

SNAKE FOOD



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Chapter Two

WHERE'S UNCLE AUSTIN?

“Hey Livvie, wake up.” Theo poked his sister gently. “We’re almost there.” They had been on the train for sixteen hours and the constant clackety-clack sound and the swaying motion of the train had made Olivia a bit queasy. She’d spent the whole trip either reading or sleeping, and when she was awake she was overly moody.

Theo told her that she was being too crabby and stayed away from her for most of the trip. He had great fun roaming the

train and stuffing himself with snacks from the dining car. He met two brothers who were going to visit their grandparents and the three of them spent a few hours playing Gin Rummy and a card game they taught him called Spit, until his new friends got off the train at their stop.

The conductor had announced that in fifteen minutes they’d arrive at the Bedford Falls Station. Theo decided that he’d better go back to their seats and wake up his sister. He hoped Olivia’s mood would improve soon. Livvie was a lot of fun when she was in a good mood, but she was tough to deal with when she was playing the role of drama queen.

“What have you been doing? You’re absolutely filthy, Theo!” Olivia rubbed her eyes. “I can’t even tell you have freckles, your face is so grubby.”

“I’ve been having a great time while you’ve been sleeping, Miss Lazybones. Now get up. Here, I brought you a snack.” Theo tossed a package of salted peanuts onto his sister’s lap.

“Thanks, Theo.” Olivia opened the package and began munching. Theo peered out the window at the changing scenery. They were in the country; the train had been passing herds of cows and corn fields for several miles. Theo could tell that they were getting closer to the ocean from the increasing numbers of gulls and sandpipers in the swampy lowlands the train was passing through.

“The conductor said we have fifteen minutes to Bedford Falls,” said Theo. “Let’s take our bags to the exit door and wait for our stop.”

Olivia shoved her book into her backpack and reached for her suitcase on the luggage rack. Theo is annoyingly cheerful, she thought as she gathered her sweater and stuffed it into her suitcase.

Theo was waiting by the doors in the vestibule when Olivia arrived, dragging her luggage behind her. She stood watching the farmhouses going by and had to admit to herself that the countryside was very pretty. Maybe it won’t be so bad after all, she thought. At last, the train chugged into a small, charming town. “Bedford Falls,” called the conductor. The train slowed and when it stopped, Theo and Olivia were the only passengers to step onto the station’s deserted platform.

Bedford Falls was nestled along the edge of a small bay on the New England coast. On this June morning a brisk breeze sent big puffy clouds across the bright blue sky. The train station was on a low hill overlooking the town’s streets that curved lazily toward the white-capped bay. Olivia took out her camera and snapped a

few shots from various angles. Theo tried the door to the small wooden station, but it was locked.

Several minutes passed while they explored the area. Finally Olivia looked at her watch. They had stepped off the train at nine a.m.; now it was almost ten. “I wonder where Uncle Austin is,” Olivia said. “Wasn’t he supposed to pick us up at the station?”

“That’s what Mom and Dad said.”

“Well, the mad scientist uncle is late! This is so typical! I knew this whole idea was stupid. I wonder what Mom and Dad would think now!”

“There’s no need to be in such a bad mood, Livvie. Lighten up.”

“Oh, be quiet, Theo!”

The brother and sister sank into a silence that became more uneasy as time went by. The early summer air was brisk and cool. Olivia pulled on her sweater and took a seat on the platform bench at a spot where it was still in the sun but out of the wind. She read for a few minutes before checking the time on her wristwatch. Two hours had passed. It was time to do something, but she wasn’t quite sure what.

“I don’t think Uncle Austin is coming, Theo. Maybe there was a mix-up and he got the time confused.”

“Didn’t Mom write down his phone number and address?” asked Theo. Olivia dug through her backpack and brought out the large envelope her mother had given her when she and Dad kissed them good-bye at the train station. Inside were two smaller envelopes. One was labeled “IMPORTANT INFORMATION” in her mother’s bold handwriting. Olivia opened it and took out a card with Uncle Austin’s phone number and address written on it, and a letter from their mother. Olivia read it aloud to Theo:

Dear Olivia and Theo,

Dad and I already miss you terribly. Please remember to write us a letter once in a while. We will call you at least once a week to check on you. Also, you can use the number I've written on the back of this letter if you need to contact us. You'll have to leave a message at that number, and we will call you at Uncle Austin's as soon as we get your message.

Please be responsible and take care of each other this summer. Remember to brush your teeth morning and night, and be sure to practice the buddy system when you go swimming or sailing. Be polite and helpful to Uncle Austin's housekeeper.

