

New friends, a frog, and a summer they'll never forget

# The Fantastic Secret of Owen Jester



By the *New York Times*-bestselling author of *Wish*

BARBARA O'CONNOR

*The*  
FANTASTIC SECRET  
*of* OWEN JESTER



*by* Barbara O'Connor



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Summary: After Owen captures an enormous bullfrog, names it Tooley Graham, then has to release it, he and two friends try to use a small submarine that fell from a passing train to search for Tooley in the Carter, Georgia, pond it came from, while avoiding nosy neighbor Viola.

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## CHAPTER ONE

Owen Jester tiptoed across the gleaming linoleum floor and slipped the frog into the soup.

It swam gracefully under the potatoes, pushing its froggy legs through the pale yellow broth. It circled the carrots and bumped into the celery and finally settled beside a parsnip, its bulging eyes staring unblinkingly up at Owen.

"See, Tooley? I told you," Owen said. "It's not hot."

He plucked a carrot out of the soup and popped it into his mouth.

Still cold.

Not yet heated up for his grandfather's supper.

Owen scurried into the pantry and hunkered down on the floor among the sacks of potatoes and jars of pickled okra and waited for Earlene.

When he heard the *clomp, clomp* of her heavy black shoes on the wooden stairs, he slapped a hand over his mouth to stifle a giggle. When he heard the kitchen door swing open, he slapped his other hand over his mouth, his shoulders shaking with a silent laugh. Then he peeked through the crack in the pantry door.

Earlene stomped over to the stove in that no-nonsense way of hers. She picked up a wooden spoon from the kitchen counter and peered into the pot. Then she placed the spoon back on the counter, stepped away from the stove, jammed both fists into her waist, and said, "Owen."

Her voice had that sharp edge to it that Owen had heard so many times before. He ducked back against the pantry wall and held his breath.

And then, quick as lightning, the pantry door burst open and Earlene's hand shot in, grabbed Owen by the collar, and yanked him to his feet.

Earlene was not a yeller.

Earlene was a snapper.

"Get that frog out of there," she snapped.

"You think that's funny?" she snapped.

She gave his collar a shake.

"You are a bad, bad child," she snapped. "And I thank my lucky stars every day that you are not mine."

She gave his collar another shake. "And I thank the good Lord up above that your grandfather doesn't know what's going on in this house."

She stomped over to the counter and began arranging pill bottles on a tray. "The very idea of that poor sick old man up there in the bed not able to do a thing but sleep and eat applesauce and you down here thinking up ways to make my life miserable."

Earlene sure knew how to ruin a good time.

After supper, Owen sat on his closet floor beside the plastic tub where Tooley lived and looked down at the frog. Tooley was the biggest, greenest, slimiest, most beautiful bullfrog ever to be seen in Carter, Georgia.

It had taken Owen nearly a month to catch him. A month of clomping through mud and scooping with fishnets and buckets and colanders and even a hamster cage. A month of squatting on logs, holding his breath, not moving a muscle, watching that big frog with the heart-shaped red spot between his bulging yellow eyes. A month of telling his friends Travis and Stumpy he was going to catch that frog no matter what.

And then one day, just last week, he did.

The right scoop with the right net at the right time.

He had brought the frog home and made him a perfect frog house in a plastic tub in the closet.

And he had named him Tooley Graham.

Tooley after his cousin who lived in Alabama and played in a rock-and-roll band and wore leather bracelets and made everyone mad when he came to Georgia to visit the family at Thanksgiving. (Everyone but Owen, who thought Tooley was cool.)

And Graham after the big pond where the bullfrog had lived before Owen caught him. Graham Pond.

Owen poked the frog with his finger. "Come on, Tooley," he said. "You gotta eat *something*."

But Tooley wouldn't even look at the dead fly that Owen had dropped into the water in the tub.

So Owen laid the chicken wire back on top of the tub, put a brick on top of the chicken wire, and flopped onto his bed, staring up at the ceiling. Travis and Stumpy were probably skateboarding over at the Bi-Lo parking lot. Maybe they were throwing rocks at the Quaker State Oil sign out on Highway 11. Or maybe they were thinking up some great new way to torture their dreaded enemy, Viola.

But Owen was stuck here in his bedroom, thanks to Earlene, who had tattled on him big-time as soon as his

mother had gotten home from work. He could tell his mother had thought that soup trick was at least a little bit funny. He had seen the corners of her mouth twitch when Earlene went on and on about what a bad, bad boy he was.

But his mother had told his father and his father had slammed his fist on the kitchen table and hollered at Owen and now here he was in his bedroom, just him and Tooley.

Owen wished they had never moved in with his grandfather. He wished they still lived in that little house over on Tupelo Road. Travis had lived next door and Stumpy had lived across the street and life had been good.

But then the hardware store had closed and his father didn't have a job, so they had moved across town to live with his grandfather.

There were three good things and three bad things about living with his grandfather.

The three good things were:

1. There was a lot of land around the house, with woods and paths and sheds and the big pond where Tooley had lived.
2. There was a falling-down barn behind

the house that was filled with stuff, like a rusty unicycle and a crate full of horse-shoes and about a hundred rolls of chicken wire.

3. Train tracks ran behind the woods below the house, and every few days the whistle blew late at night as the train roared through Carter.

The three bad things were:

1. Earlene had been working for his grandfather for as long as Owen had been alive. Maybe longer. Earlene was grumpy and needed everything to be clean.
2. Travis and Stumpy lived farther away and sometimes did things without him.
3. Viola lived next door.

Owen did not like Viola.

There were a lot of reasons why he did not like Viola, but the first four were:

1. Viola was nosy.
2. Viola was bossy.
3. Viola wore glasses that made her eyes look big, like a fly's.
4. Viola was a know-it-all.

There was only one good thing about Viola:

She had allergies.

Viola was allergic to pine and grass and dust and dogs and just about every good thing in life.

This was a good thing because it meant that Viola didn't like to play in the woods or the fields or down by the pond. And she never went inside Owen's grandfather's house, where Owen's dogs, Pete and Leroy, left tumbleweeds of fur along the baseboards of every room.

Owen checked on Tooley one more time before he turned off the lamp beside the bed. Then he sat by the window and took a deep breath of the summer night air. It smelled like pine and grass and honeysuckle.

Far off in the distance, the train whistle blew. Owen waited, listening for the faint clatter of the train on the tracks to get louder and louder as it got closer to Carter.

In a blink, the train was whooshing down the tracks behind the house.

*Clatter, clatter, clatter.*

And then . . . something else.

A noise Owen had never heard before.

From way down by the tracks.

A thud.

The crack of wood.

A tumble, tumble, tumble sound.

Then the *clatter, clatter, clatter* of the train grew fainter and fainter until the only sound left was the chirp of the crickets in the garden beneath the window.



## CHAPTER TWO

He's sad."

"He is not."

"He is, too."

"He is *not*." Owen stamped his foot and glared at Viola. He reached into the cardboard box and nudged the grasshopper closer to Tooley.

The frog didn't move.

"Besides," Viola said, "frogs only eat bugs that are alive." She stepped closer to Owen. "Everyone knows that," she added.

Owen quickly stepped aside before Viola's pudgy white arm could touch him. "Your mother's calling you," he said.

Viola reached into the box and stroked Tooley's back with one finger. "You should let him go," she said.

Well, that just proved what Owen had known all along. Viola was dumb.

"You're dumb," Owen said. "What kind of person would go to all that trouble to catch the best frog in Carter, Georgia, and then turn around and let it go?"

"A *nice* person," Viola said. "A good person. A kind person. A—"

"Your mother's calling you," Owen said again.

