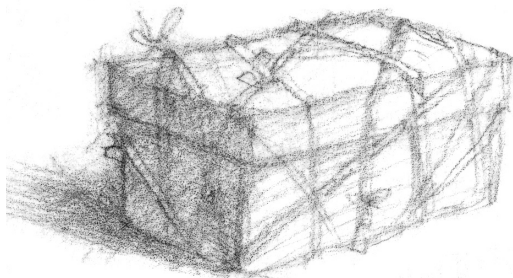


HUNTER
MORAN
SAVES
THE
UNIVERSE

Patricia Reilly Giff



Holiday House / New York

Love to my sons,
Jim and Bill . . .
who deny any resemblance to Hunter and Zack

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YEE-HA!
THE FIRST DAY
OF SUMMER.



But...

Chapter 1

We have a major problem here. And to make matters worse, sneaking out the back door is like wading through a field of land mines.

Linny watches our every move. Because she's the oldest, she thinks she's the alpha dog.

William is painting a huge mural of worlds colliding on the hall wall. Globes of paint are everywhere . . .

. . . especially on our bare feet.

"Don't screw this up," I whisper to my twin brother, Zack, my sneakers slung over my shoulder.

"I won't, Hunter." He runs one finger across his throat, then slides through a dollop of midnight blue. He keeps his mouth shut, though, as the paint oozes up between his toes.

The stakes are high. One sound before we escape and we're stuck with our five-year-old brother, Steadman, for the rest of the morning. Steadman has a mouth that closes only to chomp down on chocolate bars and potato chips.

And yes, there's Mom's soft voice coming from the

kitchen. It's a little hard to hear her. Mary is screaming in there, banging a plate on her high chair. But basically what Mom's saying is "Linny, would you check on Hunter and Zack? Maybe they'll take Steadman—"

There's only one thing to do: duck into Mom's bill-paying room. It's so sacred that Linny will never guess we're there.

I open the door an inch at a time and go in on my knees, too smart to leave footprints. Behind me, Zack hops in on one foot. A good move, but it may be too late. Blue footprints follow him all the way down the hall.

We close the door behind us and sit on the floor, hardly breathing. Next door, St. Ursula's church bells clang a bunch of times. Ten o'clock, the day is wasting away.

Mom's bill-paying room is a mess, filled with papers and bills, pictures of Pop and the six of us, an empty birdcage from Petey, who turned up his claws before Mary was born last year, and Mom's cell phone, which is ringing like crazy, alerting the whole house.

Pick it up, which we're not supposed to do? Let it ring until we're deaf? Or until Mom comes in to see who it is?

There's something wrong with this phone anyway. The static is so bad, it sounds as if a typhoon is roaring in.

Linny's circling around outside. Any minute—

Zack reaches for the phone; he lies on top of it as if it's a grenade about to explode. The sound is hardly muffled. I reach under him for it. "Hello," I whisper.

“Agent Five here,” a muffled voice says.

Who is he kidding? Or is it a she?

“Six here,” I say, listening to what sounds like a hailstorm.

“Right on,” I think the voice says. It sounds like he/she has swallowed a mouthful of stones.

I wonder if it’s one of William’s friends. Probably. They’re all weird.

“The original missing from *S-T-U*,” the voice says.

S-T-U. Ha. St. Ursula’s Church next door. “Sure,” I say.

I snicker into the phone. Zack covers his mouth.

The voice hesitates. “Dig . . .”

“What?” I say.

“Hunt—”

My name? Definitely a seventh-grade idiot in William’s class. “Hunter?” I say to help things along. I add a few explosive sounds to go with the telephone typhoon.

The caller hesitates for the barest second. “Wrong number.”

“You’re right about that, buddy,” I say.

The phone goes dead in my hands.

“So vat you tink about dat?” I say to Zack in a spy voice.

“I tink you’d better get out of Mom’s bill-paying room.” It’s Linny, alpha dog, out in the hall.

“Arf,” Zack says.

We’re caught before we can even sneak out to the funeral.

