



CHAPTER

1

THE ENVELOPES ARRIVED DURING THE UNCERTAIN hours of Thursday morning—those dark, early hours between tomorrow and yesterday, between not-quite-yet and nevermore. It's a time when the day is still young, still taking shape, and still open to possibility.

The envelopes did not arrive in mailboxes or through mail slots, nor did they arrive with any sort of postage or return address. Instead, unseen hands slipped the mysterious letters beneath bedroom doors throughout the small New England community of Middleton.

One might imagine that such a strange occurrence would create alarm and worry. Under normal circumstances, one would be right. In this case, however, the

curious deliveries failed to raise concern because most people never saw the envelopes. People lead busy lives, after all, and the envelopes were easy to miss.

One could even say that the envelopes were hard to see.

In fact, of all the people in Middleton, only one girl who received an envelope truly saw it. Prudence Potts did more than see it, actually.

She opened it.

Inside waited what appeared to be a postcard. Its face might have been white at one time, but the passing of days had added wrinkles and spots, and shifted the hue to a yellowish-brown. A handwritten message remained visible, however.

It read:

*Be grave in your search,
and avoid having stones in your head.*

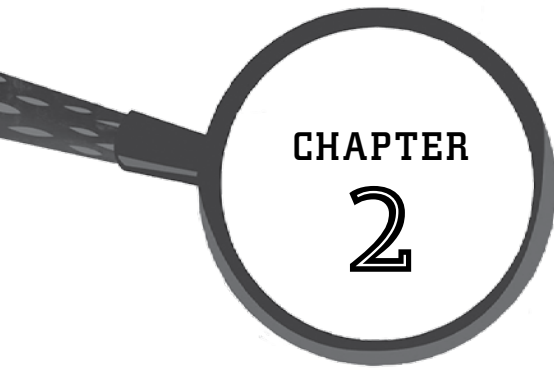
The back of the card bore more writing, golden letters across an inky field of deep midnight blue. Unfortunately, this additional text did nothing to explain the cryptic words on the card's face. In fact, the sentence written in gold was a question.

Prudence was eleven years old. She had a bob of red hair and a spattering of freckles that lay in reckless disarray across her nose. She considered herself a

detective, of sorts, just like her dad had been. As such, she had a particular interest in questions. Questions were like mysteries. Both demanded answers.

Pru was especially drawn to the question on the card. It asked:

WHAT IS THE UNBELIEVABLE FIB?



CHAPTER 2

SEVERAL HOURS AFTER DISCOVERING THE ENVELOPE in her room, Pru stood with her classmates in front of the great stone mansion known as Winterhaven House. A swirling mass of dark clouds blanketed the sky over Pru's head. They had settled over Middleton that very morning, as dark and heavy as a bad mood.

A storm was coming.

Still, Pru was willing to brave storms if it meant spending the day on a field trip and away from Mrs. Edleman's sixth-grade classroom. She just wished she could have left Mrs. Edleman behind as easily as the other antique fixtures of Middleton Elementary School. Her teacher was, at that moment, going over her Rules for Good Behavior one last time.

Pru hoped it was the last time, anyway.

She studied the clouds until her teacher paused for breath.

“Are there any questions?” Mrs. Edleman concluded with the stern sort of look that teachers use to suggest that there really ought not to be any questions at all.

Pru raised her hand.

Mrs. Edleman paused. She adjusted her glasses on the bridge of her nose. Pru glimpsed her teacher’s lips moving slightly.

Pru had practiced a great many detective skills in her drive to follow in her dad’s footsteps. And while some of her explorations had led to disappointment (she was a disaster when it came to lifting fingerprints, for example), other explorations had proved to be a surprising success. One such success had come when Pru discovered an uncanny talent for reading lips. From what she could see of Mrs. Edleman, she strongly suspected her teacher was counting silently to ten.

“Yes, Prudence?” she said, approximately ten seconds later.

“It’s about those clouds, Mrs. Edleman.”

“The clouds? Prudence, are you delaying our field trip to ask about the weather?”

“Yeah.” Why did Mrs. Edleman always feel the need to state the obvious? “They just look weird, don’t they?”

They're so dark. And the way they're acting, swirling over the house like that, it's almost like in a cartoon. I wonder if—”

“Prudence Potts, stop right there,” Mrs. Edleman said, straightening her back and folding her hands over her belly. “Allow me to make certain things clear. First, the weather does not *act* in any way at all. The weather simply *is*. There is no conscious will behind it. Secondly, I cannot help but feel that you are setting the stage for another of your . . . investigations.”

