

# MOLDYLOCKS AND THE BEAR

BY JEFF  
WILLIAMS

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*For Kelly, who inspires me to roar.*

*—Jeff*



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FRIDAY



# CHAPTER ONE

## A BEAR BURSTS IN



The story goes like this.

A breeze blows. A door bangs open. A bear bursts in.

Not just any breeze—an ill wind.

Not just any door—the front door to a zombie’s house.

Not just any bear—a fierce mass of fur. A fiery mess of furry fury. In a snit. And dripping spit and spite.

The bear is angry. Hungry. Mad to munch some zombie cub.

He's come hunting.

The bear snorts softly, shuffles down the hall, swivels his head from side to side. He wants to scare. To tear. To maul. To rip the pictures from the wall.

Needle-sharp hindclaws *clickity-click* on the floor. Needle-sharp foreclaws dig *ker-rippppp* the wallpaper.

The bear busts into the kitchen, and stops. Nose to the air. *Sniff-sniff*. Where's the zombie cub? *Sniff-sniff*. His mouth pulls back in a black-lipped grimace. Spittle dripping from his lips. Some ancestral madness in his eyes. Wild night-stink wafting off wet fur. Breath-puffs steam the kitchen.

He circles the kitchen island. Patient. *Sniff*. A ripening zombie-smell. *Click-click*. Brute instinct takes over. He knocks a stool to the floor. Stands on hind legs, peers into pots and pans hanging from hooks overhead. His thick skull knocks crockery. Metal utensils chime. He wheels around and a massive iron cookpot wobbles off its hook and crashes to the floor.

The bear's rage rises. He abandons all caution now. Cares nothing for noise. Where is that cub? Where? Muddy pawprints tattoo the kitchen floor. He rips cupboard doors from hinges. Tears drawers from counters. Sprays silverware everywhere.

He hears the sound.

A soft, wet cry.

Something waking from the sleep of the undead.

The bear scowls, glowers, growls. Where is it?

Behind the stove. He pads over, peers behind.

Oh, you sweet zombie flesh.

He reaches out an arm.

He hears a gasp.

He turns.

A zombie woman gapes at him. She holds a candle in her hand. Her eyes are wide with terror.

The bear charges toward her and stops. His bulk seems to fill the kitchen. His eyes narrow. Paws flex. He gathers himself for a mighty, house-ripping, earth-shaking, bone-breaking roar.

The woman wavers.

The world waits.

"Um...*roar?*" the bear warbles weakly.

"Cut, cut, cut!" shouts a voice. "Stop the scene. Darling, you need to find your roar."

## CHAPTER TWO

# THE BEAR WAS NO BEAR



“Ah, fungus!” yelled the bear. “Mucus, rot, and pusballs! Phlegm and goo!”

This bear was no bear. Nor no he. He was a she, and she was Moldylocks—Moldylocks LaMort. Just past her 12th unearthday, Moldy was an undersized zombie girl, with different-sized feet, currently wearing a bear costume stomping around the stage of the Zombie International Theater Company. The ZITCO: a house in the

front, a theater in the back, and a mix of everything inside.

The woman calling for more roar was her mom, Dorothy.

Moldylocks clonked toward the back of the stage, around the backdrop painted to look like a kitchen, and into the house.

She banged the counter of the kitchen island, the real kitchen island, and she roared, “*RAWRRRR!*”

“Not bad, not bad at all,” said Dorothy, shambling in behind her.

“It’s easier to roar when I’m inside,” said Moldylocks.

“You just need to bring your inside roar outside,” said her mother.

The biggest event on Plainfield’s theatrical calendar every year was the ZITCO’s performance of *Grizzly Hair*, a musical about menacing bears. The lead role always went to a seventh-grader from Plainfield Middle School, and this year, Moldylocks was one of the five candidates chosen to audition.

To ensure the lead actor could stand up to the rigors of live theater, the audition was a grueling

test. Taking place on a single night, it consisted of four demonstrations of bear-ness: honey-guzzling, wrestling, a roar-off, and a dramatic monologue.

Each event was scored by a panel of three judges, and the whole town always came to watch the five nervous, zombie adolescents struggle, soar, and sometimes, fall flat on their faces.

Legends were born. Reputations were made. Limbs were lost.

The audition was nearly as popular as the musical that followed a month after.

Some who auditioned, like Jeminy Stinkpit, did so because winning meant a scholarship to the summer theater camp at Rotburg State University.

For Moldylocks, who only had one friend, winning was a ticket out of Loser City.

Moldylocks could really have used the help of that friend, Scarlet “Scar” Bone, but Scar was gone for a week, tagging along on her dad’s business trip to Rotburg.

If she was going to find her roar, she was going to have to do it on her own.

And the audition was in a week.

## CHAPTER THREE

# SEE THE BEAR, BE THE BEAR



Dorothy lurched to her daughter, pulled her close, and buried her face in her daughter's green hair, inhaling the smell of rotted moss.

Moldylocks sagged into her mother's embrace.

"I'll never make it," she said.

"Look at me," said Dorothy.



Moldylocks looked into her mother's beautiful face. Dark circles under the eyes. Thin, blackened lips. Careworn lines on her cheeks. A touch of greenrot. Long, irregular hanks of green hair, like her daughter's. It was a face that radiated love and trust.

"I've got good news, and I've got other good news," said Dorothy. "Which do you want to hear?"

"The other good news," said Moldylocks.

"The other good news is that we've got a week."

"What's the good news?"

"Step out of that bear suit first," said Dorothy.

Moldylocks did as she was told. The bear suit became puddled fur at her mismatched feet.

"Now, come." Dorothy steered her daughter to the tall floor mirror by the bottom of the stairs.

Moldylocks took in her reflection. Before her stood a zombie girl wearing a hand-carved bear-totem necklace, a faded sweatshirt with the hand-painted, bloody bear-paw-print on the front, and a leather belt with bears carved all around it. She had a bear bandana hanging out the back pocket of her cutoff jean shorts. Her hair

was short, like green fur. And even her dirty face had a brownish tinge to it.

“The good news,” said Dorothy, “is that you are now, and have ever been, Plainfield’s one and only Bear Girl. You’ve got more bear in you than anyone ever did. You just have to...”

“I know, I know. Bring the inside outside. But how, Mom? You know how I freeze up in front of people.”

Dorothy looked outside. Late spring shadows were inking the woods surrounding the ZITCO. “There’s a little light left in the day. Go practice in the woods ’til I call you in for dinner.”

Moldylocks nodded.

“And bring Mr. B. F. Doolittle.”

“Why?”

“Sweetie, you’ve had him since the day you were unearthed. He’ll remind you of your bear-ness. Keep him with you this week. Now, hurry, it’s going to be dark soon.”

Moldylocks grabbed her bear costume.

“Remember,” said Dorothy, “see the bear, be the bear!”

That reminded Moldylocks of something.

“Mom,” she said, “do you know where the bee blaster is? I have the presentation Monday.”

“I’ll look for it. Now go, go.”

Moldylocks lurched outside, which was the only way to get upstairs.

The ZITCO had long ago stopped being a conventional house. It was, in fact, so crowded with theater gear that the inside stairway was unusable. Moldylocks clambered up the fire escape, scooted through the top-floor window, and hurried down the hall to the room she’d shared with her mother since the day she was unearthed. Sometimes Moldylocks wondered what it would be like to have a dad around. Her new friend, Scar, did—and he made the best brainwaffles Moldylocks had ever tasted. Instead, Moldylocks had a fiercely independent mom who’d always wanted a child, but didn’t want to bother with having a man zombie around. “One child is enough,” she liked to joke.

But Moldylocks never entertained the dad daydream for long. Her undeath was full. She had her mom, the theater, and her beloved stuffed bear, Mr. B. F. Doolittle. He was friendly. He was

ugly. He was her fugly. She grabbed him off the dirtbox bed, climbed back down the fire escape, and lurched into the woods.

The boggy backwater clearing known as O'Putrid's Pond was Moldylocks' happy place. Happy because no one ever ventured back there. No one who could tease her. No one to ask why her bedroom wasn't in the basement, like a normal zombie kid. No one to criticize her bear gear. No one to call her a loser.

She sat Mr. B. F. Doolittle on a boulder, walked a few paces back, and faced him. She cleared her throat and began to chant.

*"I'm a bear down to my core.*

*Give me honey and I want more.*

*I wrestle zombies, it's a war!*

*When I say ruh, you say oar! Ruh..."*

She cupped a hand behind her ear.

Mr. B. F. Doolittle said nothing.

"Ruh..." she waited.

"...oar," she whisper-shouted in answer to herself. "Now that's what I'm talking about!"

Moldylocks scanned the tops of the trees, dense moldfirs, and deadwoods.

She tried a roar. It floated out over the pond and dropped quietly in the water.

Again. The roar went a little farther, but not by much. Her last roar dropped into the mud at her feet.

“I’m such a goo-head, B. I can’t roar. I can’t eat honey. And wrestle? Look at me! I’m the scrawniest bear ever. Bear Girl. *Riiiiight.*”

Moldylocks sat down on the boulder next to her fugly bear and thought a while.

“I don’t get it. What am I missing? All I ever wanted was to be a bear. To be dangerous, dumb, and angry.” She sighed. “Bears are *soooo* cool.”

Moldylocks leaned back on the boulder and closed her eyes.

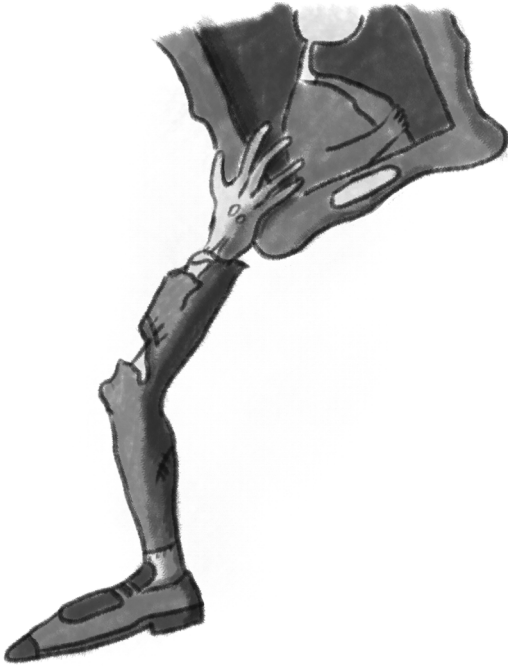
“How do you do it, B?”

Moldylocks sat up, and stared hard at her fugly. “I’d do anything to be a bear. Anything.”

Time to go home. Dark was coming.

## CHAPTER FOUR

# BRIBES AND BEE BLASTERS



While Moldylocks played bear, Dorothy did battle—against the ZITCO. The theater seemed to have a mind of its own. Sometimes, on cold winter nights, when the cold poured in through the thin soil of her dirtbox bed, when she could hear the old house creaking and groaning,

Dorothy did wonder if the house was alive (like the wild animals that roamed the Plainfield Woods) or perhaps undead—just another restless member of the family. And how could a house collect so much stuff? The ZITCO was bursting with theater props.

She and her assistants were always pushing back against the forces of disorder. Santiago Mano, her stagehand, and Harry Halfleg, her stageleg, now worked to put the stage back together after Moldylocks' rampage. They patched wallpaper, straightened pictures, closed cabinet doors, and set the cookpot back on its hook. It was slow going.

Harry, merely a leg, and Santiago, just a hand, could only work so fast.

Despite their limitations, they were good assistants. Hardworking and loyal—as long as Dorothy didn't accidentally call Harry a stagehand or ask Santiago to toe the line.

Santiago climbed to his perch atop Harry's crusty femur stub. Once in place, he tapped Harry twice with his index finger. Harry hopped to a spot under a tilted picture and began to bounce up and down. At the top of Harry's hops, Santiago

would stretch out a finger to try to straighten the picture. Instead, he knocked it off the wall. The picture fell with a crash to the stage. When Harry felt the glass sprinkle his toes, he and Santiago rode off to the supply closet to fetch a broom and a dustpan. It took two trips. Santiago could only carry one thing at a time.

So went days at the ZITCO.

“Keep up the good work, guys,” said Dorothy.

Chaos and disorder were always part of the theater, but this past season had been especially trying. As always, Dorothy had put on tried-and-true shows—the crowd-pleasers that Plainfielders knew and loved. But, also as always, she tried to put her own spin on the classics.

In *The Sound of Mucus*, Dorothy had rewritten the ending so that the Von Trapp family feasts on Nazi guts instead of fleeing over the mountains. Dorothy also altered *West Side Gory* so that the lovebirds did not decompose at the end but instead ate the brains of both of the rival gangs. Then there was *The Gizzard of Oz*, which had Dorothy stay in Oz after dining on the old wizard’s gizzard.



Her genius was lost on the people of Plainfield, however, and each show lost more money than the one before it. Dorothy fell farther behind on her rent. “I just wanted strong female leads,” Dorothy had said to Conniption Stinkpit, her landlord, after each show.

Dorothy shook herself out of her daydreaming. “Oh, what’s wrong with me?” Harry and Santiago paused their sweeping. “Why can’t I just tell the story plain?” They, of course, had no answer, so they simply twitched sympathetically and got back to the task at hand. And at leg.

Dorothy once again found herself grateful that they worked for free. Almost for free. Santiago worked for knuckle-crackings; Harry was fond of foot rubs.

“When you’re done sweeping,” Dorothy called, “can you two hop out and check the mail?”

Santiago gave her a thumb-up.

Dorothy climbed the fire escape to the second floor and lurched to the upstairs prop room, hunting for the bee blaster and any *Grizzly Hair* props she could find. She took a deep breath and opened the door.

The room was a forest of props, stuffed floor-to-ceiling with...marquees and skeleton keys... mannequins and sequins...bolts of fabric and bags of fasteners and bursting bins of phony fingers... carpets and capes; puppets and drapes...garden rakes and magic beans and foaming flakes for snowfall scenes...worn canteens and jars of brains; old magazines and rusty chains...teacups, chairs; artificial buttercups, and spares...bathing caps and ancient maps and one machine for making claps ... clocks and cloaks...headdresses and party dresses... feather boas and feather pillows...axes, maces, and swords; a broken sign that said, "Dread undead who tread the boards." Cans of skin spackle... caddies of gut putty...paints and brushes; pants and bushes...the cardboard disc of a full summer moon; an old guitar, which was dramatically out of tune...masks and costumes for bears and zombies; plus all kinds of gear for minding bees.

Dorothy waded against the surge, occasionally plucking an object from a pile, keeping this, setting that back down. She fought her way to the back of the room, and shoved aside a pile of styrofoam coffins. Then she saw it. The bee blaster.

It looked innocent enough, like a watering can wearing a cone hat, but it was the key prop in the play and the universal symbol of how bears would destroy anything to get what they wanted. It was pure, distilled, bear badness. Bad beariness.

*This may help Moldy find her roar,* she thought.

There came a thumping down the hall. Harry hopped into the doorway of the prop room and stopped, with Santiago still riding atop.

The hand held a fistful of letters.

“Coming...” said Dorothy, wading out to meet them. She took the letters and stuffed them in a frock pocket without opening them. “Let’s head downstairs, fellas. I need some fortification before I open these.”

After she’d brewed a pot of coffee, Dorothy eased herself onto the sagging leather sofa. She allowed herself a fleeting moment of rest, if not complete relaxation, and inhaled the smell of baking brain stroganoff. Dorothy took a sip of Wakeful Dead coffee and turned her attention to the pile of letters. An overdue notice from Plainfield Sewage. A bill from Plainfield Water Co. An invitation to the annual limb-roundup pre-party.

A summer-school catalogue from Rotburg State.  
And a letter from C. Stinkpit.

She tapped the letter on her knee, hesitating.

“Best get it over with,” she said to her assistants, nestled beside her on the sofa. Dorothy drained her coffee in one last, fast gulp and ripped open the letter.

*My Dearest Dorothy,*

*It is in the spirit of our long friendship that I write to you. We know each other well, so I trust you will appreciate my candor in this communication. Time is of the essence, and regrettably overrides the pleasures a personal visit would afford.*

*I'll proceed directly to the point.*

*As you are aware, your last five productions have lost money.*

*As you are aware, the date of the Grizzly Hair audition fast approaches.*

*As you are aware...*

*...it is the showpiece event of the season and an annual tradition;*

*...it is the story that shows the zombie place at the top of the natural order of things;*

*...the lead role can make a career;*

*...it is my daughter's abiding dream and sincerest desire to win the role.*

*I feel compelled to share with you our excitement and affirm that I look forward to a spirited week of respectful competition. As you know, next Friday night, you, my dear friend Tom Head, and I will make our final judges' decisions and crown a victor.*

*My fervent hope is that no matter what the result may be, you and I shall afterward share a cup of tea as friends, even though one of our daughters will most certainly be heartbroken.*

*Here the twin themes of my letter intertwine.*

*I have given up expectation of receiving the year of back rent you owe me and which, when we last met, you promised you would forthwith furnish.*

*Still, I maintain hope of remuneration. If, however, that is but a fool's dream, please do not hesitate to suggest alternate accommodation, any such as you can imagine. I am all ears.*

*We are women of daring!*

*And there are so very many ways to repay a debt.*

*Most Affectionately Yours,*

*Conniption Stinkpit*

Dorothy smacked the sofa cushion so hard she bounced Harry and Santiago to the floor. "Sorry

guys!” She scooped them up and repositioned them. “I can’t believe she’s suggesting what she’s suggesting.”

Harry waggled his toes. Santiago made a fist.

“She wants to bribe me.”

“Who does?” asked Moldylocks, who had just come in from the woods.

“Oh, it’s nothing, really. Just that some people will do anything to be actors. How’s your roar?”

“I still can’t find it.”

## CHAPTER FIVE

# SHADOWY FIGURES



The Festerings neighborhood was the grandest in all of Plainfield, full of coldly elegant homes all rank, dank, and gated to guard their secret dark interiors. Roofs were a thicket of gables and turrets. Basement bedrooms dripped spiders onto thickly soiled dirtboxes. Upper stories oozed lush decay along their reeking parlors, powder rooms, and servants' quarters.

Deep into Friday evening, a thin light flickered in a second-floor room of the grandest house of them all, creating a two-zombie shadow drama on the wall. One shadow stood, hands behind its back. The other shadow lay on its stomach—pushing up, down, up, down.

“95, 96,” counted the standing shadow.

Grunts from the low shadow.

“97, 98...two more,” barked the standing shadow.

The low shadow shook. “99,” it panted. “99-and-a-half,” arms quivering. “100.” The shadow staggered to its feet.

“Form: Horrible,” hissed the larger shadow, making notes on a clipboard. “Endurance: Awful. Attitude: Terrible.”

“Yes, mother,” said the smaller shadow, still panting from her effort.

“What are you?” asked the woman.

“A bear,” said the girl.

“Louder. What are you?” asked the mother.

“A bear!” said the daughter.

“Like you mean it!” shouted Conniption Stinkpit.

“I AM A BEAR!” screamed Jeminy Stinkpit.



Connption put her face close to her daughter's. Their splotchy gray noses touched. One pair of bloodshot yellow eyes stared into another. "Not yet, you aren't. You're still just a zombie girl. Now, to the honey."

Connption pointed to the table by the wall. A jar of honey waited. Jeminy grimaced and followed her mother.

"Remember, bears are about power," Connption explained. "You need to dominate the honey." Connption spooned a small glob into her daughter's mouth. Jeminy choked it down and adjusted the feather boa around her neck.

"Bah! Your honey score is one! Again." Another swallow of honey and a tug at the boa.

"Leave the boa alone," Connption barked. "You don't want to draw attention to it during the competition. Now take another spoonful of honey. You must build up a tolerance."

Jeminy nodded. Her mother's training plan called for ten spoonfuls of honey tonight, and she had eight more to go. Gulp by gulp, she choked the honey down.

When she'd finished, Connption wasted

no time. “Now let’s get right to the wrestling. Remember—in the audition, the transition from event to event will be quick.” Conniption snapped her fingers. “Like that!” She stomped the floor twice. “Arnold!”

Out of the shadows stepped a giant with veiny arms, muscled legs, and patches of thick, black hair covering his back. He was a fearsome wrestling competitor, made more intimidating by his brown, spandex wrestler’s unitard with a yellow “S” across the chest. Jeminy’s only advantage was that he wouldn’t be able to see, or hear, or smell her.

Arnold had no head.

Jeminy crouched. Arnold, sensing her movement, turned toward her. The two circled, bobbing and feinting. Arnold flicked his hands out, trying to locate Jeminy. Jeminy grabbed for Arnold’s wrist. Arnold brushed her arm away. Jeminy dashed behind him and went for a half-nelson. Arnold flung her aside. Jeminy moved back in front of Arnold and dove in for a takedown. It was like trying to take down a tree. Arnold caught her, flipped her over, and quickly pinned her.

“Thank you, Arnold,” said Conniption, stomping

the floor again. “Well done. Back to the attic now. Thank you.”

Arnold shuffled off, hands groping in front of him. Conniption narrowed her eyes as Jeminy struggled to her feet. “Pathetic,” she said to her daughter. “Your wrestling score is 0! Let me hear your roar.”

Jeminy’s throat was raw from the honey and she was tired from wrestling. When she tried to roar, all that came out was a raspy whisper.

“Negative ten!” yelled Conniption. “How do you ever expect to win?”

“I don’t know, Mom.”

“Obviously.”

“I’ll work harder.”

There was a thump near the doorway. Arnold had walked into a wall. Conniption stomped the floor. *Stomp...stomp-stomp*. Arnold waved, moved to his left, and headed out into the hall.

Conniption turned back to her daughter. “I don’t want you to just win. I want you to annihilate the competition—especially the LaMort girl.” Conniption Stinkpit tapped her pencil thoughtfully on the clipboard. “That’s it. I’ve decided!

You're going TBI for the rest of the week."

"TBI?"

"Total Bear Immersion."

## CHAPTER SIX

# GO FULL BEAR



Meanwhile, on the outskirts of town, in the upstairs bedroom of a homely house, another mother-daughter scene was unfolding.

Two shadows appeared upon the wall. One sat on the dirtbox bedframe beside the other, who was settling in to sleep.

These shadows were still.

Dorothy brushed the dust off Moldylocks' dirt-mask and smoothed the dirt of the bed around her. The soil was coarse. It didn't clump like the moist dirt in the finer dirtboxes of the nicer houses. Sometimes Moldylocks would wake up shivering. When she did, she'd climb into her mother's dirtbox where the two of them would cuddle, snug as skinbugs, dreaming dreams of bears and theater.

"I need to get us some better dirt," she said to her daughter.

"But then we wouldn't snuggle as much," yawned Moldylocks.

Moldylocks clutched Mr. B. F. Doolittle to her chest and touched her bear-totem necklace. "Mom, do you think I have a chance?"

Dorothy patted her hand. "I think you have a very good chance."

"Even though Jeminy's mom's a judge?"

"Remember, Tom Head is the other judge, and he's honorable. Besides, don't even worry about the judges. Just focus on finding your roar. If you find it, you'll be just fine, Bear Girl."

Moldylocks frowned. “Mom, sometimes I’m not sure what that means.”

“Good thing you have a week to find out.”

“That’s not very long.”

“It is if you Go Full Bear,” said Dorothy. “So, starting tomorrow, I want you to do everything the bear way.”

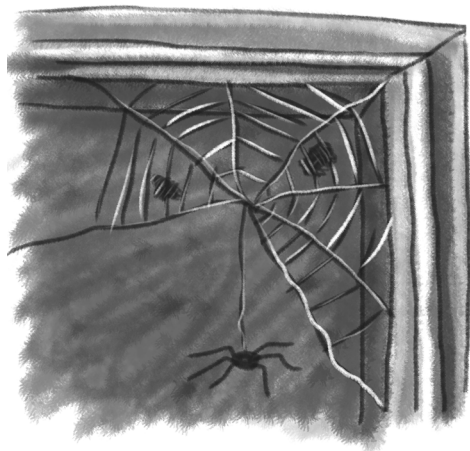
“Everything?” asked Moldylocks.

“All the way,” said Dorothy.





SATURDAY



CHAPTER SEVEN  
EVEN THE STRONGEST  
ZOMBIE IN PLAINFIELD  
GETS TIRED SOMETIMES



Phileas Batuta was the strongest zombie in Plainfield. He was, in fact, the strongest zombie anywhere. He was even stronger than Bo Stronk, the celebrated Circo Morto strongman. He was also far too shy to ever appear in front of an audience. Eight feet tall, Phileas had legs like

tree trunks, a chest like a rain barrel, arms that burst shirtsleeves, doughy white skin, and a face like a warm summer moon. Phileas could fling a manhole cover like a discus, lift a stagecoach from a ditch, and carry fifteen giggling zombie children on his back. Sixteen if they were on the small side.

It was a good thing for the people of Plainfield that he was as kindhearted as he was large. Otherwise they might have needed to pen him up. There was, in fact, such depth and silence to his kindness that people often thought him simple. For example, Phileas was famous around town for giving his horse, Mr. Goodness, a rest, if Mr. Goodness had a particularly strenuous delivery to make. Phileas would pull the wagon over and switch places with Mr. Goodness for a few miles. To Phileas this just seemed fair.

Mighty as he was, however, Phileas was worn out by this Saturday's unloading of furniture into what used to be called the Old Curmudgeon Place, but would now likely have to be called something different. Some of the furniture he'd carried into the house was familiar to him—sofas and tables

and chairs and such—though it was missing the familiar low-tide smell of zombie fixtures.

Other goods, however, were new to him. A tall, white cabinet with long, vertical handles. Bright, white toilets that looked better for holding water than sand. Great, cushioned rectangles with wood frames, soft pillowing, and stout legs on the underneath side.

Phileas was spent as much from the wondering as from the delivering.

Sweat soaked his broad brow and his skin was beginning to sag off his giant muscles. *I'm gonna need a deep skinbeetle bath tonight to dry me out*, he thought, lifting the final item from his delivery cart and setting it gently down on the front porch.

He tilted his straw hat back on his head and stuck his thumbs under the straps of his overalls. It felt good to stand like this for a moment on the porch. A pose that said “job well done.” He studied the object he’d just set down.

“That’s Edison,” said Mr. Skip Bear, coming out of the house.

Skip Bear was also an oddity to Phileas, dressed as he was in neatly creased khaki slacks, clean boat

shoes, and a white polo shirt under a sleeveless pullover sweater.

“What’s an edison?” asked Phileas.

“Edison’ is its name,” chuckled Skip. “What it *IS* is a turntable.”

That set off a small thought-stream for Phileas. The thought-stream went like this:

*So many wonders. These bears. This turntable. What could it be for? It looks so strange. Is it dangerous? The bears are so strange. Are they dangerous? What will Plainfield think? We’re not much for change. I wonder why though. And besides, what does “strange” mean, anyway? Maybe it only means “different.” Not bad or good. And ain’t I considered strange, too? But I don’t seem strange to me.*

Skip was staring at him. “A turntable,” he repeated.

“I see,” said Phileas. “Are tables often in need of turning?”

Skip laughed again. “Sometimes a properly turned table can change the world.” His laugh was warm and buttery. A laugh that invited you in. Not the shut-you-out kind of laugh. Phileas knew the difference well.

“But this turntable,” Skip explained, “plays music.” Skip turned a crank on the side and pulled a black disc from a drawer in the turntable cabinet. “This is called a ‘record.’” He set it on the turntable. Skip flipped a switch and placed a metal arm with a needle on its underside just at the outer rim of the record.

Phileas heard a crackling sound, then...angels.

He spun around, astonished. He looked behind him, toward the woods, toward the sky. It wasn't that he expected a church choir to come marching from the woods, but that would have at least made sense. He tugged at an ear, something he was prone to do when thinking. This required some hard thinking. He tugged harder. The ear came off.

“Hmm,” he said, staring at the ear in his hand. He shrugged and stuffed the ear in the front pocket of his overalls.

“The music comes from inside,” said Skip, snapping off the device.

“It is a wonder,” mused Phileas.

Skip adjusted his round, wire-rimmed glasses. “Well, my new friend, we're almost moved in.

What say we get that ear patched up and take lunch before we bid you good day?”

Phileas agreed, but only if he could let Mr. Goodness forage freely in the clearing for his lunch as well.

Twenty minutes later, when he saw what the Bears called “food,” lunch wasn’t seeming like such a good idea at all. Still, never one to be impolite, Phileas squeezed down onto a picnic table with the whole Bear family—Skip, his wife, Muffy, and their son, Brockster.

Muffy had strategically placed the table under the shade of a deadwood tree and set it with bowls of porridge and honey, plates full of honey sweetened bearclaw pastries, platters piled high with salmonberries, tureens of cream, ramekins of honey, and jars of honeyade to wash it down.

Phileas, forgetful, reached up to tug his ear and touched the bandage wrapped tightly around his head. The ear was secure, thanks to Muffy’s skill with a needle and baling wire. Phileas peeked into his porridge bowl. No brains anywhere. Yet he felt it would be an ingratitude to refuse the meal. He just hoped he could keep it down.

He did, with just a few hearty porridge belches.

While he ate, Skip and Muffy told him their story. How excited they were to be living among a group of new folks. How they'd always been a bit adventurous. How they'd wanted a plot of land where Skip could tinker on his inventions—"Big plans, big plans," muttered Skip through a mouthful of porridge. How Muffy could develop their honey-export business—"The Plainfield climate is perfect for it." How they'd probably return home again someday, but it would do Brockster good to meet kids from other cultures—"I've always dug zombies," he said. "Get it?"

