

A Night to Remember

“Can you believe this?” yelled Madelyn as she ran out of the cottage into the back yard, followed closely by her twin brother, Arthur. As they ran in circles, catching thick snowflakes on their tongues, Arthur suddenly stopped. Looking up at the white sky, he said, “Snow in the middle of August—on our birthday—this planet’s gone mad.”

Thwack! A snowball hit the back of Arthur’s head, shaking him from his momentary reverie. “You’re going to pay dearly for that, Sis,” he yelled.

A delighted shriek of laughter responded from the orchard—the chase was on.

After an hour of all-out snow combat, the wet, cold and exuberant twins were interrupted by a familiar female voice calling them to dinner. One last surge of energy sent them speeding towards the back door of the cottage. Ever competitive with each other, the twins burst into the kitchen, shoving each other aside wildly.

“Now then, you two. None of that in my kitchen,” came the friendly reprimand from Grandma Lottie. The kitchen smelled heavenly of freshly baked bread and some kind of soup. “Arthur, go and get your father.”

“Aww! Why me?” complained Arthur.

“Because you were the first one through the door, dearie,” replied Grandma Lottie with one of her sweet, mysterious smiles; the kind she always gave when she was answering a question, but not really making any sense.

Arthur wandered down the honeycomb of corridors in the old cottage, munching on a piece of warm bread with a healthy dollop of butter. He was a boy of average height and build, and walked with a loose awkward gait customary to males in their early teenage years. A thick crop of blond hair sat atop a face that had the makings of handsomeness—a finely shaped nose, a chiselled jaw and piercing jade-green eyes.

Arriving at the top of the stone stairway leading to the basement, Arthur waited and took a deep breath before descending. What mood would his father be in? Recently, Madelyn and Arthur had taken to calling the basement “the dungeon.” The famous inventor, Dr. Hayden St. Clair, spent virtually all his time there and was rarely seen, except for enforced meal-times.

Arthur quietly pushed the door open and stepped inside. The basement was the working laboratory for all his father’s ingenious experiments and devices. An Aladdin’s cave of “Solutions for a better future”—a slogan he had once coined back when his days were happier and he met life with enthusiasm. All kinds of award-winning and much sought-after patented contraptions littered the tables and shelves in a haphazard way.

One solitary lamp failed miserably to light the vast space, giving the basement a twilight feeling that was mildly spooky. Sitting motionless at his workbench, Father gazed into space, a well-worn photograph resting tenderly in his outstretched palm. His crumpled posture hid the fact that he was a tall man with broad shoulders and a lean, well-defined musculature. Unkempt greying-brown hair fell across his ruggedly handsome face, concealing the St. Clair family trait—piercing jade-green eyes—that for now were bloodshot from a silent struggle with tears that knew no end.

“Er...Dad. Sorry to interrupt, but dinner’s on the table,” said Arthur quietly.

“What? Oh! It’s you, Arthur. You startled me. Lost in thoughts, you know...”

Yes, Arthur did know. His father was lost in more than just his thoughts these days. Since the untimely death of his wife, Krista, six months ago, Hayden St. Clair had all but ground to a halt and ceased to exist. Krista St. Clair had been beautiful and wickedly humorous, with a keen intelligence outmatched only by her deep intuition and healing abilities; she had also been just a really great mother. It still didn’t make any sense to Arthur that her life could be ended—so abruptly, so pointlessly—by a drunk driver who had staggered away from the scene of the crime unscathed, leaving no trace of identity, no face to blame, no person to visualize and hate until eternity. If he ever found out who was responsible...

“Right then,” said Father, ruffling his son’s hair absently and making Arthur jump out of his skin. “Let’s see what Grandma Lottie’s concocted for us this evening, shall we?”

“Er, yeah. She doesn’t cook like Mum did.” The words were out before he caught himself. Arthur bit his lip and cursed quietly to himself, *Damn! Why can’t I keep my big mouth shut around Dad?* He glanced hesitantly at his father, who replied with a sigh and a nod of agreement.