"You're mean, Owen." Viola tossed her stringy hair over her shoulder, adjusted her glasses, wiped grass off the back of her shorts, and stalked off to the hedge that separated her backyard from Owen's grandfather's. Then, just before disappearing through the opening at the bottom of the hedge, she turned around and added, "And that frog is sad."

Owen scooped Tooley up and held him close to his face.

"You're not sad, are you, fella?" he said. He examined the frog. His shiny skin. His yellow throat. His froggy toes.

Owen glanced over at the hedge to make sure Viola was gone, then whispered to Tooley, "You want a *live* bug?"

Tooley wiggled a little bit and placed a webbed foot on Owen's cheek.

"Me and Travis and Stumpy will find you some big ole juicy ones," Owen said. Then he took Tooley over to the back porch and placed him in the outside frog house, a plastic tub under the stairs. The outside frog house was just like the inside frog house, only bigger, so Tooley had more room to swim. Owen had put a log in the tub for Tooley to sit on and added some magnolia leaves that floated on the water like lily pads.

On his way over to Tupelo Road, Owen worried about Tooley.

He wouldn't eat.

He didn't jump like he had at first.

He didn't swim like he had at first.

His eyes didn't seem quite as shiny and his skin didn't seem quite as smooth.

But mixed in with the worry about Tooley was some thinking.

Owen kept thinking about that noise he had heard last night.

That thud.

That crack of wood.

That tumble, tumble, tumble sound.

Something had fallen off the train.

Owen was sure of it.

He had planned to dash down to the tracks first thing this morning and look for it.

But then Viola had crawled through the opening in the hedge and stuck her nosy nose into his business and said all that stuff about Tooley being sad and now he had to find some live bugs. But he couldn't stop thinking about that noise or wondering if he was right about something falling off the train.

And if something *had* fallen off the train, what in the world could it be?

## CHAPTER THREE

How much do bullfrogs eat?" Travis said.

Owen cupped his hands over the cricket. "Got him!"

He dropped the cricket into the jar. "That's five," he said. "That should be enough."

"What about this?" Stumpy held up a fat, muddy worm.

"Nah," Owen said. "I don't think frogs eat worms."

Stumpy tossed the worm into the flower bed and wiped his hand on his shorts.

"Maybe we could build a cage for Tooley," Travis said. He took his baseball cap off, swished it around in the water in the birdbath, and put it back on. Dirty water ran down the side of his face and dripped onto his shirt.

"Y'all get out of my garden!" Joleen Berkus hollered out the window.

The boys ran through the garden, trampling marigolds and tripping on cantaloupe vines, until they reached Stumpy's yard.

Joleen Berkus had moved into the house where Owen used to live. She had torn down Owen's fort and made a garden. She had hauled off all the car parts on the back porch and put a rocking chair there. She had painted right over JESTER on the mailbox and stenciled on BERKUS in perfect black letters, and now she spent the livelong day hollering at Owen and Travis and Stumpy every time they set foot in her yard (which used to be Owen's).

"Maybe we could build a cage," Travis repeated as they flopped down on Stumpy's front steps to examine the crickets.

"What kind of cage?" Owen said.

"A cage in the pond." Travis tapped on the side of the cricket jar.

*A cage in the pond?*

*Hmmmmmm.*

That wasn't a half-bad idea!

"We could use that chicken wire in the barn," Owen said.

“Yeah!” Stumpy said. “Bugs and stuff could get right through it.”

“And we could make a door so we could take him out,” Owen said.

And so the boys planned.

They planned how big the cage would be and where they would put it and where they would get the things they would need to build it.

All afternoon they planned.

And the more they planned, the better Owen felt about Tooley.

Owen had been so busy planning, he had forgotten about the noise.

The thud.

The crack of wood.

The tumble, tumble, tumble sound.

But that evening at the supper table, he remembered.

“I’m going outside,” he said, pushing his chair back with a scrape and heading for the door.

His father didn’t even look up from his pork chop.

His mother said, “Be back before dark.”

Earlene squinted over at him from the sink and muttered something under her breath about bad manners and green beans.

The two dogs, Pete and Leroy, leaped off the porch after Owen, and the three of them raced across the yard, into the woods, and along the path toward the train tracks.

Owen had explored every inch of the woods and fields around his grandfather's house. The main path zigzagged around trees and boulders to the middle of the woods. Then it forked. The path to the left led to a field full of weeds and pricker bushes, then continued on down to a tilted, rotting dock at Graham Pond.

The path to the right led around the pond to the train tracks on the other side.

Owen was not allowed to go down to the train tracks.

Travis and Stumpy were not allowed to go down to the train tracks.

Owen and Travis and Stumpy went down to the train tracks nearly every day.

They had put about a million dollars' worth of pennies on the tracks for the train to flatten (and a few nickels and quarters, too).



One time Stumpy had put a liverwurst sandwich on the tracks, and when they went back the next day, not a crumb was left.

They had walked right up the middle of the tracks all the way to the main road and back again.

They had put their ears against the metal rail to listen for the train.

But the train only came late at night.

"Come on, boys," Owen called to Pete and Leroy when he got to the end of the path at the tracks.

The two dogs trotted along behind him, sniffing at every tree and rock and pricker bush.

Owen looked up the tracks.

Then he looked down the tracks.

Nothing unusual.

Just the same stuff he saw nearly every day.

The mound of red dirt that ran beside the tracks.

Gravel.

Weeds.

A few rusty soda cans.

A broken bottle.

Nothing unusual.

"Shoot," Owen said out loud, making Pete and Leroy look at him and cock their heads.

Owen had wanted to find whatever it was that had fallen off the train all by himself. But maybe he should tell Travis and Stumpy.

Owen and Travis and Stumpy had always been good at finding stuff together.

But then there was the problem of nosy Viola, lurking around, following them, spying on them.

He would have to wait until just the right time to tell Travis and Stumpy.

"Come on, boys," Owen called again to Pete and Leroy.

Then he headed back up the path toward home, with the two dogs trotting along behind him.

## CHAPTER FOUR

Shhh.” Owen pressed a finger to his lips and motioned for Travis and Stumpy to duck behind the barn door.

He peeked through a crack in the warped boards.

Viola was tromping across the yard, swinging a Girl Scout canteen with one hand and pushing at her glasses with the other.

“Dang,” Owen whispered. “She’s coming this way.”

Travis jabbed a finger up toward the hayloft.

Owen nodded.

The three boys dashed across the dirt floor of the barn and scurried up the rickety ladder to the loft. They flopped down on their stomachs, their cheeks pressed against the hay-covered floor, and waited.

“I know y’all are in there, Owen.” Viola’s irritating voice drifted into the barn.

Travis poked Owen with an elbow and Stumpy made a little snort noise. Owen flapped a hand at both of them and mouthed, "Be quiet."

Viola's sandals made a slapping noise as she entered the barn and stopped at the bottom of the ladder.

"I know y'all are in here." That irritating voice slithered up the ladder and circled around Owen.

Dang! That girl sure was annoying.

"What are y'all doing?" The voice pounded Owen on the back of the head.

The slapping sandals moved away from the ladder and shuffled over to the corner of the barn.

"What're y'all building?"

Owen lifted his head the teeny tiniest bit and peered over the edge of the loft. Viola was rummaging through the stuff that he and Travis and Stumpy had spent all morning gathering. Rolls of chicken wire. Tomato stakes. Baling wire. Twine. Old door hinges.

Viola poked at a roll of chicken wire. "I know what y'all are building," she said.

Travis pursed his lips and glared down at Viola.

Stumpy's eyes grew big and round as he looked at Owen in a *What now?* kind of way.

Owen crawled to the rear of the loft until he got to

a milk crate full of old tractor parts. He grabbed a greasy rubber fan belt, a handful of rusty nuts and bolts, and a broken gauge of some sort. Then he crawled back to the edge of the loft and began flinging the things down to the barn floor, trying to get as close to Viola as possible without actually hitting her.

