

The Adventures of Jimmy Chicklets
Book 3: Yolanda Grubb – Double Agent

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For Theo

Yolanda Grubb – Double Agent

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Chapter 1: Saturday, No Time to Play

Jimmy Chicklets and Criminey Toodle sat on their respective sleeping bags in a tent in Jimmy's backyard. Arguably it was Criminey's backyard as well, since he lived with Jimmy. But this was complicated because Criminey was a sprite: a creature of great power from the Faerie realm. As a result, it wasn't exactly clear where his home really was. Normally they would have been playing Monster Slaughter – their favourite video game – on their tablets. But on this occasion they were simply too distracted. That morning Jimmy's father, Mr. Bolger, had informed them that Criminey was the first sprite to have existed in almost a thousand years.

"A thousand years!" Jimmy said, incredulously. "People didn't even have tablets a thousand years ago! People didn't even have cars or the internet a thousand years ago! I don't think they even had shoes!"

Criminey was about to object to the whole shoes thing, when the tent door unzipped and in walked Tamara Mugwort, Jimmy's best friend.

"People have been wearing shoes for a lot longer than a thousand years," Tammy said, as she pulled a sleeping bag out of the rather large backpack she carried into the tent with her.

Criminey, who had become visible, nodded in agreement. Jimmy and Mr. Bolger always been able to see Criminey, but everyone else could see him only when he made a point of being visible, which he was getting increasingly good at.

"Well at least I didn't bring my whole closet for one night in a tent," Jimmy replied testily.

Tammy rolled her eyes; she'd been getting very good at rolling her eyes at Jimmy recently. Practice makes perfect and all that.

"For your information, Jimmy Chicklets," Tammy began.

Jimmy flinched: it was never good when Tammy called him by his full name. At least she hadn't used his middle name.

"I brought two set of clothes," she continued. "One for soccer..."

"Soccer?" Jimmy groaned. "I thought we were done with soccer."

Tammy had pretended to have a soccer injury a few weeks earlier and, to keep from getting caught in a lie, had created a team to keep up appearances.

“One for soccer,” Tammy repeated, “and one for the party Ms. Chicklets is hosting for your Aunt’s birthday after the game.”

Jimmy hung his head and groaned. A party for Aunt Janice meant his cousins Jessie and Bessie would be there. And Jessie and Bessie meant trouble. Or at least that Jimmy would get himself into trouble. The last time he had seen them, Criminey had accidentally become visible while Jimmy was playing a trick on them, and that hadn’t gone well at all.

After Tammy got unpacked, which didn’t take very long despite her overly large backpack, she pulled out her phone and read out loud the message that Jimmy had sent her that morning.

“Emergency. Criminal fost sprint in one thousand. Come to tent tonight,” Tammy read. “You really need to edit your messages, Jimmy. I figured out that you wanted me to sleep over – and I got my mom to get your mom to invite me despite the short notice – but I have no idea what the big emergency is.”

“It’s not my fault,” Jimmy replied, sulkily. “The tablet changes everything I write.”

Criminey suddenly changed into a shirt that read “fost sprint in one thousand,” took it off, and handed it to Jimmy. He had always been able to change his clothes at will, but recently he had discovered that if he became solid and and visible at the same time, his clothes became real. After a pause, they all started laughing hysterically.

“So what’s the big emergency?” Tammy asked, more gently this time, when they finally settled down.

“Mr. Bolger says Criminey’s the first sprite in thousands of years!” Jimmy announced enthusiastically.

“Nearly a thousand years,” Criminey corrected. “Nearly a thousand.”

“What? Nearly a thousand years?” Tammy replied shocked. “That’s crazy.”

Jimmy and Criminey nodded enthusiastically, although the enthusiasm of Criminey’s nod was tempered by a certain amount of concern. But after a moment, Jimmy stopped nodding and looked at Tammy quizzically.

“Nearly a thousand years?” he said. “You said nearly a thousand years.”

“Yeah, so?” Tammy asked.

“That means you heard Criminey talk!” Jimmy replied.

Jimmy, Tammy, and Criminey looked at each other in shock. Although Criminey had recently acquired the ability to become visible to everyone, this was the first time anyone other than Jimmy or Mr. Bolger had heard him speak.

Chapter 2: Sunday, Watch What You Say

Jimmy, Tammy, and Criminey awoke to the sound of Ms. Chicklet's voice; although since it wasn't entirely clear that Criminey actually slept, it wasn't clear that he woke up either.

"Jimmy, Tammy," Ms. Chicklets shouted from the back door, "it's time to get up! You're going to be late for soccer!"

Jimmy groaned and pulled his sleeping bag up over his head. Tammy grabbed her soccer gear out of her backpack and awkwardly changed into them inside her own sleeping bag. Criminey was as always already dressed, once again in his Manchester United uniform: being able to change your clothes at will has its advantages.

"Jimmy! Tammy!" Ms. Chicklets shouted again.

"Coming Ms. Chicklets!" Tammy shouted in reply. "Just a minute."

She started shaking Jimmy to try to wake him, but it had little effect beyond producing angry groans.

"Criminey, help," Tammy pleaded.

Criminey nodded and then grabbed the bottom of Jimmy's sleeping bag and pulled as hard as he could. This had the desired effect of leaving Jimmy wide-awake on the tent floor. It also had the less desired effect of leaving him entirely pant-less.

The three of them had stayed up extremely late the previous evening, which explained their rather late start the next morning. Part of the evening was spent investigating Criminey's newfound ability to make himself heard. They discovered pretty quickly that he had to be solid to do so. But they also discovered that he didn't have to be visible. And he was quickly getting the hang of making sounds while invisible.

"This is going to be so much fun," Jimmy said enthusiastically.

"And Jimmy's not going to have repeat what I say anymore," Criminey added, grinning.

"You two be careful," Tammy said. "Remember what happened last time, with your cousins."

"Okay, okay," Jimmy replied, "no more tricks around Jessie and Bessie."

Another part of the evening was spent discussing Criminey's newly discovered status as the first sprite in thousands – or nearly a thousand – years.

“The question is why there hasn't been a sprite in so long,” Tammy began, “and why, all of a sudden, one, I mean Criminey, came into existence now.”

“And why was there a whole agency for protecting sprites when there weren't any sprites to protect?” Criminey added nervously.

Jimmy's father, Mr. Bolger, had recently revealed he was an agent with the Sprite Protection Agency – a super-secret division of the SPCA – whose purpose was now a little unclear.

“Maybe their job isn't to protect sprites,” Jimmy began, “but to protect other people from sprites.”

“Maybe we need an agency to protect people from you,” Criminey replied angrily.

He produced another t-shirt, this time with the slogan “Jimmy Protection Agency” above an unflattering picture of Jimmy's face with a line crossed through it. But the bulk of the evening had been spent making uniforms for all of the members of the soccer team. Each jersey had “Vambies Soccer” written across the front – named after Jimmy and Criminey's favourite villains from *Monster Slaughter* – and each player's name and number on the back. Criminey had to create each shirt individually and wait while Tammy inspected it for spelling mistakes and decided whether it needed to be bigger or smaller. It was after midnight before they finished and sometime after that before they settled down and fell asleep.

Their second soccer game was substantially more successful than the first, largely because Tammy took more or less complete charge of the team. She arrived with a folding chair, a newspaper, and a large cappuccino for Coach Underhill. He had found a proper pair of shorts and sneakers this week – rather than his bathing suit and a pair of dress shoes – but was still wearing a button down shirt. Tammy informed him that he had been promoted to team manager and that she would be taking over the coaching duties. He started to protest that he still didn't remember signing up for this – which was, of course, because he hadn't – before he thought better of it and sat down in the chair and started sipping his coffee. The members of the team were ecstatic to receive their individually named jerseys, which left them looking substantially better than that week's bedraggled opponents, the Wolverines. There was some disagreement over whether they had officially decided to call themselves the Vambies, mostly from Lucy – Coach Underhill's daughter – who seemed to resent losing control of a team the idea of which she had just warmed to. But given that the previous week they had been wearing lime green pennies with upside down numbers on the back, this disagreement was largely muted.

The pre-game practice was a lot more organized than the previous week as well. Tammy had looked up some basic drills on the internet and more or less successfully got the team to run them. She even sorted the players into different positions, something Coach Underhill had neglected to do the previous week, unless “ball-chasing mob” counts as a position. And while Tammy worked with the players on the field, Peter Burrows worked with the goaltenders. Peter was a computer genius and malcontent – at least since the notorious “poopy-pants” incident – but his attitude had become somewhat more positive since he became aware of Criminey’s existence.

“If you stand further out from the net, it will be more difficult for the other team to get the ball into the net,” Peter said to Jimmy, “and our mutual friend can knock away any balls that get past you without being too conspicuous.”

“What do you know about it?” Jimmy replied indignantly, and then half under his breath continued, “And Criminey’s my friend, not our friend.”

“It’s just basic geometry,” Peter said, as if that explained everything.

“I can always use more friends,” Criminey interjected, out loud but still invisible.

“He talks now, does he?” Peter said nonchalantly, turning his head in the direction of Criminey’s voice.

“He could always talk,” Jimmy replied smugly. “You just couldn’t hear him.

Peter nodded, to all appearances entirely unfazed.

The game itself went better than it had the previous week: the Wolverines were somewhat less proficient than the Vambies’ previous opponents, and under Tammy’s direction the Vambies themselves were slightly more proficient than they had previously been. They still lost, but by a respectable score of 8 – 1. Peter’s goaltending suggestions cut down the number of shots on net, as well as the number of “unlucky bounces” resulting from the presence of an invisible sprite on the goal line. And the Vambies’ own goal occurred when, in a moment of enthusiasm, Criminey rushed down the field and passed the ball to a wide-open Lucy Underhill in front of the net. Invisibility has the same advantages in soccer as it does more generally. The only troubling thing about the game, at least in Jimmy’s opinion, was the presence on the sidelines of Mitch McGee, the class bully with whom he had achieved an uneasy truce after the whole “Manchurian Classmate” incident. Mitch was officially there to support his friend and crony Tommy Blinger, who had been roped into playing for the Vambies by his mother. But Mitch wasn’t generally known for being supportive of anyone. He nodded at Jimmy after game ended, but left without saying anything.

