reminds me, I have to get another bagel for her.”

She rose from his seat and got back in line, which had shortened a bit since they arrived. The others finished their bagels and got ready to leave.

“Alexander,” began Ozric. “I need to talk to you about a cooking request.”

“Okay.”

Ozric and Alexander went outside on the sidewalk to wait for the others while Paul joined Jenny in line. There was a brief silence. Then Paul drew a sharp breath and whispered to her, “That’s him!”

Following his stare, she looked behind the counter to see a man wearing gray coveralls with a red and blue logo on the back.

“He works here!” said Jenny. The two fell silent again, trying to fathom the meaning of this new nugget of information.

“We had better get going as soon as you get your bagel,” suggested Paul.

Jenny agreed. She ordered her plain bagel and paid for it as quickly as possible. The two of them then departed Bagelux in a hurry.

Chapter 14

3:44PM Fischer Residence

Three of the four children invaded Jenny's apartment a few minutes later. They found her father in his usual spot at the kitchen table. He had the sports section of the New York Times open in front of him.

Jenny turned on the TV and sat down at the table. "Hi, Dad. You're home from work early."

"I am," he replied. "It was a slow day. Sometimes, when there isn't much activity in the market, I don't have a lot to do so I leave early."

Jenny's mother walked into the kitchen after hearing the commotion. She wore green hospital scrub bottoms and a dark purple sweatshirt with "NYU" across the front in white letters.

"Who is this, Jenny?" she asked, pointing to Paul.

"I'm Paul Spielman, Mrs. Fischer," the chubby boy said.

"Nice to meet you. Your father owns the bagel shop downstairs, right?"

"That's right."

She turned back to her daughter, “So, what brings you all up here today? And where’s Alexander?”

“We’re just stopping by on our way to the park, Mom,” she replied. “Alexander ran home, but he’ll meet us there.”

“Oh, good. Would you stop by the gazebo construction site for me? They’re starting work today and I’m curious to hear about it.”

“Sure, Mom. No problem.”

“Thanks. It should be a quick project. They’ll be done next week and then we’ll have only two or three days to add the finishing touches before the grand opening.”

“Don’t most construction projects take longer?” asked Ozric.

“Normally, they do. But the gazebo is fairly simple and made of wood. It won’t take very long.”

Jenny gasped and shouted, “Hey! That commercial is on again!”

Everyone in the crowded kitchen turned to see what caused her excitement. On the television, the man in the business suit was again talking about Bagelux. Ethan, Jenny and Ozric came to the same realization.

“That’s him!” they cried.

“Who?” asked Paul.

Ozric answered, “The man from the park! We saw him in Central Park on Sunday!”

Jenny continued his train of thought, “That means that the owner of the Doberman Pinschers is the owner of Bagelux!”

“You saw this man in the park?” asked Mrs. Fischer, pointing to the TV screen.

“His dog tried to attack Officer Harbiter’s horse,” said Jenny.

“Do you know who that man is?”

“No. Well, he’s the Bagelux guy, right?” said Ozric.

Mrs. Fischer continued, “That’s Stephen Snidely. He’s the one who funded the gazebo.”

“He what?” exclaimed Jenny.

“He’s the wealthy philanthropist who donated money for the gazebo project. They say he’s good friends with the mayor.”

“Mom,” began Jenny. “He could be involved with the bagel shops closing down.”

“Nonsense! Why do you say that?”

“We saw one of his employees at Von Welring’s *and* at Spielman’s, right before they both closed.”

Mr. Fischer jumped in, “That doesn’t mean anything, Jenny. Lots of people could’ve been at both places those days. After all, you kids were there and I don’t think *you* had anything to do with them shutting down.” He chuckled.

“You guys don’t get it!” she complained. But she didn’t say anything more.

Her mother softened her tone. “I know you’re upset that your favorite hangout closed. But I’m sure Mr. Snidely had nothing to do with it. He’s an honest citizen who loves this city.”

“Fine. I have to feed Tracy and then we’re going to the park.”

“Okay. Be home by seven.”

“We will,” said Jenny.

After feeding her goldfish, Jenny joined the others in the hallway outside his apartment. To nobody in particular, she said, “Tracy ate her bagel just fine. Whatever the problem was the other day, it’s not happening now.”

Paul said, “Tracy? What are you talking about?”

Jenny realized that Paul had no idea what she was talking about. “Sorry, Paul. My goldfish is named Tracy. She only eats bagels and I usually get them from Von Welring’s. But the other day she refused to eat one from there.”

“That’s strange. I wonder why that happened.”

“Me too. Actually, it was right before they had problems with the bagels. I wonder if that’s related to the mystery. Maybe Tracy could sense something before anyone else.”

Ozric appeared in the hallway, closing the door to his own residence behind him. In his hand he held a small, round object.

Jenny asked, “What’s that, Ozric?”

He explained, “It’s a compass. It always points to the magnetic north pole. That way we can see what direction we’re walking. For example, this hallway runs east-west.” He showed how the hallway ran perpendicular to the direction of the compass’ needle, which pointed directly at Ozric’s front door.

“Watch,” he continued. He turned sideways, holding the compass out in the palm of his hand. “Notice that, even though I turned, the compass still points in the same direction.” Sure enough, the compass needle continued to point at the door to his apartment.

“Cool,” said Jenny. “What’s it for?”

Paul answered her, "I'm not sure yet. Just something I want to check out in the underground passage."

Chapter 15

4:13PM Central Park

“Let’s go by the construction site first,” suggested Jenny.

Paul nodded. “Good. I want to start there, anyway.”

The two of them, accompanied by Ozric, walked through the park to the roped-off area where their hole to China had once been.

“Wow! It looks a lot different than yesterday, doesn’t it?” exclaimed Jenny.

The once-deserted site was now crawling with construction workers, electricians and other people doing various jobs. Closest to the children, a man and a woman carefully observed the other workers and took notes on a clipboard. Their black shirts had the letters “D.E.P.” written across the back in white letters.

“I wonder what they do,” commented Jenny.

“Let’s find out,” suggested Paul. He called to the man, “Excuse me, sir?”

The man turned around and walked over to the kids. He said, “Hi. I’m Bob MacGuffin. What’s your name?”

“I’m Paul.”

“Nice to meet you, Paul. What can I do for you?”

“We were just wondering what is going on over there.” Paul pointed to a large hole in the middle of all the activity. It was similar to the hole the kids themselves had dug, but much wider. Workers busily poured cement from a cement mixer into it.

“That’s what we call the foundation. It is filled with cement and will form the base of the structure. Once it is dry, the gazebo will be built of wood resting on top of the foundation.”

“I see,” said Paul.

Jenny seized the opportunity to ask her question again, “Why aren’t you working, mister?”

The man laughed. “I am!” he declared. He pointed to the woman he had been standing with and continued, “My partner and I are with the D.E.P. That’s the Department of Environmental Protection. We’re here to oversee construction and make sure nothing goes wrong.”

“You’re protecting the environment?” asked Ozric.

“Well, kind of. The D.E.P. is responsible for the city’s water supply. There’s a large water main running right under this section of the park. Our job is to make sure this construction doesn’t disturb it in any way.”

“Is that hard?” asked Jenny.

“Not in this case. The foundation of this structure will only go down a few feet, maybe ten. The water main is about 30 feet down, so there isn’t much risk of causing a leak.”

Paul asked another question, “How long will construction take?”

“Not long. The foundation should be finished by tomorrow. Then we’ll leave it over the weekend to dry and begin building the gazebo on Monday. It should only take about 3 days after that. Whoever paid for this put a large crew on a pretty small job.”

The man looked at his watch. “Well, kids, I gotta get going. Nice talking to you!”

“Bye,” they called to him as he rejoined the woman. The two of them circled the work crew once and then left down another path that led away from the site.

“Let’s get going. Alexander is probably waiting for us,” suggested Jenny.

As they started walking toward the public bathroom, Paul turned to Ozric and asked, “Ozric, can you use your compass to tell me what direction we’re walking?”

“Sure.”

Ozric removed the compass from his pocket and held it in his palm. They walked a few steps before he said, “We’re moving northwest.”

“Thanks.”

When the three of them reached the public restroom, they found Alexander outside. He had his arms crossed and he held a clear quart-size freezer bag with what looked like hamburger patties inside.

“What took you so long?” he asked when the group was within earshot.

“Sorry, Alexander,” called Jenny, jogging to greet her friend.

“Well, don’t bother running now! It’s too late!” said Alexander, but he smiled when his friend reached him.

“What’s in the bag?”

“These are hamburgers,” said Alexander.

The others caught up and Ozric noticed the bag as well. “Good! Thanks for getting those, Alexander.”

“No problem! I cooked them myself. I added some chopped onion and Worcestershire sauce for extra flavor.” He proudly held up the bag for the others to see. “They’re easily in my top ten best meals I have made, but not as good as the French toast I made last month.”

“Yeah. That was awesome,” agreed Jenny. “And I also really like your grilled cheese sandwiches!”

“Thanks. It’s the extra butter that makes them so good.”

Ozric frowned. “These hamburgers are for *dogs*, Alexander, not people! You didn’t have to make them so fancy.”

Jenny turned to Ozric and said, “Did you say dogs, Ozric?”

“Yes. The hamburgers are for the dogs. But we want to make them happy, not sick to their stomachs!”

“Sorry,” muttered Alexander. “I guess I got carried away.”

“It’s all right. But next time, just keep it simple. In fact, some people think raw meat is even better for dogs. But ground beef can have a lot of bacteria, which is why I asked you to cook them, just in case.”

