

The Reluctant Spy

By

by Lois June Wickstrom

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Chapter One – A Rat in the Bedroom

Scritch-scratch. Skitter. Scrunch. There it was again. Something was digging under his bed. Timmy grabbed the cool metal flashlight from under his pillow, leaned over the edge of his bed and clicked the switch with his thumb.

Something moved against the wall. An indignant squeak. Timmy did his best to hold the flashlight still. Two small beady black eyes shone back at him. A hairless tail twitched. And little pink paws pulled back against a furry white chest.

It was a rat. A seven-inch long rat, with a dark brown head and neck. It looked like a hooded little bandit.

Timmy played his flashlight beam over it. The rat sat, unmoving, unafraid in front of a freshly chewed hole in his pale green wall. Now he knew what caused the scritch-scratch sound – and he didn't like it.

The rat's eyes sparkled. The haughty expression on its face seemed to say, "What are *you* doing under *my* bed?" The flashlight beam revealed translucent pink ears and long white whiskers. He could see now that the rat's dark hood was its own natural fur.

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Grandma would be horrified if she knew a rat had invaded her meticulously clean house. There must be a trap in the garage. Timmy sat up and started to burrow his feet into his slippers. He thought with satisfaction: if he caught the rat, he could put its dead body in the outside trash can before Grandma ever saw it.

His flashlight illuminated the poster on the back of his door: There was his hero: Michael Johnson, world famous sprinter, breaking through the victory ribbon. Seeing that picture reminded him – he still hadn't decided if he wanted to try out for the track team tomorrow!

Timmy was a thin boy with wiry muscles, olive skin, and jet black hair. Coach Sweet said he had the perfect build for a sprinter, just like Michael Johnson.

Footsteps came padding down the hallway. Timmy felt his toes curl up as he listened. They always curled up when he was nervous or worried. This habit tended to wear holes in to tops of his shoes – even his slippers.

The door to his room creaked open. Michael Johnson's picture swung away. He aimed his flashlight at the intruder. There stood Grandma wearing her orange and pink peony-print nightdress.

The rat squeaked, again. There was no hiding it from her now. Grandma stared at Timmy and spoke gruffly. "You must be the fastest flashlight in the East. Please lower your beam."

Timmy pointed his flashlight down at Grandma's furry pink slippers. They sparkled against his red linoleum floor. "Sorry, Grandma. I wasn't expecting you."

"You've got good reflexes!" Grandma praised him. "*Startle the invader*, I always say. How did you get your flashlight on so fast? I didn't even hear it click"

"I heard a noise under my bed." Timmy paused. "Grandma, we've got a rat." He braced himself for what she might say.

Grandma smiled. "You found Hildegarde! I'm so relieved! I just bought her last week and I was worried that she had escaped!"

"You bought a rat?" Timmy couldn't believe it. "Then it's a good thing I didn't set a trap."

"Yes, indeed it is," said Grandma. "I think it's time I formally introduced the two of you." Grandma paused. "Please give me the light." She held her hand out for his flashlight.

"You're standing beside the wall switch." Timmy kept his flashlight beam aimed at his grandmother's feet.

"Timmy," said Grandma in her I'm-trying-to-be-patient voice, "Hildegarde is late for her training. She trains in the dark. I don't want her to get used to full room light, until I'm sure of her skills in the dark. Now, please give me the flashlight."

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Up close, Timmy could smell that Grandma had taken a lavender bubble bath. He handed her the flashlight. "Why are you training a rat?"

The flashlight bobbed as Grandma chuckled. "There's been the smell of mystery in the air. I want Hildegard to investigate."

"What does a mystery smell like?" asked Timmy.

"You'll learn." Grandma aimed the flashlight under the bed. "I'm going to introduce you to Hildegard. Now sit down on the floor, facing the bed."

Timmy followed his grandmother's instructions. There was no point arguing, or even asking questions when Grandma was intent on a project.

Grandma shined the beam on his face. He squinted, involuntarily. Timmy recalled that Grandma hadn't squinted when he'd shined the light in her eyes. Maybe his cousin Axel was right. Maybe she was a spy.

"Hildegard, this is my grandson, Timmy." Hildegard twitched her whiskers.

Timmy laughed. He'd been thinking about protecting Grandma from finding out she had a rat in her house, and now they were being introduced, like people who are expected to become friends.

His cousins Axel and Joey had warned him that Grandma was odd, but he'd thought they were just trying to freak him out. Before his parents disappeared last month, he only knew Grandma from his once-a-year visits to Pillow, Pennsylvania.

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Now she was his family until his parents returned from their mysterious mission – if they ever returned. Grandma said the government used to think children needed their parents. They only sent childless people on dangerous missions. But now, the government thinks *its projects* are more important than children or anything else. She often called the government a big baby.

Timmy was afraid to talk about his parents and their mission – for fear he might jeopardize their project, and he might never see them again.



Chapter Two – She Lives Here Now

Grandma shined the light beam under the bed. “Timmy, this is Hildegarde. She’s learning to be a spy.”

“How can a rat be a spy?” he asked. “And how did you hide her in the house for a whole week without my seeing her?”

“Grandma smiled and clicked off the flashlight. Hildegarde squeaked again.

Grandma bragged, “She’s been all over – exploring our house – it’s her *territory* now.” Grandma kneeled down on the floor and peered under the bed. “Hildy’s very quiet, except when she’s hiding things.”

“Is she hiding something in my room?” Timmy didn’t like the idea of a rat using his bedroom as a storage bin.

“If you heard her, you can be sure she was gnawing a hole in your wall to hide something.

Grandma’s house was Spanish-style adobe with an open floor plan. The living room, dining room and kitchen were one large open space divided by kitchen cabinets and several strategically placed tables. The only walls in the house created the two bathrooms and three bedrooms.

Each bedroom had a laundry chute to the large open basement. Timmy and Grandma sometimes slid down the chutes for the fun of it. Grandma called it a drill, in case they needed to hide.

"Hildy has hiding places in every room of this house – including the garage." Timmy could tell Grandma was proud of that sneaky rat.

"What does she hide?" Timmy asked, uneasily. He pictured the rat hiding dead bugs and other disgusting things under his bed.

"The same things as you – carob, crackers – and some nutritious foods, too.

Timmy did not like being told that this rat was just like him. He was better than a rat! "Doesn't she shed hair and track mud in the house?"

"She's so little and sweet – I don't mind cleaning up a few hairs and tiny footprints."

Grandma sat on the floor and patted the linoleum beside her. "Come here, Hildy. Time for a snuggle." Hildegard poked her nose out from under the bed. Grandma patted the linoleum again.

"You've seen dogs sniffing luggage at the airport. They could replace all those big ugly dogs with sweet little rats like Hildy. She can sniff out anything better than a dog. Rats can pick up smells much better than you or I."

Grandma was comparing him to a rat again. And he was coming up second best. Timmy didn't like that at all.

"You can help me train her," said Grandma. "It can be our special project."

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Timmy didn't want a special project. He still hadn't decided if he was going to try out for the track team. But he didn't want to disappoint his grandmother, either.

"Maybe this weekend. I'm awfully busy with school." Timmy paused. He didn't really want to train a rat. The cold of the floor had seeped through his thin cotton pajamas. He stood up, sat on the edge of his bed, and gave a fake yawn.

"I'm going to train her right now." Grandma put her hands beside the bed. Hildy climbed into her cupped palms. Then Grandma lifted Hildy up to her face and kissed her on the forehead.

"Yuck," said Timmy. He lay down on his bed and pulled the warm covers up over his shoulders.

"It's time for her nightly lesson. I'm training her to push buttons and toggle switches." Grandma sounded like she expected him to be interested. Like she was giving him a treat. "Come on! I know a fake yawn when I see one. It'll be fun!"

Timmy grimaced. "Where's her cage? I'll go get her cage!"

"Hildy doesn't have a cage. Cages are for pet rats, or maybe lab rats." said Grandma. "Hildy is going to be my assistant. She'll need to know every nook and cranny of this house better than we do."

"Why do you need help pushing buttons and toggling switches?" Timmy asked.

“When they are in places I can’t reach.” Grandma had the ability to say the most unreasonable things in a calm voice.

“Get a ladder. I’m going to sleep.” Timmy pulled the blanket over his head.

“A ladder won’t help when the switches are in other people’s houses.” Grandma put Hildegard on the bed beside Timmy. She snuggled her warm body up against him, and tickled him with her whiskers. He tensed.

“Grandma, why do you want to press buttons and toggle switches in other people’s houses?” Timmy stretched the way he’d seen sleepy people do in movies.

“You never know.” Grandma put her hand on his shoulder. “You can pet her. She’s soft and warm. She won’t bite you.”

“I don’t want to touch a rat!” Timmy pulled the soft warm covers firmly over his head.

“She lives here now. She’s family.” Hildegard snuggled her head up against his chest. Timmy tensed some more.

“If she’s family, is she going to go off on a secret mission and disappear?” Timmy almost said “like my parents.”

“She’s family, so you can love her.” Grandma stroked Timmy’s hair.

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"I'm really sleepy." Timmy turned his face to the wall. Hildegarde snuggled her warm little body up against his back.

"Okay," said Grandma. "Good night. I'm taking Hildy for her lesson now." She leaned over and kissed him on the forehead, through the blanket and picked up Hildegarde.

As Grandma turned to leave his room, the drinking glass on his bedside table clinked and jiggled a little dance.



Chapter Three – The Earthquake

Was Grandma doing something to make him change his mind? Timmy poked his head out from under the covers. Street lamps all down the block blinked in unison. His bed shook. Timmy rolled over to see if Grandma was jumping. Grandma stood almost still as a statue, cuddling Hildegarde in in the middle of his room.

“Wha?” Timmy started to ask.

Grandma held a finger to her lips. “Shh!”

The glass skittered across his night stand. Grandma took a swift step, holding Hildy in one hand, and caught his glass just as it slipped over the edge of the table.

She held the glass to her nose and sniffed. It was lemonade – not the water he was supposed to have. But Grandma didn’t say anything. On a normal night she’d have ordered him to brush his teeth again – *immediately!*

The room shook. Books toppled from their shelves and clattered to the linoleum floor. The little hooded rat made a series of rapid high-pitched squeaks, and nestled its brown head into a fold of Grandma’s nightdress.

In the dim light from the street lamp, he saw Grandma touch her wrist, where she kept her braille watch. Grandma wasn’t blind. She liked to be able to check the time without looking at her wrist.

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"It's 10:13. Do you smell anything?" Grandma asked.

"Smell what?" asked Timmy.

"The smell that comes after an earthquake." Grandma said, calmly.

"Earthquakes don't smell." Timmy pulled the covers over his head again.

"Just take a deep breath with your nose and tell me what you smell."

Timmy poked his head out from under the covers again, and sniffed deeply several times. "It smells like the time you overheated your cast iron sauce pot on the stove."

"That's what I thought," said Grandma. "We have a mystery. The Case of the Hot Metal Earthquake."

"Ms. Mulisch says earthquakes are natural disasters." Ms. Mulisch was his sixth grade teacher. She had been a schoolmate of Grandma's. Timmy knew there was still a rivalry between them.

"Old Ding-Ding doesn't know everything," said Grandma.

"Ding-Ding?" asked Timmy.

"We used to call MaryBelle Mulisch, Ding-Ding."

Timmy laughed. Then he said, "She does know a lot about earthquakes."

"We'll see," said Grandma. "I have a hunch that this was more than an ordinary earthquake."

"I'll ask about it in school tomorrow." Timmy was in no mood for one of Grandma's impromptu science lessons.

"Listen!" said Grandma.

What now? thought Timmy. But he listened, his toes curling up. He heard a distant *beepity beeeple beep beep beepity*.

"That's the Morse code machine in the garage. Somebody is sending us a message."

"Can't it wait 'til morning?" asked Timmy. "I want to go to sleep."

Grandma tapped her head. "I almost forgot. Our neighbor Mr. Richter is giving a science demonstration at his house tomorrow afternoon. He says he's got a new invention."

"Who's Mr. Richter?" Timmy tried to sound bored.

"He's our new neighbor. The one who put up that funny looking house suspended from a pole up the middle. I'll bet his house really jiggled tonight."

"Oh, you mean the mad scientist." Timmy pulled his covers up to his ears.

"Now, Timmy." Grandma gave him an amused smile.

"That's what the kids at school are calling him."

"All the more reason to go check him out." Grandma petted Hildegard. "Isn't that right, Hildy?"

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The rat boggled her eyes. Then she reached a pink paw up to stroke Grandma's neck.

"I'll think about it," said Timmy. He'd seen enough kiddie magic shows to last a lifetime. Science was either really simple stuff like Ms. Mulisch made them do, or it was too hard to understand.

And he still hadn't decided about track tryouts. He didn't want to tell Grandma, in case he didn't make the team.



Chapter Four – Hildegarde Gets Stepped On

The next morning, Timmy woke when the sun came in his window. He sat on the edge of his bed and placed his feet onto his furry slippers. He started to stand. One of his slippers squirmed. Then it squeaked. Timmy lost his balance and fell back onto his bed. *What if he'd killed Hildy?*

Grandma appeared at his door, already dressed in a stylish suit, and wearing a straw hat with fresh daisies in the band above the brim. "Did you step on Hildegarde?" Her voice was curious, not angry.

"I didn't mean to. She was in my slipper." Timmy was afraid to look at his grandmother, or the floor. His toes curled up.

"She's not hurt," said Grandma. "I'm sure you didn't put your whole weight on her."

Timmy looked gingerly at the floor. Hildegarde was standing beside his slipper smiling up at him. Timmy felt his toes relax.

"See, she's fine!" Grandma sounded cheerful. "Rat ribcages can take a little squeezing, like you can handle Uncle Gear's hugs. Flexible ribcages allow rats to sneak through narrow crannies."

Timmy felt so happy he did a cartwheel across the linoleum floor. Hildegarde laughed.

"Why is she laughing at me?"

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“Rats have a sense of humor. She thinks your cartwheel is funny.”

Hildegarde seemed pleased with herself. She raised one paw.

“Shake hands with her,” said Grandma.

Timmy squatted beside Hildegarde and offered her his index finger.

Hildegarde stood on her hind legs and extended a front paw. They shook finger to tiny paw. This time Timmy laughed. “I never thought I’d shake hands with a rat.”

“You can pet her,” said Grandma.

Timmy reached out and stroked his fingers across the top of the smiling rat’s head. “I’m sorry, girl. I didn’t mean to step on you.” The brown fur on top of Hildegarde’s head felt like silk.

Hildegarde made soft happy sounds with her teeth. When his hand neared her mouth, she gave his fingers an affectionate lick.

Timmy decided this rat wasn’t half-bad. She could have slept anywhere, but she chose *his* slipper. Grandma said she was a good smeller. She must have known this was his slipper. She liked his smell.

“Don’t you want to check her over and make sure she’s alright?”

Timmy ran his fingers gently down Hildegarde’s back.

Grandma just smiled. “Time for breakfast.”

Hildegarde flicked her tail towards his clock.

“Oh, no! I’m late!” Timmy ran to the bathroom. Since he was wearing only one slipper the floor felt cold, warm, cold, warm. Hildegarde followed him. While he washed his face, Hildy went to her litter box behind the toilet. She tapped on the spout of her water bottle and a few drops fell into her paws. Then, as if copying Timmy, she splashed her face, and poked her wet fingers into her ears to wash them out.

“Do you want eggs or yogurt?” called Grandma.

“I’m late!” called Timmy, as he pulled on his shirt.

“Take a carob chip power bar,” said Grandma.

“Since when do we have those?” asked Timmy.

“Since we got Hildegarde. I’ll put an extra one in your lunch sack.”

“Don’t I need a real lunch?” asked Timmy as he closed the velcro straps on his shoes. “Did something happen? You’re not acting like *my* grandmother.”

The kitchen cabinet door hung open revealing a stack of power bars in different colors on the shelf right next to the cereal boxes.

“You’re getting a real lunch. The snack bar is to give you a boost before your track tryouts, if you decide to go.” Grandma ripped open a wrapper on a yellow one and bit it. Timmy wondered if Grandma could read his mind.

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“Did somebody come in the night and swap my real grandmother for a Pod Person?”

“*Silly garoo*. I’m not reading your mind, if that’s what you’re worried about. You’ve got the body language of somebody who is trying to make a decision. I know you love running. And the school sent out an e-mail message about track tryouts.”

Timmy breathed a sigh of relief, and stuffed his lunch into his backpack. Grandma chewed her power bar and smiled. Something furry brushed his foot. He looked down. “Sorry Hildy. You’re staying home.” The rat looked up, her black eyes pleading.



Chapter Five – Somebody has a pit bull

“He can’t play with you right now,” said Grandma. She snapped off a corner from her power bar and tossed it to Hildegarde. The rat daintily grasped it with her delicate pink paws, sat on her furry white haunches, and began nibbling. Her whiskers wiggled when she chewed.

Grandma touched her braille watch, then she opened the front door. Timmy bent down to give Hildegarde’s brown hooded head one last pat. The bus roared by.

“Think you can make it?” asked Grandma.

Timmy aligned his body in runner’s starting position, fully extending his back leg, and exhaled. Then he drove his front foot forward like a claw, forcing his weight against the floor. He allowed his body to fall forward, falling, falling, his legs and feet moving him forward while he fell.

Out the front door, across the lawn in front of Grandma’s salmon-colored adobe house, down the sidewalk. As he picked up speed, he remembered to breathe gently, smoothly, always falling. His feet crunched the red and yellow maple leaves strewn along the sidewalk. The maple trees became a fiery blur overhead.

His twin cousins, Axel and Joey, greeted him as the old yellow school bus screeched to a stop at the corner in front of the white two-story house

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with dark green shutters. Joey had red bows on her pigtails and was wearing a frilly floral-print dress with lace trim, like she did every day.

Axel was dressed more neatly than usual. Even his shirt was tucked in. The Australia-shaped birthmark on his chin was dark red, telling the world that Axel was in a bad mood. Then Timmy noticed Uncle Gear, standing beside the old metal lamp post, wearing a dark gray suit that almost made him look like a post himself.

No wonder Axel's shirt was tucked in and his birthmark looked dark. Uncle Gear was always telling him to look and behave like a success. No matter how many sloppy successful people Axel could point to, Uncle Gear still insisted that a tucked-in shirt was a sign of success. Axel was too serious a boy to ignore his dad's opinions. Every time they disagreed, Axel made it an argument.

"You're fast," Uncle Gear called out to Timmy. "But you need to work on your form. Come by on the weekend and I'll help you. I used to be on the track team when I was your age."

"I'm helping Grandma train Hildegard this weekend." Uncle Gear meant well, but he learned to run before all the latest scientific research. Timmy was doing what Coach Sweet had taught him, letting gravity do the work. It might look sloppy, but it had shaved nearly half a minute off his 100 meter run time.

“Grandma will understand,” said Uncle Gear. “Come by early Saturday, before breakfast.”

“All aboard!” called the bus driver. This was the last stop on the route, and the bus was nearly full.

Axel pulled his shirt out of his corduroys and undid his bottom shirt button.

“Axel!” shouted Uncle Gear.

“I’m getting on the bus,” Axel yelled back. Then he grabbed the banister on the yellow bus door and put his foot on the first step. Timmy and Joey followed. Axel would never make it as a cool kid. He was too serious about life. He was even serious about trying to look cool.

“What was your dad at the bus stop for?” Timmy asked Axel.

“Oh, he went to some seminar where they told him he needed to get more involved with his family. He even drew up a family mission statement. You’re on it.” Axel cracked his knuckles.

Joey tossed her pigtails, trying to look sweet. “Come on, Timmy. Pull your shirt out, too. Don’t make our family look like dorks.”

Timmy noticed the red stains on Joey’s fingertips – a sign that she’d been eating dyed pistachios again.

His friend Ben was checking out something by the spirea bush, but looked up when the bus driver called. “Last one on is a big fat hen!”

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Ben climbed aboard and greeted the driver, “How do you like your eggs?”

Axel grabbed Timmy’s shirt, and yanked it out of his pants. Timmy didn’t struggle. Axel was as tall as some of the teachers, and strong enough for the wrestling team, if his dad would let him join. “There. That’s better.”

The Australia shaped strawberry birthmark on Axel’s chin started to fade.

“Now you look almost cute,” said Joey, giving Timmy’s shirt one more tug. She held her fingers curled trying to hide the red stains on her fingertips. Timmy smiled, knowing her secret.

Timmy liked his shirt tucked in. It gave him a smoother line, less resistance to the wind. Looking at Joey’s curled fingers reminded him of Hildegard’s little pink paws.

Ben squeezed past him on the way to the back of the bus. Timmy followed him, tucking his shirt back in as he went. Ben gave him the aisle seat. Ben didn’t tan; he freckled. The hundreds of new freckles on Ben’s face told the world he’d been enjoying the sunshine.

“Did you notice the fresh dog poop by the spirea bush?”

Timmy shook his head. Now he knew what Ben had been looking at so intently. Timmy tried *not* to pay attention to poop that careless dog walkers left

lying around, Ben's mom ran the pet store and Ben was fascinated by everything about animals. Even their poop.

"Somebody in this neighborhood got a pit bull. A big one."

"I don't want to talk about poop." Timmy decided to change the subject. "My Grandma got a pet rat."

"Yes, the dark hooded one." Ben smiled. "My mom told me you bought her. She's a sweetie. And smart."

"Grandma says she's teaching Hildegard to push buttons and toggle switches," said Timmy.

"A German lady brought her into the shop. She said the rat is click-trained," Ben touched his finger to his palm – he was trying to remember something. "Usually we sell rats in same gender pairs, but this one's partner got lost on a spying mission."

"Grandma's going to love that," said Timmy. "Axel's always saying she used to be a spy."

"Axel loves to make stuff up." Ben tapped his finger on his palm again.

"Anything else I should know?" asked Timmy, tucking his shirt in. He could tell this spy stuff was making Ben nervous.

"Be careful not to make any clicking noises near her unless you've got food. Otherwise she'll squeak and squeak and she'll never learn anything."

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“So that’s why she squeaked when I turned on my flashlight. I thought I’d scared her.” Timmy ripped open his power bar.

“No eating on the bus!” yelled the driver.



Chapter Six – Periscopes

When Timmy stepped off the bus, Axel was waiting for him. “Didn’t I untuck that shirt for you?”

“I like it tucked in.”