They walked quietly back to the kitchen, each lost in his own private thoughts. The only sound was the steady tic-tock of the old grandfather clock in the hallway, and as they passed by, the clock suddenly sprang to life with a resounding *dong!* Completely taken by surprise, Father clutched at his chest and Arthur visibly jumped in the air; they looked at each other and burst out laughing.

Arthur was relieved by his father’s lighter mood, and as they walked into the kitchen, it appeared the festivities were only just beginning. Grandma

Lottie and Madelyn were dancing raucously to some Scottish highland music. Balloons and Christmas crackers littered the large, circular dining table, and brightly coloured streamers hung from every elevated position in the kitchen.

The dancers made an interesting pair. Madelyn was young, vivacious and slender. Her long blond hair swirled as she skipped around the table, and besides her jade-green eyes, her most striking feature was a beautiful wide mouth that framed a set of pearly white teeth. Her smile had the ability to light up a room, but was mostly put to uses such as goading her brother, manipulating her way out of trouble, or getting what she wanted. Grandma Lottie was slightly taller than Madelyn, and though no one knew her exact age (Grandma Lottie would only ever say she was *well preserved*), she was spry and unusually limber. She always wore her long silvery-grey hair up in some fashion, and her complexion was smooth and clear like alabaster.

A large pot of soup sat steaming in the centre of the table, surrounded by mountains of bread rolls that Grandma Lottie was so partial to baking.

“Yee-ee!” sang a euphoric Grandma Lottie, hoisting the hem of her skirt as she danced round the table and grabbed Arthur into a feverish jig. The mood was contagious, and soon everyone was dancing about the kitchen with wild abandon. As the refrain came to a close, everyone found a chair and collapsed into it breathlessly.

“Christmas crackers—in August?” said Father. “And why so many of them?”

“I thought you liked Christmas crackers, Hayden?” asked Grandma Lottie, studying his face.

Not wanting to put a damper on the occasion he replied, “Yes, yes, of course I do.”

Grandma Lottie shuffled in her seat and moved on. “Well anyway, it’s the twins’ birthday, and there are *thirteen* crackers because the twins have

turned *thirteen* on the *thirteenth*, AND...it's snowing outside." She gave her customary sweet smile and promptly began serving piping-hot bowls of soup.

The twins exchanged amused glances.

"I love Christmas crackers any time of year!" declared Madelyn as she and Arthur grabbed opposite ends of two crackers, pulled vigorously and released two loud *cracks!* From inside Madelyn's cracker, she retrieved a golden party hat, which she placed upon her head. Then, searching inside the ends of her cracker she found her prize—a miniature Swiss Army Knife. "Nice," she said, impressed, and promptly started opening all the tools.

Arthur was now wearing his party hat, a matching golden crown, and was looking very curiously at his prize—it looked to be a miniature leather-bound book. Opening the cover of the book, he found no pages inside, but a small box containing several intricate mechanisms. A tiny key protruded from the base of the box, and Arthur began to wind it. A delicate sound emanated, and everyone listened intently to identify the tune. Finally Madelyn shouted, "Got it! Remember, Art? Mum used to sing that to us when we were little. Oh how does it go? 'I have just one wish for you...'" she began singing.

Arthur joined in, "May your every dream come true."

Everyone laughed, and then a tenderness seemed to descend over the table, as thoughts drifted to the person sadly missing from the day's festivities. Arthur placed the music box carefully in his trouser pocket.

Crack! Grandma Lottie jolted everyone's attention back to the dinner table, as another Christmas cracker met its end. She insisted on pulling two more crackers, one with each of the twins, and then attempted to wear all three party hats on top of her head, much to the twins' amusement. Her prizes consisted of a pair of dangly amethyst earrings, a miniature LED flashlight, and a small iridescent ball. She threw the earrings to Madelyn and the flashlight to Arthur, saying cheerily, "There you go."

In anticipation, the twins turned to their father. He shook his Christmas cracker playfully in front of each of his children. Madelyn grabbed wildly at it and missed. Arthur resorted to more forceful tactics; he seized his father's arm, pinned it against his chest, and quickly pulled the loose end of the cracker with all his might. The cracker exploded with a very loud *crack!* and the prize flew into the air. Father and son leaped up, but Father's longer reach won, and he promptly hid the prize under his arm, laughing victoriously. With whoops and snorts the twins attacked their father, tickling and poking him while trying to retrieve the prize.

