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"Ooooooh, cake!" Dad said, grabbing one as we led him through the kitchen to the front door. "Mmm." Chocolate dribbled down his chin. "Can we take some for the road?"

I thought concussions made people sick to their stomach, but that didn't seem true in Dad's case. "Sure." I grabbed three more cakes and tied them up in a dish towel.

When we'd gotten Dad down the porch steps, I told Jeanine to wait there. Then I ran around to the back of the house, got Dad's bike, and wheeled it out front.

"What are you thinking? He can't bike like this," Jeanine said.

"How do you know? Let's just see."

Dad got on fine. He even pedaled off okay, but after less than

a minute, he forgot what he was doing and just quit pedaling. Luckily, he put his feet down before he tipped over too far.

"What if we just kept saying, 'You're riding a bike. You're riding a bike,' over and over?" I said.

Jeanine started back up the porch steps. "I'm getting the car keys."

"You are not! I told you, that's crazy and, like, against the law."

"So how are we getting there?"

"I have another idea. It's crazy too but not against the law."

"What?"

"What about the baby buggy?"

"For who?"

"Dad!" I called as I ran off to get it.

Behind the house, a big plastic sheet covered the brand-new, two-person bike. Nobody had even ridden it yet, but it was already set up with the baby buggy attached. I pulled off the sheet. The bike was so shiny that the blue paint looked silver. I flicked up the kickstand and wheeled it out front.

"Dad and I haven't even tried it out yet." Jeanine said.

"You ride it like a regular bike. I rode one with Mom in Montreal that time."

Jeanine studied the bike. "Maybe I could fit in the buggy with Dad."

"What are you talking about? Dad'll just barely fit in the buggy by himself. Plus, I can't pull both of you."

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"Well, why does Dad need to go in the buggy at all? Why can't he ride on the second seat?"

"It's for a kid. Dad's legs are way too long. Besides, you saw him on the bike. After five minutes, he'll fall right off or just tip over and take us all down."

"Hey, guys?" Since his bike adventure, Dad had been sitting on the porch steps staring into space. "What's this for?" He held up the ice pack.

"Your head. You fell off the roof," I said.

"Why was I on the roof?"

"Because you're a nuddy," Jeanine said.

I poked her hard through her bathrobe.

"What? He's not going to remember in five minutes." She looked back at the bike and took a deep breath. "Oh, fine. We'll take him in the buggy." Then she snapped her fingers right in Dad's face. "C'mon. We're going. Get up!"

Dad looked confused but stood up.

I tied the dish towel around the remaining cake and put it in the baby buggy. "We'll have to walk down to the road."

"You heard him, walk!" Jeanine said, giving Dad a shove.

Again, Dad did as he was told, which just made me sad. I would have given anything right then to hear him go off in French at Jeanine for bossing him around.

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When we started down Terror Mountain, I was leading the bike and Jeanine was leading Dad. But when we hit the first steep bit, the baby buggy swung downhill so fast, the bike ripped out of my hands and crashed into a tree. After that, Jeanine and Dad walked on either side of the buggy to keep it from veering into the woods. Jeanine kept reminding Dad to stay right up next to it, but of course, he kept forgetting, and before she could remind him again, he'd fall behind, and the buggy would skid off his side into a tree. Then the bike would stop suddenly, and the handlebars would smash into my chest.

"Dad!" I'd yell.

"Oh, was that me?" he'd say. Again.

It took forever, but we did finally make it to the bottom, and somehow, even with all the crashing into trees, I was pretty sure none of my ribs were broken, and we hadn't wrecked the bike or the buggy, though neither looked brand-new anymore.

"Okay, get in," I said when we'd wheeled the bike and buggy out onto the road.

"Where?" Dad said.

"Here." I held open the zippered flap on the buggy.

Dad snorted a laugh. "Absolutely not."

"It's the only way," Jeanine said.

"Why can't I bike?"

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"Because...because...you just can't! Now get in. And put this on your head." Jeanine handed him back the ice pack.

Dad stuck out his lips just like Zoe does when my parents yell at her, but he held the ice to his head anyway and said, "Fine." Then he turned his back to the buggy and lowered himself into it, leaving his feet still out on the road.

"We need all of you in there," I said.

"What do you suggest I do with these?" he said, kicking his legs straight out.

"They fold, don't they? Fold them." I picked up his legs one by one and put them inside the buggy. "See, no problem."

"Oh, yeah. This is great." Dad rolled his eyes.

I'm not going to lie. It didn't look comfortable. And, for sure, if we hit a bump, his kneecap would give him a nosebleed, but at least all he had to do was sit there.

Jeanine and I were just about to get on the bike when I realized she was still wearing her bathrobe. "Take off the robe."

"But it's cold, and I only have on pj's."

"You'll warm up on the bike."

"I can't ride into town in pj's," she said, as if two kids on a tandem bike pulling their six-foot father in a baby buggy wouldn't give people enough to talk about.

"How is your bathrobe better than pj's?"

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"It kind of looks like a coat. People won't be able to tell it's a robe."

"Uh, they will if they're not blind. Look, it could get caught. It's dangerous."

"Really?"

"Yes, really. Why don't you ever believe me about anything? I know I'm not a genius, but I'm not stupid. I do know *some* useful things."

"Fine." Jeanine took off the robe and stuffed it into the buggy. "It's freezing."

I put a leg over the bike and held it up while Jeanine climbed on behind me. Then I pushed off.

I was expecting to feel super wobbly at least at first, but the bike felt pretty balanced.

"I like this," Jeanine called from behind. "It's kind of fun."

Just then, the bike swerved, and I had to lean way out to keep it from falling over. "Jeanine!"

"Sorry. I was just trying to get more comfortable."

"Don't move. I mean, just move your legs. Not anything else."

Usually when I'm riding to town, I get on and just go. I don't even have to think about turning the pedals over. But this was different. This felt like work, and we weren't even on a hill yet.

Then I looked down and realized why I was working so hard. Jeanine's boots were going around, but when the pedals

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dropped, I could see the ground between the pedal and the boot. She wasn't pushing at all. Her feet were just along for the ride. "Jeanine! Pedal!"

"I am."

"No, you're not. Your feet are on a merry-go-round. They need to push. C'mon. Right. Left. Right. Left."

"But that's hard," she whined.

"It's called riding a bike." I stood up on the pedals.

"Why are you doing that?"

"You get more power like this. But just sit. It'll be too hard to balance with both of us standing."

When the road flattened out, I sat back down. My back was killing me, and I was breathing hard.

"Are we almost there?"

"Can you please just pedal?" I was too out of breath to talk.

Jeanine was quiet for a while after that, and she was definitely pushing the pedals down now because I could hear her puffing behind me.

"I don't like this!" she shouted as we started to pick up speed heading down a long hill.

"I can't do anything about gravity, Jeanine."

"Can't you slow us down?"

"We're not even going that fast. Just relax."

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But Jeanine didn't relax. Instead, Jeanine did what Jeanine does. She freaked, and the bike began to dip and swerve like it was trying to shake me off.

"Okay! Okay!" I slowed us down until the screaming and the swooping stopped. "Better?"

"Better."

Since even with Jeanine actually pedaling, we had no chance of making it up the monster hill outside of town, I stopped at the bottom of it. I'd planned on picking Jeanine and Dad up at the traffic light at the top, but once he was out of the buggy, Dad swore he'd never get back in, so I rode all the way to the clinic and waited for them there.

"Hello? Anybody here?" Jeanine called as we entered the empty waiting room.

Besides some armchairs and a coffee table, it didn't look much like other waiting rooms I'd seen. The walls were crowded with colorful paintings from floor to ceiling, and there was no window with a receptionist sitting in it.

"Hey! Just come on up," a man's voice called.

"Up?" I called back.

It seemed weird to have a doctor's office on more than one floor. If someone were really sick, would you want to make them climb a flight of stairs?

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"Yeah, come up!" the man said again.

"I'll go," I said and left Jeanine quizzing Dad on U.S. capitals in the waiting room. These he remembered perfectly, at least according to Jeanine. I couldn't tell you since I've taken a stand against memorizing facts readily available on the internet.

"Perfect timing. I need another pair of hands," I heard the man say as I climbed the stairs.

Was it possible that Petersville was so short on able bodies that the doctor let just anybody pitch in to help with surgical procedures? My stomach somersaulted like I was in an elevator coming down too fast. I'm not so good with blood, mine or anybody else's.

What I saw when I got up there did make me want to run back down again, but it wasn't some lady having a wart sawed off. It was a man, super thin, dripping with sweat and wearing way too little clothing to be inviting in visitors. The only thing separating him from complete nakedness were those teeny, tiny running shorts. You know the ones that are so small you're worried something will fall out? Those.

The man held a paintbrush in each hand, and he was going at an enormous canvas like he was trying to teach it a lesson. It must have been fighting back too, because the thick carpet of hair on his chest was more blue than gray.

Before I could ask where the doctor was, the guy was rushing

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at me, shoving a long piece of cardboard into my hands, and then pulling me by it back over to the painting. "Here, just hold it like this," he said, pressing it against the canvas at an angle.

"But—"

"Shush! Quiet!" he ordered, raising his paintbrush over his mouth so fast, he splattered both our faces with paint. Then he began painting furiously around the cardboard, covering not just the canvas but both my hands with cold, syrupy paint.

"But—"

"Shush!"

"It's just—"

"Please, please, please! This will only take one minute, sixty seconds, nothing."

Okay, sixty seconds is nothing, but it was so not sixty. I counted. Somewhere after 200 Mississippi, I let the cardboard drop.

"Oh no," he said, more sad than angry. "I was almost done."

"Look," I said. "I really need to find Dr. Charney."

"You're not Joe?"

"No."

"You're not here about the painting apprenticeship?"

"No, I'm here to see the doctor."

"Why didn't you say something?" he said, tossing his paintbrushes into a coffee can. I must have looked annoyed because

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then he said, "Kidding," and knocked me a little too hard on the shoulder with a blue fist. "Just give me a second."

This guy was the doctor? Maybe "doctor" meant something different in Petersville.

"Fever?" He went to a sink in the corner of the room and began washing his hands. "Flu's already making the rounds. Have you been vaccinated?"

He spoke Doctor at least. "Uh, no. It's not me. It's my dad. Downstairs. He fell off our roof. We think he has a concussion."

"I'm sure Dad's just fine, but let's go take a look," he said, drying his hands as he headed for the stairs.

"Um, aren't you forgetting something?" I tugged at my sweatshirt. Personally, I thought he could have used a shower too given all the paint and sweat, but the least he could do was put on some clothes.

"Right, back in a flash." He dashed behind a screen that hid a corner of the room. As I waited, I looked around the large, messy space, which, in addition to artist studio, was part kitchen, living room, office, and tool shop.

