

About 31,700 words

THE LEGEND OF JARMAR

by Anel Ryan

Prologue

Nine

"Numbers rule the universe." ~Pythagoras

1--2--3--4--5--6--7--8--9...

Remember the day you learned to count? You were super excited and went around telling everyone, "I know my numbers, I know my numbers." And then, all you wanted to do was count things. Fingers and toes. Days until your birthday. Candles on your birthday cake. Stars in the night sky. Stuff like that. It was a big deal back then.

1--2--3--4--5--6--7--8--9...

Today, if someone asked you, "Do you know your numbers?" you'd think the question was ridiculous. Of course, you know your numbers. You use numbers every day. We all do.

1--2--3--4--5--6--7--8--9...

But do you really, really know numbers?

1--2--3--4--5--6--7--8--9...

Think about it.

Don't you wonder what they would say if numbers could talk? Would you even bother to listen?

1--2--3--4--5--6--7--8--9...

Every single number, you know, has its own one-of-a-kind personality, and you don't need to be a math genius to be curious about what each number is like.

For instance, because number one is always first, it is undoubtedly stuck up and conceited. Two is more sociable, prefers companionship, and will never tango alone. Three's a

crowd. Four is very level-headed and seldom steps outside its box. Five's senses are very sharp. Six is a huge gamer because it knows that if it is rolled with dice, somebody's going to win. Seven is an adventurer at heart who wants to see the world's wonders, and eight thinks it's invincible since it has no beginning or an end.

But there is one figure that sticks out from the others. Its magnificence is unrivaled by any other numeral.

It is the remarkably brilliant, super colossal number nine.

Nine.

Oh my, what a number. It is extraordinary. It is magical.

When you write the number 9, you can make it curvy with a tail that looks like a hook, or you can make it severely straight and tall with a circular loop at the top.

You probably always wanted to know things about the fabulous number 9, but you didn't know that you wanted to know these things. Right? For example, there used to be nine planets in our solar system, but then Pluto got demoted to dwarf status and was kicked off the planet list. It's a shame, because no matter what size Pluto is, it's awesome.

Nine is sporty. There are nine players on a baseball team. Most softball teams have nine players as well. Both games have nine innings.

In science, the prefixes "ennea" and "nona" are used to denote the number nine. An enneagon and nonagon are shapes or forms with nine sides. Scientists might refer to people with nine eyes as "ennea-ocular," while mathematicians might refer to them as "nona-ocular," and everyone else would just call them scary.

Nine is embryonic. Generally, it takes nine months for a human baby to develop inside its mother before being born.

Nine is ancient. It was mentioned in a great number of mythologies from different parts of the world. In Greek mythology, there were nine muses. Muses are goddesses who bless creative people with inspiration. The Roman mythological monster Hydra had the body of a snake and nine heads. You probably don't care too much about things like this unless you are trying to creatively draw a picture or write a story and need a little inspiration, or you have nine heads.

Nine is alphabetical. "Redivider" is the longest single-word palindrome in the English language. A palindrome is a word, number, or phrase that can be read the same way backward as forward. "Redivider" has nine letters.

Nine is chronological. September, the ninth month of the year, is the only month in the English language whose letter count corresponds to its month number. Ninth month. Nine letters.

Nine is melodious. In music, people used to think that the number 9 was cursed. Beethoven, Schubert, and Dvorak each composed their 9th symphonies and then croaked.

Nine is elegant. You look incredibly good when someone says you are "dressed to the nines." It's a fashion thing.

"A stitch in time saves nine" refers to the idea that if you put a lot of effort into doing something, it will ultimately save you time. It's a sewing thing.

Nine is billowy. To a meteorologist, "Cloud Nine" is a cumulonimbus cloud that has risen to a height of 10 kilometers, which is about as high as you can go if you are a cloud. If you are on "Cloud Nine," it means you are as happy as you possibly can be. It's a weather thing.

Nine is ageless. Cats are said to have nine lives. Even a brand of cat food is named after this notion. An old superstition claimed that a witch could transform into a cat nine times. It's a witchy, feline thing.

Nine is the highest single digit in our numbering system. In other words, you can't go any higher than 9 without tacking on an extra digit. Nine has the last word, every time.

When you are nine years old, it's the last time you can write your age, whether curvy or sternly straight, with just one character.

If you are nine years old, you're probably tall enough to ride all of the rides at the fair, but you're not old enough to see all the movies at a movie theater.

At nine, you no longer need help with things like tying your shoes, brushing your teeth, washing your hair, or deciding what to wear each day. You are picky about what you eat. You know that you hate okra but love watermelon.

Because you're nine, you've probably mastered the art of shuffling a deck of cards and excel at games like War and Go Fish. You may not be able to beat adults at all games, but you are the one they call when they can't figure out their phone apps.

If you are nine or have ever been nine, you know all these incredible things. You know a lot of things.

Nine.

What a number. It is extraordinary. It is magical.

It is Maddison Addison Doyle. She turned nine years old last month. She learned to count at the age of two and knows all there is to know about every single number. She knows all these things and then some. At least, that's what she says.

Most of all, she knows she is extraordinary.

She, on the other hand, has never believed in nonsense like magic, and she probably never will. She keeps a scientific order to her life that is mathematically sound, antiseptically clean, and numerically accurate, much like her parents, who are math geniuses.

There is nothing curvy or in the least bit creative about the way Maddison makes her nines.

Chapter 1

Grandparents In a Box

"There is a little bit of magic in every box." ~ Adam Rex

If you were to meet 9-year-old Maddison Addison Doyle, you might not want to hang around with her for very long, especially if you have a popsicle stain on your shirt or a smidgen of dirt under your fingernail. By some standards, her tidy, organized manner might be praiseworthy, even though it's rare, for most 9-year-olds. After all, being super clean is a good thing, right?

But things changed for Maddison Addison Doyle when her mother became ill with an unusual, rarely contracted disease. Everything changed indeed. Not only did Maddison stick to her neat, orderly way of doing things, she also became super anxious about spreading germs. All germs. For instance, she had always kept her hands clean, but since Marmie's illness, she washes them constantly, and when there is no sink or soap, she squirts so much sanitizer into her palms that she could perform surgery.

She has even taken to wearing surgical masks and insists that each mask draped across her mouth be fresh from the box.

You and I would probably call her "cautious" out of respect for her sick mother. But the poor girl is obsessed with killing germs. In her mind, she reasons that if she makes the planet perfectly sterile and antiseptic, her Marmie will recover.

But we all know that nothing in the world is completely germ-free, and the efforts of a single 9-year-old can never make it so.

We also know that not all tales end happily. And, although Maddison Addison Doyle's appearance is always impeccable, on the inside she is almost always a conflicted, confused hot mess. This pretty much describes her on the day that her father, Daddo, called her into his bedroom at the end of the hallway.

Be warned. The whining, yammering, and tears are about to begin. It certainly won't be pretty. But we all hope—oh, how we hope that there will be a happy ending for Maddison Addison Doyle and her family, which is about to expand.

You see, Maddison Addison Doyle didn't even know she had grandparents. Actually, she never thought about it very much. Marmie and Daddo had always been the only family she had ever known or ever wanted. The three of them were a team, and in her mind, there was no room for more family.

It was even more of a shock when Daddo sat her down in his bedroom and gave her the news. He was taking Marmie to a distant hospital clinic for treatment, which to Maddison was great. But then he told her that she would have to spend the entire summer vacation with her grandparents, two strangers she had never even met.

Maddison began to whimper.

She pleaded with her father, "Please, let me go with you and Marmie. I'll be good. I'll keep quiet. I swear. You won't even know I'm around."

Tears welled up in her icy blue eyes, and Daddo knew that she was about to pull one of her famous "drama princess" episodes. (She wasn't quite to the "queen" level yet, but close.)

"Look Maddie, my mother, your grandmother, on the whole, is a good person. I don't agree with some of the things she has done, but she loves you. Her husband, Jim, is a nice guy too."

Daddo rummaged through his massive oak dresser, shoving socks, nail clippers, and other manly things aside to reveal a wooden box that Maddison had never seen before. It was spray-painted gold and its lid was adorned with broken bits of hardened macaroni that had been shaded to look like jewels.

Maddison gazed in awe at the treasure box as she blinked back her tears.

“What’s that?”

Daddo sat on the edge of the bed next to his daughter and looked wistfully down at the ragtag box.

“It’s something I made years ago,” he explained. “Actually, when I was about your age. I made one and gave it to your grandmother as a jewelry box for Mother’s Day, and I liked it so much, I made one for myself as well. After all these years, I doubt she still has hers.”

The lid of the box turned on a tiny nail that was carefully hidden in one corner, and it opened as if by magic.

“Oh, it’s magic,” Maddison whispered.

Being a mathematician who lived in the world of absolutes, her father scowled.

“Maddison Addison Doyle, there’s no such thing as magic. Everything can be measured. Everything can be engineered. Everything can be figured out. Look, there’s nothing there but a nail in the corner of the box. You know better.”

Although Madison's parents loved her, they had a practical, hard-nosed outlook on life because of their work in the math community. They expected the same from their daughter.

At Christmas time, even though gifts were exchanged, Santa Claus was never mentioned. They found it absurd to make a child believe that a fat, furry man visited every child on the planet in a single night, complete with reindeer, elves, and chimney antics.

Maddison was never visited by the Easter Bunny, even though Marmie and Daddo hid plastic break-apart eggs for her to find each year. She knew it was them that hid the colorful ovals. Rabbits had a more practical purpose, like for lining coats, and, heaven forbid, stew.

When Madison lost her baby teeth, they were never hidden beneath her pillow in hopes that a fairy would exchange them for a shiny new coin. That was just plain nonsense.

Daddo pulled a wrinkled photo from the box.

"Ah, here it is." He handed her the picture. "These are your grandparents."

Madison gazed at the faded picture of a couple sitting on the grass next to a small waterfall flowing into a pond. They were smiling and hugging each other. She eyed them carefully, trying to find fault with anything in the image that would make Daddo change his mind.

"They look creepy," she reacted. "He doesn't have any hair, and she is grinning like an idiot. I hate them. I don't want to go, Daddo. Please don't make me."

Daddo pulled her toward him and hugged her.

"Look, honey, Marmie is sick, and she's not getting any better. You want her to get well, don't you? We've found a clinic that has developed a brand-new treatment for Marmie's condition. So far, even though the medicine is still in the trial stage, they have had good results. It is going to take us at least a week to get there and several months to get the full treatment. Plus, children are not allowed at the clinic.

"Your grandparents will take good care of you. When Marmie and I come to get you, if you still hate them that much, you'll never have to see your grandparents again...ever. I promise. Besides, they live in Texas. You were born there, you know. This will be the first time you've gotten to go back to the Lone Star State since you were a baby."

Maddison whimpered, “So what are their names?”

“Well,” Daddo explained, “your grandmother’s name is Alice, but when I phoned her, she said she wanted you to call her ‘Grammy.’ Jim wants to be called ‘GranDude.’”

“What kind of stupid names are those?” Maddison whined.

Daddo kneeled on the floor in front of her and looked her square in the eyes.

“Honey, I know you don’t want to go, but we don’t have a choice. We’ve got to give this new treatment a try. Don’t you want Marmie to get well?”

Madison had to nod on that. She loved her mother.

Daddo hugged his daughter as tears filled his eyes as well.

Chapter 2

Critter Round-Up

"Texans ignored 'better' long ago and forgot the useless word 'good.' Everything in Texas is 'best.' " ~Edward Smith

Some people think that folks from Texas are all born braggarts. If you know a Texan, then you understand. If you are a Texan, well, you are mighty proud to be one and have no problem letting everyone know all about it.

Without a doubt, Texans have a lot to brag about. First of all, Texas is really big. You could fit five ordinary states into Texas, and some Texas ranches are larger than the whole state of Rhode Island.

If you were to drive across Texas, it would take you at least three days. That naturally includes two days spent driving and one day spent getting directions from a proud Texan who brags and has to tell you all about the amazing sights you will pass along the way.

Texas is so big that they have their own language too. They say things like "y'all" for "you all," and "fixin' to" for "about to." And, you might think that Texans are really, really polite because they say "sir" (pronounced "suh") and "ma'am" (pronounced "may-um") a lot. But you'd be wrong. In fact, if you have messed up something and a Texan scolds you with "no sir" or "no ma'am" tacked on, you know you are in big, big trouble.

Texas bigness also includes things like oil, humidity, bluebonnets, barbecue, dust, football, and critters.

You see, being Texan includes much more than just being born and living there. Much, much more. If you really, really want to understand Texas, you need to visit a tiny area in the northeastern part of the great Lone Star State known as JarMar. For in JarMar, Grammy, and GranDude's backyard woodlet, Texan is spoken, but not in an ordinary way. To truly understand Texas, you need to start with the critters that call JarMar their home.

One of the JarMar critters is Harriet Heron. Harriet is a Great Blue Heron and like the long line of proud birds before her, Harriet is a full-fledged, Texas-born and bred, showboat, boastful drama queen, and everyone at JarMar knows it. Each day as she enters JarMar, she spreads her enormous wings and does an ostentatious "TA DA-A-A" landing. Some days, if nobody notices, she does it all over again, just to make sure that everyone knows that she has "arrived."

But this is not the case today.

Everyone at JarMar is all astir. Grammy has called a woodlet meeting and has insisted that all critters be present. They hadn't had an all-tribe meeting like this since she and GranDude had unveiled "The Rules" for JarMar. Harriet knew something important was going on.

Lola Lizard scurried to her favorite basking rock and glibly squawked her usual greeting to Harriet, "Dah-ling, so good to see you. Have you heard the news? We're fixin' to have a guest staying here. Barney overheard G and G talking last night on the deck, after dinner."

Barney was Lola's fourth husband. As of last count, nine green, dewlapped, lounging lizards had fallen prey to Lola's seductive charm.

Harriet's plumes bristled. The fact that Lola had the "scoop" before her really ruffled her feathers.

It was now dusk which was the best time to unite all of the JarMar creatures. Grammy emerged, from the sliding glass door, onto the deck with GranDude at her side.

She gently called out to the beloved backyard animals, “Oh Ba-a-a-bi-i-i-es...”

GranDude exclaimed, “Look honey, even Harriet showed up for the meeting. Now, don’t forget the rules, Harriet.”

“This must be pick on Harriet day,” the long-necked bird squawked to herself. But as GranDude, with his soft touch, began to stroke her shaggy neck feathers, she softened.

“Rule Number One,” she screeched, “no diggin’ in the gardens...”

Samson and Delilah Squirrel jumped from a tree to the deck railing and chimed in with Harriet’s recitation. “Rule Number Two...don’t eat the garden vegetables,” they chirped in unison.

Tony Toad leaped onto a smooth stone at the side of the pond and, not to be outdone by his critter colleagues, he loudly croaked in his best baritone voice, “Rule Number Three...DON’T EAT EACH OTHER.”

At this, all the gathering creatures along with even Grammy and GranDude gave Harriet a cautionary stare.

“I got it, I got it, you guys,” Harriet retorted.

Grammy and GranDude sat cross-legged in the soft grass beside the pond.

“Let’s see if everyone is here,” Grammy began. “Harriet, you look lovely. It’s good to have you here.”

Harriet craned her long neck proudly so that all could see just how lovely she was.

“Sampson and Delilah Squirrel, glad you could make it,” Grammy continued. “Tony Toad, have you gathered your tads together? I don’t want anyone to miss what I have to say.”

“We’re all here,” the school of tiny pollywogs sang from the surface of the pond.

“Lola, Paulie, Frankie, Sammy, Barney, Fred, Eddie, Larry, Curley, and Moe...can y'all hear me?”

The lizards were perched throughout the yard on trees, rocks, and decking and each squawked “Here” and puffed their red gullets as their names were called.

A flash of green and red buzzed by Grammy’s ear. “Oh, hi Humphrey. I love that tune you’re humming today.” Humphrey Hummingbird was JarMar’s sing-a-long leader when no one knew the words.

Grammy continued the roll call as the animals gathered, “Are all y’all under the water listening?”

There were bright orange flashes of color as the comet goldfish all came to the surface of the pond.

“Ah, there you are. Stripe, Tweedle-Dee, Tweedle-Dum, Pretty Boy...”

“Yeah, everyone’s here but Stewpid,” Stripe whined. “He’s in da slammer agin.”

“Not again,” GranDude sighed as he got up to lift the pond’s drain cover. The rest of the animals snickered and giggled as he gently raised the net from the filter box and slid Stewpid back into the water with the rest of his swimmer buddies.

“Hey, what’s everyone lookin’ at me for?” Stewpid yelled as he pulled his whacky little head to the surface of the water.

This made the rest of the critters squawk, hiss, growl, and yawl with laughter.

Grammy shushed the crew. “Now everyone be nice and pipe down. Harriet, I think that Perry might be next door. Could you go and get him? We’ll try to coax Arnie Armadillo out from under the deck, but you know how shy he is.”

Harriet took off as Grammy and GranDude moved to the edge of the deck to encourage Arnie to join the group. Now, Arnie, a giant nine-banded armadillo, often called a “diller” by some Texans, loves to waddle through JarMar at night when the other creatures are sleeping. But, when the sun comes up, he is nowhere to be found. Every now and then, during the day, GranDude, with his gentle voice, can persuade the timid, armored creature to leave his nest.

GranDude coaxed, “Come on out Arnie. We’ve got something really important we want you to hear.”

“N-n-n-not now. I’m t-t-t-tidying up my n-n-n-nest,” Arnie whispered.

“Well GranDude, don’t you think it would be okay if Arnie just came to the edge of the deck so that he can hear what we have to say? Would that be okay with you Arnie?” Grammy asked.

“I g-g-g-guess so,” the critter stuttered. The leaves under the deck began to rustle and within seconds two black eyes and a long pink snout appeared between the slats of the deck stairs.

“Awww, Arnie, it’s good to see you,” Grammy soothed as she took her seat by the pond.

Harriet almost forgot to “ta-da-a-a” with her landing because of the announcement excitement, but several of the tads “oohed” and “aahed” as she re-entered the woodlet.

“Perry’s on his way,” she announced.

“I hope he remembers his glasses,” GranDude sighed.

Perry, the Peregrine Falcon, had all of the attributes of his proud avian ancestors -- incredible speed, graceful swooping power, majestic plumage – but he lacked one critical feature to make him a true mighty bird of prey. Perspective. As in vision. As in Perry was practically blind as a bat! The first time he crashed into the picture-frame, floor-to-ceiling windows that

lined the back of the house, Grammy and GranDude thought that the glare of the sun had caused the mishap. The second time it happened, they were convinced that he just wasn't paying attention. On the third time, GranDude sat Perry down and had a serious man-to-bird talk with him. Come to find out, Perry couldn't see so well, and he was too embarrassed to tell anyone. GranDude took it upon himself to engineer a tiny pair of spectacle goggles for the feathered critter, and it was a grand day in JarMar when Perry made his first flight as a seeing-eyed fowl.

However, today, with the excitement of the announcement, Perry forgot his goggles, and the other critters held their breath as he careened in for a landing.

"Oh no, not again," Grammy whispered. "GranDude, do something. He's going to..."

CRASH!