Axel grabbed Timmy’s t-shirt and pulled it out of his trousers again. “I’m trying to help you look cool. It’s in your own best interests.”

Ms. Mulisch, their sixth grade teacher, blew her whistle. “Detention for both of you. Now let’s see if you can get to class without any more fighting.”

“Yes, Ma’am,” said Axel.

“Yes, Ma’am,” said Timmy. They weren’t fighting. It wasn’t fair. But Ms. Mulisch was the law at Upper Dauphin Elementary. Even Axel knew that, but he whispered to Timmy, “If I’m late for my job, you’ll pay for it.”

Ms. Mulisch wasn’t done with them. “Timmy, Axel, you’ll be science lab partners today. I’m keeping my eye on you.”

The lab tables were stacked with quart-sized empty milk cartons, scissors, protractors, rulers, and rectangular mirrors. “Maybe we could dissect your rat for our science project,” said Axel. Timmy knew Axel was trying to goad him, so he said nothing.

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They sat down at opposite sides of the lab table. Joey came over and whispered in Timmy's ear. "I'll bet your rat is adorable!" Her pigtail tickled his neck.

"Stay at your own tables!" ordered Ms. Mulisch.

Joey flounced her braids, then returned to her chair and smiled at Ms. Mulisch.

Ms. Mulisch nodded approval. "Good girl, Joey." Then she tapped on the chalkboard to get their attention. "How many of you noticed the earthquake last night?"

Most of the children raised their hands.

Ben said, "I thought my kid sister was jumping on her bed." The other kids laughed.

"The earthquake was a good example of what we were talking about last week – natural disasters."

"How was it a disaster?" asked Joey. "Did anybody die?"

"The Mahantango Creek Bridge collapsed. Part of town lost electric power."

"Which happened first," asked the prim athletic girl named Beatrice. "Did the bridge fall and cause the earthquake? Or did the earthquake make the bridge fall?"

"Scientists are investigating that question right now," said Ms. Mulisch.

"Can we go to the bridge for our science lesson?" asked Joey.

Ms. Mulisch tapped the chalkboard again. "Today we are making periscopes."

"This is kid stuff" said Axel, dandling the scissors. "Where I work, we do real science." Axel spun the scissors around his thumb. "Important science."

"If you boys aren't grown up enough to use scissors, you can both have Fs for today's science project."

Joey tittered. Beatrice gave a high-pitched giggle.

Ms. Mulisch deftly grasped the blade of Axel's scissors and slipped them from his fingers. Then she returned to the front of the classroom, and began to lecture the class. Axel's birthmark darkened.

"A periscope is a device that enables you to look around corners or over walls." She held up a finished periscope with tilted mirrors at top and bottom.

"This is so tacky," whispered Axel. He cracked his knuckles. "Only little kids make toys out of milk cartons." The strawberry mark on his chin became darker still.

Ms. Mulisch straightened her bony five-foot frame at the front of the classroom. "Silence. We will now have a demonstration. Do I have a volunteer?"

Joey raised her hand.

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“Joey, come up here and crouch down behind my desk.” Joey pranced beside Timmy and Axel’s desk, on her way to the front of the classroom, tossing her pigtails. Joey was always finding ways to be the center of attention.

“Sit on the floor behind my desk where you can’t see us,” said Ms. Mulisch.

Joey disappeared from view. Then Ms. Mulisch handed her the milk carton periscope. It, too, disappeared behind the desk.

“Joey, can you see the items on your brother’s worktable?”

“Not from down here.” Joey laughed.

Beatrice giggled. Axel groaned the way he always did when his sister was being silly.

Ms. Mulisch turned around and looked at her desk as if she could see Joey hiding behind it.

“Hold the periscope so you are looking at the bottom rectangular cut-out and the top cut-out is facing the classroom above the top of the desk.”

Soon the top of the periscope poked up above the desk, like a puppet show. Timmy saw a silver flash from the mirror.

“Hey, I can see everything now!” said Joey. “My brother is scratching his ear.”

Chapter Seven – Axel’s Knife is Confiscated

“What am I doing?” called Ben, who was holding up a piece of paper with mirror writing “You’re holding up a note that says...”

“There’s no need for mirror writing,” said Ms. Mulisch. “A periscope has two mirrors so everything you see is in the right orientation.”

“Some words look the same in mirror writing and regular,” said Ben.

“Like **H**
O
W
or
A
W
A
Y
or
T
O
M
A
T
O”

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"That's fine Ben," interrupted Ms. Mulisch. "You now know the value of a periscope."

She paused for dramatic effect. "Joey, return to your chair. Class, the instructions for building a periscope are on your tables."

Axel picked up the instructions and read them. "Step one: Cut a rectangle..."

Timmy interrupted him, "How are we going to do that without scissors?"

"I've got a pocket knife. You are such a baby, sometimes." Axel reached into his pocket and pulled out a red plastic-covered jackknife. He fanned the blades: two knife blades, two kinds of screwdrivers, a bottle opener, and a pair of tiny scissors.

"Where'd you get that?"

"My boss gave it to me. He's a real scientist and he says real scientists have to be able to fix their own equipment." Axel stabbed a knife blade into the milk carton and began cutting out the rectangle as described. While he worked, the strawberry mark on his chin faded to a rosy pink.

"You're working for the mad scientist?" asked Timmy. "Does he plan to take over the world?"

"He makes ball lightning, and gets messages from outer space." Axel continued cutting.

"I saw that comic book, too. What does he really do?" Timmy felt his toes curl up.

"I am talking for real." Axel turned the carton and began cutting the final side of the rectangle. The cut section of cardboard sagged, making the cutting difficult.

"Okay, don't tell me if you don't want to." Timmy grabbed the loose flap of the cardboard rectangle to hold it still, so Axel could cut more easily.

"He's doing a science demonstration this afternoon and I have to be there to help him. Then I get to walk his dog." Axel completed the cut. "Oh yeah, Grandma told me about that science show. She's going." Timmy pulled the rectangle of cardboard free.

"You should come, too. It's going to be good!" Axel poked his knife into the carton again and began cutting out the 2nd rectangle.

"I might try out for track." Timmy watched as Axel cut the carton more quickly this time.

"If you make the team, my dad will never let you hear the end of it. You'll be at our house practicing day and night." Under his breath, Axel added, "Which would be a good thing for me – keep him off my case a bit."

Ms. Mulisch walked up behind Axel as he made the final cut. "Give me that knife. Students are not allowed to carry weapons."

Axel handed her the knife.

"I'll see both of you after school." Ms Mulisch's heels click sharply on the floor as she strode back to her desk.

Reluctant Spy

“Now what do we do?” asked Timmy.

“It’s okay.” Axel smiled confidently. “We can finish the periscope without the knife. I was done cutting.”

Timmy couldn’t restrain his curiosity. “What’s the mad scientist going to do at his show?”

“Mad scientists are only in comic books.” Axel picked up the instructions and reached for the glue.



Chapter Eight – Shake ‘em Up

After school, Timmy stopped at the restroom before going to detention. New graffiti over the urinals read: *Shake ‘em up*. Timmy wondered if that was a reference to the earthquake. The handwriting looked suspiciously like Axel’s.

#

In the detention room, Timmy saw Ms. Mulisch’s handwriting on the chalkboard:

I have a dentist appointment. I trust you boys on your own.

Axel: Your knife is in the right hand desk drawer.

Timmy: Go to the science show with your grandmother.

Your assignment: write 25 times: I will not fight in school.

Shake hands.

Leave your papers on my desk.

Ms. Mulisch.

Timmy checked the drawer. It was empty. Axel had already been here and taken his knife without writing the assignment. Timmy sat down, wrote his lines, and placed his paper on the desk.

The next instruction read: *Shake hands*.

Reluctant Spy

Timmy wiggled his hands in the air. He laughed, remembering shaking hands with Hildegard's delicate paw.

Then he headed out to the track at the back of the school yard to watch the tryouts. Everybody had already left the track, except Beatrice.

Beatrice was throwing pebbles at a target drawn in the dirt. Her aim was amazing. Phht. Phhtt. Every single one hit the bull's eye. "Wanna try?" she asked. Then she added, "I made the team. How come you didn't try out?"

Timmy shook his head. Perhaps he still had time to catch the bus home.

He ran to the parking lot. The school bus was just powering up when he knocked on the door.

"You're late, Mr. Covert," said the bus driver.

"Yes sir," said Timmy. The bus driver looked like he was going to say something else, so Timmy waited. The bus driver glared at him and said, "You run fast ... for a kid who looks like he's falling down. You should be on the team."

When Timmy arrived home, a woman wearing a fur shawl was pacing impatiently on his doorstep. She looked like a fashion model with spiky high heels and a long twirly skirt. Had she rung the bell? Grandma would have noticed her, bell or no bell. Grandma must still be at the science demonstration.

"Are you looking for someone?" he asked. The woman had an unusual scent – more like a perfume than a hair spray. It reminded Timmy of a piece

of gray wax he'd once found on the beach. His mother wouldn't let him keep it. She said it was ambergris from a whale and it's illegal to own it, because whales are endangered species. Timmy didn't see how finding something on the beach could endanger whales, but he'd left the wax where he found it.

The woman eyed him up and down. Then she spoke. Her voice had a foreign accent. "Not *someone*. I've come to visit my rat."

"Your rat?" How could this woman have a rat at their house? Was Grandma boarding rats now? Then he remembered – Ben had said the woman who brought Hildegarde to his mother's shop was German. But how could he be sure this was the same woman? And even if she was the rat trainer, she could still be dangerous.

"Yes. Is this not where my Hildegarde lives?"

Timmy nodded his head. He wasn't sure what to say. Had this woman come to take Hildy away with her? "Hildy is our rat. The pet shop sold her to us."

"You need not worry. I am only here to pay my regards." The woman stroked her fur shawl. Her fingertips were glossy red. Timmy wondered – did she eat red pistachios like Joey? He looked more closely and saw that the red was shiny fingernail polish. Her nails were long, tapered and perfectly shaped into ovals.

"Wait here," he said.

Reluctant Spy

Timmy unlocked the door, quickly opened it and slipped inside. The woman made no move to follow him.

Timmy kept an eye on her as he closed the door. The German woman called, "Komm hierher."

Hildegard skittered out from under the living room couch and ran happily to the door, perking her ears.



Chapter Nine — The Mysterious Rat Trainer

Timmy stared in amazement. “She comes to you?” He paused. “What did you say to her?”

The woman responded, “I told her to come here.”

He thought: this does seem to be Hildy’s trainer. Ben’s family knows her. She must be safe. He opened the door and invited her in.

Timmy showed the woman to a seat on the couch where her skirt fanned out like a curtain against the upholstery. Then he put two glasses on a tray, and grabbed the pitcher of lemonade from the refrigerator. He noticed that the open design of the kitchen and living room allowed him to keep an eye on his visitor while he worked in the kitchen. He carried the tray into the livingroom, and sat in the chair opposite the German woman.

Hildy lay in her lap, totally relaxed, her limbs hanging limp. Timmy had never seen her so calm. Hildy was always watching and listening, yet she trusted this woman completely. He felt a pang of jealousy. Hildy liked this German woman better than she liked him or Grandma. The woman stroked Hildegard’s belly. Timmy poured lemonade into glasses, and handed one to the woman, being careful not to disturb Hildy.

The woman took a sip and said. “Hildy is click trained. Also, she knows some words.”

Reluctant Spy

Timmy put his glass down on the table. "What words?"

"I'll show you." The woman placed Hildegarde gently on the floor. Then in a sharp clear voice she said, "*Links*."

Hildegarde turned to her left and walked all the way to the wall.

The woman said "*nach hinten*."

Hildegarde returned to the woman's feet by the couch.

"What kind of words are those?" asked Timmy.

"German words, *of course*," said the woman, draining her glass. "This is good lemonade."

Trying to be a good host, Timmy asked, "Would you like more?"

"I have taken too much of your hospitality already. I merely wanted to check on my Hildegarde."

The woman leaned down, petted Hildegarde's brown fur hood. "Does she not have the most luxurious pelt?" The woman did not wait for an answer. She stood and handed Timmy her card. It said: *Elizabeth Weber, Animal Trainer*.

"Call me so we can arrange my next visit. I do not like to arrive unannounced."

Hildegarde followed them to the door, scurrying to stay under the shadow of Ms. Weber's swirling skirt. Ms. Weber waved good-bye. Timmy returned the wave. Hildegarde stood on her hind legs and twitched her nose.

Grandma hadn't come home, yet. Timmy put the pitcher of lemonade away in the refrigerator and looked at the clock. It was only 4 PM. Grandma might still be at the science demonstration.

#

Timmy sprinted the three blocks to Mr. Richter's house.

A huge wooden platform filled the front yard. A sleeping dog, a large pit bull, was chained by his harness to a post behind the platform. About a hundred people, most of whom he didn't recognize, crowded the lawn.

Axel and a tall thin man in a white suit stood on top of the platform underneath a scarred metal cylinder. The man nodded to Axel. Axel stepped to the side of the platform and flipped a switch. Streams of crackling blue electric sparks poured from the cylinder completely engulfing the man. Sparks popped in the blue lightning; even the man himself crackled. The man's body looked stiff as if he was frozen.

The crowd oohed and ahhed. *Is he dead?* Timmy wondered. The man nodded his head slightly and Axel flipped the switch to off. The man took a stiff bow.

Suddenly a ball of fire appeared at his feet. The man in the white suit bent down and lifted it with his bare hands. He rolled it along his white sleeves. No burn marks appeared. His sleeves remained clean and crisp. Then the man reached up and placed the ball of fire into the metal cylinder over his head where it disappeared. The man took another bow.

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“And now, for my *piece de resistance*,” said the man, raising his arm stiffly, showing the crease along his stark white sleeve. Axel brought out another metal cylinder and hung it from the wire across the stage. “I will transport my body from here,” he pointed at the stage under his feet, “To there.” He pointed to the stage under the second cylinder. “This science is still in its experimental stages and I ask that you stand back from the stage. The crowd stepped back toward the bushes, murmuring. One woman remained up front: his grandmother.

Timmy remained where he was near the edge of the stage.
Grandma winked at him.

Axel leaned over the front of the stage. “Grandma,” he whispered.
“Please get back from the stage.”

“I can see better, right here,” said Grandma.

“But Grandma, it’s dangerous!”

“*Silly garoo*. Mr. Richter doesn’t look like a man who would hurt my grandson in front of a crowd of people. If it’s safe for you, it’s safe for me.”
Grandma stood her ground.

“Now!” said the man in the white suit. Axel gave Grandma a worried look, then walked to the far side of the stage and put his hand on the switch at the big grey power box. The man in the white suit nodded. Axel toggled the switch.

Smoke puffed from the cylinder over the man's head. Bits of soot fell on the shoulders of his crisp white suit. Sparks flew and crackled around his body. Volumes of smoke billowed from the cylinder, hiding Mr. Richter from view. The stench of sulphur permeated the air, then all was silent. Axel looked worried. Timmy watched his grandmother. She was smiling with anticipation. Now that the stage was quiet, Timmy felt safer. He walked over to his grandmother.

"Where do you think he is?" asked Timmy.

"He's close by," said Grandma. "Watch Axel's body language. He's keeping a secret."

Smoke began to pour from the second cylinder. A large foomph and a tower of smoke formed under the cylinder.

When the smoke cleared, the man in the white suit was standing under the second cylinder, where moments before the stage had been empty. The man stepped out of the smoke, his white suit sparkling clean. He smiled and took a bow. The crowd clapped politely.

"Thank you. Thank you," said Mr. Richter. "Thank you for attending my little demonstration."

Axel began taking down the props. The audience began wandering out of the yard, past the hedges, talking loudly. One said, "Do you believe that?" Another answered, "Nah, it has to be a trick."

Reluctant Spy

Grandma tapped Timmy on the shoulder. "Crawl under the stage," she whispered.

Timmy lifted the black curtain. It was as dark as a photographic developing room. He couldn't see his hand in front of his face. But there was that scent again. Ambergris. The dog gave a warning bark.

"Don't touch anything," shouted Axel, leaping from the stage.

Timmy ducked under the curtain. Before his eyes could become accustomed to the dark, Axel's hands closed around Timmy's leg and yanked him back to the light.

"It's dangerous down there," said Axel. "The show's over. Go home."

Grandma took Timmy's arm and guided him out of the yard, through a gap in the bushes. After they were out of earshot, she whispered, "Don't worry. After we train Hildegard, we'll send her in there to find out the secrets."

"Who cares about a silly magic trick?" asked Timmy. "And besides, there's a dog here. The dog could eat Hildy."

"That wasn't a magic trick," said Grandma, simply. "It is a potentially important scientific invention. We need to learn how it works."

"But..." said Timmy. "Hildegard..."

"We will train her to deal with dogs and other hazards of spy work. We'll keep her safe. She wants to explore mysteries as much as we do."

Chapter Ten — The Melted Bridge

Grandma stopped at the corner and pointed to the storm drain by the curb. “We’re going to have to watch Hildy very carefully here.”

Timmy suddenly remembered the mysterious German-speaking visitor. He handed Grandma the card Elizabeth Weber had given him. “This is the woman who trained Hildy and gave her to the pet shop.”

Grandma’s eyebrows furrowed. “What do you know about her?”

“She speaks German. And she wears a fur shawl and red fingernail polish, and spiky heels and a twirly long skirt. And, Grandma, I smelled her under the stage.”

“Does she know where we live?”

“That’s where I met her. At our house. She talked to Hildy. Hildy knows German.”

Grandma kneeled down in the street and peered into the storm drain. “We’ll have to put a harness on Hildy when we take her for walks.”

“We’re going to take Hildy for walks, like a dog?” *What if the other kids saw him?* Timmy thought about refusing, but he was committed now. He was going to help train Hildegard and Hildegard was going to find out what was going on at Mr. Richter’s house. The other kids could say what they wanted.

Reluctant Spy

“Did you say you smelled Ms. Weber under the stage? Can you usually smell people?”

“I smelled her perfume.” Timmy looked his grandmother in the eyes. She had to believe him.

“Timmy, lots of women wear perfume. And it’s possible for two women to wear the same brand. Hildy could tell them apart, but you’re human. You can’t. You can’t be sure it was her under the stage.”

“The perfume was ambergris.”

“Okay, I remember your mother told me when you found that piece of gray wax on the beach,” Grandma nodded her head. “That reduces the odds. Very few women wear ambergris. Unless she found it on the beach, she had to buy it abroad. Did you see what she was doing under there?”

“It was too dark. Do you think she was under there to help him somehow?” “Maybe.” Grandma nodded. “Or, she could have been spying on him, like us.”

While Timmy thought about spies spying on spies, he gazed down a narrow alley that ran behind Mr. Richter’s house. “Look at that green truck! The back half of its truckbed looks melted!”

“That must be what we smelled last night — the hot metal. Maybe it had nothing to do with the earthquake after all.”

“Ms. Mulisch says the Mahantango Creek Bridge collapsed. Nobody knows which happened first — the earthquake making the bridge fall or the

bridge falling, causing the earth to shake.” Timmy felt pleased to be able to tell Grandma something she didn’t know already.

“Let’s take our bikes out for an exploratory ride.” Grandma quickened her step.

“The road will be blocked.” Timmy knew that wasn’t an excuse that would stop Grandma. He just had a bad feeling about that bridge.

“Let’s see what we can see.” Grandma felt her braille watch. “We’ve got plenty of time before sunset.”

The key clicked when Grandma pulled it out of their front door lock. Hildegard squeaked. Timmy swung the door open, dashed to the kitchen and grabbed a banana from the counter.

“Are you that hungry?” asked Grandma.

“It’s for Hildy.” Timmy peeled the tip of a banana and broke off a chunk.

Hildegard continued to squeak.

“I’m comin’, girl.” The banana chunk slithered in his hand.

Hildegard became quiet as soon as the food was in her paws.

Grandma took her biking helmet down from its hook.

“We’re going to investigate the bridge that fell,” he told Hildegard. She blinked her eyes as if she understood.

“I think she knows more than just clicks.” Grandmother watched the boy and rat intently.

Reluctant Spy

"Hildy speaks German. Watch." Timmy petted Hildegard on the head and said "*Links*." The rat turned to her left and walked to the wall.

"Good girl, Hildy," said Grandma. "We'll be back soon and find out what else you know."

"Isn't Hildy going to come spying with us?" Timmy strapped on his helmet.

"She's not ready yet." Grandma adjusted the mirror on her biking glasses. She picked Hildegard up and kissed her on the nose. "We'll be back soon."

Timmy and Grandma rolled their bikes out of the garage, closed the garage door, and pedaled past Mr. Richter's house on the way to the fallen bridge. The truck with the melted bed was no longer in the alley. And the dog was not on its chain.

They wheeled around the corner. Axel was walking the pit bull, or more accurately, the pit bull was dragging Axel down Strawberry Street. Timmy and Grandma waved as they pedaled by.

The road to the bridge was deserted. "There's no point in anybody driving this way when the bridge is out," said Grandma. They came to a row of wooden yellow sawhorses forming a blockade across the road. Cars couldn't drive past it, but their bikes easily squeezed around it.

Ahead of them, a large crane operated a clanking chain on gears to pull pieces of twisted metal up from the riverbed.

"That's all that's left of the bridge?" asked Timmy.

"Looks like it," said Grandma. Suddenly she stopped her bike. "Look at the middle of the road, right where it drops off to the river."

Timmy looked. Metallic lumps glittered on the asphalt. Some were flecked with green. He dismounted his bike, kicked back the kickstand, and squatted down for a closer look.

"What do you think?" asked Grandma.

Melted circles of goopy black asphalt surrounded the shiny metallic lumps. Gingerly, Timmy extended one finger. The lump was warm. The green flecks looked the same as the paint on the melted truck they'd seen at the back of Mr. Richter's house. "It looks like that truck melted right here," he said. "But could the metal still be heated from last night?"

Grandma walked up to one of the men who was sitting beside the crane. "Have any trucks come out here today?"

"Lots of them. We're salvaging as much of the bridge as we can."

"Did any of the trucks have melted back ends? Or dripping metal?"

"Not that I noticed," said the man.

"Do you know what caused this?" she asked, indicating the metal spots in the road.

"No idea," said the man. "My break's over. Back to work."

"It could have been here for years," said Timmy.

Reluctant Spy

“No it couldn’t have been there for years,” said the man. “We just repaved this section of the road last week.” He turned and climbed aboard the crane.