When they got back to Jimmy's house after soccer the guests had already started arriving. While Mr. Bolger had taken Jimmy, Tammy, and Criminey to soccer, Ms. Chicklets had stayed home organizing the party. But Mr. Bolger had, perhaps unwisely, taken the kids out for smoothies afterwards, so they were late. Ms. Chicklets gave Mr. Bolger an angry glare and then quickly sent Jimmy and Tammy upstairs to get washed and changed. Criminey was, of course, already decked in his party gear, a preppy ensemble he had seen on his newest favourite tv show: Nerd Wars.

"But the Preppies are the bad guys," Jimmy protested.

"I'm so cool," Criminey replied, imitating one of the main villains from the show.

It was Jimmy's turn to roll his eyes. Tammy changed into the party clothes she had brought with her and Jimmy put on the outfit Ms. Chicklets had left out for him.

"Nerds!" Criminey yelled when he saw them, repeating another catchphrase from Nerd Wars.

Jimmy angrily grabbed a T-shirt from the floor and put it on over the uncomfortable shirt and tie he was wearing. It was the one that Criminey had made with the caption "I'm the one who's imaginary" on the front. Tammy followed suit and put the shirt that read "Jimmy Protection Agency" on over her dress. They looked at one another for a moment, and then started laughing hysterically. Once they settled down, they went to join the party.

When they got downstairs the house was full of people. Ms. Chicklets was in the living room with Aunt Janice and, of course, Jessie and Bessie. Tammy's mother was there as well, as was Mrs. Underhill – Lucy's mom – and a lot of people Jimmy didn't know. Uncle Ronnie – Ms. Chicklet's and Aunt Janice's younger brother – was in the kitchen with his new boyfriend. They were drinking beer with Mr. Bolger and his brother, Uncle Chuck. Mr. Bolger was holding a newspaper in one hand but he wasn't reading it for a change, although he seemed very tempted. Ms. Chicklets followed Jimmy and Tammy into the kitchen, Jessie and Bessie in tow. Strictly speaking she followed Criminey as well but, of course, she didn't know that.

"Jimmy," Ms. Chicklets said, "you and Tammy take your cousins out back to play. They're getting bored with the grown ups."

"But mom," Jimmy complained.

"No buts. Take your cousins out back and make sure you behave yourself," she insisted.

"Dad!" Jimmy pleaded.

"You and snapwoo ... ," Mr. Bolger began before noticing the glare on Ms. Chicklets' face. "Do as your Mother says, Jimmy. You and Tammy take the girls into the yard."

Jimmy sighed in resignation and led his cousins towards the back door.

Jimmy, Tammy, and Criminey sat in the tent with the two girls. Jessie and Bessie periodically whispered quietly to one another but otherwise there was an awkward silence. The last time they had been together Criminey had accidentally become visible while helping Jimmy play a trick on the girls and they had thought they had seen a ghost.

“Do you want to play video games?” Jimmy asked finally, holding up his tablets. “Or watch me and Crim ... me play?”

The girls whispered to one another and then, in unison, shook their heads.

“What would you like to do, Jessie and Bessie?” Tammy asked gently.

They whispered to one another again. This time they seemed to come to some kind of decision.

“We want to meet you friend, Crimily,” Jessie said. “The invisible monster.”

“We promise we won’t tell Mamma,” Bessie added, as they both nodded.

“Invisible monster?” Jimmy replied quickly. “There’s no such thi ...”

“Jimmy,” Tammy interrupted, “they know.”

“They know what?” Jimmy spluttered. “There’s nothing to to know.”

“Jimmy,” Tammy said, “ they know about Criminey. They’ve seen him.”

Jessie and Bessie nodded in agreement. Jimmy hung his head in frustration.

“Is there anyone who doesn’t know?” he asked.

Tammy nodded, but Jimmy ignored her. He turned to Criminey who seemed really excited.

“You might as well,” he said.

Criminey solidified – and became visible – almost immediately.

“I’ve been so looking forward to meeting you, Jessie and Bessie,” he said to each of the girls in turn.

They giggled in delight, and then started whispering again.

“Do you know any tricks?” Jessie asked.

Criminey grinned.

Jimmy led the girls back into the house as the party was winding down. Mrs. Mugwort had left early and taken Tammy with her. And Criminey, although still present, had said his good-byes and de-solidified.

“And where have you been?” Aunt Janice said to her daughters. “You even missed the cake.”

Jessie and Bessie giggled happily without saying anything.

“And such lovely T-shirts, too,” Janice continued.

Ms. Chicklet’s took a closer look and saw that they were each wearing shirts with a picture of the two of them on the front above the caption “Monster Squad.”

“There have been a lot of new shirts recently, haven’t there Jimmy,” Ms. Chicklets said.

“Ask Dad,” Jimmy said quickly. “Where is he anyhow?”

He quickly exited the scene and began pretending to look for Mr. Bolger.

Jimmy and Criminey in fact ended up finding Mr. Bolger despite not really looking for him. They had snuck upstairs to hide while the final guests were leaving, although Jimmy preferred to think they were retreating rather than hiding. Jimmy had pulled out their tablets for a nice, relaxing game of Monster Slaughter, when Criminey started pointing out the window.

“There he is,” Criminey said.

“There who is?” Jimmy asked, walking over to look.

Criminey gestured at Mr. Bolger, who was standing across the street talking to someone. They seemed to be having an angry argument but Jimmy couldn’t make out what they were saying.

“Who is he talking to?” Jimmy asked, worried.

"I think it's Mrs. Grubb," Criminey replied.

Yolanda Grubb was the caretaker at Jimmy's school. She also secretly worked with Mr. Bolger in the Sprite Protection Agency. Jimmy was about to speculate about what secret missions they might be involved in when Mrs. Grubb slapped Mr. Bolger across the face and stormed away. Mr. Bolger stared after her for a moment then headed back towards the house. Jimmy and Criminey rushed downstairs to meet him.

"Dad, what was that about?" Jimmy asked as Mr. Bolger walked through the door.

"Trouble, Jimmy," he replied. "Trouble."

He walked into his study and shut the door behind him. Jimmy and Criminey just stared at each other, astonished.

Chapter 3: Monday, if we may

Jimmy, Tammy, and Criminey walked into school together, as they usually did, except when Jimmy had treated someone insensitively or, as Jimmy preferred to put it, that someone was being overly sensitive. It was a cool fall morning, and Criminey was wearing a preppy sweater he had seen on Nerd Wars that, as usual, only Jimmy could see. What was unusual was that Tammy could hear him talk, and didn't have to have Jimmy translate.

"This way Jimmy can't selectively decide what he wants me to hear," Tammy said.

"And you get to hear the beautiful sound of my voice," Criminey chimed in.

Tammy and Criminey started laughing. Jimmy just scowled. They had agreed that Criminey could remain solid during the walk into school – so he could talk to Tammy directly – but he had to stay invisible. And Tammy had insisted he wear a tinfoil suit under his clothes. This was because Criminey gave off matter displacement ripples when he solidified which the SAU – a secret government department whose mandate was to acquire sprites – could detect. Peter Burrows had discovered that these ripples could be blocked by tinfoil, and Tammy was always insisting he cover himself with foil whenever he solidified in public.

"But it itches," Criminey complained, "and it interferes with my dancing."

"It's better than being captured by Crispy Bacon," Jimmy replied, using the nickname they had given to one of the SAU agents.

Criminey frowned for a moment, and then continued dancing along the sidewalk.

As they turned the corner at Mrs. Greenbottom's house, they saw Tommy and Joe Blinger standing over two kids who were lying on their backs on the ground. Tommy was chanting "Bad-body, Bad-body, Bad-body," while Joe was throwing acorns at them. Mitch McGee was standing off to the side watching, a look of satisfaction on his face. As Jimmy, Tammy, and Criminey approached, they recognized one of the victims of the Blinger's bullying as Ronnie Goodbody, the second best computing student in their class – which didn't mean he was very good – whose last name was often a source of taunting. The other victim was a girl none of them had ever seen before.

"Tommy and Joe Blinger," Tammy said authoritatively, "you leave them alone!"

Tommy and Joe looked over at Tammy and then at Mitch before they turned back and continued tormenting Ronnie and his friend.

“Tell your girlfriend that it’s none of her business,” Mitch said to Jimmy.

Tammy was about to protest when Jimmy shook his head and winked at Criminey, although really it was more of an eye-scrunch than a wink. Criminey crept over behind Tommy and Joe – still solid but invisible – and gave a high-pitched scream. The Blingers spun around, and seeing no one there, ran screaming themselves towards school. Mitch, however, was sort of aware of Criminey’s existence, and so didn’t lose his composure.

“New trick?” he asked calmly before turning away and slowly walking after his associates.

Tammy and Jimmy helped Ronnie and his friend to their feet and, with Criminey’s help, escorted them the rest of the way to school.

Mrs. Greenbottom was in an unusually good mood at the start of class, especially for a Monday. She had been in a good mood the previous Friday, after Jimmy’s rather positive contributions to the class’s Math-lympics performance, and it seemed to have continued through the weekend. But it didn’t last long. The first thing to sour her mood involved Ronnie Goodbody’s new friend.

“And who’s this?” Mrs. Greenbottom asked warmly as the girl followed Ronnie into the room.

“She’s an exchange student,” Ronnie said, handing the teacher a note. “She’s going to be staying with us for, er, awhile.”

Mrs. Greenbottom read through the note carefully, a look of consternation slowly appearing on her face.

“The Fairhaven Faraway Exchange ... open ended ... ,” she mumbled. “What’s this all about? I’ve never heard of such a thing.”

“I don’t know, Mrs. Greenbottom,” Ronnie said meekly. “My mom must have signed me up, although she says she doesn’t remember.”

The teacher just stared at him, a look of incredulity on her face.