Perry had spiraled directly into the window and lay dazed on the deck. The thunderous thud had startled Arnie from beneath the stairs and he sprung directly up, only to bump his noggin on the underside of the deck. It frightened him so much that he withdrew into himself and made an armor-plated ball that rolled out from under the deck and landed right at Grammy's feet.

GranDude rushed to check on Perry, gently picked up the stunned bird, and turned to face the group. Perry pulled himself up in GranDude's strong arms, lifted his dazed head, and spoke.

"Did I miss anything?" he slurred.

"We wouldn't have started without you Perry. Are you okay?" Grammy replied.

The bird blinked and nodded.

"He'll be okay," GranDude remarked as he stroked the bird's ruffled head feathers. "Next time he won't forget his glasses." As he gently set Perry down in the grass, he observed the ball of armor, "Well, well, well...I see this commotion brought Arnie out and about."

The boney armadillo ball jiggled a bit.

He continued, “Grammy, you’d better get on with it.”

“Okay, okay,” Grammy answered. She sighed. “Remember a few months back when my son Shawn and his dog Tito came to visit us?”

The animals all nodded.

Stripe piped up, “Yeah, Tito kept knocking rocks into the pond. Darn near hit me a few times.”

Grammy continued.

“Well, I have another son named Brent. Shawn and Brent are my children from long before I ever met GrandDude.” She glanced at her handsome partner and smiled.

“Brent has a wife and a little girl of his own now. They live in a place a long way away from here.” Grammy paused and tears welled up in her eyes.

“Many years back, Brent got very angry at me for some comments I made. In fact, he got so angry he decided that he didn’t want to have anything to do with me or GrandDude ever again. It makes me sad because I still love him very much.

“His daughter is named Maddison. She’s nine years old now. I’ve never gotten to meet her, and that makes me sad too.”

Harriet began to sniffle a bit and Arnie relaxed, unrolled, blinked, and looked up at the woman he’d grown to love so much.

“Well,” Grammy continued, “about a year ago, Brent’s wife, Nina, became very sick. He took her to see a lot of doctors, but none could help. Last month they found a special group of medical researchers that are having a lot of success with Nina’s type of sickness. So, he’s taking

her there with hopes of them helping get her well. The clinic they are going to doesn't allow kids, so...so...he called me...and...Maddison is coming to stay with us for the summer!"

A collective "aww" resounded from the group. Then they were silent.

"Oh, my," Lola grumbled, "whatever will we do with a little human around here?"

GranDude piped up, "We'll love her, of course. But we wanted y'all to know that she may be a bit different. She may not be able to hear and understand you the way Grammy and I do. We don't think she's used to being outdoors much either since they live in a big city. We're guessing this because a box of her things that her dad sent, arrived here yesterday, and..."

Grammy interrupted, "Well...there were no play clothes in it, but there were three boxes of wet wipes, a case of hand sanitizer, and five boxes of face masks."

The animals all looked at each other, quizzically furrowing their brows, as if to say, "Huh?"

"Anyway," she continued, "she will be here tomorrow afternoon. We just wanted to let y'all know. Things may be a little different around here for a while and...we love all of you so very much." With that Grammy teared up again and went inside the house.

GranDude stood to follow his bride and then turned back to the group as he climbed the deck steps. "It's going to be a great summer, you'll see."

And with that, the pair was gone.

There was a hush as none of the critters knew what to say. The news had shaken the group to silence. They all needed a little time to "noodle" things.

The moon rose and shone brightly on the glistening pond. Eventually, Stripe, Pretty Boy, Tweedle-Dee, Tweedle-Dum, and even Stewpid darted between the rays of moonlight.

Sampson and Delilah made their way back to their cozy nest in the towering oak tree that stood beside the pond.

Lola and her husbands all scattered themselves under rocks and nestled down for the night.

Perry perched in the tall pine at the corner of the woodlet.

Arnie waddled and snorted his way across the lawn.

Humphrey twittered about and finally lit on his favorite hanging basket.

Tony began his nightly ribbiting performance as he took the stage on a lily pad in the center of the pond.

Harriet sighed. She thought, “Well at least all’s well in JarMar tonight. It’s hard to tell if this kid is a neat freak or a total slob. Either way, it’s gonna be some summer.” With that, she opened her enormous wings, cleared the fence, and flew toward the moon.

Chapter 3

Flight of Fight

"When everything seems to be going against you, remember that the airplane takes off against the wind, not with it. " -Henry Ford

The flight attendant insisted on escorting Maddison off the plane when they arrived in Dallas. During the flight,, Maddison had made such a fuss about wearing the stupid yellow “child tag” that had been fastened to her shirt that the flight attendant threatened to boot her from the aircraft if she took it off.

And now this. Maddison hated being treated like a baby.

“I can get off this plane all by myself. I don’t need your help!” she shouted to the platinum blonde in the prim airlines uniform.

Two service workers watched as they started cleaning the back of the plane.

“This is why I don’t have kids,” one mumbled to the other.

“Look missy,” the frazzled blonde retorted, “you will let me help you and you will do what I say until you’re safely delivered into the hands of your grandparents. It’s non-negotiable.”

The pilot emerged from the cockpit and smiled at the masked little girl as she squirted a dollop of sanitizer into her palm.

“What have we here?” he chuckled.

He crouched down beside the child.

“Hello there. I’m Mike, the pilot, and who are you?”

Maddison relaxed a bit at the handsome man’s obvious charm.

“I am Maddison Addison Doyle,” she replied, “and I’m nine years old, and I don’t need this idiot lady to help me get off this plane. I can do it myself.”

“Of course, you can Princess. Hey, you know I have a daughter at home who just turned ten, but she’s not nearly as...uh...gifted as you. Tell ya what,” he continued, “I’ll help you get your things together here and you go ahead and get off all by yourself. I’ll just carry your bags for you until we find the people who are supposed to pick you up. Will that work?”

Maddison had never been called “Princess” before and it felt good. She tilted her head to one side and eyed the man warily. And, although he couldn’t see it because of her mask, she flashed him her most dazzling smile and giggled, “Okay. My grandparents are supposed to meet me, but, if I don’t like them, can I come stay with you and your little girl?”

Mike smiled.

“Now, I’ve never met anyone who didn’t love visiting their grandparents. Why, when I was a kid, mine gave me just about anything I wanted. My Grandma made awesome chocolate chip cookies and she’d make a special batch just for me every time I went to see her. You’ll have a great time. I promise.”

Maddison sighed. Since it appeared that there was no way to escape, she would have to go through with this.

“Okay, she said, “you can carry my stuff, but I know I’m not gonna have any fun!”

The blonde shot Mike a “thank you” glance and handed him Maddison’s backpack.

“I’ll bet they’re waiting for you at the gate right now.”

Maddison reached into her pocket and took out the wrinkled photo that Daddo had given her before she left home. She had been studying the image for most of the six-hour plane ride. As she did so she secretly plotted to make these “Grammy” and “GranDude” people miserable for

the next three months. They certainly didn't look like grandparents. Grandparents were supposed to have grey hair, wear glasses and walk with canes. Stuff like that. These two looked like they'd never baked a homemade cookie ever in their lives.

Chapter 4

Offbeat Meet

"I grew up with my grandparents around. I think that's important for a child. If for no other reason than to hear stories about their parents when they were children. " ~Al Roker

All aspects of human life can be found at an airport. If you have ever taken the time to people-watch at one, you know that it is a sanctuary for hugging, eating, shopping, walking really fast, sleeping, and waiting. Airports are exciting places.

However, our story's airport episode is fairly uneventful, as in nobody screams, makes a big commotion, or faints.

But Grammy does cry at the first sight of her precious masked granddaughter. Even GrandDude worked up a tear as the little girl walked through the revolving door with Captain Mike in tow. Grammy squatted down with arms outstretched to welcome the child. Maddison was embarrassed as she walked toward the blubbering woman but did allow Grammy to hug her.

"My arms have been so hungry for you," Grammy whispered as she embraced the girl.

"Hungry arms? What a nut case!" thought Maddison and she stiffened at her grandmother's touch.

But Grammy didn't seem to care. She clung to the girl with an outpouring of love that had been bottled within her for over nine years. Maddison didn't pull away, but she certainly didn't hug back. She tolerated the gush for a while and then turned to stare at the bald guy that she knew from the photo must be "GrandDude."

“Hi Maddison,” he said in a gentle voice, “we’re so glad you’re here.” Maddison appreciated that he didn’t gush like his wife.

Captain Mike shook GrandDude’s hand as he handed over Maddison’s traveling bags. He patted her on the head, said something about how much fun she was about to have, gave GrandDude a “good luck” glance, and then disappeared behind a door marked “Employees Only.”

Since Daddo had sent most of Maddison’s things in advance, they didn’t have to wait for bags at the carousel and walked directly to the car. Maddison didn’t take Grammy’s hand when it was offered. Instead, she walked between the two of them pretending they weren’t there.

GrandDude, sensing the tension, intervened. “Let’s see Grammy, where did we leave Saab-ie? Ah, there he is,” he exclaimed.

Now, Grammy was a master "namer." She gave names to everything that even remotely touched the couple’s existence, whether it be an animal, a vegetable, or a mineral. According to Grammy, naming things makes life more interesting and colorful. Their truck was named “TT” for Tan Truck. The sitting area located off their bedroom was called the “Chill Zone.” The Polaris vacuum sweeper that kept the pool clean was “Polly.” And, the Saab 9-3 convertible was named “Saab-ie.”

Madison ignored him. She wasn’t exactly sure what a Saab was, much less a “Saab-ie.” It probably was a place where her weirdo grandmother went to cry.

Once they arrived at the car, they buckled Maddison into the back seat along with her bags and took their places up front.

“Would you like us to take the top down, sweetie?” Grammy asked.

“I really don’t care,” replied the child indignantly.

“Hmmm,” mused GranDude. “Maybe we better leave it up Grammy. Maddison might not like that much wind blowing in her face.”

Maddison didn't respond, even though it did sound like it might be a semi-fun thing to do. She'd never ridden in a convertible before.

The ride home was a brief one. GranDude brought in the bags as Grammy ushered her granddaughter into their home. She showed her the kitchen, the game room that had a pool table right smack in the middle, the den, the bathroom, the study, Grammy and GranDude's room, and then finally the room that Grammy said belonged to Maddison for the summer. As any grandparent would, Grammy had taken great strides to make sure everything was perfect for the child's arrival. The room was painted a sunny yellow that almost glowed when the sun shone through the window. It had a wrought iron bed with a golden spread and a ton of pillows on it. There was a rocking chair in one corner of the room. One wall had shelves built into it. Grammy had removed the books and adult knick-knacks that had lined the shelves for years and replaced them with stuffed animals, dolls, and row after row of framed pictures of a baby, then a toddler, then a boy, and finally a gawky teenager.

Maddison's eyes rested on the teen pictures as Grammy commented, “Those are all pictures of your dad, honey. I thought you'd get a kick outta seeing what he looked like when he was growing up.” Grammy let that sink in as Maddison looked over the photos. Grammy continued, “Now, let's see...the things that your dad sent are in the closet. I put your clothes in the drawers of the closet chest and the rest of your things on top of it.”

GranDude appeared in the doorway with the two traveling bags and set them onto the bed. Turning to Grammy, he said, “Why don't we give Maddison a chance to check out her new

room, honey? The bathroom is right down the hall. We'll be in the kitchen starting dinner and would love to have you join us when you get settled in," he said.

He nudged Grammy and they took off down the hall.

Maddison closed the door behind them.

Having always been a neatnik, she was picky about how her clothes and other belongings were set up. There was no possible way "Grammy" could have arranged her things the way she liked. She moved to the closet and opened the chest of drawers. In the top drawer were her socks and underwear arranged in tidy rows just like she kept them at home. Hmmm. The second drawer had her shirts neatly folded and sorted by color. The third drawer contained her leggings, pajamas, some shorts that she'd never seen before, and a brand-new swimsuit. All were neatly folded exactly like at home. Next to the chest her dresses and skirts were sorted by color and hung perfectly. On the floor, her shoes were arranged neatly. A brand-new pair of flip-flops sat next to her shoes.

Looking at the flip-flops, she thought, "Yeah, right, like I'll ever wear these." But she had to admit that these people had the organization thing down pat. But she then remembered how much she missed her parents, how she didn't want to be here, and most importantly, her vow to make these Grammy and GranDude people as miserable as possible this summer. She couldn't let them get away with this sort of "perfection" right off the bat. So, she pulled all the stuffed animals and dolls down from the shelves and threw them into the empty box in the closet.

At the corner of the bottom shelf sat a gold-painted wooden box that she hadn't noticed at first. It was just like the one that Daddo had shown her at home.

"It's the magic box," Maddison thought.

She sat down on the floor and carefully placed it on her lap realizing that her dad had made this prize. Knowing the secret, she gently slid the top of the box open to see what was inside. She pulled out a stack of more photos of Daddo at various stages of his childhood. In addition, there was a baseball trading card that on the front pictured a little league player clad in his Astro uniform, kneeling with his glove propped on his knee. He was smiling all over himself. On the back of the card, it had his name, Brent Doyle, his age 9 years old, his weight 72 lbs., and height 53 inches. According to the card, he played second base, and his favorite pro was Babe Ruth. At the bottom, he had signed it with a scrawly “kid” signature. Maddison giggled.

She found three round pin-on buttons each with a photo on it. The first image was a much younger version of Grammy with a chubby baby propped on her hip. They were standing next to Sesame Street’s Oscar the Grouch. She reckoned the baby was Daddo. The second button was definitely Daddo. It was a headshot of him in his football uniform.

“He was probably in junior high then,” Maddison thought as she smiled. The third photo was of a much larger Daddo, still in football gear and looking really tough. Maddison knew that her dad had played football in high school and even some in college, but she’d never seen any pictures of him in uniform or playing.

At the very bottom of the box was a small envelope that had been folded over several times. It had a small lump of something hard inside the envelope. She cautiously unfolded it and saw that on the front was written, “From the Tooth Fairy. Brent’s first lost tooth.” Maddison knew that she had truly found a treasure. She carefully replaced the box contents and gently closed the lid. She put the box back where she found it at the corner of the bottom shelf.

Then she filled the now empty shelves with the toys that she’d brought with her on the plane. On one shelf she arranged her wipes, masks, and bottles of sanitizer. After everything was

lined up to her satisfaction, she stared at the framed pictures of Daddo, giggling a bit at the chubby baby, the boy clad in army gear, and the sassy teen with his tongue stuck out at the camera.

Then she grabbed a wet wipe from the shelf and proceeded to scrub her hands and arms all the way up to her elbows.

Chapter 5

Welcome to JarMar

"Some people talk to animals. Not many listen though. That's the problem." ~ A. A. Milne

Grammy was not a biologist, a veterinarian, or an animal whisperer, and certainly not a sorceress, but she did believe that when a person's mind and heart are open, and they purpose to pay attention to their surroundings, magic can occur.

She and GrandDude had helped the magic happen by turning their backyard into a lush garden paradise. In actuality, Mother Nature had given them a blank canvas to work with by scattering large enough oak trees throughout the area to qualify it as a "woodlet." It wasn't big enough to be called a forest, but it had everything a magical wood should have. Grammy and GrandDude had gone to pond school and then built a beautiful water retreat with a gurgling waterfall to set a relaxing mood.

Then, just like Rembrandt selected his paints, GrandDude carefully researched, chose, and then put in place the best Texas plants to decorate the backyard masterpiece.

The name "JarMar" was a Grammy invention. GrandDude's name is James Alan Ryland, and her name is Marjorie Alice Ryland. Together, their initials make the perfect word decoration for their enchanting hideaway. She had even painted the name on a large rock and propped it up against the oak tree next to the pond. GrandDude had teased her about it.

"You've got all the critters talking, and now you're going to teach them to read as well?" he joked.

"If they want to, I certainly can teach them," she had replied, as she straightened the propped stone a bit. "It's like we're staking our claim to this part of the planet, and I like it."

They didn't know what brought the animals to the area at first—the pond, the trees, the plants, the rock sign, or even the creative name—but they were sure that it was love that kept them coming back and pure magic that made the animals declare JarMar their home.

It was a nightly ritual for Grammy and GranDude to cook their evening meal on the black iron barbecue grill that sat on the corner of the backyard deck. GranDude started the charcoal fire this evening while Grammy made burger patties, cut squash, and prepared a salad for dinner. Grammy then joined GranDude on the deck.

“How do you think it's going so far?” she asked her husband.

“Fine. Just fine. I think everything is going to be just fine. It'll be an adjustment for us all, but it's going to be fine honey,” he replied as he hugged her.

Meanwhile, Maddison put on a fresh face mask and then walked down the hall and into the empty kitchen. She caught a glimpse of GranDude on the deck through the breakfast area's sliding glass door. She walked to the door to check out the backyard and then gasped in wonder at the first sight of the place. Baskets dripping with yellow, red, and purple pansies lined the deck. Some of them hung from shepherd's hooks, and the rest were meticulously positioned around the railing to create a banquet of color for her eyes to feast on. Beyond the deck, she could make out a mound covered in patches of green and dotted with fuchsia, gold, pink, and orange flowers. Three massive rocks were stacked on top of the mound, and frothy water gushed from the cracks between them. The water stream hop-skipped down a path of smooth, egg-shaped stones and then landed in a pool below, making bubbles when it hit the water's surface. Lily pads and blue iris nearly covered the entire surface of the pond. There were white, lemon yellow, and hot pink lilies peeking through the foliage.

Maddison failed to notice that, just like Grammy and GranDude, the critters had made tremendous efforts to welcome her to JarMar. In preparation for her visit, Tony, Stewpid, Stripe, and the rest of the comet goldfish had diligently polished each of the pond's smooth stones. The sliding glass door and floor-to-ceiling windows were spotless, thanks to Perry, Lola, and her husbands. The flowers that were rooted in hanging baskets were fanned and preened by Humphrey, who was constantly humming as he did his part to spruce things up for the child. Although she thought it was beneath her, even Harriet had cleared the decks of twigs and dead leaves, and Sampson and Delilah Squirrel had decorated the back fence with acorns to welcome their special guest.

Although she missed the details of the critters' efforts, Maddison felt as if she'd just opened a brand new 64-box of crayons. It was the most splendid place that she had ever seen.

GranDude was the first to spy the petite visitor as he hugged his wife. "We've got company," he whispered. Grammy pulled away, but he held her tighter.

"Give her a while to take it all in, honey. Don't rush her."

Grammy was grateful for the security that his strong arms gave her, so she willingly clung to him as Maddison gawked a bit. After a full minute, Grammy turned and motioned for the child to come out and join them on the deck.

Maddison timidly accepted the offer and opened the sliding door to enter the magical world of her grandparents.

"You ready to see JarMar, sweetheart?" Grammy gently prodded.

Maddison blinked, and Grammy took that as an "ok" and began the grand tour of the woodlet expanse.

"We call our backyard JarMar," Grammy continued. "We used both of our initials to come up with that name. We spend most of our time out here. Maybe now that you've come to visit, we can call it JarMar-Mad. Would you like that?"

Maddison frowned and then saw the rock with the inscription JARMAR that had been proudly placed at the base of an oak tree.

“Whatever,” she replied as beads of sweat broke out on her top lip and forehead. “It’s hot out here,” she added.