Grandma called after him, “Did you figure out which happened first? The bridge falling or the earthquake?”

The man didn’t answer. Just then the metal chain on the crane cranked up a misshapen section of the metal bridge.

“It looks melted,” said Timmy.

“Look at that! Think we got ourselves another Roswell?” The man sounded excited.

“What’s a Roswell?” asked Timmy.

“That’s a place in New Mexico where some folks think an alien spaceship crashed in 1947,” said Grandma.

“Was there an earthquake, then?” asked Timmy.

“No. The spaceship, or whatever it was, landed in a field far away from any houses.” Grandma said. “It didn’t topple a major bridge that lies on an earthquake fault line.”

“You think they’re going to dredge up a crashed spaceship, here?” asked Timmy. I hope not,” said the man.

“They’d make me work overtime.”

Timmy turned to his grandmother. "Axel said Mr. Richter gets messages from aliens."

"Axel says many things that happen only in his imagination." Grandmother started wheeling her bike around towards home.

"What about that Morse Code message you got at the same time as the earthquake?" The setting sun made him squint. He unzipped his saddle bag and retrieved his sunglasses.

"You're right. I haven't even looked at it." Grandma mounted her bike, and flipped on her headlamp.



Chapter Eleven — This Isn't Morse Code

The sun had completely set by the time they arrived home. Timmy aimed the headlamp on his bike at the garage door handle while Grandma unlatched it.

"Turn off your headlamp before we go in," said Grandma. They parked their bikes by moonlight. Grandma had obviously done this before. She pressed the switch that closed the garage door without even looking at it. After the door thumped on the driveway, they were in total darkness.

"Why don't you turn on the lights?" Timmy felt his way along the wall towards the door into the house.

"Hildegarde likes to train in the dark." Grandma seemed comfortable without any lights.

"Is she here now?" Timmy worried that he might step on her.

"We'll find out soon enough." Grandma snapped her fingers.

A squeak greeted them.

"She wants food," said Timmy.

"You've got yogurt drops in your pocket."

Timmy didn't ask his grandmother how she knew. He took out the baggie, opened it, and squatted down. Instantly, little feet skittered towards him.

Hildegarde's warm nose bumped against his fingers. He opened his palm to release the yogurt drops and listened fascinated to the sound of tiny teeth crunching. Sounds always seemed more interesting in the dark.

While Hildegarde munched, Grandma clicked on her flashlight and shined the beam on her Morse Code machine. It was an old wooden box with a roll of paper tape like a cash register. The messages came in over a wire connected to an inkwell.

The tape with the message curled like a wide confetti streamer piling up on the floor. Timmy straightened it, while Grandma held the flashlight. He could make no sense of the dots and dashes.

"What does it say?" he asked Grandma.

"This isn't Morse Code," Grandma answered. "I thought it sounded odd last night. I can usually translate Morse Code when I hear it. This is something different."

She shined her flashlight along the row of books on the wall, and grabbed one labeled Callbook. She opened it and shined the flashlight beam on the pages to scan the codes. "Nope. It's none of the standard codes."

"Do you think it's a secret message?" asked Timmy. "From the aliens?"

"Aliens wouldn't use Morse Code," said Grandma. "This message doesn't have any of the usual patterns. If it is a code, it doesn't translate to any language I know." She clicked off her flashlight.

Reluctant Spy

Hildy squeaked again. Timmy gave her another yogurt drop.

Grandma put the book back on the shelf. "I'd rather look for an Earth-based answer, than go hunting for aliens."



Chapter Twelve — Hildegarde's Lesson

Timmy felt his way along the wall, expecting to find his dad's old tarp-covered train set. It wasn't there. He took another step and stubbed his toe. "Ouch!"

"Careful. I've put the train set on the floor," said Grandma.

"Is Hildy going to ride on it?" Timmy imagined how much his dad would want to see that when (if) he came home.

"I hope she's going to learn to run it." Grandma aimed the flashlight beam at the floor beside the train set, revealing a row of two pushbuttons and a switch. Both buttons and the switch were connected to hoppers, with trap doors on the bottom, that released food in response to an electrical signal. Each hopper was filled with a different food: raisins, almonds and dried meat chips.

"She gets a food reward when she learns something," said Grandma.

"I thought you said learning was its own reward," Timmy shot back.

"Not if you're a rat," said Grandma.

"What are you going to teach her tonight?" asked Timmy.

"Let's see if she remembers how to push buttons and toggle switches." Grandma put Hildy down by the switches and buttons. "Then we'll find out what German words she knows."

Reluctant Spy

Grandma placed the flashlight on a shelf where it cast a dim light over the train track. Hildegard stood in front of the buttons, twitching her whiskers. "Push the green button," said Grandma.

Hildy pounced on the green button. The hopper above it dropped three raisins. Hildy neatly picked up the first two raisins with her delicate hands and stuffed them into her mouth, one at a time.

Then Hildegard pounced on the third raisin, but she didn't eat it. She scurried away along the wall.

"What's she doing?" asked Timmy.

"She's taking it to her storage place," said Grandma. "She saves some of her food in safe places all over the house. She was putting food into her safe spot in your room when you found her."

Hildegard ran along the wall, turned the corner, and burrowed into a pile of old bricks. She made scratching sounds, then was silent. Timmy and Grandma stared at the pile of bricks and waited. While Hildegard was out of sight, Grandma unhooked the hopper from the green button. "I have to do that when she's not looking," Grandma explained.

"Why did you unhook the hopper?" asked Timmy. "Now she won't get her reward."

"She knows the green button. We've been working on it for days. She knows the blue button, too. When she returns I want her to push the toggle

switch. She's very bright, but she's been refusing to learn the toggle switch. When she knows them all, we can teach her to run the train set."

Hildegarde emerged from behind the bricks, without her raisin. She scurried along the wall, turned at the corner and went back to the big colored buttons.

She pushed the green button. Nothing happened. Grandma touched the white switch. "This is the white toggle switch, Hildy. Press it here."

Grandma toggled the switch, it clicked. A piece of dried meat fell from the hopper. Hildegarde grasped the dried meat tightly in her delicate pink paws and gnawed on it as if it was the most tasty thing in the whole world and she couldn't eat it fast enough.

"Now you do it," said Grandma, when Hildy had finished. She tapped the switch. "Press the switch, Hildy."

Hildegarde pressed the green button. When no food fell, she pressed it again.

"Maybe she didn't like the meat," said Timmy.

"She liked the meat," said Grandma. "She doesn't like the switch."

"I wonder if a toggle switch hurt her at Ms. Weber's house." Timmy petted Hildegarde.

"Could be," said Grandma. She took a piece of paper out of her pocket. "Here are the German words I looked up:

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left:	links
right:	recht
up:	rauf
down:	runter
forward:	nach vorne
back:	nach hinten
stay:	bleib
come here:	komm hierher

Timmy pointed to the bottom of the paper. "That last one. That's what Ms. Weber said that made Hildy come running to the front door to greet her."

"Let's try it now." Grandma kneeled down and said gently, "Komm hierher."

Hildegarde ran eagerly to her. Grandma scooped Hildegarde up and cuddled her against her shoulder. "Good girl, Hildy."

When Grandma put her down again, Timmy said, "Recht."

Hildegarde turned to her right and walked all the way to the wall.

"Nach hinten," said Timmy.

Hildegarde returned to Timmy. "Very good girl." Timmy held out a round carob pastille in his palm. Hildegarde pushed on the carob.

"She thinks it's a brown button," said Timmy. He laughed.

"Good girl," said Grandma. "Push the brown button."

Hildegarde pushed it again. This time it cracked open revealing its buttercream filling. Hildegarde licked the filling. Grandma flicked off the flashlight and put it on its usual shelf.

When she finished, Grandma said, “*Stay*, I mean *bleib*.” Then she took Timmy’s hand and led him silently to the door that opened to the kitchen.

“Are you going to make her spend the night in the garage?” whispered Timmy.

“Of course not. I’m just testing her training. Will she follow us when we leave the room, or will she follow orders and stay?”



Chapter Thirteen — The Plans

Dim moonlight illumined the hallway. Grandma led the way to the kitchen. Hildegarde remained silent and still in the garage. A street lamp shined through the kitchen window. Grandma smiled. “Hildy is very well trained,” she whispered. Then she called, “Komm hierher.”

In no time, Hildegarde was at their feet. Grandma picked her up and handed her to Timmy. “Good girl!” Timmy stroked Hildegarde’s silky brown stripe along her back, and cuddled her against his chest.

“That’s enough training for tonight. We need to eat dinner, and you need to figure out an excuse to get into Mr. Richter’s house. If he is communicating with aliens, we want to know more about it.”

Axel worked at Mr. Richter’s house. Axel would not want to let him in. Axel had probably lied, like he always did, and said he was in high school. He wouldn’t want his boss to think he had little-kid friends.

Grandma took a tray of leftover veggie lasagna out of the freezer and placed it in the microwave. Timmy took a bag of ready-made salad out of the refrigerator drawer.

“Why don’t *you* go? Axel says you used to be a spy. You’d know what to do.”

Grandma laughed. “If you think I used to be a spy, then you should trust me when I say you are the best person for the job. Old ladies like me are regarded as busybody snoops. If you go, you’re just a kid, visiting his cousin, maybe discussing family business. You look innocent, and I look sneaky.”

“Then why don’t we let Hildegarde go. She really is sneaky.” Timmy popped a chunk of carrot into his mouth.

“Hildy will go, after she’s had more training. She needs to learn to wear a camera and turn it on and off. She needs to learn how to send signals. We don’t want to risk her before she’s ready.” Grandma reached out and petted Hildegarde. “We can’t send her into unexplored territory. That’s how her partner was lost. You have to go to Mr. Richter’s first — to get the layout of the house.”

Timmy decided to do his best imitation of Ms. Mulisch. “If you want the floor plan, you can obtain a copy at the zoning office. The city requires all builders to file a floor plan before they begin construction.”

“I already have that,” said Grandma. She pulled a large paper with blue lines on it from a kitchen drawer.

“It shows the walls, but not the furniture.” She unrolled the blueprints and smoothed them out on the kitchen counter top. “See, the rooms are laid out like a maze.” She placed her finger in the middle of the drawing. “You must go through the rooms in a specific path, if you want to arrive in this key

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room here – where the support pole enters the house. We need to know the placement of furniture and other items in each room, so we can tell Hildegard where to aim her camera. That’s your assignment.”

The microwave pinged. Grandma took out the steamy lasagne bubbling with cheese and tomato sauce, and put it on the wooden kitchen table. Timmy set out a pair of green woven placemats.

Grandma used her spatula to lift dripping hot slices from the pan.

Timmy shook salad from the bag onto each of their plates. “Why are we investigating Mr. Richter? If he’s doing something wrong, isn’t that a job for the police?”

“You don’t want Axel to get in trouble with the police. If he’s involved in something dangerous, we have to get him out of there. He’s family.” Grandma placed her napkin in her lap.

“Grandma, were you really a spy?” Timmy held his breath, hoping she’d say “yes.”

“Would you believe me, if I said, ‘no’?” Grandma picked up her fork.



Chapter Fourteen — Joey Files her Fingernails

In the morning Hildegarde followed Timmy into the kitchen, and stood defiantly in front of the refrigerator.

“Is it okay if I give her a piece of my toast?” Timmy popped two slices of bread into the toaster.

“No. I’m going to try daylight training her in a few hours. I want her to be a little bit hungry, so the rewards she gets for learning will mean something.” Grandma sliced an orange on the cutting board.

Timmy leaned down and patted Hildegarde on the head. “Sorry, girl.”

Hildegarde twitched her whiskers at him a few times and then began exploring along the wall.

“She’s looking for dropped crumbs,” explained Grandma.

“What am I supposed to do at Mr. Richter’s after school today?” Timmy was not looking forward to his first spying mission.

“You’re just going to visit your cousin Axel. You also want to tell Mr. Richter how much you loved the science demonstration yesterday. Just keep walking deeper and deeper into the house, like you’ve been invited in, even if you haven’t. Ask questions. Point at anything in the house and ask about it, particularly unusual things that might be scientific instruments. You’re there to learn everything. What science is he doing? Ask about aliens.”

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Timmy looked at the clock. He dropped his fork on the table, opened the door, and ran.

"You forgot your lunch sack," Grandma called after him.

Timmy kept running. The bus was nearly at Joey and Axel's stop. He let gravity pull him forward, catching himself at the last second with his forward foot. Moving his legs faster and faster. He arrived as the bus door was closing. He knocked on the glass pane. The driver opened the door again.

"Get an alarm clock!" shouted the driver.

Timmy didn't answer. He walked the back of the bus to sit in his usual seat, but Axel had taken the window seat beside Ben. The two of them were chatting earnestly. What could Axel want to say to Ben? The only remaining available seat was next to Joey.

"Sit down, Mr. Covert," said the bus driver.

Joey was filing her fingernails. Timmy reluctantly seated himself beside her.

"Pull your shirt out, or I'll do it for you," she said.

Timmy pulled his shirt out. He tried to think of something pleasant he could say to Joey. Something that wouldn't start an argument. "What did you think of the magic show?"

Joey switched hands with the file. Her fingertips were bright red and they left red stains on the file. "That was a science show."

“You don’t believe Mr. Richter’s transporter really works, do you?”

Joey glanced over at her brother. Then she whispered, “No, I don’t. I saw you crawl under the table. You weren’t the only one under there. A lady wearing a fur shawl around her shoulders came out after you left. She smelled funny.”

Timmy whispered back, “You think she was helping Mr. Richter with his magic trick?” Joey filed her nails round on top like Hildegard’s. Had Ms. Weber filed Hildegard’s nails?

“She’s doing something sneaky,” Joey stopped filing and blew the filing crumbs from her fingers.



Chapter Fifteen — Messages and Secret Codes

As soon as Timmy settled at his desk, he tried to get Ben's attention. Ben had his math book open and his calculator out. Timmy decided to pass Ben a note. "What did you and Axel talk about?"

Ms. Mulisch intercepted the note, crumpled it up and dropped it in the trash.

"Aren't you going to read it?" asked Joey, eagerly.

"I'm sure it wasn't important," said Ms. Mulisch. "I don't want to waste class time on childish nonsense."

Joey persisted. "Do you think all notes are unimportant?"

Ms. Mulisch's eyes lit up and a sneaky smile spread across her face. "Joey, you've just helped me decide on today's history lesson. Sir Henry Clinton was a commander for the British forces in 1778. Do you remember what war was going on in this country at that time?"

Joey shook her head. Beatrice waved her hand wildly in the air. "Anybody else?" asked Ms. Mulisch. She paused. "Okay Beatrice, you tell us."

"The Revolutionary War," said Beatrice smugly. "That's right. At that time, the British were winning, in part thanks to the secret notes Sir Henry Clinton sent."

He sent notes to other generals in the British forces. And he couldn't risk his notes falling into the wrong hands. His plans would be ruined if the colonists found out. So, what do you think he did?"

"He used a code, like Morse code?" asked Timmy.

Ms. Mulisch shook her head.

"He used invisible ink?" asked Axel.

Ms. Mulisch shook her head again.

For a while the class was silent. Ms. Mulisch asked, "Can anybody think of another way to make a note secret?"

"He could use a code book, like spies in the movies," said Beatrice.

"Then he'd have to lug the book around," said Ms. Mulisch. "Instead, he used a mask."

She held up what looked like an ordinary handwritten letter. Then she held a piece of cardboard with an odd shaped hole cut out of it. "If you hold this cardboard over the letter, you can read the real message. The long letter was to make the real note look innocent. Only the intended recipient had a copy of the mask. It's a code that's nearly impossible to crack."

"Why bother?" asked Joey. "Why not just send an Instant Message over the Internet or a text message on his phone?"

Marko interrupted. "Even I know there was no Internet during the Revolutionary War."

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"The internet is not safe," added Ms. Mulisch. "Your instant messages can be intercepted. Your e-mails are being scanned all the time for key words that terrorists might use."

"What if I'm just planning a party, and inviting guests?" Joey persisted.

"Someone you are not inviting could spy on you, and crash your party." Ms. Mulisch smiled, knowing she finally had Joey's interest. "Wouldn't you like to know how to keep your plans secret?"

Joey nodded, suspiciously.

"For this lesson, I want you pick a lab partner to whom you might really send a note. I know nobody writes full page letters any more, so design your mask to fit on an e-mail or an instant message, or a note you might try to pass in class."

Several students giggled.

"This is serious, people," said Ms. Mulisch. "If you pass a note, and I catch you, I drop it in the trash. You never know who is going to read your trash. Now pick partners."

Timmy quickly pulled his desk up beside Ben. He didn't want Axel to get there first. Axel gave him a withering look. "What's your hurry?"

"There's nothing top secret about rats," said Joey.

"Rats are disgusting," said Axel. "If you ask me they should all be trapped and killed."

Timmy felt a fierce urge to protect Hildegard, even if it meant fighting Axel. The intensity of the feeling surprised him. Just a few days ago, he had planned to kill her, when he saw her under his bed.

"Ignore him. Let's get started," said Ben.

"Go to the supplies cabinet and take two sheets of thin cardboard, two Exacto knives and a pad of paper," said Ms. Mulisch.

"We can make a hole the shape of a rat," suggested Timmy, but Ben was already gone. Ben had a trick of worming his way through crowds. He was always the first at the supply cabinet. In moments he returned with cardboard and knives for both of them.

Timmy drew a rat with a fat tail and no whiskers on his piece of cardboard and used the Exacto knife to cut out the shape.



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"I like it," said Ben. He took Timmy's cut-out and used it as a template to trace the same rat onto his piece of cardboard, so their masks would be identical.

"What did you talk about with Axel?" asked Timmy.

"He wanted to know if your rat speaks German."

Timmy decided not to tell Ben about Ms. Weber's visit. Instead he said, "That's silly. Rats don't talk."

"That's what I told him," said Ben.



Chapter Sixteen — Knock-Knock Jokes

Timmy's thoughts kept returning to his worries about his spying mission at Mr. Richter's house after school. What would he say? Would Axel let him in? What if Mr. Richter answered the door? Would Mr. Richter suspect that Timmy was spying on him – casing the joint? Mr. Richter might even call the police. Grandma was training Hildegard to be a spy. Not him.

When Timmy arrived at Mr. Richter's house, he looked down the alley. The green truck with the melted bed was gone. He walked all the way around the house to see what he could learn from the outside. The dog was not in the yard.

Over the low hedge, he saw the stake and chain where the pit bull had been. The platform for the show had been removed, but he could see where it had been from marks in the grass.

He tried to look into the house through the windows. The panes appeared dark like sunglasses. Or, perhaps the house was dark inside. He couldn't see in, at all. He thought, *maybe nobody is home. Maybe no one will answer the door.*

The sparkling white house appeared to be floating. No visible part of it touched the ground. He knew that the house was supported on a central pole, but he couldn't see the pole from where he stood. Maybe he could see it if he

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lay on his belly and looked under the house with a flashlight, but he hadn't brought one. And Grandma hadn't asked him to look under the house.

A gust of wind whistled through the trees, blowing crisp leaves in his face. The house swayed, like a boat at sea. Timmy wondered if Mr. Richter got sea sick living there. He wondered if the dog would be crushed if it hid under the house during a wind storm.

Finally he collected enough courage to climb the steps up to the porch. The house tipped towards him. He placed one foot on the bottom step. The step rocked back, lifting his foot like an escalator. He grasped the banister to keep his balance, and raised his other foot to the swaying steps.

The wooden swing on the wide porch wobbled as if occupied by a ghost. Several leafy plants sprawled in large ornate pots that had been built into the railing. The house had a solid wooden door, with a carved mail slot.

When he reached the top of the stairs, he had to let go of the banister. Timmy crawled on his hands and knees across the swaying porch. When he reached the door, he found himself eye-to-eye with the mail slot, with a good view into the front room. Nobody was in sight. The house was silent.

Timmy held the doorknob to keep from losing his balance while he stood upright. He pushed the doorbell.

No buzz or chime sounded. He pushed it again. Nothing. He thought of that old knock-knock joke: Who's there? Dumbbell? Dumbbell who?

Dumbbell won't ring, so I had to knock. He pushed a third time, really hard. A dog barked.

Axel's voice came through the speaker above the door. "Who's there?"

Timmy couldn't help himself. "House."

"House who?" Axel always fell for knock-knock jokes.

"House about letting me in?" Timmy grinned. It had been a long time since he had played knock-knock jokes.

"I don't have time for this." Axel cracked his knuckles the way he did when he was angry.

"Yes, you do. Zis is interrresting," came a voice with a German accent. Footsteps strode into the front room. "Who is at my doorrrr?" The voice was almost a growl.

Timmy hesitated. But he had to do this for Hildegard. "It's me, Timmy. I saw the magic show, and I want to know more."

"It vas not magic. It vas rrreal science!" boomed the German accented voice.

Now I've blown it, thought Timmy. But in a moment, the Germanic voice said, "Vat arrre you vaiting forrr? Let ze jokerrr in."

A chain clinked against the wooden door. A lock clacked. Axel opened the door. Timmy stepped inside the ornate well-lit living room. Mr Richter's tall thin body was clad all in white, just like he had been for his show. Axel, too, was wearing white — a lab coat — over his school clothes.

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"Have a look arrround," ordered Mr. Richter. He bent his arm at the elbow and gestured to the room. The floor swayed. Timmy felt like he was walking on one of those tilting mazes where the goal is to keep the marble from falling through the holes.

A speckled floral oriental carpet covered most of the tile floor. Thick black bolts held heavy oak tables and bookshelves to the walls. Light-emitting tubes lay in colored nets suspended from the ceiling. Directly in front of him on the wall was a black and white photograph of a thin old man sitting in a chair in front of a large black machine that spouted lightning from its entire surface.

"I see you arrre admirrring Nikola Tesla," said Mr. Richter. He reached up into the ceiling netting and grabbed a light tube. He held the light tube close to the photograph to better illuminate the details. Timmy looked intently at the light tube. It had no wires and no place to hide batteries, yet it glowed.

"Tesla vas not rrreally in zat chairrr beside zat machine while it spewed lightning. Ze picturrre iz a double exposurrre." Mr. Richter made a little bow toward the photograph, or perhaps to the man in the photograph.

"That's good," said Timmy. "It looks dangerous." He wondered how he was going to walk deeper into the house with the floor wobbling and Mr. Richter leaning over him all the time.

"But I," continued Mr. Richter. "I intend to sit in ze lightning strrream forrr rrreal. No fakerrry herrre."

