

*The
Fairy
Inspection
Agency*

Book One

*By
Ann Gregory James*

CHAPTER ONE

New Beginnings

By Ann Gregory James

S. Martin Boughtom, former Forensic Accountant, scuttled down Valley View Road and into the heart of Derry Dell. He gave a quick nod and hello to Mrs. Tingle, as she stood outside her cakes and cookies shop. “Baking so good it will make you tingle” was printed on the sign that hung over the shop door. Judging from S. Martin Boughtom’s bottom he had often partaken of Mrs. Tingles’ goods and he therefore must be quite tingly. Actually, if the truth be known, the former Forensic Accountant was quite tingly this morning. He was starting a new job; a new job of his own choosing. S. Martin Boughtom was no longer a Forensic Accountant doomed to toil in legal or insurance offices and banks combing through mismanaged and bungled accounting with, well, a fine-toothed comb. No, S. Martin Boughtom was taking his extraordinary abilities of finding the smallest, tiniest most miniscule of errors and applying it to his new career – Private Detective.

S. Martin Boughtom quickened his pace as he turned onto the main street of Derry Dell. He was heading to his new small office, located only a block away from the town centre. Dirk Neigh, the local sign-maker was putting up the sign for his new business this morning. S. Martin wanted to make sure that Dirk first of all got the sign in the right place and secondly, that the lettering was correct. Dirk had a reputation for not getting things quite right the first time. Like the time he installed a sign for Dr. Mortimer, the optometrist, at eye level – but everyone had to duck under it to get in the door. His explanation was that he’d wanted to make sure that even those with bad vision could see it. Or the first go-round with Mrs. Tingle’s sign which initially said “Baking so good it will make you tinkle”. No, Dirk was kind-hearted, but not the sharpest pencil in the box, so S. Martin wanted to ensure that everything was just right.

The town of Derry Dell was the kind of place where everyone really did know everyone else. Actually, if the truth be known, it really was a village, but the local business association had managed to persuade the local governing body that it really should be considered a town. They thought it would be better for business. No-one had ever thought to question the association to see if had made any difference. But be it village or town, Derry Dell was an idyllic place to live. It was much bigger than a “smallwooded hollow” – the dictionary definition of a dell. Why it even had enough of a population to support two, count them, two movie theatres! You couldn’t say that of Bramberry Dingle the slightly larger village (yes, village – maybe the business association was right) six and a half miles down the road. The unfortunate Bramberrians, theatre-less as they were, had to pile into their cars and drive to Derry Dell to see the latest movies.

The Thimble River ran through the middle of the town with numerous bridges connecting both sides of the river. Most of Derry Dells’ businesses were located on the streets that wandered down the sides of the river. What made it confusing for visitors was the fact that both streets on either side of the river were called Main Street. The Derry Dellians didn’t find it confusing and the occasional sharp-eyed visitor often spotted the

smaller lettering under Main Street. It said Left Bank, for the left bank and Right Bank, for the right bank. The local joke of course was, “why do you have to go to Paris when we have our own Left Bank here?” The town centre was on Main Street, Left Bank and that was the direction the S. Martin Boughtom was headed.

S. Martin was getting excited. He was less than a block away from his new office and he could see Dirk standing atop a ladder, putting the final adjustments on his sign. S. Martin had been meticulous about choosing his sign. He knew the old saying about making a good first impression and he figured his sign was going to be the first impression his clients got of his business. He had agonized over the colour, the font, the style and the size. Too big and he thought he would appear too expensive. Too small and no-one would see it. No frilly or busy font either. S. Martin had finally decided on a rich burgundy background with dark blue simple lettering that had a pencil-thin gold outline. He couldn't wait to see his “Derry Detective Agency” sign swaying over his office door.

S. Martin nodded hurriedly at the other shop-keepers that would now be his business neighbours. He sensed that they were excited as well. Many of them had smiled and waved as he passed their doors and then they had stepped outside to watch the unveiling of the sign for themselves.