Phileas thought a moment. Dug. He smiled. His smile faded when he thought on how adventure can be a mixed blessing. He found himself hoping the Bear family would get less adventure than they wanted.

Instead, they would get more. A lot more.



## CHAPTER EIGHT

# YOU CAN'T TRUST A BEAR



As Phileas sipped a mug of Earl Gray Matter tea that evening at Burial Grounds Coffee and Tea Company, he contemplated marvels. He also found himself, as he sometimes did, wishing he had a close friend with whom he could share his thoughts. Well, he did have a friend in Mr. Goodness, but aside from the occasional whinny, the horse was more a listener than a talker.

Burial Grounds was center of Plainfield scuttlebutt. Zombies were lurching in to socialize

after Saturday dinner or grabbing a quick cup of joe before heading out to a show.

Amid the swirl of motion and conversation, one figure in a shadowed corner was conspicuous for his stillness. With his trench coat, massive beard, mirrored sunglasses, and fedora hat, it was hard to tell there even was a zombie presence within.

Phileas, however, was too absorbed in his thoughts to take much notice. Especially when The Stranger touched a gloved hand to the brim of his hat and gave a subtle nod toward the back of the shop. Where Conniption Stinkpit sat alone and sipped her tea.

May Clot whisked by Phileas' table holding a tray with a fresh tea bag and a pot of hot water.

"Top-off, Phil?"

Phileas was drifting down a thought-stream again. He stared blankly out at Mr. Goodness, hitched outside and wearing Phileas' straw hat, even though the sun was almost down.

"*PHIL-e-as!*" sang May.

He looked up, smiled absently, and nodded. "I was out at the Bears' place."

“For real, or in your mind just now?” May asked as she refilled his mug.

“Both, I suppose.”

“Were you now? Well, spill it, then. Are they as odd as folks are saying? Folks out Flea Knuckle Way saw some strange contraptions in the cart as it passed earlier today. Can’t trust ‘em is what I’m hearing.”

“No. Yes. They were odd, I mean. And amazing.”

“Amazing!?” said May, surprised. “You like ‘em?”

The shop was suddenly quiet. Phileas flushed and stammered. “They were just...interesting.”

The Stranger rose, glided to an empty table behind Phileas, and sat down quietly.

“How so?” asked May.

Phileas didn’t like the attention. He tugged at his ear and got bandage instead. “They were kind. Smart. I didn’t like the food. They had inventions. One that made beautiful music.” He drained his coffee.

Murmurs around the shop. “I’d like to hear this music,” someone said.

“Maybe these bears aren’t so bad,” said another person.

The Stranger laughed loudly. He turned around in his chair to face Phileas, tugging at his enormous beard. "And tell me, my fellow, are you well-acquainted with bears?"

Phileas looked into a face that was all beard and mirrored sunglasses. He shifted in his seat and shook his head.

"Well, I am," said The Stranger. "I've traveled often to the Bear Country, and let me tell you, let me tell all of you," he swept a gloved hand across the room, "they're every bit the barbarians you've been led to believe they are. Great pretenders, yes. Sly fakers, indeed. Amazing actors, yes. But always, always barbarians in the end. *Bar-BEAR-i-ans*. Mark my words. Those bears would just as soon spread your brain on a muffin as shake your hand."

"But..." said Phileas.

"Oh, I'll grant you they put on a good show," said The Stranger, rising awkwardly to his feet. "A very good show. I bid you all good evening." With that, he walked out of the shop, bumping several tables on his way out.

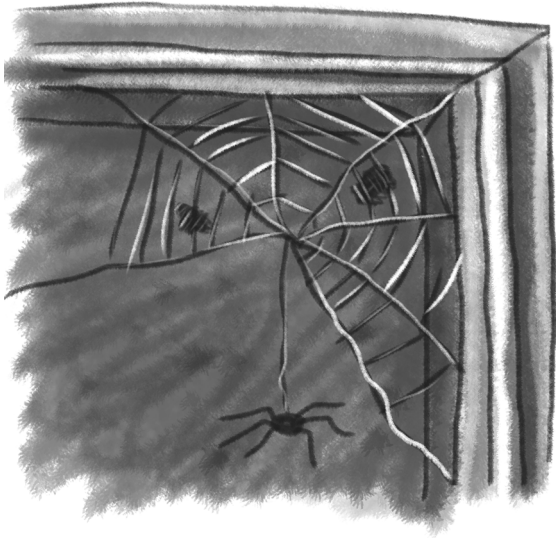
The coffee shop buzzed once more. "Knew it!" said someone. "Can't trust a bear."

A short while later, Conniption finished her tea and left the shop, smiling mysteriously.

May lurched to Phileas' table. "Refill, sweetie?"

She had to ask him three times. He was busy wondering if he could trust his own eyes and ear anymore.

CHAPTER NINE  
A SECRET MEETING  
AT THE STINKPITS



Saturday night. Jeminy lay in her dirtbox, letting the worms tickle her flesh. Exhausted from training but unable to sleep, she stared at the broken spiderweb that adorned the small window high in her basement room. A spider danced along the thread, mending the tear. Making a broken thing beautiful.

Jeminy heard the back door open quietly upstairs followed by the familiar footfalls of the zombie only known as The Stranger. She rose from her dirtbox, brushing her skin carefully, and shuffled softly up the stairs. She didn't want to leave a trail. Didn't want her mother to suspect.

At the top of the stairs, Jeminy cracked the door and peered down the hallway. She strained to listen but the words were hard to hear. She crept closer. "Total Bear Immersion," she told herself. She lurched into the powder room next to her mother's office. Traced her fingers along the corpse-flower wallpaper. Felt for the thin spot. There. She pressed her ear to the wall and listened.

There was a muffled voice that became clearer after a moment. Jeminy next heard the spinning of the dial on the office safe and the *ka-chunk* of the safe door opening.

"Two-hundred bones. Your retainer," said Conniption. "You showed me a lot today with your performance. Want me to count it?"

"No need. Just put it in the box," said The Stranger.

“You’ll get the other part of the payment when the job is done. Regarding assignment number one: Did you bring the honey?”

“In the box.”

“Smooth?” asked Conniption.

“The honey, yes. The theft, not quite.”

“Were you spotted?”

“No, a hive was tipped and we didn’t have time to reset it properly.”

“But it’s upright?”

“Yes.”

“Fine. Assignment number two: Did you tell the story per my instructions?”

“I did indeed. But what’s the point of it?”

“Story is everything,” said Conniption. “Story comes before reason, before thought, before sense. All of it. Story rules our emotions. Story tells us what we see and hear and feel and fear, and if what we see and feel and fear doesn’t fit the story, do we change our story? No. We disbelieve our senses. Unless you’ve trained yourself to rise above emotion. As I have.”

“I see.”

“You say you see, but do you understand? A story



is a powerful thing. If you control the story, you control what people fear. Therefore, you control the town. Your job is to make sure that the story Plainfield tells itself about bears is the story that should be told...”

“The truth,” said The Stranger.

“Indeed,” said Conniption. “Mind you, the story is only part of our several dramas. The other is...”

“The drama itself?”

“Yes, the play. *Grizzly Hair* unites the community every spring.”

“Against the bears.”

“Even more, against the idea of bears. A common fear is what binds Plainfield together. Without that, we fall apart.”

“Well, the real Bears are a danger, are they not?” asked The Stranger.

“Yes, but not for the reason you think,” replied Conniption.

“Oh?”

“As long as bears live among us, Plainfield is at risk.”

Jeminy strained to hear. Strained to understand.

“At risk from attacks?” asked The Stranger.

“No, you fool,” hissed Conniption. “Plainfield is at risk of liking them. Once people get to know them, they might accept them. Which will leave Plainfield with no one to hate.”

“I think I understand,” said The Stranger.

“We’re going to run them out of town. It will happen in a three-act drama unfolding this week. Act I: You and Jeminy provoke the Bears, starting tomorrow.”

“Any special instructions?”

“Grab all the empty spleens and stomachs from the offal cabinet in the kitchen—anything that can hold goo. Fill them all with mucus from the compost vat out back. I want a good supply of mucus balloons for your raid tomorrow.”

“Understood.”

“Act II: Once the Bears are all stirred up, we frame them for...disturbances around town.”

“Which disturbances?” asked The Stranger.

“The ones you create!” snapped Conniption.

“I don’t know,” The Stranger hesitated.

Conniption didn’t speak for a moment. “You *do* want to be paid, right?”

The Stranger nodded.

“Good,” Conniption continued. “Then do the work! You do a full body of work, you get full payment. *That’s* the deal. Now, where was I?”

“Act II,” The Stranger muttered.

“Right, Act II. Spread the rumors! You’ll have to put in a few appearances at the coffee shop to crank up the gossip engine. Then in Act III, we arrange the biggest disturbance of all, and the town is so outraged they deport the Bears. And we cap it all off with the grand finale—the audition Friday night.”

“And if Jeminy wins...” The Stranger began.

“When she wins,” interrupted Conniption. “We will take the town’s fear to an entire new level. I’ll control the story.”

“*And* the town,” added The Stranger.

“For its own good,” added Conniption.

“And you’ll deliver payment when?”

“After the audition.”

“Before.”

“After,” said Conniption. “I need my assurances. Now—time to go.”

Jeminy heard a soft thump, like an object being placed on a table, then another thump. The

Stranger spoke, but his voice was muffled and Jeminy couldn't hear what he said. She heard her mother stomp down the hall and out the back door.

Jeminy slipped back down to her bedroom and wiggled into her dirtbox, which was still warm. Excitement coursed through her. What did her mother mean "provoke the Bears?" What would she be doing tomorrow? And what did the week hold? She wasn't sure, but she felt she was at the beginning of an adventure. The desire to win the lead in the play burned stronger than ever in her. She would do anything, *anything*, to win. Moldylocks had to be stopped. The bears had to be stopped. Plainfield needed her.

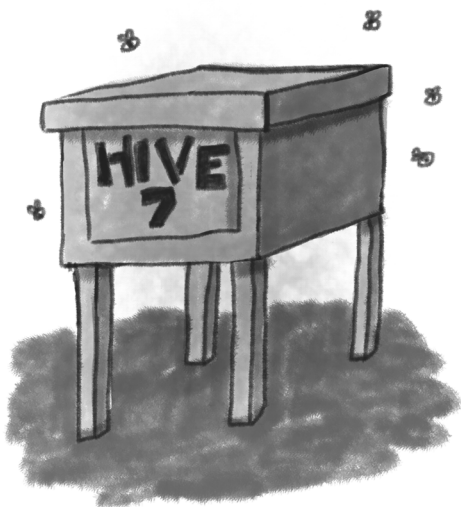
In the window, the spider had perfected its web.

**SUNDAY**



# CHAPTER TEN

## THE BUZZ AT THE BEARS' HOUSE



Judging by the buzzing, the bees had traveled easily from the Bear's old home.

Mostly.

Skip put his arm around Brockster and steered him around the bee yard while Muffy spread a picnic blanket on the lawn at the edge of the clearing.

"Listen close. Do you hear it?" asked Skip.

Brockster listened. “Seven?”

“Yep, sounds like we have a problem. Let’s take a look.”

They wove among the hive cabinets toward the far end of the clearing, toward Hive Number 7.

Bees make many buzzes. High frantic whines of worry. Low halting hiccups when they’re harried. Murmuring hums of contentedness. Sonorous sleep songs. And, occasionally, the fitful whirl of fretfulness. That was the sound coming from Hive 7.

Skip quickly pulled open the under-cabinet drawers and grabbed a beekeeping mask for Brockster and himself. When they lifted the hive lid, a squadron of bee soldiers immediately burst forth and swarmed their faces. Brockster flinched, despite the mask.

“I’ve never seen them this agitated!”

“Breathe and be calm,” said Skip. “They’re just protecting their own.”

Once the soldiers had finished their reconnaissance of the Bears’ heads, they dropped off and returned to the hive to keep watch. Skip pointed toward a strangely thick cluster of bees. He told Brockster to reach in and gently clear them away.

Brockster moved slowly, but with intent. The whine-buzz got louder. He focused on his breathing—in through the snout, out through the mouth. He extended a foreclaw and carefully flicked a mass of bees out of the way. Doing so revealed the problem. The jouncing cart ride into Plainfield had jostled loose Hive 7’s honeycomb. It had toppled, spilling honey over a group of bees, including a magnificent large female.

“The queen!” whispered Brockster.

“Gently,” whispered Skip.

Brockster pressed his claw into the glob of honey—crusted on top, soft underneath. He pressed through the crust, reached beneath the queen, and lifted her free. Once set gently on the floor of the hive cabinet, she was instantly swarmed by attendants who began to clean the honey from her. Brockster and Skip next worked patiently to free the 15 other trapped bees. Each freed bee was attended to by members of the hive.

When the last bee was released, Brockster pushed his headgear back on his head and held a honey-dripping paw to his mouth. Skip stopped him. “Let them have it.”



Both bears stood with their paws in the hive cabinet while bees cleaned their claws. Brockster scanned the area above the hive to make sure none of the bees who'd flown free were trying to return. He double-checked the inside of the cabinet. "All clear." Once he'd closed the cabinet and latched the lid, Skip lifted the hive while Brockster put a shim under one of the legs to keep it level. Inside, the worker bees were already stabilizing the honeycomb.

"Supper's ready," called Muffy from across the clearing.

Skip waved to her.

Brockster took one last look inside. The queen seemed fully restored. A happy hum filled the hive.

"Do you know why I didn't want you to eat the honey?" asked Skip as they walked back.

"Spoil my appetite?"

Skip shook his head. "It's not that. I want the bees to know how we respect them."

"But why respect them if they don't respect us? I mean, they attacked us."

"Ah, but they didn't sting. They were just protecting the hive. It's a reminder that we need

to move gently in this world. It's easy for others to misread our intentions."

They arrived at the blanket, spread with loaves of bread and jars of liquid gold.

Skip's belly rumbled. "Now we can enjoy our honey."

"After we give thanks," said Muffy.

"Indeed," Skip nodded.

They took their Sunday supper in the honey-colored dusk.

"Dad," said Brockster, "do you think it's going to work? Us and zombies, I mean?"

Skip nodded as he chewed a mouthful of honey-slathered bread.

"You're dripping, dear," said Muffy. She reached over to wipe a dollop off Skip's chin.

"Thanks, Sweetie," said Skip. He swallowed. "I think it'll work. Maybe not with us, but eventually. We've always had a connection, since way back. They may have forgotten, but we can remind them. It's a story that needs telling."

"Can you tell me again?" asked Brockster.

Skip took a gulp of cool honeyade. "Yes. Now, you have to remember, this was a long time ago, before you were born."

CHAPTER ELEVEN

THE ZOMBIE CUB  
WHO ENTERED THE  
WORLD ALONE



**T**here was a mix-up on the child's unearthing day. The keeper of the Welcome Field was on vacation, and her backup was down with a case of the screaming festers, and her backup's backup was backpacking. That's why the Field was empty when the earth began to stir.

Zombies come into the world from under a thick skin of soil. The keeper keeps watch on

the field, a patchwork of rectangular plots, each marked by a headstone. Often a low, wispy mist wreaths the site. The Welcome Field is itself a great rectangle, rimmed on three sides by banks of trees, and on the fourth by a stern granite cliff, looming like the biggest headstone of all.

Now, a typical unearthing goes like this: There's a scritch-scratching in the soil, which the keeper senses. They mutter a quick blessing, lurch over to the plot in question, and pluck the newborn free. The keeper swaddles the infant in burlap and gives them a bottle of warm brain formula. With the baby safe and warm, the keeper double-checks the registry to see which family is next in line to welcome home a zombie baby. The parents-to-be are notified and they come claim their cub.

But this particular night all those years ago was not so typical. Not at all. With no one there to receive it, the newborn's cries echoed off the cliff and were swallowed by the sky. Until a family of travelers heard them.

The family listened from the edge of the Welcome Field woods.

They spoke quietly, urgently to each other.

“Why don’t they do something?”

“What kind of people would just let an innocent cub suffer?”

“They’re not like us. They’re savages.”

“Let’s wait and see.”

So the travelers waited and saw. The evening hours passed. Around midnight, the child’s cries began to weaken.

Around two in the morning, the cries stopped.

“I can’t take this,” said one.

“We should NOT get involved,” cautioned another.

“Best let nature take its course,” said a third.

“No! I wouldn’t be able to live with myself,” said the first one. “Come on.”

The travelers stole into the clearing.

The child would remember only one thing of that fateful night. She had exhausted herself in her wailing and unburying, and now lay too tired to do anything but stare at the sky and trust in the moon. But suddenly, the moonlight disappeared, blotted out by a furry figure reaching down to pull her from the earth. Then she was swept away.

The leader carefully cradled the cub as the travelers dashed through the forest. They were frantic to get this detour over with as soon as possible and be on their way. They kept to the shadows, fens, and side paths. The forest was quiet except for the hoot-owl calls. At last came a light in the distance, a house. The travelers murmuring, conferring, deciding. "Yes, this will do."

"Just leave the zombie cub on the doorstep," said one.

"No. Too dangerous. The wolves are about. Stand guard. I'll go," said the leader.

He padded softly to the front door, claws *click-clicking* on the front porch. Sniffed. *Sniff-sniff*. He turned the handle of the front door. Locked. He tried again. Turned it harder. The handle came off and the door swung open.

Down the hall the traveler tiptoed. The hall ended in a kitchen. He entered. Peered about. He bumped a cookpot from an overhead rack. Padded over to a stove releasing the last warmth from the evening meal. The leader set the cub down behind it. Snug.

A light flicked on upstairs. The travelers heard footsteps.

“Go, go, go!” came the shouts from outside. The leader lingered, staring at the zombie cub. He pulled a small, soft object from his satchel and placed it beside the child before racing down the hall, knocking pictures off the walls, gouging the wallpaper, and ripping the front door from its frame as he shot out the front. He didn’t realize he’d nearly knocked down the zombie woman at the bottom of the stairs. He took cover in the woods, his companions urging him to flee.

He held up a paw. “Wait.” He raced through the woods to the back of the house. Peeked through the kitchen window.

A zombie woman entered cautiously, brandishing a skinbrush like a weapon.

The woman heard a small scuffling sound by the stove. She lurched toward it, afraid, but curious. She beheld the cub...

“Oh! Oh!” she said. “Who left you here? Did the bears try to harm you? You sweet precious thing. You must be starving...”

The infant felt herself being lifted again. And this time, finally, gloriously, she was fed.

The woman sat up all night with the zombie cub. As the infant fell asleep, the woman gently

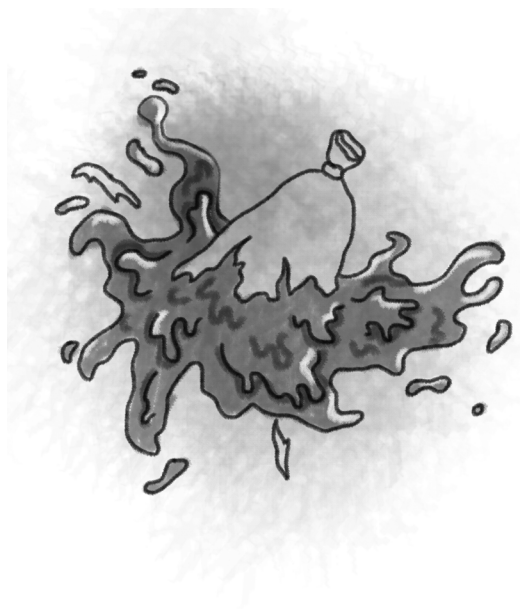
brushed the dirt from her skin, her face, and last, her hair.

Even as she slept, the child clutched the gift from the leader of the travelers—a small stuffed bear.



## CHAPTER TWELVE

# THE ATTACK OF THE MUCUS-BALLOONERS



**B**rockster Bear surveyed the battlefield on his bedroom floor that Sunday afternoon. A zombie action figure lurked behind a tented geography book, watching a group of unsuspecting bears picnicking beside his baseball mitt. The zombie gave the hand signal—thumb across the throat—to a zombie mob clustered behind the

jar of paintbrushes and yelled, “*Garr-r-ga-rarrrrr*,” which meant “Attack!”

Brockster narrated the action.

“The zombies were merciless that day. Silent, swift, and salivating. The bears never knew what bit them. One minute, there’s a nice little wedding picnic by the river. *La la la la la*. Next minute the bears *ARE* the picnic. *Dah-dah DA!* Reduced to a pile of guts being munched by...by...” he started to laugh. “By bloodthirsty undead...” He dropped the action figures and rolled over laughing. “That is *SO* over-the-top,” he said. “As if zombies would attack bears.”

He muffled his laughter when he heard a splat on the roof.

*Splat!*

Then two more.

*Splat! Splat!*

Brockster scrambled to his feet. He rushed to the window, stuck his head out, and squinted through his glasses. He couldn’t see anything. At first. Nothing in the yard, the woodpile, or the surrounding woods. It all looked normal. He peered down at the flower bed. Nothing there.

When he looked up again, he saw a squishy missile whizzing toward his face. His mouth fell open in astonishment.

That was his big mistake.

The mucus-filled spleen balloon hit his face and disgorged a torrent of mucus into his mouth.

*“Gack! Ack-ack!”*

Brockster staggered backward and crashed against his bookshelf, knocking books “E” and “F” from his encyclopedia set off the shelf.

*“Yuck!”*

Laughter rang out from the near edge of the woods.

Brockster raced out of his room and dashed down the stairs.

Skip and Muffy had been listening to a Leonard Bernstein record and hadn’t heard the commotion.

“Mom, Dad, we’re being attacked. We have to check the hives!” shouted Brockster, sprinting out of the room.

*Splatta-splat-splat.*

The Bear family raced outside and looked frantically around.

The hooligans were gone.

Skip raised up on his hind legs, sniffed the breeze.

“Let’s go after them, Dad!” said Brockster.

“No,” Skip sighed.

“Why not?” shouted Brockster. “We have to defend the hives!”

“We did defend them,” said Muffy.

“Think about it, son,” said Skip. “We reacted appropriately. But if we chase them down, if we catch them, if someone gets hurt, who do you think will get the blame?”

“Us,” growled Brockster.

“Yep,” said Skip. He sniffed, caught a faint trace of zombie. “Best we get to the cleanup.”

After the Bear family had collected the empty offal bags and scrubbed the mucus blotches off the house, they gathered in the kitchen to restore themselves with honey tea.

“Did you see who they were?” Skip asked Brockster.

“No. I just heard them. Laughing.”

“What did the laughing sound like?”

“It sounded like...like claws on a chalkboard.”

Far down Fleaknuckle Road, Jeminy Stinkpit huffed along after The Stranger. She couldn't get over how familiar he looked, but it was hard to get a good look at him beneath his massive trench coat.

Jeminy huffed along after. "Are they following us?" Jeminy gasped.

The Stranger looked over his shoulder. His great beard flapped in the breeze. "No, but hurry anyway."

"Did you see how fast they moved?" asked Jeminy.

"Indeed. They would have ripped us apart," said The Stranger. "It's what they do." He adjusted his fedora. "We can slow down now, the town bridge is up ahead. And I don't think those monsters are going to follow us."

They crossed the bridge into central Plainfield. The Stranger huddled with Jeminy a moment before parting. "Remember, we were just having fun. You saw how they reacted. You cannot trust them. Ever," he said. "Spread the word."

Jeminy nodded. "I will."

"Welcome to Total Bear Immersion."



MONDAY



## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

# THE NEW KID IN CLASS



Monday was the day of the “Talk About Your Passion” presentation for Mr. Sever’s seventh-grade class, and Moldylocks was presenting first.

She walked to the front of the classroom, already sweating under the thick fur of her bear costume. A small stack of notecards shook in her paw.



“You may begin,” he said.

Moldylocks cleared her throat. “My presentation today is about...”

“Bears?” interrupted Jeminy.

Moldylocks paused. “Uh, y-yes,” she stammered.

“Gee, how could I have guessed?” laughed Jeminy. “Bear Girl loves bears.” Several members of the class laughed with her. Moldylocks noticed they were all Threadheads. The Threadheads had started as a sewing club, but since Scarlet Bone had resigned her membership, Jeminy had turned it into a gang—although a really well-dressed one—with herself as the gang leader. She’d even managed to recruit one boy member, Possum Skidmark.

Moldylocks wished Scarlet was here instead of accompanying her dad on a work trip. She swallowed, and looked at Mr. Sever.

“Enough,” said Mr. Sever to Jeminy. “No more interruptions. Proceed, Moldylocks.”

Moldylocks stared down at her speech. Sweat dripped into her eyes. She blinked, trying to see through the mesh of the costume bear head. The paw mittens made it hard for her to hold her notes. Her real foot—the size-six one, not the

size-nine one—itched inside the paw foot.

Moldylocks began her speech, but her words were muffled by the bear head. The class leaned forward to listen.

“What bears love most in the world is going to terrify you and scare-ify you it’s a fact so grossome it’s going to bore its way into your brain like a brainworm pause here for effect.”

Jeminy snorted.

“Oh,” said Moldylocks. “I wasn’t supposed to say that last part out loud. Sorry.”

“That’s okay, Moldylocks, said Mr. Sever. Suddenly he lobbed an eraser at Calvin Gutbucket, who was sticking a slobbery finger into Maya Knabstrupper’s ear. The eraser bounced off Calvin’s head and he dropped the finger. Maya quickly placed it in her pocket and stuck her tongue out at Calvin.

Mr. Sever walked back to retrieve his eraser, pointing to the eye in a jar of clear liquid on a bookshelf near Calvin’s desk. “Please remember, class, that I have eyes everywhere.”

The eye in the jar blinked twice.

“Please continue, Moldylocks.”

Moldylocks swallowed and read on. “Okay hey let’s get on with the grossome bears eat what’s called honey but does anyone know what honey is no well I’ll tell you what honey is honey is poop that’s been puked and repuked.”

There was a knock at the classroom door.

A grownup head poked in.

“Principal Botulus, welcome,” said Mr. Sever. “Moldylocks, hold on for a moment. Do you have our new student?”

“I do indeed.” The portly principal stood aside so the figure next to her could enter the classroom. “I’m sorry about the delay, Geraldo,” she said. “The transfer paperwork took all morning.”

Dr. Botulus gave a cheery wave and departed.

Mr. Sever beckoned the new student to the front of the class. He would have felt out of place no matter what, but his clothes didn’t help. Clean, white golf shirt. Neatly ironed, peach-colored shorts. Argyle socks up to his knees. Beige boat shoes.

Oh, and the new student was also a bear.

“Welcome,” said Mr. Sever. “Why don’t you tell the class your name?”

“Brockster.”

“Say hello, class.”

No one said a word. Except Moldylocks, who offered an ecstatic, “Hi.”

Brockster noticed her for the first time.

The real bear and the zombie girl in the bear suit stared at each other.

Mr. Sever cleared his throat. “Right, then. Brockster and his family just moved into the Old Curmudgeon Place, isn’t that right, Brockster?”

Brockster nodded.

“We’re glad to have you,” said Mr. Sever. “We’ll be starting our bear unit in social studies soon. This girl beside you is our resident bear expert, Moldylocks. She’ll be your lunch buddy.”

Moldylocks held out a paw, dropping her notecards as she did. The class snickered. She tried to blink the sweat out of her eyes as she got down on her knees and pawed the dirt of the classroom floor. It was hard to see through the bear head. The laughing got louder. Finally Brockster picked up and restacked the notecards for her.

Mr. Sever guided Brockster to the back corner of the classroom, where there was a desk set by the science shelf. Jeminy sat at the desk nearest to

him, but even at that there was a generous buffer of space all around him. When Mr. Sever had returned to the front of the class, Jeminy hissed at him, “Eat any babies lately?”

Brockster winced.

Moldylocks at last began her speech again. Her notes were out of order. She was itchy. The bear suit was soggy with sweat.

She fumbled with the notecards, found the last one, and read it aloud.

“To summarize. Nectar is flower poop bees eat it then puke it then other bees eat that then puke that which makes honey which bears love. And bears kill bees with bee blasters like this one.” She held up the prop her mother had rescued from the prop closet.

The class was silent.

“The end,” Moldylocks mumbled, shuffling to her desk.

Brockster raised a paw.

Mr. Sever called on him. “Yes, Brockster?”

“We don’t kill bees.”

“Then you’re both losers,” said Jeminy loud enough for everyone to hear. “The Bear Girl is

a loser because she can't even get her bear facts right. The bear's a loser because bees are nasty and why would you let them live?"

"Jeminy, I'm warning you," hissed Mr. Sever.

She laughed, and her laughter sounded like claws scraping down a chalkboard.

Brockster looked down at his paws.

"You gonna attack me?" Jeminy taunted. "Are ya?"

"Quiet, Jeminy," said Mr. Sever. "Anything else we should know, Brockster?"

Brockster took a slow breath and stood up. "We don't kill them. We just put them to sleep," he said. "And it's called a smoker, not a blaster."

Moldylocks slunk to her desk, thoroughly humiliated, a Bear Girl, who, it turned out, didn't know very much about bears.

"And it doesn't look like that," Brockster finished. "There's a party at my house after school if you want to see. We live off Fleaknuckle Road, and you're all invited. I could show you our bees."

He sat down.

Jeminy raised her hand. When Mr. Sever nodded in her direction, she asked, "You do eat double bee barf, though, don't ya?"

