

# Untitled

A Short Story by the Geek

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## Chapter ONE

"Dad, have you seen my bike horn?"

The question echoed down the bare hallway. At one end stood Corey Townley, in mid-step with a large box of books. At the other end stood his ten year old daughter, Anna.

"Your bicycle is in the garage in the box marked 'Anna's bicycle'", Corey said, as he set down the box of paperback books. "Remember, you wanted to make sure it didn't get lost, so you put your name on it with all the magic markers in the set."

"But my bike horn isn't in there with it," Anna said with a hint of frustration. "And how am I supposed to ride my bike with no bike horn?"

Corey shrugged, and smiled. He had no answer that would make this right for Anna, short of pulling the missing bicycle horn from behind her ear. He would have to help somehow. "Tell you what, if you help me move two more boxes inside the house, we can start looking for the missing horn in them."

"First thing, Daddy?" Anna asked, her face filling with hope.

"First thing," Corey assured her, and then Anna was gone, a shrieking blur headed straight for the garage. "Be careful," he called after her, shaking his head at the futility of it all. He sighed, and set the box on a nearby countertop.

Anna peered around the garage. She had already found her bicycle, neatly stashed near the garage door. The moving people from Monroe Moving had been extra careful with it, they had assured her. "That bike horn better be out here," she said defiantly. "And I'm going to find it."

Another voice popped up beside her. "But what if it's not here? Maybe one of the moving boxes ate it..."

Anna pivoted, and was face to face with Joey the Troll. She sighed. "Joey, the moving boxes won't eat a bike horn. Don't be silly, even I know that." Joey didn't look convinced.

"Do you know the natural diet of moving boxes? Animal Planet said last night that they can eat their own body weight three times a day, easy in the wild. And these are in captivity..." Anna nodded, wide-eyed.

Corey leaned up against the countertop, sighed again, and opened the box of books. "Well, it's not just a box of books," he said to himself, and picked up the first book. "Watership Down."

Corey's eyes grew misty. "Honey, these were your books...and I just can't let them go." His shoulders drooped at the sentiment. "Not right now." Corey pulled out paperback versions of classics, and his hands felt heavier with each tome stacked on the counter. He let out a ragged breath at the treasure at the bottom of the box. Corey set an eight by ten photo frame upright on the counter corner; a framed portrait of himself, Anna, and an elegantly beautiful lady, whom Anna looked to be a spitting image of.

"Jenny, you would be so proud of your daughter," Corey said, eyes trailing to the floor. "I'm so sorry that you're not here to watch her grow, and live, and love." His brow furrowed, and the misty eyes vanished. "And I'd like to believe that some part of you is sorry too." He gingerly pressed the memory to his chest, and set the frame back down again. The sadness returned. "I miss you."

Corey set another large box on the counter near the books, and sliced through the packing tape to uncover the hidden contents. He looked up in surprise as the words, "Daddy, Daddy, Daddy," echoed down the hallway. Anna sped through the hallway, a small box in hand, and barely made the turn into the kitchen area without hitting the entryway wall. The box slipped out of her outstretched hands, and, to Corey's astonishment, launched itself right into the photo frame on the counter corner.

Anna screeched to a startled halt as Corey dove for the photo. A millimeter out of reach, it bounced off the tile floor. Corey knelt beside the now crunched frame. A crack ran up the length of the glass, drawing a cruel division between Jenny and Corey. Corey picked himself up off the floor, and, frame in hand, gingerly traced the cracked glass.

"Daddy?" Anna asked in a small voice. Corey took in a deep breath, though he was sure that a vein was pulsating on his forehead. "Daddy, I was just going to show you..."

Corey interrupted, in an overly controlled tone. "Anna, why don't you go outside and play?"

Anna's lip quivered. "But I..." she started.

Corey set the frame down, and knelt beside Anna. His voice softened. "You've been having to be a big girl, and help me out with all this moving stuff. Sometimes you help me out with so much work around the house, I forget that you're ten. Why don't you go out and ride your bike? We'll find your bike horn later, but you need to get out and burn off some energy. Stay on the cul-de-sac, and wear your helmet, ok?"