“No problem. Sorry again, Ozric.”

“Don’t worry about it.”

Paul noticed Jenny’s confused look and said, “Uh, guys. Mind telling us what’s going on?”

“Oh. Right,” said Ozric. “Well, I got the idea from my dog-walking mentor.”

“Your what?” interrupted Paul.

“I’m a dog-walker. During the day, I visit the apartments of people in our building and take their dogs for a walk. Last summer, I learned how from a man named Lawrence Qwerty. He’s my mentor.”

“How many dogs do you walk?” asked Paul.

“I currently have five customers.”

“I know you’re home-schooled, but how do you find the time to take five different dogs out for a walk every day?”

Ozric grinned and replied, “I walk all of the dogs at once.”

Paul stared at him a moment. “You do? Wow! How do you keep control over that many dogs at the same time?”

“It’s easy. Dogs have what Mr. Qwerty calls ‘pack mentality’. It means each dog follows what the others in the group are doing. When I get a new customer, I introduce the new dog to the group and the training is practically done for me.”

Jenny said, “So, once you had the first few dogs trained, all the other ones were easier?”

“Exactly. Only one of my current dogs was in my original group from last summer. But they all treat me like the pack leader and obey my commands. It’s really fun, once you get the hang of it!”

Jenny beamed. Paul nodded his head.

Alexander, who had heard this many times before, crossed his arms and said, “You were saying about the hamburgers?”

“Right, okay. I got the idea from something my mentor used to do. He would rub bacon grease on his shirt sleeves.”

“Gross! Why did he do that?” said Jenny.

“It was how he got new clients. Dogs would go crazy at the sight of him.”

“Or at the smell of him,” added Alexander with a chuckle.

Ozric laughed before continuing. “The dogs would start wagging their tails and jumping up and down in excitement. The dog owners thought he had a magic gift with animals.”

“I see,” said Jenny. “And then he’d tell them he was a dog walker and they would want to hire him.”

“That’s it!” said Ozric.

“So you want to feed the dogs hamburgers and become their friend.”

“Yep. That’s the plan, anyway. It’s like a bribe. We are paying the dogs food so they won’t bark at us.”

Paul took a turn asking a question. “But why hamburgers? Why not dog treats?”

Ozric smiled. “These are not ordinary house pets. The Dobermans we saw are trained guard dogs. I think we need something stronger than a dog biscuit.”

“And that’s where I come in,” said a smiling Alexander, holding up his bag of cooked hamburgers.

“Okay. How should we do this?” asked Paul, looking in Ozric’s direction.

He answered, “Since it’s a men’s room, Jenny should stay out and keep watch.”

“I don’t think we need three people down there,” said Paul. “I’ll stay in the men’s room. Alexander and Ozric can go down the stairs.”

“That sounds good.”

Jenny added, “If I see anyone suspicious coming, I’ll call into you, Paul.”

“Good. What’s the code word?”

“Code word?”

“Yeah. You know, a secret word that tells us someone is coming. In case people are around and you can’t say it directly.”

“Oh... okay! How about I’ll say ‘Paul, I forgot to feed the fish.’”

“That sounds good.”

“Ozric,” added Paul. “Don’t forget to use your compass in the hallway, too.”

“Right.”

The three boys went into the men’s room and waited for a man in yellow shorts to finish washing his hands. When the coast was clear, Ozric opened the secret door and he and Alexander stepped quickly through it.

Paul wished them good luck and closed the door behind them.

A few tense minutes passed. While another man, this one dressed in jeans and a faded green T-shirt, was washing up, Paul heard a tap from behind the wall. He glanced up at the man, who didn’t seem to notice.

When the man had left, Paul pulled on the garbage can to let Ozric and Alexander out.

“Mission accomplished,” said Alexander.

“Nice job!”

When they rejoined Jenny outside, she asked, “How did it go?”

“Simple,” replied Alexander. “We opened the door a crack and threw the meat inside. Before the dogs had time to react, we closed the door and started walking away.”

“And they’ll eventually get used to you?”

“Yes,” answered Ozric. “Each time we go, we’ll open the door a bit farther. By next week they should know and trust us, I think.”

“Great! And what about the compass?”

“Underground the needle was jumping around a bit, but I’m pretty sure the passage from the stairs to the dogs runs southeast.”

“Just as I thought!” said Paul.

“Care to share?” said Jenny.

“Sure,” he replied. “I think the underground tunnel runs from beneath this public bathroom to the construction site where the gazebo is being built!”

Chapter 16

Day 6 Friday

2:45PM Bagelux

Walking home from school the next day, Jenny bumped into Ozric on the sidewalk outside Bagelux.

“Hey, Ozric!” said Jenny, with a smile.

“Hi, Jenny. This isn’t your usual way home, is it?”

“No,” she replied. “I have to pick up another bagel for Tracy and this is the only place that’s open.”

“I’ll go in with you. I’m on my way home, too.”

The two children entered Bagelux and found their way to the back of the long line of customers.

After a minute, Jenny gasped. “Look! It’s him!” She pointed behind the cash register.

Ozric turned to see the white-haired man they had met in the park. They now also recognized him as the man from the Bagelux commercials on TV. He was talking to an

employee behind the counter. The man noticed the small faces staring at him and looked up.

Jenny whispered, “He sees us!”

The white-haired man smiled. He started walking around the counter, toward the horrified kids.

“What do we do?”

“Nothing,” replied Ozric. “He doesn’t know anything. Just stay calm.”

“Good day to you, children!” the man said as he approached. He wore the same silver jogging suit they had seen him in before.

“Hi,” said Ozric.

“Remember me? I don’t know that I’ve ever formally introduced myself. I’m Stephen Snidely. As you probably know, I own and manage Bagelux.” He stuck out his hand.

Ozric hesitated, and then shook the man’s hand weakly. “I’m Ozric. This is Jenny.”

“I’m pleased to meet you. I haven’t forgotten what you did in the park the other day, helping control my dog when he got off the leash. That was quite a scene, wasn’t it? Come around to the side of the counter. There’s no need to wait in line.”

The kids followed Mr. Snidely around the counter. He grabbed one of the aproned employees, a freckled girl with red hair, and bellowed, “Two bagels for my young friends, please!”

He glanced at the children and asked, “What flavors would you like?”

The children gave their orders and the girl rushed away. Mr. Snidely turned to them and said, “How do you like my bagel shop? This is the first of 37 locations around the city. Well, of course you must like it! You’re here, after all!”

“We do like it,” replied Jenny. “But, the other bagel shops are closed.”

“Ah, yes. I heard about that. Most unfortunate. But the bagel business is tricky. Some people clearly haven’t got what it takes.” As he said this, a thin smile crossed his face and his eyes glinted for a moment.

Jenny said nothing.

Ozric asked, “Mr. Snidely, your commercial said you use water from Connecticut. What’s wrong with our water in New York?”

The man’s face quickly turned to a frown. “Nothing’s wrong with it. In fact, if you ask the average resident, it’s the best water in the known universe!”

The children inched away from the man. He lowered his voice and continued, “Sorry. What I mean to say is that New York’s known for bagels and pizza. You probably know this.”

Ozric nodded, but remained silent.

“Because of this, New Yorkers have developed a certain... confidence in the quality of their water supply.” He began to rub his hands together, but didn’t seem to realize it.

“I prefer the fresh spring water of rural Connecticut. I think it gives my bagels a cleaner, more natural taste.”

He waved his arms, gesturing toward the line. “As you can see, many people obviously agree with me.”

He stopped speaking and looked at Ozric. The boy stared at his feet and said, “Uh, okay.”

Snidely spoke again, “Well, it’s been nice chatting, but I must get back to work. So many issues to deal with. I don’t suppose one of you would like a job at my bagel shop?”

When he got no reply, he continued, “No. I imagine you are a bit young. I hope to see you again soon, my friends! Come back any time. You don’t have to wait in line. Wendy here will take care of you.”

As he said this, the red-haired girl appeared with their bagels. The two children took them and thanked the man before hurrying out of the bagel shop.

3:23PM Central Park

A while later, Jenny and Ozric met Alexander outside the public restroom. Jenny kept watch while the other two went below to feed the guard dogs a second batch of hamburgers.

“I’m glad you didn’t season the meat this time, Alexander,” said Ozric as they disappeared through the secret door to the spiral staircase.

“As a cook, it bothered me not to add more flavor. But I suppose dogs don’t need it, anyway.”

Alexander and Ozric wound their way down the stairs and into the hallway below. Ozric turned on his flashlight and led the way toward the room where three attack dogs were undoubtedly sleeping.

Alexander asked, “Do you really think this tunnel leads back to the construction site?”

“I think it does.”

“So that means the place guarded by the dogs is...”

“Directly under the new gazebo.”

Alexander let out a long whistle. “No wonder they didn’t like us digging a hole there. We could have tunneled right down through their roof!”

Ozric stopped. “I hadn’t thought about that before. You’re right, Alex! That has to be why they kept filling it in.”

“Yeah. And they must not want anyone finding out what’s behind that second door.”

“If my plan works, we should be in by next week.”

“As long as nobody’s there when we are.”

As they drew nearer to the end of the hallway, the boys fell silent. When they reached the door, Ozric signaled for Alexander to step back. He opened the door a few inches and tossed in the hamburgers. He paused just a moment before closing the door behind him.

After they had walked some distance, Alexander asked, “How do they know it’s you?”

“They can smell me. Now that they’re getting used to being fed this way, I’ll keep the door open a little longer. But I’m sure they know who I am now. Dogs have a good memory of people’s smells. They can remember someone after years apart.”

