

## ☞ CHAPTER ONE ☞

2 cups sun.

2 tablespoons heat.

1 pinch of breeze.

All part of a recipe for one thing: a hot day supreme.

Sweat poured down Louis Proof's face. He didn't know if this was from the weather or the extra pounds that made up his pudgy frame. Reminders of sunblock, dehydration, and other such "momly" warnings echoed through his head but meant nothing to him on this great day—his and Brandon Davis's first trip to the JunkYard JunkLot. On the outside, the lot looked like any other home for discarded cars, visionless television sets, retired refrigerators, and whatever else makes its way to a junkyard. But the truth is, it had a secret that only the most trusted kids would come to know about: The JunkYard JunkLot was a modern marvel of juvenile amusement, if only you could get past three grand obstacles.

Louis and Brandon had had no knowledge of this secret before they found the mysterious envelopes in

their school desks at the end of yesterday's class. Each envelope contained a piece of paper with an introductory letter, a riddle, a silly rhyme, and a map, and also a book titled *Tha Rules*, which made no sense to either of the boys.

Louis's letter read as follows:

Dear Louis Proof,

This is indeed the luckiest day of your life. Due to your excellent standing with almost all who know you, you have been selected as a visitor to the most spectacular place on Earth. Forget about Disneyland and Universal Studios. You are invited to the JunkYard JunkLot. Yes, the JunkYard JunkLot.

This is your passport to this most special place on its opening day. The enclosed elements must be deciphered and followed to a T. Once you are alone in your room, a riddle, a rhyme, and a map needed to gain entry to this place will appear on the opposite side of this letter. You will have one hour to memorize this information, after which all of the words will disappear.

If you attempt to show anyone this letter, the words will vanish and you will be forbidden to enter—forever. If you try in any way to copy its contents, the words will vanish and you will be forbidden to enter—forever.

Be advised to take this seriously, as this is not a joke.

Signed,

*The Magnificent ProLProGluH*

PS: Doors open immediately after your last class. Feel free to bring one of your best you-know-whats, because a special race begins promptly at four p.m.

PPS: We took the liberty of also inviting your friend Brandon Davis, because friends should stick together. We will invite Angela after she returns from her trip.

The boys had eagerly followed the directions, memorizing what they were supposed to, and now they stood before towers of dented, pounded, and banged-up cars. Brandon was empty-handed, but Louis carried a metallic black case with the initials L. P. etched in the side. It contained one of his you-know-whats. The cars created a labyrinth that appeared impossible to thread, and they were just the first of the three obstacles that had to be overcome. Louis and Brandon could tell from the map that was printed clearly in their minds that this was where they needed to begin their quest.

“Okay. Step one. Bang on the bumper of the brown Buick,” Brandon said as he stepped up to the car that

rested on the bottom first row. *Bang! Bang!* Nothing.

“No, Brandon. The map told us to bang on the *back* bumper of the brown Buick,” Louis said. Brandon quickly moved to the back of the car and thwacked the rear bumper twice. It shifted a few inches down. Then, with a loud metallic churning sound, the entire pile of cars began to rumble and shake.

“Yo, man, this . . . these cars are going to fall on us!” Brandon yelled.

Dust. A huge cloud formed around Louis, not from the wobbly car stack, but from Brandon. He kicked it up as he ran out of sight behind a refrigerator about thirty feet back. Brandon tried to pull Louis with him, but Louis paid no attention to him other than to let out a cough. Even though it seemed as if the cars would collapse on Louis, he felt no desperation or fear. Instead he felt that this was the start of something big and worth sticking around for.

Soon the commotion was over. The entire side of the Buick swung open from its center on hidden hinges at the front and back of the car. Louis could now see that the cars were not really cars at all. They were hollow inside, stacked to create the outer shell of a hidden pathway that no one could have suspected.

Bright Christmas lights flickered, enticing travelers into the secret pathway.

“Brandon! Hey, Brandon, come check this out!” Louis yelled.

“You sure, man?” Brandon replied in a distant voice.

“Yeah. You really need to see it. This is the way,” Louis assured him. Brandon ran back, but not as fast as he had run away.

“Yeah. You know, you can never be too careful. Being squashed by junked cars is not on my list of acceptable ways to go,” Brandon said.