Anna shook her head slowly in agreement, and walked back to the garage. Corey watched her walk through the entryway to the garage, and turned back to the photo. "I never know if I get it quite right," he said softly, tracing the crack up to Jenny's face. "You always knew what to say with her." Corey took in a ragged breath, and set the broken frame back on its corner perch. "Hon, why did you leave us?"

Anna rolled her bicycle gently out of the moving box. The nice people from Monroe Moving

company had put it in a big box that had the opening on the side, so she could roll it out on her own. "My very own big girl bike," Anna beamed. She carefully adjusted the crinkly pink tassels on the handlebars, and snapped on her blue bicycle helmet. She hesitated slightly beside the bicycle, glancing back at the garage door to the house. Biting her bottom lip, her expression switched from dejected to determined, and she swung herself up on the bicycle seat.

"Hey, a little help here?" Joey outstretched his hands, reaching for the sky. Anna giggled, and swung the little troll up onto the handlebars. Smiling, she pedaled for the opening of the garage. "Here we go!"

Her eyes adjusted to the bright sunlight, and Anna let out a laugh of delight. Wind from the speed of the bicycle danced through her ponytail; Anna looked up into the clouds and smiled. "What should we do first, Joey?"

The troll looked up at her, face beaming, and replied, "Whatever we want! The world is our oyster!"

Anna screeched the bicycle to a halt, and wrinkled her nose. "Ewww, oysters," she said, making a face. Joey crossed his arms, and sighed.

"Ok, fine," he shrugged. "The world is our...pizza?" Anna giggled, and took off on the bicycle once more.

The wind of riding the bicycle on a new street was exciting. Both her and Joey were having a great time. After a few laps, Anna noticed something weird and it was Joey who said something first. "What is that?" the troll asked, as they look at the house across the

street. It was scary. There looked to be an old man out front, sitting alone and grumpy on a bench swing.

"I don't know, Joey. It's a scary house. Let's get past it quickly!"

Anna pedaled and pedaled, but she couldn't get enough speed to get past the scary house as quickly as she would have liked. The old man that had been staring at them stared at her while she rode her bike continued to stare. Each puff from his pipe made him seem like a fire-breathing dragon.

"Anna Anna Bobanna", Joey the Troll said, jumping up and down on the handlebar. "We better turn around and go the other way! That man is scary!"

"I know," she said. "He looks like a dragon with all that smoke. Let's get out of here. Hold on, Joey!"

Anna hit the brakes on her bike as Joey the Troll hung on for dear life. She skidded to a stop and began to turn her bike around when she heard the voice of the old man. It was raspy and deep. And scary.

"Oh no," Anna said. "Joey, I stopped right in front of his house."

"Run, Anna!"

"I can't, I'm too afraid."

"Well get over yourself, Anna Banana! He's cu-razy!"

Anna knew Joey the Troll was right. She knew she should turn and run, but something was holding her in place. Her legs felt like lead weights, but she was afraid of what the old man would do if she couldn't move.

The old man swatted the smoke away from his face like it was a swarm of flies and said, "Who you talkin' too, lil' girl?" He didn't see Joey? He must be a grown-up then. And grown-up strangers were not to be talked to without permission.

The man asked his question again, and she squeaked in response but didn't say anything. Joey sighed and tried to push her into motion, but being imaginary he had no real effect.

"I see you and your dad are just moving in," he called from his seat on the porch. He was swinging his body gently in a wooden bench swing. It creaked with age as it moved. The thing looked to be as old as the man sitting on it. He clenched a beat-up corncob pipe in his mouth and the swarm of smoke around him was constant.

Anna didn't reply. She couldn't reply. Her imaginary friend, Joey the Troll, forbade her from replying. This old man was Trouble with a capital "T".

"Why don't you come up here and rest a bit, lil' girl? Let me introduce myself" He asked.

"No no no no no," Joey the Troll yelled, sticking his tongue out at the old man. Then he turned around, pulled down his pants, and mooned the old man, slapping it and yelling obscenities. This made Anna laugh. She couldn't help herself.

"What's so funny?" The old man laughed. "Say, is there someone else there with you?"

She gasped in horror. He knows about Joey! She thought.

The old man laughed. "It's alright, lil' girl. I've had me a friend like that once too,

when I was about your age. His name was Bobby and he helped me get into a lot of trouble. We had lots of adventures. What's your friend's name?"