“Jeminy—enough! One more comment from you and I’m sending you to Principal Botulus.”

Brockster clenched his jaw. “We. Eat. Honey.”

Jeminy kept silent. But the gears of her scheming mind were already in motion.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN  
THE LUNCHTIME  
MINI-BEAR-OFF



**M**oldylocks and Brockster sat side by side and silent in the middle of the lunchroom hubbub, like quiet castaways who'd washed up at a remote table that felt a million miles from cool.

Moldylocks twirled her fork in a puddle of brainloaf gravy grease. She still wore her bear suit, although the headpiece was pulled back and hung from her collar like a hood. The eyes lolled toward



Brockster, which Brockster found unnerving. He pulled out his lunch pail and unscrewed the lid on a jar of honey he'd brought from home.

Across the lunchroom, Jeminy climbed on top of her table. She adjusted her blood-red, silk scarf and held out her arms. The room grew quiet.

"Greetings Guts," she shouted. "You've all been working hard, so I thought you could use a little show today."

Cheers erupted around the cafeteria. Moldy got a sinking feeling in her stomach.

"Plus," Jeminy added, "we've got a new student we need to welcome." She pointed in Brockster's direction. "He's the one dressed like a banker. You can't miss him."

Brockster looked surprised and hurt.

"What's the show, Jeminy?" someone yelled.

"A little contest between me and Hugga Bear."

All eyes turned toward Moldylocks, even the spares and extras that were just sitting on tables. Moldylocks seethed.

Jeminy continued. "I challenge Moldylocks LaMort to a mini-bear-off. Practice for the real thing on Friday night."

Moldylocks' anger came to a boil. She stood up and faced Jeminy.

"Bring it."

"Excellent," shouted Jeminy. "Who's got honey?"

Moldylocks was in turmoil. She always barfed her honey. Jeminy strode to her table with a cluster of zombies in tow. Jeminy sat down across from Moldylocks. The table was soon surrounded.

Brockster thought about the story his father had told him about the zombie baby rescue. Then he remembered his house getting mucus ballooned. He didn't trust the Bear Girl, but he hated to see anyone get picked on. He leaned over and said something only Moldylocks could hear. "I have a suggestion..."

"Wanna tell me what I'm doing wrong again? No thanks!" hissed Moldylocks.

"Fine," said Brockster.

Jeminy and Moldylocks faced each other across the table. Before each was a mug of honey, involuntarily donated from Brockster's jar.

Jeminy knotted her scarf. Moldylocks stared glumly at the honey. *Double bee barf. Flower poop.*

*Jeez, why did I call it that?* Kids shoved and jostled around them. Noise crested and broke over the room in a wave. Spangle Hallows, one of the Threadheads, held up her hand. “Ready...” she called.

Jeminy gripped her mug.

“Set...”

Moldy took a deep breath.

“Go!”

The combatants threw back their heads and chugged the honey to shouts and cheers. Moldylocks finished hers a split second before Jeminy. She slammed her mug down. Jeminy slammed her mug down.

“Now we count,” yelled Spangle. “It’s got to stay down for ten seconds.”

Jeminy fidgeted. She burped and tugged at her scarf.

“Ten...nine...”

Moldylocks felt a rumbling in her belly.

“Eight...seven...”

*Uh oh.* Moldylocks tried to think of something calming. Like Scar. Or the ZITCO. Or bears. It only upset her more. Scar wasn’t there. Thinking

of the ZITCO reminded her she hadn't found her roar. And bears, apparently, didn't like her.

"Six...five..."

Jeminy grinned at Moldylocks. "Mmm. I *loooove* double bee barf. How about you?"

"Four...three..."

Moldlocks' stomach flipped.

It flopped.

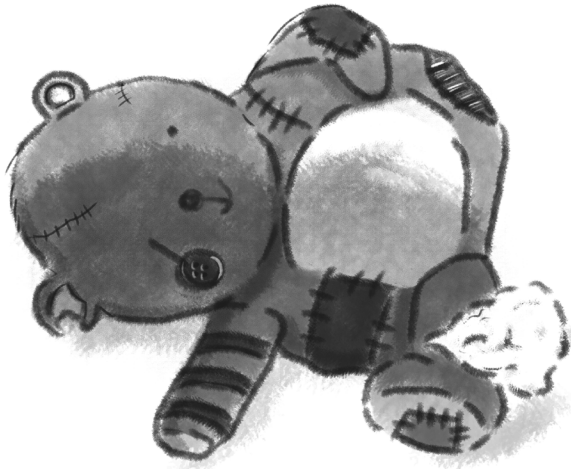
She was sweating now. *Don't think about double bee barf. Don't think about double bee barf.*

All she could think about was double bee barf.

Moldylocks puked all over the front of her bear suit.

There was a moment of silence before the cataclysm of laughter. In that moment of silence, Moldylocks had a curious thought. *That must be triple bee barf.*

CHAPTER FIFTEEN  
YOU GO WHERE  
THE BEARS ARE



**M**oldylocks didn't consider herself the bravest or the nicest or the smartest zombie in Plainfield. She wasn't the best singer. Or dancer. She wasn't the funniest. And she certainly wasn't very good at bringing her inside outside—unless “bringing your inside outside” meant puking.

But she did have one characteristic about her that was maybe better than any of those things, even though she didn't really know it and she

wouldn't have even called it a characteristic if she had. She would have said, "It's just how I am."

It was curiosity.

So as she sat in Fort Smidgen—her happy place inside a chokeberry thicket at the edge of the school playground—it wasn't long before she stopped sobbing and started to wonder about why she had puked. That set off a chain of wondering. Did her thoughts cause it? Was it something about her digestion? Why didn't bears puke? Could she become bearlike? What did it actually mean to be a bear? How could she be a bear by Friday so she could win the scholarship that would take her away from Plainfield for the summer theater camp in Rotburg?

Moldylocks' tears dried. The barf dried. She stared out at the busy playground from the safety of her hiding place. She peeled her bear costume off. She pulled Mr. B. F. Doolittle out of her backpack. She sang a little tune to herself as she stuffed the costume in, making up the words as she went along.

*"What do you do when your day goes bad?*

*When you feel lost, embarrassed, and sad?*

*When other kids are driving you mad,*

*What brings back the good feeling you had?  
Hiding yourself down under the dirt?  
Having a bowl of brains for dessert?  
We all have something to ease the hurt  
Even if we throw up on our shirt."*

Moldylocks stared at Mr. B. F. Doolittle. "What would Scarlet say?"

"She'd say, 'Find your undead center,'" Moldylocks said to herself.

"What would Mom say?"

"She'd say, 'Go full bear.'"

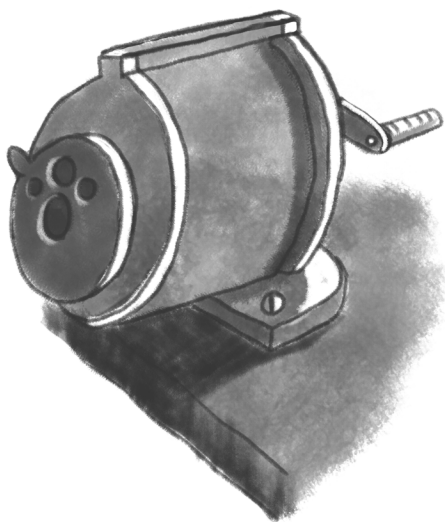
"What do *you* say, Mr. B.?"

Mr. B. F. Doolittle said nothing. But when a thought popped into Moldylocks' head a few minutes later, it was easy to convince herself that Mr. B. had somehow put it there.

*Go where the bears are.*

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

# MR. MONDO'S HAMMER TIME



**E**very Monday after lunch, Mr. Sever's class took metal shop.

Mr. Sever's class loved metal shop, because in metal shop they could talk and make noise and move around and work with their hands.

They could work in teams with their friends.

Best of all they could build things.

The class was livelier than usual when they



came in after lunch, buzzing over the events of the Mini Bear-Off.

Brockster trailed in behind the others, already comfortable in the buffer of solitude the other kids were giving him. He walked to an empty worktable at the back of the class, put on a thick canvas apron, and waited there alone. No one joined him at the table. Not even Moldylocks, who hadn't come in yet.

Brockster was already thinking of himself as the back-of-the-room bear.

Mr. Scooter Mondo, the town blacksmith, junior high wrestling coach, and part-time shop teacher for more than forty years, lurched to the front of the class and scowled. He rubbed a meaty hand across his cheek stubble and waited for the bell to ring.

When it rang, the class kept talking. Mr. Mondo expected this. Mr. Mondo loved it when the class kept talking, because that meant Hammer Time.

Quick as a gunslinger, he plucked two 16-pound hammers from loops on either side of his overalls and began banging them on the iron table in front of him.

*Bang-BANG. Bang-BANG. Bang bang bang bang.  
Banga-banga-banga-banga. Banga-banga-banga-  
banga. Bangbangbangbangbangbangbang!*

The sound reverberated off the scuffed steel of the worktables and the polished metal of the walls and the corrugated tin of the ceiling. In fact, every surface of the classroom seemed to be designed especially for bouncing noise off it.

The students covered their ears until the metal-hammer echoes died out.

“Hah! Hah-HAH!” said Mr. Mondo. “Well now we’re focused, aren’t we? Gotta hammer the message in, sometimes. Eh? Eh? You kids’ skulls get thicker every year. Hah-HAH!” He re-slung his hammers in his tool belt. “Gather up your partners ‘cause we got two projects and we only got one class to complete ‘em in. First one’s a bear trap.”

Everyone’s head snapped around to look at Brockster, who stared at Mr. Mondo open-mouthed.

“Gotcha!” cackled Mr. Mondo. He scratched his gray flattop haircut and pointed a finger stump at Brockster.

“Wrong hand!” called Maya Knabstrupper.

Mr. Mondo looked at his hand, as if surprised to see it there. He wasn’t of course, he just wanted to encourage his students to focus, so he’d occasionally point with his stub-fingered hand to see if they were paying attention.

“So it is. Extra credit for Maya—good attention-paying, kid! Here’s a treat.” He reached into his vest pocket and tossed her a grimy braindrop.

“And here’s one for you,” yelled Maya, grinning. She pulled Calvin Gutbucket’s wet-willy finger out of her pocket and tossed it to him.

Calvin glared at her from across the worktable they shared.

Mr. Mondo caught the finger easily and held it up for inspection. “Eh? Eh? That’s a fine one. I think it’d look pretty good on my hand. Nah, not a fit. I got manly fingers. This little whipper-snapper’s not good for much. Booger-picking, maybe.” He tucked the finger in his shirt pocket. “Good on ya, anyway, Knabstrupper! Ya get another braindrop. Catch!”

Maya caught the candy and slid it across the table to Calvin. He harrumphed and frowned, then popped the candy in his mouth.

Mr. Mondo pointed his left hand at Brockster, the hand with an index finger. “Thought I didn’t see ya, right, right? I did. I know all. I see all. Everyone is welcome in this class. Don’t care who ya are. And if ya come out for the wrestling team, you get an automatic ‘A’ in this class. Just kidding. Maybe. Okay, first project: pencil sharpener. Second project: surprise. Finish your pencil sharpeners first. Instructions in your drawers. Worktable drawers, not your underwear drawers—Stinkpit, I’m talking to you! Pair up. Bear, you with LaMort. She’s into bears. Everybody has their issues. Hah-HAH. Just kidding, Bear. Maybe. Everybody ready, go.”

Drawers opening...instruction sheets unfolding... tools clinking...conversations bubbling...

Brockster raised his paw, but Mr. Mondo was already moving around the room, inspecting, looking over shoulders, barking encouragement, making suggestions, and offering up good-natured jibes.

Since there was no LaMort to partner with, Brockster decided to just get to work by himself. He pulled out the instruction sheet from the top drawer, a set of tools from the drawer below that, and a set of supplies below that. Everything was neat and in its place. He thought his dad would like Mr. Mondo.

Given his long experience in the workshop at home, the pencil sharpener was easy work for Brockster's nimble paws. He bent and shaped the metal, fitted the gears, screwed in the handle, and filed the edges smooth. In a few minutes, he'd transformed the stack of metal parts into a working pencil sharpener.

He was polishing the housing when Mr. Mondo arrived at his table.

"Where's LaMort?" he barked.

"I don't know, sir."

Mr. Mondo saw the sharpener and whistled in appreciation. He tried to pick it up, but Brockster had bolted it to the table, something that had not been on the instruction sheet.

"What'd ya do that for?" barked Mr. Mondo.

The rest of the class went silent.

“I’m sorry. I can take it out.”

“Not what I asked.”

“Well,” said Brockster, “I thought it would work better that way. It’s hard to hold the sharpener down, keep the pencil in, and turn the handle all at the same time. If you don’t have an extra paw or something.”

“I see,” growled Mr. Mondo. “But—will it sharpen? Class, what do you think? Give me the up or down.”

Thumbs-down all around, except Maya and Calvin, who gave a thumbs-halfway.

Mr. Mondo pulled a thick, dull pencil from behind his ear, inserted it in the sharpener, and turned the crank. He whirred it around faster, faster, faster, leaning his full weight on it. The whole class watched.

He stopped. He pulled the pencil out and touched the tip to his tongue.

“Hah! Now that’s some good sharp. Sharp as my wife’s tongue!”

“Thanks,” said Brockster.

“Easy for you to say, you don’t live with her,” said Mr. Mondo.

“What?”

“Hah-HAH! I’m just kidding. The woman’s an angel. Ain’t that right, class?”

Thumbs-up all around.

“You’re right she is. Brings us braincake sometimes. New instruction, class: Bolt the thing down. Now back to work.” He regarded Brockster. “Nice work bear. Can you wrestle?”

“Uh...”

“You’re supposed to say ‘Yes.’ I thought all bears could wrestle.”

“Yes.”

“Good,” said Mr. Mondo. “Join the team.” Mr. Mondo addressed the class. “Time’s wasting. Start Project Two...”

“But we aren’t done,” said Jeminy.

“Finish at home!” barked Mr. Mondo.

“What do we bolt it to?” whined Jeminy.

“Something thick. Like your noggins! Figure it out. The future’s not waiting. We got worlds to build! Let’s go, go, go!” He lurched back to the front of the class amid much complaining.

“Thanks, Bear,” hissed Jeminy.

Mr. Mondo pulled his hammers out and flexed his biceps. Left-right-left-right. The class quieted down.

“Now,” he growled, “who here knows what a turntable is? Right, I didn’t think so. A turntable..” He stopped.

Brockster had raised his paw. Mr. Mondo saw him this time.

“Bear?”

“Do you mean mechanical—like a transportation turntable, or electrical—like a record player?”

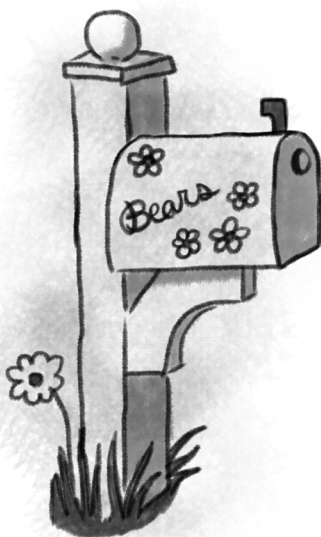
“What do you mean, ‘electrical?’” asked Mr. Mondo. “Never heard of it.”

The class stared at Brockster.

“Whatever it is,” said Jeminy loudly, “it sounds really dangerous.”



CHAPTER SEVENTEEN  
MOLDYLOCKS SNEAKS  
THROUGH TOWN



Moldylocks had never done anything as against the rules as leaving school early before, and she was about to do something even more against the rules.

She hustled through the woods behind Plainfield Elementary, talking to her fugly, gripped tight in her hand.

“What am I doing? What am I doing, Mr. B.? Do I even know? Yes. I do know. Right? This is what Mom meant by going full bear. I think. It’s ruthless, remorseless, relentless. *Grr*. I’m a bear. No, I’m no bear at all. My hair is green, I smell like barf, and my feet are different sizes. Some bear. I’m no bear. Am I?”

She stopped, holding her fugly in front of her face. She took his right paw in her left hand and slapped her cheek with it.

“I gotta snap out of this. Gotta show some spinebone! Focus! Bear down! What is it I want?”

“To win the audition.”

“And how are you gonna do that?” Moldylocks asked herself.

“Go. Full. Bear,” she replied.

For Moldylocks, to go full bear this fateful Monday meant to sneak into the Bears’ house.

“Not to harm anything,” she told herself, “only to explore. To see how bears live. To learn how to be a bear. Hostile, mobile, and agile.”

“When people say I’m nice, that will only confirm how dangerous I am. Cause you know what they say about bears, Mr. B. F. D.—the nicer they seem..”

“...the more dangerous they are,” she answered. “And come Friday, I’m going to chew up Jeminy and the others. They’re all going down. Going down like chugged honey.”

Moldylocks pushed on through the woods, heading west to skirt the retail shops of the Ptonk neighborhood. She made a hectic lurch across Plainfield Avenue toward the Plainfield River, then turned back east, hugging the shore, until she drew within sight of Town Bridge.

She knelt in the bushes and set down her pack.

“We have a problem.” Moldylocks stood on tiptoe peering over the bushtops and tilting slightly to the left because of her longer right foot. She set down her pack, perched Mr. B. F. Doolittle upon it, and sat down to think.

In her thinking silence, she could hear the sounds of traffic passing by on the road. Hellos and snippets of conversations. The lipflapping exhalations of horses and the weary squeak of cart axles. There were fleagulls chatting in the sky overhead and the puff of a breeze in the leaves. Plus the continuous shuffling footfalls of zombies going about their business.

She drew a diagram in the dirt and talked to herself. “We’re close to the river, which is a good thing. But we’ve got to get across Town Bridge. It’s totally open, and we can’t hide behind anything. Once we get across, it’s better, but still not safe. We’ve got to make our way around the Stubbs Factory to the forest behind. That’ll be safe. We’ll head west on Fleaknuckle Road ‘til we get to the Old Curmudgeon Place. We’ll stick close to the woods so we can duck into safety if we see anyone coming. But how do we get across the river? Think!”

Could she borrow a boat? No. None nearby.

Could she hide in a horse cart? No. Too risky.

“Think like a bear!”

Bears were, if anything, deceptive.

Go full bear.

*Aha!*

She dug the reeking bear suit out of her backpack. She shouldered her backpack again and gave the costume a shake. *Schwapp!* She draped it across her back and tied the forepaws like a scarf under her chin. The rest of the costume hung over her like a ratty old shawl. And when Moldylocks hunched over, she appeared to be a stinky, shaggy

beggarzombie.

Moldylocks shambled slowly out of the trees. She took a right onto Plainfield Avenue, took another right onto First Street, and shuffled across the bridge. No one gave her a second look.

Just past the massive smokestacks of the Stubbs Factory on the far side of the river, she turned right once more onto Fleaknuckle Road. Traffic thinned. Drivers of the carts that passed ignored her, except for one who shouted at her to get out of the way.

Phileas Batuta was headed into town in the opposite direction. When he passed the old woman, he brought his cart to a halt—“Whoa, Goodness”—and offered the woman a lift to wherever she was going.

Moldylocks shook her head and hurried on. After a minute, she glanced back, peeking through folds in the bear fur. Phileas was still there, a curious look on his wide, gentle face.

Before long, Moldylocks saw the ramshackle huts that marked the border of the Fleaknuckle District. She didn't come out this way much. The kids here grew up hard and tough, and didn't stay in school that long. She'd met a few over the years, and

even almost started to form a friendship or two. All too soon, however, their parents would take them out of school to work the fungus fields.

The mailbox was easy to spot. Bright yellow, stenciled with pink and blue flowers. One word on the side: "Bear." Moldylocks headed down the dirt cartpath until she came to the Old Curmudgeon Place. When she saw it, she stopped in shock.

"They've been busy."

What Moldylocks noticed most about the place was its nots. The walls were not covered with moss or rotblossoms. The windows were not cracked. The roof did not sag. The yard did not smell of fish heads, slugs, or any good things. There was nothing dark, dank, or rank about it.

It was hideous.

There was no sign of bears about, so she shambled as quietly as she could up to the side door. A note was tacked to it:

*Welcome neighbors! Thanks for stopping by. We'll be out at the bee yards all afternoon, but feel free to come by for a visit. Or, you can come back around 3:30 when our Brockster arrives home from his first day of*

*school. We're planning a big welcome. Please join us  
for some honey yummys!*

*Sincerely,*

*Skip and Muffy Bear*

Moldylocks tested the doorknob. The door  
opened silently on its well-oiled hinges.

She stepped into a strange new world.

# CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

## WONDERS AT THE BEARS' HOUSE



The door opened on a gleaming, honey-scented nightmare.

Moldylocks choked on the smell as she stepped across the threshold, clutching Mr. B. F. Doolittle by the paw. Off came her puke-stinky costume. Off came her pack. Just inside the doorway Moldylocks noticed that set in the wall was a



strange contraption whose tiny lever was nested in a slot and pointed toward the floor. Moldylocks reached to touch it, but hesitated. She touched the switch quickly and pulled her hand back.

Nothing happened.

She examined the switch closely. Pulled at it. Pressed it. Pushed it downward. Nothing. Nothing. Nothing. Until she flicked it upward.

And there was light.

She dropped her fugly as a buttery glow filled the room, illuminating the alien landscape. She flicked the lever downward and the light was gone. Up. Down. Up. Down. Up. Light. Dark. Light. Dark. Light.

Moldylocks picked up Mr. B. and held him close. She looked at the source of the light—strange smooth lanterns set in the ceiling. But not lanterns, exactly. “Freaky. There’s no flame.” She wanted to lurch the heck out of there—to leave this strange place. She resisted. *Go full bear.*

The room looked like a kitchen on a rocket ship in one of her mother’s science fiction plays. There was no mold. *Well*, she thought with a giggle, *there is now that I’M here.* The room was

full of shining surfaces—from the sheen of the faucet to the glistening formica countertop to the gleaming linoleum floor.

There were so many ways she could see herself reflected.

Moldylocks took it all in, holding Mr. B. F. Doolittle so he could see what she saw...

A dish towel hanging from a rack with a bright, embroidered sun shining down on three embroidered bears. A ceramic canister holding one-two-three...fifteen different kinds of honey-dippers. Two-thirds of a fat loaf of bread dribbling crumbs onto a cutting board. A serrated knife beside it. And the bees! Happy bees dancing across the window curtains. Bees stenciled across the walls. Bee-shaped drawer pulls. Happy bees at the end of clock hands chasing happy flowers around a happy clock face. Bee magnets on the fridge. A framed drawing of a giant bee and a message below it: "To do is to bee. To bee is to do. Do bee do bee do."

If you were a bear, this was heaven. Paradise. Bearidise.

Moldylocks noticed a small pile of books on the kitchen table. *The Bear Ambassador Handbook*,

*Pine Forest Beekeeping, Today's Honey Entrepreneur, Harnessed Lightning, and one simply titled, Zombiepedia.*

Weird.

Moldylocks flipped open *Zombiepedia*. The inscription read: "*Property of Brockster Bear.*" She flipped to a random page, titled "Culture and Customs," and read, "Zombies are private creatures, slow to change, and distrustful of outsiders, even other zombies. It takes time and patience to win their trust. If you encounter one, try not to appear threatening. You may never recover from a bad first impression."

The last sentence was underlined three times in red.

"Know-it-all," muttered Moldylocks.

She looked around some more. There was a charcoal drawing taped to a large white cabinet, in which a girl zombie and a bear headed into the woods, dressed in adventure gear that looked like it had come directly from the catalog that day—Bermuda shorts, lemon-yellow dress shirts, khaki vests. The picture was signed in a child's block letters: "Brockster."

Moldylocks pulled open the door of the cabinet. A cold breeze rolled out, but that wasn't the reason she slammed the door so hard a bee magnet clattered to the linoleum.

"You're not going to believe this, Mr. B. F. D." she said. "It's cold. And it's full of zombies."

Moldylocks opened the cabinet door again. Just a crack. She peeked in. Felt the rush of cold air again. She opened the door wide and stared in at row upon row of zombie-shaped jars with screw-on nozzle-hats. Each zombie was the same—wild eyes, lips pulled back to show a mouth full of broken teeth, left shoulder angled forward—and each jar had a golden glow shining through it from a light source at the back of the cabinet.

"That's honey inside," she said. "Honey zombies. Huh."

Each honey zombie had a label written in tidy cursive script. "Classic Honey." "Cinnamon Honey." "Apple Honey." "Balsamic Strawberry Honey." "Pistachio Honey." "Lavender Honey." "Salmon Honey." "Wasabi Honey." The varieties went on and on.

"Go full bear," Moldylocks told herself.

She grabbed three honey zombies at random and set them, and Mr. B. F. Doolittle, on the kitchen counter. The loaf on the breadboard was dense and studded with seeds. She sliced a hunk and drizzled a thread of honey on a corner.

Big breath. Small bite.

Moldylocks gagged and spat it out. “That honey was too nasty!” She clawed at her tongue, trying to scrape off the taste. She examined the label closely. “Honey Concentrate. (Dilute to Taste).”

*How many bees had to barf to make this?* she wondered.

Her belly complained, then quieted. “Shush,” she told it. “I didn’t even swallow any yet.”

“Next one. ‘Wasabi Honey.’ I wonder what’s a ‘wasabi,’ Mr. B.” Moldylocks squeezed a dollop onto the bread, bit, chewed, swallowed. After a beat, there was a detonation in her mouth. The detonation caused an explosion. The explosion became a fireball that flared up into her nasal passage and through her skull cavity before speeding down her esophagus, into her belly, and through her lower intestine, laying waste to everything in its path—taste buds, brain cells,

nose hairs, and stomach lining—before bursting out of her in a zombie fire fart.

She would have thrown up then if the wasabi hadn't vaporized any remaining food bits in her system.

"That honey was too hot," she gasped when she was at last able to speak. The fire finally died down to embers, then flickered out. *Go full bear. Go full bear,* she told herself.

"Okay," she panted. "One more." Moldylocks thought of Jeminy. She thought of theater camp. She visualized escaping from Plainfield.

She tore a hunk of crust from the loaf and poured a trickle from the skull of the last honey zombie. She took a bite.

Moldylocks didn't choke. She didn't burn. She didn't retch. She waited ten seconds. No kvetching from her belly. No reports from the interior. She had done it. In fact, the honey wasn't that bad.

"Phlegmballs," she said to her fugly. "That's actually...good."

She took another honeyed bite. It, too, stayed down. "Oh, my," she said. "I may have a chance." She took a third bite and another, drenching the

breadhunk in ever-greater globs of honey until the bread was gone.

Moldylocks pushed herself back on the chair, dribbling mouthfuls of honey and bread goo down her chin. “Ah, that honey was just right,” she said to Mr. B. F. Doolittle.

Moldylocks turned the honey zombie around and read the label. “Brain Honey.”

“No wonder,” she smiled.

With her belly full, Moldylocks turned her attention to the rest of the house.

She and Mr. B. lurched out of the kitchen, leaving a smattering of breadcrumbs and honey drippings on the counter.

CHAPTER NINETEEN  
MR. B. F. DOOLITTLE'S  
UNEXPECTED SWIM



The living room was dominated by three padded chairs. Each was covered in shiny black leather, each was a different size, and each had a large silver button on its right side. There were no holes, tears, tatters, frays, or rips. The chairs faced a small table. On top of the table was what looked to Moldylocks like a tiny suitcase.

“Sweet mucus, Mr. B. The weirdness never ends.”



Curiosity pulled Moldylocks forward. She studied the little suitcase a few moments, tested the latch in the front, flipped it open. A shiny, flat disc lay in the middle, pierced through a hole in the center by a metal post. She bent close. The disc was lined with tiny grooves. No...it was just one groove spiraling inward.

The little suitcase had a metal arm on its right side, which was hinged at the back. A tiny needle poked out the underneath side of the front end of the arm. Like a bee stinger. The suitcase had an on-off switch similar to the kitchen light, so Moldylocks flicked it on. The disc began to spin, but nothing else happened. Moldylocks tapped and poked at the suitcase. "The stinger," she said. She raised the lever arm and set it down on the spinning disc. A wall of sound blasted her.

"This sound is too loud!" she shouted to Mr. B. F. Doolittle.

She fumbled at a knob marked "VOL." It was dialed all the way to the right, to the number "10." She turned it to "1."

She could barely hear a thing.

"This sound is too quiet," she said.

She set the VOL to “5.”

*Ahh.*

Moldylocks heard drums, a guitar, a tambourine, a piano. Four instruments grooving together. Sound percolated all the molecules of her body and set them dancing. Next came the voices. “*Honey... ah Sugar, Sugar.*”

“This sound is just right,” she said.

It was the greatest thing Moldylocks had ever heard. It made her knees weak. She lurched back, as if in a dream, and fell into the first chair. She let the music wash over her. At first she was too hypnotized to move.

“*You are my candy bear,*” the voices sang, “*and you got me wanting you.*”

Her body suddenly gave in to the music and she started to twitch in the recliner, twisting, kicking, and drumming the sides of the chair. *Bap, twist, bap-bap-bap.*

When the chorus started, she chimed in:

“*And you got me wanting you!*”

She gave a big *bap* on the chair and smacked the button on the side. A footrest sprang out as the chair slammed into the fully reclined position.

Moldylocks was shocked out of her reverie and instinctively smacked at the button again. The chair flexed back to normal.