He twirled the light tube for emphasis.

Timmy stepped towards the room on his left. He remembered the front room from the blueprint. It had three exits. Only the room on the left led to the central chamber.

Mr. Richter followed him carrying the light tube. The constant tilting of the house didn't perturb Mr. Richter's walk. Timmy found that he could steady his own gait if he focused on the point of light as it hit the wall.

Casually, Mr. Richter placed the light tube on the ceiling netting in the second room. The glow from the light tube illumined a shiny brass bottle with a hole in its side. Timmy didn't really care about the bottle, Grandma had told him to ask questions to give him time to explore each room. "What's this for?"

"Don't touch that!" Mr. Richter stepped sharply between Timmy and the brass bottle. Timmy pulled his hand back.



Chapter Seventeen — Axel Throws a Fireball

“The oil on yourrr fingerrrtips will rrruin the finish and then I’ll have to spend hourrrs polishing it.”

Timmy almost laughed. Mr. Richter’s warning had sounded so intense that for a moment he had feared that the bottle was dangerous.

Mr. Richter led Timmy to a dark wooden case with glass doors. “This is my cabinet of antiquities.”

“That means old stuff.” Axel’s voice made Timmy turn.

“Ourrr jokerrr is a brrright lad. I’m surrrre he knew that,” said Mr. Richter.

The scientist grabbed Timmy’s shoulder and spun him to face the cabinet. His old bony fingers dug in with unexpected strength. “Zis is one of Galileo’s orrriginal telescopes.” Mr. Richter paused.

Timmy knew he was supposed to say something, but what? Finally he asked, “How many light years can you see with it?” He knew that sounded kind-of-dumb, but at least his question showed he knew what a telescope was for.

“Excellent question! Zee, Axel. Yourrr cousin did not say ‘What a grrreat man is Galileo.’ He asked if the telescope is useful. He is smarrtter zan zat newspaperrr rrrreporrrtterr.”

Timmy wondered how Mr. Richter knew he was Axel's cousin. Neither of them had mentioned it.

Mr. Richter's hand was still on Timmy's shoulder, he steered Timmy into the next room on the way to the center of the maze. This room had no carpet. . Timmy's shoes made clack-clacking sounds on the terra cotta tiles. The floor was slippery. The house swayed. Timmy grabbed the edge of the glass table in the middle of the room. Mr. Richter had no trouble keeping his balance.

One room closer to the center, thought Timmy. He took a backward glance over his shoulder. Grandma would want to know everything that was in this room, too.

Mr. Richter snapped his fingers. The window suddenly became clear. The room filled with bright streaming sunlight. Through the window, Timmy saw the spot on the sidewalk where he had stood trying to look inside the dark house. Suddenly, a ball of lightning, like the one Mr. Richter had rolled on his sleeves during the show, appeared on the glass table.

Axel picked it up and yelled, "Catch, Scarecrow!" He threw it at Timmy. Without thinking, Timmy clasped his fingers around it, the way he would catch a basketball. The lightning ball was nearly weightless.

It was warm, not hot. The fire ball made soft crackling sounds, and gave off tingly electric shocks that felt more like a hard spray of water than

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fire. A gust of wind roared against the window. The house shook. Timmy slid across the room, holding tightly to the lightning ball.

“Yourrr cousin is *brrrave*, too,” complimented Mr. Richter.

Were they playing a game with him? Testing him? Timmy couldn’t tell, but they did seem to be expecting him, unless they treated all visitors “like this. Mr. Richter was a scientist. He couldn’t take time away from his work to give tours to every curious visitor. Or, maybe he didn’t get very many visitors.

Timmy put the ball lightning down on the glass table where it had first appeared and walked towards the central room where he knew he would find the pole that supported the house.

Axel stepped in front of him. “You haven’t seen our vibrating platform yet.”

“Huh!” Timmy’s suspicions were aroused. Axel never volunteered information about anything good.

Axel indicated a metal table in the corner. “Climb on. You’ll like it.”

Timmy looked at Mr. Richter. The scientist’s face was impassive.

Timmy thought about leaving. The table had rows of dark metal clamps and rods. It looked like a torture device. Axel wasn’t beyond doing him bodily harm. But would Mr. Richter allow a guest to be hurt? Timmy knew if he left now, Grandma would be disappointed. He wouldn’t be able to provide

Hildegarde the information she needed about the central room to be safe on her spying mission. And, Axel would tease him unmercifully for weeks. Timmy climbed up onto the table. He braced himself for the worst. Axel clicked a switch on the wall.

The table began to shake. Faster and faster. It felt delightful, like bouncing on a trampoline, only better. Timmy laughed. It was better than any ride at the carnival.

“Okay, that’s enough,” said Mr. Richter.

“I’m fine,” said Timmy. “I like it.”

“You’ve had enough,” said Mr. Richter. “Climb down.”

Timmy thought — *if they want me to stop, they can turn the table off at the switch. This must be another test.* He started dancing.

Suddenly he felt sick. He tottered to the edge of the table, and nearly fell as he climbed to the floor.

“Where is it?” he demanded.



Chapter Eighteen — The Dog Who Heard the Doorbell

Axel directed him to the bathroom where he retched and retched. Over the sound of his own vomiting, he heard Mr. Richter through the bathroom door, “Don’t tell yourrr grrrandmotherrr I didn’t warrn you.”

As he mopped his lips at the sink Timmy looked in the mirror. He saw not only his own face, but also the reflection of the view through the bathroom window. The woman who had trained Hildegard was in Mr. Richter’s yard.

Timmy turned around to get a better look at her. She was gone. He ran the water to have an excuse to stay in the bathroom a little longer, but she did not reappear.

When he returned to the room with the vibrating table, he headed towards the central room. This time neither Mr. Richter nor Axel tried to stop him.

He put one foot over the threshold. He looked around. Everything in the central room was either white or silvery metal. Even the tiles on the floor were white.

A steel pole jutted from a hole in the middle of the floor up through the ceiling. Timmy saw immediately that this must be the central pole that went down into the ground and supported house. The room had no windows, and no obvious light fixtures, yet it was as brightly lit as outdoors on a

sunny day. The floor barely wobbled here. Timmy felt secure enough to let go of the shelf he'd been holding.

Suddenly the huge pit bull leapt on him, knocking him to the hard tile floor.

A large rough paw pinned his shoulder. Huge fangs dripped saliva on his face. Timmy closed his eyes.

"Down boy!" said Axel. "It's okay, R.P."

The dog didn't budge.

"Rrrobes Pierrre, heel!" said Mr. Richter.

The dog lifted its foot off Timmy, and obediently went to Mr. Richter's side.

Timmy sat up.

"I do hope you are not hurrt," said Mr. Richter. "Rrrobes.Pierrre is our guarrrd dog. Mainly he catches mice."

"I bet he could catch a rat, too," said Axel.

"Do not frrrighten ourrr guest," said Mr. Richter. He patted the pit bull gently on the head. "Rrrobes Pierrre, stay."

The dog sat quietly. Mr. Richter helped Timmy to his feet. "You heard a dog bark when you rang the bell. The bell rrrings in a tone that dogs can hearr, but people cannot. The doorrbell is not brrroken as you supposed."

"The dog's bark let you know I was here?" Timmy felt better now that the dog was under control.

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“Yes. Then I watched you with this camera.” Mr. Richter indicated a viewscreen near the ceiling, which showed a wide angle view of the porch. The woman who had trained Hildegard was sitting on the porch swing.

“Is Ms. Weber a friend of yours?” Timmy asked.

Mr. Richter placed a hand on Timmy’s shoulder and turned him around to face the central pole. Now, Timmy saw clamps and metal straps had been fastened to the pole to secure a large machine composed of many struts and metal boxes arranged in a symmetrical array. At the bottom, Timmy saw a row of colored buttons and a toggle switch.

“Herrre you see the centerrr of my worrrld,” said Mr. Richter.

“What does it do?” asked Timmy. He busily tried to memorize everything in this room, the monitor, the pole, the machine, the cabinets. He was going to have to ask Grandma for memory lessons. The shiny metal pole was about 6 inches in diameter. It went up through the ceiling, and down through a hole in the floor. The holes (both floor and ceiling) did not fit tightly up against the pole. A gap of about two inches surrounded the pole. Through the gap in the floor, he saw a cement plug beneath the house. “I call my machine The Communicatorrr,” said Mr. Richter.

Timmy made himself look at the machine. The first thing he noticed was a strip of paper protruding from one of the boxes on the outside of the apparatus. The strip of paper bore the dots and dashes of a Morse Code printout.

Lois June Wickstrom

"I've heard that you communicate with aliens," said Timmy, feeling bold. "Is that true?"

"Aliens arrre among us all the time," said Mr. Richter. "It's no trrrrick to communicate with them. Whenever you have a new idea, that's an alien, popping the idea into yourrr brrrain."



Chapter Nineteen — Where Would Aliens Hide?

That night Timmy told his Grandma everything that had happened. When he finished he said, “I’m worried about Hildegard. I don’t want to send her into that house where Robes Pierre might eat her.”

“A dog has to go outside sometime. A big dog like that doesn’t have a litter box like Hildy. You can hide behind the hedge, watch the yard and let Hildegard enter the house when R.P. is outside. When R.P. goes back inside, just yank on Hildy’s leash and she’ll come back to you.”

Timmy thought about it for a while. “That sounds okay. I can bring my periscope so I’ll be able to see over the hedge.”

“I like how you think,” said Grandma.

Timmy felt pleased but embarrassed by the compliment. Then he asked, “But why was Ms. Weber there?”

“They might be friends. They are both German.” Grandma didn’t seem to think this was important.

“Our job is to protect ourselves if Mr. Richter is working with aliens.” Grandma sketched the furniture onto the blueprint, where Timmy had described it. “He might have some connection with whatever or whoever melted the bridge. And his transporter might be an alien invention.”

“Do you really believe aliens would visit Earth and talk to Mr. Richter?” Timmy carried silverware to the table. “I thought they were supposed to say, ‘Take me to your leader.’”

“That’s only in comic books.” Grandma rolled up the blueprint and placed it back into its drawer. “We don’t really know what aliens are like. We don’t even know if aliens exist.” Grandma led him to the dining room where enchiladas and salad were waiting for him.

During dinner, Grandma asked more details about the buttons on the machine. Timmy found that he couldn’t remember the colors or how many, but they were about the same size as the ones in the garage.

“Mr. Richter had a dots and dashes code message, too.” Timmy poured salsa onto his enchilada. “Do you think that message you got in the garage in an alien language?”

“Whoa,” said Grandma. “All I know right now is that I can’t read the message. It might not be a message at all. Maybe it was just some electrical interference from the blip that made the street lights blink.”

Timmy was indignant. “I thought you knew all about spy stuff!”

“Nobody knows all about spy stuff.” Grandma sat down and looked Timmy in the eyes. “There are always many ways to uncover secrets. We don’t have to rely on one thing, like breaking a code. I went down to the river today and looked at chunks of metal the crane dredged up. I didn’t see anything that looked alien. I don’t think a spaceship crashed there.”

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“Do you think the aliens attacked the bridge? Are they going to attack something else?”

“They may have bumped the bridge by accident. They may have landed somewhere else.” Grandma paused. “Or maybe they did attack us with strange weapons. We don’t have enough evidence to know for sure. But I’m almost positive they didn’t land anywhere near that bridge.”

“But we know Mr. Richter is involved.” Timmy wanted all their work to mean something.

“No, we don’t even know that. We have our suspicions about Mr. Richter.” Grandma smiled. “Spying requires patience. We need to collect clues, ask questions and try out theories. We only have the answer when everything fits together.”

Timmy decided to change the subject. “If aliens landed an injured craft, where would they be?”

Grandma smiled. “I don’t know how to think like an alien. I know if I were piloting a spaceship and it was injured, I’d want to land where nobody could see me while I did my repairs.”

“You mean like the woods? Or maybe hundreds or even thousands of miles from here?”

“Those are good possibilities. But they don’t help us find the aliens, or even figure out if they exist. We need some firm evidence.”

“Mr. Richter says he talks to aliens.”

"Maybe so. There are probably lots of aliens. Who's to say if he talked to the same aliens that melted the bridge? Or if the aliens melted the bridge. Or even that Mr. Richter really talked to aliens." Grandma took another helping of salad.

"We got that strange message at the same time as the earthquake. The bridge melted at the same time, too. Don't you think all that is connected?"

"We don't have enough information yet. That's why we're going to send Hildegard to explore Mr. Richter's house."

"I was just there. What can she do that I can't?" Again Timmy felt he was being compared to a rat and coming up second.

"She can wear a little camera on her head and she can go inside that "Communicator" and give us a better view." Grandma gave Timmy a hug. "Each of us has special talents. I'm not comparing you to Hildegard when I point out that she has abilities that you don't have."

Timmy wasn't quite convinced. Grandma changed the subject.

"I talked to Ben's mom about the earthquake. She says she's been around animals out in California during an earthquake. She says animals, especially rats, run around and act nervous for several minutes or even hours before an earthquake. But you remember, our Hildy was calmly storing food under your bed when we had our earthquake."

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“So, it wasn’t a normal earthquake. There was no warning.”

“Right.” Grandma seemed to be working something out in her head.

“Could the bridge collapsing have caused the earthquake?”

“That’s possible,” said Grandma. “Or maybe whatever caused the bridge to collapse, also caused the earthquake.”

After dinner, Grandma and Timmy gave Hildegard another lesson in pushing buttons and toggling switches. Hildegard pressed the buttons every time Timmy or Grandma asked, even when the hopper was disconnected and she didn’t get a reward. But she still refused to toggle a switch, even for a piece of carob.



Chapter Twenty — Hildegarde Protests

The next morning, while he was still under the covers, Timmy remembered that Hildegarde liked to sleep in his slippers. He didn't want to step on her again. Still under the covers, he called, "*Links*."

He was rewarded with the sound of skittering feet on his linoleum floor.

"Good girl, Hildy." Timmy felt happy that Hildegarde chose to sleep in his slippers.

She followed him to the bathroom, her nails making scratching sounds against the linoleum floor. Again, she tapped on the water bottle to get a few drops. Then she washed her hands and used her wet fingers to clean out her ears.

The bag of tissue rolls beside the toilet was nearly empty. Timmy took down a new package from the shelf. As he lowered it toward the floor, Hildegarde scampered to the very spot he had planned to put it. He moved the package over a few feet. Hildegarde moved to block him again. He tried another spot. Again, she ran underneath and made scolding sounds.

Finally he put the new package back on the shelf, bent down, picked up Hildegarde, and then put the new package on the floor. Hildegarde shook her whiskers at him and squeaked. She struggled to get out of his hands.

Timmy released Hildegarde on the floor. "It's okay, girl." She certainly was making a fuss about nothing.

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Hildegarde continued to scold him. She puffed up like a fur ball, and angrily paced back and forth around the new package of toilet paper rolls a dozen times. Then she ran to the door. There was no mistaking what she wanted. Timmy let her out, and reached for his toothbrush.

Moments later he heard Hildegarde squeaking in the kitchen. He ran, toothbrush still in his mouth, to see what had happened. Grandma was on a ladder getting something from a high shelf. Hildegarde stood on her hind feet at the base of the ladder, scolding. Grandma laughed.

“Why is she squeaking?” he demanded.

“Rats are very persnickety,” explained Grandma. “Hildegarde knows her way around this house better than we do. Every time we move something, she has to relearn that part of the house.”

Timmy smiled. “No wonder you think she’ll make a great spy. But she’s too noisy. She can’t be very sneaky when her toenails click against the floor.”

“I’ll clip her nails,” promised Grandma.



Chapter Twenty-One — Don't Tell Mr. Richter

As they boarded the bus, Axel yanked Timmy's shirt out of his jeans. "Why did you come to Mr. Richter's yesterday? He thinks I'm in high school. If he thinks I hang out with little kids like you, he might fire me."

"You are my age." Timmy took his seat beside Ben.

"That's not what I told him when I got the job." Axel's birthmark was growing darker by the second.

"He knows I'm your cousin. You can have a cousin almost any age." Timmy wished Axel would sit down and leave him alone.

"Whatever you do, don't tell him!" Axel grabbed Timmy's shoulder and pinned him against the seat.

"Sit down, Mr. Covert," yelled the bus driver.

Axel took the seat across from Timmy, and the bus resumed its route.

"Why would I tell him? I probably won't be over there again, unless he does another magic show." Timmy felt relieved that Axel didn't suspect him of spying.

"Mr. Richter doesn't do magic tricks. Everything you saw was science." Axel patted his pocket, and Timmy wondered if he was carrying his pocket knife.

"Say, do you know why Ms. Weber was at Mr. Richter's house?" Timmy asked.

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“She’s his girlfriend.” Axel looked wary. “How do you know her?”

Timmy decided not to tell Axel everything about Hildegarde. He just said, “She’s a friend of Ben’s mom.”

“Oh, I knew that.” Axel seemed relieved.

When they got to class, Ms. Mulisch pulled Timmy aside. “Why didn’t you try out for track? Coach Sweet says you’re fast enough to be on the team this year.”

Timmy looked at his feet. His toes curled up. He still wasn’t sure if he wanted to be on the team. With Hildegarde and Mr. Richter and the aliens and the earthquake, he had a lot on his mind.

When he missed the tryouts, he’d almost felt relieved that the decision had been made for him. But he didn’t want to tell all that to Ms. Mulisch. Instead he said, “Tryouts were over when I got done with writing my lines.”

“Do you want me to talk to Coach? There might still be room for you on the team. Your grandmother is so proud of you.”

“No, thanks.” Timmy walked quickly to his seat. He didn’t want to be a special case — the kid who got on the team because his grandmother was friends with the teacher.



Chapter Twenty-Two — Did the Aliens Attack?

Ms. Mulisch stood at the front of the classroom and held up a newspaper clipping with a photo of the crane holding the melted piece of bridge. The headline read: Police Chief Suspects Possible Alien Attack.

“What do you young men and young women think of this?” asked Ms. Mulisch.

“I think if the aliens wanted to attack us, we’d be goners,” said Joey. “They wouldn’t just zap a tiny bridge.”

“I agree,” said Ben. “They wouldn’t stop with one attack.” He looked around the room to make sure everybody was looking at him. Most of the other students were either looking puzzled or ignoring him.

Ben continued in his most dramatic voice, “I think if it was aliens, it was an accident, like when a moving car bumps into your parked car and the driver doesn’t stop to leave a note.”

“Ben brings up a good point,” said Ms. Mulisch. “How would aliens leave a note? ‘Sorry Earthlings. We hit your bridge. Please contact our insurance company.’”

The students laughed.

“That would be kind of funny,” said Ms. Mulisch. “The aliens drive their spaceship all the way to Earth from wherever they live — on another

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planet, another solar system, maybe even another galaxy, and then they have what for them is probably a fender bender accident.”

“Or maybe they’re testing us,” said Axel. “Maybe they want to find out how easy Earth is to conquer.”

“Oooh. That’s scary,” said Beatrice. “I don’t want Earth to be conquered.”

“I don’t think you could tell the difference,” said Chip. “As long as you could still have heart-shaped boxes of chocolates.”

Beatrice lifted up the lid of her desk to make sure her chocolates were still there.



Chapter Twenty-Three — Hildegarde is Missing

When Timmy arrived home, he opened the door and called, “Komm hierher.”

He listened for the sound of Hildegarde’s little feet. Silence. Had Grandma clipped her toenails already? He called again, “Komm hierher.” Still, no Hildegarde.

He went to the bathroom. She wasn’t in her litter box. He went to his bedroom. She wasn’t under his bed. He went to the garage. She wasn’t pressing buttons or hiding food in her hole.

Hildegarde was gone. Then he thought, *maybe Grandma took her somewhere*. He heard the rumble of Grandma’s car pulling into the driveway, and ran outside to meet her. Grandma saw his worried face. “Is something wrong?”

“Do you know where Hildegarde is?” Timmy asked.

“Isn’t she in the house?” Grandma closed the car door.

“She doesn’t come when I call her, and she isn’t in her favorite places.”

“Hildegarde walks along the walls. Let’s walk along all our walls and look for her.”

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Timmy and Grandma began searching for Hildegard at the front door and walked in opposite directions. When they came to a table or shelf, they looked under it. While Timmy was in his bedroom, Grandma was in the kitchen. “Aha!” shouted Grandma.

Timmy came running. “Did you find her?”

Grandma shook her head and pointed to a small chewed-looking hole in the corner of the back door. “She’s outside!” Timmy was horrified. “Anything could happen to her!”

Grandma pointed at the hole again. “Hildy didn’t make that hole.”

“How do you know?” Timmy thought the hole looked like a rat had chewed it.

“She wouldn’t need a hole that big.” Grandma led Timmy into her bedroom and showed him a hole that Hildy had chewed in her dresser drawer. It was about half the size of the hole in the door. “I told you rat ribcages can squeeze down really small.”

“Do you think a bigger animal got in and took Hildy?” asked Timmy.

“Depends on what you call an animal.” Grandma scowled.

Timmy gave her a puzzled look.

“Let’s go back and look at that hole again. Grandma picked up a magnifying glass from her desk and carried it to the kitchen. She knelt down by the door.

“Those marks were not made by rat teeth. They were cut by somebody trying to imitate the look of a chewed hole. They probably used one of those new laser chisels.”

“Why would somebody try to make it look like a rat chewed our door?” Timmy ran his finger over the fake toothmarks.

“We’re supposed to think she escaped on her own. Perhaps she just went for a walk.” Grandma felt around the gnawed-looking hole.

“There’s nothing embedded in our door.” She went outside and scanned the trim around the door. “Nothing here, either. Whoever did this is either very, very good, or an amateur.”

Timmy felt totally bewildered.

“An expert would want to know if we have discovered this hole, and an expert would have ways of detecting our actions that we don’t suspect. An amateur wouldn’t care if we figure it out or not.”

“Aren’t you worried about Hildy?” Timmy’s voice squeaked with worry.

“I have a feeling Hildy will be back.” Grandma pinched her lips together.

Timmy wondered why Grandma was so sure. “I’m not a little kid. You don’t have to lie to me.”

Grandma smiled. “Let’s have dinner, and then we can go out to a movie.”

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“Shouldn’t we stay home and wait for Hildy?”

“I think Hildegarde is more likely to return if we’re not home.”



Chapter Twenty-Four — Hildegarde Cleans Her Ears

Timmy couldn't pay attention to the movie. He kept thinking about Hildy.