"Joey the Troll", she said before she could stop herself. Joey screamed in frustration and jumped off the handlebars. He sat in the middle of the street, pouting that he had been outed.

"That's a good name," the old man said. "My name is Immanuel Bartlett. I've lived in this house for forty years now. What's your name?"

She paused and looked at Joey, who was still in the street pouting. He didn't object, and the scary Mr. Bartlett didn't seem as scary as before, so she replied, "Anna."

"Well met, Anna who lives across the street," he said. The old man put his pipe down, got up off his bench swing with a loud grunt and audible bone cracks, and slowly started walking toward Anna.

This had Joey furious. He ran in front of Anna and struck a protective pose. "Anna!" He said. "He's going to chop you up into little pieces and eat you! I told you not to talk to him! I told you to run away!"

Mr. Bartlett made his way to the sidewalk with a pronounced limp and sat down on the curb next to the girl. He didn't even as much as look up at her as he reached into his pocket and pulled out a piece of candy.

"Would you like a Werther's?" He offered.

She shook her head. Anna knew better than to take candy from strangers. Especially strangers that were going to chop her up.

The old man shrugged and popped the candy into his mouth, sucking on it with a smile. He

sat there, sucking on his candy and not saying a word. This had Anna worried.

After a minute of silence, Anna couldn't take it anymore. "Mr. Bartlett?" she asked.

"Yeah?"

"Are you going to chop me up and eat me?"

Mr. Bartlett gasped and almost choked on his candy. After he recovered he laughed. "What gives you that idea?"

"Joey the Troll said you would."

"I don't chop up lil' girls, Anna. You can tell Joey that. Truth be told, lil' girls are too tough an' stringy."

Anna laughed at that and felt a little calmer knowing he was joking.

"I've seen you now, Anna, and I've seen your father unpacking boxes left from the movers. Is it just you two?"

Anna nodded. "My mommy died."

"Oh," Mr. Bartlett said. "I'm so sorry to hear that. I know how that feels though."

"Did you lose your mommy too?"

Mr. Bartlett nodded. "Yes, but she was old and sick. The Lord was good to take her when He did. I also lost my wife, to cancer. But that was a long time ago."

Anna looked at the old man, and he didn't seem like such a monster. Gone was the dragon mane of smoke, and the ferocity in his eyes softened as he recalled the women in his life. He looked sad and lonely.

"Are you lonely, Mr. Bartlett?"

Mr. Bartlett was taken aback by the question and considered it for a minute. "Anna, I've had lots of joy in my life. There are times when I certainly feel lonely, but for the most part I'm

at peace. I spend my time now in my workshop carving wood and remembering those times.

"Remember, child, that when things seem the most difficult for you, you can always reflect on the good memories of your mother and treasure the time you had to spend with her."

"My mommy got sick, too," Anna said suddenly. "I guess she was sick for a while. She was always sad and sleeping."

"Poor child," Mr. Bartlett said. "I tell you what. Anytime you feel sad and need a friend, feel free to come over and I'll tell you stories. You can even help me with my woodworking, if you'd like."

Anna smiled and nodded. "Do you have lots of stories? Do they involve princes and fairies?"

Mr. Bartlett laughed a heavy laugh. "No, child, no princes are in my stories. But they do involve great adventures of my time in the war, back when I was an archaeologist exploring Egypt, or how my wife and I met. I promise they will be interesting."

Anna looked at him sideways. "If you say so, Mr. Bartlett. But sure, it sounds fun. Say, can I have one of those candies now?"

Mr. Bartlett laughed and was reaching into his pocket for another candy when Anna's dad hurriedly walk across the street.

"Anna, what are you doing here? I thought you were riding your bike." Corey said with more than a touch of annoyance in his voice.

"I was, daddy. But I nearly wrecked and I started talking to Mr. Bartlett."

"Honey, come home and leave the poor man alone." He pulled his daughter to him and gave Mr. Bartlett a long look.

"Howdy, neighbor," Mr. Bartlett said with a smile. "You've got a lovely daughter."

"Thanks," he said. "But we've got a lot of unpacking to do. Come on, Anna, let's get to work."

As her father led her back across the street, Anna turned to Mr. Bartlett, giving him a smile and waving. Mr. Bartlett winked and waved back. Corey stopped suddenly, jarring Anna. "Sir," he called out across the street to Mr. Bartlett. "I'd kindly appreciate it if you'd leave me and my daughter alone."