*“Pour a little honey on me, sugar. Pour a little sugar on me, honey.”*

She got up, still shaking her hips and bobbing her head. Muddy footprints marked her progress across the polished oak floor and the braided oval rug.

When the song was over, she played it again.

Then she played it again.

She played it ten times in a row. Dancing all the way.

Finally, worn out and panting, she remembered her errand. “Hey, Mr. B. Do I look more bearish now?”

The fugly was silent.

“Yeah,” said Moldylocks. “I didn’t think so. I can’t leave yet.”

She switched the suitcase sound machine off.

“That was *sooooo* cool.”

Moldylocks wobbled up the stairs on her mismatched feet. Her backpack banged against the wall, leaving a trail of Bear-family portraits

hanging askew. At the top of the stairs, three doors led off from a small landing. When Moldylocks opened the first door, she couldn't help but laugh.

"I thought bears pooped in the woods!"

The bathroom had three toilets, each with its lid up. To Moldylocks' astonishment, they were filled with water, not with sand. And where were the poop scoops? She sat on the first and almost fell in.

"This toilet is too big!"

The second had a padded seat. She tried it.

"This toilet is too soft!"

She sat on the last one.

"Ahhhh. This one is just right." She sat there a long time, kicking her feet and looking around at the copies of *Good Beekeeping* stacked neatly in a little magazine rack, the bee wallpaper, and the wooden boxes above each toilet. Each box had a handle hanging from a chain. Ever curious, Moldylocks stood up and turned around to look.

She held Mr. B. F. Doolittle in front of her so he could see better. "What do you think this handle does?" she asked.

She pulled it. There was a whoosh that so surprised her she dropped the fugly in the toilet. Around and around swirled Mr. B. F. Doolittle, going down, down, down. Just as he was about to disappear, Moldylocks reached in and rescued him. “I’m sorry, Mr. B!” She pulled a bee-decorated hand towel off the rack and swaddled him.

Moldylocks didn’t have to wonder which of the other two upstairs rooms was Brockster’s. His door had his name stenciled on it. She pushed it open and walked in.

There was a small, neatly made bed by the window covered in a zombie-patterned comforter.

“Huh. No dirtbox,” said Moldylocks. She set Mr. B. F. Doolittle down on the bed and kissed his forehead. It was damp. Toilet water.

“Yuck.” She looked at her wet fugly. “Sorry! Not your fault!”

She took a few steps back, wiping her mouth on her T-shirt and studying Mr. B. F. Doolittle. She tried to imagine a real bear sleeping this way—in artificial softness instead of layers of warm earth. Moldylocks wondered if she could sleep that way.

Moldylocks shambled across the room, past the pictures of zombies on the wall and the books about zombies on Brockster's bookshelf. She stepped over the zombie action figures on the floor and opened the closet door.

The bee blaster—a real one!—sat right in front of her on a shelf, shining like a treasure. Moldylocks reached out, ran her fingers along the metal skin.

That's when she heard the voices.

## CHAPTER TWENTY

# CAUGHT!



**M**oldylocks grabbed the blaster. Was it a reflex? Was it for luck? Maybe it was for protection? She wasn't sure. She tiptoed to the window and peeked out through the bee-patterned curtains. Three bears—Brockster, and two grown-up bears—were walking up the path to the kitchen.

*No. No!* thought Moldylocks. Her heart began to pound. *How long have I been here?*

The grown-ups had their arms around Brockster. Moldylocks watched as Brockster shrugged them off and crossed his arms. He scowled down at the gravel path. Moldylocks remembered the note she'd seen on the door. That must be Skip and Muffy. Skip was wearing khakis and boat shoes, like Brockster. He also wore a cloth necktie over a stiff, button-down shirt. Muffy wore a blouse, slacks, and open-toed sandals.

No zombies had come to welcome Brockster home from his first day of school.

As they neared the house, Moldylocks heard him say, "No, they hated me. They think I'm a loser. A dork. A freak. What did you expect? I tried to make a friend and she just pushed me away."

Moldylocks flinched.

"They just need to get to know you," said Skip.

"You're an amazing bear," said Muffy.

"Remember what the *Zombiepedia* says. It takes time to build trust."

The Bears arrived at the kitchen door. "I'd rather bite somebody," said Brockster.



Moldylocks almost felt bad for Brockster. Almost. Then she remembered, *He's just a bear. He doesn't feel things the way I do.* The bears went inside. Moldylocks held her breath.

Door opening.

Pause.

Pause.

Shouts.

Skip: "Holy honeybees!"

Muffy: "Oh, dear!"

Brockster: "*Roar!*"

"Uh-oh," said Moldylocks. "We better go, Mr. B." Mr. B. F. Doolittle! He was still on the bed. She took a step toward him. The floor squeaked.

She listened and heard the voices say, "*Shh-shh-shh,*" then nothing.

The little green hairs at the back of her neck stood on end. Her breathing quickened. Her thoughts bounced around in confusion. Should she hide? Beg for mercy? Attack? Flee? *Go full bear,* she told herself. A bear would never beg for mercy. A bear would attack. But not if they were outnumbered three to one. Flee? That would require a jump from a second-story window.

No thanks. Fine, then. She'd hide.

"Sorry, Mr. B.," she whispered.

Moldylocks tiptoed into the closet and pulled the door most of the way closed.

Sounds of shuffling, snorting, and scuffling from downstairs. Moldylocks listened. Claws *click-clicking* on linoleum. Paws pounding on the stairs. Bathroom door banging open. The grownups rushing into their bedroom.

With her guts all a tumble, Moldylocks peered out from the closet. She saw Brockster holding Mr. B. F. Doolittle and looking directly at the closet.

"I see you, Moldylocks" he said. "I see your footprints anyway. I know it's you. The prints are different sizes."

Moldylocks gripped the bee blaster tight, but she didn't move.

"You're trapped," said Brockster. "I'm not going to hurt you."

Moldylocks put her hand on the door, gently, and started to push it open.

Skip and Muffy barged into the room, huffing and massive. The image of them standing there

activated every story Moldy had ever heard about bears. They're violent. They're dumb. They're stupid. They're not like us. They will eat you the moment they have the chance. You can never ever trust a bear.

Terror flooded her body.

Brockster walked to the closet and opened it.

Moldylocks crouched and held the blaster in front of her. She pulled the trigger. The smoker made a feeble *pfft-pfft* sound.

"Give me that!" said Brockster.

*Fight or flight?* Moldylocks asked herself.

*Flight.*

Jolted into action, Moldylocks roared.

It wasn't much of a roar, but it made the Bears pause, at which point Moldylocks took one jab-step toward them, then turned to her right, leaped out the window, ripping through the curtain and screen as she fell.

Moldylocks somersaulted head-over-feet and hit the ground, much to her surprise, softly. She'd landed on her back, which had landed on her backpack, which was still stuffed with the bear suit. She got to her feet and looked back up

at the window. Three bears stared back at her in astonishment, plus Mr. B. F. Doolittle, who was nestled in the crook of Brockster's arm.

Maybe the Bears would have mercy on him. He was, after all, a bear, too.

Moldylocks hurried across the open space of the yard and into the cover of the woods, still gripping the bee blaster. Would she be in trouble for stealing? No. No one would believe the Bears' story against hers. She pushed aside branches and brambles. Did she know enough to go full bear now? She didn't know for sure, but she felt mean and lowdown. Pretty bearish, in other words.

Jeminy's words replayed themselves in Moldylocks' mind. "I'll do anything to win." Would Moldylocks? Jeminy had all the advantages—time, coaching, money.

What advantage did Moldylocks have?

She was an actor.

*That was it!* Moldylocks decided that the best way to go full bear was to put on a performance. She could act like Brockster's friend and learn enough about bears to win the audition.

*It's perfect!* she thought.

Her day was finally looking up. Only, something about her plan didn't feel right.

She forced the thought aside, turned around, and lurched back toward the Bears' house.

"Hellooo?" she called from the edge of the lawn. "I'm, I'm sorry..."

The kitchen door opened. Brockster stood silhouetted in the yellow light coming from within.

"Don't bite me. I just want my bear back," she said. "I'll clean up the mess I made."

Brockster was on the steps outside the kitchen door. Skip and Muffy's heads appeared in the doorway.

"Why don't you tell us about it?" asked Skip.

"Yes, come inside," said Muffy.

Brockster rolled his eyes. "Did you seriously just say, 'Don't bite me?'"

Moldylocks smiled ever so slightly. Her plan just might work.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

# IT'S CALLED A RECORD PLAYER



**M**oldylocks looked up from the counter, which she was wiping clean of bread crumbs and honey goo under Brockster's supervision. Thirty minutes had passed since the Bears asked her in, and the cleaning up was almost done.

"You actually ate the honey and you didn't barf?" asked Brockster.

“Nope.”

“Why not?”

“I don’t know,” she said, starting to scrub the counter again. “The brain honey wasn’t horrible.”

Brockster handed her Mr. B. F. Doolittle. “Here. Dad says we don’t need to keep the hostage anymore.”

Moldylocks grunted.

“That’s a joke,” said Brockster. “Is he always so soggy?”

Moldylocks didn’t say anything.

Skip and Muffy came in.

“Good job on the floor and the rug,” said Muffy. “And the pictures are all straight.”

“The curtain is another story, though,” said Skip. “And the screen.”

“I’m sorry. I’ll fix them,” said Moldylocks.

“Come join us at the table,” Skip said.

“I’ll put a pot on,” said Muffy.

Moldylocks gave the counter one last wipe, set her rag in the sink, and lurched to the table.

A few minutes later, Moldylocks and the three Bears were drinking hot honey tea from matching yellow mugs. Each one had the same slogan on it:

“Don’t worry, happy bee.”

“It takes time, you know,” said Skip.

“Huh?” asked Moldylocks, eyeing her tea doubtfully. Brockster slid a honey zombie toward her. She read the label: “Surprise Honey.”

“Getting to know a stranger,” Skip said. “It’s always easier over tea.”

The Bears waited for her to pour some honey into her tea. Moldylocks grimaced, squeezed out two drops.

“First we have a question for you,” said Muffy. “You’re not in trouble, but it’s important that we know.”

“Did you mucus-balloon the house?”

“What?”

“Did you attack the house?” asked Brockster. “Were you one of the balloon chuckers? You better not lie.”

“No, I didn’t. I wouldn’t. I’m sorry. Look.” She wiped some of the crusted barf off her shirt, revealing the bear paw underneath.

“She was wearing a bear costume at school today,” said Brockster.

Muffy whispered in Skip’s ear. Skip nodded.



“We did debate it, you know,” said Skip.

“Debate what?” asked Moldylocks.

“Keeping the little bear as a hostage. We even had a note drafted out. Dear Moldylocks of Plainfield. If you ever want to see your bear alive again, you must bring us a ransom of one hundred jars of honey. But we couldn’t decide if he was worth one hundred or fifty, and ransom exchanges are so tricky, we figured it wasn’t worth the trouble.”

Moldylocks gaped.

“Plus,” said Muffy, “he was howling so much and he kept asking for brains—I didn’t think I could bear it.”

Moldylocks smiled. A real smile. Just for a second.

“Yeah, if he stayed I was going to have to give him training on how to be a real bear,” said Brockster.

Moldylocks saw her opening. “You can do that?”

“Uh, I am a bear.”

Moldylocks stared at her tea. “Maybe you could, um, train me, instead.”

“What are you talking about?” asked Brockster.

“I need to be a bear by this Friday night. It’s part of an audition. And I need to practice all the time. That’s why I was doing the presentation in my bear suit. But I’m not doing very great. You saw me.”

“She threw up,” Brockster explained to his parents. “From honey. In front of the whole school.”

“Yeah. Anyway, the audition is why I left school early today and came here. To see if I could learn something about being a bear. Really, I’m sorry. It’s just that if I’m not a bear I’ll be the biggest loser ever and I’ll never hear the end of it from Jeminy—”

—“the one with the laugh,” said Brockster. “I think she’s one of the mucus-ballooners.”

“Yeah, and I won’t win the summer scholarship and I’ll be stuck in Plainfield all summer.”

“What’s so bad about that?” asked Skip.

“I don’t have any...umm...nobody here understands...I just don’t...” Embarrassment kept her from finishing.

The table fell silent a moment.

“So what happens at this audition?” asked Muffy gently.

Moldylocks was glad to change the subject. “I need to be able to drink a mug of honey like a

bear, wrestle like a bear, and roar like a bear. And I have to do a speech—a dramatic monologue. There are judges, three of them, and they give us a score. Forty points total. Highest score wins the lead role in the play. Jeminy is really good.”

Skip and Muffy looked at each other. Each nodded at the same time.

“Brockster can help,” said Muffy.

“Really? Why?” Moldylocks asked him. She tried not to smile. *It’s working*, she thought. *They’re trusting me!*

“Because Bears and zombies need to get to know each other,” said Skip.

“Because we need to get Jeminy,” said Brockster.

Muffy frowned at him. “Because bears and zombies need to get to know each other.”

Moldylocks looked at Brockster. “That okay with you?”

“Yep.”

“Here’s what you do,” said Muffy. “Tuesday: honey practice. Wednesday: wrestling. Thursday: roaring. Friday afternoon before the audition you do the speech.”

“You’ll be full bear in four days,” said Skip.

Moldylocks nodded, excited. Go full bear. “Can I ask you one more thing?”

Moldylocks asked about the sound suitcase that had captivated her earlier.

Moldylocks and the three real bears and the one stuffed bear piled into the family room.

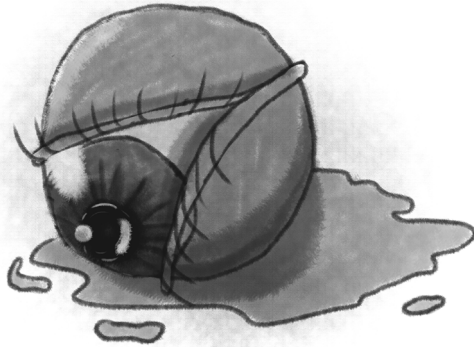
“It’s called a record player,” Brockster said. “The part in the middle is called a turntable. This,” said Brockster, lifting the black disk from the turntable, “is a record. It’s music.”

He centered the disc on the turntable, flipped the switch to ON, lifted the record arm, and placed the needle on the record. “And music makes you groove.”

On her way back home, Moldylocks told herself what great actors bears were. “Nice on the outside, treacherous on the inside.”

She had to say it over and over again to make herself believe it.

TUESDAY



## CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

# THE NEWS FROM BURIAL GROUNDS



**T**he *Plainfield Chronicle* was the official source of news for Plainfield, but everyone knew that news wasn't really news until it had been tested, digested, debated, and regurgitated by the regulars at Burial Grounds Coffee Company.

The coffee shop opened its doors at six each morning, and each morning at six, the Four Old Geezers were the first Plainfielders to totter in.

The FOGs were so old that they were not so much zombies as much as they were assemblies of second-hand replacement parts—ancient ears that didn't hear, noses that didn't smell, and eyes that may as well have been stuck in sideways. Between the four of them, they had about a single zombie's worth of working parts. No matter. In they came every morning, leaning on canes, walkers, and each other. Each one carrying a copy of the *Chronicle* folded under an arm. Each one toting a full tank of cranky.

Each morning May Clot had their coffee mugs filled and waiting for them at Geezerville, as they called their table in the back. The brain muffins were always warm. The Wakeful Dead coffee was bitter as always, just the way they liked it.

“Morning, boys,” she greeted them this Tuesday. “You all look miserable!”

“Ah, lose a limb,” said Ebenezer Rotbody, who led the short old-timers parade through the cafe to Geezerville. “You'll see how it is when you're my age.” He was barely in his seat before he'd unfolded his paper and begun reading. His bushy eyebrows shot skyward, “Oh, ho!” he shouted. His three compadres protested.

“Give us a minute, you news hog,” said Tyreeq “The Reek” Ibrahim, shambling up to the table.

“Every morning, the same blasted thing,” said Fark Farkus. “You see the news first and you think you were the center of it.”

“Remember what we said,” said Dev Carbuncle, tottering to his seat. “No racing for news. Makes us argue too much.”

Ebenezer scowled, “Aw, it doesn’t either.” He put down his paper anyway. “Fine.” He waited, and after a few minutes, he grinned at his companions and said, “I’ve just reached a decision.”

“You’re going to ask Emily Shank out on a date?” said Fark.

“Nice lady...” said The Reek.

“For a leg,” said Dev.

“Hey, you think she likes long, romantic hops on the beach?” asked Fark.

“Ha, ha,” said Ebenezer. “To answer your question: Yes. But that’s not the decision I want to announce to you. No. I have decided that once you boys decompose—which will likely be any day now at the rate things are falling off your body—I am going to have you stuffed. Then I’m gonna



wheel you in on a cart and set you up right here each morning. Yessir. You'll be better company then than you are now."

"Oh, rot off!" grumbled the others, more or less at the same time.

Ebenezer cleared his throat. He looked at each of the FOGs in turn, then looked down at the Chronicle.

They all opened their papers at the same time and saw the headline that had surprised Ebenezer. "BREAK-IN AT JEPPERSON RESIDENCE; BEARS SUSPECTED."

"It was them bears," said Ebenezer.

"We can read for ourselves," said The Reek.

Here's what they read:

*Terror has come to Plainfield in the form of a most disturbing development, a ramshackling, ransacking crime of heinous hooligan-ness.*

*Late last night, while snug in his dirtbox, Josef Jepperson, 59, was awakened by a crashing, a clanging, and a banging, in the nether parts of his domicile. He arose with a shout and a cry at the hubbub and clomped down the stairs to investigate the hullabaloo.*

*Too late.*

*The perpetrators were already on their way out the door, which was now hanging from a single snagged hinge. Jepperson stood in his doorway watching the figures disappear into the evening, his glimpses confirming what he suspected. It was bears most probably.*

*"I didn't have me glasses," Jepperson said, "but their silhouettes was most unmistakably bearish."*

*Constable Cruft and his men are investigating.*

*When asked what was stolen, Jepperson said, "A good many things."*

*When pressed to specify what exactly had been pilfered, he replied, "Well, look around ya. Everything ya don't see is what they took."*

*Jepperson was correct. There was very much in the home that was not seen.*

*This reporter, for one, calls it like he sees it. This was an act of bearrorism.*

Burial Grounds now began to hum with the morning rush.

Phileas Batuta arrived for his morning tea. The Stranger was back as well, once again bearded, gloved, and cloaked. Town shopkeepers filed in to fuel up before opening their stores and boutiques.

Conversation percolated at Geezerville.

“Never did like Jepperson much,” said Ebenezer.

“Never did like bears much,” said Fark.

“Yup, yup,” the others agreed.

“How many you know?” asked The Reek.

“About none, like you,” admitted Fark.

“But you hear the stories,” said Dev.

“Well I do. Not that you would, with those replacement ears of yours,” said The Reek. “I don’t know how you hear yourself think.”

“Well I know you don’t have that problem,” said Dev.

“Too right I don’t,” said The Reek.

“No thoughts to hear,” cracked Dev, smacking the table so hard he jostled the coffee mugs. Fark chuckled.

The Reek opened his mouth to reply. But he couldn’t think of anything to say so he just held out his fist. “Well played sir,” he said to Dev.

They bumped fists and resumed reading their papers.

“Well I think I’ll keep thinking for myself,” said Ebenezer.

Moments later, they heard a voice over their shoulders. “I couldn’t help overhear you gentlemen.”

It was The Stranger, as mysterious as always with his fedora, glasses, great beard, and trench coat.

The Reek eyed him. “Well, that ain’t much accomplishment since we got the loudest voices in Plainfield.”

“Be that as it may, I feel compelled to tell you that I’ve spent much time in my travels amongst bears.” He paused and looked around the coffee shop. When he spoke again, it was with a raised voice. “Can’t trust ‘em. They are every bit the bear-rorists the good writer indicates. I daresay more so.”

Now that he had the coffee shop’s attention, he continued.

“They had similar trouble in East Rotburg, you know. Peaceful town. Bears moved in. Series of break-ins. Fortunately, they had a strong constable. Took care of the problem straight away. I’m sure you’ll all be safe. If your constable’s strong. If you act fast. I just thought you should know.”

With that, The Stranger bid the patrons of the coffee shop good morning.

The buzz of conversation resumed.

Ebenezer tugged his bristly chin-hairs, lost in thought.

Fark noticed him. "What?"

"Cruft."

"Cruft," said Dev. "Not the sharpest nail in the coffin, as far as constables go."

"And the man's brain works slow as Rotbody moves," said The Reek.

"Persistent bugger, though," said Ebenezer.

From Burial Grounds, the story spread and took on an energy of its own. How the Bears had broken into Josef Jepperson's. How everything had been stolen. How Jepperson barely escaped with his undearth.

It didn't matter that none of it had been proven. When facts didn't fit the story, most Plainfielders ignored the facts.

Not all Plainfielders, though.

Phileas lingered at Burial Grounds awhile, staring at the leaves in the bottom of his tea mug. He'd seen Anka Mastiff telling fortunes from her Beyond Be-Leaf shop at the Plainfield Sanitary Market. There were supposed to be signs in the leaf patterns, if you knew how to read them, which Phileas didn't.

Something just felt off to him, frustratingly

beyond his comprehension. The whole town seemed to believe along one way and here he was believing some other way. It made reasonable sense that he must be the one who was wrong, but as far as he could tell, he was the only one who had gotten to know the Bears, if even a little bit. What could he do? He was big in muscles, but small of brain.

Mr. Goodness snorted outside. Time to get to the day's work. Lots of packages to deliver. Phileas would do what he always did: Keep a watch on things.

That afternoon, Constable Cruft held a public meeting and told a crowd of agitated citizens that he would increase evening safety patrols. He reminded Plainfielders, however, that there wasn't enough evidence yet to convict anybody of anything.

Connie Stinkpit listened to him, and the longer she listened, the angrier she got. When the constable was done speaking, she offered her opinion to the crowd "As a concerned citizen."

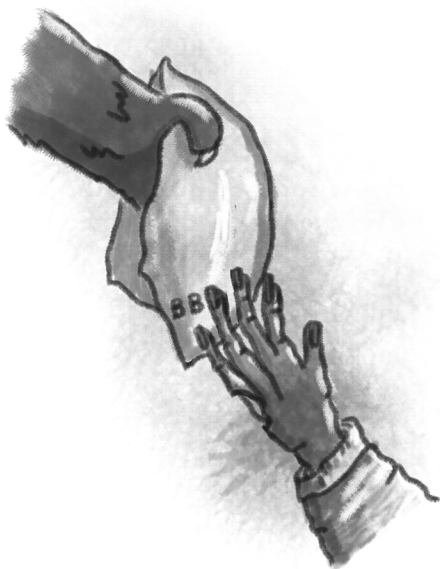
"I feel the soul of our town is at stake," she said. "However, I'm sure we've seen the last of the

break-ins. I'm sure our constable is up to the task. Aren't you, Constable?"

Hieronymous Cruft said nothing. He simply walked out of the hearing room scratching his skull bone and thinking he'd really like to be home in his easy chair sipping a brandy.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

# HOW TO DRINK DOUBLE BEE BARF



**M**oldylocks didn't care about any break-in, she cared about winning the audition. The fact that the Bears might be criminals only improved her chances of reaching full bear.

Today was Tuesday. That meant Honey Training.

She arrived at the Bear's house a few minutes late.



“You’re late,” said Brockster.

“I had detention for cutting school. Sorry, I...”

“No time,” Brockster interrupted. “We gotta start.” He led her to the picnic table in the front yard. It was set with twenty mugs of honey. She reached out for the closest one. He stopped her.

“See the honey, bee the honey,” he said. “Now you say it.”

“See the honey, bee the honey,” said Moldylocks.

“You need to say it five times in a row,” said Brockster.

Moldylocks did as he instructed.

“Now kiss the bear for luck.”

“What!” said Moldylocks. “No. Gross.”

“Not me,” said Brockster, growing irritated. “Mr. Do-Nothing, your teddy bear.” He pointed to the bear, sitting beside the row of honey-filled mugs.

“Doolittle,” she corrected. “Mr. B. F. Doolittle. And he’s not a teddy bear, he’s a fugly.”

Moldylocks kissed her fugly on the forehead.

“Sit down,” said Brockster.

She sat down.

He slid the first mug toward her. “See the honey, bee the honey,” he said. “Drink.”

Moldylocks downed the mug of honey.

And promptly puked it into the grass.

“Gack! This isn’t brain honey!”

Brockster sniffed the mug. “No, it’s balsamic strawberry. You need to be ready for anything. You want to beat Jeminy, right?”

“Yeah.”

“Then focus! Bee the honey.”

Moldylocks stood up so fast the bench beneath her tumbled backward into the grass. “I can’t focus. I can’t! How am I supposed to drink all these?” She gestured at the other 19 mugs.

Brockster gave her a handkerchief. She noticed it was monogrammed. BB. “You do look a little green,” he said.

Moldylocks snatched the handkerchief and wiped her mouth. “I am a little green, you doofus. I’m a zombie.”

Brockster smiled.

Moldylocks rolled her eyes. “Attention, everyone: The bear has a sense of humor.”

Brockster returned to his normal facial setting:

Serious. “Remember the goal. What’s your goal?”

“Beat Jeminy. You know that.”

“Why?” asked Brockster.

“Win the audition. Win the part!”

“Why!?”

“To stop being a loser!” she shouted.

Moldylocks pulled the sketch of the Rotburg Theater out of her pocket. “This is what I want.”

“Focus on that,” said Brockster. “Have that picture in your mind.”

“That’s all I need to do?”

“Of course not. What you need to do is S.A.V.E. training; Sloganize, Appetize, Visualize, Exercise.”

Moldylocks gave him a blank look. Brockster explained.

“‘Sloganize’ means to say the saying five times in a row, five times each day. One set when you wake up, one set with each meal, and one set right before you go to sleep. ‘See the honey, bee the honey.’ Got it?”

“Got it. What’s ‘appetize?’” Moldylocks asked.

“You know how when you’re hungry, anything tastes good?”

“Yeah.”

“So, don’t eat lunch the day of the contest. Makes honey go down easier.”

“How will I have any energy?” asked Moldylocks.

“Honey gives you energy. Third, visualize. You need to take time each day to imagine every detail of drinking honey. How it smells. How it feels going down. How it coats your stomach. Imagine it resting quietly in your gut. Yum.”

Moldylocks looked doubtful.

“The visualizing will help you get used to it.”

“And the last thing?”

“Exercise,” said Brockster. “You have to get your stomach muscles strong enough to digest anything. That means lots of sit-ups. And some push-ups and jogging for all around fitness.”

“Zombies don’t jog.”

“What do you do?”

“Lurch, mostly.”

“Then lurch fast. Get it?”

“Got it.”

“Good. Now we gotta stop talking. You need to jog... lurch...to the bee yard and back. Sloganize the whole time. Think about how much you love honey. Fifty sit-ups and fifty push-ups when you get back. I’ll have a mug waiting. Now go!”

Moldylocks was panting when she got back from her beeyard lurch, and what little breath she had was almost completely gone after her push-ups and sit-ups. Brockster ignored her pleading look and handed her the honey mug. She kissed Mr. B. F. Doolittle and chugged the mug.

The honey stayed down.

“Very g—” said Brockster.

Moldylocks grabbed another mug and downed it.

That honey stayed down, too.

She slammed the second mug down on the table. She threw her head back and howled, “Honey, honey, honey! Buzz, buzz, buzz!”

“I have no idea what that means,” said Brockster. “But it’s a good start.”

Skip and Muffy, who had been watching from the front porch, applauded.

At that moment, the three of them didn’t seem like criminals at all to Moldylocks.

“What?” asked Brockster.

“What what?” replied Moldylocks.

“You have a funny look on your face.”

She looked directly at him and asked in a whisper. “Did you guys do it? The break-in?”

“No,” said Brockster.

“Cool,” said Moldy. “Are you coming back to school tomorrow or are you gonna skip again, Skipper Bear?”

“I didn’t skip! The constable asked me to stay home for safety.”

“Yours or ours?”

“Yours,” said Brockster. “I eat zombies, remember?”

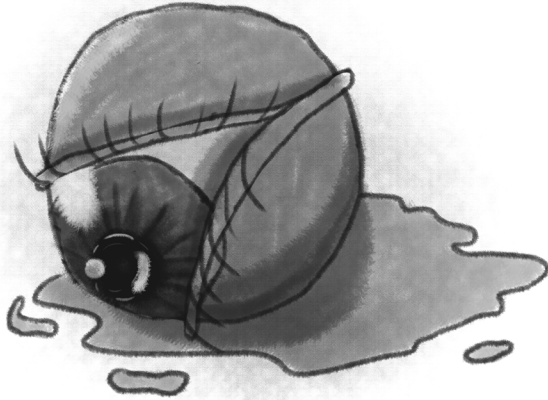
“Sure you do, Skipper.”

“Oh, get out of here,” said Brockster with a grin. “Remember: Only you can S.A.V.E. yourself!”

Moldylocks groaned.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

# THE EYE SPY'S REPORT



Connption held a stopwatch. Arnold the headless house zombie stood next to her holding a tray of ten crystal goblets brimming with honey. Jeminy focused on the tray, motionless. Right fist shoved into left palm. Elbows out. Legs bent slightly. Back straight. Skull scarf knotted loosely around her neck.

This was the pose of a warrior.

A honey warrior.

“What are you?” shouted Connption.

“A bear!”