A minute later, he popped out from behind the screen in a white lab coat, tufts of blue chest hair peeking out above the collar. "Ready!"

I guess he thought, like the shower, a shirt was optional. I couldn't help wondering if he even had underwear on under there. Just the thought skeeved me out so much I couldn't look at him.

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"I run hot," he said like he could hear what I was thinking.

"Oh," I said, and hurried down the stairs, trying not to think about whether what he'd just told me was, "No, I'm not wearing anything under this lab coat." It wasn't till I got to the bottom that I noticed he was still barefoot.

Not surprisingly, Jeanine insisted on interrogating Dr. Charney before she let him touch Dad. And I have to admit, it was one of those times that I was happy Jeanine is so Jeanine.

First, she demanded to know why Dr. Charney didn't have a receptionist like a real doctor. Was it because he didn't actually have any patients?

Not having a receptionist meant he could charge people less for seeing him, he explained. Then he picked up a date book from the coffee table and showed her how people came into the clinic and penciled in their own appointments. This actually seemed really smart to me. If it did to Jeanine too, she didn't let on.

Next, Jeanine wanted to know why Dr. Charney wasn't seeing patients that day, a weekday.

Because, he explained, he took Thursdays off and saw patients on Saturdays so they wouldn't have to take off work.

"What a great idea!" Dad said.

Jeanine was still not satisfied.

Finally, Jeanine asked about the doctor's school degrees. Dr.

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Barber, our pediatrician, had a wall in his waiting room covered with framed degrees and covers of magazines that named him one of the best doctors in New York City. "Where are yours?" she asked.

Dr. Charney screwed up his mouth, then walked out of the waiting room.

Jeanine and I exchanged looks. Was he coming back? Was this the question fast-talking Dr. Charney didn't have an answer to? This wasn't entirely good news since an artist pretending to be a doctor was still better than no doctor at all. I was just beginning to wonder what we should do now when Dr. Charney marched back in, two yellowed sheets of paper held high. "Found them!" he said with a big smile and handed them to Jeanine.

Her eyes bulged.

"Happy now?" he said.

"You went to Yale? Did you know that five U.S. Presidents went to Yale?"

"I am aware," Dr. Charney said.

"So why don't you have these out here on the wall where people can see them?"

He held up the papers and studied them. "Not really much to look at, are they? Besides, then there would be less room for these," he said, pointing to his paintings.

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By the time Dr. Charney was finally permitted to examine him, my father had started to get his memory back. He could now remember that we'd told him he'd fallen off the roof, which seemed like a good sign even if he couldn't remember the fall itself. Either way, Dr. C was sure he hadn't had a stroke. Just to be safe though, he wanted Mom to take him for a CAT scan. So when she and Zoe finally got to Petersville an hour after we'd called her from the doctor's office, she had to turn around and drive right back to Crellin with Dad. Josh's mom said we could stay with her and Josh at the library till they got back.

The first thing Jeanine did when we got to the library was sit down at the computer and google Dr. Z. Charney. There were so many hits, I was sure they couldn't all be him. The first was an Amazon link. Jeanine clicked on it.

A photo of a smiling man holding a book called *Hometown Healing: Breaking All the Rules* popped up. He was wearing way more clothing than I would have bet the man I'd just met would ever wear—shirt, tie, and blazer—but there was no denying it was him. Under the photo, it said the book was about being a doctor in small towns where most people don't have much money and few have health insurance. It also said that the author had practiced medicine in small towns all over the country before settling in Petersville, New York.

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The next hits were all articles about the book and the awards it had won. About halfway down the first page though, the results changed. They weren't about Dr. Z. Charney anymore, but someone named Zed Charney, painter.

"No way," I said. "Find a photo."

It took some clicking, but there, on some art gallery site in a photo of a party celebrating his new exhibition in Seattle was Dr. C, wearing a shirt open to his belly button, the chest hair I was becoming way too familiar with out there for everyone with an internet connection to see.

"Mom told me that this new museum in Spain just bought two of his paintings," said Josh, who'd joined us at the computer.

I couldn't remember seeing Jeanine so impressed by anyone living since she'd learned about some kid who'd figured out that the federal government could save millions of dollars each year if it just changed the font it used when it printed stuff.

I was blown away too. I'd never met someone like Dr. C, not just someone who'd done as much as he had, but someone who'd done all that stuff and didn't even go around telling everyone he had.

By the rules Zane Kramer, and now Charlie too, believed the world worked, Dr. Charney simply couldn't exist. What he'd done, who he was, none of it was possible.

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But it was. And Dr. C was living, breathing proof.

“Hey, what’s that?” Josh said, pointing to the dish towel sack I was still carrying around.

“Oh, right.” I’d completely forgotten. There was still one cake left, so I told Josh it was something I owed Winnie and I’d explain after I went to the General Store to give it to her.



“What’s this?” Winnie said when I untied the dish towel and set the cake on the counter. “Looks like somebody put their fist through it.”

“We had some bike trouble. It’ll still taste good. Do you have a microwave so we can zap it for a few seconds? It’s better warm.”

“Radiation makes it tastes better? How ’bout mercury? That make it taste better too? Maybe I have some asbestos we could shake over it like powdered sugar?”

“Never mind,” I said. It would still taste good. The chocolate center just wouldn’t pack the same ooze. Her loss.

Winnie leaned over and sniffed. “What is it anyway?”

“Molten chocolate cake.”

“Just chocolate, right? I don’t like it when people get all fancy

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and mix the chocolate up with stuff that's got no business with chocolate. Some guy came in here trying to sell me chocolate bars with chili peppers in them. What's that about?"

Clearly I was getting points for chocolate. That was something at least.

"I know," I said. "My parents took us to this fancy restaurant once that put lavender in the chocolate mousse. It was like eating that dried stuff people use to make clothes smell good."

"Potpourri in chocolate? An abomination, that's what that is."

I didn't know what an abomination was, but she seemed to be agreeing with me, which felt like a good sign. "Yeah, don't worry. This is just chocolate and eggs and butter and sugar. It's my mom's famous recipe."

"Famous, huh? Did they write about it in the papers?" She pointed to the frame on the counter.

"I just meant people love it." How was it that every other word out of my mouth got her all worked up? Worked up wasn't a good way to go into a taste test.

"Well, I'm not everyone," she muttered as she disappeared into the back of the store. Moments later, she was back, fork in hand. "Just chocolate, right?" She jabbed the cake like she was trying to wake it up.

"Just chocolate, I promise."

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"Okay, here we go..."

I tried to read her face as she chewed.

"Didn't anybody ever tell you it's rude to watch a person eat?"

"Sorry." I turned around and pretended to study the egg cartons.

"Hmn," she grunted.

I snuck a quick look just in time to see her take another bite, much bigger than the first.

"Not earth-shattering or anything," she said, still chewing, "but you should be able to make my doughnuts okay."

"Yes!" I spun around to face her.

"Not so fast," she said, wagging her fork at me. "Before you get that recipe, we need to hammer out the details. You bring your business plan?"

"You never told me I needed a business plan."

"I never told you not to put chili peppers in chocolate cake either, but you knew that. Of course you need a business plan. You're selling something, right? If you're selling, you're in business. You need a budget. You need to figure out your costs. You need to figure out how many doughnuts you're planning to sell each day. I wouldn't recommend making more than forty for starters, no matter how much people beg. And then..."

I wanted to cry. I just wanted a chocolate cream doughnut. Now I was starting a business? I'd only come up with the idea to sell the

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doughnuts to get Winnie to give me the recipe and get my parents off my back.

"After all, I need to know your profits so I can figure out my cut," Winnie was saying when I started listening again.

"What? You want money? But I'm going to be doing all the work."

"But it's *my* recipe. They call it intellectual property. You've got to pay for a license to use what I created. Now that sounds fair, doesn't it?" She took another big bite of cake. She seemed quite pleased with how things were going. Why wouldn't she be? She'd gotten the stupid new kid in town to make her chocolate cake, and now she thought she was going to get him to pay her for the privilege of making her doughnuts.

"When you use a recipe from a cookbook, you don't have to buy a license," I argued.

"Ah, but you do," she said, dotting an *I* in the air with her fork. "You had to buy the cookbook."

Unfortunately, I could see her point. "How much do you want?"

"I told you. I can't figure that out without seeing the numbers."

"But I don't know anything about making a budget and all that other stuff. It sounds like a lot of math. Maybe I could get my sister to work on it. She's really good at that kind of thing."

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"What are you talking about? This isn't math. It's common sense. Besides, this is *your* business. Why do you want to hand over the details of *your* business to just anybody?"

"She's not anybody. She's my sister."

"Even worse. Family members don't respect each other's property. It's the first rule of family: what's mine is yours. You really want somebody who can't tell the difference between yours and theirs working on your business?"

"She did sell my stuff at this tag sale we had once," I admitted.

"Of course she did! Family. They sell your stuff right out from under you."

"But I wouldn't even know how to start putting a budget together."

"Like I said, this isn't rocket science. Go across the street."

"What's across the street?"

"You have your sister do your reading for you too? Ever heard of a library?" she said, knocking on my head.

"You want me to do research?" I groaned. Those doughnuts were slipping farther away every second.

"Just tell Mary what you're looking for, and she'll point you in the right direction."

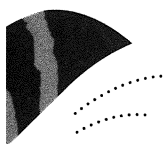
"I can't believe this," I muttered as I dragged myself out of the store.

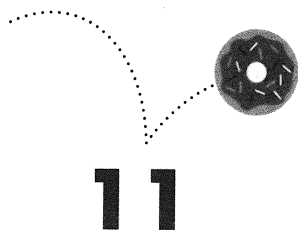
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"What was that?" Winnie called.

"Bye!" I shouted over my shoulder.

My only hope was that if I acted really stupid, Josh's mom would just do the budget for me. She was a librarian so she had to be pretty smart, and she wasn't family so I figured I could trust her more than Jeanine.





If you're ever thinking about starting your own business, you should really check out *Starting Your Own Business for Dummies*. It was definitely the most useful book Josh gave me. He was the one who helped me at the library that day, not his mom. She'd been too busy trying to keep Zoe from ripping out some little girl's pigtails. I hadn't been there when the fight broke out, but Josh told me later that it started when this girl said all fairies were made up except for the Tooth Fairy, who was obviously real because she had a job and money.

The truth is, I hadn't wanted to tell Josh about the doughnut business. So what if he loved Winnie's doughnuts? Wouldn't he think I was a weirdo for trying to build a business around something I'd never even tasted? Or maybe he'd think what

Charlie and his dad did, that kids can't start businesses at all, and that I was stupid to even try? But I needed those books, and I was sure he'd know how to find them. Besides, he'd find out eventually.

"Can I help?" he said the second I finished telling him about my project. "Not just with the research but with the actual business?"