The bolts made pingy noises as they hit garden tools and engine parts and ricocheted off the wheelbarrow and the lawn mower. The gauge skidded over the dirt floor and hit the wall of the barn with a crash, followed by the tinkle of broken glass.

The fan belt landed right on Viola's sandal. She jerked her foot away and gazed coolly up at Owen.

"Y'all are building something for that sad old frog," she said, giving her glasses a nudge up the bridge of her nose with her thumb.

"His name is Tooley and he's not sad," Owen called down from the loft.

Viola picked up the fan belt and twirled it around her finger. "Frogs don't have names."

"Says who?" Travis hollered down at Viola.

Stumpy pushed some hay off the edge of the loft. "Yeah, says who?" he said.

Viola brushed hay out of her hair and glared up at

the boys. "Says me and anyone else on the planet with half a brain." She tossed the fan belt onto the pile of chicken wire. "Frogs don't have names and don't want names. Frogs want to be frogs and live where frogs are supposed to live."

"Oh, yeah?" Travis said.

"Oh, yeah?" Stumpy said.

"Your mother's calling you," Owen said.

As soon as the words left his mouth, Owen's stomach clenched up into a ball of angry. Why did he have to go and say that again?

First of all, he said it all the time.

Second of all, Viola never even blinked an eye when he said it, so what was the point?

And third of all, Viola's mother never called her. Viola's mother never did anything but sit on the porch in her bathrobe looking at magazines. The only time Owen had ever seen Viola's mother step one foot off her porch was the time she went to the flea market and came back with a bunch of tiki torches. Viola had told him the tiki torches were for a Hawaiian luau party. Owen had peeked through the hedge every day for nearly a week to see the Hawaiian luau party, but all he ever saw was a pile of tiki torches and a barbecue grill full of rainwater.

Viola pushed aside the tomato stakes with the toe of her sandal. She inspected a tangled roll of baling wire. She squinted through her thick glasses at the rusty door hinges.

"Y'all are building a cage," she said.

Owen hurried down the ladder and grabbed the door hinges from her. He jammed them into his pocket and said, "Go away."

"Yeah, go away." Travis jumped off the last rung of the ladder and stood between Viola and the pile of stuff, his feet spread, his arms folded, his chin stuck out.

Stumpy jumped from halfway down the ladder and landed on the barn floor with an *oomph*.

"You don't really need hinges, you know." Viola nodded toward the baling wire. "And staples would work better than that wire."

"Staples are for paper, you ninny," Travis said.

"Yeah," Stumpy said. "Staples are for paper, you ninny."

But Owen stayed quiet. He was trying to keep his irritation from getting the best of him and turning him into a foot-stomping baby.

But it was hard.

Because he knew Viola was right about the staples.

And he knew she didn't mean staples like the little ones for paper. She meant those heavy-duty kind like his father used to staple plastic over the windows in the winter at their old house on Tupelo Road.

"I know where there's a staple gun," Viola said, grabbing her canteen off the hay bale.

She turned to Owen and looked smug.

Owen hated it when Viola looked smug.

More than anything, he wanted to say "Where?"

But he knew that Viola wanted him to say "Where?"

Which was why she was looking so smug.

So instead of saying "Where?" Owen said, "Rocket."

*Rocket* was the secret code word that he and Travis and Stumpy had made up to ditch Viola. They had agreed that if one of them said "Rocket," they would all run as fast as they could to their hiding place down by the train tracks.

So that's what they did.

They ran as fast as they could out of the barn, across the yard, down the path, through the woods, and around the pond. They crossed to the other side of the tracks, pushed their way through the scrubby bushes, and crawled up under the branches of an enormous rotten



oak tree that had fallen years ago and landed against a pine tree, forming a perfect tepee.

The boys were gasping and laughing and high-fiving each other when Pete and Leroy came sniffing through the brush, tails wagging, noses sniffing.

“Uh-oh,” Owen said. “I hope Viola didn’t follow them.”

Owen crawled out of the tree tepee and looked around.

No sign of Viola.

Good, he thought.

Then the time had come.

He was going to tell Travis and Stumpy about the thing that had fallen off the train.

## CHAPTER FIVE

The boys looked all afternoon. They combed the woods. They tromped through pricker bushes. They waded along the edges of the pond, their feet sinking in the gooey mud.

They found a plastic milk crate with the bottom broken out.

They found a coffee can full of mud.

They found a piece of PVC pipe with PROPERTY OF MONROE COUNTY stamped on the side.

And they found an old metal thing with a rusty bolt sticking out of it.

But none of those things seemed like something that would have fallen off the train and made the noise that Owen heard.

The thud.

The crack of wood.

The tumble, tumble, tumble sound.

"Are you sure the noise came from around here?"

Travis said, tossing a handful of rocks into the pond.

"Sure, I'm sure," Owen said.

"I mean, maybe it was farther up that way." Travis nodded up the tracks. "Maybe it wasn't near the pond."

Owen shrugged: "Maybe."

"Then you know what that means," Stumpy said.

Owen and Travis looked at Stumpy and waited.

"That means it could be up yonder behind Viola's house." Stumpy set his mouth in a hard line and drew his eyebrows together.

A deep, dead, gloomy silence fell over them.

They stared at their shoes, their hands shoved in their pockets.

Suddenly Owen's head shot up and he snapped his fingers. "Allergies!" he hollered, grinning.

Travis and Stumpy stared at Owen.

"Viola never goes back that far," Owen said. "There's weeds and stuff back there. She hates that. She sneezes and gets sick and all." He shook his head. "Naw, Viola won't be nosing around here."

Owen looked up the tracks. He knew every inch of

them, how they curved slightly just beyond the pond, then continued on through the fields way in the back of Viola's house. After that they went over the main highway, out of Carter and into Fort Valley.

Out of Fort Valley and into Byron.

Out of Byron and into Macon.

And on and on, clear on through the state of Georgia.

As the sun sank lower and the sky grew darker, the boys agreed to come back to the tracks and look some more, if they could ditch that nosy Viola.

Then they headed back toward Owen's house to catch mosquitoes for Tooley.

"Here you go, Tooley," Owen said. "These are yummy." He opened the peanut butter jar and released three mosquitoes into the frog house in the closet. Then he spread a piece of newspaper over the top of the plastic tub to keep the mosquitoes from escaping.

He waited.

He listened, hoping to hear Tooley hopping around inside, catching the mosquitoes.

But it was quiet.

Owen lifted the corner of the newspaper and peeked inside. Tooley sat on the branch. The mosquitoes flitted around the plastic tub. One of them landed on the branch right beside Tooley, but the big green frog didn't move.

Not even one little bit.

Owen sighed.

He reached into the tub and lifted the bullfrog out. He examined Tooley's yellow throat, his webbed feet, his froggy face with the heart-shaped red spot between his eyes.

Owen got an icky feeling in the pit of his stomach.

Tooley *did* look a little sad.

Owen set the frog down on the floor beside his bed.

He waited.

Tooley didn't jump.

Owen nudged him a little.

Tooley didn't jump.

The first time Owen had set Tooley down on his bedroom floor, the frog had jumped clear across the room in one giant leap.

Owen sighed again.

He scooped Tooley up and put him back on the

branch in the frog house. He covered the frog house with the chicken wire and the brick, then went over to look out the window.

The moon cast a soft glow on the yard and the woods out back. The night was quiet for a few minutes, and then the faint clatter of the train drifted into the silence.

Louder, louder, louder.

*Clatter, clatter, clatter.*

The train roared by . . .

. . . and then was gone.

But this time, there was no thud.

No crack of wood.

No tumble, tumble, tumble sound.