The main character on the movie screen was running somewhere. Timmy imagined he was racing madly to find Hildy. Did Elizabeth Weber have her? But Ms. Weber had just paid a visit to their home. She didn't need to steal Hildy to check on her.

Nothing made sense. Ms. Weber's fingernails were too perfect for someone who used tools. Timmy's mind raced faster and faster, thinking about rescuing Hildegarde.

The next thing he knew, the movie was over.

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When they returned, Timmy called, "Komm hierher."

The house was silent.

"Let's go to bed. I'm sure she'll be back when we get up in the morning." Grandma sounded calm.

Timmy still worried. His toes curled up. He could see a small hole in the top of his right shoe.

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“Worrying won’t bring her back. And when she does come back, she’ll need more training. Quickly. You’ll need to be rested and in top shape.”

“For what?” Timmy did not want to go back into Mr. Richter’s house.

“Clearly there’s something we’re not supposed to find out.” Grandma gave him a quick hug.

“Like what?” Timmy looked down at the hole in his shoe. It was bigger than just moments before.

“Maybe the secret of Mr. Richter’s transporting system.” Grandma tousled his hair.

“I didn’t see anything. It was too dark under that platform.” Timmy felt guilty. He was the one who went under the platform. Why did someone take Hildegarde?

“Maybe whoever took Hildegarde is connected to the earthquake,” suggested Grandma.

“Come on, Grandma! Hildegarde is a rat, not an alien.”

“Maybe the aliens look like rats.” Grandma had a twinkle in her eye.

“If they look like rats, then they fly in tiny spaceships that wouldn’t crash a bridge.” Timmy knew Grandma couldn’t argue with that.

“Well, somebody wants to make sure we don’t find out something.” Grandma yawned.

“And that means we have to find out?” As soon as he said the words, Timmy wished he hadn’t.

“Exactly.” Grandma nodded.

“I don’t think I can sleep.” Timmy felt his toes curl way up.

“Sleep is a spy’s best friend.” Grandma patted his head.

“I don’t want to be a spy.” Timmy ducked out from under Grandma’s hand.

“You do want your sleep. Now, go lie down on your bed. We’ll talk more about this in the morning. I’ve set your alarm clock.” Grandma blew him a good-night kiss.

Timmy sat on his bed, planning to turn off the alarm clock as soon as Grandma left the room.

“You’re not trained well enough to turn off your alarm clock yet,” said Grandma. “Stick with me and it won’t be long before you can get up without it.”

“Right now, I can’t get to sleep.” Timmy sat up. “Can you teach me a reverse alarm?”

“That’s simple,” said Grandma. “Lie down.” She waited until Timmy was on his back, under the covers.

“Now, count backwards from 100. With each count, relax your body a little more. Start with your scalp on the top of your head. Next your forehead,

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your eyes, the front and back of your head.” Grandma’s voice was soothing. Timmy could feel himself calming down, feeling sleepy.

She continued, “Your neck, your shoulders, all the way down to the bottoms of your feet. Just think about relaxing your body. You’ll go to sleep. I promise.”

Timmy planned to turn off the alarm clock as soon as he finished his count down. The alarm clock went off at 6 a.m.. He must have forgotten to turn it off. He whispered, “*Links*.” Hildegard wasn’t there. Timmy went to the bathroom to brush his teeth.

As he reached for the faucet, he heard a *plop*. He looked behind the toilet. There was Hildegard cleaning out her ears. And beside her in the litter box gravel was a small shiny metallic object.

“Hildy! You’re back!” Timmy wanted to pick her up and hug her, but he knew better that to touch her while she was washing. She might bite.

Grandma knocked on the bathroom door. “Okay if I come in?”

“I’m decent.” Timmy picked up the tube of toothpaste.

Grandma opened the door. She bent down and petted Hildegard. Then she picked up the metal cylinder, and rolled it between her fingers.

“What is it?” asked Timmy.

Grandma held it up to the light and examined it.

“What?” Timmy asked, again.

Grandma put her finger to her lips. Timmy fell silent, puzzled. Grandma took the cylinder to the garage. Timmy followed, making as little noise as possible. Hildegard followed, too, her feet making skittering sounds against the linoleum. Grandma hadn't cut her nails after all. And neither had the rat-nappers.

Grandma placed the tiny cylinder on her workbench, under a large magnifying glass. She used a thin metal wedge to pop it open, revealing a hollow tube-shaped interior filled with miniature machinery. Grandma picked up a small pointed tool, and adjusted several dials.

Timmy looked at Grandma's tool kit. She must be a spy. Why else would she have so many tiny tools, and that magnifying glass on a stand? It couldn't just be for the train set and the Morse Code machine. And why did she have that Morse Code machine? Timmy watched through the magnifying glass while Grandma expertly turned tiny dials and moved tiny levers.

Finally Grandma spoke. "That will stop them for a while. This is a radio controlled speaker. I've just changed the broadcast frequency."

"Someone wanted to spy on us?" Timmy was surprised. "Why?"

"Maybe the aliens want to know what we found out about the bridge. Or maybe those rumors about me being a spy have gotten out again and somebody wants to spy on me. It doesn't matter."

"But won't the rat-napper figure out the new frequency?"

"Of course. But that takes time."

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“Why didn’t you just take the thing apart so it doesn’t work any more?”

“That would take the fun out of it. Let’s leave this here for a few days. Now that we know about it we have plenty of time to figure out how to turn it to our advantage.”

Hildegarde nuzzled Grandma’s foot. Grandma picked her up and carefully ran her fingers all over Hildegarde’s body.

“What are you doing, now?” asked Timmy.

“I’m checking her body for implanted devices.” Grandma felt Hildegarde’s leg-pits.

“Why?” asked Timmy.

“Just a precaution,” said Grandma. “I checked her before I took her home from the pet shop. Maybe we were supposed to find that ear speaker. Where there’s one bug, there are often more.”

Grandma petted Hildegarde reassuringly.

“Is she okay?” Timmy demanded.

“Unless she swallowed something, she’s clean. But her nails do need cutting. Remind me tonight.”

“Why would she swallow a speaker?” Timmy was much more interested in spying than in trimming nails.

“Coat anything with peanut butter and she’ll swallow it.” While Grandma spoke, she inspected Hildegarde’s nails. Suddenly she stopped

and scraped one of Hildegarde's nails with her own. "This looks like a microdot. Somebody is trying to communicate with us."

Timmy looked at his watch. "I'm late again." He dashed out the garage door.

"You forgot your lunch. You need a good breakfast!" Grandma called as he ran down the sidewalk.



Chapter Twenty-Five — Axel Accuses Timmy

Timmy caught the bus at his regular stop. There was an empty seat next to Beatrice. Maybe if he pretended to be interested in her, Axel would leave him alone.

“May I sit next to the window?” he asked her.

“No, Cutie. I don’t want you looking out the window at other girls when you’re with me.”

“Don’t call me Cutie,” Timmy wasn’t sure sitting beside Beatrice had been such a good idea, after all.

Axel got on at the next stop. He grabbed Timmy by the back of his shirt. “You took something from Mr. Richter’s lab. I want it back.”

“Ooh,” said Beatrice. “I like tough guys. But right now, I’m with Timmy, so you leave him alone.”

“I told Mr. Richter, ‘my cousin is not a thief.’ But you’re the only one who could have taken it.” Axel brought his fist near Timmy’s face.

“I didn’t take anything,” Timmy’s voice squeaked, despite his effort to sound indignant. Axel pulled Timmy’s shirt tighter, making the collar press against his windpipe.

“My boyfriend says he didn’t take anything,” said Beatrice.

Timmy felt his face turning red. “I am not...” he squeaked.

“Just give it back, and everything will be fine.” Axel pulled Timmy to a standing position, at the same time loosening his collar, so he could talk.

“Give what back?” asked Timmy.

“You know. The little speaker thing.”

So that was where it had come from. There was no way he could admit having it without Axel being sure he’d stolen it. “I didn’t take it!” Timmy shouted, hoping to get the attention of the bus driver.

“I know it’s at your house. It’s turned on and your voice came over the lab loudspeaker.”

“You’re welcome to come over and look for it,” said Timmy. “Now let me go.”

Axel tightened his grip on Timmy’s shirt. “That thing’s so tiny it could be hiding anywhere.”

Timmy decided to take a chance. “Like in my rat’s ear?”

Axel’s response was immediate. “That’s too gross. Even you wouldn’t put it there!”

The bus driver called out. “Everybody, take your seats!”

Axel let go of Timmy’s shirt and shoved him down into his seat.

Beatrice whispered, “You’d better bring that thing back or you might get arrested.”

"I didn't take it," said Timmy.

"But you have it," said Beatrice. "Your voice tones gave you away."



Chapter Twenty-Six — Illusions

Ben came in late and passed Timmy a note he'd made with their rat mask. The whole note said

A photograph of a handwritten note on lined paper. The text is written in a casual, slightly slanted cursive script. The note is centered on the page and occupies the middle section of the page.

I'm sorry you didn't
hear your rat talk.
We had an adventure
walk last night.
Silly Beatrice. Is she on
the team alright?

When Timmy put the rat mask over the message, it read, "I hear your rat had an adventure last night. Is she alright?"

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How could Ben know about Hildy's adventure? He hadn't told anybody. Surely Grandma hadn't told anybody. Was Ben the rat-napper? But how could Ben have gotten the speaker from Mr. Richter's house? Ben wouldn't spy on him. Did Ben know who had put the speaker in Hildegard's ear?

He wrote back: "Hildy's fine. What do you know about her adventure?"



Ben did not reply.

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Ms. Mulisch interrupted Timmy's reverie. "Mr. Covert, do you know what an illusion is?"

Timmy started to mumble something about being fooled, when Axel spoke up loudly. Timmy breathed a sigh of relief. There was something good about having a cousin in class with the same last name.

Axel said. "Sure. It's seeing things that aren't real. Like this." Axel held his pencil between two fingers and jiggled his hand. The pencil looked like it was bending and flopping around. When Axel stopped moving his hand, the pencil was straight again.

"Very good, Mr. Covert. That was an excellent example of how our eyes can be fooled. In fact, we can fool all of our senses. That's what we'll be doing today in science lab." She looked around the room. "Pick your partners."

Timmy didn't know what to do. He didn't have many friends. And he didn't want to work with either of his usual partners. Axel thought he'd stolen the speaker. Ben knew about Hildy's adventure, but hadn't answered his note.

Neither of them was safe to talk to.

Joey tapped him on the shoulder. "Something fishy is going on at Mr. Richter's place," she whispered

Timmy looked at Joey quizzically. Was she pumping him? She looked genuinely worried and Joey was not a good actress. "Okay, you can be my partner."

The lab desks had bowls of water and rubber gloves.

"I presume all of you have washed your hands at some point in your lives," said Ms. Mulisch.

"Wash?" asked Marko. "What's that?"

The other children laughed.

"Well, if you didn't wash, maybe you've been out in a rainstorm," continued Ms. Mulisch. "You know what your hands feel like when they are wet. You can tell the difference between being wet and being dry."

"My mom says I'm wet behind the ears," said Sioux.

"Can you tell if your hands are wet or dry?" asked Ms. Mulisch. She was refusing to take any of the children's teasing seriously today.

Most of the children nodded.

"There are two gloves on each lab table. That's one for each of you. Put one on and plunge your gloved hand into the water. Then notice if your gloved hand feels wet or dry."

"Do the gloves leak?" asked Joey.

"That's for me to know and you to find out," said Ms. Mulisch.

Joey picked up her glove and worked it onto her left hand. The pistachio stains on her fingers left red fingerprints on the yellow gloves. Timmy watched. Joey gingerly lowered her fingers and then her whole gloved hand into the water.

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"My hand feels wet," she said. "I'll bet the glove leaks." She pulled her gloved hand out of the bowl. No water poured from the glove, like it would if there were a hole.

She removed the glove, making even more red fingerprints on the yellow plastic. Her hand was dry. "That's awesome weird," she remarked. She lowered her voice to a whisper. "But not as weird as what's going on at Richter's. Axel was there at 6 this morning. You know he never gets up early."

Timmy put on his rubber glove and plunged his hand into the water. The water squeezed the glove tight against his skin. His hand inside the glove felt cool and wet. But when he pulled his hand out of the glove, it was dry, just like Joey's had been. He asked, "Is this a trick?"

Ms. Mulisch answered, "This is science. Remember, this is science lab, and we are supposed to be studying illusions."

"Okay, yeah," said Timmy.

"But Mr. Richter is hiding something," Joey whispered. "Axel comes home from his job talking about the oddest things. He even says Mr. Richter can make your rat move by remote control."

"Hildy's fine," said Timmy.

"Mr. Richter is waiting for just the right time."

"What can he make Hildy do?"

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“Think. She could steal Grandma’s jewels. She could chew through your electric cords. She could ...”

Ms. Mulisch interrupted. “Now that you’ve all done the experiment, use the your report forms to record your materials, method, observations and conclusions. Answer the question: Did I experience an illusion?”



Chapter Twenty-Seven — The FBI Man Visits

As soon as Timmy opened the garage door to park his bicycle, he called, “Komm hierher!”

Hildegarde skittered up to him, twitching her whiskers. “Oh, Hildy! I’m so glad you’re safe.” He picked her up and cuddled her while he walked into the kitchen. Grandma had hammered a square of wood over the chiseled hole. Timmy bent down and showed it to Hildegarde. “See, Hildy. No more adventures.”

Just then, the doorbell rang. Timmy carried Hildegarde to the front door and peered out through the peep hole. He saw a thin little man wearing a nerdy gray suit, thick rimmed glasses and a broad-brimmed hat. The man carried an old leather briefcase. He flashed a badge, and read “FBI.”

“Do you have a warrant?” asked Timmy.

“No,” said the man. “I just want to talk with you.”

“Come back when you have a warrant,” said Timmy.

“I’ve got some information that might interest you,” said the man.

“About the aliens who melted the bridge.”

“Fine. You can leave it in the mailbox.” Timmy walked away from the door.

“Not so fast. Why should I give you something if you don’t help me?”

"No reason," said Timmy.

"Don't you want to know about the aliens who melted the bridge?"

"I can wait and read about it in the newspaper." Timmy wished the man would go away.

"Okay. I can tell you about that speaker in your rat's ear."

"Does everybody in town know about that?" asked Timmy.

"Let me in. I'll tell you what you want to know if you'll answer my questions." The FBI man persisted.

"Get a warrant," said Timmy.

He carried Hildegard back to the kitchen. He thought about calling Uncle Gear on his cell phone, but the house might be bugged. And what could Uncle Gear do? The FBI man wasn't threatening him. He just wanted to talk.

Timmy had to admit he was curious what the FBI man had to say. And he couldn't imagine that he knew any secrets the FBI man didn't already know. But he didn't want to take a chance, and endanger his parents or Hildegard.

Timmy grabbed a carrot from the refrigerator and then looked out the kitchen window. The FBI man was in the back yard, climbing his Grandmother's apple tree. That was trespassing. Should he call the police? Did the police arrest the FBI?

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Ding ping. He heard the bell of Grandma's bicycle. The FBI man must not have driven here or Grandma would have spotted his car. She would never alert the FBI by ringing her bell.

Timmy opened the front door and held his finger to his lips. Grandma rolled her bike into the living room, so she wouldn't make noise by raising the garage door. Timmy closed the front door quietly behind her.

Grandma took off her bike helmet and put it on the shelf by the door. A zinnia fell from the hat onto the floor. "*Silly garoo*," muttered Grandma, but she didn't pick up the flower. Timmy got on his hands and knees, still holding Hildegard, and began crawling towards the kitchen. Grandma got to her hands and knees, too, and grinned at Timmy. She followed him to the kitchen. He whispered, "There's an FBI man in our back yard."

"Too bad I covered up Hildy's hole," she whispered back. "We could use it to spy on him."

Timmy crawled over to the toolbox that Grandma had left in the corner of the kitchen. He gave his grandmother a screwdriver and cuddled Hildegard while Grandma removed the panel she had screwed in place that morning.

Grandma lay down on the floor and stared through the fake rat hole into the back yard.

The little man was setting up a camera in their tree. Grandma screwed the panel back in place, stood up, looked out the kitchen window and announced loudly, "I think it's time to let him in."

The little man was so startled he slipped on the tree branch and dropped his toolkit.

"Timmy, please bring our guest the step ladder so he can get down more easily."

Timmy handed Hildegard to his grandmother. Then he walked slowly down the hall to the garage while Grandma opened the back door.

"Timmy tells me you're from the FBI." Grandma greeted him. "Do you know about the aliens who melted our bridge."



Chapter Twenty-Eight — Grandma Cooperates with the FBI

The FBI man said something in a low voice.

“Could you speak up, sonny?” said Grandma in her imitation feeble-old-lady voice. Timmy knew Grandma could hear just fine, and she was doing this so he’d be able to hear everything while he was in the garage.

The man nearly shouted, “That’s right Ma’am. I’m an alien specialist with the FBI.”

“Have you met any aliens?” asked Grandma, still using her old-lady voice.

“It’s hard to tell for sure,” shouted the man. One of his legs dangled from the tree. Both his arms grasped the branch above him. “They might have been aliens. Or, they might have been extremely odd humans.”

“I’m pretty odd,” said Grandma. “Do you think I’m an alien?”

“Of course not, Ma’am,” said the little man indignantly.

“I’d like to meet an alien,” said Grandma. She petted Hildegarde. “I’ll bet you would, too, Hildy. Wouldn’t you?”

“My name’s not Hildy,” the man said. “It’s Williams. Bond Williams.”

“Nice to meet you, Mr. Williams,” said Grandma. “I guess you already know my name.”

"That I do, Ms. Covert." The man tipped his broad-brimmed hat.

Timmy carried the ladder into the yard, and placed it under Mr. Williams. After cautiously placing both feet on the ladder, the FBI man agilely clambered down and retrieved his tool box.

"Could we go inside where we'll be more comfortable?" he asked.

"I don't know why not," said Grandma. "I'll brew a spot of tea."

Timmy laughed. His grandmother never said silly things like *a spot of tea*.

"You shouldn't laugh, young man. I'm sure your grandmother makes delicious tea. You'll appreciate it when you're older." The FBI man folded up the ladder and carried up to the house.

"Why did you put a camera in the tree facing our house?" Timmy asked. "Do you have a warrant for that?"

"You must be a good civics student," said the FBI man. "You know your rights."

Grandma held the back door wide open. "Please return the ladder to the garage."

"Where's that?" asked the FBI man.

"Timmy, would you show the gentleman to the garage?" Grandma placed the teapot and cups on the breakfast table in the kitchen.

Timmy wondered why Grandma wanted this FBI man to see Hildy's training equipment, and her old Morse Code machine and all the other odd

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stuff she kept in her garage. But he didn't argue. "This way," he said. "Follow me."

The FBI man struggled with the ladder, but Timmy did not offer to help him carry it.

"I have the right to take that camera out of the tree and keep it," said Timmy, as he opened the door to the garage.

"Yes, you do," said the FBI man. "I thought you might want it in the tree."

"Why would I want you to spy on me?" Timmy wondered if Grandma really knew what she was doing letting this government agent into their home.

Grandma interrupted. "Hurry up with that ladder. We can discuss everything over tea."

Timmy showed the FBI man the hook on the wall. The FBI man placed the top strut of the ladder over the hook and grabbed one of the steps. "Got to make sure everything is upright and parallel."

Then without taking time to look around, the FBI man placed a hand on Timmy's shoulder and steered him back to the hallway. "We mustn't keep your grandmother waiting. I like my tea hot."

The FBI man led the way back to the kitchen where Grandma was pouring steaming hot mint tea into her blue-flowered china mugs on the breakfast table.

Grandma placed a cup of pale green tea in front of each of them. The little man placed one hand on either side of his cup, leaned over and inhaled the steam. “Yerba buena,” he said.

“Just because Grandpa moved here from Mexico doesn’t mean we like to speak Spanish,” said Timmy.

“Now Timmy, we can be polite to Mr. Williams. He is our guest. If he wants to speak Spanish, we can speak Spanish, too.” Grandma moved slowly. Timmy wasn’t sure if this was part of her old-lady act or because Hildegard was perched on her shoulder.

Mr. Williams gestured towards the teapot. His hand bumped his cup, and splashed tea on the table top. Timmy handed him a napkin. Instead of mopping up the tea, the man patted his brow. “I don’t really speak Spanish. *Yerba buena* means *Spearmint tea*. That’s all the Spanish I know.”

“*Yerba buena* means good herb,” said Timmy.

Grandma patted Timmy on the shoulder and said, “I think Hildy would like some carob. Would you get her some?” Grandma nodded towards the garage.

Timmy got up and walked quickly to the garage, thankful to be away from the FBI man. He didn’t go straight to the carob stash on the shelf. Instead he grabbed the flashlight on the wall and inspected the ladder, playing the beam carefully over the bottom side of each step. He found a little nod-

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ule wedged between the right edge of the top step and the side strut where the FBI man had grabbed it earlier.

Another miniature radio speaker like the one that had been in Hildegard's ear. Timmy decided it would be best to let Mr. Williams think he hadn't found it. At least not yet. Not until he could discuss it with Grandma. He grabbed a carob bar and returned to the kitchen.

Grandma was refilling Mr. Williams' cup. "Please break off a small piece for Hildy."

Timmy noisily ripped the wrapper and snapped the carob bar. Then he snapped it again, and held one chunk up near Hildegard's nose.

"*Silly garoo*. Please don't feed her on my shoulder. Take her down and put her on the table so she can eat like civilized folks." Grandma was still using her little-old-lady voice.

Timmy followed instructions. He petted Hildegard's brown hood and set her down on the table between himself and the FBI agent. Then Hildegard took the carob daintily in her small pink paws. She observed the FBI man while she nibbled. The FBI agent moved his teacup away from Hildegard, as if he feared she would dip her furry face in for a drink.

"Don't worry," said Grandma. Hildy doesn't like hot tea. She won't try to drink yours."

Timmy took a sip of his tea and asked, "Why do you think we want you to spy on us?"

Chapter Twenty-Nine — A Brown Spot on Hildegarde's Ear

The man leaned back in his chair as if getting ready to tell a long story. "Somebody kidnapped Hildegarde. If that happens again, don't you want to know who is taking her?"

"Hildy was taken at night," said Timmy. Again he found himself wondering if everybody in the whole world knew about Hildegarde's adventure last night. "A camera isn't much of a secret if it clicks or flashes at night."