As her teacher frowned down the line at her, Pru thought about her most recent investigation, the one that Mrs. Edleman was no doubt referring to. Pru pictured the flyer she had posted around Middleton Elementary earlier that week. The top of the flyer had featured a blurry photo she had taken with her cell phone. The photo had shown a furry shape moving toward the teachers' parking lot. Below the photo had been the words:

SCHOOLYARD SASQUATCH

Enormous, lumbering, furry monster sighted by reliable witness yesterday in schoolyard. Students are warned to be on guard. Could this be the famous Bigfoot or Sasquatch? There is no way to be scientifically sure. But it probably is.

The flyer had earned Pru two weeks of detention, which struck her as completely unfair. How was *she* supposed to have known that Mrs. Edleman had just bought a new fur coat?

“Let me make one thing absolutely clear, Prudence. This is a field trip to learn about Viking explorers. There is nothing mysterious about the clouds in the sky, and there will be no investigations of any sort taking place here today.” Mrs. Edleman returned her attention to the whole class. “Now, I trust that everyone understands my expectations. And remember, above all else, you are to stay together and not wander off. Is that understood?”

“Yes, Mrs. Edleman,” the class chorused, and Pru chimed in.

Then she followed her teacher into the building and, first chance she got, wandered off.



Winterhaven House perched high atop a rocky cliff overlooking the ocean to the east and the sleepy town of Middleton to the southwest. It was the oldest house in Middleton, and it belonged to the town’s founding family, the Grimnirs. Old Man Grimnir lived there now.

It seemed like there had always been an Old Man Grimnir living there.

Everyone in Middleton knew that the town patron was fascinated with Viking history. He had even turned part of his vast home into a museum to showcase Viking artifacts. Some people said that Old Man Grimnir's fascination had begun years back when hikers found the remains of a centuries-old Viking camp in the woods that surrounded the town. Others said the family's interest in Vikings went back even further than that.

Some people whispered it went back *much* further than that.

Separated from her class, Pru walked past cases filled with swords and axes and strips of aged cloth. She saw maps and tapestries, and paintings of great ships with dragon-headed bows sailing off into the unknown.

Passing a window, Pru happened to glance at a squirrel sitting on a branch outside. It was a raggedy creature. Its bristled tail and the nick in its left ear suggested that this was a squirrel that had lived a bit and seen some things. Its eyes, small and black like polished stones, stared so intently at Pru that she felt for a moment as if she were herself an exhibit on display. Pru was relieved when the squirrel twitched its tail and bounded from the branch, leaving her to continue her exploration.

The exhibit rooms were small and cool and dimly

lit. They reminded Pru of basements, or caves, or other hidden places where secret things were kept, and sometimes found. In the last room she entered, Pru discovered a large glass display case. Inside the case rested a stone. It was a little larger than a dinner plate, and it was covered with strange writing.

She approached one of the signs set out for visitors. She had to squint to read it because the flickering fluorescent bulb above her made the room even darker than the others she had walked through. Shadows slid about. As her eyes adjusted, Pru read:

THE MIDDLETON STONE

Discovered by hikers in the woods around Middleton, the Middleton Stone is the pride of the Grimnir Collection. The runes on the stone, a form of Viking writing, tell the location of a powerful talisman called the Eye of Odin. Odin is described in stories as the Allfather of the Viking gods. The stone claims that the Eye is Odin's greatest treasure and his greatest torment. Unfortunately, many of the runes are of a unique style unfamiliar to modern archaeologists, so the specific location of the Eye of Odin remains lost to story and myth.

“Well, now,” a voice directly behind Pru said, breaking the quiet. “Isn't that interesting?”

Pru spun about and took a few quick steps backward.

She tried to focus on the speaker who'd surprised her so. It took a moment. He was hard to see, at first, in the flickering light.

The man wore a long gray coat and gray hat. He was tall and thin, and his nose had achieved a level of prominence to which the other features on his face could only aspire. Pru thought it looked like just the sort of nose that would be perfect for sticking itself into places it did not belong.

"You startled me," Pru said. It was an automatic response, a phrase her mother often used. Pru felt silly for saying it, but it was true. She could have sworn she'd been alone in the room.

"I have a knack." A hint of a smile showed on the man's lips as he prowled around the display case, moving away from Pru. His eyes never left her. "You can hear me. And you can see me. That's interesting, too."