Chapter 2

What a way to start the summer! Wind whooshing all over the place, rain spitting at us, a plane taking off from Sturgis Air Force Base with a grinding noise that could drive you crazy.

Heads together, Zack and I push the shopping cart out of the garage. We're on our way to Vinny's Vegetables and Much More. The cart eeks and squeaks along the driveway, on its way to falling apart, but we're stuck with a million things to carry home. You'd need a computer brain to remember it all.

The only thing that keeps this from complete boredom is a quick stop for the funeral.

"Some phone call," Zack says. "What do you think *the original* meant?"

Thoughts of Sister Appolonia pop into my head. There she was, a couple of weeks ago, looming over me and my fifth grade essay. She wore a tan suit that made her look like a cardboard refrigerator box. "Do you have one original thought in your head, Hunter Moran?" she asks.

Who could be original when the subject was building bridges in an urban community? Never mind *original*. I don't even know what *urban* means. No wonder I had to wing it.

I wing it now. “*The original* means . . .”

And then I give up.

“It could be anything,” Zack, the thinker, says.

Next door, we pass St. Ursula’s Church. Father Elmo has the sprinkler going even in the rain. When he isn’t saving souls, he’s saving the lawn.

“S-T-U,” Zack mutters. “Something missing from the church?”

“Who knows?” I say.

Next we pass school. It’s locked up tight, the windows bare and blank. Sister Appolonia is off for the summer. She announced that she was going to teach unfortunate children out west.

Unfortunate is right.

Diglio the dentist’s house is on the corner. Diglio isn’t into lawns; the patch in front looks like the Gobi desert. We’re careful not to step on his weeds, though; Diglio is a yeller.

We cut across the street, pass Old Lady Campbell’s house, and head toward Murdock Avenue.

“Our major problem is a little your fault,” I tell Zack. I hold two fingers an inch apart to emphasize.

Zack bites his lip. He does that sometimes, teeth crunching one side and then the other. He doesn’t answer; he doesn’t have to. We can almost read each other’s minds.

And what his mind says is that we shouldn’t have tried to alter his report card in the first place, even though it was only to spare Mom’s feelings.

We're talking about a simple change, an F to an A. One downward slash with a pen. The sad thing is that the rest of the card is great. Mostly As, with only a B in health. Zack messed up on how often you should brush your teeth. Sister Appolonia said with his approach, he'd have nothing but gums by the time he was thirteen.

No, this mark was for music appreciation.

Rain dribbles down the back of my neck. I hunch my head into my shoulders, thinking, as we eek and squeak along. Mom told Mrs. Wu, the librarian, that Zack's a musical genius. After all, he takes cello lessons from Old Lady Campbell.

Mom would be crushed by that F. We can't let that happen. Mom is the best.

But last night, we messed up the report card slash. Wrong color pen, then an eraser that drilled a hole through *Music Appreciation*.

We held the card out the window to catch a drop of rain and smush it up a little. We were left with a pockmarked report card. The only visible letter was that *F*.

"This whole thing just wore me out, Hunter," Zack said, holding his head.

"Never mind," I told him. "We'll have a ceremonial report card funeral."

That brightened him right up. And it's the main reason we're heading toward Vinny's Vegetables and Much More.

Sister Appolonia would be pleased. After all, she always says, "Use your common sense, boys, that is, if you have any!"

That's exactly what we're doing. We cut across the library lawn, heads down so Mrs. Wu doesn't see us. A mistake. I barrel into Old Lady Campbell, who drops her purse, a pile of books, and a couple of Kleenex. Right behind her is her dog, Fred. He's small, brown, and fuzzy, with breath that would knock you over; he just misses taking a chunk out of my leg.

"The library will open any minute," Old Lady Campbell says.

I pick up some of her stuff and glance at the sign over the door. Gigantic letters. NO DOGS ALLOWED.

Old Lady Campbell points to her huge shopping bag. "Fred just pops himself right in there," she says. "It works every time."

Mrs. Wu would have a heart attack if she knew.