I couldn't believe it. Josh wanted in on the doughnut stand. I guess that's what happens when you live someplace with so little entertainment. You're willing to try anything. Since he wasn't family, I said yes.

By the time my parents showed up at the library to take us home that day, Josh had found me a stack of books and flagged the ones he thought would be most useful. *Starting Your Own Business for Dummies* was on top.

"That doesn't mean I think you're stupid or anything, you know," Josh said as he handed me the books.

"Yeah, I know," I said, though I liked that he was the kind of person who'd check to make sure.



A few days later, I woke up and my window was frosted over with ice crystals. Outside, the grass was frozen stiff and crackled when you walked on it. Since it was only November, I figured it would

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warm up again, at least a little, but it never did. And before I knew it, the pond was frozen. Josh said we'd gotten "lucky" winter had come early because it meant a longer skating season. I told him that now when I biked to town, the cold made my nose run and then froze the snot to my face. I didn't feel "lucky" that winter had come early, but I promised to give pond skating a try anyway.

I can now tell you from personal experience, Dad was wrong. Pond skating *is* almost as boring as regular skating. I say "almost" because the possibility that you might fall through the ice at any second does add a certain something. It didn't matter that my parents had it tested. First of all, the guy who tested it wasn't actually a professional ice tester. He was Jim the Kidnapper, also known as Jim, the carpenter my parents hired to work on the roof since Dad wasn't allowed up there anymore. Second, there was no magic test. He just drilled a hole in the ice, stuck a stick down into it, pulled it out, and said, "Should be fine. But get off if you hear any cracking."

I never would have risked my life just to skate around in circles, but it turns out skating is actually not at all boring if you can whack something across the ice with a stick at the same time.

When Josh first came over with his hockey stuff, I was the worst anyone has ever been at anything. I spent the whole day crawling around the ice, using my body to block the puck. But after only a

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week, I could skate and flick the puck with my stick at the same time, at least when I didn't accidentally skate right past it. It took me so long to stop and change direction, by the time I got back to where it had been, Josh had already whisked it off to the other side of the pond.

Josh was amazing, better than I was at basketball, better than anyone my age was at any sport, at least that I'd seen in real life. It was as if he'd been born on ice skates. He could run and spin and glide. He could dance, bits of ice spraying out from his blades with each new move. He zoomed backward and forward, dodging and weaving between invisible players charging at him for the puck.

Josh said I might be able to make the rec team if I could get my hockey stop and backward skating down. I was pretty sure rec was just a nice way of saying the worst, but I didn't care as long as I'd get to play.

Zoe wanted to learn to skate, but she was too scared. Every time Josh and I went down to the pond, she'd put on her water wings, snowsuit, and skates and just sit in a pile of leaves at the edge of the pond throwing rocks onto the ice. It was Josh who finally got her to get on.

That day, he and I were doing this drill he'd taught me where you go back and forth across the pond skating as fast as you can, hockey stopping on each end, until you're so tired you can't move.

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I couldn't go fast or stop fast, so it took me forever to get from one side to the other. It also took a lot of concentration since I was so bad I had to tell my legs and feet exactly what to do every second: *push, push, straighten, turn, bend*. I was so focused I didn't even notice when Josh stopped flying past me every thirty seconds.

I have no idea what he said or how long it took him to get Zoe to take that first step onto the ice, but by the time I realized Josh wasn't doing the drill anymore, he had her way out in the middle of the pond, skating between his legs, and she didn't even look scared. She had a huge smile on her face.

"Yay, Zoe!" I yelled.

She smiled even bigger.

"Hey! Can you bring us one of those?" Josh called, pointing to the circle of plastic chairs my parents had set up next to the pond.

"Onto the ice?"

"Uh-huh."

Zoe clearly wasn't the first kid Josh had taught to skate. The chair was genius. Zoe could lean on it and push it along the ice. By the time we went inside, she was pushing off and gliding a good ways holding on to the chair with just one hand.

When we got back to the house, we went straight to the living room to warm up by the fire. Jeanine was in there on the couch reading *The Wolves of Willoughby Chase*. Again. I'm pretty sure she

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was still staying up at night reading it because her eyes were puffy and red all the time. If you asked my parents, this was from allergies, even though we all knew Jeanine stopped getting allergies when it got cold.

Jeanine hadn't gotten on the ice even once and not just because she was convinced she was going to fall through it. Now that she was done with gathering stuff for her project, she never left the house. At least before, she'd go outside to collect leaves and dirt and "scat," which is what she called the animal poop she picked up with rubber gloves, put in ziplock bags, and stored in our freezer. But now that she had everything she needed, she wouldn't even get off the couch. She sat there all day long working on her project and studying for the Regional Solve-a-Thon, this huge competition for all the Jeanine Levins and Kevin Metzses in the Northeast who want to see how many math problems they can do in six hours. When she needed a break, she'd read *The Wolves of Willoughby Chase* for the bazillionth time.

I took off my jacket and gloves and hung them on the fireplace screen. "I'm making hot chocolate. Who wants?"

"Is this a trick question?" Josh said.

"With marshandyellows," Zoe said.

"Me too," Jeanine said, without looking up from the book.

"What's hot chocolate without marshandyellows?" Josh said

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and plopped down on the couch next to Jeanine. “You know, *The Wolves of Willoughby Chase* is, like, one of my top favorite books of all time.”

Jeanine sat up. “You’ve read *The Wolves of Willoughby Chase*?”

“Only like a hundred times.”

“Me too!”

I felt like someone had just punched me in the stomach.

Zoe tugged on my hand. “Hot chocolate!” I was standing at the entrance to the living room watching Jeanine and Josh like they were behind glass. “Now,” she said, pulling me into the kitchen.

As I stirred the milk in the saucepan, I listened to Josh and Jeanine talking in the living room.

Jeanine: “Have you read the sequel?”

Josh: “*Black Hearts in Battersea*? Yeah, not as good.”

Jeanine: “I *know*. Um, do you think you’d want to join a book club with me and my friend Kevin? He lives in Manhattan, but he’ll join by Skype.”

Josh: “Sure. That sounds cool. My mom can get us the books on interlibrary loan if you want.”

Jeanine: “Oh, yeah.”

My skin felt prickly all over. “Hot chocolate!” I yelled. The milk was barely hot, but I poured it into the cups anyway. I stirred and stirred, but the cocoa clumped up and wouldn’t dissolve.

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"So I'm joining your book club," Josh said as he and Jeanine came into the kitchen.

Jeanine laughed. "Tris doesn't do book clubs. He isn't really a reader." Then she picked up her hot chocolate and took a sip. "Uch, this is cold," she said and went back into the living room.

Josh, Zoe, and I sat down at the kitchen table and drank our awful hot chocolate.

"Thanks for the making this," Josh said.

"I took the milk off too soon."

"It's still good."

I shrugged.

"The marshandyellows are good," Zoe said.

"Great," I said.

She put her cup down and squinted at me. "How come you have the mad face?"

"I'm not mad."

"You have the face." She stuck out her chin and mashed her lips together.

"Are you mad?" Josh asked.

"No, I'm just ... don't worry about it."

What could I say? Don't be so nice? You can't be in my sister's book club? He'd think I was a complete jerk.

Besides, I wasn't mad at him. This wasn't his fault. It was

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Jeanine's. Had I ever asked Kevin to play basketball? There were rules about sisters and brothers and friends, and Jeanine had broken them. Josh wasn't the only kid in Petersville. If she wanted a friend here, she should leave the house and find one.



Thanksgiving has always been my favorite holiday. Basically, because it's all about food and being thankful that you have food, which, not to brag, I feel like I am normally anyway. Not because I think so much more about world hunger than the next kid, but because I think way more about food than the next kid. Anyway, since food is food no matter where you are, and since Mom's food is always amazing, I figured Thanksgiving could be the way it was supposed to be even in Petersville.

Then Charlie called.

It was after dinner. We were in the middle of dessert, something new Mom was calling Three P Crumble because it's made with pears, plums, and pecans. We were arguing about whether it was good enough to make the menu. I was a big no. She'd left the skins on the plums, and they'd made the whole thing bitter.

Suddenly, the lights went out.

We thought it was the power, but then the phone rang. I knew it

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was Charlie calling to ask what he should bring since Thanksgiving was only a week away.

I jumped up and felt my way to the living room. Somewhere in there, my foot caught something and brought it down with a crash.

"Sorry!" I yelled as I patted down the couch for the phone. I was pretty sure I'd just destroyed a half-built, motorized bird feeder, Dad's latest project.

"Hello?"

I was right. It was Charlie.

All the things I'd been dying to tell him about flooded my brain: Josh, the Purple Demon, the flash flood, ice hockey...

"Hey! So, it's like the North Pole up here, and my room's in the attic, which is extra cold so bring all the clothes you own," I said, speaking as fast as Josh. "And definitely bring a sleeping bag because mine smells funny since Zoe used it and—"

"We're not coming," Charlie said. "I know. It sucks."

"Why? What happened?"

"Nothing. Or, I mean, not just one thing. Justin's got this cold, and my dad's been working really hard. Oh, plus my mom says they didn't know it was so far when they said yes."

What? Nobody had gotten hit by a bus? Nobody had bird flu?

I was getting the dog-ate-my-homework, this-seat-is-saved, didn't-you-get-the-invitation. And not just from anybody. From Charlie.

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The Kramers didn't want to come. Fine. They and my parents were just friends because Charlie and I had been forever. But what about Charlie? I knew what angry Charlie sounded like—spitting, cursing, I'll-show-them Charlie. This wasn't him.

"It's not like you won't be coming back to the city, right?" he said. "I mean *everybody* comes to the city sometime."

"I guess," I said, wondering what Charlie would say if I told him Josh had never been to New York City.

"My mom says it will just be easier to see you on your trips back home."

"Back home, huh?" I said.

"What?"

He didn't get it. "Nothing."

"And she said maybe we can go up there in the summer. You know, when it's not so cold."

"Sure." Sure, summer, seven months from now.

Then we both went quiet, which feels weird when you're on the phone, because you can't see the other person, and you start to feel like you're alone, especially when you're standing there in the dark thinking about the things you wanted to say but suddenly don't anymore.

Then Charlie said, "Anyway, I got to go. Sam and I are going back to school. They're keeping the gym open late so we can get a little more practice in before tomorrow."

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He wasn't coming for Thanksgiving. He hadn't asked me anything about Petersville, and now he was getting off?

"Oh, right, tryouts," I said, and as I did, I could feel this dark corner of me hope he wouldn't make the team.

"Let me know when you're coming home," he said, and it felt even worse this time than it had the first time he'd said it.

Mom and Dad did their best to cheer me up. Mom promised to make all my favorite dishes, including double-layer carrot cake with coconut frosting and baby brussels sprouts with pancetta (think bacon but better). Then she and Dad came up with this really "fun" idea to make Thanksgiving even more special: we were going to pick our own turkey, not plucked and headless from a butcher, but live with feathers from a farm.