“She’s a very busy person,” Ronnie added after a pause. “She can’t be expected to remember everything she signs.”

The teacher sighed and then turned towards the exchange student.

“And what’s your name, dear?” she asked her.

“Estella,” the girl responded, “Estella Bluecheese.”

The class burst out laughing. Mrs. Greenbottom smacked her desk with a yardstick, causing everyone to immediately become quiet. She picked up the note and read it over again, a look of discomfort on her face.

“So, Miss Bluecheese,” she said coldly, “where are you from?”

“Faraway,” Estella replied.

“Faraway,” Mrs. Greenbottom repeated distantly, looking again at the note.

After a moment Mrs. Greenbottom started shaking her head.

“So Estella Bluecheese from Faraway, please take a seat,” she said.

Estella sat at a desk across from Ronnie, and gave a friendly wave to Jimmy and Tammy.

The second thing to darken the teacher’s mood occurred when the Principal’s administrative assistant – Donald Bracegirdle – interrupted the class to give her a memo from Principal Gardner. She glanced at it quickly and then looked back up at the class.

“Class,” she began, “apparently there’s going to be a field trip on Thursday.”

As she looked back down at the memo and started reading it more carefully, her brow began to furrow.

“The Sanitary, Antiseptic, and Unblemished exhibit at the Museum of Care-taking,” she read aloud. “A fun-filled interactive display demonstrating both the joys and jublations, and the trials and tribulations, of a career in care-taking. Curated by Yolanda Grubb, School Care-taking Professional.”

She turned and glared at Donald, who visibly shrank.

“Mr. Bracegirdle,” she said angrily, “explain this! Explain yourself!”

“I’m just the messenger, Ma’am,” Donald replied weakly.

“Well message you way back to the office and tell Principal Gardner I need to speak to him!” she shouted. “ASAP!”

Donald fled the classroom, nearly tripping on his way through the door.

The final straw for Mrs. Greenbottom was when Ms. Chicklets – Jimmy’s mom – knocked on the door about five minutes after Donald Bracegirdle had gone. Ms. Chicklets had taken over as the school guidance counsellor after the previous occupant of the role had been discovered to be an undercover government agent.

“Yes, Ms. Chicklets,” Mrs. Greenbottom asked suspiciously.

“I’m here to collect Joe Blinger for the first of the guidance appointments,” Jimmy’s mom replied. “Joe, come on.”

Joe began to get up when Mrs. Greenbottom glared at him and gestured for him to stay where he was. Joe froze in place.

“Guidance appointments?” she said coldly to Ms. Chicklets.

“Yes, I’m going to have to meet with each of your students individually today,” Ms. Chicklets replied.

“You’re going to meet with all of my students in one day?” she repeated, incredulous.

“I’m afraid so,” Ms. Chicklets replied firmly. “Ms. Jenkins’ meetings all have to be redone, and I’m only filling in part-time.”

“So I’m just going to have to put up with the constant disruption of students coming and going all day?” Mrs. Greenbottom asked. “Is that what you’re telling me?”

“I’m afraid so, Myrna,” Ms. Chicklets replied. “There’s no other option. Come on Joe.”

Mrs. Greenbottom didn’t stop him this time. But she immediately gave the class a pop quiz, one even Tammy didn’t know the answers to.

Jimmy sat on a bench outside the guidance office waiting for his appointment with Ms. Chicklets. Criminey was sitting next to him, his legs crossed casually in imitation of his favourite Nerd Wars character. He hadn't made himself solid, in part because he didn't need to speak out loud for Jimmy to hear him, but mostly as a means of avoiding wearing that uncomfortable tinfoil underwear. Jimmy was too distracted to pay much attention, a not unexpected side effect of having a guidance appointment with his own mother. He only barely noticed when two kids sat on either end of the bench he was sitting on. Criminey noticed, however, and hopped to his feet, not a moment too soon in his opinion. This was because a moment later one of the kids quickly slid along the bench until he was almost touching Jimmy, while the other one filmed it with her phone.

“Huh?” Jimmy said looking up. “What?”

The kids looked at each briefly and then quickly got up and walked away. Jimmy was about to say something to Criminey when the guidance office door opened and he was called in.

Jimmy sat awkwardly in a chair across from the desk where Ms. Chicklets was sitting, waiting for her to finish typing on her computer. When she finally looked up, a happy grin appeared on her face.

“Oh, Jimmy,” she said, “I'm so glad to be able to spent time with you at school.”

Jimmy nodded faintly, more as an acknowledgement that he had heard her than an indication of any kind of agreement.

“Maybe we could have lunch together on the days I'm here,” Ms. Chicklets continued.

A look of horror came over Jimmy's face, which his mother clearly noticed.

“Okay, maybe not,” she said. “Now let's get down to business.”

She picked a file folder with his name on it off the top of the stack sitting next to her and opened it up on her desk.

The first thing Ms. Chicklets pulled out of Jimmy's file was his most recent report card. She studied it carefully, too carefully in Jimmy's opinion. Jimmy normally got mostly B's, with an occasional C thrown into the mix. He even once got an A, although he wasn't sure the teacher

hadn't make some kind of mistake. But his first report card from this year was substantially worse.

"C, C, C, ...," Ms. Chicklets muttered as she read. "And a D in gym class? Jimmy, what have you got to say for yourself?"

"Mrs. Greenbottom has it in for me," Jimmy replied glumly.

"Jimmy, you need to take responsibility for your own actions. And you need to try harder," Ms. Chicklets began and then, noticing what appeared to be her own signature at the bottom of the page, continued, "I don't remember seeing this, but I must have.

Jimmy slunk down in his chair. The reason Ms. Chicklets didn't remember seeing Jimmy's report card was, of course, because she hadn't. Jimmy had hidden it from his parents and gotten Tammy to forge his mother's signature. Jimmy had told her that Ms. Chicklets had neglected to sign it, which was partially true. He just left out the part where the reason she had neglected to sign it was because she hadn't known it existed.

"So now let's talk about high school, college, the future," Ms. Chicklets said more cheerfully, after a few moments of quiet contemplation.

Jimmy slunk even further down in his chair, not that there was much room left for slinking.

Jimmy was in a sour mood as he walked home with Tammy and Criminey after school. Ms. Chicklets had told him he was going to have to do his homework first thing when he got home from now on, and finish it before he got to play any video games. And some of his classmates had started teasing him about his mother's new position.

"Little baby Jimmy," Tommy Blinger had taunted, "needs his mommy to take care of him at school."

"Does she change your diapers too?" his brother Joe chimed in.

"She does not!" Jimmy had replied angrily.

"So you change your own diapers, do you baby?" Tommy retorted.

The whole class had started laughing, even the exchange student, Estella Bluecheese.

Criminey tried to cheer Jimmy up by performing lines from Nerd Wars.

“Bow down, nerds,” he said, imitating a minor Preppie character from the show. “Bow down before your social superiors.”

“One day you’ll learn your lesson,” he said in reply to himself, this time imitating a minor Nerd character, “that all students are created equal.”

Tammy laughed out loud, but Jimmy cracked only the faintest of smiles. So Tammy tried to distract him with conversation.

“Weird day,” she said. “First with that phoney exchange student ...”

“What wrong with Estella?” Jimmy interrupted. “She’s seems perfectly nice to me.”

“You mean aside from having a made up name and not knowing where she’s from?” Tammy asked. “Oh, and Peter looked it up: there’s no such thing as the Fairhaven Faraway Exchange.”

“So,” Jimmy replied, stubbornly.

“And then there’s that weird field trip to the Museum of Care-Taking,” Tammy said. “Whoever heard of a field trip to a museum of care-taking? Whoever heard of a museum of care-taking for that matter.”

“It sounds fun to me,” said Criminey, as he changed into pristine white coveralls and started dancing with a broom.

“Don’t you get it?” Tammy asked. “The exhibit is called Sanitary, Antiseptic, and Unblemished. SAU.”

These were, of course, the initials of the Sprite Acquisition Unit, the secret government agency that had been pursuing Criminey.

“I’m sure it’s just a coincidence,” Jimmy replied. “Mrs. Grubb organized it and she works with my dad.”

“But they had a big fight. Remember?” Criminey added.

“Yea, so?” Jimmy replied.

“And then there were those kids on the bench, who slid up next to you when you waiting to see your mom,” Criminey said.

“Okay, that was weird,” Jimmy replied. “It was a weird day.”

And on that note, they spontaneously decided to race the rest of the way home. Jimmy won, although it wasn't entirely clear that Tammy and Criminey were trying their hardest.

Chapter 4: Tuesday, enter the fray

Jimmy was just finishing up his breakfast when the doorbell rang. Ms. Chicklets was tidying the kitchen so Mr. Bolger had to answer the door, although she had to clear her throat three times to get him to look up from his newspaper. Jimmy was about to yell to Tammy that she was early when he heard a boy's voice at the door.

"And who are you?" Jimmy heard Mr. Bolger ask.

"Ronnie," a boy's voice answered, "Ronnie Goodbody, from Jimmy's class."

Jimmy and Criminey rushed to the door to see what was going on. Ronnie was standing on his front step next to Estella. And Tammy was heading up the front walk, a puzzled expression on her face.

"What are you guys doing here, Bad-body?" Jimmy asked aggressively

"Jimmy!" Ms. Chicklets snapped before Ronnie could reply. "Dennis, invite Jimmy's friends inside."

Mr. Bolger quickly complied.

Tammy, Jimmy, Ronnie, and Estella sat around the kitchen table with Mr. Bolger, while Ms. Chicklets hovered in the background. Criminey was miffed that they hadn't made any room for him and, as a result, waited by the door impatiently. It wasn't a very big table, so everyone was crowded together. Mr. Bolger looked particularly uncomfortable.

"So Ronnie," Ms. Chicklets asked, "what brings you here this morning?"

"It was her idea," Ronnie replied, nodding awkwardly at Estella.

"And who is she?" Mr. Bolger said suddenly, to no one in particular.

Ms. Chicklets looked over at Mr. Bolger, an expression of both surprise and disapproval on her face.