Louis let out a sarcastic “riiiiiight,” holding back a fit of the chuckles. Brandon was an excellent friend, but he put his self-preservation above all else, which was not such a bad thing for a twelve-year-old.

Brandon regained his confidence and decided to lead the way. Big deal! Leading is easy when there’s only one way to go. But as they set off down the path, they heard the car doors swing closed. Now the decision to continue was final.

“I don’t see anyone else. We’re probably the last people to get here,” said Louis, following the flashing lights as they blinked, highlighting everything in different colors.

“Hey, it’s not my fault—oh wait, yeah, it is, but I couldn’t get out of staying after school today,” Brandon replied, thinking about the makeup tests he’d had to take.

After many turns and twists, the two found themselves standing in a large circular clearing surrounded by more cars stacked high and wide—with no exit. The door of the car they’d stepped out of had mechanically

slammed shut. The only way forward was through seven wide green pipes planted in the ground straight up and down; each one rose about three and a half feet above the surface. Louis did not know why, but these pipes looked familiar. Before he could put his finger on it, Brandon said, "What is this, Super Mario Brothers? Let me guess. We have to slide down one of those things?"

"That's right, Super Mario Brothers! *That's* where I've seen these pipes before," Louis said. He felt silly he hadn't made the connection. That had to be one of his brother's favorite video games.

It was time to solve the riddle from the back of the letter.

"What the number of PPGs equals when multiplied by the prequels and then divided by *Friday* and its sequels. Figure this out and you will be more than halfway there. Mess it up and you will be sent home without a care."

*Easy enough*, Louis thought. "All right, there are three Powerpuff Girls. There could be many prequels, but the most well known are the three *Star Wars* prequels, so that's three times three. That makes nine. Now divide that number by two, since there are only two *Friday* movies. That makes four and a half. That can't be right. No pipe is numbered four and a half."

"Wrong, Louis, wrong! There are three *Friday* movies."

"No, there was only *Friday* and *Next Friday*," Louis said.

"What did I tell you? Wrong! There's one that takes place during Christmas. Right now there are three," Brandon said.

"Yeah, right. I forgot about that one." Three times three divided by three is three. The third pipe was the one. Louis stood in front of that pipe, looked at Brandon, then leaped into it without regard for the possibility he might be falling to his death. Brandon rushed to the pipe and stared apprehensively into the darkness.

"Louis, you sure that's safe? You okay? You sure this is something for *me* to do?" Brandon asked. No response. He almost got worried for a second; then he heard, "Come on, you punk." For the first time, a smile cracked Brandon's face, and he too slid down the pipe.

Brandon went feet first and was amazed that the pipe was no longer straight up and down but on an incline and extremely smooth. Soon he felt a spray on his face. Next a splash. Then he was drenched. The pipe became a waterslide, its sides covered in moss here and there. He found himself running up the sides of the pipe and sliding around in 360s. He lost track of how far he was sliding and even of how wet he was. He just put his arms in the air and screamed with elated enthusiasm.

Brandon knew the ride was almost over. He saw a

light ahead and Louis's new Air Max 90s. The slide spit him back onto his feet, dripping wet. He couldn't have cared less that he was soaked. In fact, he couldn't remember ever having had a better time. But in true Brandon fashion, he was not going to let Louis know that he was having so much fun.

"Now what?" he barked at Louis, trying to hide his exhilaration. Louis stood a few feet from him, bone dry. "How come you're—" Brandon could not finish his question, because as he walked toward Louis, hoses spat out of the wall and blasted him with air at every angle until he was completely dry.

"Oh, never mind."

Louis smiled, then pointed to a wooden door that looked tattered and worn but sturdy nonetheless. In its center was a glowing blue button marked RING ME in red letters. Brandon, still hiding his exuberance, did the honors. After a tense moment of silence, the sound of machinery suddenly exploded inside the chamber. A slot in the middle of the door opened, revealing a pair of eyes. Louis saw nothing odd about them, but to Brandon they somehow looked familiar. Very familiar.

"Okay," said a kid. Then there was a bang and a screech as if someone were trying to get something to work by hitting it. As the speaker continued to talk, his words turned into a menacing adult voice that made the boys cringe, not because it frightened them but because

it was so excruciatingly loud. "You guys got this far and you know what to do!" said the unseen orator.

One thing Brandon hated was anything blatantly stupid. "Aw, man, we really have to do that? I thought that was a joke! That is just too stupid—that's not cool. Not cool at all, no way, nope!" Brandon said.