Mr. Bartlett went silent and got up to go back to his porch with an angry look on his face.

To Joey, Anna quietly said, "He's not such a bad man after all, Joey. I don't think he'd chop up and eat anyone!"

"Then why is your daddy so nervous around him?"

Anna thought about that, but didn't have an answer. Maybe her daddy was just shy around new people. Or maybe her daddy was right and Mr. Bartlett was evil. Adults could be tricky. She'd have to be careful around the old man, just to be safe.

## Chapter Two

Corey and Anna had been living in their new house for a few weeks now, and things were finally starting to approach a sense of normality. The new job at the paper was thankless, but it was work, and Anna was healthy. She was still talking to that imaginary friend of hers, but figured that would stop once school started in the fall.

For now, he worked on editing an article for work. But the silence was too much. Jenny was gone, and she wasn't coming back. And where was Anna? He hadn't heard the sound of her riding her bike in a while.

Corey pushed the curtain to the living room back and glanced outside, looking for Anna as she rode around and around the cul-de-sac. When she didn't appear to his left, as he expected, he craned his neck to the right, searching the

street for his wild daughter. He frowned when he didn't see her. Telling himself she was probably just talking to some neighbor down the street, he went to the front door and stepped out on the large wrap around porch.

The first thing he noticed was the absence of Mr. Bartlett, the hermit who lived across the street and was always on his front porch reading. The next thing he noticed was Anna's bike, dumped in an unceremonious heap just to the left of Mr. Bartlett's property. And finally, as his heart beat began to pick up speed, he realized, Anna was not anywhere near her bike. In fact, she wasn't anywhere that he could see.

Ignoring the fact that he was barefoot, Corey steamed down the steps two at a time and headed for Mr. Bartlett's house. As he neared the sidewalk, the neighbor to his left called his name. Corey turned to see Mrs. Watkins watering her prized rose bushes. He groaned internally. She was a notorious busybody who had nothing better to do than spread gossip among the neighbors. Attempting to smile and failing, he greeted his neighbor. "Good evening, Mrs. Watkins. I'd love to chat, but -"

"I saw your little girl talking to that weird old man across the street," she said, not missing a beat. She stepped closer to the small fence that separated their property and splashed water from her hose across some rose bushes. Corey closed his mouth and swallowed.

"Did she go in the house with him?"

She shrugged, as though it matter not to her. "Not sure I can say. But they were

talking on his porch just as sure as I'm standing here."

"How long ago?" he asked, trying to control the impatience he felt building like a steam engine.

She tipped her head to the side, thinking. "Hm. Let me think. Oh, I'd say about thirty minutes ago, maybe. An hour. No more than that, I'm sure. Say, I've been meaning to ask, why aren't you married? You're a handsome enough man."

Corey felt his heart tighten at the thought of Jenny, felt a surge of anger flare up at the old woman and he had to turn away, muttering "I was, once, and thank you," his fist balled at his sides. He moved away from Mrs. Watkins and hurried across the street, the sight of his daughter's bike reminding him of the more immediate need. Heedless of the bruising pebbles and street debris littering the road, he crossed to Mr. Bartlett's house. His fist swiped through air as the door suddenly opened and he found himself face to face with the old man.

It was unclear who was more startled, Corey at having nothing to pound his surging fear out on or Mr. Bartlett, who was so unused to having people invade his space. They stared at each other a moment and then Mr. Bartlett cleared his throat. With a raspiness caused by years of disuse, he asked, "Yes?"

Corey recovered slightly and nodded over his shoulder to his daughter's bike. "That's my daughter's bike," he stated.

The man raised an eyebrow and nodded in agreement, a barely noticeable shrug lifting his left shoulder. "So it would appear."

"Any idea why it's lying in a heap in front of your house?"

Mr. Bartlett seemed to ponder the idea for several agonizing moments. Then he shook his head slowly. "No, can't say as I have any ideas on that subject."

Corey breathed through his nose, trying to keep calm. He swallowed. "Mrs. Watkins said she saw you talking to Anna earlier."

He glanced across the street at the neighbor in question and snorted derisively. "She says a great many things, our Mrs. Watkins does."

"Is she telling the truth?"