4:47PM Fischer Residence

Jenny returned to her apartment to find her brother, Ethan sitting in the kitchen, watching TV.

“Why don’t you ever watch in the living room?” she asked.

“I don’t know. I just like the kitchen better.” He took a sip from his glass of orange juice.

“When are Mom and Dad getting home?”

“I think Mom will be home soon. Dad probably won’t be back for another hour or two.”

Jenny walked into her room to feed Tracy.

“Hi, girl,” she said. “I know it’s not as good as a Von Welring’s bagel, but this is all I can get for you right now. Hope it’s okay.”

She dropped small bits of bagel into the water and watched the fish gobble them up.

“I guess you don’t mind, do you?”

Jenny walked back to the kitchen and saw that her mother had just arrived from work.

“Hi, Jenny. How was school today?”

“Good.”

“Did you see the construction site yesterday, as I asked?”

“Yes, Mom. We talked to a man who worked for the D.E.P. That stands for Department of Environmental Protection!”

“Good, Jenny.” She smiled. Ethan rolled his eyes.

“What did he say?” inquired their mom.

“They’ll be done next week. Right now they’re working on the, the... what was it called?”

“The foundation?” offered Ethan.

“That’s it.”

Mrs. Fischer said, “Ah, good. And the D.E.P. is there to make sure they don’t interfere with the water?”

“That’s right,” said Jenny. “There’s a water main under the construction site.”

“I see.” She took off her coat and sat down at the kitchen table.

“Mom?”

“Yes, Jenny.”

“You know the guy who’s having the gazebo built?”

“Mr. Snidely.”

“Yeah, him. Do you think he could be a bad guy?”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean do you think he might have caused Von Welring’s and Spielman’s to close so his shops could sell more bagels?”

Mrs. Fischer laughed. “No. That’s ridiculous! Where did you ever get an idea like that?”

“I don’t know.”

“For one thing, Bagelux is opening locations all over the city. Closing down two mom-and-pop bagel places isn’t going to make any difference to him.”

“Okay.”

She continued, “And besides, he’s a good man. Look what he’s doing for Central Park. This gazebo is improving an ugly part of the park. It was just a big sand pit before. And the money he’s giving will provide for park upkeep for years to come.” Her voice had become monotone, sounding like she was reading from a brochure.

“Okay.” Jenny left the two of them in the kitchen and went to her room to start her homework.

Chapter 17

Day 7 Saturday

11:18AM Central Park

“How about boys against girls?” Jenny stood in the middle of the group of eleven kids, waiting to get an Ultimate Frisbee game started. She casually played with a Frisbee, tossing it a couple feet into the air and catching it again.

“We always do that,” remarked Alexander.

“What? Are you afraid?”

“Actually...”

“You’re on,” cut in Ozric. “Come on, Alexander. We can take them. Hey, Paul, are you going to play?”

Paul shook his head. “I know how to play, but I’m not very good. I’ll just watch from the sideline.”

“Losers walk,” teased Jenny. She continued to play with the yellow disc as the five boys made their way to the far end of the field. When they were ready, she ran a couple steps and heaved it into the air. The game had started.

Standing alone on the sideline, Paul watched intently and didn't notice the man who walked up beside him.

"Excuse me, son. What's going on here?"

Paul jumped. Standing next to him was an older gentleman in a silver jogging-suit. In a squeaky voice he managed to say, "I'm sorry. What?"

"This game your friends are playing. I've never seen it before. What is it?"

"Oh. It's called Ultimate Frisbee."

"Why don't you join in?"

"I'm not very good at it."

The man thought about this for a moment. Paul looked at him. He thought he recognized the man from somewhere, but he couldn't place it. He didn't realize that he was Stephen Snidely, the owner of Bagelux. Paul hadn't been with the other kids the day before at Bagelux, nor had he been with them when they first met the man – and his dogs – in the park. Mr. Snidely spoke again. "But you know how the game is played?"

"Yes, I do. But I'm not really supposed to talk with strangers."

"That's very smart of you. It's okay, though. I own a shop just around the corner from here. And I've always wanted to know the rules of this game. Would you mind explaining them to me? It would only be for a few minutes and then I'll be on my way.

Paul replied, "Sure. I guess."

"Excellent! So, what's the object of the game?"

"Well, it's like a combination of soccer and football, but played with a Frisbee, or flying disc."

"Are there goals?"

“No. Each team has an end zone, like in football. You try to pass the disc to a teammate in the end zone and you score a point. Just like that girl, Jenny, is doing now.”

At that moment, Jenny had the Frisbee and passed it to her teammate in the end zone. The red-haired girl, from the week before, just missed catching it and it fell to the ground.

Mr. Snidely said, “She missed it. What happens now?”

“Whenever one team drops the Frisbee, the other team gets it and tries to move the other way.” Ozric picked up the disc where it fell and passed to a blond boy in a green shirt. The boy ran to catch the throw, but then stopped before passing it upfield to Alexander.

“Why doesn’t he run with it?” asked Snidely.

Paul replied, “You aren’t allowed to. The only way to move the Frisbee is to pass it in the air to your teammates.”

“I see. So it isn’t exactly like soccer or football.”

“No, I guess not.”

As they watched, Alexander caught the Frisbee and quickly flipped it ahead to Ozric, running along the back of the end zone. He caught the Frisbee and yelled, “Goal! We’re up, two to one!”

Jenny scowled as she and the rest of the girls’ team walked to the far end of the field.

Snidely turned to Paul and asked, “What are they doing now?”

“The boys just scored a goal, so the girls have to walk. When they’re ready, Ozric will do a ‘pull’ where he throws the disc to the other team and they start playing again.”

“Interesting.”

Ozric had thrown the Frisbee and one of the girls caught it and tried to throw the disc to Jenny, who was running ahead. She had aimed badly and the disc was starting to sail out of bounds toward Paul and Mr. Snidely.

“Ooh, watch this!” said Paul, backing away a few feet.

Jenny ran to the sideline and leaped into the air. She caught the disc in the air, but her momentum had carried her off the field. But right before she landed, she threw it to another teammate who was waiting nearby.

“Nice play, Jenny!” called Paul. He turned to the man and said, “She just did one of the hardest plays in Ultimate Frisbee. It’s called ‘the world’s greatest’.”

“Because they would have lost possession if she had landed out of bounds?”

“Exactly.”

Moments later, the girls scored a goal to tie the game at two. “Next goal wins!” shouted Alexander, as he waited for the pull from Jenny. She threw the disc right to him and he waited for his team to run up the field for a pass. He threw the Frisbee up in the air too high and it started to float slowly to the ground. A group of kids from both teams rushed over to catch it.

Paul explained, “That’s called a ‘hospital throw’ because someone could get hurt trying to catch it.”

Ozric managed to come away with the Frisbee and threw to another boy standing by himself farther up the field. The throw was low and the boy used his foot to kick the disc into the air before catching it.

“Is that allowed?” asked Snidely.

“Yes. It’s called a ‘kick-catch’.”

The boy turned to throw the Frisbee to Alexander, running toward the end zone. Before it got to him, Jenny had jumped in the way and intercepted the throw. In one motion she launched it all the way to the other end, to the red-haired girl waiting in their end zone. Game over.

“Wow!” said Paul. “I knew she was good at sports, but that was amazing!”

“Indeed,” said Mr. Snidely, straightening up. “Well, thank you, young man. I must be going now.”

Paul said goodbye as the man disappeared before Ozric and Alexander arrived where Paul was standing. They didn’t notice that he had ducked behind a nearby tree, easily within earshot of the group.

Jenny came jogging over. “We win!”

“We know,” replied Alexander. “We know. I’m all done playing for today.” With that, he plopped down on the grass, breathing hard.

“Me, too,” agreed Ozric. “I have homework to finish, anyway.”

Jenny laughed. “But it’s Saturday!”

“Yes, but Alexander’s birthday party is tomorrow and I don’t want to have to finish it then.”

Jenny nodded. “Right, the birthday party. When is it again?”

Alexander said, “Tomorrow at noon at the Museum of Natural History.”

From behind the tree, Mr. Snidely smiled before slinking away into the park.

After saying goodbye to their other Ultimate Frisbee players and agreeing to meet again the following weekend, the group walked over the hill to the construction site.

Alexander ran home to get more hamburgers.

“It’s empty,” observed Jenny. “Just like the D.E.P. man said it would be.”

“Not quite,” said Ozric. “Who are they?” He pointed to two men in dark blue uniforms with matching hats. They slowly circled the construction site, talking. As they passed in front of the kids, silver badges could be seen on their chests.

Alexander said, “They kind of look like policemen.”

“I don’t think so,” said Jenny. “Their uniforms aren’t quite the same. Those aren’t the men who filled in the hole, are they?”

“No,” replied Paul.

Ozric separated from the group and approached the pair of men as they walked away. “Excuse me. Can I ask what your job is?”

The men stopped and turned toward the small boy. One of them spoke.

“I’m sorry? Who are you?”

“My name’s Ozric. I was just wondering what your job is here at the construction site.”

“We’re security. Here to make sure nobody causes trouble. You wouldn’t be causing trouble, would you, son?”

“No, sir,” said Ozric in a small voice.

“Good. Now, run along.”

Ozric returned to the group, who had been able to hear every word of the conversation.

Jenny pondered aloud, “Why would they need security guards for a construction site?”

Paul nodded and added, “It’s just a cement-filled hole in the ground right now, anyway.”

The group continued to the public restroom to wait for Alexander to return. When he ran up, huffing and puffing, he said, “My parents think I’ve become crazy about hamburgers!”