S. Martin was three doors away from his office as he watched Dirk slowly start to clamber down from the ladder. As Dirk descended the ladder, S. Martin could have sworn that he heard a quiet tittering behind him. He put it down to the wind and the annoying chimes that hung outside The Dipsy Doodle Shop, further down the street. But as S. Martin started to look up at his precious and expensive sign, the tittering got louder and as it got louder the tittering turned into large, honking laughs. S. Martin looked up and up. He now had a terrible feeling in the pit of his stomach and he was holding his breath. S. Martin finally looked at his sign. It was pink. The colour of pink you see in flashy socks for little girls. The lettering was bright blue like the bright blue you often see on computer screens. It was square and edged in gold and it said “Fairy Inspection Agency”.

**

Solomon Corrigan had been glued to his computer for hours. He'd been playing a new game, Gnomes and Trolls, that he'd borrowed from his friend Terr. It had lots of mythical creatures. Solomon was heavily into myths and fantasies. He adored Warhammer, but because his parents told him he had to buy it out of his own allowance, he'd only managed to purchase a few items. His friend Terrance, Terr for short, had Warhammer, Warhammer 40,000 and was saving up for Warmaster. Solomon and Terr would spend hours planning strategies and battles with the meticulously hand-painted miniatures.

Solomon had played many other games on his computer. He really liked Age of Empires. But Gnomes and Trolls was different somehow and he was mesmerized. His game name was Trojan. It had taken Solomon the better part of the afternoon to master the convoluted rules of the game. The Trolls collected Gnomes and you could steal Gnomes from another Troll. But if you got caught, you forfeited all your Gnomes and had to start over. Solomon had been caught a number of times, but now he had a substantial number of Gnomes that he'd stolen from other Trolls. The rules now said that he could start naming his Gnomes. The on-line game master encouraged the players to name their Gnomes after someone they didn't like or were mad at. The other players were

now allowed to give their Gnomes names too. Alex, Eliot, Gregory were some of the names that started showing up. There was also Butt-Breath, Slime-Ball, Fart-Catcher and the occasional Mom and Dad. Solomon was puzzling over what to name his Gnomes. He liked all his friends and he wasn't really mad at anyone in particular. Suddenly the door to Solomon's bedroom burst open and his younger brother, Darwin, flung himself into the room.

"I want lunch!" yelled Darwin, "you promised me an hour ago you'd make me lunch and Lillian isn't back yet and I'm hungry and I'm bored and your game is stupid!"

"Yeah, yeah, I'll make you lunch, just give me a minute and stay away from my stuff," said Solomon, as he virtually ignored his brother.

"No, not a minute, not even a second Solomon, Lillian told you to make me lunch and I want it now!"

Darwin made a quick grab for Solomon's mouse, but Solomon, who was 3 years older than Darwin, was much faster. As Darwin lurched forward, Solomon blocked him with his right shoulder. Darwin bumped Solomon, but lost his balance and staggered backwards.

"Whoa!" screeched Darwin as he wind-milled and staggered backwards. He'd tipped over too far and couldn't regain his balance. What stopped him was Solomon's model table, the one with all his Warhammer on it. Darwin hit the edge; his arms flung back and he knocked a couple of pieces off the table. They hit the hard-wood floor with a "plink." Solomon leapt from his chair and kneeled down to survey the damage.

"You stupid jerk Darwin," shrieked Solomon, "look what you've done!" Solomon gently picked up the Warhammer pieces. Darwin stood up and massaged his bottom.

"No, you're the jerk," hollered Darwin, "and your models are stupid!"

Solomon looked at the pieces. One of the edges of the downed spaceship from Warhammer 40,000 had snapped off.

"Great, just great you dork," muttered Solomon. "This model belongs to Terr. Thanks barf-breath; now just get out of my room," barked Solomon.

"I want lunch!" wailed Darwin, "I'm going to tell Lillian!"

"Get out," said Solomon as he pushed Darwin towards the door, "I told you I'll be there in one minute, now get out!" With one final effort, Solomon shoved Darwin out of his room. Darwin stomped down the stairs, yelling back, "I'm telling!"