Mr. Bartlett's head tipped slightly to the right and he nodded. "In this case she is. I spoke with your little girl earlier this evening."

"Where is she now?" Corey demanded, fighting to keep his voice under control and failing. He could feel Mrs. Watkins' greedy eyes boring into his back and he shrugged under her gaze.

"Now how would I know something like that?" Mr. Bartlett demanded, his voice gaining a rounded timber edged with irritation.

"You just admitted you were the last one to see her."

"I admitted nothing of the kind and I take offense to your insinuation."

"Insinuation? If you've done anything to her . . ."

Mr. Bartlett's eyebrows drew together and he stepped out onto his porch, letting the door bang closed behind him. "Now look here, sir. I

said I spoke with your little girl. I did not say I abducted her. I do not know where she is and I would take it kindly if you would leave my property now."

Corey, unable to control the terror washing through him, stepped closer, his face inches from Mr. Bartlett. "Where is she?"

"I have asked you to leave."

"I'm not going anywhere until you tell me where she is."

Mr. Bartlett put a hand on Corey's shoulder and with a gentle push, putting some distance between himself and Corey. Corey reacted like a coiled snake, his fist striking out of its own accord to plow into Mr. Bartlett's face. The old man staggered backwards into the door and raised his hand to his jaw, rubbing it in surprise.

Pain shot up his arm at the impact and he backed up a step as well. "I'm calling the cops, old man. If you've done anything to hurt her, I'll kill you myself."

Mr. Bartlett watched Corey back off his porch and turn to his own house. As he looked from the father to the daughter's bike, he called out, "Mr. Townley. Wait. I don't have your little girl. But I think I know where she might have gone."

Corey turned slowly, his fists clenched. "Why would you know where she is?" he demanded.

"I loaned a book to that little girl and I think it might have put an idea in her head."

Narrowing his eyes, Corey took a step towards Mr. Bartlett. "A book?"

"I'm not doing it Joey!" Even as Anna said it, she made a liar out of herself and inched her bike closer to the old house. Although the sun-dried man smoking, reading, and rocking on the porch hadn't looked up, she knew he must be watching her now. The fear pushed her feet to peddle faster and faster. She held her breath as she passed beneath him on the huge porch, braced for the yelling from above.

It never came.

As she peddled on, she warmed to Joey's plan. "You're right Joey. He can't just watch all the neighbors and never talk to us. He hasn't talked to us since the day we moved in! It's rude for him to ignore us like that. I mean, I'm a girl and you're a Troll. We deserve respect."

Anna rounded the end of the cul-de-sac for the fourth time. She stood up to really pump her legs. The bike gained speed and her bravery soared. She was ready.

Her stomach only soured a little as she leaned into the turn in front of the wide, dark house. She could do it! She pumped harder, her legs beginning to burn.

She was within one house of the still reading man when she slammed on the brakes as hard as she could. She almost lost control of the bike as the front tire slipped on the gravel, but she recovered and coasted to a stop just beneath the old man. She swung a leg over the bars in one graceful motion and hit the ground running.

"We did it, Joey the Troll, now he has to talk to us about the bike!" She made it almost three long steps before her shoe betrayed her

and she took a spill on the concrete. The flesh on her knee tore as easily as the pants that failed to protect it and her lower lip split with eye stinging pain that brought instant tears.

She laid there knowing she must die. It was the mean old man's doing. He had tricked her and he would reach her at any second. Her heart threatened to beat right out of her chest as panic froze her in place.

The man didn't come.

Feeling tricked again, she struggled to turn and push up into a half sitting position. She examined her knee. It looked bad, with tiny stones stuck to the raw pink and red flesh.

She drug herself to her feet, determined not to cry in front of the evil man but needing to wipe the tears from both eyes several times just the same. Anna started to limp home.

"You won't miss that bike?"

Having nearly forgotten what his voice sounded like, she had to look around to identify the speaker. She was looking him straight in the eye before she realized it could only be Mr. Bartlett. She didn't have time to be shocked before she further realized that he was on his feet and leaning over the rail.

"Why don't you come have a seat up here and rest that knee a little?" She wasn't that stupid to let him capture her so easily. She did need to sit down though, just until the pain quit shooting through her leg. He couldn't do anything to her out here in the open, with her bike so close. She had all but reached the chair, with some generous help up the porch

stairs, as this argument came to a close in her head.