The others laughed. Ozric took the hamburgers and walked into the men’s room. Alexander followed him and the others stayed outside to watch for trouble.

A few minutes later, the two boys returned.

“No problems,” said Ozric.

As the group split up to head for home, Alexander called to them, “See you guys tomorrow!”

Jenny yelled back, “Totally, Alexander! It’s going to be fun!”

Chapter 18

Day 8 Sunday

12:34PM Museum of Natural History

The Museum of Natural History reminded Ozric of the zoo. And the preserved animals weren't the only reason. As they searched for Alexander's party, he and Jenny wove their way around groups of senior citizens, tourists, school children and baby strollers. They each carried wrapped birthday presents under one arm. Neither one of them noticed the man following them a ways back. He stayed in the shadows and made sure they couldn't see him. He wore dark gray coveralls.

"It's in the Milstein Hall of Ocean Life," said Jenny, reading from her invitation.

"I thought it was near the main entrance," replied Ozric. "But we're in the Hall of Gems right now."

"Let's ask someone," she suggested.

"No. I can find it. Let me just look at the map again." Ozric removed the museum floor plan from his pocket and studied it a moment. "I think we should go back through the Hall of Meteorites."

When they finally reached the Hall of Ocean Life, Jenny and Ozric stared in wonder. They found themselves at the top of a split staircase, descending in two directions into the great hall. The room seemed big enough to hold a jumbo jet airplane. High above them, dozens of glass panels glowed with blue light. In the middle of the room, suspended in mid air, floated a full-sized blue whale.

“That’s the largest animal ever to live on Earth,” said Ozric.

“Wow.” Jenny’s voice trailed off. “I want to have my birthday party here!”

“No kidding.”

She continued, “This can’t all be for the party.”

Ozric saw that many people in the room were not there for Alexander’s celebration. The room crawled with the same sort of crowd they had been dodging all over the museum that afternoon.

“You’re right. I wonder where he is.”

A voice called to them from the floor below, “Ozric! Jenny! Down here!”

They peered over the railing to see Alexander, standing below them with a tray of cupcakes in his hands. He stood on what looked like a dance floor, directly beneath the great whale.

“We’re coming down!” called Ozric. He and Jenny walked down the staircase on the left side and greeted their friend.

“Happy birthday, Alexander!” said Jenny, hugging the chubby boy. He had to shove the tray of cupcakes into Ozric’s hands before she knocked it over with the hug.

“Thanks.”

“This room is amazing, Alexander,” commented Ozric, handing the tray back.

“How did your parents manage to get it for your party?”

“We only get a small part of the room. The rest is open to the public.”

“We noticed. There are tons of people here.”

“Also, my dad knows one of the curators. She’s in oceanography, which is why we got this room. Plus, there’s an educational discount. They gave us worksheets to fill out.”

Ozric and Jenny looked at each other.

Alexander continued, “Don’t worry. We can do them later. Come on. Let’s join the others.”

He led the way to the area directly beneath the whale. Some tables and chairs had been set up for the party. One contained a pile of presents and another had a triple-layer cake with chocolate frosting, waiting to be carved up by hungry kids.

A man walked up and greeted them. “Hello, Jenny and Ozric. I’m glad you could make it to Alex’s party.”

“Hi, Mr. Copperfield!” they both exclaimed.

Jenny noticed Paul Spielman standing nearby. She whispered, “Alexander, you invited Paul?”

“Yeah, just a couple days ago. I thought it would be rude to leave him out, now that he’s with us.”

“I guess so,” she mumbled.

“Do you guys want a cupcake? I made them myself. My mom made the birthday cake, but I baked these.”

Ozric and Jenny each took one from his tray.

“These are awesome!” exclaimed Jenny. “What’s in them?”

“Brownie dough and chocolate chip cookies! I call them my Chocolate Chip Cookie Brownie Cupcakes!”

“Delicious!” said Ozric with a mouth full of cupcake.

Jenny looked up and said, “Oh, there’s Emily!”

Just then, Emily Anderson, a girl from their grade, walked up and smiled shyly.

“Hi, Jenny. Hi, Alexander,” she said.

Jenny said, “Hi Emily. Good to see you. I’ll be right back.” She slipped away quickly.

Alexander said, “Hi, Emily. How are you?”

“I’m okay.” She stared at her shoes. “I heard about what Paul Spielman did to you at school last week. Did you get in trouble?”

“No. It’s okay. We’re actually friends now.”

“That’s good,” she replied. “Your dad said he has some kind of scavenger hunt for us. Are you going to do it?”

“Yeah. It sounds like fun.”

“Yeah.”

They fell silent for a moment before Emily said, “Well, good to see you, Alexander.”

“You too, Emily.”

She walked away.

After cake and ice cream, Alexander helped his father hand out worksheets to each of the children at the party. They consisted of 25 questions about the ocean and marine creatures found throughout the Hall of Ocean Life. As he passed them to the kids he instructed them, “Form into groups of two. There’ll be a prize for the team that answers all the questions first.”

Alexander teamed with Paul for the contest while Jenny joined Emily. Ozric teamed with their friend Teddy Small. The first question read:

1. *How many legs does the spider crab have? Are they all used for walking?*

Paul and Alexander looked around the room.

“There it is! Upstairs!” cried Alexander. He had spotted a large crab with spindly legs, mounted on the wall. He ran to the exhibit and read the plaque next to it.

“They have ten legs! But the front two are claws, not used for walking around.”

Paul wrote their answer on the sheet and looked at the next question.

2. *What do blue whales eat? How many pounds must they consume each day?*

Alexander looked up. “Well, that’s the whale. But where would the information be written down?”

“I think I saw something when I first walked in. At the top of the stairs, over there.”

The two boys ran to the hall's entrance and found what they were looking for. Paul began to read the card and said, "It says that they eat krill, which are like tiny shrimp."

"Wow!" exclaimed Alexander. "They can eat as much as eight thousand pounds in one day!"

"We must be in the lead," said Paul. "Hurry up, let's go to the next one."

3. *What is an apex predator? Give two examples that live in the world's oceans.*

"Do you have any idea, Paul?"

"Nope."

The boys stood at the top of the stairs, unsure of where to go next. Jenny and Emily arrived to answer question two.

"Are you guys stuck?" asked Emily.

"Yeah. We don't know where to find the answer for the next one," said Paul.

"I have an idea. Let's go!" said Alexander.

As they hurried away, Paul asked, "What is it?"

"I don't know. I just didn't want to sit there, in front of Jenny and Emily."

He laughed.

Then an idea struck Alexander. "We know what a predator is, right?"

"Sure."

"Let's look at sharks. I don't know what an apex predator is. But I know sharks are predators."

“Okay,” agreed Paul, his smile returning. “That’s a good idea!”

They ran to the Tiger Shark exhibit only to find Ozric and Teddy in the process of answering the third question themselves.

“How are you two already here?” asked Alexander. “We just finished the second question. You didn’t pass us.”

“No,” replied Ozric. “We’re doing the odd numbers first. Then we’ll do the even ones after that.”

Alexander grabbed Ozric’s arm and said, “Look! Did you see that?”

Turning to see what he was talking about, Ozric replied, “No. What was it?”

“I think I just saw someone watching us. A man wearing dark gray coveralls like the man we saw in the bagel shops!”

“Do you think he followed us here?” asked Paul.

Teddy, looking confused, asked, “What are you talking about?”

But they ignored him and started walking quickly to where the man had disappeared. Rounding the corner into another hall of the museum, Paul, Ozric and Alexander started looking around for him.

“Where did he go?” asked Alexander.

Ozric said, “I think I see him!” and started running down the hall. At the far end, a dark figure quickly disappeared around another corner. The four boys hurried to catch up.

When they reached the next corner, the boys found themselves among displays of forests and wild animals that live there. A cross-section of a 300-foot-tall giant sequoia tree stood in one section. But the man was gone.

Paul sighed. "There's no sign of him. Maybe he went down the stairs or something."

Ozric added, "Or upstairs. He could be anywhere."

Alexander said, "Yeah. I guess we should get back. I wonder what he was doing. Do you think they know about us sneaking down to their hideout?"

"I don't think so," replied Ozric. "I've been careful. The dogs are really starting to like me and I think we'll probably be able to get past them in a couple more days."

"Okay, but we should wait outside until we see them leave and we know it's safe before we go in."

"Good idea," said Ozric. "Let's get back to the party. We have to try to finish the worksheet and win the prize!"

When they returned, the four boys tried to get back into the contest, but they were too far behind Emily and Jenny to catch up. When Mr. Copperfield announced that the two girls had won, Ozric and Teddy had only completed 21 questions. Paul and Alexander hadn't gotten past number 18.

After Jenny and Emily received their prizes, T-shirts with the blue whale on the front, everyone started to pack up.

"Great party, Alexander," said Jenny.

"Thanks. See you at school tomorrow."

"Bye, Alexander" said Paul. "Thanks again for inviting me. I had a great time!"

“Me too, Paul. See you tomorrow.”

He waved bye to Ozric as the others left the room.

Chapter 19

The next two days passed uneventfully. With help from the group, Ozric continued to feed hamburgers to the guard dogs. At school, everyone agreed that Alexander threw one of the best birthday parties they had ever been to. No one saw any strange men following them, and the kids decided to go ahead with the plan to search the underground hideout.

When Ozric met Paul and Jenny in their building on Wednesday, he announced that he was ready to see if the dogs really did trust him. They got Alexander and the four of them wasted no time getting to the park.