"The camera I installed has a silent picture capturing mode," said Mr. Williams. "And it has a light detector. It knows to use the night lens at night. It doesn't use a flash, no matter how dark it gets. I do work for the FBI, you know. We have the best equipment."

"You think someone might take our dear Hildy again?" asked Grandma.

Mr. Williams resumed shouting. "I think that is highly likely. Hildegarde is our clue to a much bigger mystery. Possibly even to the aliens who melted the bridge."

"Hildy's no alien!" insisted Timmy. "Of course not," soothed the FBI man. "But with your permission, I'd like to put a bug on her. A locator with a listening device. If she is kidnapped again, we can voiceprint the kidnappers, and apprehend them."

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"You sound like you hope she'll be kidnapped again," said Timmy.

"In a way, I do," said Mr. Williams. "It will shorten our search by months." "And meanwhile, you'll be listening to me and Grandma and taking our pictures," said Timmy. "No, thank you."

"Not so fast, Timmy," said Grandma. "Mr. Williams isn't going to kidnap Hildegard." Grandma looked him squarely in the eyes. "Are you, Mr. Williams?"

"No, Ma'am." The FBI man nodded his head, affirming his sincerity.

"So this speaker would be for her protection, only," said Grandma.

"Exactly," said Mr. Williams. "It's always nice to find someone who understands. Folks are so suspicious of the FBI these days."

"Suppose you tell us more about these aliens," said Grandma.

"I'm not at liberty to..." The FBI man swirled his teacup.

"You said you'd tell me about the aliens if I let you in," said Timmy.

"*You* did not let me in," said Mr. Williams. "Your grandmother did."

"Then you can tell *me* about the aliens," said Grandma.

Mr. Williams drained his teacup. "It's like this. At FBI headquarters we have *Intuitives*. Do you know what those are?"

Grandma nodded.

Mr. Williams continued. "An intuitive can see things with his mind. Things that are happening in places he has never been."

"Like daydreaming?" asked Timmy.

"It's much more scientific and exact than daydreaming," said the FBI man. "An intuitive pinpointed your house on a map and described your rat, all the way down to the brown spot on the back of her left ear."

Timmy bent Hildegarde's left ear forwards. There was indeed a brown spot. Hildegarde continued eating.

"You could have seen her ear after you got here," said Grandma. "Why should I believe you?"

Timmy gave Hildegarde the other piece of carob.

"Why do you think I'm here at all?" asked the FBI man. "I don't go visiting everybody."

"Did your intuitive tell you who kidnapped Hildy?"

"Yes. But an Intuitive's word is not grounds for arrest. We need evidence that can be used in court."

"We're not a court," said Timmy. "You can tell us."

"No I can't. You don't have clearance."

"What kind of clearance do I need?" asked Grandma.

"It isn't a matter of rank. It's a *need-to-know* thing."

"Who needs to know more than we do?" asked Timmy. "She's our rat."

"And she is safely returned to you," said the FBI man. "That is all you need to know for now."



Chapter Thirty — Preparing for Hildegarde's First Mission

When the FBI man had gone, Timmy took a piece of paper from the pad by the phone and wrote: There's another radio speaker wedged in the ladder.

Grandma said, "Great. You can give it to Axel tomorrow."

Timmy laughed. Of course. Axel would take the speaker to Mr. Richter. Then the FBI could spy on Mr. Richter's lab. Meanwhile, he and Grandma could use the other radio speaker to train Hildegarde.

Joey had said Mr. Richter could give directions to Hildy. Now that the speaker was set to a new frequency, they could be the ones who gave directions to Hildy. They could put the speaker back in her ear and tell her which way to go when she was in Mr. Richter's house. They could watch her progress on her hat-mounted camera, and give her commands in German.

Timmy wondered: Was the FBI man working with Mr. Richter? Is that why he put the camera in their tree? So Mr. Richter could see Hildy and tell her where to go in their house?

Timmy took another piece of paper and wrote: What should we do with the FBI camera?

"For now we leave it." said Grandma. Then she took an electronic chip out of her apron pocket and motioned him to follow her. She popped the

chip into a slot on their DVD player. Then she pushed the Play button. The television showed their back yard. Someone wearing a dark hooded cape crossed behind the garage and aimed a red light like a laser pointer at the bottom corner of their back door.

“That’s the laser chisel,” said Timmy. “Where did you get this?”

“I have my own security system.” Grandma held her finger to her lips and listened intently as the chip continued to play.

It was hard to tell from the person’s backside, but an arm moved, the cape shifted, and the person squatted down.

A moment later, Hildegarde came out of the hole. The hooded person put something on the ground in front of her. Hildegarde picked it up and began nibbling. The hooded person grabbed her, stuffed her into a box and walked out of camera range.

Timmy took the pad of paper and wrote: “If we already have a camera, why do we want another?”

Grandma switched the DVD player off and spoke in a low voice.

“We want to look like we’re cooperating. It can’t hurt and the FBI might tell us something useful.”

Timmy remembered the microdot. “What was the message on Hildy’s toenail?”

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“Just a phone number. I called it from a pay phone. Nobody answered.”

#

After dinner Hildegard followed Timmy and Grandma to the garage for another lesson. Grandma put Mr. Richter’s radio speaker on a pillow and stacked half a dozen blankets on top of it. Then she taped another pillow around the step of the ladder that concealed the FBI man’s speaker. “That should muffle the sound so nobody can hear us,” she said.

Grandma placed Hildegard in front of her button training console. Hildegard pressed the green button and the blue button correctly on command. She obeyed Timmy as well as Grandma. She even pressed the buttons when Grandma unhooked the hoppers that released the treats.

“She’s learned the buttons perfectly,” said Grandma.

But nothing Grandma said or did could interest Hildegard in the toggle switch.

Timmy put a big piece of carob in the hopper over the white toggle switch while Hildegard watched. He showed her that the carob fell out when he pressed the toggle switch. Then he put the carob back into the hopper.

“You try it, Hildy. Press the switch. You’ll get carob!” Timmy tempted.

The rat refused.

"Why won't she press the switch?" asked Timmy.

"We know she's been trained lots of different ways," said Grandma.

"Maybe the switch in her last training gave her a painful shock."

"Does she have to learn to press switches?" asked Timmy.

"Was there a switch on Mr. Richter's Communicator?" asked Grandma.

Timmy nodded. "Yes, and buttons."

"Good, our lessons will pay off," said Grandma. "I think she's ready for her first exploratory trip into Mr. Richter's lab. Let's see if she's willing to wear her spy gear."

Grandma opened a drawer in her tool desk and pulled out a small hat with a chin strap. "This hat holds a miniature camera. There's not much storage on the memory chip, but it broadcasts live to our television for as long as the battery lasts." Grandma stroked Hildegard's brown hooded head, then she strapped the hat in place. When it was securely fastened, she told Timmy, "Go set the television to channel 137."

Timmy turned on the television and set the channel. There on the screen was Grandma's face. Behind her were the colored buttons. Then he saw Hildegard's foot. Suddenly the screen was filled with a picture of three raisins. Timmy laughed.

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From the garage, he heard his Grandmother say, “Nach vorne,” meaning forward. The screen showed Grandma’s shoes getting closer and closer. Then he heard Grandma say, “Rechts,” meaning right. Hildegarde turned to her right. He saw the door and the ladder beside the door with the pillow wrapped around one step. Hildegarde must have looked up, or he’d have only seen the legs of the ladder.

Timmy returned to the garage. “She’s really good. When is her first spy mission?”

“How about tomorrow after school?” asked Grandma. “I think we should send her into Mr. Richter’s lab to get a good look at that machine you saw. It’s right next to the pole, so all she has to do is climb up the pole and take a look around. I’ll put that speaker back in her ear and you can give her directions.”

Grandma showed Timmy a small battery powered television. “You can keep this in your backpack and watch her every move.”

Just then Hildegarde shook her head and the camera came loose. The next thing they knew, she had squirmed out of the chin strap and pranced away.

“I guess the hat isn’t fashionable enough for her,” said Grandma. “I’ll gussy it up for tomorrow.”

“You’re not going to put a flower on it!” pleaded Timmy.

"I was thinking about padding to make the straps more comfortable, and give it a softer look."

"What about her harness?" asked Timmy. "A fashionable lady like Hildy shouldn't have to wear a working-man's harness."

"You do work my finger to the bone," laughed Grandma. "I'll sew a little vest for her."

"You always dress up to go out of the house," said Timmy. "It's only fair that Hildegarde can dress nicely, too."

"She'll be ready for the ball," said Grandma. "*Silly garoo.*"

"We still need to get that speaker out of the ladder," Timmy reminded her. "So I can give it to Axel."

"What's your favorite radio station?"

"Why?" asked Timmy.

"Please just answer the question."

"You know," said Timmy. "The one you hate. The one you make me use my earphones for."

"Well, I want to hear it now. Turn it up loud."

Timmy looked at his grandmother quizzically. Was she teasing him?

"You heard me," said Grandma in a louder voice.

Timmy turned the dial on the old-fashioned radio that sat beside the wooden Morse Code machine. Then he cranked up the volume. Hildegarde grimaced and put her paws over her ears.

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The radio blared, “My rhymin’ skills got you climbin’ hills!”

Grandma nodded and her face grimaced. Quickly she undid the pillow around the ladder, poked in her screwdriver and popped out the miniature speaker.

It only took a few seconds. Grandma wrapped the tiny speaker in cotton and sealed it into an envelope. Then she looked directly at Timmy and shouted “Turn off that racket.”



Chapter Thirty-One — Timmy Talks to the FBI Man

The next morning, Axel sat down beside Timmy on the bus and yanked Timmy's shirt out of his waistband.

"Careful," said Timmy. "You almost dumped my pockets." He reached into his pocket and pulled out a small envelope with the FBI man's radio speaker. "I think this is what you want."

Axel took it. "Why?" he asked.

"I didn't take it," said Timmy. "I found it." He knew every word he said was being broadcast to the FBI.

"Mr. Richter will be glad to get it back," said Axel.

"Are you sure he wasn't trying to spy on me?" asked Timmy.

Axel's face flushed. "He didn't exactly tell me to get that thing back from you. He just told me you had it."

"Do you want me to keep it?" Timmy offered.

"No," said Axel. "I'll bring it to him. If he wants to spy on you, he'll have to do it without my help. You're my cousin." Axel pocketed the envelope. "Keep your shirt out."

#

Reluctant Spy

When Timmy entered the classroom, Ms. Mulisch handed him a hall pass. "You are wanted in the office."

"What for?" asked Timmy.

"Something about your rat," said Ms. Mulisch.

When Timmy arrived at the office, he saw the FBI man, Mr. Williams, carrying a briefcase.

"I'm so glad you could come," said Mr. Williams.

"My teacher said you want to talk about Hildegarde." Timmy was wary. Students don't have a choice when they are called to the principal's office. He had to be here. But he didn't have to talk. Nobody could make him talk. But Grandma had talked to the FBI man. She even let him put a camera in their tree.

Mr. Williams continued. "I have some photographs of Hildegarde that my sources tell me were taken while she was kidnapped." The FBI man laid two photos of Hildegarde on the desktop. Both photos showed Hildegarde next to metal bars. One showed what looked like part of a toggle switch behind her. Timmy wasn't sure, but he thought he recognized Mr. Richter's Communicator.

The pictures weren't much to go on. They only showed small sections of the apparatus. He knew his face had registered surprise.

"Do you recognize this place?" asked Mr. Williams.

Timmy didn't want to tell Mr. Williams what he thought. Instead he asked, "Is that a cage? We never put Hildy in a cage!"

"I was hoping for honesty from you," said Mr. Williams. "But I see you are sneaky like your grandmother. This is the Communicator at Mr. Richter's house. You've been there. You've seen it. I could tell from your face that you recognized it."

„ "What was she doing there?" blurted Timmy.

"I was hoping you could tell me," said the FBI man. "Did Mr. Richter plant anything on her?"

Timmy thought. *What could he say that was true, but not really important? He didn't want to talk about the speaker in Hildy's ear.* "Grandma found a microdot on one of Hildy's toenails after she came back," said Timmy. "But it could have been there when we got her."

"What did the microdot say?"

"It just had a phone number. Grandma called from a pay phone but nobody answered."

"When you get home tonight, ask your grandma to call from your home phone. It may be that whoever placed that dot will call back."

"You've got the photos. You must know who took them. So you already know everything. Why don't you just tell me who took her and why?"

"I don't know everything yet and I don't want to get your hopes up when I might be wrong," said the FBI man.

Reluctant Spy

“Do you think aliens put it there?” asked Timmy. “Do you think Hildy is an alien and she’s supposed to phone home, like ET? Only the phones on this planet are too big for her, so we have to call for her?”

“Something like that.”

“Then how are we supposed to talk to the aliens?” Timmy wondered if Mr. Williams was teasing him.

“They wrote the number so you could read it. They’ll figure it out.”

“Do you think Hildy caused the earthquake and collapsed the bridge?”

“Not Hildy, but maybe her people.”

“I gotta get back to class. I’ll tell Grandma what you said about calling that number again.” Timmy pushed his chair back, stood up and walked out of the room.



Chapter Thirty-Two — Hildegarde Postpones the Mission

When Timmy arrived home from school, he called “komm hierher.” There was no response.

Had someone kidnapped Hildegarde again? He followed the wall. Hildy wasn't under the livingroom cabinet. She wasn't under his bed. The kitchen door hole was still covered with Grandma's patch. He entered the garage, following Hildegarde's usual path along the wall. He moved the bricks and looked in the hole where Hildegarde hid her extra food. Hildegarde was fast asleep. He could see her chest going up and down. She was breathing. Timmy laughed. Hildy was taking a nap.

“No time for naps, girl,” he said. “We're going to explore Mr. Richter's house. You need to put on your spy gear.” Hildegarde didn't move.

“Carob,” he called, trying to tempt her. Hildegarde didn't move.

He went over to the shelf where Hildy's carob was kept and broke off a chunk, hoping the familiar snap would wake her. No response.

He knelt down beside her hole and stuffed the carob inside. The aroma did it. Hildegarde opened her eyes, and blinked. She deftly reached out one paw and brought the carob to her mouth. She took one nibble and stuffed the rest of the candy against the edge of her hole, along side the nuts and grains she was hoarding. She closed her eyes, again.

Reluctant Spy

"Hildy, we have a mission," said Timmy. "Wake up."

Suddenly, he heard Grandma's laugh beside him. He turned. "How did you sneak up on me?"

"You don't really expect me to tell you," she said. "Unless you want me to give you sneaking lessons."

"Hildy doesn't want to go on a spy mission this afternoon," Timmy said.

"You can go tonight," said Grandma. "She's at her best after dark."

Grandma showed him Hildy's modified and more fashionable hat. "I've taken a cue from that FBI man. I've fixed her camera so it can broadcast in the dark, just like his."

Timmy told his grandmother about giving the speaker to Axel. "He didn't seem sure he was supposed to get it back. Mr. Richter told him I stole it, but Mr. Richter didn't ask him to get it back."

Grandma nodded. "Let's see if it's broadcasting anything." She set some dials on the receiver equipment. "Timmy gave you this?" Joey's voice was loud and clear. "If Timmy stole it, he wouldn't give it back."

Snapping sounds crackled over the receiver.

"That's Joey, opening pistachio shells," explained Timmy.

"Look," came Axel's voice. "I want your opinion. Do you think I should bring this to Mr. Richter?"

"I wouldn't," said Joey. "Grandma is probably listening to us over this thing right now."

There was a loud crunk sound, some scratching, and then silence.

“So much for that idea,” said Grandma. “Hildegarde’s adventure this evening is now all the more valuable.”

“I’m going to need to know how to sneak so I can get close to the house without being noticed.”

Grandma opened a drawer in her tool chest and pulled out ankle bands with jingle bells on them like a Christmas elf might wear. “Here. Strap these on. The first step in sneaking is to learn to walk without making noises, even when you are wearing bells on your ankles.”

“Are you making this up?” Timmy demanded.

“I’ll show you.” Grandma strapped the bands on her own legs and began to walk slowly, first brushing the floor with the toe of her right shoe, then putting the ball of her right foot down, then the right heel, and only after her foot was flat on the floor did she transfer weight to it. She repeated the process with her left foot. Her right foot. Her left foot. Each step was short, and seemed to take longer than necessary.

The bells did not jingle. Even her shoes made no sound on the cement garage floor. After she had walked the full width of the garage without a jingle, Grandma said, “Now you try it.” The bells remained silent while Grandma unstrapped them from her ankles. As soon as Timmy took them into his own hands, they clanged.

Reluctant Spy

The bells jingled even more while he strapped them on. And they made a non-stop jangle when he walked.

“Take your shoes and socks off,” said Grandma. “It’s easier to learn in bare feet.”

Timmy lifted his right leg as slowly as possible. Moving this way felt like the opposite of running, but it used the same muscles. When he ran, he transferred his weight from foot to foot as fast as possible. Now transferring was the last thing he did. Still the bells jingled. If he hadn’t seen Grandma do it, he’d have said it was impossible. How was Hildy sleeping through all this?

After half an hour, he thought perhaps he was jingling a little bit less. Grandma came in and said, “It takes months to learn to move silently. You don’t have to be able to do it tonight. Come. Have some dinner. By then, Hildegard will be awake and ready for her first mission.”

Grandma had put a burrito feast on the dinner table. Beans, salsa, grated carrots, sliced onion, tomato wedges, a variety of cheeses, whole wheat tortillas. “I told you — it’s important to eat well before a mission.”

When they were seated, Timmy remembered, “The FBI man said to ask you to call the number on that microdot from our home phone.”

“You told him about the microdot?”

“Yes, I thought we were cooperating with the FBI.” Timmy saw that his grandmother looked worried.

“Not *that* much. But calling from home is a good idea. I’ll place the call while you are out on your mission.” Grandma looked thoughtful for a moment.

“Timmy, I don’t mind if the FBI wants to spy on us with their silly camera. But don’t talk to that man any more. He’s not trustworthy. He says he’s an alien specialist, but he’s never met an alien.”

“Are you sure he’s a real FBI man?” asked Timmy.

“Good point,” said Grandma. “He might even be a fake FBI man. I’ll call FBI headquarters to check on him. That’s another call I’ll make tonight.”

“Are you mad?” asked Timmy.

“Not mad. It was a good learning experience.” Grandma spooned more tomatoes onto her burrito. “Do you have any questions about tonight’s mission?”

Timmy finished chewing, and asked, “Why will Hildegard want to climb up the pole and go into Mr. Richter’s house?”

“Because I sent Mr. Richter a box of aromatic carobs. She’ll smell them even if he hasn’t opened the box. Hildy will want to go into the house to find it.”

“She won’t spend much time in the Communicator, if she smells the carobs” said Timmy.

“We don’t need much time — just a good view recorded for us to study later.” Grandma smiled.

Reluctant Spy

“We need to test the speaker in her ear.” Timmy was looking for an excuse to postpone his school work.

“I’m way ahead of you. I tested that before you got home.” Grandma showed Timmy a small battery-powered microphone. “I’ll put the speaker back in her ear right before you leave on your mission.”

“What if she puts her finger in her ear?”

“She won’t. Her hat has ear flaps. Very fashionable ear flaps.”



Chapter Thirty-Three — Caught!

After dinner, Hildegarde awoke, and demanded treats. “Later, girl,” said Grandma. “Later, you’ll have a feast.”

Grandma inserted Hildegarde’s speaker into her ear. Then she adorned Hildegarde’s brown hood with her fashionable spy bonnet, complete with a violet tucked into the brim. She helped Hildegarde into an embroidered vest and clipped on her reel-fed leash.

Timmy slung on his school bag, stuffed with the miniature battery-powered television, his microphone tuned to Hildegarde’s ear speaker, his headset, and his periscope. Grandma perched Hildegarde on his shoulder. Then he set off for Mr. Richter’s house.

From half a block away the street lamp illuminated Robes Pierre sniffing an old tree stump in the back of Mr. Richter’s lot. He was not on his chain. The melted truck was nowhere in sight. The house appeared dark, but that was the way it always looked.

Timmy went a block out of his way to avoid being upwind of R.P. When he arrived at the house, he crawled along the sidewalk behind the low hedge, until he was directly opposite the central pole. He set up his monitoring station. Last, he unpacked his periscope and inspected the yard. Robes Pierre was still sniffing.

Reluctant Spy

Timmy checked the clasp on Hildegarde's leash. Everything looked ready. He gently lifted Hildegarde from his shoulder, and placed her on the sidewalk in front of a gap in the bushes and said, "Nach vorne," which meant forward.

Hildegarde scooted straight for the middle of the house. Timmy watched his television screen. He saw the pole in the center of the house getting closer and closer. Everything had a greenish tinge from the night filter lens, that Hildy's camera used in semi-dark.

The pole was at least three times wider than Hildegarde. As the rat approached the pole, he saw the cement base and the white crystals that formed on the soil under the house.

When she arrived at the pole, Timmy couldn't have been more excited if she'd discovered the South Pole complete with penguins. He whispered "Carob" into the microphone. The view changed. The pole was now where the ground had been. Hildegarde was climbing the pole.

Suddenly the television went blank. Timmy watched worried. He picked up his periscope to check the back yard. Had Robes Pierre gone inside. Had he eaten Hildegarde, fashionable spy hat and all? Grandma had said the camera worked in the dark. If R.P. was eating her, why couldn't he see teeth?

Timmy had been so excited watching Hildegarde enter the house, he'd forgotten about R.P. Timmy looked through his periscope. Robes Pierre was still sniffing at the back of the yard.

Timmy turned his attention back to the television. The picture was back, bright now, without the greenish tint from the night lens. The camera must have lost the picture while it changed lenses. He'd have to talk to Grandma about that.

He saw metal bars, like the ones in the FBI man's photos. Hildegarde was inside the Communicator. He heard clicking sounds coming from his headset. *Hildegarde's toenails*, he thought. Toenails clicking against the tile floor.

They'd forgotten to trim her nails. Could Axel and Mr. Richter hear her? He knew the speaker was much closer to the floor than their ears... if they were in the lab at all.

"Did you see that?" asked what sounded like Axel's voice?

"Yes," said Mr. Richter. "We have a visitorrrr."

They've seen her! thought Timmy. "Nach hinten" he whispered into the microphone. He heard a loud click, like a door closing. He zipped the television into his backpack.