"Wait here and I'll grab something for your cuts." Anna collapsed into the chair as the smoke-smelling old man ducked into the house for a moment. She didn't look at him when he returned, afraid he would mistake her tears for crying. She just stared at his books.

"Like to read, do ya child?" She didn't answer him. She wasn't about to give anything away to him. "Well, you would like that book. It's about a bunch of tree climbing friends who reach a city in the sky after climbing these magnificent trees. You wouldn't know how great it feels to be up in those high branches with the sorry excuse for trees we have around here, but you can almost feel the sky city when you're up there. We had a great Mimosa in the yard where I grew up, like those huge trees you've probably seen on the far side of that park behind my house here."

Anna had been an idiot. He could tell he had caught her in his story now that she was just staring dumbly ahead, enraptured. He used her moment of weakness to strike, with that cloth full of burning white fizzy stuff grown-ups think heals all wounds. Her knee sizzled and the tears returned to her eyes. She pulled her lips tight to avoid crying and he used that as a chance to dab the cut there too. Now she knew he was clever and evil.

"There. That should feel better in no time. Why don't I grab you a drink and a nibble from inside? Give me one more second."

As he disappeared into the house a second time, Anna and Joey the Troll had the same idea

for the perfect revenge. He may have tricked her, but they would get even. "Oh yes, Joey, we're taking the book!"

She was sprawled under a large oak tree, face down, covered in twigs and leaves. The book the little girl had taken from him was a few feet away, the pages fluttering gently in the breeze. "There she is," Immanuel Bartlett said, pointing. The girl's father broke into a run and crossed the smooth expanse of the park lawn, dropping to his knees at the girl's side. Immanuel felt his heart twist as he watched tears stream unnoticed down his face. The man reached to take his daughter in his arms, but the medic in him told Immanuel not to move her. Not just yet.

"Wait!" he called, picking up his step as much as the pain in his hip joints would allow. He hobbled across the grass and knelt down beside the girl's father. The man looked up, his broken soul reflected in his face. The man's heart twisted in sorrow for his new friend and his wild daughter. For the second time that night, Immanuel placed a gentle hand on Corey's shoulder. "Wait," he said softly.

The arthritis in his hands slowed him down, but they remembered. Carefully, he ran his hands down her back, her limbs, probing softly. She was warm, her chest rising in shallow breaths. She was too thin under her crumpled clothing. Ever so gently he examined her. Finally, he nodded to Corey and the man rolled the girl into his arms. She stirred and her eyes fluttered open.

"Daddy?" she mumbled, her thin arms coming up around his neck. He held her close, her face burrowed into his neck, his face wet with tears. Tears for the daughter he held. Tears for the wife he had lost.

"She'll be okay, Mr. Townley. She just had the wind knocked out of her." He turned his attention to the girl who was staring at him. "You looked like someone fallen straight out of the sky city," he said to her and she managed a weak smile.

"Joey thought we should go visit the sky people," she mumbled. "I'm sorry I took your book."

He smiled at her. "You can keep it if you promise to visit the sky people only in your mind."

She nodded solemnly and together the three rose, turning back towards home.

## Chapter Three

Anna whistled to herself as she spooned refrigerated cookie dough onto a cookie sheet. "Peanut butter," she said to Joey. "I bet that's his favorite!" Anna smiled to herself as she stuck the sheet in the oven and started an egg timer.

"You should put a bug in one of 'em." Joey giggled. Anna put her hands on her hips, wagged a finger at her best friend and shook her head with a chuckle.

With the cookies still warm, Anna grabbed her wool coat and headed out the front door to meet Mr. Bartlett, looking forward to hearing about another adventure. She was glad her daddy was finally letting her talk to the old man, and doubly glad that Mr. Bartlett wasn't ignoring her anymore.

As she stepped off the curb to cross the street, Anna noticed a small gathering on Mr. Bartlett's creaky porch. Anna saw a group of about five neighbors, the most noticeable being Mrs. Watkins, the town drama queen, wailing at the top of her lungs like a tea kettle left on the stove too long. One in the group saw Anna approach and motioned for the group to stop talking. Never one to back down, Anna took a deep breath and climbed the porch steps to meet the group face-to-face.