"Why would it be interesting that I can hear and see you?" It wasn't *that* dark in the room. And he'd been standing practically on top of her, apparently reading over her shoulder.

"Fair question," the man said, but he didn't answer it. Instead, he gestured with his chin to the Middleton Stone and the sign she'd read. "What do you make of that?"

"The stone? Who knows? It's just a story." She shrugged, reluctant to admit that the sign had piqued her curiosity.

The man's eyes flicked away from her for the first time, as though she no longer carried his interest. He looked disappointed. That upset Pru, though she could not have said why.

"There's no such thing as *just* a story," he said. "After all, we're all stories in the end. Sometimes, even, of our own telling. The trick is usually figuring out which bits of the story are true."

"Oh yeah? What's your story, then?" Pru asked, still smarting a bit from his dismissive tone.

The man stopped walking and returned his gaze to Pru. His long coat settled against his legs as he clasped his hands behind his back and looked directly at her from the opposite side of the case. The smile that had been playing about his lips returned and spread into a lopsided grin that showed his teeth but seemed to hide a great deal more.

"That's better!" The man in gray nodded his approval. "I like a person who knows how to ask a good question. I like such a person almost as much as someone who goes about trying to *answer* a good question. Still, as good as your question is, it's not the right one to ask, not quite. That is to say"—the man arched one brow—"I'd be willing to bet it's not the question that's been on your mind all morning."

Her hand shot to her messenger bag, slung over her shoulder. It held all her most important things (and

her schoolbooks, when she was at school). That day, it carried something new—the card she had received that morning.

Pru didn't know what the question on the card meant. She didn't even know for sure where the card had come from. She had an idea, though. Or maybe it was a hope. Ideas were things people held in their heads, hopes the things they kept in their hearts. Hopes were secret, as far as Pru was concerned. So as her fingers found the card with its golden question, her eyes slid away from the man in gray.

“I don't know what you're talking about,” she said.

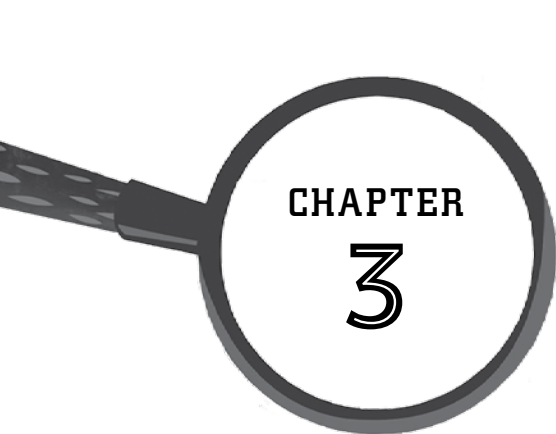
Pru had the distinct impression the man in gray was laughing to himself. She could see it in his eyes. She could not, however, tell whether she was included in his silent laughter or whether she was the subject of it.

At that precise moment, the first clap of thunder rolled out from the clouds above. The whole room shook and the fluorescent light flickered out. The man in gray's voice whispered through the darkness.

It seemed to come from very close to Pru.

“You, my dear, are a natural-born fibber.”

When the lights came back on a heartbeat later, the man in gray was gone.



CHAPTER

3

PRU HAD NEARLY FORGOTTEN ABOUT THE STRANGE weather by the time dusk temporarily masked the heavy clouds over Middleton. She'd even stopped thinking quite so much about her mysterious card. Her focus had shifted to the strange man she'd met in the shrouded rooms of Winterhaven House. Who was he? His long coat and hat reminded Pru of someone from the old-time detective movies she and her dad used to watch together.

The memory of curling up on the couch next to her dad caused Pru's chest to tighten. As she sat at her dining room table, she could hear her mother in the adjacent kitchen, washing the dinner plates by hand.

The dishwasher had broken the week before. It was the sort of thing Pru knew her dad would have fixed right away. Now, though, it sat untouched beneath the counter. It looked fine on the outside. Inside, it had gone all wrong.

Pru shifted her thoughts back to the man in gray. She couldn't shake the feeling that there was something decidedly detective-like about him. Perhaps that explained why she'd been more intrigued than creeped out by his strange behavior (and that he'd seemed to appear and vanish without a trace). There had been an air of familiarity about him.

"Mom?" Pru called into the kitchen.

A taller, older version of Pru appeared in the doorway a moment later. Anne Potts had shared all her most dramatic features with her daughter, including her red hair, small frame, and freckles. Pru thought those features combined into an effortless sort of beauty on her mother, whereas Pru just felt generally short and spotted.