Day 11 Wednesday

3:40PM Central Park

A few minutes later, they arrived at the public restroom that served as the entrance to the secret underground tunnel. Paul led everyone behind a cluster of bushes nearby and said, “We need to wait until the men leave before anyone goes in. They might know we’re up to something and we don’t want to go in if they’re inside.”

Everyone agreed. They sat on the grass to wait. Alexander put his backpack down and pulled out two walkie-talkies.

Jenny asked, "What are those, Alexander?"

"These are walkie-talkies that should work even if you're underground. We'll keep one up here and someone can take the other one down. That way we can send a warning if anyone is coming."

"Good idea," said Jenny, taking a walkie-talkie and clipping it to her pants pocket.

A while later, Alexander whispered, "Look!"

The two men, dressed in gray coveralls, were exiting the men's bathroom. They walked up the path and disappeared over the hill.

"Okay," began Ozric. "Who's going with me?"

"I will!" exclaimed Jenny.

"I'll go," said Paul. "How about you, me and Ozric?"

Jenny replied, "Sure. That sounds good."

"I'll wait here," said Alexander. "I'll be the lookout and will let you know if I see anyone coming."

Jenny turned to Alexander and asked, "Can I borrow your baseball hat?"

"Sure," he said, taking his blue and orange Mets hat off and handing it to her.

"Thanks!" she said as she put the hat on and tucked her hair up underneath it. "I look more like a boy this way, so I can go into the men's room."

"Cool!" said Alexander. "Good idea."

Ozric looked at his watch. "It's four-fifteen now. We'll try to be out in less than 30 minutes."

Leaving Alexander hidden behind the bushes, Jenny, Ozric, and Paul hurried into the bathroom. Finding it empty, they quickly opened the secret door built into the paper towel dispenser and ducked inside.

"Hold on a sec," said Ozric, reaching into his pocket and pulling out a flashlight. As he turned it on, Paul took one out as well.

"I brought one, too."

"Good thinking," said Ozric, and he led the way down the spiral staircase.

At the bottom of the stairs, they stopped while Jenny took out the walkie-talkie. She radioed up to Alexander, "We're in the tunnel. Can you read me?"

Alexander's voice echoed against the walls, "Loud and clear."

"Good. Okay, we're going in."

This part of the trip was familiar by now, except to Jenny. She followed the other two as they marched right up to the door at the end of the long tunnel. Jenny and Paul stayed back while Ozric turned the knob.

The two others cringed as he slowly pushed the door open to reveal the three Dobermans, sleeping as usual. One of the three dogs opened his eyes and looked up at them. He didn't move. The second and third dogs opened their eyes. Still, none of them moved or made a noise.

"Quick," said Ozric softly, "give me the hamburgers."

Jenny gave him the most recent batch of hamburgers from Alexander. Ozric slowly took the patties out of the plastic bag and held them out.

The dogs moved quickly. Before Jenny could react, all three Doberman pinschers were on their feet and moving toward them. She started to turn to run, but then she noticed something. *The dogs were wagging their tails.*

The three kids and three dogs stood in silence for a moment. Only Ozric seemed completely comfortable. After the animals had finished wolfing down their food, he scratched one behind the ears and walked to the inner door.

Turning the knob and stepping through into darkness, Ozric gestured for Jenny and Paul to follow him. The dogs sniffed them as they walked past, before lying down to go back to sleep.

“Can you find a light switch?” asked Paul, feeling along the wall in darkness.

“I got it!” whispered Jenny excitedly. She flicked the switch.

They found themselves at one end of a large laboratory with a very low ceiling. Three rows of workbenches stretched the entire length of the long room. On them sat microscopes, scales, racks of test tubes and other scientific equipment. Here and there, a beaker full of some unknown liquid gently boiled over a Bunsen burner.

“What’s that?” asked Ozric. He pointed toward two large tanks filled with a light blue liquid.

“I don’t know,” replied Jenny.

“These look like plans,” said Paul, holding up a stack of papers. He stood next to a desk with more papers scattered on top.

Ozric asked, "What are they for?"

"I don't know. I can't understand them, can you?"

He took a look at the papers. They contained lots of strange designs and mathematical formulas. "Nope."

Jenny said, "I bet I can read them!" She walked over and he handed the stack of papers to her. She studied them for a minute, flipping the pages back and forth.

"These are plans for a chemical formula. I don't understand what it's for, but they've been trying to create it in this laboratory." She pointed to the large tanks at the other end of the room.

"Let's see if we can find out more," suggested Ozric, and he began walking that way.

The two tanks stood at the end of the rows of workbenches. Beyond them, the group found a hole in the floor with a ladder leading down.

"I wonder what that's for," said Paul.

Jenny picked up another sheet of paper from the end of the nearest workbench. She studied it for a moment before answering his question, "Oh my gosh! They're putting it into the water supply for the *whole city!*"

"What?" said Ozric. his eyes widened. "They're adding this chemical to the city's water supply?"

Jenny continued reading for a minute before looking up. "That's what it says here. There's a water main that runs right below us. They will pour in the chemical and it will spread from there."

Paul cut in, “Just like those D.E.P. people said. They were at the gazebo construction to make sure it doesn’t interfere with the water main. They said it runs right below us, 30 feet down.”

“That must be what the ladder is for,” said Paul, peering down into the dark hole in the floor.

“And the gazebo construction,” added Jenny. “I bet it was just a cover so they could work on tunneling down to the water main without being noticed.”

“Kind of like my hole to China,” said Ozric.

“There’s more,” said Jenny. “The chemical they’ve been working on... it’s designed to ruin *bagels!*”

“Bagels?” said the three boys at the same time.

“Yeah. It looks like it ruins the dough so the bagels don’t turn out right.”

Just then, Alexander’s voice squawked from the walkie-talkie. “Jenny, you forgot to feed the fish!”

She toggled the talk button and answered, “What are you talking about, Alexander?”

Paul covered his mouth with his hand. “Oh no! It’s the code word, Jenny!”

From the walkie-talkie, Alexander’s voice said, “They’re back! And the guy in the jogging suit, Mr. Snidely, is with them! They just went into the restroom. Hurry up and hide!”

Chapter 20

The three kids ducked behind the bench and laboratory equipment along one side of the room. They sat in silence for a moment before Paul realized there was a problem. “The lights!” he said, and ran to the front of the room to turn them off.

Paul quickly flicked the lights off, leaving everyone in darkness. He turned to rejoin the others at the far end of the room when he heard voices just outside the door. The knob began to turn. He jumped behind the nearest workbench and crouched down, waiting.

Stephen Snidely and his two henchmen entered the room. “Come out, come out. I know you’re in here,” he called. The children did not reply.

Snidely stood near the open door, but left the lights off. The glow from the other room cast his shadow along the workbenches. He cleared his throat and continued. “You didn’t think you would really get away with it, did you? We knew you were poking around down here. We’ve been following you for days now.”

The children remained silent. Jenny crouched near Ozric and reached out to take his hand. He reached back and squeezed hers gently.

“So, you know about my plan. You can’t stop me! Soon all the bagels in Manhattan will be hard as rocks!” He laughed before adding, “Except for Bagelux, of course. Yes, and New Yorkers will be eating bagels made from Connecticut water! Oh, they’re so smug, saying their water is better than everyone else’s.”

He changed to a mocking New York accent and continued, “*New York has the best water. Everyone knows it makes the best pizza and the best bagels! Nobody else can make them. Well I can!*” For the last part he used his regular voice.

Jenny crouched, frozen in fear. She jumped when someone tapped her on the shoulder. She turned to see Paul, kneeling beside her in the gloom.

“Jenny,” Paul whispered as Snidely continued his rant. “When I say ‘go’, start moving toward the front of the room. When the doorway is clear, make a run for it. Don’t look back until we get outside.”

Jenny couldn’t think clearly, but she nodded. “Okay.”

Paul quickly told Ozric the same thing and then disappeared again.

Mr. Snidely continued his tirade, “Oh yes, they’ll pay. I’ve spent my whole life hearing that my state, my beloved Connecticut, was not as good as New York. *Our* bagels were inferior. Well, I’ll give you inferior! Dawkins, Dimwoody, get them!”

The lights came on and the two henchmen started toward their hiding spot. Suddenly, Paul stood up in the other corner of the room and yelled, “You’ll never get away with this! You won’t catch us!” He ducked behind one of the large tanks as the two men changed direction and lumbered toward him with Mr. Snidely right behind them.

Jenny and Ozric crawled toward the door. The long benches hid them from the view of the three men, who moved down another row in the opposite direction. Paul's voice called out again, "You won't catch us!"

Snidely replied, "Stay where you are, children. I won't harm you." He continued to the tanks, unaware that two of the children had passed him, nearing the room's exit.

Jenny reached the open door and looked back. To her surprise, not only was Ozric behind him, but Paul had joined them as well. She began to say something when Paul's voice again rang out from the far side of the room, "You won't catch us!"

Paul nodded at Jenny. "Go!"

She ran.

She didn't stop running until she burst out of the restroom into the late-afternoon sunshine. Paul followed her out and Ozric appeared a couple moments later.

"I stopped to close the door so the dogs wouldn't chase us. They like us, but dogs have a natural instinct to chase," explained the smaller boy.

"Are we safe?" asked Jenny. "Should we keep going?"

Paul was breathing hard and replied, "I think we're okay. They wouldn't try anything out here."

At that moment, Alexander came running up with Officer Harbiter right behind him. "Are you guys okay? I ran to find Officer Harbiter after I saw the bad guys go inside."

The heavyset policeman looked at the group. He asked, "What's going on here?"

Still panting, Jenny replied, “We were in the secret hideout and the bad guys came back and almost caught us, but we got away!”