There was no doubt that Maddison found the place beautiful, but the idea of spending the summer outdoors in the Texas heat did not appeal to her. Her grandparents were fruitcakes.

The JarMar critters were, naturally, curious to catch a glimpse of their dainty new masked guest but kept their distance on the edge of the area. It was good ol' Stewpid who put all his shyness aside, rose to the top of the pond, and began babbling with his swampy Texas drawl.

“Hi, there! My name is Stewpid, and Grammy told us that you were coming to visit. Would you like to be my friend? I like friends, and I’d sure like for you to be mine. Want to meet my brothers? I have lots of brothers, and we all live down here in the pond...” He gurgled on and on and on.

Of course, Maddison couldn't understand a word he was saying. With her analytical mind and inherited skepticism, there was no way she would let down her guard and believe in anything as preposterous as a talking fish. She was just not ready to understand and speak critter-talk. Grammy knew how sensitive Stewpid was, so she stepped in when she saw that this one-sided conversation was only going to hurt the poor little guy’s feelings.

“Maddison, we’ve got a lot of critters, uh, animals that live with us here at JarMar. Would you like to give some of our pond friends a snack?”

Grammy walked to the shed by the vegetable garden and pulled a box of fish food flakes from a shelf. She then walked to the edge of the pond, with a sweaty Maddison close behind her.

“You want to see something magical?” Grammy asked as she kneeled down next to the child.

“We don’t believe in magic at our house,” Maddison replied curtly.

“Hmm, I see,” Grammy nodded and then looked up at GrandDude on the deck. He winked with an okay-just-show-her wink.

“Watch this,” Grammy continued. “Oh, babies...” she called as she grabbed a pinch of fish food and held it over the pond.

Maddison’s eyes grew wide with wonder as she saw five brilliantly colored comet goldfish poke their heads through the pond’s surface. Each was at least five inches long and vividly emblazoned so that no two were exactly alike. She noticed that one of the little fellows kept bobbling up and down and moving his mouth as if he were on a spring.

“That one over there must really be hungry,” Maddison noted.

“Oh, that’s Stewpid,” Grammy replied.

“Stupid? What kind of name is that?”

“No honey, Stew-pid,” Grammy corrected. “He, uh, well, he gets stuck in the pond filter a lot. Would you like to feed them? Reach down into the box and grab a few flakes...”

Maddison did as Grammy instructed, but as she stuck her fingers down into the box, even through her mask, the rank odor of stale, dried shrimp seeped into her nostrils.

She thought she was going to barf. “This stuff smells awful,” she screamed.

“Well, to you, it might smell awful, but to Stewpid it smells delicious!” Grammy explained. “Go ahead, sprinkle some on the water.”

Maddison again did as she was told, trying not to gag as she watched the fish gobble up the flakes. Stewpid kept on chattering between gulps of food.

“Thanks, Maddie, this is really good stuff – GULP – we’re going to have so much fun this summer – GULP – wanna see me do a flip? – GULP – why don’t you answer me?”

“Because, she can’t understand ya, ya big dope!” Stripe piped up. “Grammy told us this might happen, stupid Stewpid.”

GrandDude came to the rescue. “Well, my lovely ladies, how about some burgers? We’ll let Maddison make friends with all the critters tomorrow, but now it’s time to eat. Why don’t you ladies go in and wash up while I set the table?”

Maddison was grateful for the opportunity to clean the putrid fish flake smell off her hands and get out of the sweltering heat. She handed the fish food box to Grammy and turned to go inside and find a hand wipe and sanitizer. But before she entered the house, she turned back to take another glance at the pond critters. She saw Stewpid still bobbling up and down at the surface of the pond, and noticed a big tear rolling down from his eye to his fin. “It must be the heat,” she thought to herself, “Fish don’t cry, do they?” She then rushed to her room to clean up.

“But...but...I just wanted to be her friend...” Stewpid whimpered.

Chapter 6

Flap Dance

"Hey summer, stop showing off. We get it. You're hot." ~ Everyone in North Texas

Texas summers are wretched. It is sweltering hot, all day, and all night, for the entire months of June, July, and August. Mornings are bad. Afternoons are awful. And, it doesn't get much better in the evening. The humidity is so thick that you can almost cut it with a knife. Getting into a car is like entering a furnace, and often seat belt buckles turn into branding irons. Within minutes, iced drinks, taken outdoors, have as much liquid on the outside of the glass, as they do on the inside. Even going to the mailbox makes you sweat enough to soak everything you're wearing, and air conditioning repairmen are treated like royalty.

Texas summers are always a big shock for Grammy and GranDude's friends that visit from up North. In fact, their summertime guests normally stay parked in the pool until their fingers look like raisins. Those who want to keep their fingers smooth offer to clean out the fridge so they can get out of the oppressive heat. Of course, Grammy, GranDude, and the critters are used to the heat. Unfortunately, Maddison Addison Doyle is not.

Maddison woke up in a hot sweat on her first morning at JarMar. Soon after she got into bed the night before, she kicked off the covers. Grammy had set the ceiling fan in the room to low, but after five minutes in bed, Maddison cranked it all the way up.

"How do these people live like this?" she thought as she tossed and turned and then finally got up. She reached for a hand wipe to mop her sweaty face and then ran into Grammy in the hallway as she headed to the bathroom.

“Honey, your room will stay much cooler if you leave the door open,” Grammy explained. “I know you’re probably not used to heat like this, but you’ll adjust.”

“Yeah, right,” Maddison thought as she slammed the bathroom door behind her.

Grammy called after her, “We saved you some breakfast. After you eat, you might want to get cooled off in the pool.”

Now, Maddison had never had the opportunity to learn to swim very well. Her mother had promised to teach her, but it all fell by the wayside when Marmie got sick. She noticed that Grammy had on her swimsuit with a towel wrapped around her waist. She also noticed that Grammy and GranDude never seemed to wear shoes when at home. What freaks.

After breakfast, and a thorough clean-up, Maddison decided to try on her new swimsuit. She wiggled into it, put on her socks and best tennis shoes and retreated to the backyard. At the door, she spied Grammy standing by the back fence, next to the vegetable garden. She looked like she was talking to two brown squirrels perched atop the fence! Maddison scanned the yard. There was nobody else there. Not a neighbor, not GranDude, nobody!

Maddison hesitated, knowing for sure now that her grandmother was a screwball. She slowly opened the door and was greeted with a blast of heat that could bake a cake. Sheesh, how could she possibly last three months here?

“Hey there honey,” Grammy called, “I’ve got some things to show you out here.” In a snap, the squirrels scurried up a huge oak tree on the back side of the fence.

Grammy approached the child. “Wow! That suit looks really nice on you. Come on over here to the pool and let’s get you cooled off.”

In the yard, the JarMar swimming pool was located opposite the pond. It was shaped like a huge light bulb. The main part was completely round and at the shallow end, there was a moon-

shaped area that had three steps leading down into the water. Grammy took off the towel she had around her waist and folded it to make a seat pad at the edge of the step area. After retrieving another towel for Maddison, she plopped down on the towel and stuck her feet in the cool, blue water. Maddison sat down beside her. She meticulously removed her shoes, then socks, and folded them neatly into her tennis shoes. As her feet landed in the chilly water, she shivered. It felt really good and her sweaty body relaxed a bit.

“Feels nice, huh?” Grammy sighed.

They sat there for a full minute in silence, enjoying the time out from the heat.

“GranDude has gone to the store, so I thought this might be a good time to talk and get to know each other better.”

Maddison didn't respond, so Grammy continued, “Let's see, where to start...uh...first off, Maddison, do you like animals?”

“Yeah, I guess so...” the girl replied.

“Have you ever had a pet or a wild animal that's lived close to you? Anything like that?”

What was this lady getting at? “No, not really. I've been to the zoo,” Maddison glibly retorted. “Why?”

“Well, ever since GranDude and I put in our pond, we've had quite a few critters that have come to live with us here,” her grandmother explained.

“Critters? Like, what kind of critters?”

“You saw Stewpid and his brothers in the pond last night, right?”

“Yeah, so? I've seen fish before.”

“Well...” Grammy hesitated, then decided to tell more. “When you came out just now you probably saw the two squirrels on the fence. Their names are Sampson and Delilah. They

live in that big tree over there by the pond. They have three baby squirrels that live in a nest there with them.”

Grammy pointed to a huge oak just beyond the waterfall.

“So. I’ve seen squirrels before too...in parks. But I never **named** them. That’s dumb.”

Grammy ignored that remark and continued.

“We have more critters that live here as well.” Grammy paused and then decided not to share more.

“You’ll meet them all in good time. It’s gonna be a great summer.” She paused again and then continued, “Whew, I’m ready to get really wet. How ‘bout you?”

With that, Grammy dove into the water with a smooth motion that reminded Maddison of a seal. The girl watched her grandmother swim underwater to the far side of the pool and then popped her head up.

“Come on in sweetie. It feels great!” she said.

“I’d rather not. I’m fine right here,” Maddison lied.

She actually wasn’t scared of the water, but she was terrified about what would happen if she dove right in like Grammy did. She was not about to admit to anyone here at “JarMar” that she didn’t know how to swim.

“Suit yourself,” Grammy replied as she did the sidestroke back and forth across the pool.

Maddison enviously was watching her grandmother’s aquatic maneuvers, when suddenly, a huge shadow swooped over the water and startled the child. She immediately looked up to see what could have caused the illusion. She spied the tail of some sort of flying creature as it cleared the house. Now, her third-grade class had studied dinosaurs this past year, and she

thought it looked a lot like the replica of a prehistoric pterodactyl she'd seen on their field trip to the museum. The thing was enormous.

“What is it, honey?” Grammy asked as she stroked across the water.

“Did you see that?” Maddison stood and screamed. “Something really big just flew over us.”

“Oh, that's probably just Harriet,” Grammy giggled. “She likes to show off a lot.”

“What's a Harriet?”

“Oh, I'm sorry honey. Harriet is a Great Blue Heron. She lives with us here at JarMar.”

Grammy explained.

“What?!!!” the child shrieked.

“A Great Blue Heron,” Grammy repeated as she swam to the steps to be near the child.

“Blue herons are beautiful, graceful birds. You'll love Harriet. Maybe, just maybe, if we're really still and quiet, Harriet will come back so you can meet her.”

“Are you crazy?” Maddison snarled. “I don't want to meet...”

Grammy shushed her, “Shhhh...be very quiet and still, honey, and watch...”

“But...”

“Shh!”

Maddison felt like an absolute idiot, but she obeyed her grandmother out of curiosity to see if this Harriet creature would really re-appear.

Harriet, up above, had overheard everything and knew that this landing was going to be the performance of a lifetime. She circled the woodlet just beyond the tree line on the outer side of the fence.

“There she is now,” Grammy whispered.

Maddison looked up into the glaring morning sun and saw the silhouette of the proud bird. Harriet's wingspan was at least six feet wide and the mere size of her made Maddison gasp in awe.

Realizing that she had the child's full attention now, Harriet swooped down over the yard, dipped her right wing slightly, and then glided back up above the trees.

Lola was perched on her favorite sunning rock by the deck. "Show off," she screeched as Harriet circled the woodlet again.

With the grace of a prima ballerina, Harriet descended into the yard and landed right next to the pond. She had decided to milk this performance for all it was worth. She strutted to the edge of the waterfall and tilted her lanky neck forward. She then gulped a beak full of the frothy water, retracted her neck into her famous "S" position, and then, to make the "tad da-a-a" complete, she elongated her gullet so that she stood a full four feet tall. Just to make sure that Maddison was properly impressed, she opened her wings and did a little flap dance for the girl.

"Good grief," Lola thought, as she rolled her bulging eyes and blinked in disgust.

"That's our Harriet," Grammy grinned at the bird's magnificent performance. "Bravo," she shouted and clapped her hands.

Maddison couldn't believe what happened next. It appeared that the Harriet creature actually dipped her head from side to side as if to take...a..a bow! The child blinked in disbelief. She wished that Daddo had left a phone number so she could call him to come to get her right now! This place, these people, these "critters" were looney, whacko, bonkers and she didn't want to have anything else to do with them.

She jumped up from the pool and ran across the deck and into the house. She raced to her room and, heat or no heat, she slammed the door behind her.

“Oh my,” Grammy exclaimed. “We definitely have our work cut out for us. Don’t you think twice about this Harriet, I loved your landing and your performance.”

Grammy then grabbed Maddison’s shoes, as well as the towels, and followed the child into the house.

Harriet stood dazed for a moment. No one had ever reacted like this. Obviously, Maddison must have had the sun in her eyes and hadn’t been able to properly absorb the magnificence of her performance. Of course, that had to be it. But this time when she flapped her gigantic wings to leave the woodlet, she hoped no one was watching.

Lola giggled under her breath, “Serves ya right, ya big show off.”

Chapter 7

Toad Choir Practice

"Be silent if you choose, but when it is necessary, speak — and speak in such a way that people will remember it." ~Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart

Maddison stayed indoors for the next few days. Grammy and GranDude tried their best to entertain the child. They offered to play board games or cards with her, but she refused. They encouraged her to join them in the backyard, but she would have none of it.

She'd brought a calendar from home and taped it to the wall in her room. She "x-ed" off a day every night before she went to bed. She longed for news from Daddo and Marmie. Daddo had warned her that they might not be able to call her often, which made her miss them more.

Although they fed her and made an effort to keep her entertained and cool, her grandparents were crazy. No wonder Daddo never told her about them. Maddison thought all of their "critter" antics were utterly absurd. She knew that Daddo and Marmie would never name every single squirrel or pigeon they saw in the park, and would disapprove of her getting involved with all this JarMar stuff. So, she amused herself with books, video games on her tablet, and "x's" on the calendar.

The JarMar critters were all disappointed that they hadn't seen more of Maddison and they knew Grammy was stressed about the way things were going. Of course, Lola Lizard had blabbed to the whole group that Harriet had frightened the girl so much that she wouldn't even come outside anymore. GranDude told them that wasn't the case at all. He explained that it would just take a little more time for Maddison to adjust to everything. They all accepted this and did their best to cheer up Grammy and survive the scorching heat.

According to her calendar, Maddison had been at JarMar for a full week now. She had just finished her evening meal and retreated to her room to mark the calendar and read. As she settled into bed with her book, she heard an awful racket that appeared to be coming from the backyard. It was a steady rasping, grating sound that intensified at different pitch levels and droned on and on...and on. She covered her ears with her pillow, but it didn't even begin to muffle the horrid noise.

Finally, she could stand it no more. She got up and marched down the hall to find out what on earth could be causing such a racket. The kitchen was empty. Grammy and GranDude had finished doing the dinner dishes and had evidently retreated to the backyard.

Maddison peeked through the sliding glass door. The summer sun was setting just beyond the back fence and there was a mystical, pink glow behind the trees. She blinked to adjust her eyes to the dim lighting and find out what was causing the ruckus.

She saw Grammy over by the pool watering the side garden. The dreadful din didn't seem to bother the woman a bit!

The wretched noise seemed to be coming from the pond area. Its source appeared to be a blob of brown the size of Madison's fist on the waterfall's tallest rock. As she squinted to make out what the thing could possibly be, she noticed another brown blob, then another, and another all lined up around the edge of the pond. There, in the midst of the deafening din, sat GranDude with his legs crossed and eyes closed!

Grammy was rolling up the watering hose when she noticed Maddison at the door. She smiled and motioned to the child to join her. Maddison slowly opened the door and warily walked out onto the deck where the ruckus was even louder.

"What's going on out here?" she hollered to her grandmother.

Grammy joined her on the deck. “Tonight is toad choir practice. They are getting really good, don’t you think?”

Maddison couldn’t believe that Grammy thought this terrible noise sounded good. She frowned.

“Come and sit with me on the steps, honey,” Grammy beckoned.

Maddison reluctantly obeyed and positioned herself next to her grandmother.

“See the big guy on the top of the waterfall? That’s Antonio Marcellus Phillipe Rodrigo Toad. We all just call him Tony. He’s the lead singer.”

Tony puffed up his monster jowls and let out a crusty, deafening “Waaaaa-uhhh.”

“GranDude loves to be in the middle of things on choir practice night. Makes him feel peaceful,” Grammy continued.

GranDude smiled and winked.

“Peaceful? What’s so peaceful about all this creaking and croaking? It hurts my ears,” Maddison whined.

“Well, it may hurt your ears, but to them, it sounds really good...no, better than good. I think Tony sees himself as a great tenor singing opera. GranDude likes it.” Grammy returned the wink to her husband.

She continued, “It always amazes me how they can puff up their necks like that and that such a loud noise comes from such a small critter. Let’s move a little closer.”

Maddison hesitated, but followed her grandmother to the edge of the pond and positioned herself between her grandparents, who sat cross-legged in the cool, green grass. Grammy took a deep breath and closed her eyes like GranDude. Maddison wasn’t about to close her eyes. She had never been this close to so many toads at the same time. She heard a big “ker-plop” as one of

the slimy amphibians jumped into the pond and extended his long legs to propel across the water. The croaking crescendoed as more and more toads joined the chorus.

Of course, they were trying to entertain Maddison with their singing, but she didn't know that. Tony hopped down from his perch on the waterfall and landed on a smooth boulder directly in front of the child. Maddison screamed and grabbed hold of GranDude's arm.

"It's okay honey. Awww...it looks like Tony wants to sing a solo especially for you," GranDude exclaimed. "What an honor!"

"But...but...he's so...so...ugly," Maddison groaned.

"Well, the lady toads around here don't seem to think so," Grammy chuckled. "Just listen."

The three of them sat there, Grammy sighing, GranDude tilting his head back and closing his eyes, and Maddison wanting desperately to cover her ears.

The "choir" droned on and on, and on...

It was the JarMar custom, after choir practice, for the lyrical hoppers to line up beside GranDude to let him pet their little bellies. It was their reward for a job well sung. Tony, so absorbed in the virtuoso performance that he forgot Maddison was there, became anxious for his well-deserved reward. He did a flying leap from the boulder and meant to land in GranDude's lap as he'd always done. But a rare summer breeze gusted at the exact moment the hopper ascended, causing him to overshoot his target and land with a huge plonk right on Maddison's lap. The child felt the slime of the toad on her bare leg and bounded up like a rocket. This caused the poor critter to be catapulted directly into the air and then dropped back down with a humongous splash into the water.

“It touched me. That ugly thing touched me!” Maddison screamed as she ran for the door. “I’m gonna get WARTS!!” She didn’t even bother to close the glass door behind her as she bolted into the house.

The concert abruptly stopped and it was one of the rare moments when JarMar was completely silent.

GranDude broke the hush.

“Oh my,” he jeered. He couldn’t help but smile. “You okay, Tony?”

“Sorry ‘bout that,” Tony croaked from the surface of the water. “I guess I got a little carried away.”

“It wasn’t your fault, Tony. I loved the concert, and I’m sure Maddison did too. I’d better go check on her,” Grammy sighed as she retreated into the house.

GranDude erupted into raucous laughter once his wife left the yard, and the toads all joined in as he rubbed their tiny bellies.

Chapter 8


Tad Trauma

"Some family trees bear an enormous crop of nuts." ~Wayne Hulzenga

It was hot, really, really hot.