"What is it, sweetie?" her mother asked, wiping her hands on a dish towel.

Pru rolled her pencil back and forth across the table and avoided her mother's eyes.

"Have they hired anyone new at the station?" Pru couldn't bring herself to ask the question that first sprang to her mind: *Have they replaced Dad?*

“I don’t think so. But I can ask the next time I’m there, if you like.”

“That’s okay. It’s nothing. I just thought I heard something about a new detective in town, that’s all.” Pru lifted her math book up so it covered her face.

“Pru.” Her mother’s voice went soft. Pru hated when her mother’s voice went soft like that. “If it’s something you’d like to talk about—”

“I have to do my homework.”

Pru didn’t look up over the edge of her math book to see her mother’s reaction, but she heard it in the silence that filled the room. Eventually, that silence was broken by the sound of her mother’s footsteps as she retreated into the kitchen. In her mind, Pru pictured her mother hanging the dish towel over the handle of the dishwasher. She found herself thinking once again of things that were all broken inside that no one knew how to fix.



Pru awoke the next morning expecting more strange events. But even though a quick glance out her bedroom window revealed that the unusual clouds still hovered in the sky, Pru did not discover any more mysterious envelopes in her room or anywhere else in the house (she checked thoroughly). Nor did she encounter any tall men sporting a gray coat and hat, and with a pronounced nose on her walk to school.

She concluded (with some disappointment) that the weirdness of the day before had passed.

Even so, her arrival at school presented Pru with one surprise.

An unfamiliar boy stood at the front of the room by Mrs. Edleman's desk. He was just a bit taller than Pru, who everyone said was small for her age. He had a mess of blond hair and absolutely no freckles (which to Pru hardly seemed fair at all).

Pru studied the new kid from her seat. On the chest of his tie-dyed shirt he wore a name tag on which he had written "ABE," just like that. It seemed shouty, writing your name all in capitals. But nothing else about the new kid struck Pru as loud as Mrs. Edleman introduced him as their newest classmate. He shuffled awkwardly from foot to foot as he stood at the front of the class. When Mrs. Edleman said his name, he half raised his hand to wave, but then he seemed unsure if that was the right thing to do—and he ended up shoving both of his hands into the pockets of his cargo pants and looking down.

Pru almost felt bad for him.

Her sympathy quickly vanished when Mrs. Edleman partnered Pru and ABE on an assignment for their Viking unit so that ABE could catch up. Everyone else got to work alone. Not only did they have to read a Norse myth, which for some reason was the name for

stories about Viking gods, goddesses, and heroes, but they also had to prepare a report on it to share with the class on Monday. A report already required far more schoolwork than Pru wanted to do over the weekend. Working with a partner would just make things more complicated.

Pru knew Mrs. Edleman had partnered them just to get back at her for wandering off at Winterhaven House the day before, but there was nothing she could do about it. So she sought ABE out at recess that day to figure out a time and place for them to meet.

She found him on the blacktop. He was standing apart from the other kids, hands in his pockets again, rolling a piece of sidewalk chalk beneath his feet. The chalk left marks on the broken pavement that reminded Pru of strange writing scratched on an ancient stone.

“So, I guess we should plan to meet and go over the story Mrs. Edleman assigned,” Pru said as she walked up to ABE. No point beating around the bush.

“Okay, sure.” ABE appeared pleased to have someone to talk to. “That would be great.”

Pru did her best to ignore ABE’s obvious relief at not being alone. It wasn’t *her* job to help the new kid adjust, even if he did seem kind of lost.

“Well, we can’t meet after school because I have detention this week and next.” Pru folded her arms across her chest. “Here’s a little hint for you. Don’t

compare Mrs. Edleman to a hairy, lumbering beast. She takes it all personal for some reason.”

“Oh. Um . . . okay. Sure. I’ll remember that. Thanks.”

“Anyway, let’s meet tomorrow. Do you know where the library is?” Pru knew ABE had just moved in, but Middleton was small and the library was hard to miss. It was also central enough that you could walk there from just about anywhere in town.

“Yeah. I saw it on my way in to school today. I’ve been wanting to go, actually.”