“Hold on. Hold on a minute. Secret hideout? Bad guys?”

Paul interrupted, “Sir, we found an underground laboratory. They’re doing something to the water main. They use a hidden door in the men’s room to get in and out.”

The officer put his hands on his hips and asked, “Did you say the *men’s room*?”

Ozric took his arm and pulled him to the restroom door. “Come on! We’ll show you!”

Officer Harbiter shrugged his shoulders and let Ozric lead him into the men’s bathroom. Paul followed while Alexander and Jenny stayed outside. Ozric rushed over to the stainless-steel wall unit that hid the entrance to the spiral stairs. He pulled on the garbage can.

Nothing happened.

Chapter 21

Ozric protested, “But I swear it’s here! Behind this thing is a spiral staircase that leads to a long tunnel!”

Officer Harbiter crossed his arms and stared down at the small boy. “I don’t know what kind of joke you think you’re playing here, but it has gone far enough.”

He led the two of them out of the men’s bathroom. When they had rejoined Jenny and Alexander on the sidewalk, he continued, “The four of you will go home now and I’ll forget this ever happened. But don’t tell any more stories about secret doors and underground laboratories, okay?”

“But...” began Paul.

“I said, ‘Are we understood?’”

The children nodded.

“Good. Now you better head home. It’s getting close to dinnertime, anyway.”

With that, Officer Harbiter turned on his heels and strode away down the path.

“I’m going to have to start a new list of the ten worst situations we’ve ever been in,” observed Alexander.

“No kidding,” agreed Ozric.

Why couldn’t you open it, Ozric?” asked Jenny.

“I don’t know. They must have locked it somehow.”

“What do we do now?”

“What can we do?” said Alexander. “We go home.”

Day 12 Thursday

3:15PM The Higgins School

After class, Jenny caught up with Alexander and Paul on the sidewalk outside their school. The three began to walk home together.

Jenny asked, “What should we do about the bagel plan?”

Alexander sighed. “I tried to tell my parents last night, but they don’t believe me. I bet yours won’t either, Jenny. After all, your mom is on the Gazebo Committee, too.”

“Yeah,” she replied. She thought a moment before exclaiming. “I know! What about Mr. Von Welring? He might believe us!”

Alexander smiled and added, “You’re right! Snidely closed down Mr. V’s bagel store. He just *has* to listen to us!”

“I don’t know,” said Paul. “My father’s shop shut down, too, but he didn’t believe me last night.”

“Do you have any better ideas?” asked Alexander.

“No.”

“Okay, then. Let’s go talk to Mr. Von Welring and see what he says!”

The three of them hurried off down the street.

3:27PM Von Welring's Bagel Shop

The bagel shop owner stepped through the door just as they arrived. “Kids, what are you doing here?”

Alexander asked, “Are you closing for the day, Mr. Von Welring?”

“Yes. There’s nothing to do any more. I am preparing to sell the shop.”

“Oh, no!” cried Jenny.

Alexander said, “You can’t close the shop, Mr. V! Besides, we know what’s wrong with the bagels!”

“You do? How do you know that?” asked the old man.

Jenny answered him, “Mr. Snidely put a chemical that ruins bagels into your water. We found his secret laboratory and his plans to spoil all the bagels in the whole city!”

Mr. Von Welring stared at the girl. “Mr. Snidely? The owner of Bagelux?”

“Yeah, he’s the one!”

“You all better come inside, sit down and tell me everything from the beginning.”

The three children followed him into the shop. They sat at a table near the window while he disappeared in the back. He returned a moment later, carrying four root beers. As he set them on the table, he said, “Okay. Tell me the whole story.”

For the next few minutes, while the other three sipped their root beer, Jenny explained the mystery to Mr. Von Welring. She told him about Ozric’s hole to China and about the mysterious men who filled it in at night. She explained about the secret entrance in the public restroom and the underground laboratory.

The old man listened carefully, nodding every once in a while. When Jenny started talking about the chemicals and the plans to add them to New York's water supply, he interrupted. "You're saying they created a chemical that destroys bagel dough? Why didn't I notice it?"

Jenny answered, "You can't tell the chemical is there until you cook the bagels. I looked at the plans quickly before they came back and almost caught us."

"They almost caught you?"

"It's okay," said Alexander. "Paul came up with a plan for us to escape."

The old man looked at Paul. "You're the Spielman boy, right? Your father owns Spielman's Bagels?"

"That's right, sir," nodded Paul.

"Well, if my young friends here trust you, then so do I. Go on, Jenny. Tell me how the chemical affects bagels."

She continued, "It only happens when you boil the dough. That starts a chemical reaction that removes carbon dioxide from the dough."

Alexander quickly added, "It's like the opposite of letting the dough rise!"

"That's right," agreed Jenny. "After the bagels are boiled, they get smaller and smaller because the carbon dioxide is leaking out. They come out of the oven looking like little rocks."

"Very interesting," said Mr. Von Welring. "This story certainly explains the problems we've been having. But it's so extraordinary. I don't know why you'd lie to me, but how can I believe all of this is true?"

“We can’t prove it to you,” said Alexander. “Mr. Snidely and his henchmen almost caught us and we were in too much of a hurry to keep any of the papers or evidence.”

Paul added, “And when we took the policeman back to the secret entrance, it was locked and he didn’t believe us!”

Mr. Von Welring sighed and scratched his chin. He thought for a moment before saying, “I’m sorry, children. Without evidence, I don’t know what I can do for you. Stephen Snidely is a very powerful man. We cannot accuse him of this criminal behavior unless we have *proof*! Can you think of any way you can prove beyond a doubt that he’s doing what you claim?”

The children remained silent. Two minutes passed. The bagel shop owner sighed and started toward the front door. Before he took two steps, Paul exclaimed, “I have it!”

“What is it, Paul?” asked Jenny.

“Alexander, when is the grand opening of the gazebo?”

“Sunday at 3:00.”

“Okay, good. I know how we can get our proof and expose Mr. Snidely and his henchmen in front of the mayor and everyone!”

“Really?” asked Jenny. “How?”

Paul smiled and leaned back in his chair. “It’s simple. We’ll dig a hole to China!”

Chapter 22

For the next two days, the kids told everyone they knew about the plan. They wanted to dig the biggest hole anyone had ever dug before – so deep it could tunnel right down through the roof of the underground laboratory.

Jenny printed up flyers, similar to Alexander’s birthday invitations, and handed them out at school. They read, “Bring a shovel and be a part of history! Meet at 10:00AM on Sunday to dig a hole from New York to China!”

After the others told him what had happened at Von Welring’s, Ozric became really excited, too. He went door to door in their neighborhood, inviting any kid between the ages of seven and eleven to help out with the plan. He found that the younger children were more enthusiastic about it. Many of the ten- and eleven-year-olds laughed at the idea, saying things like, “You can’t dig a hole to China! That’s the stupidest idea I’ve ever heard!” He didn’t let it bother him. He knew that the real plan wasn’t to get to China – it was to catch Stephen Snidely and save the city’s bagels.

Day 15 Sunday

9:52AM Central Park

On the day of the grand opening, the four friends arrived at the gazebo site a few minutes before ten. The construction equipment and yellow tape were gone. The gazebo glowed white in the morning sunshine. Alexander could see the purple and pink flower arrangements and decorations that their parents had helped create. A few adults worked on last-minute details, but they paid no attention as kids began to arrive for the big dig.

“Is everyone ready?” he called from the middle of the gathering group of children. His head rose a few inches above the crowd because he stood on a slightly raised mound of dirt. Soft dirt. Dirt that Stephen Snidely’s henchmen had used to fill in their hole to China three times. *This time*, Alexander thought to himself, *no one will fill it in. This time, the trick is on them.*

“Okay, everyone. Here’s what’s going to happen. Ozric is going to draw a circle in the sand. The hole should be inside the circle. Some people can dig and others will move dirt away to the side, to that grassy area over there.” He pointed to an empty area about 15 feet away. “We don’t want the dirt to fall back in the hole. Okay, ready, Ozric?”

Ozric nodded and began to drag his shovel through the dirt, creating a circle ten feet in diameter. When he had finished and arrived back where he started, Alexander stepped to the middle and drove his shovel into the ground. “Away we go!”

The children quickly warmed up to the task. Some just played with the dirt and sand, some talked or ran around, but many got down to serious work. Even with the much larger circle, there were still too many people trying to dig. Some had no choice but to be dirt carriers, carting shovelfuls off to the side where it wouldn’t fall back into the hole.

Every few minutes, some of the diggers would get tired and take a break. When this happened, dirt carriers, or others standing around eagerly jumped in to take their places. Kids talked in excited tones about the possibility of getting to China.

“Tell us something else about China, Ozric,” said Jenny.

“Okay,” he replied. He thought for a minute before saying, “The Chinese have a different calendar from us. Theirs is the oldest calendar in the world and is based on the cycles of the moon. It’s called the Lunar Calendar.”

Alexander asked, “Does that mean they celebrate a different New Year’s Eve from us?”

“Yes, they do! It’s called Lunar New Year and they have huge parties and dancing in the streets with colorful costumes and people who dress up like dragons and lions.”

“Wow!”

After an hour, the group had already dug five feet down at the deepest part of the hole. This larger hole had more of a gentle slope, so it was still easy for kids to climb in and out of it from the sides.

Alexander looked at his watch and nudged Ozric, who put his shovel down and said, “I’m going to take a break.”

As he walked off toward the restroom, Ozric glanced at Paul, who nodded and stepped to the edge of the hole. In a loud voice he said, “Great work so far, everyone! Let’s keep going and see if we can get even deeper in the next hour!”