"She," Ms. Chicklets began, "Estella is an exchange student, staying with Ronnie. I met her yesterday while I was doing my guidance appointments for Jimmy's class. She's from ..."

"Faraway," Estella chimed in.

“Faraway,” Ms. Chicklets repeated absently.

“That’s not very specific,” Tammy announced. “Is it?”

Ms. Chicklets seemed confused for a moment. And if anyone had looked, they would have noticed that Mr. Bolger appeared to be ill. But no one did.

“Mitch and the Blingers were picking on them on the way into school yesterday,” Jimmy said finally, breaking an awkward silence. “They want to walk with us to stay safe, right Ronnie?”

Ronnie nodded gently.

“The Blingers again?” Ms. Chicklets said angrily, reaching for her phone.

“Mom!” Jimmy snapped.

“Okay,” Ms. Chicklets replied, putting down her phone. “I suppose there’s strength in numbers. Now get going: you’re going to be late.”

The kids grabbed their backpacks and headed for the door.

Although he wasn’t sure how it happened, Jimmy found himself walking next to Estella with Tammy trailing behind next to Ronnie. Criminey danced back and forth between them, making a point of not solidifying.

“It’s not fair,” Criminey said, so that only Jimmy could hear. “I like talking out loud and not having you decide what to repeat.”

“I’m not repeating anything today,” Jimmy said, half under his breath.

“What was that, Jimmy?” Estella asked, smiling warmly at him.

“Nothing,” Jimmy mumbled in reply. “Just talking to myself.”

They walked silently for a few minutes until they reached Mrs. Greenbottom’s house.

“Why did you really come to Jimmy’s house this morning?” Tammy said to Ronnie suddenly.

“I don’t know,” Ronnie replied. “Estella said she wanted to – she’s really persuasive. And Tommy and Joe seemed to be scared of you for some reason.”

“That’s because they’re Nerds!” Criminey yelled – so only Jimmy could hear – quoting yet again from Nerd Wars.

Jimmy smiled, but when he looked over at Estella, she was smiling as well. He was about to say something when he saw Mitch McGee standing across the street staring at them.

“I’m watching you, Chicklets,” he said, pointing at his own eyes and then at Jimmy. “All of you.”

Nobody said anything in response. But they hurried the rest of the way to school without looking back.

Jimmy and Criminey clustered around Tammy’s desk, waiting for the bell to ring. Since there were only three of them, it was a fairly small cluster. Jimmy looked over at Estella who waved at him. He waved back. He then noticed that Mitch was watching them intently.

“What do you think she wants?” Tammy asked quietly.

“She? What do you think he wants?” Jimmy said in response.

“Who are you talking about?” Tammy asked.

“Who are you talking about?” Jimmy replied petulantly.

Tammy sighed and rolled her eyes.

“I’m talking about Estella, little Miss Bluecheese,” Tammy said. “She’s following you around, coming to your house, always waving at you. And that exchange student business is some kind of cover.”

“Estella? She’s just being friendly,” Jimmy replied. “I’m talking about Mitch. He seems like he’s spying on us again.”

“Maybe he’s just being unfriendly,” Tammy replied sarcastically. “And anyway, he only spied on us last time because he was hypnotized.”

“Maybe they’re both nerds!” Criminey said out loud, but quietly enough that only Jimmy and Tammy heard.

They all fought to keep from laughing out loud, and succeeded in looking like they were choking instead. Jimmy was about to joke that Criminey was the only nerd in the vicinity when the bell rang, at which point he hurried to his desk. You didn’t want to be the last person standing in Mrs. Greenbottom’s class.

About halfway through math class Jimmy noticed the door to the classroom slowly opening. The rest of the class was focused on the set of problems Mrs. Greenbottom had given them. Jimmy was taking a break – albeit an unofficial break. He tapped Criminey on the shoulder, although since Criminey hadn’t solidified he really tapped him through the shoulder. They watched the door curiously until they could see two figures standing in the opening.

“It’s the kids from the guidance office,” Jimmy hissed.

“I wonder they’re going to do this time,” Criminey replied, a hint of amusement in his voice.

They didn’t have to wait long. While one of them took a video with her cell phone camera, the other one started throwing tennis balls at Jimmy. The first ball caught him right on the forehead and almost knocked him over. And the second looked like it was going to hit him in the face before Criminey solidified, still invisible, and knocked it away. In quick succession Mrs. Greenbottom slammed her desk with a yardstick, Estella jump to her feet, waved her arms, and shouted something in a language Jimmy didn’t recognize, and Jimmy’s assailants turned and fled. Jimmy just stood there stunned.

“Jimmy Chicklets,” Mrs. Greenbottom shouted, “what is the meaning of this?”

“I ... I don’t know, Mrs. Greenbottom,” Jimmy replied weakly.

“This is the last time you’re going to bring your nonsense into my classroom, young man,” she said angrily. “Go to the Principal’s office, now!”

“But he didn’t do anything,” Tammy pleaded on Jimmy’s behalf.

“Mind your own business, Miss Mugwort,” Mrs. Greenbottom replied, and then turning to Jimmy ordered, “Go!”

Jimmy slunk out of the room, still stunned. Criminey followed slowly after him.

Jimmy was just sitting down in Principal Gardner's office when Ms. Chicklets stormed in after him, Tammy tailing behind her.

"What is the meaning of this?" she demanded angrily.

Principal Gardner seemed to shrink in his chair. He paused for a moment, thinking carefully before he answered.

"Apparently Jimmy was involved in some kind of disturbance in class this morning," Principal Gardner replied, reading the email he had just received from Mrs. Greenbottom.

"Disturbance?" Ms. Chicklets said incredulously. "By all reports he was assaulted."

Principal Gardner nodded, still reading Mrs. Greenbottom's email.

"According to Mrs. Greenbottom, he was somehow complicit in the incident," he said, "although it doesn't say exactly how. Hmm."

"Complicit?" Ms. Chicklets replied, still angry. "He's never even seen those kids before. Right, Jimmy?"

"Well I have seen them before," Jimmy replied cautiously, "but I don't know who they are."

"You see," Ms. Chicklets continued, "vague allegations, mysterious children. That woman doesn't belong in the classroom."

The principal had a tired and slightly confused look on his face. He looked down and read the email again, before looking back up at Ms. Chicklets.

"There's nothing to be done until I talk to those children," Principal Gardner said finally. "You can go now, Jimmy."

"And what about that woman?" Ms. Chicklets asked.

"There's nothing to be done," Principal Gardner began before trailing off.

They left the office and headed out into the hall just as the lunch bell rang.

“Off you go,” Ms. Chicklets said to Jimmy and Tammy, nodding in the direction of the lunchroom with a forced smile on her face. “I’m going to go speak to your teacher.”

“But Mom,” Jimmy complained.

“Don’t worry, Jimmy,” she said warmly, “she won’t take it out on you. I’ll make sure of that.”

Jimmy, Tammy, and Criminey walked slowly to the lunchroom. Jimmy was unusually quiet – he had a lot on his mind.

The day didn’t get much better from Jimmy’s perspective. Mrs. Greenbottom didn’t complain when he returned to class after lunch, as Ms. Chicklets had promised. But she did scowl at him periodically. And she gave the class another of her impossibly hard pop quizzes. She didn’t blame the quiz on Jimmy – at least not out loud. But the rest of the class knew he was the real reason and blamed him themselves. Every time the teacher looked away, someone threw a crumpled up wad of paper at him. Even when she was looking they shot him angry glares. The only exception – not counting Tammy and Criminey, of course – was Estella who smiled and waved whenever she caught his eye. At one point he asked permission to use the washroom.

“Do whatever you want, Mr. Chicklets,” Mrs. Greenbottom replied. “Apparently the rules don’t apply to you.”

And when he got back, the classroom was empty. Mrs. Greenbottom had let everyone else leave early to study in the library.

When Jimmy finally made his own way to the library, he saw Tammy and Criminey sitting at a table with Peter Burrows, of all people, having what appeared to be a serious conversation.

“What are you talking about?” Jimmy asked sullenly, as he sat down between Tammy and Criminey.

“Peter is telling us about a computer workshop he’s been invited to. He thinks it’s fake,” Tammy replied.

“And Bad-body got invited too,” Criminey added out loud – but not too loud – so that Tammy and Peter could hear.

Tammy looked over at Jimmy and shook her head.

“What?” Jimmy demanded.

Nobody said anything.

“It is fake,” Peter said firmly after a moment.

“So there’s not going to be a workshop?” Jimmy asked.

“Oh, there’s going to be a workshop,” Peter replied. “It’s just that the organization that’s supposed to be putting it on isn’t, and the organization that’s really putting it on doesn’t exist.”

“Huh?” Jimmy said.

“The invitation is from Insight Computing, but I checked and they’re not putting on any workshops this week,” Peter explained. “And the only record of whoever is putting it on – who rented the room, bought the computers, hired the instructors – is an account number, 19-1-21.”

“Maybe it’s a code,” Jimmy suggested.

“Of course it’s a code,” Peter replied sharply. “But a code for what? As far as I know, it could just refer to letters of the alphabet: the nineteenth letter, followed by the first, followed by the twenty-first.”

“What does it spell?” Jimmy asked.

“You figure it out, genius,” Peter replied.

Jimmy glared at him.

“S. The nineteenth letter is S,” Criminey said happily, after a moment.

“You’re not going to go, are you?” asked Tammy.

“A. The first letter is A,” Criminey added.

"Of course I'm going to go," Peter replied. "Anything would be better than that stupid care-taking field trip."

"U. The twenty-first letter is U," Criminey announced. "SAU."

"SAU!" Jimmy and Tammy shouted in unison.

"Yeah, so?" Peter replied.

"SAU are the initials of the Sprite Acquisition Unit," Tammy explained, "the government agency that sent the fake sociologists into the school and hypnotized Mitch."

"And they're behind the field trip," Jimmy added. "It's called Sanity, Antidote, and U-something. SAU."

"Sanitary, Antiseptic, and Unblemished," Tammy corrected.

Peter sat quietly for a few moments, thinking.