"Come on, we have to. Look what time it is. I am going to miss the race," Louis pleaded.

"I mean, can't we go through some more cars or slide down some more slides?" Brandon said.

"Jumpin' monkeys. Why did I have to be on the door?" the voice asked. It was still loud, but no longer menacing, just frustrated.

"Jumpin' monkeys? Jumpin' monkeys? Derrick. Derrick Carlton, is that you? That's you. I know it is," Brandon stepped up to the door and pushed his head into the slot, trying to see if it was indeed Derrick. "You better let us in without all of that nonsense."

Derrick Carlton sat in front of Brandon in school because of alphabetical seating. Brandon hated alphabetical seating. Derrick said "jumpin' monkeys" after everything good or bad, and only his tone changed.

He said it with despair after failing a test.

He said it with excitement after passing a test.

He said it with relief and a laugh when he let a silent one go right in front of someone.

Brandon said it when he was that someone.

“Okay, fine, it’s him. Let it go. Come on, we got to get in here. I’m going to miss the race. Let’s get it over with,” Louis said, calm but firm.

Brandon said, “Just get ready. One, two, three—”

They glanced at each other and, skipping backward in a circle, began to sing:

*“Ohhhh . . . the most specialest place in the world I’m  
told*

*isn’t Fort Knox or filled with pirates’ gold.*

*It’s the best place where a kid can play;*

*xenon lamps keep it lit all night and day.*

*If you let me in, I promise not to tell or my breath*

*will smell*

*because I’ll have to eat stinky snails*

*wrapped in slimy fried kale.*

*“Sooooo . . . Keeper of the JunkYard JunkLot’s*

*secret, let me in!*

*Let me in. Please let me in.*

*Keeper of the JunkYard JunkLot’s secret, let me in!*

*Let me in. Please let me in.*

*So my funnest days as a kid can begin.”*

They both tripped and landed clumsily on the ground. As they got up, about to start the second verse, the voice behind the door broke into a fit of laughter. It told them to stop because he couldn’t take

it anymore. The door split apart in four squares with the button still attached to the lower right corner of its upper left. Each square retracted into the wall. Derrick Carlton was there, exactly as Brandon expected. He had tears in his eyes as he rolled around on the floor of what appeared to be an elevator, holding his stomach and kicking his feet. Derrick somehow managed to stop, took a good look at the two, then laughed even harder.

“Aiiight, get up—take me and L. Proof to where we need to go. He can’t miss this race,” Brandon commanded.

Derrick got himself together and stood up. “The great Brandon Davis acting like a fool. That’s a first. Come on, we’re all the same down here . . . no one is better than anyone else. Sometimes we all need to humble ourselves. Maybe not as much as that, but no one told you to be so good at it.”

The elevator was roomy, with a place to secure bikes on the right. “You have to put that briefcase in the slot,” Derrick told Louis. Derrick banged on the left wall and a compartment opened. The case easily fit inside.

“Okay, guys, stand on this circle and you’ll be fine. Don’t get scared. This thing moves pretty fast.” The three stepped into a blue circle in the elevator’s center. The door closed with a clank, and Derrick pressed a button identical to the one Brandon had pressed on the other side. The elevator began to move quickly. In an instant

they were suspended weightlessly in the elevator's center. They were safe there, never once wavering toward the top, bottom, or sides. The elevator went up, then down. Right, then left. It spun counterclockwise, then clockwise. It moved so freely and spontaneously no one could keep track of the crazy directions it traveled in. Brandon looked worried, but Louis was relaxed. He was at peace because he knew that for better or worse there was nothing he could do other than enjoy the journey. So he surrendered control and rode it out with an optimistic heart. The experience reminded him of one of his favorite activities: riding roller coasters.

The elevator began to slow down, making Brandon even more nervous, because they were not as stable in the center as before. He knew they were going to crash to the floor, but before they could, the elevator rose up with lightning speed, planting their feet soundly on its floor. Then, ever so slowly, the elevator lowered itself until it came to a stop. *Ding!* Everything was perfectly still, but boisterous children could be heard beyond the sealed door. Neither Louis nor Brandon had any idea where they were, or even if they were still in the JunkYard JunkLot.

Wherever they were, it was where they wanted to be, and they were finally there.