With daily temperatures already above 100 degrees, the weathermen agreed that this was likely the hottest summer in the history of north Texas. It's only June, and normally the 100-degree mark is not achieved until mid-July. The term "sweltering" had a whole new meaning. Grammy and GranDude were having to water the JarMar gardens twice a day, and then the woodlet sprinkler system took over at night. Likewise, the pool had to be topped off daily, and even Stewpid and his brothers had started to sweat in the scorching afternoon sun.

Grammy wracked her brain to think of ways to keep Maddison cool. She kept fruit juice and bottled water on ice and readily available for the child at all times. Maddison welcomed the attempts but never showed gratitude for the effort. Grammy didn't care. She had waited nine years just to meet her granddaughter, and she knew she'd wait as long as it took to achieve any kind of significant relationship with the child. Grammy took nothing for granted and was grateful just to have Maddison close to her.

GranDude's focused on the critters. Daily, he took the time to hose down each creature and have a little "talk" with each one, gently reminding them that the heat would pass, and the temperatures would eventually drop to a more comfortable level. He reminisced about the winter two years ago, when JarMar was  blanketed in a white layer of snow. That kind of cold didn't happen often, but this encouraged the thirsty critters to think "cool" thoughts.

Maddison had read all the books she had brought with her the first week after she arrived. The tablet games were beginning to bore her. She was too proud to ask Grammy to take her to the library or toy store to get something, anything, to entertain and occupy her time. So she started closely examining the gallery of photos of Daddo that was in her room. She made up stories of what he had been like as a baby, a toddler, and even at her age. She pulled the golden box off the shelf, imagining it held a magical potion that would heal Marmie and miraculously bring her parents back to take her home.

But, as we all know, there is no such thing as magic.

There was also no news from Marmie and Daddo.

Maddison knew that she would eventually be forced to join her grandparents in their activities at “JarMar” just to have something to do. After the choir practice episode, she steered clear of the pond, and Tony kept his distance so as not to frighten the child. Harriet, too, was careful not to present herself when Maddison was around. The critters, with GranDude’s calming reassurances, were patient, hoping that Maddison would eventually open her heart and want to be their friend. In the meantime, they watched her from a distance and did their best to stay cool.

On his daily hose-down and cool-down session with GranDude, Tony Toad mentioned a growing concern he had about this season’s developing tadpoles.

“It’s just too darn hot in the pond,” croaked the hopper. “I’m afraid we’re going to lose some of them if things don’t get cooler real soon. They haven’t even gotten their legs yet.”

GranDude knew that the water from the outside faucet was, at its coolest, only lukewarm and couldn't be pumped continuously into the pond because it contained chorine which would be harmful to the teensy swimmers. He called Grammy to the edge of the pond to discuss the situation. They had discovered early on in their relationship that input from two heads was

always better than one. There was rarely an issue at JarMar that they couldn't solve when they worked on it together.

“Honey, the tadpoles are in trouble,” he announced. “We've got to cool down the pond until they get their legs.”

They both got on their knees to check out the tiny black swimmers that were all huddled in the shade of a big stone on the edge of the pond. Each tad looked a lot like a comma—not much more than a round dot with a squiggle attached to it. After talking to Tony, GranDude did some research. According to the leading amphibian experts, when water temperatures exceed 89 degrees, only the strongest tadpoles make it to become toads.

GranDude had the pool thermometer out, testing the temperature of the pond.

“Honey, it's already up to 86 degrees, and it's only 11 o'clock. We're going to have to do something, like now!” he exclaimed.

Grammy hovered over the water and gently called out, “Oh Tads, how are my babies today?”

All of the teeny dots slowly struggled to face the surface of the water where Grammy kneeled. Their tiny voices were barely audible as they greeted her with breathy, muffled whisper squeaks of, “Hi, Grammy... Grammy...Gram...”

“Oh, Jim, this is terrible. You're right. We've got to do something right now, or we're going to lose them all! We've got several bags of ice in the freezer. What do you think?”

“Well, it couldn't hurt,” GranDude replied. “You start throwing in what we have a little at a time.” We don't want them to cool down too quickly. Maybe Maddison can help. I'll run to the store to get more ice.”

They immediately went into emergency action mode.

GrandDude grabbed Saab-ie's keys, gave Grammy a quick kiss, and headed out the front door. Grammy retreated to the garage, where the freezer was, and came through the kitchen toting a ten-pound bag of ice.

"Maddison, honey, I need your help," Grammy called down the hall and then exited to the backyard.

Maddison was actually relieved to do anything other than sit around and be bored, so she welcomed her grandmother's request. After putting on her shoes, she walked into the pool room and looked out the windows to see Grammy going around the pond and dropping ice cubes into the water.

"Good grief," she thought, "she's lost it again."

By now, Maddison was used to her grandparents' peculiarities.

She sighed, "Oh well, I wasn't doing anything else."

So, she marched out the back door, across the deck, and joined her grandmother at the pond. She had decided to play along with the woman's weirdness. At least it was something to do.

"Oh, Madison," Grammy panted in a panicky voice. "The tadpoles are in trouble. GrandDude says we have to cool them down gradually,"

Grammy emptied part of the bag of ice into a bucket and handed it to the child.

"If we throw in a few cubes at a time, it should help. It's supposed to get really hot this afternoon, so GrandDude has gone after more ice."

Madison was pretty sure she had never done anything so utterly ridiculous ever in her life, but she accepted the bucket and plopped a chunk into the steamy water. It melted within

seconds, so she chunked another and then another as she watched the tiny dots with their squiggly tails move slowly through the clear water.

Of course, the teensy critters were all thanking her in their weakened, muffled voices, but she didn't hear them. Truth be known, she didn't care if the itty-bitty dots ever made it to the toad level. Toads were gross.

Grammy exhausted her bag and headed to the house.

"Honey, you're doing a great job; keep it up. I'll be right back after I get another bag."

Maddison positioned herself in the shade of one of the huge oaks that stood beside the pond. She continued to toss the cubes into the water as instructed. Grammy returned and refilled her bucket. She also brought two tall glasses of lemonade and a portable stereo.

She flashed a grin as she connected the device to the outdoor outlet and turned up the volume, saying, "I thought this would help everyone."

Then she sat next to her precious Madison and tossed a cube of ice in the water as Bing Crosby crooned about snow and his dreams of a white Christmas.

"Really?" Maddison said and looked up at her grandmother in total disbelief.

"Well, I figure it couldn't hurt," Grammy muttered and grinned sheepishly.

This made Madison giggle. Marmie and Daddo would never believe it. Here she sat in the middle of the day at 100+ degrees, trying to help some black dots get their legs by flinging cubes of ice into a pond.

"I have fallen down the rabbit hole," she thought.

She re-crossed her legs, took a sip of sweet lemonade, and concentrated on the hundreds of tiny dots in the pond.

She mused to herself, “I guess it could be worse. At least the Queen of Hearts is not trying to chop off my head.”

She plopped another ice cube into the water.

Bing sang on about the joys of cold weather and tromping through the snow. Maddison giggled again, almost out loud.

“Go figure,” she thought.

Chapter 8

Ticker Tape Tad Parade

"Life is full of surprises, and you need to be ready for everything." ~Massimiliano Allegri

After two days of the ice regimen, GranDude decided that a more extreme measure was necessary to save the tads. With the help of Tony and his friends, he gathered all the tadpole babies into three big 5-gallon buckets and brought them all indoors.

He placed the buckets in the extra bathroom shower. Grammy boiled lettuce before freezing it into cubes. A fresh lettuce cube was dropped into each bucket every other day to feed the tiny creatures. The change in temperature and lettuce pops were exactly what the babies needed to grow, sprout their legs, and become stronger.

It was bright and early on a Tuesday morning when the final metamorphosis occurred. Grammy was in the kitchen scrambling eggs as GranDude worked the daily crossword puzzle from the newspaper.

The smell of bacon, eggs, and toast floated through the house as Maddison lazily stirred and sniffed the scrumptious aroma that announced a new day.

She had been dreaming about a fairy princess who lived in a kingdom where no one got sick and everyone got along and was happy. She yawned, grabbed her pillow, and turned over to snuggle into the comfy bed and continue the sweet allusion when she suddenly felt something brush against her shoulder. She reactively shooed off the nuisance without even opening her eyes. Then, it happened again. She flinched and felt another wisp of movement on her forearm, then another on her cheek. She rustled a bit and blinked her eyes a few times.

And then, she saw them.

Her bed was covered with hundreds of tiny toads no bigger than her fingernail! Most of them still had tails, and ALL of them had legs. She sat straight up and let out an ear-piercing shriek that knocked a few of the critters to the floor.

Grammy and GrandDude came running in response.

“Oh my!” Grammy exclaimed as she tried to grab hold of the screaming child.

Maddison leaped out of the bed and did a shiver dance across the room.

“Get them off of me!” she bellowed over and over as the midget varmints fell to the floor and darted about the room.

The tads were actually giving Maddison froggie-kisses to thank her for cooling them down in the pond. They were glad to finally have their legs, but they were just too young to understand that she might not appreciate their extreme gratitude.

“It’s okay, honey,” Grammy soothed. “The tads are mighty proud of their new legs, and they just wanted you to see them.”

She gave GrandDude a “do something” look, and like a knight in shining armor, he delivered a brilliant rescue speech.

“Oh babies,” he beckoned.

“We’re not babies no more,” the tiny jumpers replied, “we got legs!”

“Okay...uh...toadlets, let’s put those new legs to use. Everyone look this way and line up!” he continued.

Maddison immediately stopped her howling and blinked in wonder as the bantam leapers all jumped to attention and formed a near-perfect conga line.

“Everyone at JarMar is anxious to see your new limbs, so this is the perfect time to show ‘em what you’re made of. Junior toadlets...forward...hop!” GrandDude commanded as he led the tiny, proud amphibians down the hall, through the pool room and kitchen, and out the back door.

Maddison couldn’t believe her eyes! The hideous baby toads were actually doing what GrandDude had commanded. Still, in her pajamas, she trailed behind the last little straggler and followed the parading hoppers down the hall. By the time she hit the pool room, Grammy was behind her and smiling from ear to ear.

“I guess toads don’t seem so bad now, do they? Huh, Maddie? You helped save their lives, ya know,” Grammy exclaimed.

“How did he do that? They are actually doing what he tells them to,” the child cried out.

She watched from the window as the line of springing toad dots made their way through the yard and began to circle the pond.

“Sweetie a lot of magical things can happen, if you just open your heart and let them,” Grammy soothed.

Maddison’s demeanor suddenly stiffened.

“There’s no such thing as magic, Grammy!” she sassed and then turned her back on her grandmother and flippantly walked down the hall into the bathroom and slammed the door.

Despite the child’s back talk, Grammy continued to grin from ear to ear.

“Oh Maddison, magic most certainly does exist,” the woman whispered to herself.

“That’s the first time you’ve called me Grammy, my dear.”

Chapter 10

Merry Melon Festival

"Watermelons are the smiles of summer." ~Anonymous

There are very few better ways to celebrate summer in Texas than with an ice-cold watermelon. It's a tradition. It's even so much of a tradition that many Texas communities have festivals in honor of the wonderful plants. There are thumping contests, eating contests, and melon-rolling events, but, the big cash awards go to the seed spitters. In fact, the world record for watermelon spitting is held by a Texan who puckered up and let one of the black pits fly for 65 feet, 4 inches.

It was a tradition in JarMar to hold at least four or five Merry Melon Mini-Festivals during the summer months, with each event focusing on a different juicy, prized melon. GrandDude was an expert "thumper" and consistently brought home only the best ones available. He figured that an ice-cold melon would be exactly what Maddison needed to take her mind off of worrying about Marmie and the tad ordeal. Grammy was sure the frigid delicacy would be a great respite from the scorching heat for them all. So, the Merry Melon Mini-Festival was on!

Now, it's impossible to eat watermelon in a neat fashion. Done right, invariably the succulent juices find their way to chins, trickling downwardly to arms, elbows, laps, and eventually, the floor. Thus, at JarMar, Merry Melon Mini-Festivals were always outdoor affairs.

The critters loved the JarMar Merry Melon parties because they knew that GrandDude and Grammy always made sure that each animal got a hearty portion of the jackpot. Each varmint enjoyed the juicy delicacy, but none of them really loved it like Lola Lizard and her husbands. In

fact, on Merry Melon nights, every skink, anole, gecko, and even horned toad would come from woodlets all around, to share in the scrumptious celebration.

Since it doesn't get really dark in north Texas during the summertime until almost 9 o'clock, Grammy had insisted that they have an early dinner, splash a bit in the pool, and then start the melon merriment.

GranDude had the melon on ice all afternoon, and the minute that Grammy and Maddison got out of the pool, he spread newspapers on the picnic table and lifted the goliath green striped oval onto the surface.

Grammy started the countdown, "10 – 9 – 8..."

Maddison smiled a bit and couldn't help but chime in. "7 – 6 – 5 – 4 – 3 – 2...1...GO!"

With the "GO" order, GranDude pierced the melon with a butcher knife and carved until the green globule broke into two pieces. He then cut off slices for Maddison and Grammy, and another for himself. The three of them sat on the steps of the deck and enjoyed the decadence of the luscious fruit, slurping away like there was no tomorrow.

"How is it, sweetie?" Grammy asked.

"It's good," Maddison replied as a trickle of pink goo dribbled down her chin. Grammy smiled and handed her a paper towel.

GranDude glanced at Grammy, then spoke. "Wanna see something really, really cool Maddison?"

"Sure, I guess," she replied as she slurped.

He moved to the edge of the deck and placed about 10 chunks of the scrumptious melon on the railing. He sat back down and spoke, "Now watch."

Maddison thought that throwing away the wonderful delicacy like that was a waste of good food, but she didn't say anything, in hopes of seeing something "really cool" happen. She hadn't forgotten the tad parade.

Lola, being almost as much a drama queen as Harriet, peeked around the corner of the railing first. Maddison noticed the critter move deliberately toward the pink piles.

"What now?" she exclaimed as she slowly swallowed a mouthful of melon.

"Thank you, GranDude, dahling, you handsome thing," Lola drawled as she moved toward the melon heaps.

"You're welcome, Lola," GranDude whispered.

Lola paused to take a good gander at Maddison.

Grammy interceded, "Maddison, that's Lola Lizard. She won't hurt you, honey. Lola and her husbands absolutely love watermelon. They usually invite all their cousins over on Merry Melon nights. Looks like we're going to have a big crowd tonight GranDude."

No sooner than she finished her sentence, Maddison began to notice that the perimeter of the yard was covered with every kind of lizard that she had ever imagined, and many that she never knew even existed. Like Jurassic Park on a miniature scale.

Grammy kept a close eye on Maddison as the child watched the reptilian parade in wonder. "Well, at least she's not screaming and running inside," GranDude whispered. Grammy smiled.

Lola was bound and determined to succeed where the other JarMar creatures had failed miserably. She was going to be the one to teach Maddison "critter-talk." The other varmints had only succeeded in frightening the child, so she felt it was her obligation, her duty, to take matters into her own tiny claws and fix things.

Now, Lola and her husbands, as Texas anoles, were often confused with chameleons, because of their awe-inspiring ability to completely change their colors based on their moods and whims. For Lola, it was a performance that she flaunted with flair, especially when she knew she had an audience. And frankly, when the impulse hit her just right, she was a site to behold. She had secretly concocted a brilliant plan to show off a bit by putting on such an exquisite display of color magic that the child would “ooh” and “ah” and be amazed at how one so teensy could transform herself into every brilliant shade of the rainbow. This awesome display would then make Maddison want to be a part of the JarMar clan.

To Lola, it made sense. Piece of cake. Simple...right? Lola also was sure that after she demonstrated her rare talent for color transformation, magicians would be lined up from all over the world to make her part of their acts. She might even take her wonderful performance to Vegas...

But we all know that the best-laid plans of critters and men often go awry.

Lola was jolted from her dreams of grandeur by the movement of her husbands, cousins, and in-laws, as they crept toward the dewy pink prizes that GranDude had left for the group. She was not going to be upstaged by them in what was about to be her moment of glory.

She inched slowly toward Maddison, using the deck railing as a runway ramp for her performance. For dramatic effect, she began by wearing her drabbest, dingiest shade of brown, so that she blended in with the wood tones of the railing and almost completely disappeared. She figured that she would end the scene with her loveliest shade of lime green, for contrast.

Grammy leaned over to Maddison and spoke softly, “You’ll be amazed at all the lovely colors Lola can make. Watch.”

Lola began her masterful metamorphosis with all the confidence of a runway model, and the show had begun.

Now, history has taught us all about the overwhelming influence of the spoken language. In fact, wars have been fought, philosophical beliefs have been broken down, and lives have been changed with the utterance of one single word. Anyone that says “talk is cheap” is lying.

And so it was. History repeated itself on this particular Merry Melon Mini-Festival at JarMar, in north Texas, in the middle of the hottest summer in history.

Maddison looked up and stared directly at the spirited reptile.

Then it happened.

She wrinkled her nose and uttered one solitary, powerful word.

“Gross!”

To Lola, that single word had the destructive force of a subatomic missile. All of her husbands and family had heard. Grammy and GranDude had definitely heard. Heck, all of JarMar and most of the critters from the entire county had heard.

When faced with a mortifying moment like this, most humans would pale, or turn a blushing shade of red out of sheer embarrassment. But for poor Lola, unfortunately, it had the opposite effect. She froze, absorbing the weight of the child’s cruel reaction.

She desperately attempted to muster all the color-changing ability from within herself to prove her resiliency and flexibility...but nothing happened. She remained the same dull, boring brown.

She tried again, this time visualizing every “green” thought she could garner – leaves, emeralds, peas, the Statue of Liberty. Still nothing. It was as if all the color juice had been drained from her petite lizard body, and her soul was leaking as well.

“Come on Lola,” GrandDude encouraged, “we know you can do it.”

Lola glanced at Grammy and noticed that she was beginning to blink “I’m-so-sorry” tears.

So she breathed deeply, closed her eyes, and took one last stab at it. Her thoughts raced, “I’m green, green, green...come on green... pleeeeeeeesssseeeee.... be... greeeeeeeeeeennnnn...”

She opened her eyes and glanced down at her claws. Nothing had happened. She was still the same hideous, yucky brown.

“This is boring,” Maddison sighed. “I’m going inside to wash my hands.”

And with that, she exited the porch through the sliding glass door.

Tears were streaming down Grammy’s cheeks. “Lola, it’s okay. I’m sure Maddison didn’t mean it. She’s so worried about her mom that she can’t see how lovely your performance was.”

“What performance?” sulked Lola as she crawled, and hid in the shadows under the railing.

GrandDude held his blubbering wife as the tears kept coming. “This is really bad, isn’t it Honey?” she sobbed.

“Yes, it is,” GrandDude replied. “We just have to have faith that things will change. I don’t know when, how, or where Maddison will come around. But, she will. I don’t even know that we’ll be around when it happens. But it will happen. We’re not gonna give up on her. We’re gonna love her through it. She’ll come around. She’s your granddaughter, ya know. She’s got you in her, doesn’t she?”

Grammy looked up at him and smiled as he kissed her on the forehead.