I think they thought it was going to be like picking your own Christmas tree, not that any of us had ever done that before either. The thing about a Christmas tree though is that even if you're chopping one down, it's a plant, so it's pretty easy to get over the whole ending-a-life thing. Turkeys, however, are very obviously alive. They don't actually "gobble, gobble," and they're not cute or anything, but they do make noise and run around. Another important difference between Christmas trees and turkeys: we don't keep Christmas trees in little jails where they walk around looking sad and begging to be rescued.

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So, let's just say, this was one more "surprise" that would have been perfect for that other family, the one with the four-year-old girl who loves staring at sad turkeys in little jails, because that girl wouldn't have masterminded the biggest turkey breakout in Thunder Hill Farm pick-your-own-turkey history.

Luckily, turkeys aren't very smart—how much brain could fit into those tiny heads anyway?—so even with Zoe chasing them out of their cells, yelling, "Run! Run!" they refused to go very far.

I'd been afraid Mr. Jennings, the guy who owned the farm, would flip out, which particularly worried me because he was the size and shape of a WWF wrestler. But he just laughed. He wouldn't even let Mom and Dad make it up to him by buying the biggest, most expensive turkey he had.

The worst part about my parents' stupid idea was that when Thanksgiving did finally come, and Mom had made this amazing dinner and brought out that delicious turkey, I couldn't eat it. Not one bite. I kept seeing all those birds running around Mr. Jennings's yard, and I just couldn't separate the live birds running around in my head from the bird on our table. And the idea of putting one bite in my mouth was just impossible, like eating something that wasn't even food, like sand or a pencil or a sister. I tried to talk myself out of it. I tried so hard, but nothing worked. The thing that really drove me crazy: I was the only one who felt this way. Even

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Zoe, the great turkey rescuer, ate three portions. Of course, they all said it was the best turkey ever.

Nobody got to eat dessert that night though because before Mom made it, all the lights went out again, just like they had when Charlie called. Dad offered to hold a flashlight while Mom made crepes—they're his favorite—but she didn't think it was a good idea. The lights came back on again sometime in the middle of the night but then went out again the next day, so my parents called an electrician. Of course, when he came, the lights worked just fine.

My parents have now hired every electrician in the county, but nobody has been able to figure out why, every few days, all the lights in the house turn off and refuse, no matter how nicely you ask, to turn back on. What really stumps people is that even when the lights go out, everything else works just fine. I told my parents to stop wasting their money, but they refuse to accept what I think is pretty obvious: when the Purple Demon gets bored, she turns out all the lights so she can watch us bump into things.

The Tuesday after Thanksgiving, I got an email from Charlie. The second I saw it in my inbox, that bad feeling I'd been carrying around since our call was suddenly gone because I knew what the email was going to say: sorry I couldn't come for Thanksgiving; sorry I didn't seem sorry; sorry I got off so fast; sorry I didn't ask one thing about Petersville; sorry about not sending more emails.

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Then I clicked it open.

To: JaxTLevin441@mar.com

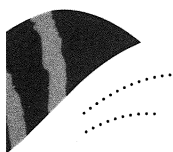
From: CKramerRocks@mar.com

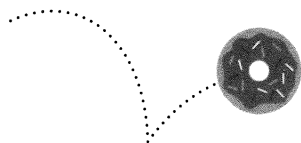
Subject: Hey

I MADE IT!!

And that was it.

I wish I could tell you I sent an email right back and that it said: YAY!!!!!!!!!!!!!! That's what the twelve-year-old kid in that other family, the one I was supposed to be, would have done right after he'd dug up worms in the backyard and made bark tea. But I didn't. Me, I stole *The Wolves of Willoughby Chase* off the couch where Jeanine had left it, climbed up to the attic, and stayed there in bed under the covers reading for the rest of the day.





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After I finished *Starting Your Own Business for Dummies*, I went back to the General Store to show Winnie the chapter on costs, because it was clear I'd need to know the doughnuts' ingredients to figure out what it would cost to make them. I was prepared for her to give me a hard time as usual, but instead she acted like she'd known all along I'd need the ingredients to put together the budget. She even said, "It's about time, Slick." She'd started calling me Slick by then. I never asked why, but I'm guessing it's because I'm not, so she thought it was a big laugh.

The next day, I got up early and shut myself in my parents' office with everything I'd need to work up the budget: the list of ingredients, *Starting Your Own Business for Dummies*, and a stack of Mom's peanut butter–butterscotch granola bars. The book

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says setting goals and sticking to them is key to getting your business off the ground, so I told myself I couldn't come out until I figured out how much of each ingredient we'd have to order every month.

Things started off okay. I knew my first step was just to come up with the number of doughnuts we'd make in a month. After talking to Winnie, Josh and I had decided that for starters, we'd sell eighty doughnuts every week: forty on Saturday and forty on Sunday. To get the number of doughnuts we'd sell in a month, I just had to multiply the eighty doughnuts we'd be making in a week times the number of weeks in a month:

$$80 \times 4 = 320$$

The next part wasn't too hard either. Since Winnie's recipe made ten doughnuts, all I had to do was to figure out how many batches of doughnuts I'd have to make to get 320 of them:

$$10 \times ? = 320$$

In fourth grade, Mr. Gratz taught us that if you have a times problem and you're looking for what to times your number by, you actually need to divide:

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$$? = 320 \div 10$$

$$? = 32$$

This is where the problems started.

Problem number one: the list of ingredients was full of annoying fractions. They were all over the place— $3\frac{3}{4}$ cups of flour, $1\frac{1}{3}$ cups of sugar, $\frac{1}{4}$ teaspoon of cinnamon. There were so many fractions I was sure Winnie had put them in there on purpose just to make the math harder.

Problem number two: I wasn't sure how to multiply fractions using the calculator on my parents' computer. Was I supposed to turn them into decimals and then multiply them? In the end, I just decided to do the calculations on paper, which took forever.

Problem number three: I knew I was making mistakes, like always. The thing is, all those other times I'd messed up some math problem, it had been in school, and those mistakes hadn't really mattered since those questions were all made-up. But *this* problem, the doughnut problem, wasn't made-up, and if I messed up this time, I'd be messing up something real.

Problem number four: because I was sure I was making mistakes, I kept redoing the problems. And the more worried I got, the more mistakes I made. And every time I redid a problem, I came out with a different answer, sometimes a really different answer.

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Eventually, I'd erased and rewritten stuff so many times, I tore the paper. That's when I threw my pencil at the wall. And then, because that didn't make me feel any better, I threw a whole bunch of stuff at the wall: a tape dispenser, a plastic cup, a box of paper clips.

I was not in a good way, as Mom likes to say. I needed a break. I was out of granola bars. I'd missed lunch. I needed to eat and go outside and skate so fast I couldn't think about anything but moving and breathing.

But what about my goal? I'd set a goal, and the book said I needed to stick to it.

Then it came to me. I'd just set a new goal. Something easy. Something fast. The book never said you couldn't *change* goals. I looked back at the recipe.

Cocoa: 3 tablespoons. Three was a nice round number. Perfect. I'd figure out how many tablespoons of cocoa I'd need to make 320 doughnuts, come up with how many boxes of cocoa that was, and then I'd take a break.

$$3 \text{ tablespoons} \times 32 \text{ batches} = 96 \text{ tablespoons}$$

But how many boxes of cocoa was that? I slid the roly chair across the floor to the computer.

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“How many tablespoons are in a box of cocoa powder,” I typed into Google and hit Return.

I crossed my fingers as I read through the results. There it was—fourth from the top. “There are thirty-five tablespoons in one eight-ounce carton of cocoa powder.”

I rolled back across the desk and wrote:

$$8 \text{ oz. box of cocoa} = 35 \text{ tablespoons}$$

This was like the problem I’d done to figure out how many batches of doughnuts I’d need to make to get 320 doughnuts, only instead of batches I was looking for boxes.

$$? \text{ boxes} \times 35 \text{ tablespoons} = 96 \text{ tablespoons}$$

$$? = 96 \div 35$$

$$? = 2 \text{ with } 26 \text{ left over}$$

Since I couldn’t buy part of a box, I’d have to round up.

Finally, I could fill in a square on the order sheet I’d made. Under *Cocoa*, I wrote: three boxes.

Done. I’d reached my new and improved (easier) goal. It was definitely break time.

Down in the kitchen, something sweet-and-spicy smelling was

cooking on the stove. I was so hungry, I didn't care enough to ask what it was. I just spooned out a big bowl and ate it standing up.

Then I grabbed my skates and ran out the door without even putting on a jacket or gloves.

When I got on the pond, I didn't practice hockey stops or skating backward. I just skated as fast as I could. In circles. Without thinking. And it wasn't boring. It was awesome. And when my legs burned and my ears stung and my fingers were numb and I couldn't take it anymore, I went back inside.

I actually couldn't wait to get back to work, maybe because now I had a plan. I'd get the budget done one small goal at a time. As I ran up the stairs, I decided I'd tackle the butter next.

Then I got to the office, and all that good feeling zapped right out of me.

Jeanine was in there. She had the budget in one hand and a red pencil in the other. "I think if you turned the mixed numbers into improper fractions, you'd make fewer mistakes," she said as she crossed something out.

My face, which had been freezing only a second before, suddenly felt like it was on fire. I ripped the paper out from under her pencil, making a big red slash across it.

"Hey! I'm not done. You know how many mistakes there are in there?" she said.

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"I don't care!"

"You don't care?"

"I mean..." I was so mad, it was hard to speak. "I wasn't finished. I haven't... checked it over yet."

"Why don't you just let me do it?"

"Because..." I started, but then nothing else came out. I couldn't think of what I wanted to say or how to say it in a way that wouldn't make me feel even worse.

I grabbed the back of the roly chair with both hands and tipped it forward till it dumped Jeanine off. Then I started pushing her out into the hall.

"Ow! You're hurting me," she said, shoving me back.

"Then get out!"

The next second, Mom was at the door, breathing like she'd run up the stairs. "What's going on here?"

"You need to tell Jeanine to get her own life. Maybe she could start by leaving the house for once."

"I was just trying to help. You *need* help. Look at all these mistakes." Jeanine grabbed the budget and shook it in my mother's face.

"I told you I wasn't done!"

Mom stepped between us, took the budget from Jeanine, and handed it back to me. "That's enough. Jeanine, go downstairs."

"But—"

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"Now!"

Jeanine made a face and stormed out.

I crumpled the budget into a ball and threw it after her.

Mom looked at the ball of paper, then back at me. "Don't you need that?"

"You heard her. It's all wrong."

"She didn't say it was *all* wrong." She picked up the paper and smoothed it out on the desk. "Here, get back to work, and I'll send Zoe up with some snickerdoodles in a bit."