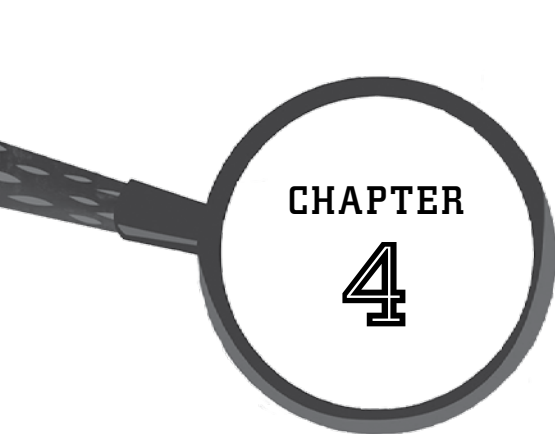
“Okay, good. I’ll see you tomorrow at eleven.” With that, Pru walked off. It wouldn’t do to be seen talking to a boy for too long. Sixth grade was weird. Everyone had come back from summer all filled with gossip about who wore what and who liked who. Pru didn’t have any interest in that nonsense. She was better off with her investigations.

The thought made Pru glance upward. If she were to be completely honest—and complete honesty was something she tried to avoid, as a general rule—but if she *were* to be completely honest, she’d have to admit that she’d only mentioned the clouds to Mrs. Edleman the day before to get under her teacher’s skin. But now the clouds really *did* seem ominous. They sealed the sky shut so that even though she was outside, she couldn’t escape the sensation of feeling confined. It put her in mind of how she felt in the darkened hallways

of Winterhaven House, with its hidden treasures and unexpected encounters.

She jumped at a sudden clap of thunder, then looked around quickly to make sure no one had seen her startled reaction. As she turned, she noticed the bushy tail of a squirrel as it darted from the playground area to the trees that bordered the schoolyard. Odd that a squirrel had come so close to where kids were playing.

Odder still that the squirrel seemed familiar, with its scruffy tail and the nick in its left ear.



CHAPTER
4

SATURDAY DAWNED GRAY AND GLOOMY AGAIN. PRU walked to the library. The dark clouds had spread as far across the sky as she could see. They left Pru feeling unsettled and anxious as she found ABE on the second floor. He was waiting with his books already open and spread before him.

“Hi,” he said. He started to stand up.

Pru grunted something by way of a greeting before dropping into her seat. Deep down, she knew it wasn’t really ABE’s fault that they’d been assigned to work together. Mrs. Edleman wasn’t there to be grouchy to, though, so accommodations had to be made.

ABE hovered over his seat a moment before settling

back down. “So, um, I guess maybe we should get started?”

“I guess.” Pru hefted her messenger bag onto the table. “We should probably start with the story Mrs. Edleman assigned us.”

“I actually read it last night. It was pretty good!”

“Are you kidding? You did homework on a Friday night? But that’s the best night for TV.”

“Oh. Actually, I don’t really watch a lot of TV . . .” ABE abandoned the sentence. Perhaps he saw the look of astonishment on Pru’s face. “Sorry. You’re right, let’s read the story.”

With a roll of her eyes, Pru pulled out her own notebook and also began reading the Norse myth Mrs. Edleman had assigned.

THE STORY OF LOKI AND THE BUILDING OF ASGARD’S WALL

*Across the Rainbow Bridge lies the realm of
Asgard, where the gods of the Vikings live.*

*In the early days, the city of the gods was vulner-
able. It had no wall to protect it from the wild giants
of nearby Jotunheim. Then one day a builder pre-
sented himself before Odin, Allfather of the gods.*

*“I will build your wall,” the builder said,
“and I will do it before two winters pass.”*

“For what price?” asked shrewd Odin, god of wisdom and war.

“I ask for the most beautiful goddess to be my wife, and I ask for the sun and the moon, too.”

“Is that all?” mocked Odin. The other gods also raised their voices in outrage, all save one. Sly Loki appeared thoughtful.

“Give us a moment to consider your generous offer,” Loki said, and he ushered the builder from the hall.

With their guest gone, the gods turned to the trickster. Though Loki was the blood brother of Odin, he was himself a child of giants and the other gods looked on him with suspicion. Loki, the Sly One, the Sky Traveler, the Shape-Shifter. He had always been different from them, even as a youth, with his clever mind and mischievous ways.

“What is in the twists and turns of your mind, Loki?” Odin demanded. “Would you give this stranger all the light, beauty, and warmth of the world?”

“I would not,” Loki said. “But think! Suppose we accept this offer but demand that the task be done in just one winter, not two?”

“Impossible,” the gods and goddesses exclaimed.

“Exactly. And if the builder fails in his task, then he gets no payment, none at all. So! We will have part of our wall built, at least, and at no cost.”

Then the other gods congratulated Loki for his agile mind. They brought the builder back and Odin gave him the terms.