Owen tried to imagine something in the bushes or the gully or the woods somewhere out there beside the tracks.

Something that had fallen off the train.

But what?

What had fallen off the train?

And where was it?

Owen was determined to find it.

But first, he and Travis and Stumpy were going to have to build that cage for Tooley. It would be the best

frog cage ever. It would be big enough for swimming and jumping. Half of it would be out of the water, with logs and leaves and squishy mud to sit in. The other half would be in the water, with room for Tooley to swim in big, big circles, kicking his froggy legs the livelong day. And a whole parade of water bugs and grasshoppers and crickets and flies would go right through the chicken-wire sides of the cage and Tooley would gobble them up.

And Tooley would not be sad.

## CHAPTER SIX

Owen tucked the duct tape under his T-shirt, motioned for Pete and Leroy, and tried to open the screen door so it wouldn't squeak.

He failed.

The screen door squeaked and Earlene's harsh voice thundered from the front hallway.

"Where are you going?"

"Out yonder," Owen called back.

Earlene stormed into the kitchen, wiping her hands on her apron and shaking her ugly ole head. "You're going nowhere till you sweep up every crumb of dirt and blade of grass you tracked in here last night. I don't know why on God's green earth you can't take your shoes off like I've told you a million times and . . ."



She yammered on and on but all Owen heard was *blah, blah, blah*.

He let out a big, heaving sigh and trudged to the broom closet.

"What's that under your shirt?" Earlene said, squinting over at him.

"Nothing."

The duct tape fell out from under his shirt and rolled across the kitchen floor. Earlene snatched it up and shook it at Owen. "What're you doing with this?"

"Nothing."

Earlene's face turned red as fire as she shoved the duct tape back into the junk drawer.

The whole time he was sweeping up dirt and grass, Earlene stood stiffly beside him, her fists jammed into her waist and the toe of her clunky shoe tap, tap, tapping on the floor while she yammered some more. Her voice swirled around the room like a horde of angry bees. Owen hummed to himself, very, very quietly so Earlene wouldn't hear. His humming helped turn Earlene's words into a steady buzz. But every now and then, a word tumbled out of the swirling buzz.

Frog.

Mud.

Disgusting.

Trouble.

Noise.

Owen hummed a little louder so he could shut out *all* of Earlene's words and think.

He thought about meeting Travis and Stumpy out in the barn. He thought about putting all the chicken wire and tomato stakes and stuff into the wheelbarrow and taking it down to the pond. He thought about how to keep Viola from sticking her nosy nose into his business and ruining all his fun.

"Hurry up," Owen called over his shoulder as he scurried down the path toward the pond, the hinges and baling wire banging and clanking as they bounced in the bottom of the wheelbarrow.

Travis and Stumpy huffed and puffed behind him, dragging a roll of chicken wire that left a trail in the pine needles scattered along the path.

When they got to the pond, they stopped, panting, wiping sweat off their brows.

"I was thinking we should attach the cage to the dock," Owen said. "That way, we can reach it without getting in the water."

Travis and Stumpy nodded in agreement.

So the boys dumped the stuff in the weeds beside the dock and set to work building a cage for Tooley.

But they didn't have wire cutters to cut the wire.

They didn't have a saw to cut the tomato stakes.

They didn't have a plan.

"We need a plan," Owen said.

"Yeah," Travis said.

"Yeah," Stumpy said.

Owen tossed the hinges into the wheelbarrow. "Let's hide this stuff in the bushes and go to Stumpy's and make a plan," he said.

While Joleen Berkus glared over at them from her glider on the porch, Owen and Travis and Stumpy sat on the sidewalk in front of Stumpy's house and made a plan for the frog cage on notebook paper.

First they made a list of the tools they would need, like wire cutters and a staple gun and a saw.

Then they drew a picture of the cage, showing the measurements for each of the sides and where the door would go.

They drew and wrote and drew and wrote and then . . .

... a short, fat shadow fell across the paper.

The boys looked up.

Viola stared down at them with her big fly-eyes through her thick glasses. "I know what you're doing," she said.

Owen looked back down at the notebook paper and pretended like he didn't see her chubby white legs standing there beside him.

"Jarvis has a staple gun," Viola said.

"Jarvis is a wormy-headed doofus," Travis said.

Stumpy slapped his knee and snorted.

Jarvis was Viola's brother, who sometimes went to high school and sometimes worked in a sign-painting shop over in Fort Valley.

He was pale and freckly and wore thick glasses that gave him fly-eyes, like Viola's.

"You shouldn't use hinges," Viola said. "They'll get too rusty."

"Do you hear somebody talking?" Travis said to Owen.

"I don't hear a thing," Owen said. "How about you, Stumpy?"

"Not one dang little thing," Stumpy said.

"Me neither," Travis said. "Not even a bossy toad-

brain who thinks she knows everything there is to know about everything on the planet.”

The boys huddled over the drawings on the notebook paper on the sidewalk and didn't look up.

Owen pretended like he wasn't irritated as all get-out at Viola. And he pretended like it hadn't suddenly occurred to him that Viola was right. Using hinges *wasn't* a very good idea. Maybe it would be better to use the baling wire to attach the top of the cage so it could be opened and closed.

He gathered up the papers and motioned for Travis and Stumpy to follow him.

The three boys trotted off toward Owen's grandfather's house, leaving Viola behind.

The boys worked on the frog cage down by the pond all afternoon. Every now and then, Owen ran up to the house to check on Tooley, who sat motionless in the frog house under the back stairs. Every time Owen checked, Tooley was sitting in the same spot, on top of a soggy magnolia leaf.

Every time, Owen poked him with a finger.

Every time, Tooley blinked one long, slow blink, but didn't move.

Owen tried to nudge Tooley so he would swim around the tub like he used to.

But Tooley wouldn't swim.

So Owen raced back down to the pond to work on the cage some more.

If they could finish the cage today, they could put it in the water and Tooley could move right in and be happy.

And then . . .

. . . first thing tomorrow morning, he could meet Travis and Stumpy down by the tracks and they could look for the thing that had fallen off the train.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

Owen stepped back and admired the cage.

It was perfect.

The boys had rolled out a piece of chicken wire and bent it into a large rectangle shape. Then they used the wire cutters that Travis had taken from his father's toolbox to cut two pieces of chicken wire, for the top and bottom of the cage. Since they didn't have a staple gun (and no way were they going to borrow one from Viola's fly-eyed brother, Jarvis), they used baling wire to attach a tomato stake to each of the four corners.

Next, they attached the bottom securely all around the edges. They attached the top loosely on one end so that they could lift it up and down, open and closed. They made a latch out of bent wire to hold the top closed.

They tested it a few times, opening and closing the top. Hooking and unhooking the latch.

Owen had never seen a finer cage.

Tooley was going to love it.

"Tooley's going to love it," Owen said.

Travis and Stumpy nodded.

"Now all we have to do is put it in the water," Owen said, and walked out onto the rickety dock and inspected the pond. He squinted into the murky water. "I wonder how deep it is here," he said.

Stumpy tossed a rock into the pond.

*Ploink.*

It disappeared out of sight.

Owen pulled a tomato stake out of the wheelbarrow. He walked to the edge of the dock and put the stake into the water until he felt the squishy mud on the bottom of the pond. He inched along the edge of the dock, poking the stake into the water until he could no longer feel the bottom.

"This is where it starts getting deeper," he said. "We should put the cage here."

He poked the stick into the pond some more, stirring up the muddy bottom. "One end can be in the



shallow part so Tooley can get out of the water and one end can be in the deeper part so he can swim around.”

So the boys sat on the dock and planned how they would position the cage in the pond. They debated which side of the dock was best and how deep the cage should be in the water and whether or not they should attach it to the dock with wire.

But before they could start carrying out their plans, a voice interrupted the still summer air.