"I don't feel like working on it anymore." I dropped into the chair and looked at all the crossed-out numbers. "Maybe I *should* just let her do it."

Mom frowned. "Is that what you want?"

Part of me did. The part that just wanted it done. And done by someone who wouldn't make mistakes. But then, there was the other part of me that didn't. And not just because Winnie told me I couldn't trust family or even because it would feel like cheating. It was more than that.

"Everything's so easy for her."

"Everything?" Mom looked at me hard.

I shrugged. That's what it felt like. I didn't care if it were true.

Mom put her hands on my shoulders and squeezed. "I got you something. I was going to wait till you got the whole recipe, but I

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don't know, now seems like the right time." She left the room and came back a few minutes later with a cardboard box that she put down in front of me on the desk.

I picked up a pair of scissors, sliced open the box, and looked inside. Whatever was in there was covered in so much Bubble Wrap, I couldn't even guess what it was.

"So?" she said as I uncovered the final layer.

"What is it?" I didn't have the first clue what the thing in my hands was. It looked like something you'd use to give a giant a flu shot.

"It's for the doughnuts. To stuff them. It's a pastry gun. See, you fill it with cream here." She unscrewed the back. "Then you shoot the cream out the tip. It'll be way easier to use than those bags." Mom uses special bags with metal tips for filling stuff like cream puffs, but they have to be twisted and squeezed in just the right way.

I picked up the gun, squeezed the plunger, and imagined a stream of chocolate cream flying out of it.

"So cool, right?" she said, her eyes all big like she was looking at the world's first time machine and not just a tool for cramming gooey stuff into baked goods.

"So cool. Thanks. When did you get this?"

"A while ago. When you told me about the project."

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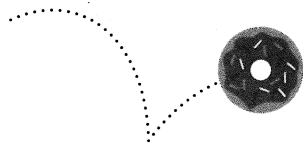
"But how did you know I was going to... I mean, I don't even have the recipe yet."

"Yeah, but I know you. You'll get it." She was smiling her big smile, the one that shows her crooked tooth. "And now you really have to get it, right? I mean, you kinda *owe* me now since I shelled out for the gun." She crossed her arms and squeezed her lips together like she was suddenly all serious.

"Okay, okay. But *only* because you got me the pastry gun."

"All right, then get back to work!" She smiled again. "I'll send Zo Zo up with the cookies soon."

I worked straight through the afternoon, took a break for dinner, and then went back to work. It was past midnight by the time I crawled into bed, but I'd filled in every box on the order form. I'd stuck to the plan, one small goal at a time. Then I'd triple-checked my work, and this time, I got the same answers. I knew there were probably a few wrong numbers, but they were *my* wrong numbers. So I was okay with them because it meant the right ones were mine too, and that felt better than not having any wrong numbers ever would.



Starting Your Own Business for Dummies said if you were opening a restaurant or café, you should buy your ingredients wholesale. I had no idea what that meant, but one great thing about a book for dummies is that it assumes you don't know anything about anything. What's great about that too is when you already know something the book thinks you don't, you feel kind of smart.

The gist of wholesale is actually simple. If you're buying stuff for your business, other businesses cut you a deal on price. We got to buy our ingredients wholesale because we needed them for our doughnut business.

Josh was actually the one who came up with the list of food suppliers who offered what we needed wholesale. Poking around

on the internet, he'd found this food supplier site where you type in your location and the foods you want, press Enter, and presto! It spits out a list of all the suppliers who have what you need and deliver to your area.

The next step was to call each of the food suppliers on the list and see what kind of deals we could get. Between figuring out what to say and actually making the calls, I figured it would take us a full day. Since most of the suppliers only worked Monday to Friday, we decided to do it on a Monday that Josh had off from school.

I was still eating breakfast when I heard Josh's mom's car coming up the driveway that morning. Mom was hunched over some papers opposite me, and Zoe was playing with pans on the kitchen floor.

Josh knocked, then opened the door and peeked inside. "Okay to come in?"

"Yup," I said through a mouthful of oatmeal. "Almost done."

"Hi, Josh," Mom said without looking up.

"Hi."

"Welcome to Zoe's Purple Giraffe!" Zoe said as she stirred a pan of ice cubes with a wooden spoon.

"What's Zoe's Purple Giraffe?" Josh asked and not in a you're-so-weird kind of way, but like he actually wanted to know and was talking to a real person.

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"My restaurant," Zoe answered, stirring so hard ice cubes flew out of the bowl and across the floor.

Josh looked around the room as if he were seeing it for the first time. "Cozy. I like it."

Zoe sipped from the spoon and made a face. "Too much salt! Hand me the bear!" She pointed to the honey bear on the floor next to Josh's foot.

Josh gave her the bear, and she squeezed a long ribbon into the bowl. Then she put her head back and squeezed an even longer one straight into her mouth.

Josh laughed.

"Mom?" I said.

"What?"

"Do you see what's going on here?"

"She's playing. It's fine." She stood up. "Look, can you guys watch her for a bit? I have to go upstairs to talk to Dad about something."

"Mom, please. This is the one day Josh has to call food suppliers."

"It will only take a second."

"Sure," Josh said to my mother. "Really. It's fine," he said to me.

"Thanks so much. Just fifteen minutes."

"Fifteen minutes? Didn't you just say, 'a second'?" I said.

"Oh, and I had an idea for where you could order all of the dairy you need for the doughnuts."

If she thought I wouldn't notice that she wasn't answering my question, she was wrong. "Seriously, how long are you going to be?"

"I bought this amazing cheese from a local farm," she went on, ignoring me. "I mean, truly amazing. The guy makes milk, butter, and cream too. You guys should really think about ordering from him. Great products, no delivery costs. Local. Stinky Cheese Farm, it's called."

"Oh, yeah. I know about this place. The farmer's name is Riley, right?" Josh said.

"You know him?"

"I just know who he is. He grew up here, but he was away for college and stuff."

"I tasted the cream. It's out of this world. Like from magic cows or something."

"Magic cows?" I said.

"You know what I mean."

"We should check it out, right?" Josh said.

"Sure," I said.

"Great. I'll arrange it for you as a thanks for taking care of Zoe for an hour," Mom said and then ran up the stairs.

"An hour? Now it's an hour?" I yelled after her. "Sorry," I said to Josh. "You can go upstairs. I'll come up when she comes back."

"I'm fine here. Don't worry about it."

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"Yeah," Zoe said. "We're fine here."

"So, what kind of food do you serve at Zoe's Purple Giraffe?" Josh said.

Josh was a natural at this stuff, way better than even Jeanine, who's been a big sister almost her whole life. Jeanine doesn't really do make-believe.

Zoe handed Josh a torn piece of construction paper with crayon scribbles in different colors. "Here's the menu."

Josh pretended to study it. "I'll have a hamburger and fries."

"Can't you read? We have spaghetti and carrot cake and cheddar bunnies," she read, following a scribble with her finger. "Where do you see hamburger and fries?"

"Sorry. I'll have the spaghetti then."

"Aw, too bad," she said as she flipped an ice cube into the air with a spatula. "We're all out."

This is where I'd have told Zoe I was finding another place to eat, but Josh just laughed and kept playing along.

After an hour and a half, Mom came back, and Josh and I finally headed up to my room to start figuring out the script for our supplier calls.

"I'm so sorry," I said as we climbed the stairs. "My friend Charlie never wanted to come over because we always ended up having to watch Zoe."

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"Does he have any younger brothers or sisters?"

"A younger brother."

"So he probably does enough babysitting. It's just me at home, so I don't mind. Plus, Zoe makes me laugh. Are all little kids that funny?"

"You mean completely wacko?"

"I guess."

"I don't know, but I don't think so."

As I held the ladder still for Josh to climb up, I thought about why I hadn't told him that actually Charlie never does babysit for Justin. His parents used to ask him to, but he always said no, and they never made him. It felt bad, letting Josh believe something I knew wasn't true. I guess I just didn't want him thinking that Charlie was the kind of kid who wouldn't take care of his younger brother, even though he was.



Since it's hard to concentrate when your teeth are chattering, Josh and I worked in jackets, hats, and gloves. Judging from the ice crystals I found every morning in the glass of water I keep next to my bed, the Purple Demon had been keeping the attic at a toasty thirty degrees.

Though warmer, working in the living room was not an option.

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Now that the family computer was set up in there, Jeanine was permanently camped out on the couch Skyping with Kevin Metz. She'd convinced him to email her photos of all the G&T assignments, and they reviewed the answers together on Skype. When they ran out of schoolwork, they'd play chess, study for the Solve-a-Thon, and giggle, at least Jeanine would. Kevin didn't say much except, "Nice move, Jeanine," or, "Sorry, Jeanine," every now and then. They'd even had a Skype sleepover.

It was a round-the-clock Skype-a-Thon, and I couldn't take it. Not because I felt stupid hearing them talk all that math, which was so beyond what I'd probably ever be able to do, it sounded like a different language. I hated that, but I was used to it. That wasn't the reason I walked around the house with earphones on. That was because Jeanine and Kevin were still JeanineandKevin.

I hadn't spoken to Charlie since he'd called about Thanksgiving, and I'd never emailed him back after he'd told me he'd made the basketball team. I tried to blame whatever was going on with us on my moving to Petersville, but every time I did, JeanineandKevin went off like an alarm. If they were still JeanineandKevin, why weren't we still TrisandCharlie?

By lunch, Josh and I were ready to make the calls. We downed grilled cheese sandwiches and then shut ourselves up in my parents' office.

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I was so nervous dialing the first number, I could feel my heart beating in my fingertips.

"Lucky's Food Corp. May I help you?" said the lady who answered.

"Uh..." My mind had gone blank.

Josh held up our script.

"Excuse me?" the woman said.

I took a deep breath. "My name is Tris Levin, and I want to know how much it would cost to order some ingredients to make doughnuts."

"Uh-huh. And where is it you're calling from?" Something, gum probably, snapped painfully in my ear.

"Petersville."

"No, I meant, what company?" she said in a tone that made clear she thought I should have known what she'd meant.

"Oh, I'm not calling from a company. I'm calling from a stand, or it's not a stand yet, but it will be." This wasn't going at all how we'd planned. "I can't do this," I whispered and shoved the phone at Josh.

"No." He pushed the phone back at me. "Keep going."

"A stand?" the woman repeated. Another *pop*.

"Yeah, you know, like a lemonade stand? A hot dog stand? This is a going to be a doughnut stand, a chocolate cream doughnut

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stand.” Now that I was saying the words out loud to someone other than Josh, I couldn’t believe how stupid they sounded: I’m going to open a chocolate cream doughnut stand?

“I see, a chocolate cream doughnut stand. Really?” the woman said. She obviously couldn’t believe how stupid the whole thing sounded either. I couldn’t tell for sure, but I think maybe she was laughing a little too. “Then you need to speak to Sal. Hold on a sec. I’ll connect you.”