“What’s on the tray?”

“Prey!”

“What are you going to do?”

“Devour the prey!”

“Who’s your prey?”

“Everyone!” shouted Jeminy.

“Do you show mercy?”

“I show no mercy!”

Connption started the countdown.

“Five seconds...four, three, two, one, go!”

Jeminy drank the first goblet of honey and slammed it on the tray. She downed the second.

“Be a bear. Eight to go,” said Connption, eyes on the stopwatch.

By glass number five Jeminy was tugging at her scarf. She gagged after glass number six and gasped, “I’m done.”

“Keep going!” snarled Connption, checking her watch.

“I can’t, Mom. The pouch is full.”

“Oh, for phlegm’s sake!” said Connption. “You were on a pace. Undo your scarf, let me see.”

Jeminy unwound her scarf and revealed a



leather pouch dangling from a nozzle in her neck. Conniption unscrewed the pouch then quickly capped the end of the tube protruding from Jeminy's neck. The pouch-and-tube contraption had been Conniption's idea. It allowed Jeminy to divert food away from her stomach—nasty things like honey or brussels sprouts could be collected in the pouch and disposed of later. So unlike Moldylocks, Jeminy didn't have to worry about honey upsetting her stomach. Honey would never get to her stomach.

“Did I do enough?” asked Jeminy, “For the audition?”

“Don't think ‘enough,’” said Conniption. “Think ‘annihilate.’” She examined the pouch. “Hmm. We can't use a bigger pouch or we run the risk of detection. You may just have to digest some.”

“I can't!”

“Yes. You can,” said Conniption. “And you will.”

There was a pounding downstairs at the front door.

“That will be the delivery driver with my package,” said Conniption.

“I'll get it,” said Jeminy.

“No!” shrieked Conniption. Her daughter threw her a confused look. “No,” said Conniption in a calmer voice. Propriety, dear. Arnold will see to it.” Conniption stomped the floor. *Stomp-stomp. Stomp. Stomp-stomp.*

Arnold bumped out of the room. Conniption touched her daughter on the shoulder.

“I’m tough on you.”

“I know it’s for my own good.”

“Because the world is a tough place. Most Plainfielders don’t understand that.”

“I understand it.”

“They need someone to lead them. Someone strong. The constable, Mayor Stubbs, they’re weak. You can’t be.”

“Yes, Mom.”

“That’s what this is all about. We need to unite the town. The bears threaten our way of undeath, but the town doesn’t know that. But we’ll show them. For their own good. That’s what last night was about. That’s what tonight is about.”

Jeminy nodded. She would be strong.

The door to the room swung open and The Stranger entered.

Jeminy, by now, was used to his attire, but found it odd that he was wearing his sunglasses at night.

“You have the eye spies?” asked Conniption.

The Stranger reached into his satchel and pulled out a bulging flask. He uncorked it and poured the contents onto Arnold’s serving tray. Out gushed several dozen eyelidded eyeballs. For a moment, Jeminy wondered where Arnold had got to, but she was soon preoccupied by all the blinking.

“One at a time!” said Conniption. “Which one of you was out by the Bear Place?”

An eyeball in front blinked twice.

“Tell me,” commanded Conniption. She translated as the eyeball blinked its message. *Blink-blink. Blink. Blinnnnnnnk. Blinnnnnnnk. Blink.*

“Yes. Bears house. I know. Who was there? Moldylocks...Moldylocks?! What was she doing? Training...with...the... little...bear. What kind of training?”

Conniption was silent while the eyeball finished. When it was done blinking its report, Conniption returned the eyes to their flask, which

she handed to The Stranger.

“Tomorrow,” she told The Stranger, “I want you to place all of them at the Old Curmudgeon Place.” (Connption refused to call it the Bear Place.) “Around the yard, and along the cart path. Understood?”

“Understood,” said The Stranger.

“What’s going on, Mom?”

“That LaMort girl is drinking honey.”

“Did she keep it down?”

“Yes. Two mugs. We can’t take her lightly.”

“She can’t roar, Mom, and she can’t talk in front of people.”

“Well, up until a moment ago, we thought she couldn’t drink honey. Remember, I don’t want her beaten, Jeminy. I want her...” she waited for her daughter to finish the sentence.

“...annihilated,” said Jeminy.

“Indeed. Now, let’s review the plans.”

The three zombies lurched to a table in the corner of the training room. Connption lit a candle and unrolled a map of Plainfield.

“What’s the target tonight?” asked The Stranger. Connption’s long, bony finger descended

slowly on a house in the Ptonk neighborhood. The Stranger had to lean close to read the map, and as he did, his glasses fell off. Jeminy caught a glimpse of his eyes, which were like no zombie's she'd ever seen. They were as blue as the sky on a sunny day. The Stranger gave her a smile, but his eyes were cold. He found his glasses and looked to where Conniption was pointing.

The name on the map read "Cruft."

"We're raiding the constable's house?" whispered Jeminy.

The Stranger grinned. "De-lightful."

"Like last night," said Conniption. "Wake the house. Let them see you. Then get out. No showing off. You don't need to. The story will grow by itself. Now get into costume."

Conniption held Jeminy back while The Stranger strolled to the far corner of the training room and ducked behind the tri-fold screen by the wardrobe. He began pulling on his bear costume.

"Mom, who is he?" asked Jeminy.

"You'll know soon enough," said Conniption.



# WEDNESDAY



CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE  
A FIRST DATE AND  
A SECOND BREAK-IN



**E**benezer Rotbody led the FOG parade into Burial Grounds precisely at six o'clock on Wednesday morning. Tyreeq, Fark, and Dev, scuffled in behind him, with dirt from their dirtbox beds still unclumping from the nooks and folds of their ancient bodies. They scraped their



canes and walkers along the floor, moving with squeaks and creaks and wheezes before easing down at Geezerville.

Ebenezer unfolded his *Chronicle*. “Oh, ho!” he said.

“Wait, wait!” said The Reek, snatching Ebenezer’s paper. “Papers down, old farts.”

“Sweet pusballs, what now?” grumbled Ebenezer.

“First, a first-date update,” said The Reek.

“Ah, yes,” said Fark, leaning back, “You went out with Emily Shank last night.”

“Emily the Leg,” Dev interjected.

“I bet that date was hoppin’,” added The Reek.

“Spill it,” said Fark, taking a swig of coffee.

“Did you go hiking?” asked Dev.

“Pedicure, maybe?” asked The Reek.

“Croquet?” asked Fark. “She’d make a lovely mallet.”

“Yeah, yeah,” said Ebenezer. “Easy to make fun when you all have wives at home...Though why they stick with you I’ll never know.”

“Must be our good looks,” said The Reek, pulling a set of brass teeth from his shirt pocket, dunking them in his coffee, and slipping them

into his mouth with a sucking sound.

“Or your charm,” said Ebenezer. “Truth be told, Emily was very nice.”

“What did she wear?” asked Dev.

“Pant,” said Ebenezer.

As if on cue, the others leaned forward, stuck their tongues out, and started to pant.

“Ah, stuff it,” said Ebenezer.

The other FOGs laughed.

“What’s she gonna do,” asked Ebenezer, “wear a whole pair? That’s another thing I luh...I like about her. She’s frugal. A pair of pants to a regular zombie is two whole outfits to her.”

They laughed even harder.

The Reek studied him. “Why, Eb. You’re red in the face. You really luh...I mean like this woman, don’t you?”

Ebenezer blushed deeper. “Give me that!” He snatched his paper back from The Reek. “Actually, I do. And I’m seeing her again tonight.” He smiled at the thought.

When he read the front-page headline, his smile disappeared.

“Looks like we may still have a bear problem.”

Burial Grounds began to fill with the morning crowd.

Phileas left Mr. Goodness munching happily on a bag of oats and entered the shop. He reflected on how peaceful it was to be known so completely he could order and pay for his tea without ever saying a word—just a nod and a smile and a tip.

Phileas sat down next to the geezers just as Ebenezer was reading the headline on the *Plainfield Chronicle*.

“Listen to this everyone,” he raised his voice, “it’s a two-exclamation-pointer: ‘BEARS BREAK INTO CONSTABLE’S HOUSE!’”

“We can read! We can read!” the other FOGs grumbled.

Ebenezer ignored them. “You’re slowing me down. Listen: ‘Constable Issues Quarantine; Bears Under House Arrest.’”

Phileas turned in his chair and read the article over Fark’s shoulder.

*In what is now beginning to look like a crime wave, the second bear burglary in as many nights took place at Constable Hieronymous Cruft’s last night. The renegade bears entered the house, stomped*

*all over Cruft's imported red-clay floor, and bearorized most maliciously, before fleeing the scene.*

*Constable Cruft was out of bed in a flash, however, and spotted the perpetrators fleeing the premises. Cruft has issued an order placing the Bears under house arrest pending a hearing.*

*Some are wondering if the measures go far enough. Some are insisting on immediate and severe action. Immediate bear deportation, in other words.*

*Those cries are sure to get louder as the question on the tip of every Plainfielder's tongue is, "Are we safe?"*

Phileas turned quietly back to his tea.

"Like that fellah said yesterday, you can't trust a bear," said Dev.

"You mean that fellah," asked The Reek, pointing at The Stranger waiting in line for his coffee.

"Yup," said Dev.

Phileas noticed that The Stranger was relaxed, but seemed to be listening intently to the flow of conversation around him. Indeed, after getting his coffee, The Stranger walked over to Geezer-ville. "Morning, gentlemen," he said in his smooth rumble. "Happened again, hmm?"

The geezers nodded.

“I’m not surprised.” The Stranger raised his voice slightly. “As I said, bears put on a good show. A very good show. I ought to know. They’re crafty, folks. It’s a pattern I’ve seen before. Many times. And just when they get you believing they want to be part of the community, their true nature comes out. They want to destroy you. They can’t help it. It’s just who they are.”

“What do we do?” asked a woman holding a baby zombie.

The Stranger strolled to her and gently pushed a lock of greasy hair off the infant’s forehead. “You do what keeps you safe.”

With that, he left.

The coffee shop erupted in conversation. Phileas found it hard to hear the details of anyone’s words but easy to summarize the theme: The bears were a threat.

Yet none of it made sense when Phileas reflected on what he’d seen the night before.

As usual, he’d been eating a supper of warm brain salad in his tiny cottage. As usual, he’d apologized to his sofa before sitting his great

bulk down upon it. And as usual, he'd set his meal and his worn copy of the *Book of Wisdom* in front of him.

Phileas closed his eyes and flipped the book open to a random page. When he opened his eyes, he read: "Don't let thy ears see for thy eyes."

He chewed his salad slowly. He chewed the message, as well. What did it mean? Plainfielders were talking, saying bears were bad and had to go. Schoolkids were saying the bear child was dangerous, too. But no one seemed to have actually gotten to know the Bears. Not even Phileas. Not really.

Then he understood. The story Plainfielders were hearing was telling them what they saw. Instead of the other way around.

Phileas closed the book. After he finished his salad, he walked into the evening to see if he could see with his eyes.

He stopped at the edge of the woods. There was a warm butter-pat of yellow light coming from the kitchen. Phileas could see the Bears inside, talking and laughing over a board game. He stepped toward the house, intending to knock and say hello. Maybe they'd let him join the game.

Then he thought the better of it. Let them have their peace. Besides, why would they want to be bothered by him?

He watched them finish the game, clean up, and head upstairs. Before long the lights went out, so Phileas went home. It must have been about ten o'clock. According to the paper, the break-in had taken place about ten-thirty the night before.

So while it didn't seem likely that the Bears had robbed the constable, it was possible. Just bear-ly.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

# MOLDYLOCKS WRESTLES... WITH HER CONSCIENCE



“I didn’t think you’d come,” said Brockster on Wednesday afternoon when Moldylocks walked up the path. “Now that we’re on a crime spree and everything.”

“Better for me,” she said. “The truer you are to your actual bear nature, the better my chances of beating Jeminy.”



Brockster looked at her, trying to figure out if she was joking. He decided she was. Moldylocks stopped just outside the white picket fence that bordered the yard. Brockster stood just inside the gate.

“So what do you think now? For real?” he asked.

Moldylocks avoided his eyes. “I think I want to win. To beat Jeminy. That’s what you want, right?”

“Yeah, I guess.” He opened the gate.

She shambled through, her mismatched feet crunching the gravel path. *Crunch-KER-unch, crunch-KER-unch.*

“First thing for today’s training,” he said, “you need to wear the required wrestling uniform. I’ve got some gear for you on the kitchen table. You can change in the pantry.”

Moldylocks began to protest, but Brockster pointed to the door. “Go!”

But when Moldylocks turned away, Brockster pounced on her from behind, rolled her onto her back, and slapped the ground three times. “One, two, three...pin!”

“Hey,” grumbled Moldylocks. “What are you doing?! I wasn’t ready.”

“First rule of wrestling: Always be ready. Now go change.”

“Fungus and muckballs!” said Moldylocks. She got up and brushed off her T-shirt.

Once she looked down, Brockster tackled her again. *Wham!* It was a quick pin.

“Okay, Bear. Jeez. You made your point,” Moldylocks sputtered.

Brockster released her again. Moldylocks walked toward the house complaining. “Knucklehead bears. Can’t trust ‘em. Giant furballs is all they are. Hairy stinkerpots. Hairy hairballs.”

She stopped to shake the dirt out of her hair, listening. Footsteps on the gravel behind her. *Crunch crunch crunch!* At the last moment she knelt down and Brockster went flying over her, sliding to a stop below the kitchen steps.

Moldylocks jumped on him, laughing. “One, two...” she said.

*Whompf!* Brockster twisted out of her grip, reversed, and pinned her. “Three!” he said.

She looked up into his grinning face. “Yeah, but I got you that time,” she smiled.

What did she think? Could Brockster and

his family have been involved in the break-ins? She didn't know what to believe. *Just focus on the scholarship. See the Rotburg, be the Rotburg.*

She squirmed out of Brockster's grip and lurched to the kitchen to change.

A few minutes later she emerged from the house scowling. "I look ridiculous."

"It's the required uniform," said Brockster.

"Tights?" Moldylocks shook her head. The green singlet she wore had a bright red "B" on the front. Her headgear had green ear protectors.

"You look ready," said Brockster. "And kind of ridiculous, too."

They began. "You don't need to learn a lot of different things," Brockster explained. "Just a few. The trick is to know them really well. First: How to stand."

He taught her the essentials of a stance ("wide legs, low behind, straight back, head up"). Once she had more or less mastered the stance, he showed her the single-leg takedown, three kinds of headlock, the art of the pin, and a handful of critical moves.

All afternoon they scuffled through a series of

mini-bouts in the yard, getting muddier and more grass-stained as they practiced. Mr. B. F. Doolittle watched from his seat on the front-yard picnic table.

When Brockster called “Time” after one of the sessions, Moldylocks asked, “Aren’t you gonna teach me how to get out of things?”

“Nope. No escaping. Just attacks.”

“Can you explain that to me a little more?”

“Look, if we had more time...” Brockster began.

Moldylocks pounced and took him down with an ankle pick, maneuvered him onto his back with an arm bar, and tried to grapevine him. “One...” she yelled. Brockster bridged, twisted out of her hold, and reversed her. Just like that her back was on the dirt. “Two, three!” he finished. “Pin!”

He helped her up. “Nice work, for a zombie.”

The sun had dipped below the trees. Muffy called to them. “Almost curfew time, Brockster! Come on in.”

Moldylocks and the Bears gathered around the kitchen table a few minutes later. She was happy to be out of the wrestling tights, and would have been even happier if Brockster hadn’t insisted she take them home with her.

“Wear the uniform when you do your S.A.V.E. practice,” he said.

*As if*, she thought.

“So we were all a little curious about this audition,” said Skip, interrupting her thoughts.

“I told you about the four parts, right?” asked Moldylocks. “Honey-drinking, wrestling, roaring, and dramatic monologue. And there are three judges. And you can get a maximum of forty points.”

“Do you all wrestle each other?” asked Brockster.

Moldylocks shook her head. “Everyone wrestles the same person: Mr. Mondo.”

“The metal shop teacher,” Brockster explained.

“And wrestling coach,” added Moldylocks.

“And the point of all this is...what, exactly?” asked Skip.

“It’s supposed to help determine who’s the most realistic bear for the musical,” said Moldylocks. “*Grizzly Hair*. People *love* that show.”

The three bears started laughing.

“What?” asked Moldylocks.

“Well, there’s what you do and there’s how you do it,” smiled Skip. “Besides, they could just ask us.”

Moldylocks wasn’t sure what he meant, so she sipped her tea. Which wasn’t too bad.

“You’ll see,” said Muffy. She said it kindly, but Moldylocks felt like that was all the information she’d get for now. So she asked Muffy another question that had been on her mind.

“What did you mean by ‘curfew?’”

“Ah,” said Muffy, setting down her cup. “Well, you heard about the breaks-ins, I’m sure.”

Moldylocks nodded.

“Such a shame,” said Muffy.

“Well,” said Skip, “the constable asked us to stay home again today.”

“And for the foreseeable future,” added Muffy.

“He said it was safer,” Skip continued. “He seems to think, or he thinks the town thinks, that we’re behind the recent troubles.”

“Everyone is blaming you,” said Moldylocks. “Grownups, kids, everybody.” She put her hands over her mouth. “Oh, sorry.”

“I can’t say I’d believe any different if I was in their place,” said Skip.

“What do you think?” asked Brockster.

Moldylocks squirmed. She didn’t know what to believe about anything. She looked around the kitchen. The shiny, sunny surfaces, the books, the

zombie drawing on the cold-food cabinet. And all those bee decorations.

“I think you have really weird taste in insects.”

Skip laughed. “You don’t have to answer, Moldylocks. You’ll know the answer when you need to.”

All Moldylocks knew was that she wanted to win the contest and get out of Plainfield. She didn’t want to be involved in the Bears’ problems. She didn’t want any more of Jeminy. Most of all, she didn’t want to be a loser.

Brockster walked her to the gate. She kept her distance, and stayed in a crouch as she walked.

“What?” he asked.

“Always be ready,” she said. “First rule of wrestling.”

“Good. You’re learning.”

They reached the gate. “I have to stop here,” Brockster said. “Constable’s orders.”

“Okay,” said Moldylocks.

“This is weird, but I feel like we’re being watched.”

“That’s ‘cause there are eyes everywhere,” said Moldylocks.

“Yeah, sure feels like it.”

“No, I mean literally. They’re all over the place.

Plus arms, fingers, feet.” She looked at her own feet. “Heads sometimes.”

“That’s nasty.”

“Why is it nasty?”

“That stuff is supposed to be part of your body.”

“Yeah, but so are claws and fur. You trim your claws, right? Cut your fur?”

“I don’t trim my eyes.”

“Neither do we. But stuff just comes off sometimes. It’s not a big deal.”

“It is to me. I like my eyes.”

“There’s always extras.”

They were silent a moment.

“See you tomorrow?” asked Brockster.

“Yep.”

“Get ready to roar,” he said.

Moldylocks walked home, not sure what to believe about the Bears. They didn’t seem that bad. Weird, maybe, but not criminals. She felt her dedication to her goal weakening. The problem was that when you took away the goal, there was nothing. And Moldylocks hated the feeling of nothing. She had to be strong. To bear down. To go full bear.



“See the honey, bee the honey,” she said to Mr. B. F. Doolittle. “See the honey, bee the honey.”

All over Plainfield, however, most zombies had no doubts about how they felt: Bears were trouble.

And for anyone who still had a little bit of doubt, the events of Wednesday night would erase them completely.

Later, at home, Moldylocks was in a fretful state of mind.

*Outside town. The clearing in the eastern woods.  
The kitchen of the ZITCO.*

“You’re quiet tonight,” said Dorothy LaMort to her daughter. “You haven’t even touched your dinner.”

Moldylocks stared glumly at her chicken-fried brainsteak.

“Hey, what is it?” asked Dorothy. “Worried about the audition?”

Moldylocks sighed. “No. Well, yes, but that’s not it. Mom, what do you think about the Bears? I mean really? Do you think they did the break-ins?”

“Well, if we were talking about zombies, I’d

say it's best to make up your own mind before you go rushing to judge them. But bears, well, bears are different. *Grizzly Hair* is based on a true story, you know."

"I know. It's just...I feel like no one's met them except me. They don't seem bad."

"That makes sense, dear. But you know the stories, how deceitful they can be."

"What should I do? I have to finish my training."

"I think you should train here now. Just to be safe."

Moldylocks slumped on her stool. Without Brockster's training, she would never learn how to be a convincing bear, never win the audition, never get away. Jeminy's voice would be forever screeching in her ears until the day she decomposed. "There goes LaMort the Bear Girl, loser for all time. Ha, ha, ha."

Across town, Phileas Batuta sat lost in thought for so long that an entire candle burned down to a waxy puddle. And still he kept right on thinking. One question tormented him.

*Were the Bears criminals?*

Trying to answer the question gummed up

his brainworks. So he peeled back the thought, like it was a patch of bark on a nurse log, and he examined the little thoughtlets wriggling underneath. It always took him a long time to come up with an answer, but by the time he did, it had the weight of something durable.

And after he found an answer, he'd ponder awhile on the best course of action. This was why other zombies thought him slow. But he seldom wasted his efforts.

He lit another candle and opened the *Book of Wisdom*. As always, he chose a passage at random, trusting the forces of the universe to provide him instruction. As always, the wisdom was indirect: "The thing to do is the thing most you."

But what was most him?

The candle burned.

The best answer he could come up with was: I like to look at things and think about them.

"Guess that means I'll just go watch the Bear folk. Only this time I'll stay all night."

*Poof.* He blew out the candle.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN  
JEMINY WRESTLES...  
IN THE LIMB PIT



Jeminy readied herself for wrestling practice. Her senses alert to her surroundings: the hard-packed dirt; the heavy trapdoor; the bumping thumping coming from underneath it; the single lantern hanging from a rafter, throwing the zombies into shadow.

Connption made notes on a clipboard as she circled her daughter.

Jeminy chanted to herself, “Be a bear. Be a bear. Be a bear.”

“Ready?” asked Connption.

“*Grr*,” said Jeminy.

“Open the pit, Arnold.”

Giant, headless Arnold lumbered out of the shadows and bent over, groping about for the trapdoor ring.

Jeminy kept loose. She shook out her arms and bounced her weight from one foot to the other. Watching. Ready.

Connption made several notes on her clipboard. She pulled a stopwatch out of her frock pocket and stuck a whistle in her mouth. Watching. Ready.

Jeminy tilted her head to crack her neck. “Mom?” Jeminy pointed at Arnold.

Arnold had wandered off to the side of the room and was tugging at a horse’s bridle. Which was attached to a horse. Which was whinnying in protest.

“Oh, for the love of pustulence,” said Connption. “You just can’t find good help these days. First chance I get I’m exchanging you, Arnold!” She led Arnold to the trapdoor handle. He heaved it open.

The pit was ten feet across, waist-deep, and full of wriggling parts. Arms and legs, mostly, but also feet and hands and noses and ears and fingers. Conniption had been gathering strays for some time. Her plan was to drive Pick-A-Part out of business and set up a monopoly in its place. Which she would, of course, control.

The limbs wriggled all over and around each other. One size-six right foot in particular seemed particularly desperate to escape.

“Their natural instinct is to cling to you and hold you down so you don’t abandon them,” Conniption explained. “This exercise will help you practice your escapes.”

Her mother saw Jeminy’s worried look.

“Don’t think. TBI!” commanded Conniption. She held up her stopwatch. “Ready... go!” *Tick, tick, tick.*

Jeminy dove in and started wrestling. The limbs had her pinned in seconds. “One, two, three...pin!” yelled Conniption.

Jeminy swam out of the pit and flicked some clinging fingers from her shoulders. She barely had time to catch her breath before Conniption shouted “Again!” and blew her whistle.

Jeminy dove in. She fought even harder this time, but her legs were soon pinned down by legs and her arms held down by arms. One mischievous hand crawled up her neck and stuck its index finger up her nose. She frantically shook her head back and forth as Conniption yelled, “Pin!”

The limbs released Jeminy and she crawled out of the pit, more slowly this time.

“That effort is going to score about a one,” said Conniption. “If you’re lucky.”

“But I’ll be wrestling Coach Mondo. Not a bunch of strays.”

“If you can beat the strays, you’ll have no problem with Mondo.”

Conniption and Jeminy heard the tinkle of horse bells from the front of the house, followed by a gentle, “Whoa.” Conniption stomped twice.

Arnold took one step forward to greet the new arrival, but he’d forgotten where he was and he plopped into the pit. He was so disoriented the limbs pinned him faster than they did Jeminy.

“One, two, three, pin!” shouted Jeminy, smiling. Conniption frowned.

“Sorry,” mumbled Jeminy.

“That will be Phileas with my delivery. I’ll go. Jeminy, I need you to go to the market and pick me up a haggis for dinner.”

“Why can’t Arnold go?” Jeminy whined.

“I need him here,” said Conniption.

“Why?”

“That’s not your concern,” hissed Conniption.

Jeminy sighed overloudly, but left the stable.

“Meet us upstairs when you get back,” Conniption called after.

Conniption’s stomp-vibrations had been muffled by the dirt of the stable floor, so Arnold missed part of her message.

As Jeminy rounded the corner of the house, she bumped into Phileas. Phileas didn’t move. Jeminy fell down. Phileas apologized and extended his free hand to her up. The other hand held a box about the size of a medium-sized pumpkin.

“Oaf,” muttered Jeminy. She narrowed her eyes. “What’s in the box?”

Phileas, who was incapable of lying, puzzled over what to say. Finally he settled on, “A project for your mom.”

“A project? For what?”



Phileas thought some more. And thought. At last he said, "For helping her get ahead."

"So it's like homework?"

"It is for home work," said Phileas.

"Whatever," grumbled Jeminy, and stormed off to the Plainfield Sanitary Market to fetch the haggis.

Arnold struggled out of the pit. He was covered with hands, including a fist sitting where his head should have been, giving a thumbs-up. Arnold lurched in circles, plucking the hands. Conniption shook her head and left the stable with Jeminy.

Arnold finally managed to unhand himself. When he felt the vibration of the stable door closing, he lay down and plunged his arms into the limb pit, groping around for his friend. The one who had lately been appearing and disappearing unexpectedly. The one who, although bossy, made him feel not so lost.

No luck.

He gave up and decided to close the limb pit.

He couldn't find the lid.

At least not right away. Arnold got down on all fours, patting the stable dirt. Sensing their

opportunity, the stray arms and hands made a ladder out of themselves and helped pull the legs and feet and noses and ears and fingers to freedom. The last of the arms and hands pulled themselves up and over each other until the pit was empty.

The strays inched their way to freedom out a hole in the back wall of the stable. Once outside they headed for the woods. Except for the size-six right foot. It followed a homing instinct and headed for the ZITCO.

When Arnold finally managed to locate the handle and slide the lid back in place, it was over an empty pit.

Twenty minutes later, Jeminy had returned with the haggis and joined her mother and The Stranger at the upstairs training room table to watch the eye spies blink their reports.

Jeminy looked around. "Where's Arnold?"

"The fool is rounding up escaped limbs," muttered Conniption. "Now shush."

Conniption watched the eye spies intently and translated. "The LaMort girl wrestled well today," she told them. "Jeminy, you need to keep

your training going strong, but our anti-bear efforts are yielding results. The town is against them. One more attack should get them removed. However, hmm, Phileas could be a problem,” said Connption.

“Nobody will believe him,” said The Stranger.

“I don’t want it left to chance,” said Connption.

The Stranger nodded. “I’ll take care of it.”

“Good,” said Connption. “Now here’s the plan for tonight.” She spread the town map on the table.

“Where?” asked Jeminy.

Connption jabbed a finger down. “Here.”

“Genius!” whispered The Stranger.

“But that’s...” said Jeminy.

“...where you’re hitting tonight,” finished Connption. “Do your best work. And make sure the neighborhood hears you. Now, I’ll leave you to your business. I shall be out tending to mine. I have a loose end to tie up at the ZITCO.”

## CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

# CONNIPTION'S IN THE ZITCO



It was charades night at the LaMorts. Moldylocks, Dorothy, Harry Halfleg, and Mr. B. F. Doolittle sat on the sofa watching Santiago Mano the stagehand take his turn in the middle of the coffee table. Harry lay on one end of the table, his toes feeling for vibrational clues.

Santiago walked around on two fingers.

“It’s a play,” said Moldylocks and Dorothy together.

Santiago held up all five fingers.

“Five words,” they said.

Santiago held up two fingers.

“Second word.”

He positioned his thumb and index finger so they were almost touching.

“Little word!”

Dorothy and Moldylocks began to fire possible answers at him. “As, was, is,” said Dorothy, leaning forward.

Harry flexed his toes excitedly.

“The, if, of...” said Moldylocks.

Santiago pointed at her.

“Of!” said Moldylocks. “Blank of blank blank blank.”

She watched Santiago. “Third word...also a small word.”

“The,” said Dorothy.

Santiago snapped his fingers.

“Blank of the blank blank,” said Moldylocks and Dorothy together.

Santiago held up his index finger.

“First word,” said Moldylocks and Dorothy together.

He curved his four fingers toward his thumb.

“Sounds like...”

Santiago crawled over to Harry, grabbed the big toe, and began to wrestle the foot. Harry flexed and twitched and twisted, trying to get upright so he could roll on top of the stagehand.

“Wrestle, deathmatch, toe lock,” yelled Moldylocks.