A dreaded voice.

Viola's voice.

“O-o-o-o-o-o-wen!”

Owen looked at Travis and Travis looked at Stumpy and Stumpy looked at Owen.

“Dang!” Owen said.

“What's *she* want?” Travis said.

“Let's hide!” Stumpy said.

“O-o-o-o-o-o-wen!” Viola's voice drifted through the trees from up at Owen's house.

“We better get up there and see what she wants or she's liable to come down here,” Owen said.

“Nah,” Travis said. “She hates it here.”

But Owen wasn't taking any chances. "Let's go," he said.

The boys raced up the path through the woods. When they got to Owen's backyard, Viola was sitting under the stairs beside the frog house.

"What are *you* doing here?" Owen said.

"Earlene's looking for you." She pushed at her glasses and peered into the plastic tub beside her. "Your frog looks terrible," she said.

"Go away," Owen said.

"Yeah, go away," Travis said.

Stumpy kicked at the dry red dirt of the yard, sending dust and pebbles in Viola's direction.

Viola stood up and wiped dirt off her shorts. "Is that water from the pond?" she said, pointing at the tub where Tooley sat, his big yellow eyes staring up out of the dirty water.

Owen pushed his irritation down, down, down, trying hard not to let it come busting out like it wanted to. "Why is Earlene looking for me?" he said.

"You should put water from the pond in there." Viola brushed past the boys and skipped toward the hedge. Then she turned around and said, "Earlene knows you took the wheelbarrow out of the barn and you left

the shed door open and who in the world told you you could have that chicken wire?"

Then she knelt down and crawled through the hole in the hedge, disappearing into her own backyard.

"Let's go back and put the cage in the pond," Owen said.

But just as the boys reached the edge of the yard, thunder rumbled. Rain began to fall in big, slow drops.

*Plunk.*

*Plunk.*

*Plunk.*

And then the sky turned dark, lightning flashed, and the rain poured down, drenching the boys and sending them scurrying for shelter.

That night at supper, Owen told his parents about the frog cage while Earlene fumed by the stove.

His father thought it was a great idea.

His mother worried that the boys would fall in the pond.

Earlene mumbled about the chicken wire belonging to his grandfather and that mangy stray cat getting in the shed when Owen left the door open.

After supper, Owen took Tooley up to his bedroom and set him in the middle of the bed.

Tooley did a little half jump, then settled down in the folds of the quilted bedspread.

Owen inspected Tooley's froggy skin.

He rubbed his finger along Tooley's yellow throat.

He examined Tooley's big webbed feet.

He lifted Tooley and peered into his eyes.

Then he put the bullfrog into the tub in the closet and sat on the bed and worried.

Maybe Viola was right.

Maybe he should have used water from the pond in the tub instead of water from the hose.

Owen sat still and listened. The rain pattered against the window. Thunder rumbled in the distance. But inside the bedroom, it was quiet.

Owen sighed.

When he had first brought Tooley home, the frog had croaked all night long. That deep *r-u-u-u-m-m-m* sound that bullfrogs make.

But now he was quiet.

A flash of lightning lit up Owen's room. The rain beat harder against the window.

Tomorrow, Owen thought . . .

Tomorrow he had to do two things:

1. Get the frog cage into the pond so Tooley could move in and be happy.
2. Find the thing that had fallen off the train.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

Y'all get out of my yard!" Joleen Berkus hollered through the screen door.

Owen cupped his hand over a grasshopper in the weeds and glared at her. Anybody who would tear down a perfectly good fort was deserving of a glare. Owen wondered what she had done with that trapdoor he had sawed into the wooden floor of his old bedroom or the ladder he and Travis and Stumpy had nailed to the back of the garage so they could climb up onto the roof.

"I said get out of my yard!" Joleen stormed out onto the porch and flapped a dish towel at the boys.

Travis yanked a small green cantaloupe off a tangled vine beside the birdbath and tossed it toward the porch. It landed on the walkway with a *thwump*.

Before Joleen could stomp down the steps, the boys

were clear across the street and around back of Stumpy's house, laughing so hard they could barely catch their breath. Then they jumped on their bikes and raced over to Owen's house.

As Owen pedaled, clutching a jar of grasshoppers in one hand, his stomach flipped and flopped with excitement. Today was the day they were going to put the cage in the pond.

They had made all kinds of plans for Tooley's new house. It would be attached to the side of the dock, one end in the shallow water and one end in the deeper water. There would be a log to sit on and rocks to hunker down beside and leaves to sleep on.

Water bugs and crickets and flies could go right through the chicken wire so Tooley would always have something tasty to snack on.

And every once in a while, the boys could open the top of the cage and take Tooley out and play with him.

It would be great.

"Let's go on down to the dock and start cutting the baling wire," Owen said after dropping two grasshoppers into the tub for Tooley.

He retrieved the baling wire and wire cutters from the shed, put them in a plastic grocery bag, and carefully

closed the door behind him so Earlene wouldn't have anything to yammer about. Then he started across the yard with Travis and Stumpy behind him. But just as they got to the edge of the woods, Viola crawled through the hedge and said, "You should catch crawfish."

Owen sighed and rolled his eyes at Travis and Stumpy.

"Be quiet," Travis said.

"Yeah, be quiet," Stumpy said.

Viola eyed the grocery bag in Owen's hand.

"What's that?" she said.

"Nothing." Owen jiggled the bag at Viola. "Your mother's calling you," he said.

"Bullfrogs love crawfish," Viola said, pushing at her glasses. "I read it in the encyclopedia at my cousin's house."

*Crawfish?*

*Really?*

There were tons of crawfish in the creek beside Travis's house. Owen had caught about a million of them last summer. The boys had even had crawfish races and made trophies for the winners.

"You think you know everything, but you don't," Travis said.



"I know that bullfrogs don't want names and they don't want to live in cages and they love to eat crawfish." Viola lunged for the grocery bag in Owen's hand, but he yanked it away before she could grab it.

"Go away, *Vi-o-la!*" Owen hollered. Then he motioned for Travis and Stumpy to follow him and started down the path through the woods. After a few feet, he whirled around to see if Viola was following them.

She wasn't.

She was standing at the edge of the woods with that smug look on her smug face and sending irritation zip-ping down the path full steam ahead.

"She's gonna follow us," Stumpy said.

"Naw," Owen said as he stomped down the path, swinging the grocery bag. "When she goes in the woods, she gets wheezy and itchy. Besides, she hates the pond. There's too many gnats and too much mud and poison oak and all."

Owen hoped he was right.

But with a girl like Viola, you never knew.

"There!" Owen stood up and grinned down at the cage.  
The perfect cage.

The cage where Tooley would live and be happy.

"Let's go get him!" he said, and raced up the path, through the woods, into the yard, and over to the back steps to the tub where Tooley sat, blinking up at the summer sky.

Pete and Leroy leaped off the porch, tails wagging, and trotted over to join the fun.

Owen lifted Tooley out of the tub.

The back door opened and Earlene stepped out of the house and glared down at him. Her eyes darted from him to Tooley to Travis to Stumpy and then to him again.

"You're not going back yonder to those train tracks, are you?" she said.

"No, ma'am."

She glared some more.

"You're not going out on that rotten ole dock, are you?"

"We're taking Tooley down to the pond." Owen held Tooley up so his froggy legs dangled.

Owen was a master of evasion.

He could evade a question better than anybody he knew.

But Earlene was persistent.

"You're not going out on that rotten ole dock, are you?" she asked again.

Owen's mind raced. He was thinking that maybe he needed to sharpen his evasion skills.

"We put the cage in the pond for Tooley," he said.

"You listen to me, Owen Jester," Earlene said. "I'm in no mood to be fishing three drowned boys out of that snake-infested pond."