Finally Father submitted. "OK, OK! I surrender. But the prize is mine," he said between involuntary snorts of laughter.

When everyone settled, Father opened his palm to reveal a miniature figure dressed in what looked like a futuristic space suit. The face of the figure bore an uncanny resemblance to the owner of the prize.

"Cool!" said Madelyn and Arthur, speaking simultaneously as they often did.

"Does it do anything?" asked Madelyn, moving closer to the curious little figure.

"Well, let's see," said Father, wiggling each of the figure's limbs and turning it upside down.

As he slid his finger down the spine of the spaceman there was a faint but audible *click!* The figure's arms outstretched, revealing a pair of tiny wings made of the same fabric as the space suit.

This time everyone cooed a quiet, "Wow."

Father lifted the little figure up above his head, preparing to see if it could fly. With all eyes expectantly on the spaceman, Father let go and the figure plummeted down to the table, landing unceremoniously in his glass of water with a splash.

"Boo!" wailed Madelyn.

“It’s busted!” cried Arthur.

“Maybe...” said Father “...maybe not.” He dried the little figure with his napkin and carefully placed him in his shirt pocket, giving it a little pat.

Seeing the twins’ disappointed expressions, Grandma Lottie said cheerily, “Don’t worry—you know your father can fix anything. Let’s eat!”

When all had had their fill of dinner, Grandma Lottie brought to the table a large apple pie with thirteen lit candles. Clearing her throat and gesturing vigorously with her eyes to the twins’ father, she began to sing in a loud voice, “Happy Birthday to you, Happy Birthday to you....” By the second line, Father caught on and joined in.

“Make a wish now, dears. Wish for something you *really* want,” instructed Grandma Lottie.

As the twins blew the candles out, Grandma Lottie clapped her hands in approval and once more cleared her throat. “Ahem! And now for the final clue of the day.”

The twins sat down eagerly and focused on Grandma Lottie with their undivided attention. Today, from the moment the twins had woken up, she had led them on a long drawn out treasure hunt leading them to bigger and better surprises and presents with each clue.

She continued:

“Follow the lights
Into the night;
A surprise lies ahead
When you lie in your bed.
From there on,
Nothing will be left unsaid.”

Quietly, the twins sat thinking about Grandma Lottie’s cryptic words, Arthur tapping his finger to his chin, and Madelyn twirling a strand of hair

around her finger. After only moments Arthur leaped to his feet, shouting to Madelyn, “Outside!” to which Madelyn replied, “Yes!” Bursting once more through the kitchen door, the twins disappeared into the dwindling daylight.

“What have you been up to, Lottie?” asked Father with a smile.

“Oh, you know, a bit of this and a bit of that,” she replied, smiling sweetly.

Outside, the twins discovered a path of lights shining from the ground, leading in the direction of the orchard.

“Did you see her do this?” Arthur asked.

“No, I was with her the whole time in the kitchen. Do you think Dad did it?”

“No, I was with him in the dungeon. And he was miles away, lost in thought—as usual.” Thinking about it further, Arthur continued, “No, he definitely wasn’t up to anything.”

“It’s Dotty Lottie. I know it is. I just don’t know how she did it. Oh, who cares? Come on!” declared Madelyn, throwing her arms up into the air and running off towards the path of lights.

Lingering momentarily, Arthur reached down and picked up one of the lighted objects. The small globe had some interesting characteristics: it was virtually weightless, revealing that it was not made of glass; it was cool to the touch, maybe from lying in the snow; there were no electrical cords coming out of it and he couldn’t see any filament inside, either—it definitely wasn’t electrical. *So where’s the light coming from?* he wondered. He shook it—nothing moved. *Must be one of Dad’s*, he concluded, throwing the globe up in the air like a ball, catching it and depositing it in his trouser pocket. “Oi! Wait for me!” he yelled to Madelyn, who was already disappearing into the orchard.