Zack and I turn down Vinny's alley, moving fast; we pass under Diglio the dentist's office window, cringing at the sound of the shopping cart. It would be a mistake if Vinny realized we're heading toward his back door and his huge garbage pile. It's almost a mountain, filled with orange peels, banana crates, stringy bits of lettuce, and much more.

Zack has second thoughts. "How will I explain to Mom?" he begins.

"Don't worry," I say. "You never got an F before. No one will expect it. And you lose stuff all the time."

We hollow out a square of ground under some eggshells and in goes the report card. "Goodbye," I say in a hushed voice. "This is a sad loss for Sister Appolonia and St. Ursula's School."

I pay no attention to my buzzing cell phone. I know it's Linny. She's convinced we've stolen her skateboard. Zack's lost that, too. But we have enough to think about without skateboards.

"May you rest in peace, old friend," says Zack, leaning over the grave site.

We toss dirt over the whole thing, and that's when it happens. A torn piece of paper flies out of the shopping cart, almost as if it has wings. It loops around our heads before it nose-dives onto the grave and nestles there above the departed.

I bend over and pick it up with two fingers. Is it meant for us?

"What is it, Hunter?" Zack asks.

I read aloud: *Bom/Twin. REVENGE!*

I sink down on a cardboard carton.

What kind of craziness is this?

A note about twins?

Zack and me?

I kick at an empty cheese box.

What kind of revenge?

I gulp.

Wait a minute. What's the other thing Sister Appolonia always says? "You have the sad habit, Hunter Moran, of jumping to dubious conclusions."

Dubious. Whatever that means.

But there's only one conclusion here. Think about that phone call in Mom's room. Didn't the caller say "Hunt"?

Of course.

Zack looks at me in horror. “Someone may be after you, Hunter. Or both of us.”

I straighten up, aiming for courage. We’re thinking exactly the same thing. The call before? Wrong number. Right victim.

Zack turns the paper over. “There’s a phone number here. Maybe it’s the caller’s. We’ll call back, tell him we’re innocent bystanders.”

Zack knows he’s talking nonsense. What we have to do is gather evidence and get the guy before he gets us.

And something else. Dig. Wasn’t that on the phone, too?

Dr. Diglio, the dentist, I bet. Diglio with the beady eyes, the four strands of hair pasted over his baldy bean. Diglio, who hates me.

“You don’t know that for sure,” Zack says, reading my mind again.

But we both know I’ve crossed Diglio too many times. I wave the bottom of my T-shirt back and forth to get air. “It was an accident that I dinged his Acura with a rock.”

Zack nods sympathetically. “You can hardly see it, with all the rest of the dings. That car is one lemon.”

But there were other situations, too. My bicycle rutting up his desert front lawn, Diglio screaming as if it were the botanical garden.

My cell phone is vibrating like a plane going down. Linny never gives up. “What?”

“Don’t get nasty,” she says. “Where’s the stuff from the store? Where’s the milk for Mary? Someone drank it all.”

“Want me to die of thirst?”

“No, just get back here before the summer is over.”

I cover the phone. “Do you remember what else we were supposed to get?”

Zach’s still squinting at the revenge message. “What do you think *Bom* means?”

“Cauliflower!” Lenny screams into my ear. “Broccoli, two heads; carrots; dishwasher soap.” She goes on and on. I close the phone, shutting off her voice with a satisfying snap, and squint over Zack’s shoulder. “*Bomb*,” I say. “It stands for *bomb*.”

Zack hesitates. “Do you remember that movie? The one with the two kids and the bomb?”

How could I forget? I couldn’t sleep for a week after I saw it. One kid was blasted away and half the neighborhood was gone. Actually, I look just like that kid, or what was left of him.

“Only pieces,” Zack says.

What is all this about anyway?

The original is missing from S-T-U?

Original what?

But bomb? There’s no doubt about it. It’s all linked together, heading toward one thing.

Kaboom!

Zack frowns. “There goes the summer. We’ll have to work this out before Diglio blows up Newfield.”

And me, too.