Olivia, honey, don't stay up all night reading. You know it makes you tired and grouchy the next day. Theo, please don't tease your sister, and Olivia, the same goes for you. I've enclosed an envelope with money in it for both of you. Olivia should be in charge of the cash because you tend to lose things, Theo dear.

We love you both very much. Be good, and have fun.

Love,

Mom and Dad

P.S. from Dad: I took tennis lessons at the Bedford Falls Clubhouse. Check to see if the lessons are still available and sign up for them. Both of you could benefit from tennis lessons, and it's a good way to meet people.

All my love, Dad

Olivia folded the letter up and put it back in the envelope. She pulled her cell phone from her backpack and flipped the cover open. "Oh-oh, it says there's no service available. Try yours, Theo."

"I would if I could," said Theo, who'd had his phone

confiscated for the summer because of his constantly playing games on it when he was supposed to be doing his homework or his chores.

"Oh, yeah," said Olivia, remembering how mad Theo had been when their dad had taken his phone away. "And don't for one second think that you're going to use mine," she said, tucking the phone back into her pack. Theo made a face at her, and she made one back, and then they both laughed at each other and the whole situation.

A few minutes passed while both of them roamed around the station once again. Finally, Olivia pointed to the pay phone on the wall of the locked station. "Look, Theo, we're in luck. Do you have any spare change handy?"

Theo found a couple of quarters in his pocket and handed them to her. "Now you owe me a dollar fifty."

Olivia rolled her eyes at him as she fed the phone the quarters and dialed Uncle Austin's number. The phone rang and rang. Olivia frowned. "No one is answering,"

"Try again. Maybe you dialed the wrong number."

"Here, you try Theo." Olivia handed him the phone and they traded places. Theo punched in the number carefully and let the phone ring twenty times before he hung up.

"Maybe he's on his way to pick us up," said Theo.

"I'd think he would be here by now. Mom said he lived just a few miles out of town." Olivia walked across the platform and looked in all directions to see if a car was approaching. The minutes ticked by.

Theo took out his slingshot and launched a few rocks at the trunk of a dead oak tree. "Now what?" he said.

"We should call a taxi." Olivia picked up the phone book

that hung from a metal ring attached to the shelf beneath the phone. She found a listing for Bedford Express Taxi and dialed. A gravelly voice answered, "Bedford Express at your service. How can I help you?" Olivia made arrangements quickly and hung up the phone.

"The cab will be here in ten minutes."

"Good," said Theo, "I'm hungry."

"You're always hungry."

"What do you think we should do if the taxi takes us to Uncle Austin's house and no one is home?"

"We'll just have to break in," said Olivia.

"Livvie, I'm serious."

Olivia sighed and pulled her book out of her backpack. "I suppose we'll figure that out when we get there." She settled on the same wide bench and passed a pleasant ten minutes reading the next chapter.

At last, a battered old taxi pulled up, and the driver, a man with leathery, wrinkled skin and mutton chop whiskers, got out and opened the trunk. Theo lifted their bags into the hold. "Where are you going?" asked the cabdriver. When Olivia gave him Uncle Austin's name and address he said, "You mean Professor Hazelsmith's house?" Olivia nodded. "Yep, I know where that is."

The cab turned onto a narrow road and climbed a small hill. "It's a mighty nice day," said Theo to the cabdriver.

"Yep, I reckon it is." The old man scratched a bald patch on his head. "Are you kin to the professor?"

"He's our great uncle," said Theo. "We're spending the summer here."

"Well, fancy that!" The old man craned his neck over his shoulder to peer at them. "The professor hasn't had any

young-uns around since his nephew Aaron visited, and that was years ago!"

"Aaron is our father," Olivia said.

"Why of course, now I can see the resemblance. You've got the same reddish blonde hair as your dad. How is Aaron?"

"He's fine," said Theo. "He and my mom are spending the summer in Africa, and we're here to visit Uncle Austin."

"Well, I'm mighty happy to hear that. I bet that it gets kinda lonely for Austin, out here all alone. You'll be welcome company, I'm sure." The taxi driver and his passengers fell silent for a minute. Olivia flipped her cell phone open and tried to send a text message to Paige, but the no service available message flashed across the screen. The cabdriver glanced at her and chuckled. "You'll find those newfangled phones won't work in Bedford Falls. It's too small a town and stuck off by itself, out here on the bay like it is."

"You've got to be kidding! No cell phone service at all?" said Olivia.

"Nope. Bedford Falls is what they call 'off the grid'. Out here, you just gotta get by using the telephone, like us old timers." He smiled cheerfully.

Bad luck, thought Olivia. I can't even call Paige or Savannah. She peered grimly out of the car window at the thickly wooded road. Soon, it narrowed to one lane, the sides crowded by trees leafing into a million shades of spring green. There were no houses, farms or fields to break what seemed to Olivia like endless forest. Olivia had pictured a friendly neighborhood with family homes and children playing in their yards, not lonely wilderness.