"So the people who are after Criminey created a fake computer workshop so Ronnie and I wouldn't go to the care taking field trip they arranged?" he said finally. "Sounds like a trap to me."

"So you won't go to the workshop?" Tammy asked.

"No, now I have to go," Peter replied. "Otherwise they'll know we're onto them."

Jimmy, Tammy, and Criminey looked at each other for a moment. Then they started nodding; although it wasn't entirely clear what they were nodding about.

Chapter 5: Wednesday, watch your way

Jimmy and Criminey had waited impatiently for Mr. Bolger when they got home from school. They wanted to tell him about the SAU plot they had uncovered and ask for his advice. But he never showed up. Ms. Chicklets received a text saying he was working late and would probably miss dinner. He still hadn't gotten home by the time Jimmy and Criminey were ready for bed. Ms. Chicklets didn't seem too concerned, so Jimmy wasn't either. Frustrated? Yes. But concerned? No. But when he hadn't turned up by the morning, she did seem concerned. Very concerned.

"A work emergency?" she muttered to herself, reading Mr. Bolger's last text. "What kind of an emergency could an accountant have that would keep him out all night?"

"Mom, where's Dad?" Jimmy asked. "Is he okay?"

Ms. Chicklets paused for a moment, and the look on her face slowly changed from concern to a mix of mild annoyance and mild amusement.

"I'm sure he's fine, Jimmy," she replied. "He just had a work thing that he's taking too seriously. Accountants are like that sometimes."

Jimmy and Criminey nodded skeptically: Jimmy because he was not convinced; Criminey because he was imitating a skeptical teacher from Nerd Wars, which he had binged watched, again, the previous evening.

There was a knock on the door just as they were getting ready to leave. This time it was Tammy. But by the time Jimmy got ready to go, Ronnie and Estella were waiting for them out in front the house. Ronnie gestured towards Estella, indicating that yet again it was her idea. Jimmy and Tammy made a point of walking together this time, and Criminey danced along with them. They walked quickly so they could have a private – or at least semi-private – conversation, and Ronnie struggled to keep up. Estella, however, skipped along easily behind them.

"So what did Mr. Bolger say," Tammy asked, "about the SAU."

"He's missing," Jimmy replied, tears forming in the corners of his eyes. "Mom says texted to say he was working all night, but what would an accountant do in the middle of the night?"

"Count?" Criminey offered helpfully.

Jimmy glared at him.

“He must be working on Sprite Protection Agency business,” Tammy said firmly. “Secret agents stay out all night all the time.”

“Do you think they caught him?” Jimmy asked. “The SAU?”

“If he texted,” Tammy replied, “then probably not.”

Jimmy was about to object when Mitch appeared across the street. He pointed at his eyes and then at Jimmy, again. And he started shadowing them, walking parallel to them on the other side of the street. They kept their eyes down and rushed the rest of the way to school.

Jimmy, Tammy, and Criminey clustered around Tammy’s desk in Mrs. Greenbottom’s class, still shocked by what had happened when they arrived at school that morning. There was some question about whether it was strictly speaking Mrs. Greenbottom’s class because she wasn’t there that morning, although this wasn’t the question that was foremost in their minds. A more relevant question was whether it was the substitute teacher Ms. Sandheaver’s class. And in this case it was clearly not. Under the lead of Tommy and Joe Blinger, true chaos ruled. Kids were running around the room, yelling and screaming, throwing paper and other things, and generally ignoring all of Ms. Sandheaver’s attempts to restore order. As a result, even if she had noticed the quiet conversation going on around Tammy’s desk, she would have been more relieved than concerned.

Everything had been fine up until the time they arrived at school. Well, nearly fine at least: they were, of course, still being shadowed by Mitch; and Ronnie and Estella were still walking with them. But compared to what happened next this was all okay. It started when they entered the school building through the front doors. Standing at the end of a row of lockers – the row where Jimmy and Tammy’s lockers were – was one of the kids who had thrown tennis balls at Jimmy. And she was filming him with her phone yet again.

“Hey!” Jimmy yelled. “It’s her!”

He started running towards her and, after a brief pause, Tammy and Criminey started running too. Just before Jimmy passed his own locker, a thin wire was snapped tight – at about shin level – in front of him.

“Look out!” Tammy yelled, noticing the wire.

But it was too late. As Jimmy ran through it, a net – yes, a net! – fell from the ceiling on top of Jimmy, Tammy, Criminey, and about five other kids. They toppled to the ground in a heap, and struggled to get free. Even Criminey, who had been solid when the net fell, struggled for a few moments, before de-solidifying and rolling away. The kids still struggling in the net only managed to get themselves more tangled. A few of the observers, Criminey included, tried to pull them free, with little success. After a few minutes, Principal Gardner appeared with some of the teachers. They were attracted by the increasingly loud ruckus the net incident has produced. They succeeded in pulling the trapped kids free in relatively short order. When Principal Gardner realized Jimmy was one of them, he started shaking his head. But he didn’t say anything. At that moment the bell rang, however, and the kids headed off to their respective classes.

Well most of the kids, anyway. After they got over the initial shock of having been trapped in a net in school, the first thing they noticed was that neither Estella nor Mitch had made it to class. Although it was hard to tell, given the chaos that the Blingers had caused, they checked twice and their two prime suspects were still both missing. Ronnie wasn’t there either at first, but he was led in by the school nurse about five minutes after class started. The nurse seemed like she wanted to say something to Ms. Sandheaver but, seeing the bedlam the substitute was facing, simply shook her head and left.

“I told you there was something suspicious about her,” Tammy said. “She follows you around like a lost puppy and then when the action hits she disappears.”

“Who? Estella? A puppy?” Jimmy asked. “What about Mitch? He’s been spying on us all week and he disappeared too.”

Jimmy imitated Mitch’s eye pointing gesture, which lost some of its effectiveness when he pointed at himself after pointing at his own eyes.

“What do you think?” Jimmy and Tammy asked simultaneously, turning towards Criminey.

“Nerds,” Criminey replied unconvincingly.

This time nobody laughed, not even Criminey.

“If you want to know who’s behind it,” Peter said, joining them, “you need to take a look at the school surveillance video feed.”

“What?” Jimmy, Tammy, and this time Criminey, asked simultaneously, as much in surprise that he spoken at all as in surprise at what he had said.

“The school has a system of video cameras hidden in the sprinklers,” Peter explained. “They record everything.”

“Since when?” Jimmy asked, a note of panic in his voice. “Who can see it?”

“Interesting questions,” Peter replied, without elaborating.

“Can we get access to the video feed?” Tammy asked.

“I have my ways,” Peter replied, smiling. “Meet me in the computer lab at lunch break.”

Jimmy and Tammy nodded. A few minutes later Ms. Sandheaver fled the room, leaving the class unsupervised. At that point, the students returned to their desks – their mission accomplished – and sat, hands folded innocently, waiting for Principal Gardner to come and take charge.

Jimmy, Tammy, and Criminey stood behind Peter as he typed on the computer keyboard. They had locked the door to the computer room behind them so Criminey felt comfortable being solid and visible. He was wearing his favourite preppy ensemble, over his tinfoil undergarments of course.

“Nerd Wars?” Peter asked.

Criminey nodded enthusiastically.

“Got it,” Peter said after about a minute.

The computer screen was suddenly completely filled with small thumbnail video images. Peter zoomed in on one and played it. It showed the net falling on Jimmy, Tammy, Criminey, and the other kids in slow motion. Peter paused it at the point they had all fallen to the ground.

“So who do you want to track first?” Peter asked.

“Estella,” Tammy said quickly, “the so-called exchange student from faraway.”

Jimmy was about to object, but thought better of it instead. He nodded in agreement. Peter started typing again and in a moment zoomed in on an image of Estella. He reversed the image to before the net fell and then played it. It showed Estella running with Jimmy and his friends towards the girl who was taking the video. Then it showed her jumping elegantly out of the way of the net, landing in a forward roll, bouncing to her feet, and then continuing around the corner. Peter zoomed in on another video thumbnail that showed Estella come to a stop as she turned the corner and start waving her arms and shouting something, although they couldn't hear what she was saying because there was no audio.

"She did the same thing when they threw the tennis balls at me," Jimmy noted.

After a few moments, the video showed Estella collapsing on the floor. She lay there for a minute or so before Ronnie appeared and helped her to her feet. Peter then showed a series of videos of Ronnie taking her to the nurse's office.

"Well I think we can rule her out as a suspect," Jimmy said. "Now what about Mitch."

Tammy nodded but retained a look of skepticism on her face. Peter zoomed in on a video of Mitch this time. It showed him going in the direction of the girl taking the video as well, walking quickly but not running. The next video showed him walking past Estella lying on the ground, glancing at her briefly but not stopping. The third video showed him entering a classroom and then shouting something. The girl with the camera emerged from behind a cupboard. Mitch started saying something to her, which again none of them could hear.

"Can anyone lip-read?" Jimmy asked.

Tammy was about to reply when, all of a sudden, Jimmy's other tormenter appeared on the screen, sneaking up behind Mitch and then tasing him. The video showed Mitch collapsing to the ground, and then, after a brief conversation, the two kids exiting the classroom together.

"So it's not Mitch either," Tammy said, puzzled. "Peter, show us what those two kids did next!"

Peter zoomed in on a series of videos which showed the kids make their way to the schoolyard doors and then cross the schoolyard to the caretaker's shed in the far back corner. The final video was taken from a camera inside the shed. It showed them coming through the door and then being hugged by a familiar figure.

"It's Mrs. Grubb!" Jimmy and Tammy said nearly at the same time.

But before they said anything else, Jimmy noticed another figure sitting a chair in the corner. It was Mr. Bolger.

Jimmy, Tammy, and Criminey rushed as fast as they could to the caretaker's shed. Jimmy was worried that Mr. Bolger didn't know what Mrs. Grubb was up to – he wasn't sure he knew himself – or worse, was her prisoner. But one thing he knew for sure: Mrs. Grubb was a double agent. When they reached the shed Jimmy tried the door only to discover it was locked. The three of them looked uncertainly at each other, not sure what to do.