"What are you all doing here?" Anna asked with concern in her voice. The group of five all looked at each other, as if trying to decide what to reveal to a little girl. Mrs. Watkins had no qualms, however.

"Mr. Bartlett is missing!" She exclaimed. Anna looked skeptical. "Oh honey! It doesn't look good!" Mrs. Watkins grabbed Anna and pulled the girl into her chest. The cookies almost crashed to the ground as Anna was smothered in Mrs. Watkins' huge chest.

"What does that mean?" she asked as she squirmed to free herself from her the clutches of her cushiony prison.

"The police just left here. They said there were signs of a struggle in the house and Mr. Bartlett is no where to be found." Mrs. Watkins explained as she fanned her face with her jewelry-covered hand as if about to faint.

"The police said they had some leads to check on, we don't know anything yet." Reverend Charles explained, trying to defuse the situation.

Anna and Joey shared a silent look and both knew it was time for them to do their own investigation. They broke for the house and ran inside. Anna dropped the cookies on the kitchen table with a clank and ran upstairs to find Joey already digging out their detective gear from the box on the bottom shelf in the closet. The pair emerged from Anna's bedroom several minutes later with a magnifying glass and a backpack filled with all of their best investigative tools. "Okay, Joey" Anna whispered to the Troll, "Where to first?"

"What are you up to?" a deep voice came from behind Anna.

"Hey, Daddy" Anna smiled sweetly. "Me and Joey are just doing some..." she paused, debating how much to reveal of their "detective work". He sighed, nodded, and patted her on the head

"It's okay, you and Joey have fun." He walked past her down the hall before turning around to add, "and be careful" to which Anna nodded vigorously. The pair stepped out onto the porch of the Townley house. They nonchalantly watched the group on Mr. Bartlett's porch disperse, pretending to pick lint off of their clothes. Once the coast was clear, they quickly crossed the street to go through Mr. Bartlett's side gate to access the backyard.

The first thing Anna noticed is Mr. Bartlett's 1984 white Lincoln Towncar. Anna opened her backpack and pulled out a small notebook. She scribbled "Car still here".

Joey walked over and touched the hood. "Cold" he observed.

Anna walked over to the bedroom window and cupped her hands over her face to look inside.

Again, she whipped out the notebook and wrote, "Messy bedroom, clothes on the floor".

Next she went to the kitchen window and peered inside. She gasped when she saw a dining room chair toppled.

"Chair tipped over" she wrote. "This doesn't look good, Joey."

Anna shook her head in despair. "Joey?" she looked around for her friend.

"Look at this!" Joey exclaimed from inside the garage. Anna dashed over to see.

"Oh my Gosh!" Anna stared at the discovery with wonder and the pair looked at each other knowingly, neither wanting to admit they had no idea what this discovery meant.

Joey held up an old dusty picture frame. Inside the frame was a well-preserved newspaper clipping with the headline, "Archaeologist Retires after Monumental Find". Under the headline was a picture of a young, tan Mr. Bartlett, wearing khaki cargo pants and a floppy straw hat. He had a proud grin and a pencil thin mustache. He was posing next to a giant, shiny sarcophagus.

Anna read on, "It says here that the tomb of the mummy is rumored to be cursed. Are you thinking what I am thinking?"

"I think so, the mummy finally caught up to old Mr. Bartlett and got his revenge" Joey explained.

"Exactly!" Anna agreed excitedly about their discovery. They paused and looked at each other. They glanced around the dimly lit, dusty garage behind them and both wondered if the mummy was still around. A cold chill crept up Anna's

back and they both felt the hair on their necks and forearms stand up.

"Let's get out of here!" they both exclaimed simultaneously as their wide eyes met. They placed the clipping gently back in the box and hurried to their feet and out the door back to the safety of Anna's bedroom.

Joey laid on Anna's bed on his stomach with his feet in the air as Anna paced the room. "What do we do?" she kept asking Joey.

"We need to tell somebody." he pleaded.

"But who? No one will believe us. You know how adults are. They don't believe in scary things like mummies."

"Which is crazy!"

"I know"

"They exist!"

"I know."

"We just saw a picture of one!"

"I know!"

"So what are we going to do?" Joey returned the question.

"We've got to get proof. Lets go back over there and get that photo so we can prove to my dad that the mummy is real." Anna explained her plan.