Chapter 11

Squirrels on the Fence

"Life is always a tightrope or a feather bed. Give me the tightrope." ~Edith Wharton

Back in April, Sampson and Delilah Squirrel were blessed with the arrival of three adorable baby boys, Jaxson, Jasper, and Jake. Well, actually, when the tiny critters were born, they weren't so adorable. They were almost completely blind, furless, and about two inches long. Had Maddison been around JarMar back then, and seen the wee babes in their nest, she would have definitely called them "gross," and even Sampson would have agreed with her. In fact, in the beginning, Sampson kept his distance from the nest and let Delilah do what she did best: feed and nurture her babies.

Delilah had hoped that the Merry Melon Mini-Festival would be the "coming out of the nest" event for the boys, but after the Lola episode, she decided to keep her babies safe at home for another day or two until things settled down.

But Jaxson, Jasper, and Jake were all large for their age, and, frankly, the nest was getting pretty crowded. Plus, Delilah had shared with them stories about Grammy's granddaughter. They had peeked out of the nest a few times when they'd heard the child screaming and running across the yard, and they were curious as well as anxious to see what she was all about.

So, Delilah decided it was about time to take the squirrel tykes on a field trip and do her motherly duties of teaching them to climb, look for food, and most importantly, stay away from the roads. She knew that most of the progressive squirrel mothers nowadays taught their babies to simply look both ways before crossing the street. However, Delilah, being the overprotective mom that she is, doesn't want her children anywhere close to the roads that are on the periphery

of JarMar. She told the boys scary stories about what happens to naughty squirrels who refuse to mind their mamas and venture out onto the roads. She knew that most baby squirrels never see their first birthday, not because of predators or a lack of food, but because they ignore their mama's warnings, take chances crossing roads and streets, and get hit by cars.

The next morning, as the sun started its fiery quest across the sky, the Squirrel family prepared for the big day. Delilah sighed as she looked at her children and realized that after today, they wouldn't be nest babies anymore. Sampson watched from an overhanging limb, beaming with pride at his sons, who were eager to make their debut at JarMar and, eventually, the world. He had spoken to Grammy and GrandDude about the boys' "coming out" event. The couple was as proud as the squirrel parents and anxious to finally catch a glimpse of the tiny critters. Grammy had the camera ready to capture the babies' first-day-into-the-world in pictures.

"Line up, my babies," Delilah chattered to her children.

"We iz not babies no more Mama. We iz Super Squirrels!" Jax sassd his mother.

Jake and Jas twittered and giggled.

"Young man, I don't care how old you are, you three will always be my babies," she responded. "And, as long as you're in my nest, you're going to obey my rules. Now, let's go over them again. Say them with me, out loud..."

Jax rolled his eyes and all three of the squirrelets recited in unison the rules that their mother had pounded into them since the day they were born.

"Rule Number One: Don't dig in the gardens. Rule Number Two: Don't eat the vegetables..."

GrandDude joined Grammy on the deck and handed her a cup of coffee.

"Did I miss anything?" he asked.

“Not yet. Delilah’s just going over the rules with the babies before she cuts them loose. Oh...and I don’t think that Jax is going to like being called a baby.”

The mini squirrels continued, “Rule Number Three: Don’t eat each other...”

“And the most important rule of all is what?” Delilah ordered.

“Rule Number Four: Don’t go near the street!!” the trio shouted in unison.

“And why is Rule Number Four so important?” Delilah continued.

Stripe piped up from the pond, “Cuz dey don’t wanna end up being road kill.”

“Stripe, that wasn’t very nice,” Grammy scolded.

“But it’s da truth,” he retorted.

“Okay, okay,” GrandDude chimed in. “The squirrel boys are not going to venture out beyond JarMar. We’ll see to that.”

The trio poked their heads out of the nest and slowly made their way down the big branch of the tree.

“Oh, honey, look! Aren’t they adorable?” Grammy exclaimed as she grabbed GrandDude’s arm.

Delilah shouted, “Be careful boys, and don’t forget to use your tails to balance!”

“We won’t. We iz not babies no more,” Jax hollered back.

Sampson comforted his wife as the couple watched their babies make their way down a huge limb of the oak tree and onto the back fence.

“Hiya Grammy! Hiya GrandDude!” the boys chimed in unison as they struggled to balance on the fence.

“Oh boys, we’re so glad to finally get to meet you,” Grammy responded. “Do you think the three of you could line up here on the fence so I can get a picture? You need to be real still

for me to focus, so make sure you use your tails to balance, okay?” She looked up at Delilah and winked.

The squirrel babies were swishing their tails and proudly lining up for the photo shoot when the sliding glass door to the house opened and Maddison appeared. She yawned and rubbed her eyes.

GrandDude noticed the child before anyone else. “Honey, take the picture...like NOW!” he whispered to his wife.

Maddison focused and blinked. She spied the three tiny critters on the fence.

“Well, this is a very important day and I want this picture to be perfect. Jake, sweetheart...could you move a little closer to Jas?” Grammy directed the boys. “And Jax, look over here towards me, honey...”

Jake moved, as directed, and Jax turned toward the camera.

Maddison thought she must be dreaming. Her eyes widened. The sun blazed down and made her blink again. Were these midget squirrels actually doing what her grandmother was telling them to do?

“Okay boys, are you ready? Smile. One, two, three...say CHEESE!” Grammy exclaimed.

With these final orders, all three of the babies opened their mouths and grinned from ear to ear. Grammy snapped the picture. Delilah snapped a twig on the branch as she proudly moved toward her babies. And, Maddison well...Maddison just snapped!

“You people are nuts!!!” she screamed at the top of her lungs.

Nobody was quite sure what caused what happened next.

Perhaps it was the sound of Maddison's scream or the fact that proper tail balancing techniques were ignored, or maybe it was because it was before breakfast and nuts were mentioned. Nobody knew what caused it, but, just about every critter in JarMar witnessed poor little Jax lose his balance, fall down off the fence, and hit the hard-packed dirt with a big THUD.

There was a hush over the woodlet and to Maddison, it was as if she were watching a movie in fast-forward mode. Grammy and GranDude dropped their coffee and ran to the baby squirrel. Both were careful not to touch the little critter until Sampson and Delilah were at Jax's side.

"Jax...Jaxson...can you hear me, son?" Sampson chirped. Jas and Jake held on tight and leaned over the fence to check on their downed brother.

Delilah slowly began to stroke and nudge her fallen nestling. She checked all his limbs and nothing appeared to be broken. She then began to lick the crown of his head to smooth the tousled fur that was spiking a bit from the fall. Jax's lids began to flutter, and he slowly opened his eyes.

"Mama?" he blinked.

Sampson heaved a sigh of relief. The other critters had begun to gather around to catch a glimpse of poor Jax.

"Back...get back everyone. Give my boy some air," he ordered.

Jax, with his mama's help, was able to sit up. Delilah then grabbed hold of the back of his neck with her mouth and began to carry him up the tree and back to the nest.

The tiny critter caught his breath, realized what was happening, and began to whine, "Awwww, Mama...I'm okay...I'm not a baaaaabbbbyyyyy..."

Delilah ignored his resistance and gave Jas and Jake the "mom eye." The brothers marched in line behind their mother, and within a minute, all three of the Squirrel boys were back in their nest.

"Thank goodness, he's going to be okay," Grammy said. "That was a really close call."

The couple turned around and saw Maddison frozen in the middle of the yard, watching the scene. Her eyes were wide, and she was obviously creeped out by what she had just witnessed. She just stood there, unable to move or speak.

The three of them—Grammy, GranDude, and Maddison—stared at each other for almost a minute, at an impasse over what to say.

GranDude broke the hush. "Well, uh, how about some pancakes?"

He guided both of the females in his life up onto the deck, through the back door, and into the kitchen. After a while, Maddison had a plate of flapjacks smothered in strawberries and decorated with a dollop of whipped cream positioned in front of her. Even though this was her absolute favorite breakfast of all time, she wasn't able to eat much. Seeing that baby squirrel fall off the fence had sorta, kinda made her lose her appetite.

Chapter 12

The Necklace

"A mother and a daughter always share a special bond, which is engraved on their hearts."

~Unknown

It is difficult for any mother to be separated from her children. It's even more challenging for a sick mother to be separated from her children. Marmie knew that she was going to be away from Maddison for at least three months. She also knew that if the doctors could not help her condition, there was a very real possibility that she might never see her daughter again. The week before Maddison traveled to Texas had been an emotional one for both mother and daughter.

Marmie wanted to give her daughter something very special so that the child would remember that her mother was always with her despite the miles that kept them apart. She wanted to give Maddie a token of the unending love she had for the child.

Marmie had found the perfect gift online. Actually, it was more than one gift, it was two necklaces. Each necklace had a pendant. When combined, the two pendants formed a perfect heart with flowers in the middle. One was engraved "Daughter," and the other had "Mother" etched on the border of the heart. Marmie gave the "Mother" part to Maddison and kept the "Daughter" part for herself. She had clasped the silver chain around her daughter's neck and then worn the second one around her own neck. This was to be a reminder that no matter what happened, they would always be a part of each other.

Maddison longed for the day when the two halves of the heart would be united and her mother would be healthy again. Every morning as she looked in the mirror, the necklace made

her miss both Marmie and Daddo even more. Because of the heat, she was not wearing masks much anymore, but she had not taken off the necklace since Marmie had placed it around her neck.

Grammy and GranDude noticed the trinket but said nothing about it. Both of them figured out what the treasure seemed to mean and left it at that. It was pretty obvious to them that Maddison was miserable at JarMar and they didn't want to compound the child's anxiety by quizzing her about the bauble hanging around her neck. Some things are better left unsaid.

However, even though their attempts to cheer up the child had ended disastrously, they weren't giving up. Grammy longed for the day when her granddaughter would open her heart and spirit so that the love and beauty in the world could heal the hurt. She knew that if something happened to Marmie, the pain within Maddison could fester and harden the child to the point that she might never recover. Sickness of the soul is much more difficult to heal than that of the body.

Late the next afternoon, Grammy suggested that Maddison help harvest tomatoes from the JarMar vegetable garden. Despite the brutal heat, the garden was thriving, thanks to GranDude's attention to the watering schedule and Grammy's nurturing of the botanical babies of the woodlet. In actuality, Grammy talked to her plants in the same way that she did the critters, but today, with her granddaughter by her side, she refrained from having a conversation with the woodlet flora. She gave Maddison a wicker basket to hold the big red fruits, while she gently twisted and pulled the ripe ones off their vines.

"These will be yummy in our salad tonight," Grammy said, "I just love homegrown tomatoes, don't you?"

“Yeah, sure,” Maddison curtly replied. Secretly, she had to admit that the food around here was really, really tasty. Her parents had never actually “grown” anything that they served on the dinner table. To them, that’s what supermarkets were for.

After harvesting, Grammy showed Maddison how to rinse off each red prize with the garden hose. They then took them inside and laid them beside the squash, onions, carrots, and green beans in a special vegetable bowl on the kitchen counter. Grammy winked at the child.

“Hey, you’re turning into a real Texas farmer, huh? Thanks for your help, sweetie. Wanna go swimming?”

Since there wasn’t much else to do, Maddison agreed and headed for the bathroom to change into her swimsuit, which was still semi-wet from the day before. As she wiggled into the wet garment, she struggled to get the straps up over her shoulders.

It was then that she had the feeling that something just didn’t feel right. She took off the suit, which wasn’t an easy task, and then shook it out. She wiggled into it again and took a good look at herself in the bathroom mirror. Everything appeared to be okay. The suit didn’t seem to have any rips or tears in it. It looked clean too. She turned to check out the back. Nope, everything seemed okay. It felt weird because it was wet, no doubt, but no, that wasn’t it.

As she turned to open the door, she took one last glance in the mirror and proceeded to erupt with one of her now-famous Maddison screams. This time the scream was not from fear or from being totally freaked out. It was a scream of pure, unadulterated panic.

The necklace that Marmie had given her, was missing.

She started blubbering as tears exploded from her eyes. She shook the clothes that she had tossed in the hamper. Nothing fell out. She did a thorough scan of the entire bathroom floor

and counter. Nothing. She threw open the door and blasted down the hall, retracing her steps, and checking out every inch of the pathway where she had just been. Nothing was there.

“Oh, please no, no, no....” she wailed. It must have come off when she was outside.

It was a good thing GranDude kept the sliding glass door well-oiled because Maddison might have crashed right through it if it hadn’t opened easily. She ran across the deck to the pool where Grammy and GranDude were sitting with their feet dangling over the edge.

Maddison’s obvious distress made both of them rush to the child. She was so upset that she couldn’t get the words out to explain what had happened. Grammy stroked her hair as GranDude gave the child a quick “once over” glance to make sure she wasn’t bleeding.

GranDude then wet a towel in the pool as Grammy made the child sit on the deck steps. They had seen Maddison throw some colossal hissy fits, but never anything like this.

GranDude wiped her face with the cool towel as Grammy continued to gently stroke her auburn hair.

“Should I go inside to get a paper bag for her to breathe into?” GranDude offered.

Grammy shook her head and continued to caress the child.

“Honey, calm down. Catch your breath. You need to tell us what happened,” she said gently, soothingly.

Maddison did what her grandmother had suggested by taking in a wheezing breath as she sniffled, “It’s gone...I’ve lost it...”

“Lost what, honey?” GranDude asked.

“...the n-n-n-necklace...that M-m-m-Marmie gave me...” she sobbed.

Grammy shot GranDude a look of panic. She knew that this trinket was obviously a material reminder of her mother and probably the only object the child had to make her feel close

to Marmie. It represented the ultimate hope, beyond all hopes, that her mother would reunite with the child, healthy, and cured.

GranDude buffered the crisis with an immediate plan of action.

“Sweetie, it’s got to be here somewhere. We’ll find it. When was the last time you remember seeing it?”

Grammy stroked the child’s hair and held her tightly as Maddison continued to blubber.

“Shhhhhh...” Grammy softly whispered, “try to remember sweetie.”

Maddison sucked in a staccato breath of air. “I...I...think I h-h-had it on th-th-this morning...at b-b-breakfast...”

“Okay,” GranDude responded. “Let’s start there. Grammy, what all do you remember that Maddison did today?” As he spoke, he was doing a scan of the yard to see if the shiny trinket was easily visible.

Grammy responded, “Well, we know that you didn’t swim this morning, so it’s not in the pool, right?”

Maddison nodded.

“Let’s go inside, and I’ll help you look there,” Grammy continued. “GranDude, why don’t you start searching out here? Okay?”

She knew that GranDude would rally the critters together, and if the necklace was at all “findable,” the JarMar creatures would retrieve it.

Grammy put a beach towel around Maddison’s shoulders and led the still-sniffing child into the house.

As soon as the door closed, GranDude summoned the critters. They gathered in the center of the yard as he explained what had happened and the gravity of the situation. Stripe and

Stewpid agreed to scour the pond. Sampson, Delilah, and the three squirrelets would search the perimeter of the fence. Lola and her husbands were assigned to the vegetable garden. Tony and the toadlets would check out the rocks surrounding the pond and the waterfall. Humphrey would search all the hanging baskets and the flower gardens. Harriet and Perry (with his spectacles on) would do an aerial sweep of the entire woodlet expanse.

The search was on.

All the hubbub didn't bother Arnie, who was soundly sleeping under the deck, snuggled cozily into his nest of dried leaves. You see, the shiny heart necklace had fallen through one of the cracks in the deck. Had Arnie been a "daytime" critter, or even a restless sleeper, he would have noticed the neckpiece immediately, for it was perched on a pile of sticks less than two feet away from his snoozing spot. As things stood, Arnie innocently dreamed of rooting through a field filled with grubs and worms, which, to Texas 9-banded armadillo, is paradise.

The necklace would just have to wait.

Chapter 13

Summer Camp

"Home is where you pitch your tent." ~Unknown

But Maddison could not wait.

She was certain that if she could not find the necklace, her mother would not return to her alive. It was a life-or-death situation, and she HAD to find it.

Grammy helped her remove the sheets from her bed, and they both searched every corner of the room and even under the bed. They looked in the chest that was in the closet, emptying each drawer, and then shaking out every garment. They gave each pair of shoes and each toy a vigorous "shake," but, the necklace was not to be found.

"I'm afraid it's not inside, honey," Grammy announced. Maddison started blubbering again. Grammy wet a washcloth and mopped the child's now blotchy face. "We're gonna find it. Let's go help GranDude."

Grammy poured a tall glass of lemonade for the child as Maddison opened the sliding glass door that led to the deck. The sweltering heat of the afternoon had relaxed a bit as the sun began to sink into the sky. Grammy sprayed the little girl with bug spray and made her sit in the shade on the deck and hold the wet washcloth over her eyes as she, GranDude, and the critters proceeded with the search.

"It's going to be dark soon," GranDude whispered. "We're not going to do much good in the dark."

“I know, I know,” Grammy responded. “I’m going to call for a pizza. We’ve got to eat and maybe that will calm her down enough to sleep and we can start looking again in the morning.”

GranDude nodded as Grammy returned to the house to make the call.

When the pizza arrived, Maddison refused to leave her seat on the deck to go inside and eat, so Grammy tried to cheer her up by making a pizza picnic of the unfortunate occasion. Maddison loved pizza but had no appetite for it despite Grammy’s attempts to make the best of things. So, Grammy and GranDude sat next to the child and ate as the sun began disappearing on the horizon.

Grammy spoke, “Honey, it’s getting too dark to keep looking tonight. We’ll have to start again in the morning...”

Maddison exploded again. “No...no....no...it’s out here...I-I-I just know i-i-it is...I’m s-s-staying r-r-right here...”

GranDude, who had never had kids of his own, gave Grammy a what-do-we-do- now look.

Grammy looked at him, sighed, and then spoke. “You know, GranDude, I’ve been wanting to do a little camping out. I’ll bet we have just enough light to set up the tent over by the pond. What do you think?”

He jumped into action. “I’ll betcha we can. You know, I’ve had the hankering to do a little camping myself.” And with that, he exited into the garage to pull out the plastic bin marked “CAMPING GEAR.”

Maddison almost forgot to cry as she watched her grandparents pitch the tent. It was a kind of cool thing to do. Grammy brought out a box of wet wipes so that Maddison could freshen

up at least a little. GranDude gave her a flashlight just in case she had to go inside to the bathroom during the night. They had fixed a cozy little spot for Maddison to sleep inside the tent right alongside Grammy. GranDude had decided that he would rather look up at the stars, so he opted to drop his sleeping bag outside the tent on the soft, cool grass.

The three of them settled down with the quest for the necklace put on pause.

Grammy called out softly, “Good night GranDude. I love you.”

“I love you too, honey,” he whispered back.

Grammy whispered to Maddison, “Sweetie, I just know we’re gonna find your necklace in the morning.”

Maddison whimpered.

Grammy continued as she wiped the child’s sweaty forehead with a wet wipe. “Good night, sweetheart. I love you.”

Maddison said nothing as she turned over and gave her swollen eyes a rest.

Chapter 14

Things You Bump into at Night

"I often think that the night is more alive and more richly colored than the day."

~Vincent Van Gogh

When Arnie awoke, he was blinded by a glaring ray of moonlight that was reflecting off of the shiny necklace that had found its way to his under-the-deck nest.

He thought that he had confused his day and night rituals. It must still be daytime! He rolled over to continue snoozing. He had just about re-situated himself comfortably in his cozy bed of dead leaves when his stomach began to growl. Something was just not right. He snorted and squinted at the shiny object.