“Maybe we should knock,” Tammy whispered.

Jimmy shook his head. All of a sudden Criminey grinned. He de-solidified and changed into a construction worker's uniform, complete with a sledgehammer in his hand. Then he re-solidified and handed the now solid sledgehammer to Jimmy. Jimmy grinned. He was just getting ready to swing it at the door – despite Tammy's rather vigorous head shaking – when the door suddenly opened and Mr. Bolger appeared.

“Jimmy!” Mr. Bolger said happily.

Jimmy dropped his sledgehammer and ran over and hugged his father.

“Dad,” Jimmy said tearfully, “where were you?”

“Come on inside and I'll tell you everything,” Mr. Bolger replied, “all of you.”

“But Dad,” Jimmy said, “Mrs. Grubb is a double agent.”

“Yes, I know,” Mr. Bolger replied, nodding.

Jimmy, Tammy, and Criminey looked at each other in surprise, and then followed Jimmy's dad into the shed.

They sat in a big circle on folding chairs in the caretaker's shed: Jimmy, Tammy, Criminey, Mr. Bolger, Mrs. Grubb, and the two kids. Mrs. Grubb prepared a pot of tea that they were all drinking out of small paper cups.

“These are my children, Rosie and Pip,” Mrs. Grubb began, gesturing towards the two kids. “Their father, Mr. Grubb, has been missing since ...”

“Mr. Grubb was ... is my partner in the SPA,” Mr. Bolger interrupted. “We were on a mission in the Faery realm ...”

“The Faery realm!” Jimmy interrupted this time, shocked.

“Yes, the Faery realm,” Mr. Bolger continued. “Given the nature of our mission we had to travel there through an SAU portal, and that meant we had to pose as SAU agents.”

“But you left him behind!” Mrs. Grubb interjected angrily. “Abandoned him!”

Mr. Bolger looked stricken.

“I had to hurry back,” he continued, “to complete our mission. Mr. Grubb stayed behind to, er, tie up some loose ends. But somehow his cover must have been blown.”

“They’ve got him,” Mrs. Grubb added, unhappily. “The SAU have got Mr. Grubb. And they said they’d hurt him unless we helped them capture the sprite.”

“So your kids ... ,” Jimmy began, gesturing towards Rosie and Pip.

“They wanted to know how to determine when he was there, and how to get him to solidify when he was,” Mrs. Grubb continued. “So the little Grubbs and I, we devised a series of tests.”

“And you passed the results on to the SAU?” Tammy asked indignantly.

“But that’s the interesting part,” Mr. Bolger interjected. “All the videos were scrambled. And the little Grubbs don’t remember what they saw. It’s almost as if ...”

“He did it!” Mrs. Grubb shouted angrily, glaring at Criminey. “He cast a confusion spell on my babies!”

“Now Yolanda, we don’t know that,” Mr. Bolger replied.

Mrs. Grubb glared angrily at Mr. Bolger, who looked uncomfortably back at her.

“But what are we going to do?” Tammy asked finally. “How are we going to rescue Mr. Grubb while keeping Criminey safe?”

“We’re going to need come up with a plan,” Mr. Bolger replied.

And they spent the rest of the afternoon doing just that.

Chapter 6: Thursday, we can't stay

When they arrived at school the next morning Mrs. Greenbottom was back. She behaved like normal – giving orders, making threats, expressing disappointment with the results of their most recent pop quiz – but she still seemed a little depressed. About halfway through first period she started organizing the class for the field trip.

“The bus is here,” she announced. “Everybody get your jackets, change into your outdoor shoes, and line up next to your safety buddy. Last pair ready to go will be writing a 500 word essay on promptness.”

The kids rushed out of the room towards their lockers. Tammy was a lot faster than Jimmy at getting ready, both because her locker was better organized and because she was more focused. But they had worked out a system. Tammy would run to the boot room and get both pairs of shoes, while Jimmy went directly to his locker to retrieve his jacket. Tammy would then untie his shoes on the way back and pass them to Jimmy before going to her locker to retrieve her jacket. They were never the first buddies ready, but they were never the last either. And this time was no exception. They ended up near the middle of the line. Estella was by herself near the front, only behind Lucy and her usual buddy, a very organized girl name Sophia. Ronnie was, of course, away for the day with Peter at a fake computer workshop. Estella waved for Jimmy to join her but he pointed at Tammy and stayed where he was. The Blingers were near the back like usual. And like usual, Mitch was alone at the very end of the line. Sometimes Mrs. Greenbottom tried to pair him with Peter, but neither one of them was particularly cooperative on that front, so she normally let them go buddy-less. On this occasion, however, she moved Mitch up to pair with Estella, leaving Tommy and Joe at the end of the line. She pulled out her “end of the line” essay assignment sheet to give to the Blingers, but apparently changed her mind and dropped it in a recycling bin instead. Then she led the class out the front doors to the waiting bus.

The plan was very straightforward. Peter was going to hack into the computer system at the so-called Museum of Care Taking using a computer at the fake workshop he was going to be attending: when they asked him if he could do it, he told them he already had. He would then tap into the video feed and find out where the SAU was keeping Mr. Grubb. He would then let Mr. Bolger know where Mr Grubb was, using the fancy SPA earpieces they were all going to be wearing. Mr. Bolger, who would be disguised as a care-taker, would then rescue Mr. Grubb and hide him in a large ceremonial wastebasket that was going to be awarded to the class. Tammy would wheel the wastebasket out the front door and pass it off to the little Grubbs who would be waiting out front. Jimmy's only job was to listen to the communication through the earpiece, and get himself and Criminey out of there immediately if something went wrong. And Criminey's job was, no matter what, to not solidify.

The plan got off to a bit of a bumpy start. As they were getting on the bus, Donald Bracegirdle – the one who had given Mrs. Greenbottom the news about the field trip in the first place – rushed up and handed her a note.

“Tammy,” Mrs. Greenbottom announced, “you’re wanted in the Principal’s office.”

“But Mrs. Greenbottom,” Tammy complained, “I’ll miss the field trip.”

“Lucky you,” she replied. “Now get going!”

Tammy reluctantly headed off as ordered.

“Dad, Tammy’s gone,” Jimmy said quietly. “Should we abort?”

“No, Jimmy,” Mr. Bolger replied. “You’ll have to push the ceremonial waste basket out the door, but the rest of the plan will remain the same.”

Jimmy looked over at Criminey and nodded seriously. Criminey changed into a suit with a bow tie and returned his nod. He maintained a serious expression on his face until the bow tie started spinning in a circle, at which point they both started laughing.

When they arrived at the Museum of Care-Taking, Mrs. Grubb met the class at the door, wearing an unusually ornate care-taker’s uniform: at school she didn’t wear any discernible uniform at all. Jimmy listened intently through his earpiece as she led them through the Sanitary, Antiseptic, and Unblemished exhibit. Mr. Bolger had successfully infiltrated the Museum and Peter had already found where they were keeping Mr. Grubb – in some kind of sub-basement. And Peter was giving Mr. Bolger directions to Mr. Grubb’s cell. Jimmy gave Criminey the thumbs up, and then looked around nervously before surreptitiously putting his hand in his pocket. The exhibit consisted of wax figures of care-takers – all wearing the same fancy uniform Mrs. Grubb was wearing – using different kinds of cleaning implements, as well as a number interactive displays, which bore an uncomfortable resemblance to the tests the little Grubbs had subjected Jimmy to. One, called “Polishing Pants,” involved being pushed along a bench by a wax figure who was cleaning the seat with his bottom. Another – “Attack of the Germs” – consisting of having tennis ball sized germs flying towards one’s head, only to have them stop just before they made contact. And a third – “Hairnet Dreaming” – involved having a giant net fall on anyone who stood on a head-shaped target on the floor.

“Don’t solidify, don’t solidify, don’t solidify,” Jimmy whispered to Criminey when it was his turn in each of the exhibits.

Criminey nodded and didn’t, although he was sorely tempted when the bacteria started flying at Jimmy’s head.

“Don’t talk out loud to Criminey, Jimmy,” Mr Bolger said through the earpiece, and then to Peter, “I’m here. Can you remotely unlock the door?”

“Got it,” Peter replied after a few seconds.

Jimmy looked over at Criminey and gave a fist pump. Criminey looked back and grinned. All of a sudden, he heard a burst of noisy static through his earpiece.

“...detected...losing feed...,” a crackling voice that sounded like Peter said.

“... trap...run...,” another crackling voice that sounded like Mr. Bolger followed.

Then the earpiece went silent. A look of panic appeared on Jimmy’s face.

“What’s wrong?” Criminey asked, so that only Jimmy could hear him.

“I don’t know. Something,” Jimmy replied. “We’ve gotta go.”

They spotted an exit and started towards it. But before they had gotten very far, the exit door opened and a figure stepped through it.

“Crispy Bacon!” Jimmy yelled in dismay.

And he was right: standing before him was Dr. Drake, Sociologist aka Ms. Jenkins, Guidance Counsellor aka Secret Agent Sabrina Fairbairn aka Crispy Bacon. And she looked like she meant business.

Jimmy and Criminey searched for another way out, but everywhere they looked SAU agents in grey suits and black sunglasses appeared. And they were walking slowly towards them, forming an increasingly tight circle around Jimmy’s whole class. And just as slowly, Jimmy’s classmates started to notice. Lucy’s friend, Sofia, was noticed first.

“Oh hi Ms. Jenkins,” she said to Crispy Bacon, “I didn’t know you were going to be here.”

Crispy Bacon just smiled and kept her eyes focused on Jimmy. Mitch, who had been busily scratching his name into the faces of the wax figures, noticed second.

“You!” he yelled, startling most of his classmates.

He looked about ready to charge when Mrs. Greenbottom grabbed his shoulder and shook her head.

“That’s right, Myrna,” Crispy Bacon said coldly, “keep them under control if you don’t want them to get hurt.”

Mrs. Greenbottom just glared at her, but didn’t relax her grip on Mitch’s shoulder.