“Misbehave, sneak attack, fight,” said Dorothy.

Santiago stopped and pointed. At which point Harry gained the upper hand, so to speak, and started kneeling Santiago.

Dorothy separated the two and placed Harry on the sofa next to Mr. B. F. Doolittle.

“Sounds like ‘fight,’” said Dorothy.

“Right, height, plight...” said Moldylocks.

“Blight, spite, night...” said Dorothy.

Santiago snapped his fingers again.

“Night of the blank blank,” said Moldylocks.

“*Night of the Living Living!*” she and her mother shouted together. They both started laughing.

Santiago collapsed on his palm, exhausted. His

fingers drummed the table softly.

“Best play *EVER*,” said Moldylocks. “And novel. Astro Sputum told me about it.”

“It’s the showpiece play at Rotburg this summer,” said Dorothy.

“I know!” Moldylocks exclaimed. “Nice work, Santiago.”

The doorbell rang.

Dorothy clomped to the door and opened it, still laughing.

When she saw who it was, she stopped laughing.

“Conniction...” Dorothy stammered.

“Lovely to see you, as well,” said Conniction, lurching past Dorothy and into the living room. She frowned, scanning the vanity tables around the edge of the room, the hand on the coffee table, the leg on the sofa.

“Hello, Bear Girl. How is training coming along?”

“Fine,” said Moldylocks, scowling.

“Indeed. It is going quite well for Jeminy, too. Her work tonight in the limb pit was superlative.”

“The what?”

“Oh, just some specialized wrestling training

I've devised. Well, best of luck Friday night."

Dorothy cleared her throat. "Moldy, help Harry and Santiago tidy up the living room then head upstairs to bed."

Moldylocks and Santiago began to put the room back together. Harry, still angry over Santiago's sneak attack, hopped to the corner to pout.

"You'll be wondering why I'm here," said Conniption.

"Not that you ever need a reason to visit the house you own," said Dorothy. "Would you like a cup of tea?"

"Yes, in a clean cup, please. Do you have green tea?"

"No."

"Goo-long?"

"No."

"English Blecch-fast?"

"No."

"Spearmint? Peppermint? Dismembermint?"

"No, no, no."

"Goodness, woman, what do you have?"

"Earl Gray Matter."

"*Hmpf*. It'll do."



Dorothy set a pot to boil. Conniption pulled an official-looking document out of her handbag.

“Before you get started, Conniption, I want you to know that I did consider your earlier, most gracious offer, and I was unable to arrive at an alternate accommodation.”

“I see,” said Conniption.

“I suspect you are a woman of more daring than I,” Dorothy hurried to add.

“Then you may set this in the stove to burn,” said Conniption. She handed the document to Dorothy, slowly so that Dorothy could see what she was about to destroy.

Dorothy couldn't help but glance at the document. The letters were written large. The title hooked her, and after that she couldn't help but begin reading.

*Proposal for Immediate Forgiveness of All ZITCO Back Rent*

*Pursuant to matter of monies owed Conniption Stinkpit (the RENT-EE) by Dorothy J. LaMort (the RENT-ER), immediate forgiveness of debts is proposed upon fulfillment of the following and suchlike obligations entered hereunto by the RENT-ER, chiefly,*

*namely, and to wit: that Jeminy Stinkpit be awarded role of Grizzly Hair in the eponymous play.*

Moldylocks interrupted her. "Mom, I'm done."

"Huh?" asked Dorothy.

"I'm going to bed. What's that?"

"Just some trash, darling."

"Okay. Thanks for charades. It helped me feel better."

Dorothy hugged her daughter and kissed the top of her head. "I love you, Sweetie," she whispered.

Once Moldylocks had left, Dorothy turned to Conniption. Her hands were shaking, but her resolve was firm. She tossed the paper into the stove.

Conniption eyed her coldly. "Water's boiling," she said.

*Clank, clank, clank.* They could hear Moldylocks climbing the outside fire escape up to the second floor. Dorothy prepared the tea and served Conniption.

"I'll proceed to Plan B," said Conniption. She pulled out a second paper, took a sip of tea, and continued.

"I believe you'll want to sign this one," Conniption said.

Dorothy folded her arms and stared, unblinking, at her landlord.

“We have some things in common, you and I,” Conniption said. “We both had husbands who decomposed at an early age.”

Dorothy snorted. “My husband may have been a fool who got caught in a hailstorm, but he was a loyal fool. He didn’t run off with a traveling esthetician. We have nothing in common.”

Conniption pursed her lips. “Indeed,” she hissed. “You run your undeath on emotion and I run mine on reason.” She took a sip of tea to calm herself. “And it now stands to reason that it is in both our interests that the play succeed. First, it will make money—that will allow you to pay your back rent. Second, it will tell the right kind of story about the wrong kind of...creatures, something we can all support. Third, it will launch the career of one of our daughters...”

“Or one of the three other contestants,” said Dorothy.

“If you say so,” shrugged Conniption. “Now, read the document!”

Dorothy looked over the document. It spelled out in very legal-sounding language that the

role of *Grizzly Hair* was in no way to be altered from the original script and that Dorothy would do everything she could to ensure the financial success of the play.

“Why would I want to undermine a play?” asked Dorothy.

“Two reasons I can think of. First, because you always change plays. Second, sabotage. If your daughter is a loser...”

“Then she’ll have lost honestly,” said Dorothy.

“And she’ll have had the perfect role model.”

Dorothy tried to stay calm. “I am a professional. I will direct whoever wins the part.”

“Still, I require assurance,” Conniption replied. She pulled a fountain pen from her handbag and pushed the document across the counter toward Dorothy.

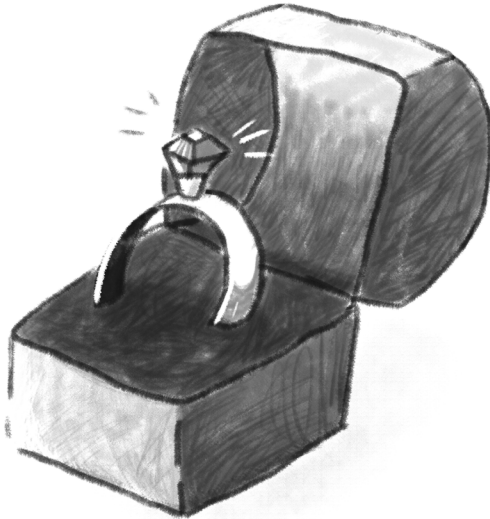
Dorothy signed.

Conniption folded the paper and rose to leave. “Thank you for the,” she looked down at the full cup, “tea.”

THURSDAY



CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE  
EBENEZER ROTBODY  
MAKES NEWS



When he tottered into Burial Grounds on Thursday morning, two things were different about Ebenezer Rotbody. First, he was *not* carrying a copy of *The Plainfield Chronicle* folded under his arm. Second, he had a big smile on his face. So big, in fact, that May Clot could see all the teeth that he didn't have up front and the

ones he did have in the back—the green, the gray, the black, the tilters, and the fizzers.

“Good morning, May, you glorious embodiment of zombiekind!” he said.

“Well, I’ll be decomposed,” she said. “You’re in a fine state this morning. What’s wrong?”

Ebenezer merely chuckled and said nothing. The three other FOGs creaked to the table. Dev put his palm on Ebenezer’s forehead. “You seem hot.”

“You eat some bad brains?” asked Fark.

“You’re never this happy. It’s messing with our world,” said The Reek.

Ebenezer motioned the others to sit down. He poured their coffees. Which made them even more suspicious. He beamed at them like a child.

“What!” asked The Reek.

“I’ve got news.”

“No thanks,” said Dev, reaching for his newspaper.

“Boys, trust me on this one,” said Ebenezer. My news will top anything in *The Plainfield Chronic-Fail* this morning.”

“That’s it,” said Fark. “I’m calling Dr. Bone. You need a head exam.”

“We had another date last night,” announced Ebenezer. “Me and Emily Shank.”

“Another?” said The Reek.

“She’s half your age!” said Fark.

“And a quarter of your limbs,” said Dev.

“None of that matters. She’s greater than the sum of her...part. Last night I had a realization. She’s all I ever wanted in a woman,” said Ebenezer. “And less.”

He slapped a tiny velvet box down on the table.

“Is that what I think it is?” asked The Reek.

“Yep,” said Ebenezer. He opened the box to show them. “It’s a toe ring. A wedding band. My sweetie’s already wearing the engagement ring on her second-to-littlest toe. You should see it sparkle.”

That set off an explosion of back slaps, handshakes, and good-natured teasing, plus more coffees and a round of breakfast braincake from May, “On the house.”

Fark, Dev, and Tyreeq were truly happy for their friend, though each one was asking himself



similar questions, like, *Can she cook? What would they talk about? And What if the rest of her body comes back one day and wants her back?*

May delivered the braincake to the table. “So who’s your best man?” she asked.

Ebenezer stuffed a wad of braincake in his mouth and leaned back in his chair. He grinned around the table at his friends, each of whom tried not to look at him. He swallowed his mouthful of cake and took a sip of coffee.

“Well, I’m planning on having three of them. Now, what else is news?”

The bears had broken into Stinkpit Manor.

The picture on the front page showed a picture of Conniption Stinkpit, whose face was buried in her hands. “DESTRUCTION AND HEARTBREAK” read the headline of the main story. There were four other stories on the front page. Each one about the break-in. “Bears’ Manor Attack Proves Bears Manners Unbearable!” “Bears: Too Hot! Too Cold! Too Dangerous!” “Public Hearing at 10 a.m. Today!” “Bears Under Guard; Cruft Says Town Safe.”

Still too happy to let something like a crime wave ruin his mood, Ebenezer sat back and

watched his friends talk about the latest break-in. He listened to the Plainfielders arriving for their morning cup talking among themselves. And he saw The Stranger arrive, listen in for a few minutes, and depart without saying a word.

The Stranger was smiling as he left. That's because a single story had emerged from all the individual chatterings, like a rope woven tight from smaller strands. It was a story that embodied what everyone had always thought about bears. A confirmation that you can't trust them. How it had been a mistake for Cruft to open the city border to outsiders. How the Bears were a threat to traditional zombie values. How the Bears must go.

Bears, in other words, were the enemy.

Ebenezer's bliss, however, was untouchable. He was in love, and love is not bound by the things of this world. He found he wanted to share his good mood with anyone and everyone. The more the merrier. The bigger the better. That's when he noticed there was a massive hole in Burial Grounds. It was the size of Phileas Batuta, the biggest zombie in town.

“Hey,” he asked nobody in particular. “Where’s the big fellah?”

## CHAPTER THIRTY

# PLAINFIELD TURNS AGAINST THE BEARS



There are many fine alarm clocks in the world, but a horse's tongue is not one of them. Not even for Phileas Batuta, who loved his horse very much.

Mr. Goodness was hungry, however. For some reason, his owner had been gone most of the night, and by the time Phileas did stumble sleepily home, he was too preoccupied to give Mr. Goodness anything more than an absent-minded

chin-scratching. Phileas had then gone off to his dirtbox and slept past the dawn.

Well, enough was enough. Mr. Goodness' repeated nickerings had gone unanswered, so he nudged his way through the unlatched door of Phileas' cottage and began to lick the dirt off the Big Guy's face. The dirtbox had never quite fit Phileas. Sometimes it was his feet poking out the feet end; sometimes it was his head poking out the head end. If he'd had a bad dream, it might be his feet out the head end or his face out the the foot end. Like today, which was unlucky for Phileas, because it's a lot better to have a horse lick your toes than your nose.

"Okay, okay, buddy," he mumbled. "How about some hay for you and some joe for me?" He fetched the feedbag and let Mr. Goodness munch his breakfast as the two ambled into town.

The door to Burial Grounds was locked when he arrived. A sign hung from the worn brass handle.

*Off to the police station for the 10 a.m. hearing.  
Back after.*

Below that, there was a drawing of a bear. There was a red circle around the drawing. And a red line across the bear.

Written underneath: *Keep Plainfield Bear-Free.*

“Oh, no.” Phileas looked down Plainfield Avenue in one direction and back up it on the other. The town was empty. He backed into the middle of the street. The door of every store was closed. And there were a lot of “Bear-Free Plainfield” posters nailed to the walls.

He pulled out his pocket watch: 9:55. Not much time.

Phileas lurched quickly to his horse and spoke into his ear. “Sorry, my friend. But it’s an emergency.” He got on his horse and rode.

“Quiet, everyone. Quiet please.” Constable Cruft banged a gavel on the podium. The hearing room was jammed with angry Plainfielders.

Phileas had arrived on time. Just. But he couldn’t force his way into the hearing room. Actually, he could have. He could have forced his way through a brick wall if he had chosen, but he didn’t want to trample anybody. So he chose to stand outside and peer in through a window.

Conniption sat in the first row of chairs, her arm in a sling. The Stranger sat next to her. The FOGs were in the front row. Ebenezer still

looked deliriously happy, perhaps because Emily Shank was on the seat beside him and he was holding her pinky toe. The room was stuffed with Plainfield's high-and-mighty and low-and-questionable. The prosperous, the down-at-heel, the pieces and parts, the somebodies, the nobodies, the sums, and the wholes. And although Plainfield Elementary was technically in session, Mr. Sever had brought his entire seventh-grade class to the hearing for "an important civics lesson," as he put it. The whole class except Brockster, that is.

Moldylocks stood in a back corner, frowning. This was going to mess up her training.

# CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

## A CASE CLOSED... AND REOPENED



Constable Hieronymous Cruft scratched his head at a spot just above his right ear whenever he was amused, confused, or simply bemused by the goings on in Plainfield. Which was often. Especially this week. In fact, he'd done so much thinking the past few days that he'd scratched



down to the skull bone. Another week like this and he'd wear right through to his brain.

All the signs pointed to the Bears having committed the crimes they were accused of, but neither he nor his deputy, Tug Singlebuttock, could connect the Bears conclusively to the crimes. All the evidence was hearsay and circumstantial. Cruft liked his crimes neat and tidy. Find the evidence. Try the accused. Send them to jail. Move on to the next one.

Cruft looked out at the crowd of angry Plainfielders.

"Alright" he grumbled. "First thing: The Bears are under house arrest for suspicion of bear-rorism. Plainfield is safe. The accused are being guarded by a squad of deputies, led by Deputy Singlebuttock and temporary subdeputy Kay Hamhock."

Connption stood up, shakily. "House arrest! Why aren't they in jail?"

"Lack of evidence," said the constable.

Hoots and catcalls erupted around the room. Connption waved her good arm for silence and held her wounded arm in front of her.

“Constable, have you seen my arm this morning? This should be all the evidence you need!”

Cheers. More shouting. Chants of, “Jail the Bears! Jail the Bears!”

The constable folded his arms and waited for the room to quiet down. “Circumstantial evidence is not enough to put anybody in jail.” Boos and hisses. “However, it is enough to activate the town’s deportation policy. Which I have done.” Hoorays and hurrahs. “The Bears have been given one day to pack their belongings. They have until tomorrow at sundown to vacate Plainfield forever. Case closed,” said Cruft.

Jeminy and the Threadheads smirked at Moldylocks.

“Freakin’ fungus,” muttered Moldylocks. She reached into her pocket and crumpled the illustration of Rotburg State Theater. *It’s not like I had that great of a chance before. Now I have NO chance.*

Moldylocks smoldered, angry at everybody. Conniption, who had to be behind all this. Jeminy, for being Jeminy. The constable, for kicking the Bears out. Brockster, for getting her hopes up. Everybody in Plainfield, for being such

stupidheads. The keeper of the Welcome Field, for pulling her out of the earth in the first place. Her mom, for having to rewrite every play. Mr. B. F. Doolittle, for not helping her. And herself, for being such a gigantic loser. An ugly, angry fiery feeling swelled in her belly. The feeling began to rage. The rage blazed.

Go full bear. How would she finish her training now? There had to be something she could do.

Mr. Sever tapped her shoulder as he shepherded the class out of the hearing room.

“Take your time and catch up to us when you’re ready,” he said. There was a kindness in his eyes.

Phileas had observed the meeting in silence. Now, with all but a few stragglers cleared out of the room, he leaned in through the window, his big body blotting out all the light. “Constable?”

Cruft turned. “Yep.”

Phileas cleared his throat. “It wasn’t them.”

Moldylocks heard this. She scrunched up her face. *What?*

Connption heard him, too, and paused at the door. “What?” asked The Stranger, edging closer to Phileas.

“It wasn’t them,” Phileas repeated.

“What wasn’t who?” asked Constable Cruft.

“The Bears didn’t attack Mrs. Stinkpit’s home.”

A pause.

“Then who did?” growled the constable.

Phileas shrugged.

The constable gave his skull a good long scratch. He stared at Phileas. Stared hard. Phileas didn’t flinch.

“How do you know?”

“I was there. Watching.”

“You were watching the Bear house?”

“Yes.”

The Stranger spoke up. “If I may...”

“You may not,” the constable growled at him.

“How long were you there, Phileas?”

“Til dawn.”

Conniption interrupted, “Constable? Constable?”

Constable Cruft waved her off. “Not. Now!” He was still staring at Phileas. “Why were you there all night?”

“I was...” he felt the eyes of the others on him.

“I was just curious,” he stammered. “About bears.”

The rage in Moldylocks eased a little when she heard this. Someone else was curious. Like her.

The Stranger and Conniption crowded the constable and began speaking quickly, peppering their conversation with phrases like “unreliable witness,” and “overwhelming evidence,” and “general untrustworthiness,” and “it’s just the way they are.”

“Tell you what,” the constable said. “I’ll meet you halfway.” He turned to his deputy. “Deportation order still stands. But—I’m reopening the case. Sound good to you, Phileas?”

Phileas looked from Cruft to Conniption and back to Cruft. He didn’t know what to say. He nod-shrugged and departed without a further word.

Moldylocks’ mood lifted. Maybe Brockster would be freed and could help her find her roar—before he got deported. *But how do I get past the guards?*

During the hearing, Moldylocks had thought only about herself and winning the audition. But now, for the first time, she thought about things from the Bears’ perspective. Being deported would feel awful.

But what could she do? It would take a miracle to write a different ending to this story.

## CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

# SOMETHING STRANGE AT THE STINKPITS



After the hearing, Constable Cruft left the police station and shambled to Stinkpit Manor. Arnold showed him.

The entry was high. *Feels like a museum*, he thought. The place let in too much light for his tastes, even if the light was Plainfield's usual gray. He ran his fingers along the smooth woodwork

of the entry doorframe. Eyed the unstained walls. Studied the floor. Polished oak. *Too* polished. Something was off.

He got the feeling it was going to be a long day and thought for a moment of home—the red clay of the floor between his toes, the smell of comfortable rot in his nose, settling into his easy chair with a glass of brandy at the long day's close.

*Tough it up, Cruft*, he said to himself.

He shoved his fists deeper into his overcoat pockets and leaned against the wall, waiting.

A voice from the second-floor landing sang down to him. "Hieronymous. What a...pleasant surprise."

Conniption descended the entry stairs slowly. In the light, Cruft could see the layers of skin spackle on her masklike face. She stopped on the bottom stair, just above him.

"Conniption," he grunted.

"To what do I owe the..." she paused.

"Pleasure? Just tying up loose ends. Mind if I look around a little?" He climbed up to her stair; his eyes met hers.

“I don’t understand. Your deputy already conducted an investigation.”

“Just double-checking.”

“I must say,” said Conniption, folding her arms. “I’m astonished at your department’s incompetence.”

Cruft chuckled once and squeezed past her. “Well, I guess you just don’t know the police department like I do.” He brushed past her and began to climb the stairs. “Incompetence is our motto.”

When he reached the top of the stairs, she called up. “I know this is difficult for you, but try not to make a mess.”

The constable looked at the ceiling. “Speaking of...doesn’t seem to be much of one in the entry.” He pulled out a notebook and flipped through the pages. “Wasn’t that where the damage was?”

“Arnold cleaned it up, you fool.”

*She’s defensive*, he thought. “And rebuilt it? Amazing, for a headless fellow. Anyway, I’m glad your arm is feeling better.”

Conniption glared at him, unfolding her arms. “Thank you,” she said through clenched teeth. “It is. Much. I heal quickly.”



Cruft scribbled in his notepad. “Heals quickly.’ Got it, thanks.”

“But I don’t forget quickly,” she added. “Not at all.” She marched off to her office.

Cruft wandered down the hall, opening every door. Here was a music room. There was an art studio. There a library. He ambled into the training room.

The room was mostly bare. Just a wardrobe off in a corner, a dressing screen, an empty work table on the other side of the room, and the faint smell of honey in the air. He blew out his cheeks, looking. Cruft lurched to the worktable, pulled open drawers. He made scribbles in his notebook. Empty flasks. Honey jars. A bandana. The script of *Grizzly Hair*.

*The Bears are trouble, he thought. Best to just be rid of them. Pause. But only if they did it.*

He shuffled over to the wardrobe and studied it on the outside. He opened it and studied it on the inside.

There were two bear costumes—one big and one small—hanging from a rack. Suspicious, but not proof of anything. The Stinkpit kid, after

all, was in the audition. The constable got down on his knees, grunting. *I could lose a bit of weight*, he thought. He took out a nightstick from deep inside his overcoat and poked it to the back of the closet. Just exploring. *Sometimes you just had to follow your gut*, he told himself. He snorted a quick laugh at the thought. *Maybe I should GAIN weight. More gut to follow.* There was a sifting of red dust on the wardrobe floor. He reached into another inside pocket, fishing around for a specimen jar.

“They’re for training,” said Conniption behind him.

The constable stood up quickly.

“The costumes. My daughter is in the audition tomorrow night. We’ve been rehearsing.”

The constable shambled toward her. “Ah, right right. Well. Good luck with it. I’m done here.”

“I’ll show you out, then,” said Conniption.

At the bottom of the stairs, Constable Cruft fumbled about, patting his pockets and frowning. “Forgot my nightstick. I won’t be a moment.”

He returned to the training room, retrieved the nightstick from the wardrobe, and was soon

shambling back to the station with his nightstick dangling from a belt loop.

As he walked, he stuck his left hand into his overcoat pocket and patted the specimen jar, now full of the red dust.

## CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

# MOLDYLOCKS VS. THE DEPUTIES



After school, Moldylocks went directly to the Bears' house, toting the *Grizzly Hair* script and Mr. B. F. Doolittle in her pack. The script for practice. The fugly for luck.

The trip took twice as long as usual. She took the back paths through the woods once she crossed the river. She veered off Fleaknuckle Road early, approaching the Bears' house from the southeast via the bee yard path.

Moldylocks heard the buzzing from the clearing as she passed.

She was getting close to the house. *Careful, now.* She lurched off the path. Peered through a patch of nettles. Observed.

Lights off in the kitchen. Not that unusual. It was only late afternoon. But—unusual for the Bears, who loved them some yellow. She scanned the perimeter of the yard. Deputy Singlebuttock patrolled the front gate, pacing and looking bored. Down the fence line, Spasm Jenkins sat on a fence rail reading a magazine. Off on the other side of the yard, Tom Femur picked his nose. The other Tom, Tom Head, had been set on a fencepost and was blinking slowly. Last, around the back, paced Kay Hamhock. She was the only one who seemed to be taking her job seriously.

Moldylocks looked again at Tom Head, wondering what use he would be. *Right,* she realized. *Another pair of eyes. Eyes!* She looked in the near tree branches and spotted three eye spies. They were blinking madly, trying to get the guards' attention. She'd been spotted.

She looked back at Tom Head. He had fallen asleep, thankfully. The others didn't notice the blinking eyes. Not yet. Kay Hamhock, still some distance away, was drawing closer. She'd be the first to notice.

What to do?

She took another look at Tom Head, lips fluttering in a snore. "I wish they would *all* fall asleep."

That gave her an idea.

She quickly snatched the three eye spies out of the trees and tucked them safely in an outside pocket of her pack.

Moldylocks hurried back to the bee yard.

The clearing felt holy. Columns of sunlight ran up to the sky and disappeared in broken clouds. Dew on the pine needles prised the light into tiny, stained-glass ornaments. The hives were aligned in rows, and the grass across the clearing had been trimmed to a uniform height, perfect for lying on your back and contemplating infinite things. Planter boxes full of flowers were spaced at intervals around the clearing. For the bees? For beauty? Yes and yes.

Moldylocks peered into the first hive cabinet.

The bees were busy building. They tended to the honeycomb, each other, or the baby bees. She peeked into several other hives. Each was the same. Clean. Peaceful. Purposeful. A different way to live. There was a chest of drawers at the end of one row of hives. Moldylocks lurched to it and pulled the brass, bee-shaped knob on the top drawer. Beekeeping supplies, precisely laid out. Gloves, a mask with a respirator, bee blasters (smokers, she corrected herself), dried moss and other tinder, and a flint for sparking a fire.

Brockster's voice came back to her from his first day of class. "We just put them to sleep," he had said.

Was that only three days ago? So much had happened. So much was happening. She had to hurry.

Kay Hamhock had seen many strange sights in her undeath. One of her fondest memories, in fact, was of the Circo Morto, the fantastic traveling circus full of strange zombies and wonderful creatures, wrangled into a delirious dance by Ringmaster Quintillion Slick. But now, right here in Plainfield, was a sight to top them all.

Kay's eyes widened when she saw the puff of smoke from the strange device. *It's a ray gun*, she thought. And the ray gun was held by a small alien being, wearing a full-body suit that shielded its alien eyes, protected its alien body, and regulated its alien breathing, which emerged harsh and raspy. The only unprotected part were its alien feet, which were different sizes. *Looks like a six and a nine*, thought Kay. *This is rather strange. I must think ...more...about...alien... feet...* But already she was growing woozy. Her eyelids fluttered. Her knees wobbled and she fell. Alien hands caught her and set her gently on the forest floor.

In the end, Moldylocks smoked them all to gentle sleep. Spasm. Tom Femur. Tug Singlebuttock. She double-puffed Tom Head, even though he was still sleeping, and set him in Tug's lap. She collected all the eye spies she could find, including the ones she'd stuck in her pocket, and set them in a nest of moss near Tug. *Smoke-smoke. Blink-blink...zzzz*. All eyes closed.

She hurried to the kitchen door and knocked.

Brockster opened it. A baffled expression came over him. Moldylocks pulled back her goggles.



Brockster's face lit up. They hugged.

"How did you..." he began.

"Let me explain," she said. "No, there is no time. Let me sum up: I need to roar and practice my monologue. We don't have much time."

"But the guards?"

"I smoked 'em," said Moldylocks.

"Let's do it," said Brockster. "I can take a break from packing."

Roar training went terribly.

## CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

# “THIS STORY IS ALL WRONG!”



The house was dark because Skip had powered down the generator and the lamps had been packed away. The once-cozy living room was sad and bare now. The chairs, the rug, the pictures on the wall—all had been tied, wrapped, or stored in boxes. Tufts of packing sawdust drifted across the floor where only the turntable remained.

“We wanted to have music while we worked,” explained Skip, coming down the stairs with Muffy.

Brockster explained how Moldylocks had gained access to the house. Skip and Muffy looked impressed. Muffy put her arms on Moldylocks’ shoulders. “We’re gonna miss you.”

Moldylocks looked at this family, unlike any she’d ever known. “Same here,” she said.

Skip put a paw on Brockster’s neck and gave it a squeeze. “But Brockster will write, won’t you son?”

Brockster swallowed and nodded his head.

Awkward silence.

“Maybe you can come visit Bear Country,” said Muffy.

“Mom, Dad, we have to hurry,” said Brockster. “Moldy needs to roar.”

“Right, right,” said Muffy.

“We’ll be upstairs packing if you need anything,” said Skip.

“One more thing,” said Muffy. She handed Moldylocks a small package tied with a ribbon. “A story to read when you get home.”

Skip and Muffy hugged her.

“Kids, remember,” said Skip, “you both still need to keep your voices down just to be safe. Moldylocks, the guards will be asleep for about twenty minutes. You need to get out of here before that. We’ll say we have no idea what happened. That’s our story and we’re sticking to it.” He gave her a wink.

Brockster faced Moldylocks in the middle of the living room. “Okay, roaring. There’s the technique—which I can teach you, and then there’s the passion—which I can’t. So we’re just gonna focus on the technique.”

“You can practice loud tomorrow. Before the audition.”

“You’ll be gone then...”

“Yeah.” Brockster looked away and cleared his throat. He was silent a moment. “All right,” he said. “Let’s get started.”

He put “Honey Honey” on the turntable with the volume low and ran Moldylocks through a series of roar-warmup exercises in time with the music. Quick inhalations and exhalations. Mono-syllables and plosives. “*Ha! Ha! Ha!*” Little puffed expulsions. “*Pah! Pah! Pah!*” They shook out their shoulders and rolled their heads. “*Yee! Yee! Yee!*”

Brockster had Moldylocks ascend a vocal scale. “*La la la la la.*” Each note higher than the one before. Then back down, lower and lower, until the sound was a deep-well rumble that vibrated her ribs. Then a deep breath. Another one. A third.

“I know we can’t go full roar,” said Brockster. “But try to put your whole self into it.”

Moldylocks roared.

“Again.”

Moldylocks tried again.

“That was a bit better. One more.”

She roared one more time. “How was that?” she asked. But she knew the answer. Something was missing. Her inside was still stuck inside.