It was then that he heard a deep, rumbling sound that he wasn't at all familiar with. He peered out at the woodlet through the deck steps and spotted the tent. He peeked out further and saw GranDude sprawled on a sleeping bag next to the tent. He was snoring away. Arnie wriggled through the crack between the steps and waddled over to the tent. Inside, he saw Maddison and Grammy. Grammy was snoring like a saw as well. Arnie snorted. His snort was loud enough to awaken GranDude.

"Hey there, Arnie," GranDude stretched and yawned.

"Wh-wh-what's g-g-g-goin' on?" the plated critter stuttered.

"Come over here, buddy, and I'll tell you all about it," GranDude whispered. He then proceeded to tell the shy little fellow all of the events that had happened surrounding the case of the missing necklace.

Arnie blinked and then panicked.

“Oh-no...oh-no.....oh-no.....oh-no...oh n-n-n-n-ooooo,” he snorted as he started springing straight up and down like a pogo stick.

“Calm down, little fella,” GranDude comforted. “Breathe...breathe...breathe...”

GranDude’s soothing voice was always able to calm the frenzied creature to the point that Arnie was finally able to keep all four paws on the ground. His agitation was calmed to a heavy panting.

“There...there...now talk to me,” GranDude coaxed.

Arnie snorted in a deep breath and blinked again. “I...I...I...th-th-th-think I...I...I know wh-wh-where it m-m-might b-b-b-be.”

Arnie waddled back to the steps and disappeared under the deck, just as Grammy poked her head out of the tent.

“What’s going on out here?” she whispered.

Granule had a big smile, and he turned to hug his wife.

“Well, it looks like Arnie may have found the necklace,” he answered.

“Oh, my,” Grammy responded as she glanced in at Maddison. The child appeared to be fast asleep.

Grammy slipped out of the tent and sat next to GranDude.

Arnie appeared from under the deck with the shiny piece of jewelry wrapped around his pink snout. He sat up on his hind legs and grabbed the bauble with his claws and handed it over to GranDude.

“C-c-c-c-could th-th-th-this b-b-b-be it?” he stuttered.

“Oh YES!” Grammy exclaimed. She then remembered her sleeping granddaughter and lowered her voice back down to a whisper.

“Why don’t you go put it in the tent so that Maddison will see it when she wakes up?”

She squeezed GrandDude’s hand and gave him a big “whew” hug.

Arnie blinked and stayed put on his hindquarters as the couple kept smiling and hugging each other.

GrandDude stopped the gushing, turned, and spoke to Arnie. “Go ahead Arn. You’re the one who found the necklace. You deserve to get to return it to Maddison.”

“It’s okay Arnie, she’s asleep,” Grammy chimed in. “She’s probably not gonna see you, sweetie.”

“I-I-I-I j-j-j-j-just c-c-c-can’t...I-I-I-I m-m-m-might w-w-w-wake her,” the shy critter protested.

GrandDude spoke. “Yes, you can, Arnie. Hey, bud, even if you do wake her, she’s going to be so glad to get her necklace back, she’s probably going to hug you. You’re a hero!”

“Go ahead, Arnie,” Grammy soothed. “We know you can do it.”

Arnie took a deep breath and then snorted, “O-o-o-o k-k-k-kay...”

Arnie used his claws to wrap the shiny amulet around his snout and then slowly waddled toward the tent. He tried to stay as calm as possible so that he wouldn’t start springing around the yard and lose the necklace all over again. He poked his snout under the flap entrance of the tent. Maddison was turned on her side, facing the center. Her eyes were closed. Arnie carefully inched his way into the canvas shelter and gently laid the necklace right next to Maddison’s outstretched hand.

He then, as if by magic, was overcome by a moment of boldness and had the nerve to actually speak to the sleeping child.

“H-h-h-here’s your n-n-necklace M-M-M-Maddison. I h-h-h-hope your M-m-m-m-Marmie gets well.”

He then turned and doddered out of the tent, leaving just enough of the tent flap open so that the same moonbeam shone in and made the pendant glow again. The brightness made Maddison blink and squint. Was she dreaming? She sat up immediately and gazed at the shining spangle, hardly believing her eyes. She lifted the necklace as Grammy and GrandDude poked their heads into the tent.

“How about that, honey,” GrandDude beamed. “Looks like we’ve had a little magic here tonight!”

Maddison opened her mouth to protest about the silliness of his magic talk but stopped herself. She grasped the necklace in her fist, held it close to her chest, and began to whimper. This time, however, her tears were not of panic, disgust, or fear, but of sweet relief.

Grammy crept back into the tent, took the child into her arms, and gave her the warmest, most comforting embrace that has ever been given in the history of grandma hugs.

“It’s gonna be okay honey,” Grammy soothed, tears rolling down her own cheeks as she gently rocked the sobbing child.

“Shhhh...tomorrow we’ll get you a new chain, one with a strong clasp that won’t break. It all right....shhh...”

They sat like that for almost an hour, softly rocking back and forth until Maddison fell asleep in her grandmother’s loving arms.

Maddison awoke the next morning nestled comfortably in her own bed. She stretched, yawned, and snuggled into the downy pillows. As she lay there and let her brain and body catch

up to the sun's announcement of a new day, she slowly began to remember the events of the past day.

Was it all a dream?

She vaguely recalled falling asleep in a tent set up next to the backyard pond. She then remembered losing Marmie's necklace. She reached around her neck, but the necklace was not there. She started to panic again but then felt the chain and trinket wrapped neatly around her wrist.

"I guess it really did happen," she thought as she examined the bauble closely through swollen eyes.

She vaguely remembered that a shadowy figure had come into the tent the night before and put the valuable piece of jewelry in front of her. She also remembered hearing the critter stutter about finding the necklace and Marmie getting well. Yep, she had definitely dreamed the whole thing. But wait a minute—losing the necklace and looking for it had actually occurred. Hadn't it?

She'd obviously had a dream within a dream, and the whole thing had been a nightmare. Then, though, when the strange creature came into the tent and returned her necklace, it was, well, it was an incredible sight. And when the thing spoke to her, it was a little like...like...magic.

"Madison Addison Doyle, there's no such thing as magic," Daddo's voice echoed in her head as she tried to make sense of what she thought had happened.

Nah...it was a dream.

She almost really didn't care. She had Marmie's necklace back, and that was all that mattered.

Chapter 15

Vision Test

"The only thing worse than being blind is having sight but no vision." ~Helen Keller

After they had picked out and paid for a replacement chain for Madison's necklace, the clerk at the jewelry shop handed GrandDude two quarters and three pennies in change. Grammy secured the double-clasped necklace chain around Maddison's neck as GrandDude turned one of the shiny quarters over in his palm.

"Hey, honey, look," he exclaimed. "It's one of the Idaho quarters with Perry on the back!"

He handed Grammy the coin as they walked out of the store.

"This is great," she responded. "I knew they were in circulation, but I've never seen one. Let's show it to Perry when we get home. He'll love it!"

Since Grammy and GrandDude had gotten very little sleep the night before, they obviously had forgotten that Maddison was still around and had not yet met Perry Peregrine Falcon. Maddison was just hoping that no one in the store had overheard what her kooky grandparents had just said. How embarrassing!

She sat quietly in the back seat of Saab-ie and knew that the excitement about the quarter thing was probably one of her grandparents' ridiculous, quirky nature things, so she kept her mouth shut. She let them babble on about the quarter and the "Perry" creature without commenting or sassing back.

Grammy turned from the front seat and placed the quarter into the child's sweaty palm.

“Check it out sweetie,” Grammy spouted. “See the bird on the back of the quarter? It’s a Peregrine Falcon. A few years back the Peregrines were really in trouble in Texas. Well, actually everywhere. The chemicals used to kill bugs on crops were also killing birds. It was bad news for the falcons and just about wiped them out, right honey?” She turned to GrandDude.

“Yep,” he added. “When the government outlawed using the chemicals, the Peregrines bounced back. Perry is the Peregrine Falcon that lives with us at JarMar. We’ll have to show him the quarter when we get home. It will make him proud.”

Maddison rolled her eyes. Another “critter” with a name in her grandparents’ backyard zoo! Good grief!

“Yeah right,” she mouthed. The sass in her was back. This was the most ludicrous thing she had ever heard, regardless of whether any of them had slept or not.

Grammy gave GrandDude a we’ve-pushed-it-too-far look.

“How about some ice cream?” GrandDude quickly exclaimed.

Once everyone was home, Grammy and GrandDude decided it was time for a nap. The necklace fiasco and camping caper had worn them out. Maddison retreated to her room and lay down too. She took the Idaho quarter out of her pocket and examined it closely.

Finally, her curiosity got the best of her. She decided to conduct a mini-experiment to prove once and for all how completely insane her grandparents were. She got up, tiptoed down the hall, and then exited to the backyard. Yet again, the relentless summer heat greeted her as she stepped out onto the deck.

She did a quick scan of the backyard, got up her nerve, and called out, “Perry...Perry Peregrine Falcon. I’ve got something to show you.”

She then placed the shiny coin on the railing of the deck, waited a few minutes, then retreated into the kitchen, sliding the door behind her. She positioned herself with a clear view of the quarter on the railing and sat cross-legged inside, behind the glass door, to see the outcome. She had decided that if, after ten minutes, nothing happened, she would know, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that Grammy and GranDude were fruitcakes.

The first five minutes of her experiment passed uneventfully. She fiddled with her necklace on its new chain and wondered what Daddo and Marmie were doing. She really, really missed them.

Another minute passed, and then another. She was pretty much certain that her experiment was a success, proving that magic does not...

When suddenly a shadow floated across the deck. She blinked and thought her imagination and swollen eyes were just playing tricks on her. She sat up straighter and kept her eyes glued on the quarter. And then, through the canopy of the trees, a brown mass of feathers glided directly toward her and the glass door. She had little time to react, but did manage to squeal out, "Stop....nooooooooo!"

CRASH!

Perry hit the glass with a deafening SMACK that rumbled throughout the house shaking the other windows. Both the frazzled little girl and the frenzied bird fell back from the impact, each landing on their respective sides of the glass door.

Grammy and GranDude came rushing into the kitchen.

"What happened?" Grammy cried as she bent down to check out the child.

Maddison was too startled to respond. She just stared wide-eyed at the fallen mass of feathers. GranDude assessed the situation and then slid the door open to check on Perry. He

gently scooped up the stunned flier and carried him into the shade to give the critter a thorough “once over.”

After a few minutes, he shouted, “Everything’s okay out here. Perry’s fine! He’s just a little stunned. He didn’t have his glasses on.” He then continued to speak softly to help the groggy creature come around.

Inside Grammy spoke and gently shook the startled child. “Honey...Maddison, he’s not hurt. Perry’s going to be okay. Now tell me what happened???”

Maddison drew in a huge breath. “I was...I was...”

But, she didn’t have the nerve to tell her grandmother that she had actually beckoned to the bird and caused the accident. She was just too ashamed and embarrassed to disclose the details of her mini-experiment. So, she did what she was now really good at doing; she got up, ran down the hall into the bathroom, and slammed the door.

Chapter 16

Humming and Hawing

"Our task must be to free ourselves by widening our circle of compassion to embrace all living creatures and the whole of nature and its beauty." ~Albert Einstein

The summer heat didn't let up. It went on and on. Maddison had never, ever experienced the oppression that extended days of over-100-degree temperatures can cause. In fact, the entire area had never experienced it. Unattended plants wilted, local cities decreed burn bans and set up residential watering schedules, and lakes and streams began to evaporate.

It was dreadful. And Maddison had only been at JarMar for three weeks.

After the latest mishap, Perry explained his door-crashing episode to GranDude and Grammy. GranDude created a tiny strap that turned his glasses into goggles that would stay put on the feathered fellow's head. Even though he had been beckoned, the window crashing needed to stop. Grammy and GranDude decided that it was best not to confront Maddison about her part in it all.

However, the day after the crash, the shiny Idaho quarter mysteriously appeared on her dresser as a reminder of the near-catastrophic event. They knew that no matter how much they prodded and preached, matters of the heart were very private. Maddison had to figure things out on her own.

Two days after the "crash" all three human residents of JarMar were sitting out on the back deck enjoying cherry popsicles when GranDude caught wind of a faint, sporadic humming noise in the distance.

He turned to Grammy and spoke, "I think Humphrey is going to show up any time now."

“Oh yay!” Grammy exclaimed. “We haven’t seen Humphrey in a long time. Maddison, you’re going to love Humphrey Hummingbird. He’s adorable...so tiny and cute!”

Maddison cautiously braced herself for yet a new “critter” episode.

After Perry’s crash, she had decided she was not going to get involved with any of the whacky animal antics of JarMar. She’d just about had it with the whole lot of them no matter how adorable and cute they were.

Sure enough, as if on cue, a tiny vibrating flash of green cleared the back fence and flew right into one of the hanging baskets next to the deck.

“Did you see him?” Grammy cried out. “Wait till you get a good look at him up close Maddie, he’s all green and has the most beautiful ruby red throat you’ve ever seen.”

Lola poked her head up from the edge of the deck railing and pouted, wishing that she could be green again.

The three of them watched the hanging plant that Humphrey had flown into. They slurped their icy treats and waited patiently for the tiny hummer to emerge. They waited some more. Then some more.

Finally, GranDude muttered, “Something’s wrong.”

He dropped his popsicle stick into the trash and hurried down the stairs and over to the hanging basket. Grammy and Maddison moved to the edge of the deck to peer over into the basket as GranDude gently lifted the bottom leaves of the petunias that grew there. At the dirt level, Humphrey was lying on his back with his tiny little wings spread out on each side. He was panting.

“Oh no...” Grammy exclaimed. “Is he...dying?”

The mention of "dying" caused something to snap in Maddison as she looked down on the mini-flier. His red neck and chest were throbbing up and down, and she was afraid that each little thump was going to be his last.

"GranDude," Maddison whispered, "we've got to do something. We've got to help him..."

GranDude looked up and saw yet another tear roll down the child's cheek. But this one was completely different from the gazillion other tears she had shed since she had come to JarMar. This was a tear of compassion.

GranDude's gut told him that something remarkable was about to happen. He gently placed two fingers under the bird's tiny body to try to scoop up the wee fellow. This action was enough to startle Humphrey into the air. He flew in a zigzag fashion plummeting and then rising until he finally rested on the gutter at the edge of the roof. He then collapsed.

Maddison wailed, "Noooo...we've got to save him..."

"I'll get the ladder," GranDude exclaimed as he rushed to the side of the house. He returned and propped the extension ladder up against the side of the roof. Before he could do anything else, Maddison started climbing.

"Oh honey, be careful," Grammy cried out. "GranDude get behind her and make sure she doesn't fall."

GranDude went up right behind and got hold of the child as Grammy steadied the ladder.

"His foot is caught in the gutter," Maddison called out. "I think I can get it loose."

With that, she carefully wrapped her fingers around the wee little bird's foot and gently pried it free. Humphrey immediately fell over on his side. This time his tiny chest was not moving at all.

“He needs water...” GranDude muttered. “Let’s get him to the pond.”

GranDude slid the tiny critter into Maddison’s cupped hands and supported her as they both came down the ladder.

“Don’t die...don’t die Humphrey. We’re gonna get you some water.” The child whispered as she carefully made her way off of the deck and into the yard. “Please don’t die...”

She kneeled at the edge of the pond as Grammy held her waist so that she could lean over the waterfall. She lowered Humphrey gently closer to the water so that the gush of the waterfall splashed into her hands.

The tiny bird didn’t respond.

“Come on Humphrey, take a drink,” Maddison continued. “You can do it...I know you can...just please...please...don’t...die...”

Miracles happen every day. Some of them go unnoticed. Some of them change the world. Some of them don’t. But this one changed the life of Maddison Addison Doyle.

Slowly, Humphrey lifted his tiny green head and extended his long, nectar-sucking tongue into the cool frothy water. At the very same time, it was as if a shard of awakening pierced Maddison’s heart and opened her spirit so that pure, sweet, tender love gushed into every part of her being. The resentment was washed away. The worry was gone. The anger disappeared. She was free, and her mind and spirit were open to the beauty, compassion, and magic of nature.

Humphrey’s tiny wings fluttered and he sprang from Maddison’s hands and began humming. He hovered next to her shoulder and got right next to the child’s ear and sang and hummed the sweetest thank you song the world has ever heard. It went like this:

“...hummmmm...Thank you, my friend...hummm...You saved my life...hummmmm...Thank you...Thank you...Thank you...You are my hero...”

“You’re welcome, Humphrey,” the child responded without even thinking. She sighed, turned, and sat by the edge of the pond. Grammy and GranDude sat beside her. Tears were rolling down their cheeks but they both were smiling despite it.

Suddenly Maddison was startled by the realization that Humphrey had spoken to her and she understood what he was saying! She looked at both of her grandparents.

“Did you hear that? He talked to me...Humphrey actually talked to me...”

GranDude pulled a bandana from his pocket and blew his nose. “We know honey. We heard it too,” he responded. “We’re so very proud of you.”

“There’re some more critters around here that are just itching to do some talking with you as well,” said Grammy. Then she stood up and shouted, “Oh babi-e-e-s-s...”

Madison sat crossed-legged next to the pond as all of the JarMar critters made their way into the woodlet, each finding a special place next to the little girl.

At first, it sounded a bit like a movie soundtrack on fast-forward because each critter had so much they wanted to tell Maddison. But eventually, they all settled down and took turns.

Grammy and GranDude stood on the deck and watched their precious grandchild with her new friends as they all chattered back and forth.

GranDude hugged his wife. “Well, I guess you got your miracle.”

“Yes, we did,” she replied as she hugged him back.

They stood there, arm in arm, and looked on as the animated conversations continued.

“And, I love it,” she sighed contentedly.

Chapter 17

Happy Campers

"Happiness is not something ready-made. It comes from your own actions." ~Dalai Lama

For the next nine weeks, the JarMar critters occupied most of Maddison's waking hours.

Harriet, as a prima ballerina, taught Madison a variety of dances, her favorite being her famous flap dance. The pair shimmied and pranced around the yard like majorettes in a parade. After all, who knows better how to strut and do fancy wing flapping than a Great Blue Heron?

Stewpid, Stripe, and the other comet goldfish coached Maddison as she finally learned to swim like, well, like a fish. After all, who knows more about swimming than a fish? She even, with GranDude's help, learned to rescue poor Stewpid from the pond filter.

GranDude found an old railroad tie under the deck and put it out by the back fence. Maddison walked heel to toe back and forth atop the plank mirroring the movements of Jax, Jas, and Jake as the squirrelets babbled with tales of tall trees, snug nests, and acorns. After all, who knows more about balance than a squirrel?

Lola and Maddison found a cool spot next to the deck and chattered on and on about the latest fashions and hues for the fall season. Lola, with encouragement from her new bestie Maddison, was able to show off a kaleidoscope of colors that made the girl finally "ooh" and "ahh" with delight. After all, who knows more about color trends than a Texas anole?

In the early evenings, GranDude and Maddison joined Tony for choir practice. Because of Madison's age, her voice had not developed quite enough to join the adult toads, so she found the perfect spot right smack in the middle of the junior section, where all the toadlets practiced their nightly serenades. Humphrey stayed handy and often buzzed around Maddison's ears to

help her hum along to the songs when she didn't know the words. She was sure they would soon be ready for Broadway. After all, who knows the beautiful sounds of nature better than toads and ruby-throated hummingbirds?