“So Mr. Chicklets,” Crispy Bacon said, turning to Jimmy, “I think you know what I’m here for.”

“Don’t solidify, don’t solidify, don’t solidify,” Jimmy whispered to Criminey, while shaking his head to Crispy Bacon.

“But I want to help,” Criminey replied, as he changed into a zookeeper’s uniform with a skunk under one arm.

Jimmy shook his head, no, although he couldn’t keep a slight grin off his face.

“Solidifying is exactly what your friend is going to do,” Crispy Bacon said. “What’s his name? Criminey? Criminey Toodle?”

With a few exceptions, Jimmy’s classmates were entirely confused by this exchange. They were even more confused when a man wearing a care taker’s uniform, pushing a large, extremely shiny waste basket, was led into the room by three of the agents with the grey suits and sunglasses, especially since he bore a striking resemblance to Jimmy’s father.

“It looks like your dad got demoted, Chicklets,” Tommy Blinger joked.

Only his brother Joe laughed. Everyone else just stood there quietly, except for Mrs. Greenbottom who shook her head dismissively when she recognized Mr. Bolger.

Crispy Bacon paced around Jimmy, stroking her chin.

“Hmm,” she said, “I wonder what it’s going to take to get the your friend, Criminey, to solidify.”

Jimmy shook his head, indicating to Crispy Bacon that he didn’t know, and indicating to Criminey that, no matter what, he shouldn’t solidify.

“Grubb’s little tests seemed to suggest that he’ll do it to protect you,” she continued, “if he thinks you’re in danger. I guess he realized that in our little exhibit here you weren’t in any real danger. Maybe we should fix that.”

She gestured to one of the grey-suited agents who tossed her a baseball bat.

“Now Jimmy,” she said, poking him in the chest, “let’s see if your friend, Criminey, lets me hit you with this.”

She raised the bat above her head. Mr. Bolger struggled to get free from his captors and broke loose for a moment. But they quickly knocked him to the ground.

“No!” he yelled helplessly.

Crispy Bacon looked at Mr. Bolger for a second and smiled. Then she started swinging the bat towards Jimmy’s head. Criminey quickly changed into monk robes, with a large gong in his hands. He then solidified and blocked the bat with the gong. The Room was filled with a loud clang and, for a moment, everyone froze. Then Crispy Bacon waved her right hand. Two of the SAU agents pulled out tranquilizer guns and fired. Criminey immediately collapsed to the floor: solid, visible, and unconscious.

Before anyone had a chance to contemplate the boy, wearing monk’s robes, who had suddenly appeared unconscious at Jimmy’s feet, three different things happened in the same instant: Mitch broke free from Mrs. Greenbottom and charged towards Crispy Bacon; Estella started chanting and waving her arms while spinning in circles; and Mrs. Greenbottom pulled a black cable out of her purse and quickly started placing it on the ground around Jimmy and his classmates. Jimmy dropped to the ground and wrapped his arms around Criminey.

“Criminey!” he yelled, shaking his friend. “Are you okay?”

Criminey groaned, but that was the only response he got. When Jimmy looked up, Crispy Bacon and the other SAU agents seemed to be moving in slow motion. But Mitch wasn't. He banged into his nemesis and knocked her to the ground.

"Keep her outside the circle, Mr. McGee. And keep yourself inside it," Mrs. Greenbottom said as she sped past, laying her cable. "And somebody get Mr. Bolger."

Mrs. Grubb raced over and pulled Mr. Bolger to his feet, and together they pushed the waste basket containing Mr. Grubb into the circle. When she finished laying her cable, Mrs. Greenbottom hurried over to a panel on the wall that Jimmy hadn't noticed before. She plugged the end of the cable into an outlet and grabbed a lever. A couple of the grey-suited SAU agents tried to stop her, but they were still moving in slow motion so they couldn't reach her.

"No-o-o-o!" shouted Crispy Bacon, also in slow motion, still lying on the floor where Mitch had knocked her.

"Myna," Mr. Bolger said, "there's still time."

"Sorry, Dennis," she replied. "I need a change. I'm burned out."

Mrs. Greenbottom pulled the lever. All of a sudden a giant portal opened up all around the outside of the circle. And Crispy Bacon, the grey-suited SAU agents, the entire Museum of Care-Taking – which, of course, was really the secret SAU headquarters – and, yes, even Mrs. Greenbottom disappeared inside it. And when Jimmy opened his eyes again, they were sitting in a vacant lot where the building had once been. Mr. Grubb climbed out of the ceremonial waste basket and had a tearful reunion with Mrs. Grubb and the little Grubbs, who had rushed from the sidewalk to join them. With Mitch's aid, Jimmy helped the recovering Criminey to his feet. And then Jimmy and his classmates lined up next to their safety buddies and marched onto the waiting school bus: minus one home room teacher, but plus one well dressed caretaker who looked strangely like Jimmy's father.

Chapter 7: Friday, please go away

Tammy, Jimmy, and Criminey walked into school together as usual. And, as was becoming usual as well, Estella and Ronnie walked with them. Criminey seemed mostly recovered as well. He was walking with a cane, but it was more of a prop for his dancing than anything else. During the bus ride back to school, he had been very woozy. And he hadn't been able to make himself invisible, let alone de-solidify. But for whatever reason, none of the other kids on the bus seemed to notice. Jimmy's classmates, in fact, seemed more confused than anything else, about how the field trip had ended, where Mrs. Greenbottom had gone, and even how they had gotten on the bus. The only exceptions were Mitch and Estella. They were sitting across from Jimmy and Criminey, watching them intently. Mitch had a look of triumph and satisfaction on face, with a pinch of calculation thrown into the mix. Estella was smiling warmly at them, with a look of mild concern and heavy fatigue on her face. In fact, the bus had barely started to move when she fell into a deep sleep. When they had arrived back at school, it was already lunchtime. And as there was no school that afternoon – a professional development afternoon for the teachers had been scheduled – Mr. Bolger simply dismissed the class. A couple of the students were a little worried about whether a care-taker had the authority to dismiss them – no matter whose father he looked like – but no one complained.

Tammy and Jimmy had texted the previous evening about the events at the Museum, so Tammy was more or less up to speed. But there still seemed to be a lot to reflect on.

“So how are you feeling, Criminey,” Tammy asked. “Did they hurt you?”

Criminey rubbed his shoulder, where the tranquilizing darts had struck him, and grimaced.

“Better, but it still hurts a little,” he replied, before sticking his tongue out at Jimmy. “Thanks for asking.”

“So what happened to you?” Jimmy asked, ignoring Criminey's tongue, “at the principal's office?”

“It was weird,” Tammy said. “When I got there, Principal Gardner asked me what I wanted. And when I told that Mr. Bracegirdle said he wanted to see me ...”

“Space Turtle,” Criminey interrupted, giggling. “Mr. Space Turtle.”

They all laughed, even Estella and Ronnie who shouldn't have been able to hear him.

“So when I told him that Mr. Space Turtle said he wanted to see me,” Tammy continued, “he denied it. Then he called Mr. Space Turtle in and starting yelling at him, right in front of me. So I got sent to the library for the morning. I tried to text Peter but none of my messages would go through.”

“That is weird,” Jimmy replied. “Do you think Space Turtle works for the SAU?”

“No, he seemed more confused than anything. And I think he started crying at his desk,” Tammy said, and after a pause, “race!”

She started sprinting towards school, with Jimmy and Criminey at her heels. Ronnie and Estella started running as well. But while Estella easily caught up with them, Ronnie started lagging behind: his unfortunate nickname might have had a grain of truth to it.

When they arrived in class, Mrs. Greenbottom was missing. This was, of course, unsurprising: she had disappeared into a portal during the previous day’s field trip, after all. What was surprising was that there was no substitute teacher present: apparently no one had informed Principal Gardner about her disappearance. And what was even more surprising was that none of their classmates – Mitch and Estella excepted – remembered what had happened to her. As Jimmy, Tammy, and Criminey clustered, yet again, around Tammy’s desk, Lucy wandered over, a mischievous glint in her eyes.

“Did you hear about Mrs. Greenbottom?” she asked enthusiastically.

They all shook their heads, in Criminey’s case invisibly.

“I heard she burned down Principal Gardner’s house and got thrown in jail,” Lucy said. “They dragged her away from school in handcuffs.”

Jimmy, Tammy, and Criminey looked at one another in puzzlement, before Jimmy responded.

“But you were there,” he said. “You saw what happened at the museum.”

Lucy’s eyes glazed over for a moment.

“No, fire ... jail ... handcuffs ... ,” she said as she walked away. “That’s what I heard.”

Tammy was about to say something when they heard shouting from the back of the classroom. They turned to see Mitch having an argument with the Blingers.

“So you’re saying an invisible boy appeared out of nowhere and was shot by darts,” Tommy asked incredulously, “and then Greenbum saved the day and disappeared?”

“You saw it too!” Mitch replied, angrily.

“Are you sure you’re not going coo-coo again?” Joe asked, spinning his index finger in circles by his ear.

Mitch charged towards Joe, but Tommy stepped in the way, blocking him.

“Whatever you say, Mitch,” he said. “Whatever you say.”

Mitch calmed down substantially but still had a sour expression on his face.

A few minutes later, Peter strolled in and joined the small cluster around Tammy’s desk. They quickly filled him in on the previous day’s events, after they had lost contact with him.

“So Greenbottom’s a hero, eh?” Peter said. “Who knew?”

“What happened to you,” Jimmy asked, “after you got cut off?”

“They must have been monitoring the lab,” Peter replied. “All of a sudden an alarm went off and the computers started freezing up. And a couple of those dudes with the sunglasses came in and pretended to be fixing things. But they were really trying to figure out who had hacked into the museum video feed.”

“What happened?” Tammy asked. “How did you get away?”

“Well it was really Ronnie who saved the day,” Peter replied. “He created a distraction by pretending to have an asthma attack. It gave me enough time to get back into the computer I was using and wipe it clean.”

Peter nodded to Ronnie, who nodded back. A moment later, the door to the classroom opened and Ms. Chicklets came in. She walked over and sat down at Mrs. Greenbottom’s desk.