Owen heard Travis and Stumpy shuffling in the dirt behind him.

Travis and Stumpy were scared of Earlene. They always left all of the evading to Owen.

"Yes, ma'am," Owen said, because what else could he say?

Earlene made a *hmmpf* noise and pressed her lips together in a thin, hard line.

Owen waited.

Earlene went back in the house, letting the screen door slam shut behind her.

Owen and Travis and Stumpy and Pete and Leroy raced to the pond with Tooley.

## CHAPTER NINE

Owen lay on his stomach on the dock and peered into the murky water. Tooley sat on the bottom of the pond inside the perfect cage.

Owen nudged him gently with a stick. Tooley swam to the other side of the cage and nestled back down into the squishy mud.

"He likes it!" Owen grinned up at Travis and Stumpy.

But inside Owen, something was niggling at him.

A teeny tiny niggle.

Barely noticeable.

But a niggle, nonetheless.

The niggle was caused by a thought.

The thought was this: Maybe, just *maybe*, Tooley should not be in that perfect cage.

Maybe he should be swimming freely around Graham Pond. Gliding gracefully through the water. Floating among the rotting oak leaves that had settled on the surface. Sunning lazily on the moss-covered logs along the edges.

Instead of in a cage. (Even if the cage was perfect.)

Owen pushed the nigger away.

Then he tossed the stick into the pond and said, "Now we can go look for the thing that fell off the train."

Travis and Stumpy let out a whoop.

The three boys raced around the pond toward the train tracks.

"What's that?" Travis said, pointing to a clump of weeds beside the tracks.

Something shiny and round was nestled in among the prickly vines.

Owen ran over and examined it. "A hubcap. Shoot!" he said, kicking at the weeds.

The boys walked glumly along the side of the tracks. Every now and then, one of them spotted something and would point and holler and they'd all race over to examine it. But it was never anything that seemed like

it might have fallen off the train and made the noise that Owen had heard.

The thud.

The crack of wood.

The tumble, tumble, tumble sound.

“Let’s go to my house and get lunch,” Stumpy said.

So the boys headed back up the path through the woods. But they hadn’t gotten far when Owen stopped.

He snapped his fingers.

“Wait a minute!” he said.

Travis and Stumpy waited.

“Tumble, tumble, tumble,” Owen said.

Travis and Stumpy waited some more.

“If something’s tumbling, that means it’s, like, rolling,” Owen said.

Travis and Stumpy waited some more.

“So that means that whatever was tumbling was probably going downhill, right?”

Travis and Stumpy looked at each other.

“Yeah,” they both said.

“So?” Travis said.

“So maybe whatever fell off the train isn’t up by the tracks where we’ve been looking, but more downhill from the tracks, like in the bushes and stuff,” Owen said.

Travis and Stumpy nodded and grinned and high-fived Owen and they all raced back to the tracks to search the bottom of the rocky, red-dirt slopes that ran along the sides.

They found a bicycle wheel with broken spokes.

They found a bullet-riddled stop sign.

They found the bent-up frame of an aluminum lawn chair.

They found a mildewed, mud-covered sofa cushion.

They found a grocery cart with two missing wheels.

They found cinder blocks and broken bottles and rusty cans.

"I'm sick of this," Travis said.

"Yeah," Stumpy said. "Me, too."

Owen's disappointment swirled around inside him and then settled with a heavy thunk in the pit of his stomach.

"Not me," he lied.

"I'm going home," Travis said.

"Me, too," Stumpy said.

"Not me." Owen jammed his hands into his pockets and strolled off, studying the ground, peering into the weeds and bushes, kicking at clods of dirt, pretending like he didn't care that Travis and Stumpy were quitters.

He glanced over his shoulder to see the two boys trotting up the tracks toward the path in the woods.

"Quitters," he muttered under his breath.

Owen climbed back up the slope and scanned the bottom of the ravine on the other side of the tracks.

It wasn't nearly as much fun searching without Travis and Stumpy.

But Owen was not a quitter.

While he searched, he thought about Tooley, and the niggle he had had earlier that day came back. The more he thought, the bigger the niggle got. It grew and grew until it became a tangled-up mass of worry. And in the center of the tangled-up mass was the biggest worry of all:

Maybe Tooley really *was* sad.

And then, just as Owen's stomach was beginning to ache, something caught his attention.

Something big.

Something red.

Down among the tangled bushes and scrub pines at the bottom of the ravine beside the tracks.

Owen hurried down the slope, slipping and sliding on the loose dirt and rocks, pushing through clumps of brush and weeds.



And then he stopped.

He stood in gape-mouthed wonder.

"Whoa!" he said out loud.

The tangle of niggling worry in his stomach disappeared.

*Poof!*

Because lying there before him was the thing that had fallen off the train.

Owen was sure of it.

## CHAPTER TEN

Owen scrambled through the thick brush, ducking under low-hanging branches and climbing over rotting logs. Prickers scratched his legs and snagged his clothes as he made his way toward the thing.

The thing that had fallen off the train.

The thing that had made the *thud*.

It was big and red and made of metal.

But what was it?

Next to it, jammed between two scraggly oak trees, was part of an enormous wooden crate. Scattered here and there among the brush and weeds surrounding it were pieces of wood, splintered and broken.

*The crack of wood.*

The red thing lay nestled at the bottom of the ravine,

where it had rolled down the slope from the railroad tracks.

*The tumble, tumble, tumble sound.*

One last push through the weeds and Owen was standing next to it.

His mind raced.

What *was* this thing?

One end was rounded, like the nose of an airplane.

On the other end was a small propeller.

On each side was a short, stubby wing.

There was a small propeller on each stubby wing.

Was this an airplane?

Owen didn't think so.

The wings weren't big enough.

There were no wheels, just a flat, box-shaped bottom.

Besides, it was surely too small to be an airplane.

Owen could stand on tiptoe and see right over the top of it.

Then what was it?

Owen walked around it, studying it carefully. There was an enclosed compartment with three large windows in the front and one round, bubble-shaped window on each side.

In back of the enclosed compartment was a hollowed-out space. Strapped inside the space were four large tanks, like the kind that scuba divers use.

Painted on one side of the red thing, just under the bubble-shaped window, was a dolphin. A silvery dolphin swimming through blue ocean waves.

Above the dolphin, in swirling black letters, was written:

## *Water Wonder 4000*

"A submarine!" Owen whispered.

This red thing that had fallen off the train was a submarine!

Owen peered through the windows. Inside was an instrument panel with a few glass-covered dials, some switches, and a joystick. In front of the instrument panel were two small seats.

A submarine just big enough for two people!

Owen had never seen anything like it.

He ran his hand along the side of the submarine, feeling the smooth metal, tracing the dolphin, brushing dirt off the rounded nose up front, turning the little propeller in back. He examined the top. There were a

few small dents here and there. Some scratches in the shiny red paint. But other than that, the Water Wonder 4000 looked perfect.

Owen's heart was racing.

*Wait . . .*

*. . . just wait . . .*

*. . . until Travis and Stumpy saw this!*

Owen dashed across the yard toward the woods, followed by Travis and Stumpy. Pete and Leroy galloped along beside them, barking happily.

"Where are y'all going?"

Viola's voice sliced through the air.

Owen stopped.

Travis and Stumpy stopped.

Pete and Leroy ran in circles around them.

Owen's face twitched.

His fingers fluttered.

His feet bounced.

*Why, why, why* did Viola always have to show up at the wrong time?

He could hardly wait to show Travis and Stumpy the little red submarine.

He had told them he'd found the thing that had

fallen off the train, but he hadn't told them what it was.

He wanted to surprise them.

But now Viola was here, ruining everything like she always did.

"We're going to the pond to catch some snakes," Owen said. "Wanna come?"