"Does anybody live up here?" she asked the driver.

"Just the professor and his housekeeper, and some other fella who helps in the laboratory."

Olivia's heart sank and a wave of homesickness swept over her. She wondered what her friends were doing back home, and when she thought about Danny Wheeler she felt like crying. When she and Theo had said goodbye to their parents, Olivia softened her attitude at the last moment and hugged both of them. "Promise me you'll try to be positive and make the best of things, sweetheart." Olivia had nodded and kissed her mother on the cheek. Her dad had held her in a bear hug and kissed the top of her head, and she told both her parents how much she loved them and would miss them. "Be extra careful, and hurry back," she'd said. Now she wanted to yell at her parents for sending them to such a far away spot where she couldn't even send a text message, for heaven's sake!

The taxi turned down a long driveway lined with graceful elm trees and stopped in front of an enormous three story house with two curved towers jutting up on both sides of a steep slate roof. Theo's eyes widened and he whistled admiringly. "I didn't realize that Uncle Austin lived in a mansion."

"Yep, it's a mighty nice house," agreed the cab driver. "It has quite a history. I believe it was built in the 1860s, and of course your uncle has added on to it."

The driver opened the trunk and lifted out their baggage. "That'll be \$15.80."

Olivia gave him a twenty dollar bill from the money their parents had given them. "Go ahead and keep the change." The driver thanked her politely, wished them good day, and drove off, leaving Theo and Olivia and their pile of luggage in the middle of Uncle Austin's circular driveway.

"This isn't looking good." Theo pointed to the shuttered windows which gave the house the appearance of being empty. "Uncle Austin doesn't seem to be home."

"There's only one way to find out." Olivia lifted the handle

of the brass knocker shaped like a lion's head and rapped it sharply against the huge, beautifully carved oak door. They waited but no one answered. She rapped a second time.

He tried to peer through the slats in the shutters, but he couldn't see anything. "Maybe Uncle Austin is asleep."

"At one in the afternoon? I doubt it." Olivia paused and grinned mischievously. "Maybe he's dead," she said in her spookiest voice.

"That isn't the least bit funny, Livvie." Theo lifted the heavy knocker and banged it. "Hello," he shouted, "is anyone home?"

Suddenly, the door swung open. A tall, shapely woman with a sharp nose and carrot-red hair knotted into a messy bun stood in the doorway. A pair of wire framed glasses sat on the end of her nose and had the effect of magnifying her close-set brown eyes. Her arms were tightly crossed over a gray silk robe, and Olivia had the impression that she'd just woken up. "May I help you?" She eyed them suspiciously. Her accented voice was harsh and unfriendly. Olivia couldn't quite figure out what country she was from and made a mental note to ask Theo's opinion.

"Uh, hi." Theo offered his hand. The woman did not take it. "I'm Theodore Hazelsmith and this is my sister Olivia. We're here to visit our Great Uncle Austin. This is his place, isn't it?"

The red-haired woman eyed their pile of luggage. "It is Professor Hazelsmith's home, but I know nothing of this visit," she said, her voice sharp and unwelcoming.

"He was supposed to pick us up at the train station," said Olivia, "but I guess he forgot or something."

The woman's eyes widened ever so slightly. "Just a minute please." She slammed the door shut.

Olivia looked at Theo and raised her eyebrows. "This all seems pretty weird to me so far. What do you think, Theo?"

"It does seem strange."

“Maybe we should leave.”

“Where would we go?” asked Theo.

“The police station might be a possibility, or the nearest orphanage?” Olivia giggled.

“Since when did you decide to be a stand-up comic, Livvie? Your act isn’t very funny.”