"But that is back in Mr. Bartlett's garage, and it is getting dark out there." Joey's voice trembled.

"I don't want to go either but it is the only way we can prove what happened to Mr. Bartlett."

Reluctantly Joey agreed to go but only under the stipulation that they stop by the kitchen for a courage cookie on the way.

With cookies in hand and a consensus that a little extra courage from a cookie couldn't hurt, they stepped out the front door and headed across the street. As they crossed, the lamppost came on with a small pop and then a buzz as it warmed up. Both took a deep gulp. They realized how dark it was getting and how the light over their heads made Mr. Bartlett's home look even darker and scarier. Together they each took a big bite of cookie and took a few more steps to climb the curb into the dark yard.

Anna pulled a flashlight out of her detective bag and the pair opened the door to the garage with a loud creak. "Shh" they both hissed at each other. Anna tiptoed back to the corner where they left the picture frame and shined the light around looking for it. Before Anna could reach for the evidence, they heard a rustle outside. The youngsters froze and Anna tried to hide the flashlight under her coat.

"Who's there?" a familiar voice called out. "I'm callin' the cops!" Anna is so relieved she shrieks.

"Oh my Gosh! You're alive! You're alive" and she ran full speed out of the garage and hugged Mr. Bartlett around the waist. The old man looked confused and gently patted Anna on the head and tried to back away from her.

"Where were you? Did the mummy try and get you?" She looked up at him begging for a tale of adventure. He pondered his response, then slowly answered.

"In a way, child. In a way." He smirked to himself. This little girl sure has an imagination! "Come inside and I'll tell you about it."

Anna bounded ahead of the old man and sat herself at the kitchen table, placing the newspaper clipping in front of her, patiently waiting for what is sure to be the best adventure story yet.

"Mrs. Watkins thinks you're dead." she said matter of factly. Mr. Bartlett chuckled again

"She does, does she? Maybe I'll let her think that for a little while longer." He sat at the table to be on Anna's level. He pointed at the picture on the table.

"This pyramid was my life's work, my greatest adventure. I spent thirty years of my life excavating this pyramid, looking, searching for the tomb of Ankhesenamun. Many scholars said she didn't exist, but I knew"

Mr. Bartlett stared at the photo longingly. "Before retiring to my woodworking, and before I was married to my beautiful wife, I studied history and lore, looking for the fabled queen. As we excavated the pyramid, 10 years passed, then 15 and 20. My crew lost hope, but I never did. I kept searching, feeling her presence was close." He wiped his brow as if the Egyptian Summer sun were beating down on him this very second.

"As you can see, we found her" his grin matched the one in the picture. Anna could see the pride on his face.

"After we found her, I retired. I knew I couldn't spend another 30 years looking for another mummy or chamber." He went to the fridge and poured himself a glass of iced tea. "My protégé took over the dig, and it's been going on for 13 years without me."

A hint of sadness quickly disappeared from his face "Until two days ago. My protégé called me to announce the discovery of another burial chamber! Another find of a lifetime!" He took a big gulp of tea.

"So, I booked a plane ticket, called a cab and rushed out to the airport. I know I left this place in shambles, but I was too excited to concern myself." He stood and started talking with his hands. "They waited for me to arrive before opening the new chamber. There is nothing like the smell of thousand-year-old air." He took a deep breath and Anna held her breath waiting to hear "We found the tomb of Prince Zanannza!" Mr. Bartlett claps his hands together excitedly! " We found the royal couple! Isn't that wonderful?"

Anna smiled a sleepy smile. "That's great Mr. Bartlett. Another exciting adventure!" He watched her eyelids grow heavier with each word. Even though it was against his nature, he scooped up the little girl and carried the sleeping child home.

He rang the bell and waited for Corey Townley to answer the door. The father looked at the sleeping girl in the old man's arms.

"There she is! I should have known she was with you."

"She was apparently investigating my murder," the old man laughed with a cough."

"I see. I don't know what it is about you, Mr. Bartlett, but Anna seems to hold you in high regard. And you've been nothing but good to her. I apologize for how I treated you before, and I hope she wasn't any trouble to you." Corey said. Mr. Bartlett gave only a scowl and a groan as he

bundled up and headed back home. Once his back was turned, a proud grin spread across his face.