During the next 45 minutes, the hole drilled deeper into the ground. The sides dropped three or four feet from ground level while the center went seven or eight feet

down. They had dug past the soft sandy topsoil and past the thick dirt and rocks. Each shovelful now pulled up a heavy, clay-like soil, tinged with orange and yellow.

“I wonder how close we are to the roof of the underground laboratory,” whispered Jenny to Alexander as they rested against a nearby tree.

“I know,” he replied. “I was thinking the same thing. We must be very close. They might even be able to hear us if they’re down there in the hideout.”

“If they can hear us, then they will probably be here soon.”

As she spoke this, an angry voice called to them from the distance, “What is the meaning of this!”

Alexander and Jenny saw three men running up the path from the public restroom. It was Stephen Snidely with his two underlings, Dawkins and Dimwoody. Snidely’s face was bright red. His eyes appeared as if they were about to bulge out of his head and a large purple vein throbbed in his neck.

The three men raced to the edge of the hole and searched about wildly for a face they recognized. Snidely’s eyes focused on Paul and he sneered as he addressed the boy. “Young man, what do you think you’re doing?”

Paul didn’t flinch. He calmly returned Snidely’s gaze and said, “We’re digging a hole to China, sir.”

Alexander whispered to Jenny, “Boy, Paul’s definitely not afraid of authority, is he? I knew he was like that at school, but I am still impressed.”

“Yeah,” agreed Jenny. “I’m glad he’s on our side.” The two of them inched a little closer to the showdown.

Snidely continued, "This is private property, young man. You have no right to dig a hole here or do anything else here, for that matter."

Without missing a beat, Paul answered, "I thought this was public land. This is Central Park, right?"

"I've donated more money than you will ever see so that this beautiful gazebo could be constructed here. I don't need some little twerps ruining it with a big hole in the ground!"

"We have permission to dig our hole here."

"Just who exactly gave you permission to do this?"

"I did," came a voice from behind Snidely. A mounted policeman trotted his horse up to the scene. "Officer Fred Harbiter. I told the children they could dig the hole here."

Snidely stared up at the man, still sitting on his horse, holding a half-eaten Twinkie in his hand.

"Did you say *you* gave them permission?"

Officer Harbiter took another bite and chewed it slowly before responding. "I did."

"That was a big mistake. Do you know who I am?"

"I do. You are Mr. Snidely, owner of the Bagelux chain of bagel shops."

"That's right. And I'm very good friends with the mayor of New York. I'll have your job for this if you don't get rid of these children and have this hole filled in right now!" He practically screamed this last part. The vein in his neck bulged even more than before.

Officer Harbiter finally got down from his horse. He looked around at the children, most of who had backed several feet away from Snidely and his henchmen. Only Paul remained in the hole. He stood near the edge, leaning on his shovel. The officer turned to him and asked, "Where is Ozric? This was his idea in the first place."

Paul shrugged. "I think he had to go home for lunch."

"Well, in any case, you can't dig here anymore. You have to fill the hole in and go home. The gazebo dedication ceremony is in a few hours. I thought I made it clear that this was only okay as long as the gazebo was under construction, but you had to stop once it was complete."

Paul didn't answer, but began to climb up out of the hole.

Jenny whispered to Alexander, "What's Paul going to do? We're not ready yet."

Alexander replied, "I know. He has to stall for more time."

As if he had heard them, Paul suddenly said to the policeman, "It doesn't look like the gazebo is finished yet. There's a man over there painting one of the railings." He pointed to a man adding finishing touches with a bucket of white paint.

"You know what I meant, Paul," replied the officer. His frown deepened. "Now, this is your final warning. Get these kids to fill in the hole or I'll start taking down names and calling your parents, all of them."

Paul glanced over at Jenny and Alexander. He shrugged his shoulders. Then he smiled. He turned back to the officer and said, "Okay. But it's going to take awhile. There's nothing we can do now because the hole is too big."

"That's it!" shouted Snidely. "I'm not going to sit here and take this!" He pulled a phone from his jacket pocket and said, "I'm calling the mayor."

But there was no need. At that moment, a procession of people appeared over the hill from the Ultimate Frisbee field. The mayor of New York City led the group, closely followed by Mr. and Mrs. Fischer, the Copperfields, and many others.

“Finally,” muttered Snidely. “We’ll get this taken care of.”

Chapter 23

When the mayor and the parents arrived, Mr. Snidely immediately stepped forward. His face had returned to normal color and his voice sounded calm again. “Mr. Mayor, I demand that these children fill in this hole and stop disturbing my gazebo!”

The mayor remained silent a moment, scratching his chin. Mrs. Fischer took the opportunity to jump in. She turned to Alexander and said, “Is this what you have been up to? Don’t you know how important this is for us? Where’s Jenny? I want to have a word with her!”

Before Alexander could reply, the mayor had regained his wits. He spoke with a deep voice – it remained calm yet it immediately silenced the buzz of the crowd.

“Everyone, please settle down. Now, what seems to be going here? You, Officer...”

Several other police officers had joined the crowd, but the mayor looked straight at Officer Harbiter, who replied, “Harbiter, sir. Officer Fred Harbiter.”

“Yes, Officer Harbiter. Please explain to me what this is all about, if you would.”

“Of course. These children have been digging a hole to, er, uh, China, for the past couple of weeks.”

“We haven’t been able to!” yelled Alexander. “*They* keep filling it in!” He pointed at the henchmen, Dawkins and Dimwoody. Their faces showed surprise and Mr. Snidely raised his eyebrows, but he never lost his smooth grin.

The mayor turned to the boy and said, “You’ll get your chance, son. Let the man speak.”

Officer Harbiter continued, “Uh, yeah. They’ve been digging the hole for a couple of weeks, but I made it very clear that they were to finish when construction on the gazebo was complete.”

Snidely interrupted, “Obviously this Twinkie-eating excuse for a cop can’t control even a few small children! They didn’t listen to him!”

Officer Harbiter tried to respond, but the mayor cut him off. “Clearly they have continued to dig. This is quite a large hole.” He gestured across the hole in the ground. At ten feet across and several feet deep, it made a big gap in the growing crowd.

The policeman replied, “They did all of that this morning. When I checked yesterday, the hole was completely filled in and they seemed to be finished with it. I thought it was just a passing idea, but I guess I was wrong.”

“This morning, eh? That’s impressive.” Upon hearing this, Paul grinned. The mayor turned to him and continued, “However, you should not have dug this hole here on the day of the gazebo grand opening. What do you have to say for yourselves?”

Again Paul looked to Jenny and Alexander for help. They didn’t know what to do. He shot a quick glance toward the public restroom before launching into his story. “Sir, we had to dig the hole today. It was the only way.”

The mayor looked puzzled. “The only way to do what?”

“To prove that Mr. Snidely is trying to poison the city’s water supply!”

At that, Mr. Snidely again turned beet red. He burst out, “Nonsense! Mr. Mayor, I will not stand here and be accused of such outrageous things!”

The mayor said to Paul, “Son, what is your name?”

“Paul. Paul Spielman.”

“Well, Paul, that is a very strong accusation you’re making. Why do you think Mr. Snidely is trying to poison the water supply?”

“My friends and I found his secret laboratory. He has chemicals and plans and everything. He’s going to put the chemical into the water main and ruin all the bagels in the whole city!”

“Did you say *bagels*?”

Paul didn’t answer.

“I asked you a question, son.”

In a more shaky voice, Paul said, “Yeah, bagels.”

The mayor began to laugh. “You’re telling me that Stephen Snidely here has a plan to sabotage all of the bagels in the whole city! And he has a secret laboratory where he’s mixing up his magic formula?”

“That’s right.”

“And he told his assistants, here, his... henchmen to fill in the hole that you and your friends were digging to China?”

Paul nodded.

“And why did he do that?”

Paul glanced at his friends, a frightened look on his face. In an even quieter voice, Paul said, “So we wouldn’t discover their hideout.”

The mayor’s laughter became louder. He struggled to continue, saying, “Tell me, where is this secret laboratory located, anyway?”

A clear voice called out from behind him, “You’re standing on it!”

Jenny and Alexander both exclaimed, “Ozric!”

The mayor turned to see Ozric striding up the path toward the crowd. He walked right up to the mayor before continuing. Pointing to Snidely, he said, “Mr. Mayor, that man is trying to shut down New York’s bagel industry and I can prove it.”

Mrs. Fischer rushed forward. “Ozric! Stop it...” A firm hand on her shoulder stopped her from taking another step.

“Rachel, I think we should listen to what he has to say,” suggested Jenny’s father, gently pulling his wife back to him.

The mayor asked, “What proof do you have?”

Ozric held up a stack of papers. “I have chemical formulas, plans of the city’s water supply and lists of bagel shops to be replaced by Bagelux when they go out of business. And I brought back a sample of the chemical itself!”

He held up a jar of light blue liquid.

“Where did you find these things?” asked the mayor.

Ozric grinned. “In the secret underground laboratory, of course! The entrance is just over there.” He pointed toward the public restroom.

Mr. Fischer said, “So there *is* a secret laboratory?”

Alexander couldn't control himself any longer. "Yes! That's what we've been saying all along!"

"Lies! Mr. Mayor, how can you sit here and let these, these *children* make up these lies about me? I'd like to think my contributions earned me a little respect around here."

The Mayor looked puzzled. "I don't know what to believe. These kids could have created the evidence themselves, but why would they? I think we'll have to see this secret laboratory for ourselves!"

Snidely cut in, "There is no laboratory! The idea is preposterous!"