“Hi class,” she began, once the students settled, “I’m afraid I have some bad news. Your homeroom teacher Mrs. Greenbottom has gone missing.”

This produced some mild murmuring, but less than one might normally have expected given news of this kind.

“In the interim,” Ms. Chicklets continued, “until a more permanent substitute can be found, I will be acting as your home room teacher.”

This announcement produced a light smattering of polite applause. Jimmy, however, just put his head on his desk and groaned.

When he finally found out that Mrs. Greenbottom hadn't returned with the class from the Museum of Care Taking, Principal Gardner called the police. At first he filed a complaint against her for abandoning her students: he didn't consider the presence of a random care-taker to be proper supervision, no matter whose father he looked like. But when the police could find no sign of her, it turned into a missing person case. Sooner or later they were going to interview her abandoned students, which might raise some uncomfortable questions. And it looked like it was going to be sooner. Just before the lunch bell rang, Mr. Space Turtle knocked on the door and handed Ms. Chicklets a note.

“Police interrogations,” she said as she read the note.

Mr. Space Turtle nodded, and then tried to slip away.

“Wait a minute, Mr. Bracegirdle,” Ms. Chicklets said sharply. “The principal is aware that school board policy requires that parents be present for any formal interviews of this kind.”

Mr. Space Turtle nodded in reply, although it wasn't entirely clear whether this meant that he agreed, or merely that he understood the question. A few moments later the lunch bell rang and Jimmy and his classmates rushed out of the classroom to the school cafeteria, excitedly speculating about what might've happened to Mrs. Greenbottom despite having witnessed it.

Jimmy and Tammy were almost expecting a video this time, and the Prime Benefactor aka Peter Burrows aka Poopy-pants did not disappoint them. About halfway through lunch the video monitors starting flashing and, after a minute or so, Mrs. Greenbottom's face appeared on the screens. She was sitting on a beach chair, with palm trees and an ocean in the background, holding a drink with a little umbrella sticking out of it.

“I’m sure by now you’ve noticed I’m gone,” she began, “at least those of you who are even aware of people other than themselves.”

“This is going to be good,” Jimmy whispered.

Tammy and Criminey both nodded, although Tammy’s nod was a little less certain.

“For those few of you capable of human compassion, let me assure you I am safe and sound,” she continued. “But for the rest of you, let me say that I’ve had enough: enough of lazy, disinterested students; enough of meddling discipline-averse parents; enough of trendy incompetent teachers.”

The room had fallen into largely stunned silence, except for the laughter of Mitch and the Blingers — and that of a smattering of trouble-making students from some of the other classes. Principal Gardner had walked into the cafeteria just after the video began playing, flanked by two police officers. He just stood in the middle of the room, open-mouthed, watching in horror.

“And last but not least is our fearless leader, Principal Gardner,” Mrs. Greenbottom went on, “a corrupt and petty little tyrant, more concerned with lining his pockets than educating students. Don’t worry, Bill, they won’t find anything in your secret slush fund: how do you think I paid for all this?”

Principal Gardner looked like he was going to be sick. He turned and fled the room, the police officers on his heels.

“Good bye and good riddance,” Mrs. Greenbottom finished. “Good bye and good riddance.”

Then the screen went blank, and the room burst out in animated conversation.

The rest of the afternoon dragged on and on, at least from Jimmy’s perspective. As a result, when the final bell rang he popped to his feet and headed immediately for the door.

“Jimmy,” Ms. Chicklets called.

“See you at home, mom,” Jimmy replied without stopping as he rushed out into the hallway.

This produced a few titters from his classmates, but Jimmy ignored them. Tammy and Criminey caught up with him at his locker — he was, as always, slow getting himself ready to go. By the time he had his backpack all packed up and his shoes and jacket on, Peter had joined them. And by the time they reached to main doors to the school, Estella and Ronnie were tagging along behind them as well. Jimmy was about to complain about all the extra people when they saw Mitch standing on the sidewalk in front of the school staring at them and seemingly waiting for them.

“Hi Mitch,” Jimmy said as they approached the sidewalk. “What’s up?”

“I want in,” Mitch replied, a hint of anger in his voice.

Jimmy, Tammy, and Criminey looked at each other in confusion. Strictly speaking, Jimmy looked at Tammy and Criminey, Criminey looked at Tammy and Jimmy, but Tammy only looked at Jimmy, Criminey being invisible after all. And Peter kept his eyes on Mitch, a look of mild amusement on his face.

“I don’t know ...” Jimmy began cautiously.

“Don’t bother, Chicklets,” Mitch interrupted. “I want in on your invisible friend, those guys with sunglasses, that whole government conspiracy.”

There was a long pause during which everyone looked at Jimmy expectantly. But it was Tammy who finally broke the silence.

“I think it’s time for some introductions,” she said.

Criminey started dancing, Mitch nodded in satisfaction, and Estella smiled warmly. Jimmy did his best imitation of someone rolling his eyes, a rather poor imitation it must be said.

They met in the care-taker’s shed behind the school. Mrs. Grubb was nowhere to be seen — and, in fact, hadn’t been seen since her husband’s rescue the previous day. The door was locked but Mitch jimmied it open. Once they were all inside Tammy nodded at Criminey, or at least where she thought he was. He was, in fact, behind her. But he got the point and immediately made himself visible. He was, as was his recent habit, wearing a preppy ensemble from Nerd Wars. And he made a similar entrance.

“Nerds!” he yelled as he become visible.

Tammy jumped in shock, mostly because he yelled it in her ear.

“Hi everyone,” Criminey continued, “it’s very nice to finally meet you all.”

“Hey, where did he come from?” Ronnie exclaimed. “Who is he?”

Ronnie, it should be noted, was the only one who never seen Criminey before.

“My name is Criminey Toodle,” Criminey replied on his own behalf. “Pleased to meet you, Ronnie Goodbody.”

Ronnie nodded but didn’t say anything.

“The question isn’t who you are but what you are,” Mitch interjected sharply. “What are you? Some kind of ghost?”

“There’s no such thing as ghosts,” Jimmy replied. “He’s a ...”

“No, let Criminey tell them,” Tammy interrupted.

“I am a sprite,” Criminey announced proudly, after a brief pause, “a creature of great power from the Faerie Realm.”

“So there are no ghosts but there are faeries,” Mitch said skeptically. “And you’re a faery.”

“So what kind of power?” Peter interjected before anyone could reply.

Criminey de-solidified, changed into a gardener uniform holding a bouquet of flowers in his right hand, and then re-solidified and handed the flowers to Peter.

“Neat trick,” Mitch said, “but ...”

“It’s true,” Estella’s interjected, beaming, “you’re back!”

Everyone turned and looked at her, but Estella’s eyes were fixed on Criminey.

“I was sent to find out if it was true, and to protect you,” Estella continued, “from Faraway.”

“And where exactly is Faraway?” Tammy asked suspiciously.

"It's my home," Estella replied, a little puzzled by the question.

"Is Faraway in the Faerie Realm?" Ronnie asked, in a moment of insight.

Estella nodded, as if it was obvious.

"And so you're a Faerie?" Ronnie asked.

"A sylph," she replied, nodding.

"Wait a minute!" Jimmy said sharply. "What does Criminey need protecting from now that the SAU are gone?"

They all looked at Estella expectantly.

"Those people with the dark glasses?" Estella replied. "They were nothing, pawns. The real danger is the Forces of Darkness."

They all shuddered involuntarily at the name. And Jimmy thought, just for a moment, that everything got darker.

Chapter 8: Saturday, yea or nay

Jimmy and Criminey lingered around the breakfast table, waiting for Ms. Chicklets to go to her yoga class so they could interrogate Mr. Bolger. If he noticed he gave no sign. He just sat there sipping his coffee and reading his newspaper.

“Dennis,” Ms. Chicklets said as she was getting ready to leave, “make sure Jimmy doesn’t spend the whole morning on his tablet.”

“Yes dear,” Mr. Bolger replied absently, “I’ll get Jimmy a bowl of orange crackers.”

Ms. Chicklets just shook her head and left. When they were sure she was gone, Jimmy and Criminey sat back down at the table across from Mr. Bolger.

“Dad,” Jimmy said, “Dad.”

Mr. Bolger put down his newspaper.

“Yes, Jimmy,” he replied, “what can I do for you?”

Jimmy had so many questions that, now that he had his father’s attention, he didn’t know where to start.

“So Estella’s a faerie too,” Criminey said, breaking the silence.

“Yes,” Mr. Bolger replied, “she’s a sylph. I have to admit I was quite concerned when I first saw her, but she’s on our side.”

“What’s a sylph?” Jimmy asked. “And how do you know she’s on our side?”

“A sylph is a magic using faerie,” Mr. Bolger replied, “with the ability to influence people’s minds.”

“Is that why no one could remember me,” Criminey asked, “after seeing me on the bus?”

“She probably cast some kind of confusion spell,” Mr. Bolger replied, nodding.

“But how can we know she’s really on our side?” Jimmy asked.

“While I was in Faraway on Wednesday night,” Mr. Bolger began.

“You were in the Faerie Realm!” Jimmy interrupted.

“Yes,” Mr. Bolger replied. “Faraway, lovely town. But while I was there trying to find out what had happened to Mr. Grubb, I got in touch with my contacts and they gave me assurances: she’s here to help.”

“But what do we need help with? Aren’t we safe,” Criminey asked, “now that the SAU is gone?”

“And what are the Forces of Darkness?” Jimmy added.

Mr. Bolger’s face turned grave.

“The Forces of Darkness are the Dark Elves and their allies who rule the Faerie Realm, and have ruled it since the last sprite disappeared,” Mr. Bolger replied. “And the last thing they want is for there to be a sprite that they can’t control.”

“But they’re in the Faerie Realm,” Jimmy objected. “Aren’t we safe here?”

“They can get to us through our dreams,” Mr. Bolger replied, before picking up his newspaper and starting to read again.

Jimmy and Criminey looked at each other in shock, expressions that were starting to become old news.