Viola marched toward them, clomping across the yard in flowered rubber rain boots. "You are not," she said.

"We are, too," Travis said. "And then we're gonna dig up some big, fat worms for Tooley. Those slimy gray ones that live in the mud down there by the pond."

Viola narrowed her eyes and set her mouth in a thin, hard line. "Fibber," she said.

Owen couldn't keep still. He bounced from foot to foot.

"Come on with us, Viola," he said. "You can stick your arm down in the water and touch Tooley. If you're lucky, you won't get any leeches stuck on you."

"There's no leeches in that pond," Viola said.

Owen made a little *pfft* sound and rolled his eyes. "You think you know everything, but you don't," he said.

He nodded toward Travis. "Tell Viola about the leeches," he said.

Travis stared at Owen.

Owen winked a teeny tiny little wink and said, "You know, the *leeches*?"

"Oh!" Travis said. "You mean them nasty, slimy, squishy, juicy leeches that stick on you and suck all your blood out?"

Owen nodded solemnly. "Yep. That's the ones."

"There's leeches down there, all right," Travis said. "Gerald Asher's brother went fishing down there once and got a leech this big stuck on him." Travis held his hands out about a foot apart, then widened them a tad, then widened them a tad more until that leech was about a yard long.

Stumpy snorted with laughter and Owen shot him a look.

"Y'all must think I'm stupid," Viola said, resting one hand on her hip and cocking her head. Her voice had that usual know-it-all sound to it, but Owen was delighted to see that she had turned a little pale.

"We might even feed some leeches to Tooley," he said.

“Bullfrogs don’t eat leeches,” Viola said. “Besides, that frog does *not* want to be named Tooley. Trust me.” She brushed a strand of hair out of her face and added, “*And* he should *not* be living in a cage.”

Owen couldn’t stand it another minute. The only thing left to do was to holler “Rocket!”



## CHAPTER ELEVEN

Just when Owen thought he could finally show Travis and Stumpy the submarine, Earlene's voice came thundering through the trees.

"Owen Jester!"

"Dang." Owen peeked out from under the branches of the oak tree tepee.

"Owen Jester!"

"Dang," Owen said again. Just when they had finally ditched Viola, here was Earlene messing things up.

"Owen Jester!" Earlene's voice was harsh and sharp.

"Coming!" Owen hollered.

*Thunk.*

*Thunk.*

Owen kicked the leg of his chair.

*Swirl.*

*Swirl.*

He circled his fork around on his plate, leaving a trail in the cold gravy.

“But why can’t I just go check on Tooley?” he said.

His father shot him a stern glare.

His mother let out a heaving sigh.

Earlene harrumphed by the stove.

Owen hated Wednesday nights.

On Wednesday nights, the Jesters went to Fork Creek Baptist Church for Bible study.

Owen didn’t care for Bible study.

He could never remember the Bible passages that he was supposed to recite.

He felt stupid acting out the parts in the Bible story skits.

He hated standing in a circle around the piano singing hymns.

*Thunk.*

*Thunk.*

Owen kicked the leg of his chair again.

*This little light of mine,*

*I’m gonna let it shine.*

Owen glanced around him.

All the other children were singing.

Miss Nora Haskins was playing the piano.

A couple of the goody-goody girls were clapping their hands and swaying from side to side.

Owen tugged at the stiff collar of his shirt and moved his mouth, pretend-singing.

He was good at pretend-singing.

*Let it shine,*

*Let it shine,*

*Let it shine.*

Owen's mind wandered.

Actually, it wasn't so much wandering as it was darting.

Back and forth.

Sometimes his mind darted to Tooley. Owen pictured the bullfrog sitting on the log inside the cage in the pond.

All alone.

Sad?

There was that niggles again.

Other times, his mind darted to the submarine.

The Water Wonder 4000.

Nestled there in the bushes below the train tracks.

Then the niggles about Tooley turned into a whirl of excitement about the submarine.

Owen could hardly wait to show it to Travis and Stumpy.

But here he was, standing in a circle, pretending.

"Amen!" Miss Nora Haskins sang out with one last, grand flourish of her fingers on the piano keys.

"Amen!" all the other children echoed.

"Amen," Owen muttered under his breath.

"Tell Grampa about the frog," Owen's mother said.

"Um, well . . ." Owen glanced at his grandfather's brown-spotted hand, resting on top of the pale blue blanket. Every now and then, his gnarly fingers twitched.

"I finally caught that big ole bullfrog down at Graham Pond." Owen's grandfather hadn't felt well enough to have visitors for a while, so Owen hadn't been able to tell him about Tooley.

He watched his grandfather's face.

Was he sleeping?

His grandfather took a wheezy breath in.

He let a wheezy breath out.

"And me and Travis and Stumpy made a cage for him out of that chicken wire in the barn," Owen said.

The stale air in the bedroom smelled like medicine and furniture polish.

Owen's mother fiddled with the blanket and fluffed the pillow.

Owen's grandfather's mouth turned up a teeny bit at the corners.

A smile?

"His name is Tooley Graham," Owen said.

His grandfather drew in a sharp breath and let out a gravelly "Huh!"

Then he opened his eyes and looked at Owen and nodded a little bit.

"Viola says he's sad, but you know how dumb she is."

"Owen!" His mother frowned over at him.

"Well, she is."

Owen's grandfather said "Huh!" again.

So Owen spent the rest of the evening sitting beside his grandfather's bed, telling him about Tooley.

He told him how there were a lot of bullfrogs in Graham Pond but that Tooley was the biggest and

greenest and had a heart-shaped red spot between his eyes. He told him about how long it had taken to catch him and how he had made the two frog houses (the inside one and the outside one) and then the perfect chicken-wire cage down in the pond. He told him about how he and Travis and Stumpy caught crickets and flies and mosquitoes for him, but how Tooley didn't seem to have much of an appetite.

Owen's grandfather seemed to enjoy the conversation.

He even chuckled one time.

Owen told his grandfather everything he could think of to tell him . . .

. . . except . . .

. . . he did not tell him about the Water Wonder 4000.

That submarine was the biggest, most fantastic secret Owen had ever had in his whole life and he wasn't sharing it with anyone except Travis and Stumpy.

Owen was relieved when he finally saw the moon glowing in the darkening sky outside the bedroom window, signaling the end of the day.

First thing tomorrow, Owen was taking Travis and Stumpy down to the tracks to see the submarine.

## CHAPTER TWELVE

Whoa!" Travis said, thwacking his forehead with the palm of his hand.

"Whoa!" Stumpy said, arching his eyebrows in surprise.

Owen crossed his arms and grinned. "Know what it is?" he said.

Travis studied the little red submarine, peering in the windows, examining the scuba tanks.

Stumpy walked around it, patting the smooth metal sides, pushing on the propeller in the back.

"It's a submarine!" Owen said.

Travis shook his head in wonder.

Stumpy's jaw dropped.

The three boys chattered excitedly as they examined the Water Wonder 4000.

The rounded nose in front.

The stubby wings with the propellers on the sides.

The windowed compartment on top.

The little propeller in the back.

The scuba tanks.

Owen climbed up onto one of the stubby little wings and then crawled onto the top of the submarine, grinning down at Travis and Stumpy.

He was sure he had never, not ever, not even once, seen anything as perfectly, fantastically cool.

He jumped down off of the submarine, landing in the leaves with an *oomph*.

"Hey, wait a minute!" he said. "Where's the hatch?"

"The hatch?" Travis said.

"Yeah, you know, the *hatch*." Owen stood on tiptoe and ran his hand along the top. "How do you get in this thing?"

The boys looked and felt and studied, and then Owen dropped to his hands and knees and examined the bottom of the submarine.

"There!" he said. "You crawl up in there!" He pointed to an opening in the bottom.