“Great, thanks,” I said, but she was already gone. Maybe I was wrong, and she hadn’t been laughing at me.

“What’s happening?” Josh whispered.

“She’s going to get Sal.”

“Who’s Sal?”

I shrugged. “The guy who deals with stands?”

Josh gave me a thumbs-up.

I don’t know what this lady told Sal, but a minute later, a man had picked up and he was yelling, “Who is this?”

“Um, it’s... this is—”

“Anton?”

“Who? No.”

“How many times have we talked about this?”

“But this is—”

“You just keep quiet before you dig yourself in even deeper.”

I must have looked like I felt because Josh whispered, "What's wrong? What's he saying?"

I shook my head and tried to get a word in with Sal.

"*Enough!*" Sal yelled so loudly that I almost dropped the phone. "You're gonna hang up this phone and go tell your mother you've been pranking again, and I mean now. Got it?"

"Got it," I said.

"What was that?" Sal said.

"Got it, sir," I said louder. Sal seemed like a sir kind of guy.

"All right then. See you tonight. But we're not done with this. Not by a long shot. Copy me?"

"Thank you." I was so relieved my time with Sal was coming to an end.

"Thank you? You still think this is funny?"

"No, sir. Sorry."

"Okay then."

"Bye," I said and hung up.

"Look at the bright side," Josh said when I told him what had happened. "You're not actually Anton. That kid won't know what hit him when Sal gets home."



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Once I'd gotten my lines down, our food supplier calls went much better. And by better, I mean by the end of the day we'd gotten prices from everyone on the list, though one guy did insist on talking to “my mommy” before we talked business.

Josh and I had set a timeline for ourselves. We had only two weeks to figure out where we were getting our ingredients, but Mom made us promise we wouldn't make any decisions until we'd gone to Stinky Cheese Farm. She was sure it was the perfect place for us to buy the butter, milk, and cream we'd need, and Josh and I agreed that if we could get a good enough deal, it would be cool that the doughnuts were made with dairy from cows right here in Petersville. It might even be a good hook. *Starting Your Own Business for Dummies* says it's good to have a

hook for your product, something that makes it especially cool or different.

Mom knew we were in a hurry to figure out our suppliers so she arranged for us to visit Stinky Cheese Farm the Saturday after Josh and I had made the calls. The catch was, she wanted Jeanine to go too. To sweeten the deal, she promised to take Josh and me to the movies if we could get Jeanine to come. Basically, she just wanted Jeanine to leave the house, which she hadn't done in days.

I hadn't seen a movie in forever. Back in the city, there was a theater three blocks away, but the closest one now was almost an hour's drive. I didn't even care what we saw. I just missed the whole sitting-in-a-dark-place-on-someone-else's-adventure feeling.

And the movie theater popcorn. I missed that too. What is it about movie theater popcorn?

When I came downstairs that morning, Jeanine was in her usual place on the couch studying for the Solve-a-Thon. Mom was there too, already working on her. "Not just cows, *baby cows*. Look how cute." Mom was shoving her phone right up in Jeanine's face.

"They're called calves," Jeanine said, underlining something in her study guide.

"You're not even looking."

"Because I don't care." Jeanine fled to the other side of the couch.

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"C'mon," I said, "Josh is gonna be here any minute. You're not even dressed."

"I'm not going."

"We won't even be gone that long. We'll just bike there, see some cows, eat some butter, taste some cream. Then we're outta there, and you can come right back here and study for the rest of your life."

"I'm not interested, thanks."

If I weren't such a nuddy, I'd have gotten Mom to say she'd take us to the movies just for *trying* to get Jeanine to come with us.

Mom shuffled down the couch and shoved her phone in Jeanine's face again. "You haven't even looked. Tell me you don't want to see this adorable calf, and I'll leave you alone."

"I don't want to see this adorable calf."

"Well, I don't believe you."

"What happened to, 'I'll leave you alone?'"

"Ask Zoe how cute they were. Zo Zo, tell Jeanine how cute the baby cows were," Mom shouted.

"So cute!" Zoe called from the kitchen.

"See," Mom said.

"Are you saying they won't be cute after the Solve-a-Thon?" Jeanine said.

"Less cute."

"They're going to get less cute in two weeks? How much less cute exactly?"

"I wanna go see the cows again!"

"No! The cows need a Zoe break!" Mom yelled back.

"Why do the cows need a Zoe break?" I asked.

Mom didn't answer. Instead, she put her hand under Jeanine's chin and tipped back her head so she had to look up. "Please, honey, you need to get out of the house. It will actually make you study better. It's true. There's research."

"Where? Show it to me."

Mom didn't have any research. She had photos of cows, and those weren't getting the job done. There was no way we were getting Jeanine to Stinky Cheese Farm or anywhere else. Maybe we could get Josh's mom to take us to a movie if we let her pick which one. Really, I would have agreed to see almost anything.

"Jeanine, this is ridiculous." I could tell Mom was about to lose it because she was cracking her knuckles, something she tells us not to do. "Nobody needs to study this much. Plus, you'll love the farm."

"I can love it in two weeks," Jeanine said.

"Tom!" Mom yelled.

Dad appeared at the door to the living room. "What do you think?" He held up a picture frame filled with wine bottle corks all glued together.

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"What is it?" I said.

"I made a corkboard. Get it? *Corkboard*. For the restaurant, you know, for posting specials. What do you think?"

"Great idea, sweetie," Mom said.

Dad turned the frame around and admired it. "Yeah, I thought so too. And since we talked—"

"Tom, honey, I need you to focus."

"On what?"

"Jeanine doesn't want to go to the farm."

"What farm?" He was still smiling at his creation like he'd just invented tinfoil.

"Stinky Cheese Farm, remember? Tris and Josh are riding out there to talk to the owner, and it's so close, I thought Jeanine should go too. You know, to get out a bit." Mom had that just-say-what-I-say tone.

"Sounds good to me." No way did he actually remember.

"After the Solve-a-Thon," Jeanine said.

"After the Solve-a-Thon?" Dad said to Mom.

"That's not for two weeks," Mom said to Dad.

"That's not for two weeks," Dad said to Jeanine.

"Tell her to go," Mom said to Dad.

"Go," Dad said to Jeanine.

"You can't make me bike someplace. It's physically impossible."

"This is true," Dad said. "But I could drive you and your bike over there, push both of you out, and then drive off."

"You're not funny," Jeanine said.

"Who's joking?"

"Honey, you need light and air. You're wilting," Mom said, petting Jeanine.

"I'm not a plant. I don't rely on photosynthesis for survival."

Mom cracked a few knuckles. "You know what I mean."

Jeanine laid the study guide down and looked at Mom. "What if I eat lunch on the porch?"

Mom twisted a finger, but it was all cracked out. "Fine. But you have to stay out for thirty minutes. And I'm locking the doors, I swear I am."



"Tell Riley I loved the Farmers' Wish!" Mom called from the porch as Josh and I walked our bikes down Terror Mountain.

"Farmers' Wish?" Josh said.

"Some cheese she bought when she was there. Those grilled cheese sandwiches she made, that's what she put in them."

"Oh, those were awesome!" Josh blew at the wall of hair hanging in front of his face. He needed both hands to keep his bike from

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taking off down the driveway. "But I think that bread your mom makes is awesome even on its own."

"I know. I don't think I can go back to store-bought now."

"Yeah, the packaged stuff is so much worse. It should be called something different."

"Like what?"

"I don't know." He thought for a minute. "Something like bread, but something less than bread, like maybe just... 'ed.'"

"That's so good," I said, laughing. "The ads would be like, 'Why eat bread when you can have Ed? Ed never goes bad because it starts out that way.'"

"I was telling my mom the other day how good the homemade stuff is. She thinks it's really cool you guys make your own bread."

Josh had been spending so much time with us, it made sense he'd talked to his mom about what it was like at our house. I just hadn't thought about it before now. He'd probably told her that Zoe liked to eat frozen peas and uncooked pasta and that the Purple Demon got her kicks by turning out all the lights and that Jeanine studied for the Solve-a-Thon 24/7. I would have told her that stuff too if I were him. But it felt good to know he hadn't just told her about the crazy stuff.

"You know, making bread's not as hard as you think," I said. "I've done it with my mom. I could show you, I mean, if you wanted."

“Oh, yeah, definitely! And you think I could make it myself then?”

“Sure. I mean, you’d need a recipe, but yeah.”

“Cool! Maybe then I could surprise my mom with it, like for Christmas or something.” Even through all that hair, I could see he had a huge smile on his face.

I’d been trying not to think about Charlie since I’d gotten that last email. But right then, something popped into my head so fast, I didn’t have time to push it back out.

Charlie and I had never baked anything together.

He’d tasted almost everything I’d ever made. My peanut butter–white chocolate chip cookies were his favorite dessert in the whole world, or at least that’s what he said, but I’d never showed him how to make them himself, and he’d never asked me to. And somehow, I’d never thought how weird that was until right then.

At the bottom of Terror Mountain, we got on our bikes and pedaled off. The road was much flatter going away from town, and there were fewer patches of woods and more fields on either side.

“What do they grow here?” I asked as we passed a brown field covered in stubby stalks.

“Corn. It’s gone by the end of October, but in August, there’s a stand out here where you can buy it just picked.”

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My mouth watered. Corn on the cob. Corn pudding. Corn muffins with whole kernels baked into them. Maybe even corn ice cream. I had to remember to tell Mom about the stand.

"Someone stands out here selling corn all day?" I asked.

"It's an honor stand."

"What's that?"

"You know, you're on your honor to pay. There's a sign with the price and a pile of corn and a box for the money, and you just put your money in the box and take what you pay for."

"Yeah, right."

"You've never heard of an honor stand?"

"Uh, no. Because that's crazy. Is there like a security camera or something?"

Josh laughed.

"And nobody steals the corn or the money or both?"

"I don't think so. I mean, they'd stop doing it if that happened."

"I bet if you did that in New York City, you know, put out a table on the sidewalk with a sign and a pile of corn and a money box, people would think it was some kind of trick. Like the corn was poisoned or something. Nobody would believe it was for real."

"That's kind of sad."

I didn't say anything. I didn't want Josh thinking living in the

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city was sad, even just “kind of sad.” “Well, there *was* this flower shop on our block, and whenever Zoe passed by, the lady gave her some flowers for free.”

“I think Winnie would run through town naked before she’d give anything away for free,” Josh said.

I laughed. “Oh, and one time, this guy found my mom’s wallet on the subway, and he tracked her down by calling the number on her bank card. So, I mean, it’s not like nobody in the city has honor, you just don’t *expect* them to, you know?” I pointed to a tangle of wood boards in a field on the right. “That must be it.” Mom had told us that the road we needed to take was just past a collapsed barn.