In the garage, Maddison found an old pair of goggles that looked a lot like the ones that Perry wore. Grammy made the child a cape out of an old beach towel. Just about every afternoon, Perry and Maddison, bird and girl, ran circles around JarMar, with Perry coaching his new friend not to get too close to the windows. After all, who knows more about superhuman visual acuity than a peregrine falcon?

And, when nighttime finally descended on the woodlet each day, Arnie sat next to Maddison on the steps of the deck. They exchanged ghost stories, kid and armadillo style, which made them both exclaim, "I'm not scared!" Both of them giggled a lot, too. Sometimes Maddison laughed so hard her side hurt when Arnie became a ball and rolled around in the grass to entertain the child. After all, who knows more about stouthearted, tactical maneuvers than a nine-banded Texas armadillo?

Grammy and GranDude just smiled and smiled as they watched all of their babies, both critter and human, thoroughly enjoy each other's company.

We all love joyous times like these. Everyone is having the summer of their lives. Happy critters. Happy grandparents. Happy child.

But as much as we want these pretty scenes to continue forever, we all know that they rarely do. Happiness and sorrow are twins that love to tease us. It's the way of the world. Things change. Weather changes. People change.

Everything was about to change for the JarMar inhabitants, and not necessarily in a good way.

It all started with a phone call.

Chapter 18

Hopeless

"If you knew that hope and despair were the paths to the same destination, which would you choose?" ~Robert Breault

Daddo sat at the airport with his arm cradled around his wife as she rested her head on his shoulder. Their flight to Texas had been delayed, so they waited. They didn't even consider doing normal airport things. They didn't shop at the gazillion posh stores; they didn't look for a decent place to eat; and they didn't hug. They just sat, emitting an aura of despair. It felt to them as if a giant pin had been hammered into their shiny balloon named Hope, causing all of its contents to shrivel and blow away.

Daddo was a defeated man. Marmie, well, she just looked sick. Anyone who gazed upon the couple could see that they both were drowning in worry and sorrow.

The treatment at the faraway hospital clinic had failed.

They'd stayed two weeks longer than they were supposed to in a last-ditch effort to find something, anything, to heal Marmie. But, despite all the advances that medical science has made, especially with rare, severe illnesses like Marmie's, the new, innovative treatments from the faraway hospital clinic just didn't work. It was now time to return to Texas, retrieve their precious Maddison, and prepare for the worst.

"How did Maddison sound, when you called?" Marmie slowly lifted her head and looked at her husband.

“Well, you know, it was hard to tell. She was upset, really upset when I told her how things turned out at the clinic, but she sounded different. She said y’all several times. She definitely doesn’t hate my mother anymore.” He spoke “my mother” with disdain.

“Well, Brent, that is a good thing, I suppose. Right?” Marmie replied.

“Yeah, sure, I guess so. I just hope my mother didn’t try to push her whacko beliefs onto Maddison,” he said with disgust. “We’ll get to Texas, stay the night at my mother's house, and then head home. After that, none of us will have to see them again. Being at home, in your own bed, will make you feel better.”

He kissed Marmie on the top of her head.

The gate attendant made the announcement, “Sorry for the delay, folks. We will now begin pre-boarding for Flight 999 with service to Dallas, Texas.”

Daddo carefully helped Marmie into an airport wheelchair, picked up their bags, draped the straps onto his shoulders, and then pushed the chair toward the boarding gate.

Chapter 19

Trail of Tears

"Tears shed for another person are not a sign of weakness. They are the sign of a pure heart."

~ Jose N. Harris

After Daddo's phone call, Maddison cried, and cried, and then cried some more. Of all the tears she had shed since coming to Texas, these were the most wholehearted and sincere. They were not just 9-year-old, kid tears anymore. They represented complete and utter disappointment and despair. All the hopes she had for her mother's recovery were now gone.

During the past months, with the help of Grammy, GranDude, and the JarMar critters, she had gotten used to the heat and finally opened her heart to Texas, the splendor of nature, and all the enduring kindness and unconditional love in the world.

But now. her newly expanded heart, which she never knew she had, was broken.

Grammy and GranDude tried to be as positive and upbeat as possible, but they too were crushed, perhaps Grammy more so. She feared that without Marmie, her son would abandon all efforts to reconcile with her, his mother. And this meant, more than likely, that she would lose contact with her newly-found granddaughter forever.

The three humans at JarMar were so distraught that they forgot to tell the critters about Marmie's prognosis. But it didn't matter. The creatures of JarMar inherently felt the sorrow and misery of JaR, MaR, and MaD. They sensed the sadness. They just knew. So, without help from Grammy, GranDude, or Maddison, they banded together for their own woodlet meeting the night before Daddo and Marmie's arrival.

At times like this, we'd all like to know that despite what pragmatic reasoning, critical thinking, and scientific absolutes tell us, there can still be hope.

At times like this, we'd like to trust that even in the darkest hours, miracles can still occur.

At times like this, we'd like to, with all of our hearts, believe in magic.

If you were to witness the critters gathering on the eve of Daddo and Marmie's arrival, in Grammy and GrandDude's JarMar backyard in the northern part of the great state of Texas, you would say that it was a miracle.

To begin with, it was a wonder that so many wild critters would even meet in such an organized fashion without tearing up the yard. Moreover, it was an even grander miracle that the feral creatures did not eat each other.

With Harriet's grace, Humphrey's energy, Stewpid's wisdom, the Squirrel family's poise and balance, Perry's foresight, Lola's adaptability, Tony and the Toadlets' appreciation for all things beautiful, Arnie's courage, and a little help from the moon, the JarMar menagerie devised a clever plan. Now, they needed to share their strategy with their three favorite humans, who had all gone to bed.

So, they did what anyone who is truly creative and innovative would do. They made a racket.

Stewpid, Stripe, and the other comet goldfish started jumping into the air and making the biggest belly-flop dives they had ever done.

Tony and the Toadlets sang their loudest olio of lyrical songs, accompanied by Humphrey's very loud humming.

Together, with their parents, Jaxson, Jasper, and Jake accompanied the toad choir on percussion by banging acorns on the deck steps.

Harriet made loud squawking noises as she performed aerial wingovers above the yard.

Lola strutted back and forth on the deck railing and flashed neon green so brilliantly that it lit up the yard as if a flare had been lit.

Perry, even with his goggles on, crashed into the giant windows over and over again.

And Arnie pretended he was really scared and bounced like a pogo stick, banging against the underside of the deck, making a loud “thunk” each time his armored plates hit the wood.

“What on earth?” Grammy exclaimed as she rushed through the house, turned on the porch light, and opened the glass door.

GranDude and Maddison followed. The three of them sat on top of the picnic table as the critters excitedly shared their scathingly, brilliant scheme, which started out like this...

“Tomorrow is September 9th,” screeched Harriet.

“At 9:09 p.m. tomorrow night, the moon will be full,” Perry chimed in.

“And we all know what that means,” Stewpid sagely added.

“9th month,” chirped Sampson and Delilah in unison.

“Plus 9th day,” jabbered Jaxson.

“Plus 9th hour,” twittered Jasper.

“Plus 9th minute,” squeaked Jake.

“Equals FULL M-O-O-N,” croaked Tony virtuously in his deep baritone voice.

“And I’m 9,” gasped Maddison in a “eureka” moment.

Lola bobbed her head up and down and then drawled, “Nine. dahlings, you know it’s quite a number.”

“It is incredible,” the tadpole junior choir chimed in.

“It is m-m-m-agical,” stuttered Arnie with an armadillo smile across his face as big as Texas.

Chapter 20

The Play's the Thing

"There's a lot that is good in your life — don't take it for granted. Don't get so focused on the struggle that you miss the gift of today." ~Joel Osteen

Daddo and Marmie arrived at noon the next day. Their focus was on their daughter, and they had little to say to Grammy and GranDude. Of course, Marmie didn't feel well and was tired from the trip. Maddison gave up her room so that her parents would have a comfortable place to rest. She moved all of her stuff to the chill zone adjacent to Grammy and GranDude's bedroom and planned to sleep on the couch there.

Grammy, GranDude, and Maddison had been up most of the night preparing the "big surprise" that was to happen that evening. It was up to Maddison to convince her parents to attend. Grammy, GranDude, and the rest of the JarMar critters had complete confidence in Maddison's persuasive abilities.

Daddo had to practically carry Marmie down the hall to the bedroom. Once he got her settled, Maddison joined them and sat on the edge of the bed next to her mother.

Of course, Maddison wanted to gush to her parents about everything that she had seen and done the past three months, but knowing that they didn't appreciate magic talk, she held back.

"You'll need to get all your things packed so we can leave early in the morning, Maddison," Daddo stated stiffly.

"Okay," Maddison slowly drawled. "But tonight, we have something special planned for you and Marmie."

“We? Who is we, Maddison?” Daddo asked, thinking his mother had overstepped some boundary with his little girl.

Maddison looked at Marmie. “‘We’ is all the new friends I’ve met here at Grammy’s house. We’ve written a play for you both, and we’d like to perform it for you tonight.”

This sort of made sense to Daddo. Grammy used to be a drama teacher. He saw the excitement in his daughter’s eyes.

“Honey, I’m afraid Marmie is not going to feel up to going out to see a play tonight. Maybe you can just tell us about it,” replied Daddo.

“Oh, no,” Maddison was quick to answer. “You don’t have to ‘go’ anywhere to see it, we are going to do it here, in Grammy and GrandDude’s backyard.”

“Well, I don’t think...” Daddo continued.

But he was interrupted by Marmie, who gave Daddo a this-is-the-way-it’s-going-to-be glance. “Honey, of course, we would love to see your play. What time do we need to be back there?”

“You need to be there by 9. GrandDude has an outdoor recliner ready for you, Marmie, so you will be comfortable. The play starts at 9:09. I’m so glad you’re coming.” The child’s eyes twinkled with excitement.

Maddison gave both of her parents a really big, long hug.

“My friends and I have a few more things to do to get ready, okay? Gotta run now. Love you both.” And with that, she darted out of the room.

Daddo and Marmie looked at each other in disbelief. Was this the same kid they put on a plane three months ago? She wore a new “Texas” swimsuit with shorts, like, all the time. And on her feet were flip-flops, for heaven's sake! She was now mask-less and was tan, with freckles

scattered over her nose and cheeks. It looked like she hadn't combed her hair in days, and she hadn't cried, thrown a hissy fit, or washed her hands once since her parents had arrived.

Daddo finally spoke. "Uh, well, my mother used to teach drama, you know. She probably introduced Maddison to a few neighborhood kids, and they've put together some kind of show. Starting the thing at 9:09 is probably just another of my mother's quirky ideas. Are you sure you feel up for this?"

"Oh, you bet I do," Marmie replied. "I feel better just seeing Maddie so excited."

Marmie knew, deep down, that she might not have many more opportunities to watch her daughter play with friends, perform in a play, or do much else.

"Tonight will be special," she thought as she closed her eyes and gently touched the "daughter" necklace that hung around her neck.

Chapter 21

A Child's Dream

"Forgiveness is the answer to the child's dream of a miracle by which what is broken is made whole again, what is soiled is made clean again." ~Dag Hammarskjold

Marmie and Daddo opted to have their dinner in the bedroom. Maddison kept checking in on them every 15 minutes to remind them not to be late for the evening's performance.

"We'll be there, honey, I promise," Marmie told her.

After the third time Maddison had popped her head in to remind them, Daddo shook his head and even grinned a bit. Maddison's exuberance was contagious.

At nine o'clock sharp, Daddo helped Marmie down the hall, through the kitchen, and to the sliding glass door. As Daddo opened the door, Marmie gasped in awe at the beauty of JarMar. Even at night, the place was magnificent.

GranDude had positioned tiki torches throughout the woodlet and all of the flowers, both in hanging baskets and planted in the ground, had been watered and were looking their best. The pool and pond lights were on, and the waterfall gently splashed and twinkled like diamonds as the water hit the smooth rocks.

Maddison was waiting at the door, ready to escort her parents to their seats. Marmie stumbled a bit, so Daddo ended up carrying her down the deck stairs to the recliners that GranDude had wiped down and positioned facing the pond. Between the recliners was a small iron table with a huge pitcher of icy lemonade and two empty glasses atop it. A large bouquet of flowers tied with yellow and pink ribbons sat on Marmie's recliner. Maddison lifted the flowers

as Daddo gently lowered Marmie to her seat. Once situated, Maddison laid the flowers on her mother's lap.

“These are for you, from Grammy,” whispered Maddison to her mom. “She said to tell you it was a little mother-to-mother gift.”

Grammy stuck her head out from behind the waterfall and winked at Marmie. Marmie smiled weakly.

GranDude and Grammy were in charge of all the technical aspects of the show. GranDude stood behind Marmie and Daddo's seats with two gigantic flashlights. He, along with Mr. Moon (the stage name for the shimmering full orb in the sky), was in charge of lights. Grammy stood behind the waterfall holding a clipboard. Next to her was a prop box and the outdoor stereo. She had made most of the props for the performance and was acting as stage manager.

There was a big easel positioned next to the pond with posterboard signs propped up on it. The signs were turned backward so that no one could see what was on them.

Daddo looked around the yard for any other neighborhood kids or their parents, but there were none. It appeared that he and Marmie were the only ones here to see the performance. Too bad, he thought.

Maddison was the emcee of the show. She wore her beach towel cape, and her goggles were perched on top of her head. Of course, the rest of her “costume” consisted of her swimsuit, shorts, and flip-flops, which she wore like a pro. At precisely 9:09, she took her place next to the easel, and the show began.

Maddison announced, “I'd like to welcome y'all here tonight to our show. But before we start, I'd like to give a special thanks to my grandparents. GranDude is the spotlight operator.”

GranDude turned the flashlights on and off, and then circled the lights around the pond. He looked like he was signaling a plane to land but in a cool way.

“Grammy did our props and is our stage manager,” Maddison explained further.

Grammy again waved from behind the waterfall, smiling with pride at her granddaughter.

“I have the best grandparents in the world, and without them, none of this would have been possible.”

Tears welled up in both GranDude and Grammy’s eyes, and they almost started blubbering, but then caught themselves because, after all, the show must go on.

Daddo sat up straighter in his chair and crossed his arms.

Maddison nodded to her grandmother, and Grammy turned on the boom box, which played “Do You Believe in Magic?” by Lovin’ Spoonful.

“...do you believe in magic in a young girl’s heart? ...”

Maddison turned the first card on the easel around. It read “The Tale of the Magic Box” in neat Grammy printing.

“Once, many years ago, a young boy made a box,” said Maddison.

She walked to the waterfall, and Grammy, from behind, handed her the gold box that Daddo had made. Maddison then stepped back to her place next to the easel. GranDude and Mr. Moon adjusted the light so that the macaroni jewels on the top of the box glistened. Daddo re-adjusted himself in his chair and re-crossed his arms.

“When the boy was young, the box was filled with all sorts of wonderful, magical things.” Grammy turned up the music as Maddison slid the top of the box open. Then, the music faded.

“But as the boy grew into a man, he forgot about all the magical treasures of his childhood that were kept in the box. And, eventually, he forgot about the box too.”

Maddison walked to the small table nestled between her parents. She laid the box with the lid open in front of the lemonade.

Then she continued, “Restoring the wonderful childhood treasures to the empty box wasn't just going to happen on its own. Help was needed. It required a superhero girl, and that girl is Mega Marvelous Maddie!”

With that, she twirled around positioning her fists on her hips and struck a fearless superhero pose.

Marmie giggled, and even Daddo snickered a bit.

“But as hard as Mega Marvelous Maddie tried, she knew that hunting for lost treasures is not easy, especially when they've gone missing for many years. She alone could not re-fill the box. She needed help. So Mega Marvelous Maddie went on a quest to a far away land called Texas to find friends who could magically help her fill the box.”

Daddo smiled as he looked around the yard, thinking Maddison's “friends,” the neighborhood kids, had been coached well to stay quiet and out of sight before their entrances.

Maddison turned over another card on the easel. This one read, “Great Blue Heron of Texas.”

Harriet was right on cue. GrandDude tilted the flashlight up in the air to spotlight Harriet's majestic entrance. The bird gracefully soared down and stood next to the child.

Marmie gasped. Daddo immediately jumped out of his seat to protect his daughter, but GrandDude caught him by the shoulder and pulled him back, assuring him that everything was okay. Daddo warily sat back down.

Maddison continued as Harriet pranced about.

“One day, while on her quest in Texas, Marvelous Maddie met Harriet Heron. Harriet is a Great Blue Heron, the largest heron in all of North America. Harriet taught Maddie to flap dance.”

Grammy hit the button on the stereo box right on cue, and Abba’s “Dancing Queen” began playing loud and clear.

“...you can dance, you can jive, having the time of your life, Ooh, see that girl...”

Maddison and Harriet flapped, sashayed, swaggered, and flamenco danced until Grammy faded the music.

Maddison continued her story.

“Along with dancing, Harriet brought with her the first treasure to put in the golden box.”

Harriet ducked behind the waterfall and returned with a polished pebble, about the size of a child’s fist, in her beak. She dropped the pebble at Maddison’s feet and disappeared behind the waterfall.

Maddison picked up the pebble. On it was inscribed “Humility.” Maddison walked to the table between her parents and dropped the pebble into the gold box.

Daddo picked up the pebble and read the inscription stumped by what it meant. He showed it to his wife, but Marmie just smiled and gestured for Daddo to put it back in the box. He obeyed.

Maddison walked back to the easel and turned over another sign. It read “Comet Goldfish.” She continued.

“Next Marvelous Maddie met five Comet Goldfish named Pretty Boy, Tweedle-dee, Tweedle-dum, Stripe, and Stewpid.”

“Stupid?” Daddo whispered to Marmie.

“No, STEW-pid,” Maddie loudly corrected.

Stripe, Stewpid, and their brothers splashed up and down on the surface of the pond.

GranDude spotlighted the five of them as Maddison continued.

“These little guys taught Marvelous Maddie to swim. And Stewpid showed her some of his favorite places, like in the pond filter, in case she ever needed to hide from dangerous things in the world. They gave her treasure number two for the box.”

At this, Maddison knelt down beside the pond and stuck her hand down into the water. She pulled up another smooth pebble. Its inscription read “Wisdom.” Maddison arose, walked to the box, and dropped it in.

Marmie and Daddo stared in disbelief at the new addition to the box.

Maddison turned over the next poster. It read “Texas Ruby Throated Hummingbird.” Humphrey buzzed around Maddison’s head humming away.

“Next Marvelous Maddie met Humphrey, a Ruby Throated Hummingbird. Humphrey got dehydrated on a day when the weather was way too hot, and Maddie helped him recover.”

Maddison walked to the waterfall, cupped her hands, and let the water splash into them. She then turned for everyone to see as Humphrey landed on the edge of her cupped hands and drank the cool water.

“As a reward, Humphrey gave her the third treasure for the box.”

Maddison, with Humphrey fluttering ahead of her, walked to one of the hanging baskets, reached in, and retrieved another pebble. On this one, it said “Persistence.”

Maddison dropped this pebble into the box as well.

Daddo and Marmie were stunned.