“We’ll stop there,” said Brockster. “You know the basics. Now just put some passion into it. Go out to that pond by your house and roar like crazy. Don’t hold back. And remember, each roar is a little bit different. Mom and Dad always say your roar is your way of shouting ‘I am’ to the universe. Which is kind of cool.”

“My mom says I need to bring my inside outside.”

“Yeah, that’s good,” said Brockster. He walked

to the window and peeked out at the sleeping deputies. “We’re okay. Let’s get in character with a few lines—then you kick into the monologue.”

Moldylocks suddenly didn’t want to show him the script.

“Shouldn’t we try to roar some more?”

“There’s no point, really,” he said. “The rest is up to you. Inside outside.”

Moldylocks reluctantly pulled the script out of the back pocket of her overalls. She handed it to Brockster. He looked at the cast of characters.

“You’re *Grizzly Hair*, obviously. I’ll be the zombie woman.” He read aloud. “The play begins at night. Interior. House. A bear bursts through the door, frothing and snarling. Ha! This is so over-the-top. Okay, let’s see it.”

Moldylocks gave a half-hearted snarl as she broke open an imaginary door.

“Fiercer!” Brockster commanded.

Moldylocks snarled a little louder.

“It’ll do,” said Brockster. He flipped the page. “Okay, here comes the zombie woman. She’s terrified.” He made a frightened face. “That’s your cue,” he said, looking at Moldylocks.

“I’ve come to eat your baby,” she mumbled.

Brockster laughed. “No, seriously!”

“That’s what it says,” said Moldylocks miserably.

He read. “Yeah, I guess it does. Huh.” He read the rest of the page. Then he flipped through the rest of Act I, where the snarling bears fled the house. Act II, where the town banded together to fight off the bear menace. Act III, where the bear army was wiped out.

When he finished he had a devastated look on his face. “This story is all wrong.”

Moldylocks couldn’t look at him. “It’s just a story,” she muttered.

Brockster shook his head. “No, not just a story. Stories are everything. This makes us sound so mean.” He bit his lip and thought a moment. “Do you believe all this?”

Moldylocks stared at the floor. “No,” she whispered. “Not anymore.”

“But you did?”

She looked at him, her face full of sorrow. “Yes.”

“Then why come around if you thought I was so mean?” asked Brockster, puzzled.

Then he understood.

“Because you wanted to win the contest,” he said. “You used me.”

He sounded more bewildered than angry. That somehow made Moldylocks feel worse.

*Go full bear*, she told herself. “Well, what about you, huh? You just used me to get back at Jeminy for throwing mucus balloons.”

“Yeah, I wanted to get back at her,” he flashed. “But that’s not all I wanted. I thought we were friends! I actually like you! Shows what an idiot bear I am. You really are an amazing actor.”

Moldylocks looked around the room. At the floor, the turntable, out the window, anywhere but at Brockster. Her throat was tight. Her eyes welled up. “I actually...I...I...should go.”

Brockster had tears in his eyes, too, as he flung the script at her.

Moldylocks fled out the front gate past the sleeping deputies.



CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE  
JEMINY ROCKS  
HER ROAR



Jeminy stood in the middle of the Stinkpit Manor training room, still as a corpse. Shoulders back. Head up. Eyes fixed. Arnold was absent, away on an errand. But no matter, he wasn't needed for this night's training. Conniption circled her daughter slowly. Inspecting. The only sound was the soft complaint of floorboards underfoot.

Jeminy smelled poached brains on Conniption's breath each time her mother exhaled.

"A true roar is rage," said Conniption. "You eat the pain of the world and you spit fire back. You scream, 'I will not be defeated! I am power! I will win!' Now let's hear it. Bring it forth!"

As if released from a spell, Jeminy took five breaths. In through the nose and out through the mouth. Each progressively deeper. Breathing in every cheat, every insult, every act of disrespect she had ever felt, staring at her mother all the while. After the fifth breath, she unleashed a howling, wailing, blood-freezing roar.

When the sound at last died down and Jeminy stood doubled over, hands on her knees, out of breath. Conniption said simply, "That's a ten. Now practice your monologue."

"Yes, Mom."

Conniption lurched to the door.

"Mom?"

Conniption turned.

"Will there be a raid tonight?"

"No. We've accomplished our mission. The Bears are leaving tomorrow. You've achieved Total Bear Immersion. Congratulations, dear."

Downstairs, Connipion received The Stranger in private. "Give me the report."

He dumped the eye spies on her desk. Connipion was incredulous at their blinked message. "They fell asleep? All of them? No one saw a thing?"

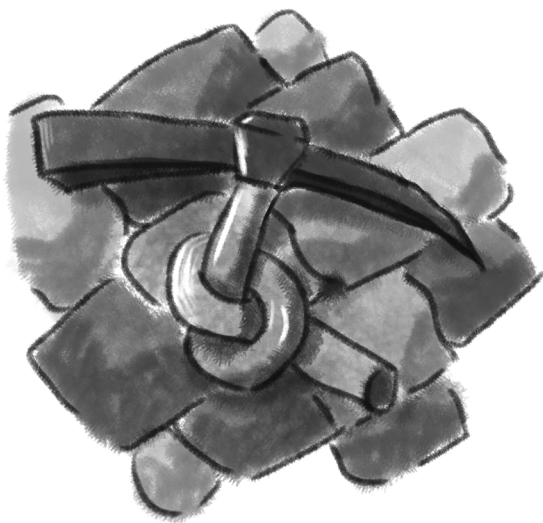
"Is the story under control?" asked The Stranger.

"It's unlikely anything momentous could have happened while they were asleep, but be on your toes. You have a job to finish tomorrow."

"And once I do," The Stranger hugged himself. "I get my reward."



FRIDAY



## CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

# MOLDYLOCKS REALIZES SHE'S NOT THE BEAR GIRL



Audition day, and Moldylocks was one sour mope. And when she wasn't moping she was sulking.

She wouldn't talk to her mom at breakfast. She refused to help Harry and Santiago take out the trash. She stuffed Mr. B. F. Doolittle in her backpack upside down next to the gift the Bears had given her, which she'd been too ashamed to open but too curious to throw away.

She put her head down on her desk during

Maura More-or-Less' presentation on brainworms. Her curiosity was dead all day. Not even Maura going on about how the worms "get stuck in your brainfolds and can be hard to get out unless you have a special drill and a power extractor, could catch her interest.

At recess, Moldylocks retreated to Fort Smidgen. During PE, she let the dodgeballs bounce off her, and her team lost.

At lunch she sat at her usual table alone, clutching Mr. B. F. Doolittle's paw in her hand, not ready to let go of that little bit of beariness. She uncrumpled the picture of Rotburg Theater, stared at it bleakly, and heard Brockster's voice in her mind. *Focus on that. Have that picture in your mind.*

"Right," she said to Mr. B. F. Doolittle. "Like that was ever gonna work. I was always going to be a loser."

There was a laugh behind her. Like claws on a chalkboard.

The cafeteria got quiet.

"That's right, Bear Girl. Loser now, loser forever," said Jeminy. "Best just accept it."

Moldylocks spun around.

When Jeminy saw the picture of Rotburg Theater, she grinned. “Enjoy it,” she said. “It’s the closest you’re going to get to Rotburg.”

It was too much for Moldylocks. She stood up, put her face in Jeminy’s, and roared.

Her roar was a weak squawk.

Jeminy laughed again. “That’s all you got? You do know the audition is tonight, right?”

Moldylocks felt all her mopey, sulky, losery feelings boil up. She flung herself at Jeminy, but was intercepted midair by Possum Skidmark, who pinned her in no time.

Moldylocks squirmed to get out of his grip. No use. Jeminy looked down on her. “Your voice is cracked, you can’t wrestle, and honey makes you puke. Give up now. Don’t embarrass yourself tonight.” Jeminy bent down and whispered in Moldylocks’ ear. “You’re no Bear Girl. You don’t even know what that means.”

Possum released Moldylocks. The Threadheads retreated. Conversation resumed across the cafeteria. Moldylocks scooted on her back until she was directly under the center of the table. She pulled Mr. B. F. Doolittle to her chest and shut



her eyes hard, wanting Plainfield to just disappear. She fell deep inside herself. She could hear kids laughing at her, but they seemed far away. Jeminy's words played over and over in her mind. *You don't even know what that means. You don't even know what that means.*

The lunch bell clanged.

Moldylocks didn't move.

*You don't even know what that means.*

Somewhere deep in her brain, a curiosity cell lit up.

*Was that true? Do I REALLY not know what it meant to be a bear? IS Jeminy right? A crazy answer came to her. I DO know what it means to be the Bear Girl. But going full bear is not what I thought. Being a bear isn't what anybody thinks it is. The story IS all wrong. EVERYBODY'S wrong.*

She chewed on the thought all through Mr. Sever's social studies lecture on the founding of Plainfield and the rise of the brain-based economy. Mr. Sever finally finished.

One more class to go. Geology.

Finally!

Mr. Sever pulled down the window shades

and set out the slide-lantern on its stand. Thank goodness for filmstrips. Gretel Farmer ran the projector. Her brother Hansel read aloud the captions about strata.

“Everyone know what strata are?” asked Mr. Sever. When the class was silent, he continued, “It means ‘layers.’ Everything has more layers than we can see with just our eyes.”

“What else is there to see with?” Jeminy sneered.

“Anyone have an answer for Jeminy?” Moldylocks raised her hand. “Ms. LaMort?”

“Our hearts,” said Moldylocks simply.

“Very good,” said Mr. Sever. “Maya and Calvin, please continue.”

Moldylocks felt a surge of hope. She had strata, too, and some of it was good. Most of it.

She untied the bow and unwrapped the package. It was a small book, called *The Real Story of the Three Bears*.

In the dim light she read:

*This is the story of the Great Bear Migration and how calamity is not always the misfortune we think it to be.*

*A long time ago, a once-in-a-generation snow-*

*storm separated a band of bears from their family and forced them into the Zombielands. This is the story of how they encountered a zombie cub lost in the woods, and the decision they made to save the cub by taking a dangerous journey to find it a home and a mother. This is the story about the stories we tell, how important they are, and how they can change our lives for the better.*

Moldylocks was stunned. *Yes, I DO know what it means to be the Bear Girl, she thought. But Plainfield doesn't.*

Moldylocks realized there was only one person who could tell them.

*Me.*

She took out a piece of parchment and wrote a note. She was so engrossed in her writing that she didn't hear Mr. Sever walk up.

"Eyes in the back of my head," he said.

Her eyes widened.

"And one in a jar."

He handed her a folded slip of paper. "Take this. I think you need to spend some time with Principal Botulus," he said loudly.

Moldylocks gulped.

Then Mr. Sever looked meaningfully at the Moldylocks. And he winked.

Out in the hall, curiosity overtook her and she unfolded the paper.

“Go see Phileas,” it said. “Now.” Below that he’d written “Good luck,” and an address.

There was one more line.

“This note excuses you from school early today. We’ll call it ‘field research.’”

## CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

# THE GATHERING OF THE CLOUDS



There are times when the world seems to spin a little faster on its axis. A zombie can be lumbering along casually, taking time out to smell the corpse flowers or patch her skinholes, when *wham!* suddenly it feels like she and everyone around her are hurtling along like leaves in a windstorm. Driven by a force they cannot control or comprehend, they converge toward the same

mad destiny, powerless to shape it, bumping and jostling, faster, and faster, and faster.

The Friday afternoon before the *Grizzly Hair* audition was one of those times.

Moldylocks LaMort...

...lurched out of school, across the bridge, and once more down Fleaknuckle Road. She paused only twice. Once when she had an idea for a gift and took a moment to wrap it. The second time to ask for directions. Before long she found her way to the path that led through the woods to Phileas Batuta's cottage.

Jeminy Stinkpit...

...fidgeted at her desk in Mr. Sever's class, waiting for the end-of-day school bell to ring. *Where did Bear Girl go? What was she up to?* Jeminy didn't want to leave anything to chance. *Total Bear Immersion*, she told herself. She didn't just want to win, she wanted to ruin Moldylocks. *Tick-tick-tick*. Waiting was a torment.

Dorothy LaMort...

...set up the judges' table at the side of the ZITCO stage. She slid a folding chair under each end of the table for herself and Conniption—the

farther apart the better—and set a small vase in the middle as a perch for the third judge, Tom Head.

Santiago Mano and Harry Halfleg...

...straightened the ZITCO's rows of chairs, picked up trash, and plucked slugs off the grass to sell from the concession stand later.

Constable Hieronymous Cruft...

...fumed in his police station office. He was angry about the slip-up of the guards at the Bear Place the day before. Angry at the delay in getting the lab results. Angry at loose ends. Angry at Conniption Stinkpit, who always seemed to be behind everything suspicious. Angriest of all at himself. He hadn't yet figured out where the data led. He pounded his thick fist on his desk and shouted down the hall to Deputy Singlebuttock, "The results on that specimen from the Stinkpit place should have been done by now. Head over to the lab and hurry them up!" He remembered he'd sent Singlebuttock and twenty-five temporary deputies away to escort the Bears out of town. He got up grumbling. "Gotta do it myself."

Conniption Stinkpit...

...sat in her office, making checkmarks next to

a list of items. Bears gone? Check. Jeminy trained? Check. LaMort deal offered? Check. LaMort child neutralized? Check. The Stranger in position? Check. Threadheads deployed for one last task? Check. She leaned back and allowed herself a rare smile. It had been a well-organized week.

Ebenezer Rotbody...

...sat on a blanket at a quiet spot along the Plainfield River, tickling the sole of Emily Shank's foot. Emily squirmed happily. The ring on her second-to-littlest toe sparkled in the light. "And after we're married," said Ebenezer, "I'm going to give you a foot massage every night. And I'm going to carry you everywhere in a special backpack. And I'm going to build an elevator so you don't have to take the stairs up from the basement."

The Geezers...

...now known as the TOOGs—Three Other Old Geezers—hid in the riverside bushes opposite Ebenezer and Emily's picnic spot. They took turns peering through a spyglass, and chuckling. But as much as they liked to poke fun, the truth was, they were bored without their friend. Fortunately for them, things were about to get a lot more unbor-



Tom Head...

...relaxed and let his wife, Mary, dip him in the beetle box. The beetles fluttered all across his face and hair, munching bits of leftover food, dandruff, and boogers. They tickled. Which made him smile. Which made the beetles squiggle into his mouth. He blew them out. He smiled again, this time with his mouth closed. Mary pulled him out by his left ear and brushed the beetles off with a soft beetle-off brush. The last of the clingers fell. Mary held him in her hands and gave him a kiss. They'd been married 30 years and he didn't think he had ever loved her more than at this moment. She deserved so much. He hoped she liked the surprise he was bringing her tonight.

A size-six right foot...

...inched ever closer to the ZITCO.

Skip, Muffy, and Brockster Bear...

...sat on the side stoop of the house they'd only just started to know. They were surrounded by crates, suitcases, twenty-five temporary deputies, and a very twitchy Permanent Deputy Tug Singlebuttock. He and Kay Hamhock stood back

to back, turning in place, watching for anything mysterious, suspicious, or sleep-inducing.

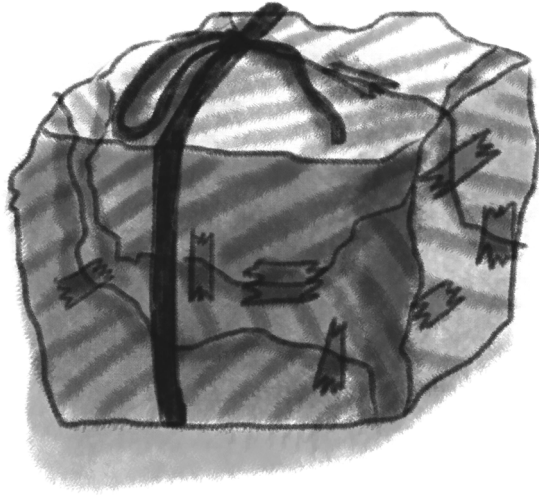
The Threadheads...

...huddled with Jeminy on the playground the moment the school bell rang to end the day. She gave the instructions her mother had given her. "Find her, detain her. Do not let her make it to the audition. This is real. Bear down!"

Phileas Batuta...

...checked the harness straps and scratched Mr. Goodness behind the ears. "Tough job, today, my friend." Mr. Goodness whinnied. Not the whinny that said, "Yeah, I understand" but the surprised one that asked, "Were you expecting company?" Phileas looked up and saw the girl with green hair and mismatched feet hurrying toward him.

CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT  
ALMOST THE ROAR  
SHE'D BEEN LOOKING FOR



“Mr. Batuta?” Moldylocks panted, “I’m Moldylocks LaMort. And I like bears.”

Phileas held out a massive hand, which Moldylocks shook. His grip was gentle. His smile was kind.

“Me, too,” he said.

“You’re helping the Bears move, right?”

He nodded.

“Can you give them something for me?” she asked.

He nodded again.

Moldylocks reached into her pack and handed him a lumpy gift wrapped in the Bears repurposed gift wrap. Moldylocks had tucked a note under the string that bound the present.

Phileas set the note and package carefully on the wagon’s bench seat. “You want to come with me to say goodbye?”

She shook her head. “He doesn’t like me anymore.”

Phileas looked at her with tenderness.

“It’s my fault,” she said. “But I wanted to tell him sorry.”

They walked back down the path together. When they got to Fleaknuckle Road, Moldylocks told him thanks. She went left and he went right.

The audition was two hours away.

Moldylocks felt as much an outsider as ever, but she regarded the feeling with curiosity now instead of anger. Despite all her selfishness and her imperfections, for the first time she could

ever remember, she felt comfortable in her own greenish skin. The boundary between her inside and her outside was disappearing. She was on the right path.

She lurched around a bend in the road not far from the Stubbs Factory and the Plainfield Bridge. The clump of saplings on the river side of the road rustled. Hoarse laughter leaked out and the Threadheads stepped out from their hiding place and surrounded her.

“Hello, loser,” said Possum Skidmark.

“Bear lover,” said Fantabulous Ooze.

“Don’t hurl on us,” said Sparkle Hallows while her twin sister Spangle made retching sounds.

“Yeah,” said Possum. “We just want to hang out with you for a while. Like a few hours. Just ‘til the audition is over.”

Moldylocks looked at each of them calmly. “If I’m such a loser, why are you so worried I might win?”

While the Threadheads paused to think about this, Moldylocks seized the moment.

She brought her inside outside. She unleashed a howl from her core. She roared an “I am” roar

from the depths of herself, from the very center of her undead center.

The pure force of it shocked and staggered the Threadheads. Moldylocks pushed past Possum and out into the safety of Plainfield Bridge before any of them could regain their wits. Truth be told, Moldylocks had frightened them.

She lurched home. It had been a pretty good roar. Almost the one Moldylocks had been looking for. But not quite.

“I don’t want anything from her,” said Brockster.

“Give her a chance, son,” said Muffy, securing the pile in Phileas’ cart.

“Mom, I did. We did. Lots of chances.” He handed the last of his toys, a sack of zombie action figures, to Phileas.

Tug and the twenty-five deputies watched Phileas and the Bears finish loading. There was space on the wagon floor for one more item.

Skip and Phileas muscled a massive metal spool onto the cart. Skip explained, “It’s something I was working on this week. It’s the rotating base for a wagon turntable. You sink it in the ground, see, almost to ground level. Then you park a cart

over it, unhitch your horse, raise the turntable, and spin the cart right around. Slick as a whistle. With this, you can turn a wagon in a small space, like in a barn or in front of a shop downtown. Wish I could have put it to use. I think you folks would have liked it. Ah, well.”

Brockster and Muffy set the last of the bee hives carefully on the cart.

The Bears climbed onto the wagon. The cart was heavy, so Phileas helped Mr. Goodness pull the cart out of the yard. Skip and Muffy held paws. Brockster sat between them, scowling. Head down. Arms crossed. Skip and Muffy looked over their shoulders and watched the house ‘til the trees closed around them.

“Just give the note a look, Brockster,” said Skip. “You never know.”

“She’s such a jerk. She only wanted to win that stupid scholarship. She took advantage of us, Dad. Of me. You know how zombies are,” Brockster grumbled.

Phileas stopped Mr. Goodness and turned to face Brockster. For the second time in two days, he spoke up.

“She *does* like you,” he said. “All three of you. I do, too.”

He turned and resumed pulling. The deputies filed past them, out to Fleaknuckle Road to stand guard. Muffy picked up the present and held it out to Brockster.

“All right, all right.” Brockster read the note aloud.

*Dear Bear Family,*

*I'm sorry. I'm really really really sorry.*

*I can't TELL you in a letter how sorry I am. Please come to the audition so I can SHOW you. I know you don't have any reason to, and I know I don't deserve it, but ... maybe you could trust me?*

*Your FRIEND,*

*Moldylocks LaMort*

*P.S. Brockster—I found my roar.*

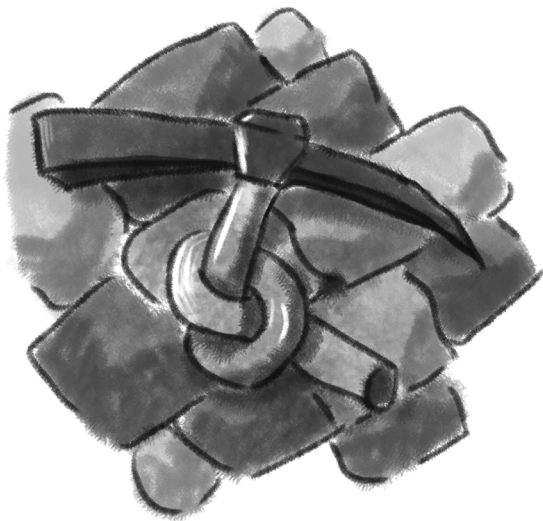
Brockster handed the note to his parents and opened the package. He saw the familiar face of Mr. B. F. Doolittle.

“Phileas,” said Skip, calling the giant zombie quietly over and whispering so the deputies wouldn’t hear. “How do you feel about a detour?”



## CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

# A CHANGE OF DIRECTION



No one had ever stood up to the Threadheads before. Suddenly they weren't quite sure who they were, so they spent a while blaming each other for letting Moldylocks escape.

Every mob, even a small one, needs a unifying purpose. For the Threadheads, that purpose was

about to come lurching down the road on cart wheels.

Temporary Deputy Kay Hamhock shambled ahead of Permanent Deputy Tug Singlebuttock and the twenty-four other temporary deputies to wait at the junction where the cartpath to the Bear Place—soon to be called the Old Curmudgeon Place again—met Fleaknuckle Road. Kay had been furious with herself after falling asleep during her first attempt at guard duty and had begged Constable Cruft for a second chance. Cruft rewarded her enthusiasm by promoting her to lead temporary deputy under Deputy Singlebuttock. She'd even taken a vacation day from her job as Plainfield Quarry's senior rock hammerer in order to fulfill her civic duty.

Kay waited, tightening her grip around Large Marge—her fifteen-pound rock hammer. She stood clear of the underbrush, the better to avoid sneak attacks from sleep-making alien hooligans.

She watched the path.

She waited.

The other deputies lined up next to her.

Phileas considered Skip's question about a detour. Best keep things peaceful. Too much commotion could cause confusion. What could he do? And yet...

"Whoa, there," he called to Mr. Goodness.

Phileas fished the *Book of Wisdom* out of his back pocket. He closed his eyes and let the book fall open. His thick finger found a page. He opened his eyes, read.

"You are the book. You have opened to the answer you seek."

Phileas returned the book to his pocket, then kissed Mr. Goodness on the forehead. "I know what that means," he said. He led the Bears to Fleaknuckle Road. Kay Hamhock waited. Tug stood on her right. The twenty-four deputies stood to his right, in the out-of-town direction. Kay held out her arm, pointed west. Away. She swung the hammer slowly at her side. Back and forth. Back and forth.

Phileas *whoa*-ed Mr. Goodness to a halt.

Skip slid closer to Brockster and Muffy.

Brockster squeezed Mr. B. F. Doolittle. A growl

low in his throat.

“Afternoon, Tug, Kay,” said Phileas softly.

“It’ll be a better one when they’re gone,” Kay said.

Phileas said nothing.

“We’re just keeping the peace, Big Phil,” said Tug. “We don’t want any trouble.”

“You know how bears are,” said Kay.

Phileas sighed. He patted Mr. Goodness softly.

“I do, Kay. But the town doesn’t.”

Kay lurched into the middle of the road so that she stood between the cart and Plainfield, blocking the way to town. She lifted Large Marge and slapped the hammer head into her open palm. Tug hesitated, then shambled up beside her. “Can’t let you turn toward town,” she said. “We can do this the easy way or the hard way.”

“Kay,” said Phileas, “I’d like you to meet my friends, the Bears. Skip, Muffy, and Brockster.”

“Phileas...” warned Tug.

“I guess it’s the hard way,” said Kay.

Kay had expected to just scare Phileas and the Bears. She expected Phileas would back down. She expected she’d lead the Bears out of town herself,

trailed by Tug and the deputies. She'd expected to be a hero. And she expected that Constable Cruft would bring her on full-time in the police department.

What she didn't expect was that Phileas would snatch the hammer from her grip. She didn't expect him to twist and bend the hammer's long metal handle into a knot and hand it back to her. She didn't expect him to gather her and Tug up in his arms—firmly, gently—and set them to the side of the road, clearing a path toward town. She didn't expect herself, Tug, the twenty-four other deputies to just stand there as Phileas squeezed into the wagon, and Mr. Goodness went trotting off toward town.

But that's what happened.

Phileas turned toward town. Toward destiny.

As soon as Moldylocks arrived home, she began to rummage through the racks of costumes that clogged the stairway. If the Bears did show up, she had an idea about how to keep them safe. She found the three costumes she was looking for at the top of the stairs. More inspiration: She found a fourth, for Mr. B. F. Doolittle.

Moldylocks looked up from her costume-

gathering. Dorothy was watching her, a sweet-sad smile on her face. “You look so grown-up.”

Moldylocks dropped the costumes. She lurched to her mother and gave her a big hug. A bear hug.

“They might be coming, Mom.” Moldylocks held out the costumes. “We have to be ready just in case. What do you think? Can we hide the Bears in plain sight?”

Dorothy beamed, and nodded.

“Do we still have those foaming flakes in the prop closet?”

“Yes, we sure do.”

“Okay. I’ll get them.”

Dorothy collected herself. “Moldylocks, no matter what happens tonight, you’ve already won.”

The TOOGs heard the commotion coming along Fleaknuckle Road. They left their Ebenezer-gawking to chase down the fuss. Tyreeq paused long enough to shout across the river to Ebenezer. “Break it up, you old goat! There’s trouble brewing!”

Ebenezer roused himself out of his love-daze. When he saw the puffs of dust on the far riverbank, he kissed Emily on the knee and slowly

began to pack up the picnic.

The puffs of dust were being kicked up by Phileas and Mr. Goodness, hauling the cart as fast as he could through town. Past the smokestacks of the Stubbs Factory. Clattering across the Plainfield Bridge. Veering right onto Plainfield Avenue. Past the offices of North Tendon, the boutiques of the Steaming Heaps, and the houses of the well-to-do at the Festerings.

Speeding toward the ZITCO.

Rising gusts of to-do and ado and hullabaloo followed in his wake. A whirlwind gathering force and volume as it spun forward. Shouts and cries, and grunts and sighs. Moans and groans. Yipping and yapping. Yowling and howling. And one dreamy voice humming a love song. Ebenezer's voice. A zombie mob roused itself out of every corner of Plainfield, growing and lurching relentlessly forward.

Constable Cruft paced the lobby of Plainfield Labs. He'd had to twist the arm of the director, Dr. Hadley Ganglion, to hurry along results of the soil-sample Cruft had secreted from the Stinkpits.

Cruft twisted too hard. The arm had come off. Which caused more delay while Ganglion left to get it reattached. Cruft huffed a gruff apology and Dr. Ganglion assured him the results would be ready “at any moment.”

The constable pulled out his pocket watch and snapped it quickly shut.

The ZITCO was ready.

Moldylocks and Dorothy sat on the front porch swing beside Santiago and Harry. Harry nuzzled Moldylocks with his femur stub. Santiago gave her the thumb up. All Moldylocks could do, she'd done.

The porch deck began to vibrate faintly. Moldy could feel it through the sole of her size-nine foot. *Were they coming? This could be them. Best be ready.* She acted fast, barking directions. “Harry, Santiago—get ready with the makeup and the foaming flakes. Mom—grab that leftover brain casserole. Phileas will be hungry.”

Dorothy and the stagehands disappeared.

Phileas and Mr. Goodness came stomping around the bend toward the house.

They came!



Phileas grinning like a madman. Mr. Goodness panting. The Bears all smiling, their fur swirled and whorled by the mad dash through town. The cart skidded to a stop at the front steps and Phileas helped the Bears down.

“The whole town’s coming,” said Phileas. “Got a plan, Moldy?”

“Bears—inside. Put on the costumes. Quick! Phileas, take Mr. Goodness and hide out at O’Putrid’s Pond. There are reeds and cattails to munch. For him, I mean. I’ll come with you and show you the way.”

The Bears tumbled out of the wagon and rushed into the house.

Brockster paused. He held Mr. B. F. Doolittle out to her. “Thanks.”

“He’s for you to keep,” said Moldylocks.

“I never asked you,” said Brockster. “What’s the ‘B. F.’ stand for?”

She gave his paw a squeeze. “Best Friend. Now go!”

Dorothy reappeared with the picnic basket. Moments later, Mr. Goodness was pulling Phileas and Moldylocks back down the drive.