Madelyn slowed down as she saw where the path of lights terminated. It was their favourite hangout place—the treehouse. Madelyn stood admiring what the twins affectionately called “the Base.” Built when they were eight years old, it had given them their first taste of independence, their own space away from grown-ups, and still to this day no one was allowed inside without their permission.

To the undiscerning eye, it looked like a regular square wooden treehouse with a door, a couple of windows and a sturdy wooden ladder. The sloping roof had a hatch in it that could be opened to view the night sky, or it could be used as an alternate window to spy on unsuspecting villains.

Inside, the treehouse was furnished with a couple of old futon mattresses, blankets and lots of cushions. There was a bookshelf that held a mixture of books, paper, coloured pencils, and an assortment of glass jars containing everything from murky-looking water to dead insects. A beaten-up old wooden trunk with a big brass lock sat in one corner. This contained some of the twins’ most treasured toys, including an assortment of prototype Zero-point energy devices their father had made. The trunk remained carefully locked when not in use.

But the Base had undergone incredible enhancements over the years. Benefiting from their father’s ingenious inventions, as well as Grandma Lottie’s very specific recommendations, the Base had been insulated with nanogel, reinforced with lightweight basalt rods and was connected to a thin film solar system. It now had the strength and all-weather resilience of a small fort.

Yes, thought Madelyn to herself, *it has been worth it*. She was remembering the events of the last two months. It had all started when Grandma Lottie arrived unannounced on their doorstep one day in England. Things had been so bleak after Mum’s death. Dad had sunk into a deep depression and she and Arthur had had to do everything—shop, cook, and

clean. Upon arrival, Grandma Lottie had spent only twenty-four hours with them before concluding that things simply could not go on this way. Ten days later they were all transplanted to Mount Shasta, California, in the United States of America; home of Grandma Lottie, whom they affectionately referred to as “Dottie Lottie.” Now there was laughter again, good food and someone to care for them. But best of all, they had the Base to hang out in every day. For Madelyn, it was the one place she could be where she felt almost normal again.

“So...the last clue is the Base,” said Arthur, running up behind her. “What do you think?”

“No idea. Let’s find out.” Climbing into the Base, Madelyn immediately noticed the anomaly. “That’s new,” she said, pointing at a long purple curtain hanging on the far wall.

“What is?” asked Arthur, entering the Base behind her.

“Well, Art, it looks like a purple curtain to me,” said Madelyn as she walked towards it.

“Be careful, Mad, you don’t know what’s behind that,” cautioned Arthur, grabbing hold of Madelyn’s elbow.

“Oh, come on, scaredy cat,” said Madelyn, reaching round and grabbing Arthur’s arm and dragging him forward. “You know it’s going to be good.”

“Actually...er...no I don’t know that,” replied Arthur in a slightly raised voice.

It was no use. Madelyn had already wrestled him the short distance across the room and grabbed the side of the curtain. “Ready? Three, two, one. Ta-DA!”

Behind the curtain they discovered a door—a new door.

“Great! I hope there’s some steps or a walkway or something beyond that door. Otherwise someone’s got a sick sense of humour, ’cos it’s a long way down,” ranted Arthur.

“Oh, for goodness’ sake,” cried Madelyn. Before Arthur could think of something better to say or do, Madelyn shook him away and opened the door. Her hand flew to her mouth, stifling a gasp.

“It’s good, Mad, isn’t it?” asked Arthur as he gingerly peeked over her shoulder.

Madelyn simply nodded her head. There beyond the doorway was a connecting wooden-slatted rope walkway that spanned about six metres, and led to an entirely new treehouse tucked away in a densely treed part of the orchard. Shaking her head from side to side in awe, Madelyn stepped out onto the walkway, mumbling, “Who? How? When?”

Following closely behind, Arthur joined in the questions. “No way! How on earth did they do this? We were here all afternoon yesterday, and this place definitely did not exist.”

The twins had now reached the door to the second treehouse. Admiring the impressive new addition, they stood there quietly.

“Amazing,” muttered Madelyn.

Pushing past his sister, Arthur opened the door and went inside. “Oh...my...God! You have got to see this, Mad.”