"No," countered Paul. "There is. And we'll show you!" He took the mayor's hand and started walking down the path.

Snidely yelled, "This is ridiculous! They won't show you a secret entrance. This is a waste of time!"

"That's what you think," said Ozric. "But you didn't see me waiting in the stall when you came out of the spiral staircase, did you? I was standing on the toilet so you couldn't see my feet under the door. And your dogs are great animals. We get along really well." He laughed. Jenny, Alexander and Paul joined in.

Snidely started backing away from the group. "Please," he said. "Please, Mr. Mayor. Joe, you've got to believe me. I have nothing to do with this plot. It's all a mistake— they're trying to frame me!"

He turned to run away, but Officer Harbiter caught him by the sleeve. "Not so fast. Bill, Ed, hold mister escape artist and his two goons here. I'll go with the mayor and the kids to check out this laboratory."

“With pleasure,” replied two of the other policemen.

“No!” cried Snidely. “I won’t take it! You New Yorkers and your stupid water – I can’t stand it any more! I’m so sick and tired of hearing about how great your bagels are. I was going to change everything! Nooooo!”

The mayor turned to Officer Harbiter and said, “I think we have all the proof we need. You can take the three of them downtown and lock them up. We’ll get this sorted out and file charges later today.”

“But, what about the gazebo?” asked Mrs. Fischer.

Her husband laughed, but the mayor answered her. “Well, the money has already been donated. As soon as we clear up this mess and bring out the crime-scene team, I don’t see any reason why the ceremony can’t go on as planned.”

She almost fainted with relief.

“Come on!” shouted Ozric, and he led the group, including the mayor and Officer Harbiter, down the path to the men’s bathroom one last time.

Chapter 24

Later That Summer

3:24PM Von Welring's Bagel Shop

“Mr. V, how has business been since your water was fixed by the science team from Columbia?” Jenny sat at a table, sipping a fruit punch and eating an everything bagel.

“Well, Ms. Fischer,” replied the bagel shop owner. “Business has returned to normal. For a while, the publicity made me a sort of minor celebrity, but now it has settled down.”

“Good!” exclaimed Alexander. “We’re so glad you didn’t go out of business! Your bagel shop is in my top five favorite places to eat in the city! Right after Koronet, the place that makes the giant slices of pizza, up by Columbia University.”

“Thank you, my young friend.” The old man smiled and then returned behind the counter to serve new customers who had just walked in.

“So, keep telling me what happened,” said Emily. She had Joined Jenny and Alexander at the bagel shop to hear the conclusion of the mystery.

“Well,” Alexander continued the story. “Ozric led everyone to the public restroom and showed them the secret door, which he had propped open with a mop.”

“Good thinking!” she smiled.

“Totally! So, we showed the mayor and Officer Harbiter the secret laboratory. Well... after we got everyone past the dogs, of course.”

“Dogs?”

Jenny giggled. “Tell her about the dogs.”

Alexander nodded and turned back to Emily. “Ozric had a hard time keeping them calm when we came back with such a big group. We finally had to send someone up for hamburgers before we could get in the room. One of the mayors’ assistants came back with probably 30 or 40 of them.”

Emily laughed, “That’s a lot!”

Alexander cut in, “The best part is that he had put toppings on them. Some had ketchup, some had mustard, one even had pickles and onions on it!”

“Yuck!” said Jenny.

“I know,” nodded Alexander. “When the mayor asked what he was doing, the assistant said he didn’t know what kind of hamburgers the dogs would like, so he got one of everything!”

They laughed for a minute before he continued. “We finally got in and showed the mayor the secret laboratory. The next day he sent down a special team of scientists to examine it and dispose of all the chemicals.”

“Did they fix the problem here at Von Welring’s and over at Spielman’s?”

“No, there was nothing they could do. But when Snidely stopped making the chemical, the effects wore off after a few days.”

Emily said, “There’s one thing I don’t understand. If they hadn’t put the chemical in the city’s water supply yet, how did Von Welring’s and Spielman’s get affected in the first place?”

Jenny cut in, “I know! It was the strange man in the gray coveralls. We saw him snooping around at both bagel shops right before they shut down. He must’ve brought some of the chemical with him and put it here himself!”

“That’s right,” said Alexander. “The police found evidence that he had sabotaged these shops at a test run to make sure the chemical worked. The police charged him for it and he’ll be in jail for a long time. So will Snidely and the other henchman, too.”

“Good,” said Emily. “So, that’s it?”

“That’s it,” replied Alexander. “The mystery is solved and we’re hanging out and playing Frisbee for the rest of the summer. No more mysteries, no more digging, just fun!”

“What about Ozric,” she asked. “How does he feel about the whole thing?”

Jenny answered her, “He wasn’t too happy that his idea about digging a hole to China never worked out, but he got over it.”

Alexander wondered aloud, “Where is he, anyway?”

Jenny began to say, “I don’t…” when the door to the shop opened and their friend walked in.

“Ozric!” exclaimed Alexander.

“Hi guys,” said the thin boy. He grinned as he sat down at their table.

Alexander said, “We haven’t seen you in a while. What have you been up to?”

Ozric pulled a glass bottle out of his backpack. He unscrewed the top and took a sip of the bright red liquid inside. “This,” he said, and sat back in his chair.

“What is it?”

“It’s my secret formula. I’ve been working on it for a few weeks.”

“It’s a drink?” asked Alexander.

“Yep. Try a sip.”

Alexander took a quick sip from the bottle. He smiled. “It’s awesome! Did you get the idea from another fortune cookie?”

“Ha-ha, no,” said the younger boy, laughing. “But guess what?”

“What?” they said in unison.

“You guys are going to help me sell it.”

They laughed, and continued eating their bagels.

THE END

Appendix A.

Alexander's Recipes

(always have a grownup help when using the grill, stove or oven)

1. Alexander's Super Hamburgers for People (Not Dogs)

- 1 Lb. hamburger meat
- 1 small onion, diced
- 2 Tbsp. Worcestershire sauce
- ½ tsp. garlic powder
- 2 slices cheese (American, Swiss, mozzarella)

Mix all ingredients except cheese in a bowl. Shape into 8 very thin hamburger patties. Cut cheese slices into quarters and place one quarter in the center of each patty. Combine the patties like sandwiches with the cheese in the middle. You are making 4 larger burger patties with cheese in the center. Pinch down the edges so the cheese cannot drip out when it melts. Grill burgers or cook in the broiler like you normally would.

2. French Toast

- 6 slices white bread
- 2 eggs
- 1 Tbsp. milk
- 1 tsp. cinnamon
- Lots of butter

Bring a large frying pan or griddle to medium heat. Whisk the eggs, milk and cinnamon in a shallow bowl. Put a pat of butter on the pan. It should sizzle, but not smoke or turn brown. If it does, turn down the heat a little bit. Dip a piece of bread in the egg mixture until both sides are wet. Drain off the excess liquid back into the bowl and put the bread into the pan. After a minute or so, flip the bread and cook until both sides are brown. Repeat, using a new pat of butter in the pan for each piece of French toast. I like to keep a plate in the oven on low heat to keep my French toast warm while I am cooking the rest. Serve with butter and maple syrup or whipped cream and fruit topping.

3. Alex's Extra-Buttery Grilled Cheese Sandwiches

- 2 slices white bread
- 1 slice cheese (American, Swiss, mozzarella)
- 3 Tbsp. very soft butter

If you know you are making this ahead of time, take the butter out of the fridge and leave it on the counter to get soft. Otherwise, you can microwave it for a few seconds to soften it up. Heat a large frying pan or griddle to medium heat, about the same temperature as for my French toast recipe. Spread 1 Tbsp. of butter evenly on each slice of bread. Unwrap the cheese so it's ready to go. Put the last Tbsp. of butter into the pan. It should sizzle, but not smoke or turn brown. If it does, the pan is too hot, so turn it down a little.

Put one piece of bread into the pan with the buttered side facing down. Place the cheese on top of the bread and immediately cover with the other slice, butter side facing up. Let it cook for a minute or two until the bottom is golden brown. Flip the sandwich with a spatula and cook the other side.

4. Birthday Chocolate Chip Cookie Brownie Cupcakes

Batter of your favorite brownie recipe

Dough of your favorite chocolate chip cookie recipe

Cupcake pan and liners

Cooking spray

Frosting (optional)

These combine three of my favorite foods: cookies, brownies and cake! Preheat oven to 350. Be sure to spray all the cupcake liners lightly with cooking spray. Fill each liner about 2/3 full with brownie batter. Cook for 5 minutes. Remove pan (careful, it's hot!) and put one spoonful of cookie dough on top of each brownie cupcake. Put back in the oven and cook another 15 minutes or until done. Sometimes I top these with a little dab of chocolate or vanilla frosting.

5. Alexander's Banana Chocolate Chip Muffins

2 ripe bananas, mashed

1 cup sugar

1 egg

1 stick soft butter

3 Tbsp. milk

2 cups flour

1 tsp. baking powder

1/2 tsp. baking soda

1/4 tsp. salt

1 cup chocolate chips

These muffins use my secret ingredient: bananas! Preheat oven to 300 degrees and line a 12-muffin pan with papers. Cream the sugar, egg and butter in a bowl. Sift together flour, baking powder, baking soda and salt. Stir into the sugar mixture. In a separate bowl, mash the bananas with a fork and mix in the milk. Blend banana mixture with other ingredients until just combined. Add chocolate chips. Spoon the batter into muffin cups and bake for 15-20 minutes. Let them cool in the pan for at least 10 minutes before removing.