CHAPTER FORTY  
A MOB MARCHES  
ON THE ZITCO



Minutes later the town mob came down the ZITCO drive, its whirlwind of sound rebounding around them. Conniption led, flanked by Jeminy and Arnold, who carried Tom Head cupped in his hands.

Behind them lurched Tug, Kay, and the other twenty-four temporary deputies, along with the

Threadheads, the TOOGs, a blissed-out looking Ebenezer, The Stranger, and most of the town.

They marched up the path to the ZITCO.

Connption held up her right fist. The mob halted.

Dorothy came out the front door onto the porch, followed by three zombies no one had ever seen before.

“Where are they?” Connption asked.

“Where are who?” asked Dorothy.

“You know who,” said Connption.

“Don’t play games, LaMort,” said Kay. “I’ve got twenty-four deputies.” She held up the knotted remains of Large Marge. “And this lump of metal.”

“And me,” said Tug.

“Where’s the constable?” asked Dorothy.

“He’s on important police business,” said Tug.

“We want to know where the Bears are,” said Connption.

“Weren’t they deported?” asked Dorothy.

The mob fidgeted behind Connption.

“The deliveryman led them right through the middle of town,” said Connption. “They were headed this way. And who is that behind you!”

She gestured to the three zombies behind Dorothy, in the shadows of the porch.

“Ah, how rude of me,” said Dorothy. “My cousins. In town for medical treatment. Beulah, Bernice, and little Betty. The baby is Bupkis.”

Conniption squinted and took a few steps forward.

The Bear family squirmed in their zombie costumes.

Dorothy came down the porch steps to block her way. “I should tell you, they’re still contagious.”

Conniption made to step around her.

“Tongue rot,” said Dorothy. “I’d hate for you to lose the power of speech, Conniption.”

The zombies stepped forward and opened their mouths. Foam poured out. They closed their mouths, and stepped back in the shadows.

“Whoa, that’s a bad case,” said Tug from the yard. “Even the baby has it.”

Moldylocks arrived quietly at the back of the crowd. Though the situation was deadly serious, she had to bite her lip to keep from laughing at the sight of Mr. B. F. Doolittle dressed as a zombie and smeared with foaming flakes.

Connption backed up. “*Hmpf*. I don’t believe you. Prove they’re zombies.”

“Want to show them, Beulah?” asked Dorothy.

Muffy stepped forward, holding Santiago Mano in her concealed right hand. Santiago wiggled his fingers at the mob. Then Muffy grabbed Santiago with her left hand, yanked him off her arm, and flung him to the crowd.

“Perhaps,” said Connption, “but...”

Before she could finish, Harry Halfleg came flying out of the shadows of the porch.

Tug collected Santiago and Harry, then stepped forward. “Yep, they’re legit.” He handed the limbs back to Dorothy. “I still need to search the premises,” he told her. “Just a formality.”

“As you wish,” said Dorothy. She turned to the mob. “Welcome, everybody! While the deputy conducts his search, please meet me around back at the theater. The show must go on, and we’ve got a great group of kids auditioning tonight. The theater box is reserved for my sick cousins, but if you hurry you can get some great seats. Oh, and grab a snackin’ slug. They’re just one bone each.”

Kay stepped forward to speak, but Tug motioned her silent.

“Good advice,” he shouted. “Deputy Hamhock, lead the other deputies back to the road. We’ll find ‘em folks! Meantime, go enjoy the show. Nothing has changed in Plainfield!”

Kay led the deputies back toward the town road. The rest of Plainfield hurriedly lurched to the theater behind the house. Everyone wanted great seats.

Moldylocks shambled up last, climbing the steps to the porch.

“Everything good?” whispered Dorothy.

“Yes, Phileas loved the casserole.”

The ZITCO living room made no pretense this night of being anything but a theater dressing room. Three seventh-graders sat in front of three vanity tables making final audition preparations, while their parents assisted them.

Flemma Ball’s mother was dirt-brushing Flemma’s feet. Velveeta Lardbelly quietly visualized chugging mugs of honey while her father, Retch, rubbed her temples. Conniption starched Jeminy’s pigtails. Jeminy gasped when

she saw Moldylocks, but soon recovered her customary scowl.

The fourth vanity table was empty. Moldylocks looked around for Hondo Mondo, the only boy in the competition. There he was. On the floor practicing his wrestling escapes.

Moldylocks knew he was almost guaranteed of winning the wrestling part of the competition. Not because he was Mr. Mondo's son or because she thought Mr. Mondo would favor him, but because he was Mr. Mondo's son and had been wrestling almost from the day he was unearthed.

The fifth vanity table was empty, too, waiting for Moldylocks to claim her space.

Instead, she chose to stay apart a while longer. She sat down on the stairs and cleared her mind. She was ready.

Dorothy shushed the room, welcoming the contestants and wishing them good luck. Hondo took a seat at his vanity table.

Dorothy announced the order of competition and reviewed the rules.

"First up, Velveeta. Followed by Hondo, Flemma, Jeminy, and last, Moldylocks."

Dorothy's words floated in and out of Moldylocks' awareness. Moldylocks had her eyes closed and was thinking. About what it meant to be a loser.

Maybe Plainfield has it all wrong about that, too.

"You'll have two-and-a-half minutes per event. No breaks between. Ten minutes total."

Being a loser doesn't mean "not winning."

"Honey. Wrestle. Roar. Monologue."

Being a loser means not being yourself.

"Ten possible points per event. Forty points total."

The bears had taught her that. She understood now.

"Scores will be announced after the last participant."

The only way to go full bear...

"Good luck everyone."

...was to go full Moldylocks.



CHAPTER FORTY-ONE  
ONE PERFORMER SHINES  
AND ONE REWRITES  
THE RULE BOOK



**E**ach performer had their strengths. Velveeta downed the honey in a single long mug chug. She had an advantage, since she had no tongue and the honey dropped in viscous glops from gullet to gut. But it was impressive nevertheless.

Velveeta eased through the wrestle and the roar segments with moderate success, but was of course marked down on the monologue, which came out as a long mishmash of guttural utterances and interpretive-dance gestures. “*Myunh, un-humminah humminah rowr.*”

The crowd applauded politely when she finished.

The four country cousins watched from their elevated theater box. Bears being zombies watching zombies being bears.

The second candidate, Hondo Mondo, was squat and thick like his dad. He stomped to the honey table, screamed at the mug, and gulped the honey down. He screamed again, wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, and ripped a mighty honeyfart. Dorothy, Conniption, and Tom Head wrinkled their noses as the fart cloud drifted toward them. “Reminder: That’s not a penalty,” Dorothy announced to the crowd.

Hondo moved immediately into his wrestling stance. He glared at his dad and said, “Bring it on.” Scooter wrestled his son hard. Harder, in fact, than he wrestled the others. Hondo would

have to earn this. Hondo feinted and backed up, jab-stepped and lunged. He caught his dad off-guard once or twice, but each time his dad regained the upper limb and tossed his son to the floor, only to have his son escape again. Hondo surprised his dad with a late attack. He had Scooter on his back! Dorothy counting. "One, two..." *Ding-ding*. Santiago Mano rang the bell ending the bout. It was a tie. The father and son shook hands, smiling.

Hondo's roar was terrific.

But then came his downfall. The dramatic monologue. Hondo stood scowling at the audience, as if he was trying to intimidate them into applauding.

The ZITCO waited silently.

Hondo had forgotten his lines.

He waited patiently, painfully, for the words to appear in his brain.

Finally, his eyes lit up.

The audience leaned forward. Had he found the words?

"Bears are bad," said Hondo. "Very, very bad. Thank you."

He bowed deeply to confused applause.

Next up, Flemma. She held the honey in her cheeks—swallowing it in tiny thimble-size gulps. Indeed, she was still swallowing it as her wrestling match began. It was difficult to do both at the same time and she was quickly pinned.

She was still swallowing the honey by the time she had to roar, so the roar came out as a gargle.

She finally finished just before the start of the monologue. It was worth the wait. Her strong clear voice rang out.

*“I’m the terror of the woods and plains.*

*Night and day one thought remains:*

*I’ll find the zombies in their homes,  
steal their cubs and eat their bones.*

*I dare! I scare! I bear!*

*I’m the rot inside your hopes and dreams.*

*I’m the source of fears and screams.*

*When you wake up don’t open your eyes  
‘cause I’ll be there to bearrorize.*

*I snare! I tear! I bear!”*

Many in the crowd were moved to tears. The applause was thunderous.

Meanwhile, Kay and the deputies returned from their failed search for Phileas and the Bears.

Tug had them fan out around the perimeter of the ZITCO crowd for security. They soon forgot their duties, however, and got caught up in the last two performances. Even Kay Hamhock.

Three contestants had auditioned. They were good, but none of them had put together a complete performance.

Until Jeminy.

Total Bear Immersion. She downed her honey gracefully moments after Santiago and Harry had filled her mug. Knotting her scarf with a flourish, she readied herself to wrestle.

Total Bear Immersion. Her practice in the limb pit served her well. Twice Coach Mondo threw her to the floor and twice she wriggled free from his grip. Reversing momentum quickly, she caught him off guard with a leg lock and threw him onto his back. "One!" called Conniption as Santiago slapped the mat. Scooter twisted out of Jeminy's grip, and he finally pinned her just before the bell rang.

The crowd held its breath. This was some performance.

Total Bear Immersion. Jeminy was motionless

at the center of the stage. She gathered her rage. Deep breath...

Her roar blew the hair off babies and the false teeth from the mouths of the elderly. Eyes rolled up in their heads. Noses smushed into faces and ears slid backward on skulls. It was a roar like a hurricane and when it was done, it left zombies gasping for air.

Total Bear Immersion. Jeminy didn't miss a beat. She moved right into her dramatic monologue, delivering the same words as the other "bears," but with a quiet fury that had zombies on the edges of their seats. She finished with a devastating whisper.

*"I snare! I tear! I bear!"*

Total. Bear. Immersion.

She bowed to a standing ovation.

That left one more performer.

Moldylocks appeared onstage. Wearing her bear suit. Calm.

Dorothy said, "Go."

The honey was downed in a moment. Moldylocks licked her lips.

She unzipped the suit in a flash. The crowd

*ooohed*. She was wearing a bright green wrestling uniform with a red “B” on the front. For “Bear.”

*Ding-ding*. Within ten seconds, Moldylocks had pinned Scooter Mondo.

She stood up. Focused.

The crowd leaned forward. The country zombies leaned forward.

It was time to bring her inside outside. Time to be a winner. It was time to punch her ticket to Rotburg.

It was time to roar.

She didn’t.

Instead, she asked a question. “If it’s okay with the judges, I’d like to combine the monologue and the roar.”

The judges huddled, consulting. They came to an agreement.

“This is unusual, but there’s no rule specifically prohibiting it,” Dorothy said to the audience.

A delicious, malicious smile had replaced the worried frown on Conniption’s face. This would make it all too easy to mark the girl down. “Please do as you wish, Moldylocks.” She made a note on her score sheet.

Tom Head chewed his pencil, looked at Connip-  
tion, and nodded agreement.

“Are you sure?” asked Dorothy.

“I am, Mom.”

“Okay, then.”

Moldylocks spoke to the audience with a calm confidence. “You don’t know bears,” she said.

She waited for her words to sink in. She scanned the faces of the crowd, seeing disbelief, and shock, and anger.

She continued.

“I trained with Brockster Bear all week. And I learned that roaring isn’t about how loud you can be, but how honest. It comes from trusting your own eyes. And your own ears. And your own feelings. And your heart. I don’t know who did the break-ins, but it wasn’t the Bears. The Bears are good. They like honey, but they live peacefully with bees. They are expert wrestlers, but only for self-defense. And they are magnificent roarers, but it’s not a battle cry. It’s expressing themselves. Anyway, here’s my roar.”

The audience braced themselves.

Instead of a roar, Moldylocks said simply, “The best friend I’ve ever had is a bear.”



No one moved. No one said anything.

“Now I have a question.”

Before she could ask it, she was interrupted by a commotion off to the side of the first row. A voice growled out, “The kid’s right! It wasn’t the Bears!”

## CHAPTER FORTY-ONE

# A QUESTION OF TRUST



Constable Cruft held the lab report over his head. He climbed onto the stage, breathing hard.

A look of alarm crossed Connption's face.

The constable addressed the crowd. "New evidence." Cruft held up the report that contained the lab results. "It links the bear costumes found at Stinkpit Manor to the crimes committed this

past week. The dirt found in the Stinkpit residence matched the dust from my house.”

Connption strode to the front of the stage to confront him. “Hardly enough to go hurling accusations, I say,” she spat. Then she lowered her voice. “Mind yourself, Constable. There’s an election coming up.”

“Not enough evidence to convict anyone of anything,” Cruft told the crowd, “but enough to clear the Bears’ names. All charges dropped.”

Connption Stinkpit had just lost control of the story.

Down in the front row, Arnold hadn’t understood everything, but the rumblings of the crowd had finally made him understand what he’d been doing all week. He’d been taken advantage of and it hurt his heart.

“And another thing,” said Cruft. “All eye spies now have to be registered with the police department.”

Moldylocks tugged at the constable’s sleeve.

“Ah, yes. I believe I interrupted Moldylocks just now. Take it away.”

Moldylocks glanced at the theater box, and back to the audience. “Hi. So, like I was saying—we can trust the Bears. But what I want to ask you is...Can they trust us?”

Whispers and murmurs rippled across the theater. The Bears leaned forward in the theater box. Arguments blossomed. “No way!” and “Why not?” and “You know how bears are.” and “They didn’t do it.”

Ebenezer Rotbody cut through all the noise. He stood up, clutching Emily Shank. “Quit yapping everybody!” he shouted. The whispers and murmurs faded to quiet.

In the stillness he said, “Never thought I’d love a leg. But I did. I figured out that time’s short. You gotta love what you love and think with your own brain. All that bear-scare stuff is just stories. The Bears can trust me.”

Mr. Sever stood up. “The Bears can trust me.”

“Us, too!” said the TOOGS. They rose, creakily.

“Yep, yep, same here,” said Scooter Mondo from the back of the stage. Dorothy stood up at the judge’s table. Yes. Santiago propped up Harry and climbed him. Thumb up.

“Me, too!” said a voice from the woods behind the theater seats. Phileas! Moldylocks beckoned him to the stage.

Velveeta, Flemma, and Hondo stepped to the front of the stage. Yes. Yes. Yes.

“Us, too!” shouted a girl who’d just entered the theater. She pulled back the hood of her cloak. It was Moldylocks’ friend, Scarlet Bone.

Moldy clutched her hands to her heart and mouthed the words. You came.

“Yes!” shouted Scarlet’s mother, Daisy.

“Nyunhh!” said Scarlet’s father, Dr. Sigmund, fumbling for his portable brass jawbone.

Entire rows of Plainfielders began to stand up across the ZITCO. “Yes!”

Almost everyone was standing now. Connip-tion and Jeminy were silent, of course. Arnold stayed seated, but that was because he was lost in thought. And the Threadheads stayed seated, along with a number of others. Tom Head couldn’t stand up, but wouldn’t have anyway. But almost everyone was on their feet, or foot, or stumps.

Moldylocks was beaming. She motioned for silence and looked to the theater box. “Well,

Bears, what do you think?”

The Bears took off their zombie headpieces. All three of them (and Mr. B. F. Doolittle) nodded. Yes.

“I knew there was something suspicious about them,” said Conniption. But nobody was listening to her anymore.

Constable Cruft apologized to the Bears and instructed the remaining deputies to make sure no one harmed them.

Because while stories do change, change can be slow.

Most of the zombies in the audience were talking and shaking their heads at how quickly their world had been spun around.

Finally, Maura More-Or-Less remembered why they were all there and called out, “Who won the contest?”

## CHAPTER FORTY-THREE

# WINNERS AND LOSERS



Scooter Mondo collected the judges' cards and huddled with Constable Cruft, who double-checked his tabulations. Flemma, Hondo, Velveeta, Jeminy, and Moldylocks stood stage right.

Scooter walked to the front of the stage. The lead role in the play and the scholarship to Rotburg State Summer Theater Camp hung in the balance.

The audience hushed.

Scooter cleared his throat.

His announcement came out as a choked whisper.

“Congratulations Jeminy Stinkpit.”

Connption and the Threadheads clapped wildly. No one else made a sound.

Moldylocks lurched to Jeminy and held out her hand. “You were great.”

“I know,” said Jeminy, ignoring Moldylocks’ hand.

Connption nudged Dorothy, and Dorothy stood to address the crowd. Her voice faltered. “Remember, *Grizzly Hair* opens one month from tonight. See you then. Thank you for coming, and thanks to all of our talented actors.”

She sat down heavily in her chair.

A cloud of confusion descended upon the ZITCO. Most zombies weren’t sure how to feel about the results of the contest, or about the new ideas in their heads. Eventually, though, the Plainfielders gathered themselves to leave. Keeping with tradition, they filed past the stage on their way out, reaching up to shake hands with



the actors, who were standing at the front of the stage in the order they'd performed.

The Bears came down from their box, carrying the zombie-costume headpieces in their arms. Conniption had lurched over behind her daughter, to bask in the congratulations of well-wishers.

Skip, Muffy, and Brockster reached out to shake hands with Jeminy at the same time. A peace offering. Conniption pushed Jeminy behind her and leaned over so only the Bears could hear her. "You may have fooled them, but not us. Not us."

The Bears ignored her.

When the Bears reached Moldylocks, she took their paws, one-by-one, in both of her hands. "Stay for tea?"

"We have honey," said Dorothy, who had composed herself and now stood beside her daughter.

"Okay!" laughed Skip. "We'll get changed and meet you inside."

Dorothy took Moldylocks' hands in her own. "I'm so proud of you. You did win. You're the bravest girl I've ever known."

Tom Head and his wife, Mary, were next-to-last in line. Mary couldn't stop squeezing the right bicep of Tom's new body. Indeed, Tom was now perched happily atop Arnold's body. Without the fedora, sunglasses, fake beard and trench coat, this new zombie looked nothing like The Stranger that had so recently been lurking around town. No, nothing at *all* like The Stranger.

Tom congratulated Jeminy and winked at Conniption. "I have to confess, I do love the view from up here. By the way, you can call me Tom Head-and-Body, now."

Jeminy stared. Tom Head-and-Body's eyes were as blue as the sky on a sunny day. She opened her mouth to speak, but in the end said nothing. *Everything we did was for the good of the town*, she told herself, ignoring the feeling in her body that maybe she was wrong.

"Well, I hate to lose good help," said Conniption, "but I'm glad it was for a good cause." While she and Tom were talking, Arnold reached out and gave Jeminy's hand an affectionate squeeze.

Last of all came the Bone family. Scarlet climbed up onto the stage and hugged Moldylocks.

“I’m so sorry we were late!” said Scarlet, beaming at her friend.

“Scar, you’re not going to believe what a week I had.”

Dorothy exclaimed over Scarlet and gave her a hug. “You and your folks have to join us for tea. Come meet the Bears. We’ll be right in.”

Moments later, there were just four left onstage: Conniption, Jeminy, Dorothy, and Moldylocks.

“What happened tonight is best for the town,” said Conniption.

“Or best for you?” asked Dorothy.

“The Stinkpits are the town,” said Conniption, putting an arm around her daughter’s shoulder. “Now, remember our agreement. You can’t change *Grizzly Hair*. You’ll never change *Grizzly Hair*. The story will be back to normal in a month. If zombies don’t know what to fear, they don’t know what they are. Your production will help them see that.”

Santiago and Harry served the tea. Phileas, the Bears, the Bone family, Dorothy, and Moldylocks sat around the living room, perched on ottomans, the sofa, and, for Phileas, the floor. The kitchen

table was arrayed with teacups, sugar, honey, and Mr. B. F. Doolittle, whose face had been scrubbed clean of foaming-flakes residue.

Santiago poured the tea, missed, and drenched the fugly. Dorothy redirected his pour. She passed the tea around and shook her head. "I can't figure out what happened. Did we win or did we lose?"

Skip patted her hand. "You were both true to yourselves. That's always a win."

"You're right," said Dorothy. "Moldylocks, you were amazing."

"That was some honey drinking," said Muffy. "Good as any bear."

"And the wrestling," laughed Skip.

"Best roar ever," said the Brockster.

"Oh, my gosh," said Scarlet. "I missed so much. I can't wait to hear the story!"

"It's a great story," said Moldylocks. She picked up Mr. B. F. Doolittle and ran her fingers through his wet fur. "So's the real story of *Grizzly Hair*. I wish we could tell that one."

"We can't," said Dorothy. "And it's my fault." The others gave her questioning looks.

She explained how she was behind in rent. The deal she'd made with Conniption. No choice

if she wanted to save the theater. How she hadn't known the real story then, anyway, or things might have been different. Now, she was forced to go through with the play as is.

"Is that what Conniption meant when she said you can't change *Grizzly Hair*?" asked Skip.

"You heard?"

"I was listening by the door." He looked at Moldylocks, smiling. "I guess I was curious."

"It's true," said Dorothy. "I'm sorry. It's a hateful story to me now. Just hateful. But the contract says I have to give a good faith effort to make the play a success or I'll lose the ZITCO."

"Mom," said Moldylocks, "we can move."

"No, no, no," murmured the others.

"There has to be a way," said Muffy.

Phileas, that questioner of obvious things, cleared his throat. "Um, Dorothy," he asked, "I'm confused. When you said you can't change *Grizzly Hair*, did you mean you can't change *Grizzly Hair* the character, or *Grizzly Hair* the play?"

"What diff—" Dorothy began.

"What was it, Mom?" interrupted Moldylocks breathlessly.

Dorothy reached into her jacket pocket and spread the contract on the table and the bears and zombies read aloud, in a sound cloud of legal words like “whereas,” “adjudication,” “twitter-pated,” “conflabulation,” and “fusticated.”

“There’s nothing about changing the play,” said Skip. “It’s only the lead role you can’t change.” The zombies, the bears, and the stagehands fell silent. Pondering.

Connption had neglected to change the rest of the contract language. To her, the story of the lead character was the only story that mattered.

“Interesting, but I still don’t see a way around this,” said Dorothy. “That woman! Just once I’d like to turn the tables on her.”

Moldylocks and the Brockster both sat up. They looked at each other with massive grins.

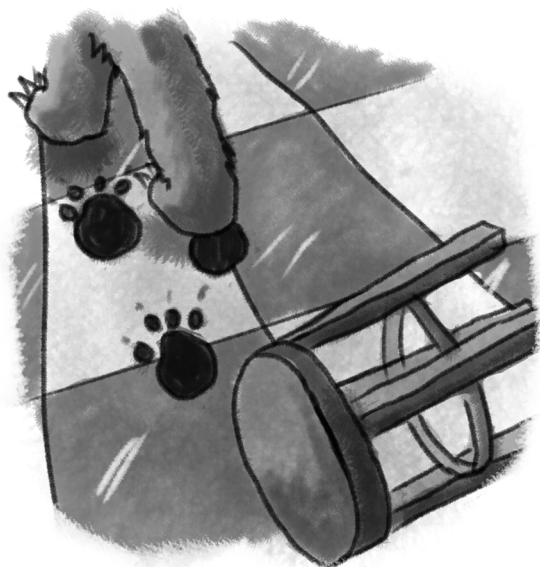
“Are you thinking...” asked Moldylocks.

“...what I’m thinking?” finished Brockster.

They laughed. They high-fived. They told the others their plan.

They’d need to hurry. They only had a month.

ONE MONTH LATER  
THE STORY  
GOES LIKE THIS



A breeze blows. A door bangs open. A bear bursts in.

Not just any breeze—an ill wind.

Not just any door—the front door to a zombie’s house.

Not just any bear—a fierce mass of fur. A fiery mess of furry fury. In a snit. And dripping spit and spite.

The bear is angry. Hungry. Mad to munch some zombie cub.

He's come hunting.

The bear snorts softly, shuffles down the hall, swivels his head from side to side. He wants to scare. To tear. To maul. To rip the pictures from the wall.

Needle-sharp hindclaws *clickity-click* on the floor. Needle-sharp foreclaws dig *ker-rippppp* the wallpaper.

The bear busts into the kitchen, and stops. Nose to the air. *Sniff-sniff*. Where's the zombie cub? *Sniff-sniff*. His mouth pulls back in a black-lipped grimace. Spittle dripping from his lips. Some ancestral madness in his eyes. Wild night-stink wafting off wet fur. Breath-puffs steam the kitchen.

He circles the kitchen island. Patient. *Sniff*. A ripening zombie-smell. *Click-click*. Brute instinct takes over. He knocks a stool to the floor. Stands on hindlegs, peers into pots and pans hanging from hooks overhead. His thick skull knocks crockery. Metal utensils chime. He wheels around and a massive, iron cookpot wobbles off its hook and crashes to the floor.



The bear's rage rises. He abandons all caution now. Cares nothing for noise. Where is that cub? Where? Muddy pawprints tattoo the kitchen floor. He rips cupboard doors from hinges. Tears drawers from counters. Sprays silverware everywhere.

He hears the sound.

A soft, wet cry.

Something waking from the sleep of the undead.

The bear scowls, glowers, growls. Where is it? Behind the stove. He pads over, peers behind.

Oh, you sweet zombie flesh.

He reaches out an arm.

He hears a gasp.

He turns.

A zombie woman gapes at him. She holds a candle in her hand. Her eyes are wide with terror.

The bear charges toward her and stops. His bulk seems to fill the kitchen. His eyes narrow. Paws flex. He gathers himself for a mighty, house-ripping, earth-shaking, bone-breaking roar.

The woman wavers.

The world waits.

Jeminy is Grizzly Hair, and Grizzly Hair's roar is so powerful it seems to loosen the stage from itself. The icebox shakes, pots jostle, and the cabinets dance on the walls. Grizzly Hair speaks:

*"I'm the terror of the woods and plains.*

*Night and day one thought remains..."*

But what strangeness is this? Jeminy's world is turning. The stage is rotating! A new scene comes into view.

Grizzly Hair continues, confused:

*"I'll find the zombies in their homes,  
steal their cubs and eat their...bones?"*

Conniption watches from the front row, horrified.

Dorothy lurches about backstage, offering encouragement to her cast and crew. Her excitement infects them all.

Daisy and Scarlet fuss about the actors, adjusting costumes and touching up makeup. Muffy ushers the actors forward from the wings.

Below the stage, Phileas and Skip work the machinery of the turntable stage Skip has designed. They are assisted by the wise body of Arnold, who has separated from the domineering Tom Head

and is feeling quite content with himself as he is. Santiago and Harry oil the gears, just as they've practiced all month.

The stage continues rotating and Jeminy has almost disappeared from view. As a new stage spins into view, a trio of bears traipses through the woods. The lead bear carries a child in his arms. In the distance, they see a house. A home for the zombie cub.

No one can hear Grizzly Hair now.

The bears enter the house, and set the baby safely down. They bless the baby and exit quietly.

The stage spins Grizzly Hair back into view. She's sounding the alarm about the bear army, but the story has lost its power. What seemed ferocious before now seems merely silly. The audience is chuckling at all the wrong places.

The stage keeps turning.

The bears look back on the house and wave farewell. But an alarm has rung out. The bears are being hunted. The audience is dead quiet as they make their way through the perils of the woods, trying to elude capture by the zombies. "No, no," come the calls as the bear story spins out of view.

Here is Grizzly Hair leading an army off to war against the bears. “Be brave! Be bold!” she calls. The army charges. The stage spins.

The bears run breathless through the woods, leaping logs, almost to safety.

They break into a clearing. No use. They’re surrounded by zombies. The leader of the bears raises his paws.

The stage locks into place. Jeminy-Grizzly Hair is hidden from view. The play goes on in darkness because, while Dorothy has promised not to change the play, she never promised it would have an audience.

The zombie commander, played by Ebenezer Rotbody, has a question. “What is it you want?”

The lights go out. The ZITCO is plunged into darkness.

The audience waits.

And waits.

Suddenly a single bright beam shines down on a small bear and a small zombie at center stage. There’s a turntable between them. And one massive speaker.

The pair answers together. “We. Want. To. Dance!”

The zombie sets the needle down. The bear begins to tap his size-six right foot.

The sound hits the audience like an electric earthquake. The drums, the guitar, the tambourine, and the piano. Four instruments grooving together. The sound invades their bones. Delirious grins blossom across the crowd. Limbs twitch. Onstage, the bear and the zombie are dancing. They begin to sing.

*“Honey, ah honey, honey.”*

The crowd leaps to its feet.

*“You are my friendly bear, and you got me digging you.”*

The crowd is clapping and stomping its feet. The bear takes off his headpiece, revealing Moldylocks. The zombie takes off her headpiece, revealing Brockster.

Brockster sings:

*“When I met you girl, I knew how sweet a zom could be (I knew how sweet a zom could be)”*

Moldylocks sings:

*“When I met you boy, I knew how rare a bear could be (I knew how rare a bear could be)”*

Everyone (well, almost everyone) sings.

*“Honey, ah honey, honey.”*

*“You are our friendly bears, and you got us digging you.”*

The sound carried up over the trees and out into the world, a new song for a new story.

Sometimes the world is too hard. Sometimes the world is too soft. Sometimes it’s too hot. Sometimes it’s too cold. Sometimes it’s too empty, and sometimes it’s too full.

But on one beautiful night when the town of Plainfield glimpsed how big its heart could be, the world was just right.



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