The next thing he knew, a hand grabbed his shoulder. A voice said, "What do you think you'rre doing?" He turned his head. Mr. Richter was standing over him. The scientist's white suit glowed under the street lamp.

Reluctant Spy

"I'm waiting for Hildegarde to come back," said Timmy.

"I saw the glint of yourrr mirrrrorrr and knew you werrre spying on me. Does yourr little frriend Hildegarrde have a perrriscope, too?"

"Hildegarde is a rat," said Timmy. "Rats don't use periscopes."

"A perrriscope is not enough?" Mr. Richter sounded furious. "You sent a rrrat to spy on me?"

"Y-y-you said you talk to aliens," said Timmy.

"Does that make it okay to spy on me?" asked Mr. Richter.

"Does yourrr Grrrandma know you arre here? Did *she* send you to spy on me?"

"Where's Hildegarde?" demanded Timmy, frightened now that she had not yet returned. "Have you captured her?"

"I don't catch rrrats," said Mr. Richter. "They arre dirrty things!"

Timmy looked into his television screen. He saw a large box of car-obs. He couldn't help himself. He laughed.

"This is not a funny situation," said Mr. Richter sternly. "I should call the police."

The police, thought Timmy. That's a relief. I'd much rather go to the police station than be kidnapped by a mad scientist. But Hildegarde was still in the mad scientist's house. She wasn't safe. He picked up his microphone and called urgently, "Komm hierher!"

"Where did you learn Gerrrman?" demanded Mr. Richter.

"From Ms. Weber," said Timmy. "She trained Hildy and she showed me."

"Ms.Weberrr would not help a sneak like you," said Mr. Richter.

"She just wanted to visit Hildy," said Timmy. Warm paws tapped his leg. Timmy scooped Hildegarde into his lap where she nestled into the crook of his knee. Hildegarde had a large piece of carob in her jaws.

"Thief!" shouted Mr. Richter. Then again, more loudly, "Thief!"

Neighbors rushed out, holding flashlights. One carried a cell phone.

"Where is the thief? Should I call the police?"

Mr. Richter pointed at Hildegarde who was sitting happily in Timmy's lap, nibbling on her carob.

Beatrice ran up to Timmy. "Hi, Cutie," she said. "Are you in trouble?" Timmy couldn't tell if she was talking to him or to Hildegarde.

"Get this girl away from me!" shouted Mr. Richter. "I hate giggling girls!"

As if on cue, Beatrice began giggling. "A mouse stole your candy?" she asked? "Is that the thief?"

"This is a rrrrat — not a mouse!" sputtered Mr. Richter, indignantly. "And this young man was spying on me!" . He pointed at the periscope. "You see the mirrrrrrrrrs!"

"You're afraid of a milk carton periscope? Our whole class made those." Beatrice giggled again.

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“Just sounds like a boy having fun,” said the man with the cell phone. He turned to Timmy. “Next time you want to try out one of your school projects, ask first. You don’t want to go scaring people.”

“I wasn’t scared,” said Beatrice.

“Go home, little girrrl,” said Mr. Richter. He kept his hand on Timmy’s shoulder. “Not you.”

Beatrice backed off a few feet, and then stood her ground.

“It’s okay,” said Timmy. “Hildy is safe with me. You can go home now.”

“Nothing to see herrre!” said Mr. Richter. “Go home!”

Beatrice crossed the street, but she didn’t go home. Timmy saw her hide behind a telephone pole.

Soon, the neighbors dispersed. Timmy stuffed his periscope and television back into his backpack and put Hildegard on his shoulder. He could still see Beatrice’s shadow beneath the street lamp.

“Not so fast, “ said Mr. Richter. “We both know you have committed a serrrious offense.”

“Are you going to call the police?” asked Timmy, standing up.

“No,” said Mr. Richter.

“Are you going to call my grandmother?” asked Timmy.

“No,” said Mr. Richter. “This is between you and me.” He held Timmy’s shoulder tightly. “If you come sneaking arrround herrre again, I

will give you the thrrrashing of your life! I will brrreak your bones!" He glared at Timmy. "Do you underrrstand me?"

Timmy petted Hildegarde and nodded his head.

"And if that rrrat comes into my house again, I will be rrready with trrrraps!" Mr. Richter turned on his heel and stalked back into his house.



Chapter Thirty-Four — Listening to the Speaker

When Timmy rounded the corner, he smelled ambergris. Ms. Weber stepped out from behind a tree, her red fingernails sparkling under the street lamp. Even though the evening was warm, she wore a brown fur stole. “I did not show you how to talk to Hildegard so you could send her spying on my boyfriend!” she shouted.

Timmy thought about telling Ms. Weber that her boyfriend was using Hildegard to spy on him. But if she didn’t know that already, he saw no point to informing her.

He had to say something. And he knew he was no good at lying. “Mr. Richter is the most interesting person around here. And he’s got the only house that’s easy for Hildy to get into — with the gap around the pole.”

Ms. Weber clicked her fingernails on the plastic handle of her purse. Hildegard began squeaking. Before Timmy could object, Ms. Weber handed Hildegard a small sandwich. Hildegard twitched her whiskers, took the sandwich in both hands and began nibbling.

“No more spying on my boyfriend,” said Ms. Weber, loudly. “Do we understand each other?”

She didn’t wait for an answer. Timmy took the sandwich from Hildegard who began squeaking inconsolably. He opened it up. There under

the lettuce, covered with mayonnaise was another speaker. Timmy put the sandwich in his pocket. Hildegard squeaked louder. "We'll be home soon, girl," said Timmy. He broke into a run.

#

Grandma fed Hildegard a few almonds and a slice of apricot. Then she kissed Hildegard's warm little nose. "Here's my brave little spy, back from her first adventure." She let Hildegard snuggle into her lap. As soon as Hildegard was quiet, she inserted the speaker into the amplifier. Immediately, they heard static. Grandma turned a few dials. Then they heard, "You don't have to be afraid of him."

"That's Axel," said Timmy excitedly.

"I won't have your cousin playing spy games around my house. This is a scientific laborrratory. I have secrrrrets that must be prrrrotected."

"Didn't you say that Ms. Weber gave you this speaker and told you *not* to spy on her boyfriend?" Grandma raised her eyebrows.

"She shouted it loudly enough for the whole neighborhood to hear her." Timmy petted Hildegard.

"Aha," said Grandma. "She thinks he's up to no good, and she wants us to find out the facts."

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“Timmy doesn’t take orders from anybody.” Axel’s voice came over the speaker again. “Certainly not me.”

“I will invite Timmy’s class to tourrr my lab. I will show the students how dangerrrous my lab can be. They will see why they must not spy on me or send theirrr pets into my home.”

“Ms. Mulisch isn’t going to let her class come here if you tell her it’s dangerous.” Timmy could tell his cousin was looking for reasons not to let Mr. Richter find out he was really in sixth grade.

A series of beeps interrupted the transmission. Their Morse Code machine was picking up a message. A slightly delayed series of beeps came over the speaker. The same message was coming into Mr. Richter’s lab.

“The Communicator!” he whispered.

“You don’t need to whisper,” said Grandma. “This is a receiver — not a speaker.”

The series of beeps repeated.

“Meet me at the bridge,” said Grandma.

“Huh?” asked Timmy.

“That’s what the message says. This is actual Morse Code. Not gibberish like the last message. I understand Morse Code when I hear it.”

“Is Mr. Richter sending the message to us? Or is he receiving, too?”

“I don’t know,” said Grandma. “Put Hildy down and let’s go!”

Chapter Thirty-Five — Meeting at the Bridge

Beatrice was waiting beside Grandma's car. "I knew it," she whispered. "I knew you were up to something. You have to take me with."

Before Timmy could protest, Grandma said, "Hop in. Both of you. Into the back seat!" Grandma held the door open.

"I want to sit in the front!" said Timmy.

"We don't have time to argue!" said Grandma. She walked around the car and slid into the driver's seat.

Timmy and Beatrice clambered into the back seat. The car started up as soon as they clicked their seatbelts. Timmy listened, expecting Hildy's squeak that always followed every click, but then he remembered — he had left her in the house."

"Don't worry about my parents," said Beatrice. "They think I'm still in bed. I climbed out the window when I heard Mr. Richter yell, 'Thief!' and I followed you here."

Grandma drove on in silence.

"You owe me one. I protected you from Mr. Richter. He left you alone because I giggled. He hates my giggles."

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"No more giggling tonight," said Grandma in her most stern voice. "No matter what happens. Not even if you see something that is extremely funny."

"I'm not sure if I can help myself," said Beatrice.

Grandma opened the glove compartment, pulled out a heart-shaped box and tossed it into the back seat. "If you feel the giggles coming on, pop one of these in your mouth."

Beatrice started to giggle, then opened the box, and popped a chocolate into her mouth.

"*Silly garoo*. You'll need faster reflexes than that," said Grandma. She dimmed the headlights and drove the car off the road into the woods, following a rough dirt path. The car bumped along, with nobody talking. Unexpectedly, the headlights blinked out and the engine stalled.

"I guess this is our stop," said Grandma.

"I thought we were going to the bridge," said Timmy.

"I thought we were going to meet the aliens," said Beatrice.

"We really don't have time for discussions," said Grandma. "Be quiet and follow me."

When they opened the car doors, Timmy saw a huge log lying across the road just inches from Grandma's car. "How did...?"

"Shh!" said Grandma. She led them on a foot path over a stream. Beyond the stream was a clearing. The truck with the melted back end was

parked next to the stream. Grandma headed off into the woods. Timmy and Beatrice followed.

Soon their eyes adjusted to the starlight and they could see that Grandma was following a narrow path — not a hiking trail, but a deer path.

“Careful now,” whispered Grandma. “Brush the ground with your toes before you step. If you feel a twig, keep brushing until you find a clear spot to put your foot down. We want to be as silent as possible.”

“Oooooo,” said Beatrice.

“Quiet,” whispered Grandma.

A twig snapped under Beatrice’s foot.

Grandma stopped, turned around and faced Timmy and Beatrice and whispered fiercely. “I don’t know what is waiting at the bridge. But I don’t want to scare it away. If you cannot follow my instructions, then stay here.”

She turned again, checked the time on her braille watch, and resumed walking.

Timmy felt a leaf crunch under his foot. He gasped, and felt his toes curl up.

Grandma stopped again. “Accidents happen. Don’t make any extra noises.”

Soon they were at the edge of the woods with a good view of the bridge. Mr. Richter, in his white suit, and Ms. Weber, wearing her fur stole,

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were standing by the bridge. In the moonlight, her red fingernail polish looked like drying blood.

“Do you have the oscillatorrrrs?” hissed Mr. Richter.

“Not yet,” said Ms. Weber. “If you place an order, I can ship them tomorrow.”

“Stealing is not difficult,” said Mr. Richter. “No one will miss a few herrre and a few therrrre.”

“I have most of the keys to the database. I will simply reduce the inventory and voila — you have them without a trace.”

“We must hurry. That Covert boy has bugged my house. He was there this afternoon, watching, spying.”

“You will have them, darling,” said Ms. Weber. She grabbed Mr. Richter’s face with both hands and kissed him hard.

“Eeew!” said Beatrice, then clamped a hand over her mouth as if to stuff the sound back inside.

Mr. Richter and Ms. Weber pulled apart and stared in the direction of the sound. Then Ms. Weber said, “Don’t worry about the Covert boy. I told him to leave my boyfriend alone. He looked frightened.”

Timmy took a hurried step and found himself wobbling. A leaf crushed under his foot.

“Probably an animal in the woods,” said Ms. Weber.

“Yes, my darling. I’m just so eagerrr to finish my invention that I can’t stand any delays.”

They kissed again, and climbed into their separate cars.

When the roar of their motors had died away, Grandma spoke. “I don’t think Ms. Weber intends to deliver the oscillators. I wonder why she wanted us to hear that.”

“How are we going to get home?” asked Timmy.

“In our car,” said Grandma.

“But it’s dead,” Timmy reminded her.

“Nothing a little gasoline won’t fix. I can siphon some from that old truck.” Grandma led them back towards the clearing.



Chapter Thirty-Six — Where Can Hildegarde Hide?

No sooner had Timmy turned the key in the front door lock than the phone rang. “Is somebody watching us?” asked Timmy. “Just get the phone,” said Grandma.

“You have reached...” said Timmy, as Grandma had taught him.

“I know what number I dialed,” said the voice. “I’m calling about the rat.”

“She’s fine,” said Timmy.

“You got the female,” said the voice, sounding relieved. “Your rat is part of a special breeding program. She was not supposed to be sold. We’ll come by tomorrow and pick her up.”

“She’s my pet! You can’t!” shouted Timmy. Grandma took the phone.

“To whom am I speaking?” asked Grandma.

The phone connection clicked, and the dial tone returned.

“They want Hildy!” said Timmy. “We’ve got to get her away from here!”

“We can’t take her anywhere at this hour,” said Grandma.

“But first thing tomorrow morning,” said Timmy. “She’s not safe here.”

“You could take her to Axel and Joey’s before school,” said Grandma.

“And Axel will tell Mr. Richter.” Timmy couldn’t imagine why Grandma was so calm.

“And then what?” asked Grandma. “Did the man on the phone sound like Mr Richter?”

“No,” said Timmy. “I just don’t want Axel knowing where our rat is.”

Timmy paused. Hildegard hadn’t greeted them when they came in. Where was she? He started walking along the walls, looking for her. “We have to find her!”

When he opened the bathroom door, he saw her, poking her fingers into her ears.

“We forgot to take the speaker out,” he shouted.

“I’ll get the tweezers,” said Grandma. Just then, the shiny little speaker shot out of Hildegard’s ear and pinged against the gravel in her litter box.

Timmy picked Hildegard up and cuddled her. “I’m sorry, girl. You did great today.” He petted her from the top of her head down her back to where her tail started. Hildegard vibrated like a happy kitten.

“Maybe Ben’s mom could hide her at the store,” Timmy suggested.

“The mall doesn’t open until 10,” said Grandma. “I can keep her with me in the car until then.”

“Can I stay with you and say goodbye to her at the store?” asked Timmy.

“If we’re being watched, we need to act as normal as possible. You can’t be late for school. That would look suspicious.”

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Timmy made his saddest face.

"You'd better get to bed, so you can be awake for school tomorrow."

Timmy kissed Hildegarde on the top of her brown head and gently put her down on the floor. Her toenails clicked on the linoleum as she followed him down the hall to his bedroom. "We've got to trim her toenails."

"I tried," said Grandma. "She won't let me get near her with the clip-pers."

"Joey uses a nail file," said Timmy. "So does Ms. Weber."

"I'll buy one in the morning. Good thinking, and good night."

Grandma made smacking sounds with her lips. An air kiss.

As he rolled into his bed, Timmy remembered. *We have to watch Hildy's movie.*

He got up, plugged Hildegarde's fashionable hat into the television, and stared in surprise. There in the Communicator was a row of buttons and a toggle switch just like Hildy's training station. A green button, a blue button and a toggle switch.

#

In the morning, Timmy awoke earlier than usual. To his surprise Grandma was already up. She was squeezing oranges for juice and her hat was trimmed with freshly picked marigold flowers. The breakfast table was

laid out with yogurt, granola, and sliced fruit. "We've got time for a real breakfast today. And I have an idea I want to discuss with you."

Timmy set out the napkins and silverware. While he scooped yogurt into his dish, he asked, "An idea about Mr. Richter?"

"And Hildegarde." Grandma took a drink of orange juice. "What would you think if I told you I can get those oscillators for Mr. Richter?"

"Why would you want to do that?" Timmy pulled out his chair.

"I could put them in a box and have them delivered to his house." Grandma scooped her spoon into her yogurt.

"But you wouldn't do that," said Timmy. "We don't want to help him communicate with aliens or whatever else he's doing."

"I could sneak Hildegarde into the box," said Grandma. "She'd have her speaker and her camera. I could build an exit door for her at the bottom of the box and she could sneak out to explore the house. We could see and hear everything that is going on. We'd find out what Mr. Richter is really up to. In time to stop him if necessary."

"That sounds dangerous," said Timmy. "How would we get Hildy back?"

"That's the part I haven't figured out," Grandma took another drink of orange juice. "How would *you* get her out?"

"We could call Ms. Weber. I think she's on our side."

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"Maybe. But I'm not sure, yet," said Grandma. "Got any other ideas?"

"I could sneak under the house and put carob by the pole and then she'd come out to eat it."

"That sounds good," said Grandma.

"But what about the traps? And Robes Pierre?" asked Timmy. "How do we keep him from eating Hildy?"

"She can handle herself around traps and dogs. She's fast and she's sneaky. But if you think it's too dangerous, I'll take her to Ben's mom's pet shop, like we planned."

Timmy didn't know what to do. Grandma was leaving the decision up to him. He decided to stall for time by asking questions.

"Did you look at the footage she sent yesterday?"

"Yes. It's good. We've got a lot more information about The Communicator than we had before."

"Like what?" asked Timmy.

"I saw that the Communicator has been for a ride in that melted truck. It was probably on the truck bed when the melting occurred."

"How could you tell that?" asked Timmy.

"There are bits of green paint from the truck on some of the struts." Grandma shook more granola onto her yogurt.

Timmy wondered how he could have missed such an important detail when he watched the video last night. *Grandma was good.* Still, there were

other possible explanations for paint on the Communicator.

“Mr. Richter could have carried the struts in the truck before he assembled them into the Communicator.”

“He could have, but that wouldn’t have left paint in the crevices and joints. The assembled Communicator has been in that truck. And from the looks of some of that paint, it was hot in there. The heat may have damaged the oscillators. That’s probably why he needs more.”

“Can’t you just write the word Oscillators on the box and give him something else?”

“He needs oscillators. He’ll open the box. If there’s something else in the box, he’ll be suspicious and he might find Hildy before she sneaks out to go exploring.”

Timmy ate a spoonful of yogurt with granola. When he finished chewing, he asked, “Will Hildy have to have that speaker in her ear the whole time? How long will she be in there?”

“If I get the box delivered this morning, you can get her out after school tomorrow. That should be long enough to throw the rat-nappers off the track.”

“Okay,” said Timmy. “I guess she’ll be okay with it in for that long. We need to find out what Mr. Richter’s up to. And she’s probably safer there than here.”



Chapter Thirty-Seven — The Track Team Wants Timmy

When Timmy arrived at school, Coach Sweet greeted him. “Did you sleep well?” Coach Sweet’s muscles bulged from his t-shirt.

Timmy shook his head. Why would Coach Sweet meet him at the bus to ask him that? Was Coach Sweet involved in the bridge collapse? Or the earthquake?

Coach Sweet continued. “I’m sorry to hear that. I’ve got a proposition for you.”

Timmy felt himself becoming even more suspicious. Did Coach Sweet know about Hildy?

“We’ve suddenly got an opening on the track team. One of our runners broke his leg playing football. And we have our big meet tomorrow, upstate. I think you’re fast enough to win this meet for us. Can you come?”

“I’ll have to ask my Grandma.” Timmy didn’t have anything else to do tonight, except watch Hildy on the monitor. Grandma could do that alone. She was better at it than he was, anyway. He did like running. A track meet might be fun.

“I’ll call her, right away,” said Coach. “Everything is arranged. We’ve got your hotel room booked. The school bus will take you and the rest of the

team to Williamsport. And we'll bring you back by 4 p.m. tomorrow." Coach sounded really excited.

He could run and be back in time to get Hildy out of Mr. Richter's house. This could work. "Thanks," said Timmy.

"Thank you," said Coach. "The team is counting on you."

Axel came up and yanked Timmy's t-shirt out of his pants. "Hurry up! You'll be late for class."

"The team is meeting on the track after lunch," called Coach Sweet. "I'll ask your grandmother to pack your overnight stuff and bring it here."

Timmy just waved to Coach and followed Axel. Joey tagged at his heels, singing, "Timmy likes Beatrice. Timmy likes Beatrice." Timmy didn't even turn around to scowl at her. Everything was happening awfully fast.

The earthquake. Hildegard. The mad scientist. The mad scientist's girlfriend who trains rats, The FBI man. And the mysterious phone call last night. A track meet would be like a vacation.

He looked at the strawberry mark on Axel's chin. It was pale pink. Axel was in a good mood. Timmy found a note from Ben tucked into his desktop. He started to unfold it.

"As soon as we have quiet, we can begin," said Ms Mulisch.

Axel dropped a pencil on the floor. It rolled toward Ben, who picked it up and threw it back just out of reach. Beatrice coughed. Marko raised his hand and without being called on, asked, "Can I go to the bathroom?"

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Several students laughed. Timmy unfolded the note. Ben had not used their rat mask. The note just said, “Call Ms. Weber.” Timmy shrugged. He had no idea when he’d have time to get to a phone before he got on the bus for the track meet.

Eventually the room was quiet.

“Today, we are going to do an exercise in comparing and contrasting. We are going to compare humans and animals.”

Again the students laughed. Beatrice joined in with her high-pitched giggle.

When the class was quiet again, Ms. Mulisch wrote on the chalkboard:

Humans	Action	Animals
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“Who can think of something humans do that animals don’t?” asked Ms Mulisch.

“Talking,” said Ben, immediately.

Ms. Mulisch wrote *talking* in the Action column, and Yes under Human. “Now is it true that animals don’t talk?” she asked.

“Parrots talk,” said Marko. “So do parakeets.”

“That’s not really *talking*,” said Ben. “They copy the sounds, but they don’t know what they are saying.”

Marko looked insulted. “Sure they do. A parrot says ‘ Polly want a cracker,’ and you give her a cracker. She knows what it means.”

“A baby knows that crying will get her fed,” said Ben. “But that’s not *talking*.”

“Ben, would you tell us what *talking* is?” asked Ms. Mulisch. “I know you see a lot of animals at your mom’s pet shop.”

“*Talking* is combining words into sentences,” explained Ben. “A parrot can say ‘Polly want a cracker.’ She can also say, ‘Pretty boy.’ But she always says those sentences exactly the same way, as if they were just one word. She never makes a new sentence, like ‘Polly want a pretty boy.’”

The class laughed.

Ben continued, “*Talking* is recombining words to create new sentences with new meanings.”

“Chimps use sign language like deaf people,” said Joey. “I saw it on TV. They make sentences with signed words.”

“Okay, okay,” said Ben. “Using sign language the way chimps do *is* talking. But only people talk out loud.”

Ms. Mulisch added the word *Aloud* to the board, and then wrote *No* under *Animals*.