Maddison turned over the next poster. It read “Anole Lizard of Texas.” GranDude used both flashlights to illuminate the railing of the deck that was covered with what looked like a gazillion mini dinosaurs. But it wasn’t dinosaurs, it was Lola, her husbands, and their extended family. As GranDude illumined each critter with the flashlights, they miraculously changed color. It was like a psychedelic laser light show. But none of them were as brilliant as Lola, perched atop a pebble, right smack dab in the middle of the group, wearing her most lavish shade of emerald green.

As Maddison walked back to the deck she said, “Marvelous Maddie then met Lola Lizard and her family. Actually, Lola is an anole. Texas anoles can, just like magic, change their color to blend in with their surroundings or, as in Lola’s case, to make a brilliant fashion statement.”

Lola puffed up her gullet a couple of times before she hopped down from the pebble. This one said “Flexibility.” Maddison took the stone, walked to the box, and dropped it in. There were now four pebbles in the box.

Maddison returned to the easel and turned over the next card that read “Peregrine Falcon of Texas.” This was spectacle-clad Perry’s cue to sweep down from his perch in a tall tree and head toward the giant windows that lined the back of the house. He performed this aerial maneuver like an elite circus acrobat. Before he slammed right into the pane, he veered to the right and swooped back up.

“Is that bird wearing glasses?” Marmie whispered to Daddo with wide eyes.

“The fifth friend Marvelous Maddie met was Perry Peregrine Falcon. Peregrine falcons are super birds and are the fastest birds in the bird kingdom. They also have superior, sharp vision...when they don’t forget their spectacles!”

Perry dipped one wing in a salute to the marvelous girl. He then dropped a pebble at the girl's feet. It read "Insight." Marvelous Maddie added this treasure to the box.

Then she turned over another poster that said "Texas Toad." She walked to the pond where Tony and the Toadlets were arranged on the waterfall boulders as if they were choir risers. Tony sat on the top rock, waiting for his cue from Maddison.

"Marvelous Maddie used to think that toads and the sounds they made were ugly, but that changed when she met Tony and the Toadlets. Tonight, in a virtuoso performance, they would like to sing for you "La Donna e Mobile" from Verdi's Rigoletto. Is everyone ready?"

Tony hopped a bit and repositioned himself, as if to say "hit it, Maddie."

"And a one, and a two, and a..." Maddison chanted.

The toads croaked deeply, they warbled loudly, and they gave an amazingly "ribbet"ing performance. When it was over Maddison spoke.

"Aren't they wonderful? Let's give it up for Tony and the Toadlets."

Maddison clapped along with Grammy and GranDude, who beamed with pride at his boys. At this point, Marmie and Daddo's brains were so addled by what they had witnessed that they didn't know what else to do, so they clapped too.

Maddison retrieved another pebble that was next to Tony. The word "Beauty" was inscribed on it. The girl put the sixth stone in the box and returned to the easel.

The next placard read "Texas Fox Squirrel." Again GranDude focused his lights on the deck railing. Jaxson, Jasper, and Jake were centered on the rail. Samson and Delilah were on each side of the trio.

“Next Maddie met a family of Texas Fox Squirrels. Samson and Delilah Squirrel have three sons: Jaxson, Jasper, and Jake. Fox squirrels can live to be almost 20 years old if they stay away from roads.” Delilah turned and gave her boys a warning glance.

Maddison continued, “They are also very nimble and can jump from tree to tree without falling by using their tails.”

Jax, Jas, and Jake demonstrated by moonwalking back and forth across the railing. Not one of them fell.

Samson held a pebble in his paws. He pushed it to the edge of the rail and Maddison took it. This pebble read “Balance.”

Maddison placed pebble number seven in the gold box.

She then revealed another poster that read “Texas Nine-Banded Armadillo.” As the sign was turned Arnie rolled out from under the deck in a tight armored ball. When he got next to Maddison he unfurled himself and sat up on his hindquarters.

Maddison spoke. “The next friend that Maddie met is Arnie who is a Texas Nine-Banded Armadillo. Armadillos in Texas are very shy; because of this, they only come out at night. When they get frightened or startled they jump straight up and down.”

At this, Arnie demonstrated some expert armadillo jumping for the audience. He then waddled back under the deck and returned with the eighth pebble in his snout. He placed the rock at Maddison’s feet and ambled back under the deck steps. This pebble read “Courage.”

Maddison added it to the box.

Maddison turned over the final posterboard on the easel. It read “Family.” Grammy dropped her clipboard and GranDude put down his flashlights. The couple walked toward the easel and stood at both sides of Maddison.

The girl in a very loud voice said, “The final friends that Maddie met on her journey turned out to be related to her, even though she had never met them before. They were Grammy and GranDude, her family. They live in a magical kingdom called JarMar, where plants, critters, and people communicate with each other all the time, every day. Where plants, critters, and people live with open hearts and open minds, and love.”

All of the JarMar critters then came forward and took the stage alongside Maddison and her grandparents.

Grammy stared at Daddo with tears streaming down her cheeks as she handed the ninth and final pebble to her precious granddaughter. It read “Forgiveness.”

Maddison took the pebble and placed it in the golden box which suddenly began to glow. She then took the shining box and placed it on her mother’s lap.

We all know that during emotional moments like this, there usually is a lot of crying. But that wasn’t the case now, except for Grammy and GranDude. They were bawling buckets. But none of the animals cried because, well, animals don’t cry, and Mr. Moon and Maddison were smiling, beaming from ear to ear.

On the ninth day of the ninth month, at 9:09, nine treasures made a boy’s homemade box come alive again.

But, in case you were wondering, this sort of thing doesn’t happen every day. It’s rare and very potent. In fact, some may say it’s Nature’s superpower. This kind of magical energy can open hearts so that love can gush through. It can heal a hardened soul. It can heal a broken body.

And, that’s what happened.

A miracle.

Chapter 22

Miracle

"There are two ways to live: you can live as if nothing is a miracle, or you can live as if everything is a miracle." ~Albert Einstein

Nobody was exactly sure what caused Marmie's body to heal. The doctors all decided that the treatment at the hospital clinic in the faraway place must have had a delayed reaction. There were studies written about it, and Marmie's healing was recorded in their research trial data results as a positive, a success.

Texas meteorologists felt that it definitely was the moon that caused the healing. They claimed that the specific full moon on September 9th had created a pattern of polarized light that scattered atmospheric particles that could heal all sorts of diseases in both animals and humans. They went on to do more studies in Marfa, Texas.

Geologists claimed it must have been some special combination of elements that was found in the pebbles that were gifted to Marmie.

Mathematicians attributed Marmie's recovered health to the power of numbers, especially the number 9.

All of them were right. Or maybe, all of them were wrong.

Maddison didn't care which. Her mother was healthy, Daddo was speaking to Grammy again, and the three of them, Daddo, Marmie, and Maddison, were returning to JarMar for Thanksgiving in a few months. Daddo even told Maddison to start making a list of things she'd like Santa to bring her for Christmas this year. This made the girl over-the-top happy.

Grammy, GranDude, and the JarMar critters missed their precious Maddison terribly after she left Texas.

Stewpid wouldn't come out of the pond filter for days because he had wanted the girl to take him home with her. Grammy finally convinced the little gold fellow that fish were not allowed on planes and that Maddison would be back real soon. This pulled him out of his funk.

Soon, things are back to normal at JarMar, with two major changes.

The first big change is the boulder that is positioned in the middle of the woodlet, under the big tree by the pond. It no longer says "JarMar." It now reads "JarMar-Mad" and everyone that lives in the woodlet is happy with the change.

Secondly, the weather has changed, finally. The oppressive heat has been replaced with cool breezes that rustle leaves in the trees. Texans call it "State Fair weather." The Squirrel family has begun to stock up on acorns for winter and one by one all the brilliant flowers of the woodlet are wilting as they began their long sleep until spring. At night, the brisk breezes make the leaves dance in circles, like magic.

It is on one such nights, after Maddison has left, that Harriet raises her long s-shaped neck and does a little gawking at the woodlet and its inhabitants. The toads are singing scales as they prepare for choir practice. Humphrey is humming around the hanging baskets trying to retrieve the last drops of nectar in the flowers before they disappear. Lola is sleeping under a rock by the deck dreaming, in color, of fall fashions and bling. Perry is on acorn patrol for the Squirrel family, reporting any clusters of acorns that might be hidden under brush or rocks. Stewpid is again stuck in the pond filter and Arnie has just emerged from under the deck for his nightly ritual of waddling and rooting.

Harriet stands proudly in the middle of it all. She takes another long look and sighs as she thinks to herself, “Well, tonight, all’s well in JarMar, oops, I mean JarMar-Mad.” She sighs again, “It’s been some summer.” With that, she opens her enormous wings, clears the fence, and flies toward the moon.

Appendix

The Real Animals of JarMar

"It is good to realize that if love and peace can prevail on earth, and if we can teach our children to honor nature's gifts, the joys and beauties of the outdoors will be here forever.

~Jimmy Carter

Great Blue Heron

Life Span: 15 years

Size: Body: 3.2 to 4.5 feet; wingspan: 5.5 to 6.6 feet

Weight: 4.6 to 7.3 pounds

A group of Great Blue Herons is called a: Colony

If you see a large, bluish-gray bird with long legs and an S-shaped neck while walking along a body of water, it's most likely a great blue heron. The great blue heron is the most common and largest heron in Texas and all of North America. They enjoy wading along coastlines, streams, and yes, ponds.

Many pond owners in North Texas have to be on the lookout for great blue herons because they love to prey on all types of pond swimmers. They are pros at catching and eating fish.

Here is how they do it: first, they approach the water slowly and stand very still while scouting their prey; then, with a lightning-fast movement, they stab their sharp bills into their victim and swallow them whole! Why do you think Stewpid spent so much time hiding in the pond drain? Maybe we should change his name to Not-So-Stewpid!

The feathers of the great blue heron are longer on the bird's head, chest, and wings. Great blue herons like to keep their feathers looking good, too. To do this, they have a special claw on their middle toe that has fringe on it and helps them comb their feathers. This claw is used like a washcloth to remove oils and slime from their feathers.

Although great blue herons do not have black eyes, the area directly above each eye is marked with a black stripe. This is a good way to tell if you are looking at a great blue heron.

If you were to look up into the sky and see a great blue heron flying overhead, the first thing you would notice would be its long legs trailing behind and below its body. Their wings are very broad and have rounded tips at the ends of them. Herons flap their wings very slowly because of their enormous size.

Great blue herons prefer to build huge nests in trees high above the ground. Their nests are built 2–4 feet across and nearly 4 feet deep. Most great blue herons, like Harriet, are very practical. They will return to the same nest year after year.

Fox Squirrel

Average Life Span: 6-7 years, record age is 18 years

Size: body length is up to 27 inches

Weight: 1-3 pounds

A group of Fox Squirrels is called a: Scurry

Fox squirrels are active during the day and really fun to watch. You can find them all over Texas and throughout North America. They like to build their nests in tall trees, so you probably won't find many of them living outside of forests and wooded areas.

After a mama squirrel, like Delilah, becomes pregnant, the papa squirrel doesn't stick around but rather leaves the mama to take care of the babies. Generally, there are 2–6 babies in each litter. It is the mama squirrel's responsibility to feed and take care of her youngsters. She rarely leaves them unattended and stays with them until they learn the "ropes" of being a squirrel.

You'll be relieved to learn that fox squirrels can live for a very long time. Most live for 6–7 years on average, but with a good food source and good trees for nesting, they can live for up to 20 years, UNLESS they attempt to cross streets and highways. The major cause of death for fox squirrel babies is being hit by cars, or what Stripe would call "roadkill."

Fox squirrels like to talk and chatter a lot. They communicate with sounds ranging from barks to quacks to whistles. They will even purr when they feel loved and nurtured, like when a mama squirrel is caring for her babies. They can also express aggression and anger by chattering their front teeth and giving "don't mess with me" stares.

Anole Lizard

Life Span: up to 7 years

Size: Height is 0.5 in. - 2 in.; Length is 4 - 20 in.

Weight: 1.5-3 ounces

A group of Anole Lizards is called a: Lounge

The anole lizards found in Texas are actually Carolina anoles. They are small to medium in size and they have a very slender bodies, just like the fashion models that Lola dreams of becoming. Their heads are pointed, and they have ridges between their eyes and nostrils. They also have a small ridge on the top of their heads.

Anole lizards have dewlaps, which are pieces of skin that hang beneath their mouths at the front of their necks. Their dewlaps are usually red to pale pink when they are puffed out.

You can easily tell if an anole is male or female by looking at their size (males are larger), their dewlaps (males are brighter and redder in color), and the stripes down their backs (females have a white stripe going down their backs).

Anoles can morph into a variety of colors, from very dark brown to a full range of greens, but they are not true chameleons because true chameleons are not found in North America. Texas anoles change their color depending on their mood, stress level, and activity level.

Anoles eat insects and live on shade tree branches, bushes, and brush. They have sticky pads on their toes that make them experts at climbing tall trees and walls.

On average, anoles live for 2–7 years. If they are kept in a cage like a pet, their lifespan is shorter. But if an anole lives in a protected area, like JarMar, where there are plenty of bugs to eat, they can live up to 10 years.

Comet Goldfish

Life Span: 10-20 years

Size: up to 12 inches

Weight: up to 6 pounds

A group of Comet Goldfish is called a: Troubling or Glint

Comet goldfish are in the carp family but are actually descended from wild goldfish that lived hundreds of years ago. They live only in freshwater. They are often kept as pets in fish bowls or aquariums, but if kept in ponds, they can grow over a foot long, depending on the quality of the water, how much space they have, and what they eat. They mainly eat flakes, but sometimes they will eat worms and snails.

Comets are very active and playful. They love to dart back and forth with their fish buddies. They are happiest in ponds, or in Stewpid's case, pond filters!

Peregrine Falcons

Life Span: up to 17 years

Size: body is 14 to 19 inches; wingspan is 3.3 to 3.6 feet

Weight: 18.8 to 56.5 ounces

A group of Peregrine Falcons is called a: Cast

Peregrine falcons are very flexible in the fact that they can live almost anywhere on Earth, even in big cities. They are equally happy in hot and cold climates. Many of the peregrines that live in arctic regions will migrate south during the winter, sometimes all the way to South America. This is a round-trip of over 15,000 miles. After their vacations down south, they return to the north when it's time to mate and lay eggs.

Maybe because they like to travel so much, peregrines don't build nests. They usually find a shallow dip in a rock on the ledge of a cliff or even a building, and nest there.

Peregrine falcons in the United States were on the endangered species list between 1950 and 1980. Pesticides, like DDT, harmed peregrines by making their eggshells really thin, and so fragile that when the parents tried to incubate them, they broke. Laws were put in place to outlaw DDT, and eventually, peregrines recovered and came back strong. Some bird scientists estimate that there may be even more peregrines now than there ever used to be.

Peregrine falcons have binocular vision, which is eight times more powerful than human vision. They can see their prey from a distance of over two miles. Now, that's a superpower! They also have a third eyelid to protect their eyes when they dive down to catch prey. Of course, Perry probably didn't need to use his as long as he was wearing his spectacles!

Texas Toad

Life Span: up to 40 years, but on average 5-10 years

Size: 3.5-4 inches

Weight: 1-2 pounds

A group of Texas Toads is called an: Army

Texas toads are generally shy and are most active at night, especially around choir practice time! They like to hang out around small pools of water. They don't have teeth so there is no need to worry that they might nibble on your hand. They are grayish-green in color and resemble hopping rocks if rocks were in the habit of doing much hopping.

The most well-known sound that a Texas toad makes is called an advertisement call. During the mating season, a male "sings out" to attract females or warn other males to get lost. Their "calls" are usually made around bodies of water that are suitable for breeding and egg-laying. These can be heard during the evening and at night.

The life-development process of a Texas toad is fascinating. Texas toads' eggs are laid in small ponds and look like long, clear, straw-shaped strings with black dots. The black "dots" are the eggs, which begin to hatch within 2-3 days and become tadpoles.

Tadpoles have tails for swimming and gills to breathe underwater. As time passes, their tails become smaller and smaller, and eventually, they disappear. While this is happening, each tad is growing legs.

When the last stage is finished, the toads will have fully formed legs, and their gills will be gone. They are then ready to have a full life on land and are eligible to join the JarMar choir!

Ruby Throated Hummingbird

Life Span: 10-20 years

Size: up to 12 inches

Weight: up to 6 pounds

A group of Hummingbirds is called a: Bouquet, Glittering, Hover, Shimmer, or Tune

Hummingbirds are the smallest migratory flyers in the bird kingdom. But they like doing their travel alone and can fly for up to 500 miles at a time.

They get their name from the humming sound that their wings make because they beat so fast. They are the only bird that can fly backward.

They cannot smell at all but have great color vision. The ruby-throated hummingbird prefers orange or red flowers. If you put red dye in a hummingbird feeder to attract them, it can harm them, so don't do it. Many hummingbird feeders, not the nectar inside, are red to attract these wonderful tiny birds.

Hummingbirds drink nectar or water by moving their tongues in and out about 13 times per second. They can consume up to double their body weight in fluids in a day.

On average, hummingbird mamas lay only two eggs at a time, and the eggs are about the size of a coffee bean or jellybean. And, speaking of tiny, hummingbirds weigh less than a nickel.

Their legs are used for perching, but they can't walk or hop, they just keep their wings humming. And, when it comes to hummingbirds, what everyone usually wants to know is: "How fast do their wings beat?" Although there are some hummingbirds that are faster, a ruby-throated hummingbird, like Humphrey, averages around 53 beats per second! Now that's a lot of flapping!

9-Banded Texas Armadillo

Life Span: 12-15 years

Size: 15-17 inches

Weight: 8-17 pounds

A group of Armadillos is called a: Roll

Most Texas 9-banded armadillos are about the size of a small dog. Their bony shells give them protection from predators.

One of the JarMar rules is “Don’t dig in the gardens.” This was written for Arnie because armadillos love to dig! Their claws are very strong and they use them to dig for insects, grubs, and larvae, which are their main sources of food.

Since they have little hair to help regulate their body temperature, they forage for their food at night during the summer and in the afternoon during the winter.

They make a lot of noise when they are searching for food, which makes them easy to sneak up on. When surprised, they will jump straight up into the air, which is why you often see many of them dead along Texas highways. Instead of scurrying off when a vehicle engine is heard, an armadillo often leaps into the air, right into the path of the oncoming car or into the undercarriage of a passing semi-truck.

In the spring, female 9-banded armadillos, almost always, have four babies that are identical. The babies are born fully formed with their eyes open.

When an armadillo needs to cross a small pond or a narrow stream, rather than taking the risk of sinking with such a heavy shell, it bravely just holds its breath and walks across the bottom. An armadillo can hold its breath for 4–6 minutes. If they need to cross a wide body of

water like a lake, armadillos make their own life jackets. They swallow air to make their stomachs inflate to double their size, making them buoyant and allowing them to swim across.

Afterward, it takes them several hours to deflate. Being able to cross the Rio Grande River is what brought the nine-banded armadillo to Texas in the 20th century.

And Texans are mighty glad the “dillers” are good swimmers and chose to live in the Lone Star State because the armadillo is the official small mammal of Texas. Way to go, Arnie!