“And there’s the road,” Josh said, pointing to a sign marking a dirt road.

“Hey, what do you know about this guy anyway?” I asked as we followed Valley View Road into a creepy forest of trees with white bark.

“Riley? Not much. My grandparents are good friends with his parents. They’re not here anymore though. They moved to Florida when Riley took over. My grandfather says this place has been a dairy farm for, like, four generations. But it was always just milk till Riley took over.”

We stopped when we saw the sign for the farm. STINKY CHEESE

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FARM dribbled down it in red letters, and next to the words was painted a triangular block with lines all around it like Zoe puts around her suns.

"Is that supposed to be stink?" I said.

"Coming off the cheese? I think so."

I peered down Stinky Cheese Farm Road. A short ways ahead, the forest ended and fields began. "C'mon. Let's go."

On the other side of the woods, the land was open and flat all the way to the mountains. Fences lined both sides of the road, and behind them were white cows with black splotches and wiggling ears. There were big ones and little ones, and the big ones had bulging pink balloons that hung down between their back legs.

Up ahead, the road circled around the field on the right to a barn and a small house. Both were gray, but they must have been white at some point because there were places where bits of paint still clung on. Everything—fences, house, and barn—drooped as if too worn out to stand up straight.

The road here was rocky, and weeds had completely taken over in places, so we got off our bikes and walked them.

"Something stinks, but not like cheese," I said.

"I bet it's worse in summer."

"So what we're smelling is..."

"Cow poop."

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“Great,” I said and tried to breathe only through my mouth.

On the other side of the fence, a calf with black patches around each eye bounced through the grass next to me. “The baby ones *are* kinda cute.”

Josh stopped. “Hey—is that him?”

Across the field, just in front of the barn, a guy in a black baseball cap was waving.

“Probably.” I waved back.

The guy put his hands up, palms out like he wanted us to stop, so we did.

“You think we’re going the wrong way?” I asked.

We watched as the guy then jogged over to a mud-splattered truck and got in.

“I guess he’s coming to get us,” Josh said.

“Makes sense. We *are* the customers.”

“He looks pretty young to be running the whole place, huh?” Josh said.

“Yeah, in my head, farmers are old, but I think that’s just because of the song.”

“The song?”

“You know, ‘Old MacDonald.’ Zoe used to make my mom sing it over and over.”

Josh and I watched the truck make its way toward us. I guess

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because the road was barely still road, he had to drive really slowly.

Finally, the truck pulled to a stop beside us. "Tris? Josh?" the driver said through the open window.

We both nodded.

"Cool. I'm Riley." He grinned and tipped his baseball cap. The stinky cheese symbol from the sign was printed on it in neon yellow. Up close, Riley looked even less like Old MacDonald. What he looked like was the guy who taught me keyboards at Ricky's School of Rock, right down to his thick black glasses, hoodie, and ponytail.

"I set up this whole tasting for you guys at the house. Jump in. We can throw those bikes in back," he said. Then he got out and helped us load the bikes.

Since the truck had just one row of seats, we both sat up front right next to Riley.

"So you guys are into doughnuts, huh? I think that's what that lady said."

"You mean my mom?" I said.

"With the little girl."

"My sister."

"She was *way* into the cows, which was cool, but you can't ride them," Riley said, all serious like we might actually not already know this.

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"She tried to ride them?" Josh asked, trying not to laugh.

"I kept telling her: no riding the cows. But she wouldn't listen. I gave her some grain, you know. I said, 'Here look, you can feed 'em, and they eat right out of your hand.' But every time I turned around, she was trying to climb on."

Now I knew what Mom had meant about the cows needing a Zoe break.

Just then, we hit a bump, and Josh went flying into Riley. "Sorry," he said. Even with Riley driving super slowly, we were getting tossed all over the place. At least I could hold on to the door, but Josh was stuck in the middle with nothing to grab onto.

"No worries," Riley said. "So, tell me about these doughnuts."

"Well, we haven't actually made any yet. It's a long story," I said. Riley didn't need to know that this whole doughnut business had started with Mom and Dad making me do a project. That was just unprofessional. We were customers, and we were there to sample his products, and hopefully, make a deal. That was the only story Riley needed to know.

"You don't have to explain it to me, man. I get it. It's the dream, right? You just got to go for it. It can take a while to get there though, so don't lose hope. You just keep at it."

"Thanks. But I meant—"

"Like with me, all my life, my pops was like, this farm is going

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to be yours someday. And I was all like, 'No. Thank. You.' Getting up early is not for me. See, I was hard into the electronic music scene. I'd saved up and bought all my own gear. I had this sweet synthesizer. But all that equipment is super expensive. You need a computer and..."

What kind of business was Riley running? We didn't need to hear his whole story any more than he needed to hear ours. Why wasn't he talking about his products? Didn't he know the ABCs of selling? Always be closing the deal. That's the very first Selling Tip in *Starting Your Own Business for Dummies*.

"So I needed cash, and that's how I ended up working at this fancy French restaurant in Boston. And they had a cheese guy. One guy, his whole job was just cheese. He'd buy all these cheeses, put them out on this cart, and when people finished their meal, he'd like wheel it out so they could pick their cheeses. And I was like, 'Whaaaat?' because all I knew was cheddar and swiss and American. Maybe I'd had some provolone. But that was it. You know there's thousands of different cheeses?"

Here was my chance to focus Riley. "Actually—"

"Crazy, right? And each cheese has like its own story, where it's from, how it's made. Anyway, this guy—his name was actually Guy. Funny, right? But they don't say Guy. They say Geeeeey. It's French, whatever, anyway. So one day, Guy gave me this crazy,

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super melty, super stinky cheese, and it was like magic. I mean, one bite and I was hooked. I couldn't believe a food tasted like that. It was so different and so awesome. After that, Guy started teaching me all about cheese ..."

Riley pulled up in front of the house but didn't stop talking. As we climbed out of the truck, Josh whispered, "It must be *really* hard to live out here all alone with nobody to talk to."

Something about Riley made me think he'd be like this even if he didn't spend all his time alone.

"So one time, Guy takes me with him to this farm in Vermont to a cheese tasting, and I was like *this* is it. *This* is what I'm gonna do! Like for life. I'm going to make cheese on my family's farm. And I told my dad, and he was so psyched that I wanted to come back and like do my thing here. He'd had it with those big dairy folks anyway, so he was like Riley, you do it your way. Your mom and I are hitting the beach. So I went back to school, changed my major from electronic music to agriculture, and now I'm here, living the dream. My girlfriend graduates in June, then she's moving up here. Maybe some friends too. It's a crazy lot of work."

We'd followed Riley onto the porch of the little house, and he pushed open the front door. "Hey, boys!" he called into a small room lined with shelves and hooks.

The second we stepped inside, two huge gray blurs—the "boys"

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I guessed—were coming at us. Before I knew it, one of them had me pinned against the wall, his paws on my shoulders.

“Meet Ziggy,” said Riley. “This one’s Gonzo,” he said of the other dog whose paws were on his own shoulders. Riley seemed to think this was a fine way to say hello. This was so not professional. I didn’t need *Starting Your Own Business for Dummies* to know that.

“Hello, Ziggy,” I said, looking up. Stretched out like that, Ziggy was taller than I was. Drool yo-yoed down at me from both sides of Ziggy’s furry chin. I tried to turn my head to the wall to get out of range of the drool, but Ziggy dipped and blocked, and then all I could see was tongue.

“Uch!” I gagged.

Ziggy had licked my face so hard, he’d gotten saliva up my nose—his saliva. It hurt and it stunk. Ziggy’s breath was toxic, and now it was inside my nose so I couldn’t even get away from it.

“Wow! He really likes you,” Riley said.

Gonzo dropped off Riley and mashed his head into Josh’s side.

“Hey, Gonzo.” Josh scratched the dog’s back.

“Ziggy’s kinda heavy.” On top of the smell, I felt like my shoulders were about to separate from the rest of my body.

“Yup. Two hundred pounds of love, isn’t that right, Ziggy?” Riley stroked Ziggy’s head, and finally, Ziggy jumped down.

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As Josh pet Gonzo, the dog flopped over, knocking Josh backward, and he had to grab onto a hanging raincoat to keep from falling.

"They love attention. Isn't that right, Gonzo?" Riley squatted and scratched the dog's belly. "What's this—oh no!" Riley rubbed something greasy off Gonzo's nose. "What did you do?" Riley suddenly sounded a whole lot like my mother. He stood up, marched down the hall, and disappeared into the room at the other end.

Gonzo popped up onto all fours.

"Gonzo! Ziggy!"

Ziggy whimpered. Then he and Gonzo slunk slowly off down the hall.

Riley appeared in the doorway. "Didn't I leave this door closed? Didn't I?" Now he really sounded like my mother.

The dogs stopped at the doorway and dropped to their bellies.

"Am I going to have to get a lock on the kitchen door?" Riley waited. Not surprisingly, the dogs weren't answering.

Josh looked at me.

"We can come back," I said.

"Don't look at me like you don't know what you did."

"He's still talking to the dogs, right?" Josh whispered.

One of the dogs, Ziggy, I think, barked.

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"Yes, you do. And I'm very disappointed in you," Riley said, shaking his head.

The other one barked.

"You just stay there and think about what you did." Riley turned around. "Look at this mess."

"Now he's talking to us. C'mon," I said.

In the kitchen, broken glass covered the floor, and two chairs, snapped in half, lay in a pool of milk. "I don't know how that dog whisperer guy never loses his patience. I'm really sorry," Riley said.

"Oh, it's okay. Don't worry about it," Josh said because he's Josh. I didn't say anything.

"I had this whole tasting set up with crackers for the butter, and I made this awesome drink with the milk and some maple syrup."

"We can come back some other time," Josh said.

"Or maybe we could just do it at my place," I said, giving Josh a look.

Riley snapped his fingers. "Hey, I got it. Care package. Hold on. Two secs."

It took way more than two seconds, but eventually, Riley had put together the care package and Josh was bungee cording it to his bike rack.

"So you've got the butter, a pint of milk, and one of cream. And I put in some Farmers' Wish for your mom, and also something

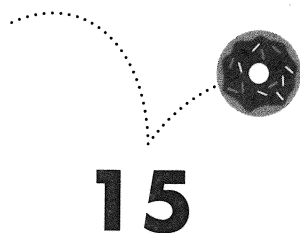
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I'm experimenting with, triple cream made of raw milk, super gooey, crazy stinky. It's wrapped in Riverbirch bark so you just scoop it out."

"Okay, thanks. We'll taste everything today and get back to you," I said.

"Yeah, stop by anytime. I'm always here."

"We'll email!" I called as we biked off. I didn't plan on visiting Stinky Cheese Farm again anytime soon.