Though the outside of the new treehouse looked conventionally square and made of wood, the inside was circular and appeared to be made of some seamless material—a metal or alloy—with an iridescent glow to it. The twins had never seen anything quite like it; even in their father’s laboratory, which, they had thought, contained everything weird and wonderful. The only furnishings were two very comfortable looking camp beds, complete with pillows and sleeping bags, and a small bedside table between the beds, on which sat another glowing orb, lighting the room softly. There were no windows and only one doorway.

Moving further inside the treehouse, the twins discovered a circular rug on the floor between the beds, and on the bedside table sat two stainless steel

water bottles and a couple of notepads with pencils. One of the notepads was propped up and had a message written on it.

Arthur read the message out loud:

“Dear Madelyn and Arthur,
If you are reading this note—well done.
You have almost solved the last clue of the day.
Your father and I have agreed,
you may spend the night outdoors.
So have fun, and enjoy.
Much love, G. L.”

Arthur sank onto the camp bed and gave a long low whistle as he continued to take in the new environment. “It feels like we’re inside a rocket, or something.”

Madelyn punched the air victoriously and shouted, “Yes!” Dancing her way round to the opposite bed, she sat down and promptly jumped back up. Underneath the sleeping bag she found a plastic bag. She shook the contents onto the bed and laughed out loud, “How does she do it?” There were the seven remaining unopened Christmas crackers from dinner, plus their other prizes.

With a series of loud *cracks!* the twins finished the Christmas crackers off. Searching through the debris of party hats and shreds of Christmas-cracker paper, they retrieved their prizes with great amusement. Scooping them all into a pile, the twins took turns choosing prizes.

Madelyn went first and chose a small pair of folding sunglasses. “How do I look?” she asked, putting them on.

“Cool,” said Arthur, nodding his head. He looked at the prizes and scratched his head, “These prizes are so unusual—and interesting. Not like

the plastic rubbish we always got in England.” For his turn, he chose a small clear crystal shaped like a finger. It fit comfortably in his hand.

Throwing her sunglasses aside and rubbing her hands together, next Madelyn chose a small black velvet pouch and inside found two slender mirrors. She looked at herself in one of them and pulled a funny face.

“Careful—you’ll crack it,” laughed Arthur, picking up a small futuristic-looking silver car. He rolled it across the bedside table to his sister, who caught it and threw it back to him.

As their stockpile of prizes dwindled, it took the twins longer to make their final choices. Madelyn decided on a small whistle made of some kind of pink stone, and blew it. Nothing happened. “Boo!” she cried, throwing it aside.

Arthur sat tapping his chin, deciding. Finally he chose a folded piece of paper. Opening it, he found a technical drawing, with symbols he couldn’t understand. Showing Madelyn the paper he said, “Some sort of instructions or something, but no kit. Weird! We’ll have to show it to Dad.”

The twins sat looking at the one remaining prize. In a dramatic gesture of generosity Madelyn said, “No. Please. I insist. You have it.”

Equally dramatically, Arthur said, “Why, thank you,” and with a small bow, picked up the last prize from the bed, and both of them burst out laughing. It was a dog biscuit shaped like a small bone.

Tired from their day’s activities, the twins lay on their camp beds. “It’s been a great day, hasn’t it?” said Arthur.

“Yeah,” agreed Madelyn, yawning.

“I just wish, you know, Mum could have been here...” Arthur’s voice trailed off. He pulled his music box out of his pocket and played a tune. This time the tune was different and unfamiliar, but soothing.

“Yeah, me too,” said Madelyn, rubbing her eyes to hide a solitary tear.

Trying to squash his stirring emotions, Arthur hurried on. “Actually, I wish today wasn’t over yet. It was great to see Dad dancing and laughing at dinner, wasn’t it? He was almost...normal.”

Seizing the opportunity to change the mood, Madelyn forced herself to laugh, saying, “Dad—normal? Those two words don’t belong in the same sentence. Anyway, who says everything’s over with? Don’t you remember Dottie Lottie’s note? She said that if we had found the note, then we had *almost* solved the last clue. I reckon there’s still something to come. I mean, think about it, this treehouse has got to be magic. Yesterday it wasn’t here, and now it is. I’m telling you, I have a strong feeling something else is going to happen.” The thought cheered Madelyn up immensely.