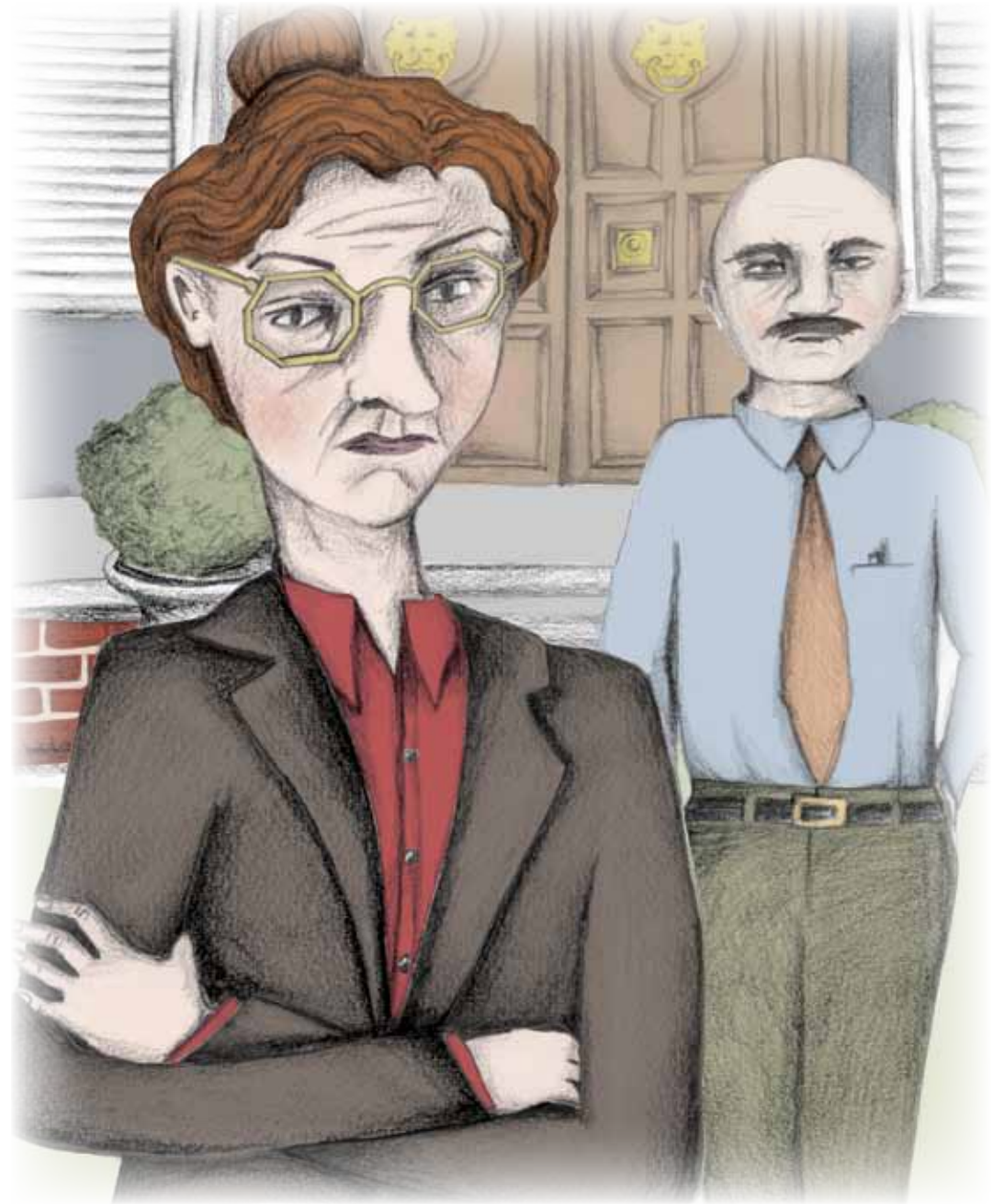
“Oh, chill out.” Olivia grinned at him and ruffled his hair.

They waited nervously for the unfriendly woman to reappear. After what seemed like a long time, the door swung open and the woman stepped out. She had changed from her robe to a businesslike black suit and had tidied her hair. At her side stood a thin, bony man with a rough, pockmarked complexion. He was completely bald but the lack of hair on his head was made up for by a pair of extremely bushy eyebrows that looked like caterpillars crawling across his forehead. He wore a matching mustache on his upper lip.

“I apologize for closing the door on you before,” the woman said in a friendlier voice. “I am Professor Hazelsmith’s housekeeper, Mrs. Zelinsky, and this is Mr. Trokov, the professor’s laboratory assistant.”

“A pleasure to meet you both.” The man bowed from the waist. “You may call me Vladimir.”

Olivia noticed that he spoke with the same accent as Mrs. Zelinsky. What nationality are they, she wondered; Hungarian, or maybe Turkish? She and Theo introduced themselves and shook hands with the strange couple. The housekeeper broke the awkward silence that followed. “Well, come in, come in,” she said, and Olivia could tell that though she was trying to sound pleasant, Mrs. Zelinsky was not happy about their sudden appearance.



Lena Zelinsky and Vladimir Trokov

SNAKE FOOD

“In my opinion, the whole thing sucks!” says Olivia Hazelsmith when she finds out that she and her brother, Theo, are being sent away to spend the summer with their Uncle Austin.

What Olivia doesn’t know is that she and Theo are about to embark on a perilous, rip-roaring adventure that will change their lives.

Plunged into a web of unexpected danger, the siblings ultimately solve a mystery, save their captive uncle, and prevent his secret formulas from becoming a dire world threat.

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