For his part, the builder demanded that if he must complete the job in so short a time, he should be allowed the aid of his stallion to help transport the stones for the wall.

“That was not in our bargain,” said Odin. “It cannot be so.”

“Odin, you are too stubborn,” Loki interrupted. “Give him the use of his stallion. What harm can it do?”

In the end, Odin agreed, but later he warned Loki that the trickster would bear the consequences if his scheme went wrong.

The next day, the builder began his work and the gods retired to their own halls. As the wolves of winter howled, the gods remained in their warm homes and did not see the builder’s progress. It would have brought them no joy if they had.

Each morning, the builder’s stallion dragged great mountains of stone to the builder, who then cut, shaped, and placed the stones with a skill

beyond any mortal. If the gods had seen him work, they would have known that the builder was a giant in disguise.

Three days before summer, the gods emerged from their halls and their feasting and stared in horror at the great wall surrounding their city. Only the gate remained unfinished, and it lacked just one stone!

The gods turned upon Loki, forgetting their earlier admiration. They told Loki that he had brought this woe upon them, and that he must fix things or face their wrath.

Loki fled the hall. When the gods followed him, they found not Loki outside but a beautiful mare.

The mare ran to the builder's stallion. With a toss of her mane, she led the stallion on a merry chase for three days. And for three days, the builder raged and cursed and searched for his stallion in the green fields and mountain paths, for he knew he could not move the final stone alone.

The first day of summer came, and the wall remained unfinished. The builder returned and demanded payment. He threw off his disguise and threatened to bring down the hall.

But by then the gods had guessed the builder's nature and had sent for Thor, the god of thunder

and their greatest warrior. Thor had been in the world of Midgard, where mortals live, for he was fond of mortals and was their protector.

Thor had no love for giants, though, and they feared him greatly. When the giant rose up, Thor cast him down. Thor's fury roared like thunder, and the skies echoed his rage. Thor swung his hammer, and the giant fell.

Months later, Loki returned to Asgard. He brought with him a magnificent foal with eight legs, named Sleipner, which he gave to Odin. Odin was much pleased, and peace was restored to Asgard for a time.

“I don’t get it,” Pru said when she had finished. “Where did Loki get the baby horse?”

ABE’s cheeks reddened. “Well, Odin did warn Loki that he’d *bear* the consequences if something went wrong.”

It took a moment for Pru to understand the double meaning of the word. “Ew!” she exclaimed when she realized people could “bear” a child and that mares could “bear” a foal. ABE’s blush deepened, but a moment later they both found themselves laughing.

Still laughing, Pru reached for her messenger bag to grab a pen. She accidentally grabbed the bag by the wrong end and spilled its contents onto the table and

ground. Groaning, she retrieved her things from the floor and sat back up to gather what remained on the table. As she did, she saw that ABE held her special card.

“Hey, that’s mine!” Pru yanked the card away. She’d still not had any luck puzzling out what “THE UNBELIEVABLE FIB” was, and she didn’t know what the sender meant by *Be grave in your search, and avoid having stones in your head*. But it was still *her* card.

“Sorry.” ABE instantly looked down. Whatever ease had begun to grow between them vanished. One of ABE’s feet began to tap a nervous rhythm on the ground. “I didn’t mean to. It’s just, I really like riddles and stuff. They’re one of the few things I’m good at. I’m kind of literal about things, and that helps with riddles. So I saw your card and I just . . . sorry.”

“Never mind.” Pru softened a bit. Most kids in her class just talked about how good they were at everything. ABE’s attitude was refreshing.

“It’s a good one, though. The riddle on the back of the card? I like it. Did you make it up? It took me a minute to figure it out.”

“No, I didn’t make it—wait.” Pru stopped replacing items in her bag. “You know what the card means?”

“I think so. I mean, I don’t know what ‘THE UNBELIEVABLE FIB’ is. But I think I got the other part. It said to be ‘grave,’ right? And avoid ‘stones in your

head.' Well, headstones are what you put on actual graves, so I thought it must mean—”

“The cemetery.” Pru leaned back in her chair and let her arms drop to her sides. How could she have missed that? It wasn't just a card she'd received.

It was an invitation.

Pru tried to ignore the flutter of hope that stirred in her chest. She had to answer the invitation, and she couldn't wait a moment longer. But she couldn't bring herself to go to the cemetery alone.

She glanced at ABE.

Her dad used to say that desperate times call for desperate measures. “Come on,” Pru said, deciding. “We have to go.”