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Mom was right. The Stinky Cheese Farm's butter, milk, and cream were all mind-blowing, and a great deal too because Riley wasn't going to charge for delivery since he was in Petersville anyway. His butter would be a little harder to work with because it came in different size lumps instead of sticks, but it was worth it. He weighed each so you knew how much you were paying for, but there was nothing on the package to help you measure out pieces like the lines printed on the paper around sticks of butter. I'd just have to use Mom's cooking scale to measure out what I needed.

We still had to make deals with suppliers for the other ingredients. To do that, the book said we were supposed to call back the wholesalers with the lowest prices and play them off each other to see if we could get them to go even lower. Since Josh and I didn't

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have the first clue how to do this, I decided to ask my dad for help. He'd done a lot of negotiating when he worked at the bank, so I thought he was qualified even though he was family. Besides, I had a feeling Winnie's warning against doing business with family applied more to siblings than parents. Just to be safe though, I decided not to tell her.

It was the day after Josh and I had made the calls. Dad was in his office reading another book about windmills. His latest plan was to put windmills up all over our property to harness the wind that constantly whips around our house, threatening to knock it down. He was sure that with the right number, we could power our whole house. He was super excited about it. He kept talking about how we needed to go to Denmark to see their windfarms, because they get something like half their electricity from wind there. I was terrified that this was the one project he'd actually stick with. He'd shown me photos of the windmills he wanted, and they were like something out of a sci-fi nightmare. It was bad enough up there on Terror Mountain without things that looked like Transformers towering over us.

"Dad, can I ask you something?" I said from the door to the office. "It's about the doughnut stand. It's kind of a business question."

He closed the book. "Sure. Fire away."

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I went inside and showed him all the information Josh and I had gotten from the suppliers.

"So now we're supposed to negotiate for the best prices," I explained, "but something doesn't seem right about that. Isn't a price a price? I mean, you have the choice whether to buy something or not, but can you actually tell the seller to lower his price? Is that even legal?"

Dad laughed. "Yes, it's legal."

"Even if it is. It still feels weird, like something I shouldn't do."

"You got to get over that. You know what you need?"

"What?"

"A pitch, what you're going to say to convince these guys to lower their prices."

"Oh, yeah, they talk about that in the book."

"Yeah, a really good pitch," he said and stood up from his desk all of a sudden like he'd just remembered he had somewhere to be but then didn't go anywhere. "All right, take me through everything. This is going to be so great!"

I must have just been sitting there staring at him because then he clapped and said, "Come on! Get me up to speed. We've got a lot of work to do."

That's when I knew Winnie's warning about family did apply to parents, but by then it was too late.

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“Okay, so first I made a list of—”

“Wait!” He grabbed my arm. “You know what we need?”

“No, what?”

“Supplies!” He sounded way too excited.

“I’ve got the book and paper and stuff.”

“No. We need to be able to see all the information someplace.

Visual representation of information is key. We’ll need poster board and different colored Post-its and flags and markers and maybe a microphone so we can tape you and you can hear yourself doing the pitch and—are you writing this down?”

The good news was, Dad had found a new project, one he actually knew something about. The bad news was, that project was me.

Four hours and one trip to the office supply store in Crellin later, my parents’ office had been transformed into Tom Levin’s Negotiation Boot Camp. Every piece of information I had about the doughnut business was now color coded on Post-its and stuck to the wall along with a poster board with my pitch in bullet points, the words I was supposed to “punch” highlighted in neon orange. Dad had this theory that you had to “punch” the most important words in each sentence.

“I think I’m ready now.” My voice was hoarse from practicing the pitch.

“Almost,” he said. “You still need to hit those punch words harder.”

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“Okay.”

“It’s definitely better, much better, but I’m beginning to think what you really need now is a dry run.”

“I’ve already run through it twenty times!”

“No, I mean live, with a real person, so you have to think on your feet. You need to know there’s nothing wrong with negotiating, that you’re not going to get into trouble. Otherwise, you won’t sound confident, and confidence is key, right? The worst that can happen is somebody says no.”

“Fine,” I moaned. “What do you want to do?”

“Get your coat.”

This was going to be painful. I could just tell.

Fifteen minutes later, my father pulled up in front of Renny’s on Main Street.

“You want me to negotiate at the Gas Mart?” I said.

“Yup.”

“But the prices are printed on everything.”

“So?”

“You can’t negotiate in a place like that!” Now I was getting angry. The stuff he’d made me do in the office was embarrassing enough but at least that was in private.

“Of course you can. A price is just whatever the seller and the buyer agree to. That’s what I’m trying to teach you.”

"Fine!" I yelled. "But this is it. I do this, and then I get to make the calls. No more practicing."

"This is it. I promise," he said.

"Okay. Let's get this over with," I said and got out of the car. Dad was smiling his big, goofy smile like this was about the most fun he could have.

Once inside, Dad walked slowly up and down the aisles studying the shelves, and I followed along behind. On our fourth loop around the store, I noticed the pimply kid behind the register eyeing us like we were going to steal something.

"So what should we get?" I whispered.

"These." He pulled a pair of sunglasses off a rack. "They sell these at the CVS in Crellin for ten dollars." The sticker on the glasses read "\$11.99."

I looked at the glasses and then at the kid behind the register. "I don't know if I can do this."

"Yes, you can. Just do it," he said and handed me the glasses.

I didn't move.

"Now! Go!" he said, shooing me away.

There was no way my father was going to let me chicken out of this. This wasn't like deciding I didn't actually want to jump off that cliff into the waterfall on vacation last year in Mexico. People don't *need* to be able to jump off cliffs into waterfalls. But being

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able to negotiate? That, as my father had been telling me all afternoon, was a “life skill,” something I had to learn how to do or I’d spend the rest of my life getting ripped off.

I turned around, walked to the register, and put the glasses on the counter.

The kid tipped his baseball cap back to look at me. “That’ll be twelve dollars and ninety-two cents.”

“Seems kind of high,” I mumbled.

“What?”

“Seems kind of high.”

“There are cheaper ones in there, I think.” He pointed at the rack. “You want to go check?”

This wasn’t how it was supposed to go. The guy was trying to be helpful, and now I was going to give him a hard time. I stood there for a minute not sure what to do next. Then I turned around and started back to the rack, but there was my dad, standing right in front of it, pumping his fist in the air. I guess it was supposed to be some kind of, “Hang tough, son,” thing, but it just made me feel even more like a wimp. And not because I was too chicken to negotiate but because I was too chicken to tell my dad how stupid this was.

I took a deep breath and turned back to the register. “I’m not trying to give you a hard time, really. I want these glasses. It’s just

they seem like a lot, you know, for what they are. I was thinking they're more like ten-dollar glasses. That's what they sell them for at the CVS in Crellin."

The kid pulled off his cap, smoothed back his hair, and then put it back on. "So go to Crellin then, I guess."

"But don't you want my business?"

The kid looked over my shoulder at my dad who had this look on his face like he'd just seen me make a basket from the middle of the court in the last second of the game.

"Is this a dare?" the kid said.

"No. I'm just trying to negotiate with you. If you lower the price, I'll buy them here instead of going to Crellin."

"Man, I can't negotiate with you. This isn't my store. Do you know what Renny would do to me if he found out I was selling his stuff for less than he said to?"

I looked back at my Dad, who tick-tocked his head as he thought about this. Then he nodded and mouthed, "Okay."

"Okay," I said to the kid. "Sorry. I'll put them back."

"So it *was* a dare?"

"Not really."

"I don't get it. This is weird."

"I know. You're right. It is. Sorry," I said and walked out.

"So?" Dad said as we drove home.

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"So what?" I said. "That was so embarrassing."

"But you didn't get in trouble. You didn't get arrested, right?"

"Right," I admitted.

"And you learned something else too."

"Yeah, don't negotiate at the Gas Mart."

"No. Make sure that the person you're talking to has the authority to negotiate."

"Oh, right, that too," I said.

By the time we got home, it was too late to make the calls, so first thing the next morning Dad and I locked ourselves back up in the office, and I called Pinehurst Food Corp., which had tied with Elwin Farms for the lowest prices.

"Hello, may I speak to Carl, please?" I said. Carl was the guy I'd spoken to the first time, and Dad said I should ask to speak to him again because it was important to develop relationships in the business world. Also, I knew Carl was the owner of the company, so he'd have the power to negotiate.

"For you, Carl!" shouted the man who'd answered.

A second later, Carl was on the line. "Yeah."

"Hi, Carl. This is Tristan Levin from Petersville. Maybe you remember—"

"Yeah, yeah. I remember. You ready to put in your order?"

"I'm actually calling about the price you quoted us."

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“Yeah, what about it?”

“I just wanted to make sure that it was the *best* you could do for us. You know, because we’re a *small* business just starting out and any additional *savings* we could get would really help. Also, even though I know we’re not ordering *large* quantities now, if the doughnut stand does as well as we expect it to, we’ll definitely be *increasing* those numbers.”

I’d done my pitch perfectly. I’d punched my words. Not a single “um” and only one “you know.” Based on what Dad had said, I fully expected the next words out of Carl’s mouth to be, “Well, sure, I’d love to help you out, and I do think I can do a little better. How about we cut that price by five percent?”

But that’s not what happened.

“What?” Carl said.

I repeated my pitch word for word a little louder this time, wondering if maybe Carl’s hearing was going.

Turns out, Carl hears just fine.

“Let me get this straight. *You want me* to take my profit and pass it on to you. Is that right? Is that what I’m hearing?” Carl shouted into the phone. I looked at Dad and tried to hand him the phone, but he shook his head and pushed it back at me.

“No...um, I mean, I guess. It’s just that we could really use that money to buy other stuff.”

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Okay, looking back, that was a really stupid thing to say. I just hadn't been prepared for someone to get all bent out of shape by my just asking if they could give us a better price. Dad kept saying the worst thing they could do was say no, but this was way worse than no.

"And what about *me*? What about *my* business? Don't I got other stuff I need that money for? Don't I got two kids heading off to college next year? *Twins!* I don't even get a break because they start the same year."

"I'm so sorry. I really didn't mean to offend you. I just thought that since Elwin Farms quoted us the same price, you might want the chance to underbid them."

"That's extortion. That's what that is."

"What? No. That's not what I meant." I turned to my father and whispered, "What's extortion?"

Dad chuckled, and I put my hand over his mouth.

"No, no, no. I know exactly what you're doing," Carl said.

"Please. Can I just explain?"

"No. You wanna do business with that slime bucket over at Elwin, you go right ahead. The two of you deserve each other," he growled and then hung up.

"Thanks a lot," I said to my father.

"Yeah, well, some people don't like you to negotiate. They take it personally."

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“And wasn’t this a piece of information you should have shared with me before I made the call?”

“Nah. This was way more fun,” he said, grinning. “Besides it’s all part of the learning process. I knew getting you guys to do these projects was a great idea.”

I’d never missed school so much.