“You’re making me nervous, Mad,” said Arthur.

“Well, we’ll see.” Madelyn closed her eyes and in no time was fast asleep.

Arthur lay on his bed, systematically thinking through the day’s events, a practice he had developed in recent months to help him fall asleep at night. The problem was that whenever things became quiet, or slowed down too much, he was plagued with dark thoughts. Looking at Madelyn sleeping peacefully, he was envious. He wondered how she was able to do that—just close her eyes and go to sleep. They were so alike in many ways, and yet they were different.

Madelyn didn’t worry as much as he did. She was wild and often as “Mad” as her name implied. He smiled. She was a great friend, and the only one he could really talk to anymore, since Mum died. *Ah! Stop it!* he berated himself. He slapped his forehead several times, trying to dispel the tidal wave of thoughts and emotions that insisted on finding their way into his mind whenever some thought, some reference, some image of his mother arose.

Arthur applied every ounce of mental exertion he could, to make his mind go blank and his body numb. He broke into a sweat, and now it was

difficult to breathe. His chest wouldn't move. He had to get some air or he was going to die—like his mother. With one last huge effort, he lunged his body off the bed, and grabbed for the door handle. Throwing the door open, he fell onto the slats of the walkway and gulped the cool night air into his lungs. As his breathing steadied, he lowered himself carefully until his back was flat against the wooden panels. Lying there, suspended high above the ground, he realized he had to get some help with this. Maybe he would talk to Mad, tomorrow, see what she thought. Maybe he was the “mad” one after all, and with that thought he drifted off to sleep.

A short while later, Madelyn stirred. Half opening her eyes, she became aware of a light in the room. Thinking at first that it was the glowing orb, she groped around the small bedside table to find it and hide it under her pillow. The orb, however, was no longer glowing. In her sleepy state, Madelyn looked around to find the source of the brightness. With a start, she discovered a bright light in the centre of the treehouse, directly between the two camp beds. The light steadily increased in size and intensity, until it reached from the floor to the ceiling; it swirled and shimmered and emitted a faint soothing vibrational tone.

Calling out quietly to her brother, Madelyn sat up and studied the light with fascination and awe. Discovering that Arthur wasn't in his bed, a sudden fit of panic overcame her, and she yelled out his name.

Arthur awoke abruptly, responding to the alarm in his sister's voice, “I'm coming!” he yelled back. Struggling to his feet, while simultaneously discovering he was actually on a rope walkway instead of a bed, proved to be very precarious. Arthur lost his balance and plunged dangerously through a gap in the side of the rope-work. His arms flailed wildly, as he tried to grab hold of anything he could to stop his momentum. His hands found some rope, and he swung himself back onto the walkway. “I'm coming, Mad,” he yelled again, as he scrambled towards the door of the treehouse. Bursting

through the doorway, he stopped dead in his tracks when he discovered the light. “What the...? What is it, Mad?”

“I have no idea, but it’s...beautiful,” whispered Madelyn, having regained some of her calm, knowing that her brother was still there.

“Is this something to do with Dottie Lottie?”

“I don’t know—come on, let’s take a closer look.”

“No, Mad! Maybe it’s some aliens that want to abduct us,” said Arthur, gesturing to his sister to sit back down on the bed.

“You always wanted to meet an ET and ride on a spaceship. Remember that UFO we saw in Mexico, two years ago? You weren’t afraid of that,” countered Madelyn.

“Yes, well, that spaceship was a few miles away and up in the sky. And we were with Mum and Dad. This whatever-it-is is right in front of us, and inside our treehouse, and...we’re alone,” replied Arthur, struggling to stay calm.

“Well, whatever it is, it must be friendly. I mean, think about it, they could probably have whisked us away in our sleep, if they’d wanted too,” Madelyn countered again.

“Mad, don’t say things like that,” said Arthur, putting his finger to his lips and gesturing to his sister to be quiet.

“Oh, get over it, worrywort! This is really cool.”