“Anybody else?”

Nobody raised a hand.

Ms. Mulisch waited. Finally Ben raised his hand again. “Yes, Ben.”

“Running through fire,” said Ben. Humans will run through fire to get

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out of a burning building. They know that it will hurt, but only for a little while. Animals don't understand that. That's why horses will burn to death in a barn."

"That's fascinating," said Ms. Mulisch wrote *Run Through Fire* on the board. "Anybody else?"

The fire drill bell rang. The children laughed.

Ms. Mulisch glowered at the class. "Come on. You know what to do. Get in your lines. Go straight to our spot by the baseball diamond." The children were still laughing as they lined up, and headed out the door. Axel pushed Timmy in front of him. "We can't lose you, now that you're on the track team."

When the class was all standing in their official location by the baseball diamond, Coach Sweet came up to Timmy. "Your grandmother brought over your stuff. Congratulations! You're on the team." He gave Timmy's shoulder a friendly squeeze.

Timmy opened the sack. On top was a note. "Have fun running. I caught last night's caller when he tried to break into our house. He won't be back. Hildy is safe and broadcasting clearly. Love, Grandma."



Chapter Thirty- Eight — Nikola Tesla

The track team bus left promptly at 1 p.m.. Beatrice sat next to Timmy. Timmy felt his shoulder muscles tense, dreading the sound of her giggling. He stood up to move to another bench when Coach Sweet said, "Be seated."

Timmy sat down.

"We have just enough time to show a movie during the ride. It's about Nikola Tesla, one of America's greatest inventors."

"Like Edison?" piped up Marko.

"We don't have time to talk. The movie starts now." Little televisions swung down from the ceiling of the bus and the movie started.

Timmy remembered that Mr. Richter had a picture of Nikola Tesla on the wall in his front room, surrounded by lightning. Mr. Richter had said the picture was a fake.

The movie showed Nikola Tesla playing with balls of lightning, just like Mr. Richter. Tesla wore a white suit, just like Mr Richter. And he had moveable light tubes on his ceiling. About the only thing Tesla hadn't done the same as Mr. Richter was disappear in one place and reappear in another.

Then the movie took on hushed tones. The actor playing Tesla took a little metal box out of his pocket and said, "This box could destroy the Empire State Building in ten minutes. I just have to set it to the right oscillation. I will demonstrate with this metal bar."

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The actor then attached the box to a heavy steel beam. A hammer in the box tapped on the beam. The actor held out his hand and let the hammer tap on his fingers. “Each tap is so gentle it wouldn’t hurt a baby,” said the actor.

The actor let the hammer resume tapping on the steel beam. Soon the beam began to shake. The hammer tapped repeatedly at carefully timed intervals, destroying the strength of the metal. The steel beam gave a shudder, and then shattered.

“You just have to find the right frequency,” said the actor playing Tesla. “You can destroy anything.” The narrator laughed as he told the story of Tesla accidentally causing an earthquake in downtown New York when he attached his oscillator to a support beam in the building where he had his laboratory. Tesla was a generous man. He paid for all the broken windows and other damage he had caused.

Suddenly, Timmy knew what Mr. Richter was up to. Mr. Richter was imitating Nicola Tesla. No aliens had crashed into the bridge. The bridge had collapsed because the Communicator had oscillators — bigger than Tesla’s. It had overheated and melted the truck, but not before it had caused the earthquake.

Mr. Richter had collapsed the bridge and caused the earthquake at the same time. And since the Communicator could send Morse Code, it had sent

that garbled message while it was overheating. No wonder it didn't make any sense.

Now Mr. Richter wanted to do even more damage. That was why he wanted the oscillators. Timmy had to get off the bus. He had to reach Grandma. He had to get Hildy and the oscillators out of Mr. Richter's laboratory. Now!

Coach Sweet was up front chatting with the driver. Timmy raised his hand.

Coach didn't notice.

He waved his hand madly.

Coach didn't respond.

He stood up.

Coach still didn't respond.

He climbed over Beatrice and walked down the aisle. The bus was hurtling down the freeway at about 70 miles per hour. He could read the dashboard speedometer as he approached the front of the bus.

Still no response from Coach.

He cleared his throat.

Coach turned his head. "Get back in your seat, Mr. Covert."

"You've got to let me off the bus," said Timmy.

"Do you need to throw up?" asked Coach.

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Several of the other students laughed.

"I need to get back to Pillow!" Timmy shouted.

"Homesick already?" asked Coach.

Timmy knew Coach wouldn't understand, wouldn't believe him.

He wouldn't have believed it himself an hour ago.

A mad scientist, right there in Pillow, Pennsylvania, about to cause a gigantic earthquake. The other kids would tease him for weeks, but that was way better than allowing an earthquake to happen.

"Yeah," he said softly. "I'm homesick." To Timmy's surprise, a few of the other kids gasped. But none of them laughed or taunted him. "I can't turn this bus around, Mr. Covert." said Coach. "You're a big boy. I'm sure you'll get over it."

Beatrice squeezed his shoulder, and whispered, "Don't worry. I'll get you on the next bus home as soon as we arrive in Williamsport. We're almost there." Then more loudly she said, "Let's go back to our seats."

Timmy followed her.

When they were settled in, Beatrice asked, "This is about the mad scientist we saw at the bridge, isn't it?"

Timmy nodded. "I'm coming with you." Beatrice rummaged in her purse. "Want to use my cell phone to call your Grandma to meet us at the station?"

“She never leaves her phone on,” said Timmy. “She won’t let me know where she is during the day. The whole family thinks she’s a spy.”

“She sure acts like a spy. What she did in the woods was spooky! But there’s got to be somebody you can call.”

“I can call my Uncle Gear in an emergency. But he won’t believe this is an emergency. Axel works at Mr. Richter’s and Uncle Gear will be sure that Axel would tell him if something was wrong.”

Timmy looked at Beatrice. She was taking this a lot better than he’d thought she would. She wasn’t even giggling. “Can you call one of *your* parents?” he asked.

“They’re off on an overnight getaway. They’re always doing stuff like that. They say it keeps their romance alive.”



Chapter Thirty-Nine — More Knock-Knock Jokes

At the bus station, the coach herded all the students out through the electric eye door to the curb where several small vans awaited them. Each had a sign on the side that read Upper Dauphin Elementary.

Timmy and Beatrice allowed themselves to be counted. Then they moved to the rear of the crowd. And as Coach Sweet helped the students into the first van, they sneaked back into the bus terminal.

Beatrice bought their tickets and within moments, they were aboard the bus back to Pillow, Pennsylvania.

During the ride, Timmy told Beatrice about Hildegarde and the spy helmet, and the FBI man and Ms. Weber, and the maze-like floor plan of Mr. Richter's odd house-on-a-pole, and even how much Mr. Richter liked knock-knock jokes.

Beatrice was amazingly cool about everything. She didn't giggle once. But she did pop a chocolate in her mouth when Timmy told her about how Grandma had gotten Hildegarde into Mr. Richter's house.

When they arrived at Mr. Richter's house, Timmy remembered that the doorbell would alert Robes Pierre, the pit bull. He knocked.

Nobody answered.

He knocked again.

Finally somebody called, "Who's there?"

Timmy answered, "Arizona."

"Arizona who?" came Axel's voice.

"Arizona only so many times I can knock."

"Who's that with you?" Axel did not sound suspicious. He couldn't have seen Hildegarde yet.

"Emma," said Timmy.

"Emma who?" asked Axel.

"Emma too early for dinner?" asked Beatrice.

"Good one," whispered Timmy, amazed that she had caught onto this game so quickly.

"Ah, it is ourrr jokerrrr," said Mr. Richter. "Let him and his girrrlfriend in. They arrre just in time to see ourrr trrrriumph."

"Her name's not Emma," said Axel, once he'd taken a good look at Beatrice.

"Who's therrrre?" asked Mr. Richter, jovially.

"Clair," answered Beatrice.

"Clairrr who?" asked Mr. Richter.

"Clair out of my way, I'm coming in," said Beatrice. She pushed open the door, and following Timmy's description of the floor plan, she headed for the laboratory.

Reluctant Spy

While they walked, Timmy kept a lookout for Hildegarde.

“Ze Communicatorrr is nearrrly rrready!” Mr. Richter sounded happy.

“We’re going to send a message to the aliens,” said Axel. “This is an historic event!”

Timmy caught a whiff of ambergris. Was Ms. Weber here?

Beatrice pointed at the ceiling where light tubes had been arranged into an eight-pointed star. “Are those the moveable light bulbs?”

“Ah, you have hearrrd about my little trrricks.” Mr. Richter reached up and pulled a tube from the net on the ceiling. “Would you like to hold one?” He offered it to Beatrice.

She took it and smiled. Timmy watched jealously. Mr. Richter hadn’t let him hold a light tube. But, he reminded himself, he wasn’t here for a science show. He was here to rescue Hildegarde.

Beatrice squatted down and let the light illumine the oriental carpet. The speckled pattern on the carpet included dots and dashes amidst the flow-ers. “Is that a code, she asked?”

“Yes,” said Mr. Richter, obviously pleased. “Morrse Code.”

“S.. H...A...” Beatrice read. “It says ‘Shake them up’ over and over.

“The rug is my own design,” said Mr. Richter. “I see you are starrtled. That is good. You arrre being shaken up.”

Beatrice used the light to lead the way into the next room. The little brass bottle with a hole in its side sparkled in the glow. "You've got a Klein bottle!" she said.

Timmy couldn't believe she was stalling like this. They were here to rescue Hildegarde. She had the only light. He couldn't see into the next room without it.

He tugged on her sleeve. She ignored him. At least Mr. Richter couldn't do his research and give a tour at the same time. But the machine might already be in motion. In the movie, the vibrations had gone on for quite a while before breaking that rod. It probably took even longer to cause an earthquake. But how much time did they have?

"You know what a Klein bottle is?" asked Mr. Richter.

"Sure," said Beatrice. "It's a bottle where the inside and the outside are the same surface, so it has no volume at all."

"Verrry good," said Mr. Richter. "You arrre even smarterrr than ourrr jokerrr, herrre. Do you know what zis is?" He held out a little metal box, like the one Nikola Tesla had used in the movie.

"That's an earthquake box!" Timmy blurted. "That's how you destroyed the bridge."



Chapter Forty — Shake Them Up Some More

Axel came out from the back room. “Timmy, don’t be rude!”

“He is not being rrrude,” said Mr. Richter. “He is rrrecognizing my abilities.”

“But you didn’t!” said Axel. “You said they were *rubes*. You said you wanted to *shake them up*. But I thought you meant your great scientific achievements, like that transporter machine.”

“You would deny me my crrredit? My glorrrry?” Mr. Richter sounded amused, rather than angry. “The worrrld ignorres my scientific worrrks. Calls them magic trrricks. Eccentrrricities. I will make them cowerrr.”

Beatrice took this opportunity to lead the way to the laboratory. Timmy followed. Mr. Richter continued to brag to Axel. Axel kept trying to take the light tube from Beatrice, but she was too fast for him.

Suddenly, Beatrice stopped. “Is this the vibrating table?”

“Yes,” said Axel. “Would you like to try it?” He reached out for the light bulb.

“No, she wouldn’t,” said Timmy.

Beatrice handed Axel the tube. Then she climbed onto the vibrating table, and Axel flipped the switch. “Oooh, this is fun!” She danced on the table. She giggled.

“Stop that giggling at once!” shouted Mr. Richter.

Beatrice just giggled louder and faster. Timmy reached toward the wall switch. Axel shoved his arm away and pushed him into the laboratory.

The intense lights from the invisible source made everything in the white and silver laboratory appear sharp and dangerous. Timmy quickly spotted Hildegard's white sides and sleek brown stripe deep inside Communicator.

At the top of the Communicator, near the ceiling, out of Timmy's reach, a hammer tapped on the central pole that supported the house. Evenly spaced gentle taps. Timmy had no idea how long it had been tapping, but he knew that these seemingly gentle taps had no gentle purpose. He looked around for a ladder. There was none.

He saw the colored buttons arranged just like the ones in Hildegard's training station, with the white toggle switch to the far right. He had no idea what each button did. His arms were too short to reach inside and press them. But Hildy could do it. Just like Grandma had said. Hildy could press buttons that he couldn't reach.

“Hildy, press the green button.”

“What arrre you doo-ing?” shouted Beatrice from the vibrating table. “You might set the ma-chine off.” Timmy heard a loud thump and turned around. Beatrice had jumped off the table.

Reluctant Spy

“Komm hierher, Hildy,” said Beatrice. Hildegard ignored her. She was leaning with all her might on the green button. Timmy heard a faint click. Hildegard had pressed the button. But the hammer continued to tap.

“You don’t know what you’re doing!” shouted Beatrice. “Don’t set the thing off. It could cause an earthquake.”

Hildegard knew she had succeeded. She squeaked, hoping for a treat.

Beatrice began rummaging in her purse.

“It’s already been set off,” said Timmy. “See that hammer tapping on the central pole?”

Hildegard looked at Timmy and squeaked again.

“You’ll get a treat when we’re done,” said Timmy. “Press the blue button.” Hildegard obediently walked over to the blue button and leaned on it. Nothing happened. She climbed on top of it. After a moment, it, too, made a gentle click. The hammer continued to tap the pole.

Hildegard squeaked louder and looked at Timmy demanding a treat.

“Press the white switch,” said Timmy. Hildegard continued to stare at him, demanding a treat.

A bar inside the Communicator moved towards Hildegard.

“Komm hierher,” said Timmy. Hildegard ignored him and continued to demand a treat. Timmy could see that the bar was swinging on top of her. It

could kill her. He stuck his leg into the machine. The bar came down in what looked like slow motion. It hit his leg and bounced slightly, then came down again, crushing his ankle. The bar formed a triangle over Hildegarde, sloping over her back.

He saw Hildegarde's ribcage compress and heard the clang of the falling bar as it hit against the bottom strut of the Communicator. Hildegarde didn't move. Was she dead? Had the falling bar crushed her spine? And with her, all their hopes for turning off the Communicator, and preventing the earthquake?

Timmy saw Hildegarde's ribcage expand slightly. She was still breathing. The fallen bar was wedged against her back. Was she, trapped? crippled? The hammer continued to tap the pole.

Timmy tried to lift the bar with his leg. Pain shot through him and the bone cracked. He tried to shift the bar with his hands, but it was wedged beyond his reach. He was trapped. And so was Hildegarde. Another bar began to move. Mr. Richter entered his laboratory.

"It is too late to stop me now. You will be at the epicenterr of the earrthquake. Verry little damage, perrrhaps none, to this house. You arrre safe. The town will be destrroyed."

'You're just trying to frighten them, so they'll stay out of your lab,' said Axel. "I know you'd never do anything like that."

Reluctant Spy

Hildegarde stretched out her front paws. She looked at Timmy, and squeaked for a treat. “One more,” said Timmy. “Press the switch.”

Hildegarde squeezed her way out from under the bar. There had been less than an inch clearance, but Hildegarde had survived. Grandma was right. Rats could indeed squeeze through small spaces.

“Hildy, press the white toggle switch,” said Timmy. “Please.”

“She will not press that switch.” Ms. Weber entered the lab from the opposite side. “I have trained her not to press toggle switches.”

Timmy’s pant leg was stained with blood where the bar crushed his ankle. He couldn’t move. He saw the carob box his grandmother had sent, lying open on the floor.

“Your grandmotherrr’s gift of oscillatorrrs has made this grreat day possible.”



Chapter Forty-One — Inside the Communicator

Timmy looked imploringly at Hildegard. Her head tilted toward his leg. She was filming his foot. If Grandma was watching her monitor, there was still a chance. Looking at the spreading circle of blood on his pant leg gave him an idea. The spot of blood looked like a chocolate button. "Beatrice, do you have any chocolate pastilles in that purse?"

"They're all melted and goopy," she said.

"Good," he said. "Throw one at the toggle switch. The raised end."

A side strut on the Communicator swung loose and fell atop the bar compressing Timmy's thigh. He gasped in pain. The bar vibrated, making Timmy's leg shake. The bleeding at his ankle increased. Timmy could see that the bar was attached to a gear and it was trying to swing the bar into place. Timmy's leg was in the way. The gears made a knocking sound. Hildegard squeaked.

Beatrice fished the heart-shaped box of chocolates out of her purse.

"Seize her!" shouted Axel.

Had Axel seen Hildegard?

"Caesar, who?" asked Mr. Richter. "I love a good knock-knock joke."

"This isn't a joke!" Axel pleaded. "Seize her before she throws the chocolate!"

Reluctant Spy

Beatrice unwrapped a gooey chocolate blob and threw, just as if it were a pebble aimed at a bull's eye. It landed only partly on the switch.

"Want me to throw another?" she asked.

"Press the brown button, Hildy," said Timmy.

Hildegard pounced. The chocolate smooshed open, revealing a raspberry filling. Hildegard climbed on the switch to lick more efficiently. The switch toggled with a snap. Hildegard licked her paws. She smiled. Timmy and Beatrice watched the hammer. It took one last wide swing and stopped.

"I told you I would brrreak everrry bone in yourrr body if you trrrespass on my prrrroperrrrty!"

Mr. Richter took a crowbar and clanged it against the Communicator. Metal bars collapsed, pinning Timmy's arms and chest to the floor. Hildegard squeaked madly. Robes Pierre bounded into the room mouth open. Hildegard remained deep in the middle of the machine beyond the reach of the pit bull's fangs.

R.P. reached his paw into the Communicator. He stretched and snarled. Hildegard burrowed under a fallen bar. R.P. gave a final lunge and gouged her back with his claws. She hissed and squeezed deeper into the crevice. R.P. swung his paw again, fruitlessly. Hildegard was out of the dog's reach, looking defiant.

Axel threw a fireball at Hildegard. She squeaked in terror. Timmy lay helpless under the struts of the collapsed Communicator, unable to move.

“Beatrice!” he pleaded. Beatrice batted the fireball away with her foot before it could enter the Communicator. Axel threw another and another, like snowball fights Timmy remembered. Beatrice caught them with her hands, kicked them with her feet. “They don’t feel hot!” she exclaimed. “I can go through fire.” Hildegard kept squeaking.

Grandma walked into the room, accompanied by the FBI man. Beatrice threw one final fireball at Axel, who dodged it and tripped over the empty oscillator box. Suddenly Hildegard was laughing.

“Grandma!” called Timmy.



Chapter Forty-Two — Alien Technology

“That rat has no right to laugh at me!” shouted Axel angrily.

Timmy, trapped in the Communicator, found the humor of the situation made him forget his pain. He explained. “She thinks you’re doing a cartwheel. She laughs at me when I do cartwheels.”

Ms. Weber took the crowbar and stepped between Mr. Richter and Grandma. “You know nobody will believe you if you tell,” she said. “Nobody will believe you stopped an earthquake.”

“I’m not after headlines,” said the FBI man. “I’m just doing my job.”

“You can’t arrest him,” said Ms. Weber. “You have no evidence.”

“You can quit pretending now,” said the FBI man. “Mr. Richter, Ms. Weber is not your girlfriend. She works for me. If Mrs. Covert here hadn’t provided you with the oscillators, we wouldn’t be here right now. She didn’t understand what you were really doing. We were all on the wrong track, except for young Mr. Covert here.”

Grandma took the crowbar from Ms. Weber and pried up the bars that had trapped Timmy. Then she pulled him out of the machine. “I’m so sorry, honey,” she said. “I know you wanted to run in tomorrow’s race.”

“I can’t fix him that fast,” said the FBI man. “But I can help.” He pulled a sparkling strap from his briefcase. “This is alien technology.” He wrapped it around Timmy’s bleeding ankle.

"Wow!" said Timmy. "It doesn't hurt."

"Leave that on for 24 hours, and you'll be good as new." The FBI man smiled at Grandma. "But you can't tell anybody. This is top secret and it isn't approved by the Food and Drug Administration."

Robes Pierre made another lunge for Hildegarde. Grandma grabbed his harness with one hand and scooped Hildegarde up with the other. "Have you got anything for Hildy's wounds?"

The FBI man took a packet of red powder from his pocket and sprinkled a few grains on Hildegarde's back. Within seconds the bleeding stopped. "That's some alien technology they gave me back at headquarters."

Grandma laughed. "That's cayenne. My grandmother used to sprinkle red pepper on my scrapes, to stop the bleeding. all the time."

"Doesn't it hurt?" asked Timmy.

"Not a bit. You don't have tastebuds in your skin." Grandma handed Hildegarde to Timmy, who undid her spy helmet.

"Good girl," he told her, and petted her from the top of her brown head all the way down her furry back. He kissed her warm little nose. Hildegarde poked a finger in her ear and popped out the speaker. Grandma caught it before it could hit the floor.

"You've done a wonderful job with her," said Elizabeth Weber. "We weren't sure how well she'd do without her partner."

Reluctant Spy

"Ben's mom sold Hildegard to us. You had nothing to do with that," said Timmy.

"Who else would Ben's mom sell a spy rat to?" asked Ms. Weber.
"That was the easiest part of this whole project."

Grandma laughed. "And I thought I was getting a rat just for fun."

"She is fun, Grandma," said Timmy, still cuddling Hildegard.

"Now, Mr. Richter, what are we going to do with you?" asked Grandma.

"You can do nothing. The brrridge was an accident. And since you foiled my earrthquake, I have done nothing wrrrong."

The FBI man tapped some keys on his cell phone. "The house is surrounded. I suggest you come with us peaceably."

Mr. Richter backed away, toward the corner of the room.

"No!" shouted Axel.

Mr. Richter flipped a switch on the wall. Smoke and lightning fell from the ceiling, and he was gone.

The FBI man patted the walls and the floor. "That wasn't a trick!"

"I didn't know he had it working yet," said Ms. Weber. She turned to Axel. "Where's the other one? Is he still in the house?"

"I thought he'd given up on that," said Axel. "I saw him load the cylinders into that old green truck. He said he was taking them to the dump."

Lois June Wickstrom

"Hildegarde will sniff him out. Won't you, girl," said Timmy.

"I think it's time you call her Rat Woman," said Beatrice. "She's a hero."

Grandma and the FBI man carried Timmy out to the waiting car.

Beatrice followed. "Will you drive me to the race tomorrow?" she asked.

Timmy petted Hildegarde. "You did it, girl -- I mean Rat Woman. You pressed the toggle switch." Hildegarde licked his fingers affectionately.