The three boys knelt in the dirt and weeds and peered into the opening.



"I'm going in," Owen said.

He crawled in and pulled himself up inside the Water Wonder 4000.

"What's in there?" Stumpy called through the opening.

The inside of the submarine was small and cozy. There was just enough room for Owen to sit on one of the seats and reach the instrument panel in front. He touched the joystick. Ran his fingers over the dials.

"Can you see me?" Owen called, pressing his face against the bubble-shaped window.

Travis and Stumpy appeared beside the submarine and gave Owen a thumbs-up.

Owen grinned out at them. He tried to imagine being underwater, zipping along the ocean floor, maneuvering in and out of coral reefs, gliding among the dolphins, zooming up and down with the sharks.

He let out a satisfied "Ahhh."

Pure joy.

But Owen's moment of pure joy came to a sudden, screeching halt.

Outside the window of the submarine, Travis and Stumpy were gesturing wildly, pointing up toward the

train tracks, and mouthing the one word that Owen, in his moment of pure joy, most definitely did not want to hear:

*Viola.*

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Owen scrambled out of the submarine.

The boys poked each other and gestured and scurried behind a tangle of bushes.

"Owen, Travis, and Stumpy!" Viola called.

Owen put his finger to his lips and peeked out from behind the bushes. Viola was up on the train tracks above them.

He ducked back behind the bushes, his heart pounding and his stomach knotted with dread. He sent a silent message up through the trees to Viola:

*Please, please, please . . .*

*Please don't see the submarine.*

He peeked out again. Viola took a few steps.

Owen waited.

Was she leaving?

Viola stopped.

Owen waited.

"Your frog is sick, Owen," Viola called out, pushing at her glasses.

Owen's dread-filled stomach did a somersault.

*Tooley!*

He had been so excited about showing Travis and Stumpy the Water Wonder 4000 that morning that he hadn't even thought about checking on Tooley.

*Niggle.*

*Niggle.*

Owen looked at Travis and Stumpy. They stared back, wide-eyed, waiting.

Owen put his finger to his lips again.

And then he heard the sweet sound of Viola's sandals on the gravelly ground beside the tracks . . .

. . . walking away.

*Phew!*

When Owen was fairly certain that she was gone, he motioned for Travis and Stumpy to follow him. Then he scrambled up the side of the slope to the edge of the tracks. Viola was way off in the distance, running toward home.

"She's been to the pond!" Travis said with an

indignant stamp of his foot. "I thought you said she wouldn't never go down to the pond."

Owen let out a sigh and shook his head. "I didn't think she would."

"And you said she wouldn't never come back here to the railroad tracks," Travis said.

Owen shrugged. What could he say?

"What if she goes back to the pond and lets Tooley out of the cage?" Stumpy said.

"Naw, she wouldn't do that," Owen said. But his voice didn't sound nearly as convincing as he wanted it to.

Owen could only hope that the one good thing about Viola—her allergies—would kick in big-time and keep her away.

"Okay, listen," he said. "Here's what we gotta do. We gotta cover the submarine with branches and leaves and stuff so nobody will see it."

Travis and Stumpy nodded.

"Then," Owen said, "we gotta go check on Tooley."

Owen stroked Tooley's back. The bullfrog blinked.

One slow blink.

"Aw, he ain't sick," Travis said.

“Viola’s dumb,” Stumpy said.

Owen held Tooley up and examined his stomach, his throat, his legs.

The bullfrog wasn’t quite as green as he used to be.

His throat wasn’t quite as yellow as it used to be.

The heart-shaped spot between his eyes wasn’t quite as red as it used to be.

*Niggle.*

*Niggle.*

“Maybe we should catch another frog to keep him company,” Travis said.

“Maybe he needs a bigger cage,” Stumpy said.

Owen put Tooley back in the cage and shut the lid. The frog climbed up on the log and stared out at the pond with dull yellow eyes.

“Let’s go scoop up some water bugs over yonder on the other side of the pond,” Owen said.

That night, Owen sat by his bedroom window.

The soft, steady chirp of crickets drifted up from the garden below.

Way off in the distance, a dog barked.

And then Owen heard a sound that made him sit up straighter and cock his head.

The deep *r-u-u-u-m-m-m* of a bullfrog.

Owen's heart did a little flip.

Was that Tooley?

Tooley making a bullfrog sound?

*R-u-u-u-m-m-m.*

There it was again.

And then . . .

. . . another frog joined in at the same time . . .

. . . and then another . . .

. . . until there seemed to be a whole chorus of bullfrogs.

Owen's niggles turned into a punch.

*Ooomph!*

Because Owen realized that all the other bullfrogs down there in the pond were free. Pushing their froggy legs through the dark water under the starry sky.

Calling out their froggy songs from a moonlit log.

But not Tooley.

Tooley was sitting glumly in his perfect cage.

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

After dumping a jar full of bugs through the chicken wire of Tooley's cage, Owen raced over to Tupelo Road to Stumpy's house.

A sprinkler *chug, chug, chugged* in circles in the yard while Owen, Travis, and Stumpy sat on the porch steps and talked about the submarine.

"Should we tell somebody about it?" Stumpy said.

Owen and Travis stared at Stumpy in disbelief.

Travis smacked him on the arm. "Heck, no!" he said.

"Not yet, anyways," Owen said.

Every now and then, Joleen Berkus appeared at her front door and glared over at the boys.

"I say we get that thing into the pond and go for a ride," Owen said.



"Heck, yeah!" Travis slapped his knee.

Stumpy frowned. "I don't know."

"Then stay home, diaper-head baby," Travis said.  
"Me and Owen'll do it, right, Owen?"

Owen's mind raced.

Could they really get the submarine into the pond?

How in the world would they get it there?

And even if they got it there, could they actually figure out how to make it run?

Could they *really* zip along under the water, gazing out at the pond from the bubble-shaped windows?

Owen nodded slowly. "Yeah," he said. "We *will* do it."

He and Travis slapped each other a high five and looked at Stumpy.

"You in or you out?" Owen said, holding his palm up.

Stumpy hesitated.

Then he slowly lifted his hand and lightly tapped Owen's palm with his own. "I'm in."

The boys huddled together up in the hayloft of the barn the rest of the morning, planning how they would get the Water Wonder 4000 down to the pond.

The good news was that the submarine was on the same side of the train tracks as the pond.

The bad news was that the submarine was probably heavy.

Real heavy.

The other bad news was that there were a lot of bushes and small scrub pines between the submarine and the pond.

The boys made lists of possible ways they could get the submarine down to the pond, like

*Put the submarine on a wagon.*

and

*Pull the submarine behind a riding lawn mower.*

Then they made lists of supplies they might need, like rope and chains and bungee cords.

Sometimes the idea of getting the submarine into the pond seemed like the greatest idea Owen had ever had.

Other times, it seemed stupid and impossible.

Then there was the problem of actually driving the submarine. Could they really figure out how to do it?

As if he had read Owen's mind, Travis said, "Do you think we can figure out how to make that sub run?"

Owen shrugged. "There's not that many switches

inside. Maybe we can just fiddle around with them a little bit."

"Maybe there's instructions somewhere," Stumpy said.

Owen and Travis stared at Stumpy.

Stumpy never had good ideas.

Stumpy never thought of stuff before Travis and Owen did.

But now he had.

"Instructions!" Owen said. "Yeah! I bet there's instructions somewhere!"

Owen and Travis high-fived Stumpy, and they all hurried out of the hayloft, whistled for Pete and Leroy, and raced across the yard, through the woods, and around the pond to the train tracks.

They scrambled down the slope toward the submarine.

And then . . .

. . . they stopped.

There in front of them, standing next to the Water Wonder 4000, staring through thick glasses with red-rimmed eyes, was Viola.