Solomon slid into the chair in front of his computer. The prompt was still there for the name of a person you didn't like or were mad at. 'Darwin' – Solomon typed. He then got up and bolted downstairs to make his younger brother lunch.

**

"What on earth is all the commotion about," thought Lillian Corrigan, as she put down the skinny tie-dyed tank-top she'd been looking at in The Dipsy Doodle Shop. She said goodbye to Flora Green, the flamboyant owner of the shop (today the ends of her hair were dyed a florescent pink and she was wearing a multi-coloured kaftan) and stepped out onto the street. The noise had subsided a bit, but there was still some twittering and giggling coming from the crowd standing in front of the shop three-doors down. Lillian shielded her eyes from the sun and looked up. She was now curious. What were all these people laughing and pointing at? "Oh dear," she said to herself as she focused on S. Martin Boughtom's sign. "Well, at least it isn't as bright a pink as Flora Green's hair," she thought. Lillian glanced at her watch. Yikes, time to get home. She

crossed the street and walked quickly along the sidewalk that bordered the river. As she traveled over the Daisy Bridge (all three bridges in Derry Dell were named after flowers), she could still hear an occasional guffaw from the gathering under the Fairy Inspection Agency sign.

**

Lillian Corrigan hurried over the Daisy Bridge and then turned right onto Main Street, Right Bank. She was tall for her age and had masses of mahogany-coloured hair that she kept swept off her face with an old “hippie” style bandana. The bandana had actually once belonged to Lillian’s mother, Jay. Jay had worn the bandana to sit-in’s, love-in’s, protest marches and rock and roll concerts in her early days. Lillian was proud to wear it and the bandana was one of her favourite possessions, along with her saxophone, her grandmother’s opera glasses and her cat, Squeezer. She glanced at her watch. 2:30. “Rats”, she thought. Solomon is going to be furious. She knew she shouldn’t have left her two younger brothers alone for the afternoon, but she just had to get out of the house. Not only because she couldn’t stand their constant squabbling, but because fashion had beckoned and The Dipsy Doodle shop was having a sale. Lillian was 14 going on 15. She really enjoyed the freedom her parents had been allowing her since she turned fourteen, but sometimes she found the responsibility a little hard to handle. She found it especially hard to baby sit her two younger brothers. They were always at each others’ throats. Solomon constantly baited Darwin and Darwin, even though he adored his older brother, responded by annoying Solomon. “Please let them not have shredded the entire house” thought Lillian “and please, I hope Solomon remembered to turn off the stove after he made Darwin’s lunch.” Lillian was running now. Up Cooling Meadow Road and left onto Leafy Glen Drive. She could see her home down the road. Everything looked fine. She slowed her pace, just a little. As she passed the Throttles place Lillian noticed that their usually award-winning garden was looking quite shabby. “Odd”, she thought. She was pleasantly surprised to see that the ugly gnomes that had appeared in the yard a few days ago were gone. She had been taken aback when they first appeared. They were quite ugly and she’d assumed that the Throttles had better taste. She had also been puzzled by the fact that they were always in different places in the yard. The gnomes had given her the creeps and she’d had the uncanny feeling of being watched by them. “Good riddance,” she thought as she hurried along.

Solomon Corrigan was only a year younger in age than Lillian and couldn’t be more different. Lillian was a straight A student. Solomon was thrilled if he got C+ although he did get A’s in math. Not that Solomon wasn’t bright, he was just very lazy and unfocused. Solomon found school boring. He was gifted musically, was a whiz at anything related to computers and was extremely talented at tormenting Lillian and her friends. He’d inherited his Grandfathers blonde good-looks and like Lillian he was a good athlete. He was as tall as Lillian and there was no mistaking the fact that Lillian and Solomon were brother and sister. Darwin, the baby of the family, was nine, almost ten, or as he would tell you 9 and eleven twelfths. He was very proud of the fact that he was going to be a tween-ager in the next few days. Darwin was still very much a little boy. He still had a slight pudginess to him and seemed to be following Solomon’s footsteps as far as his aversion to school. He kept his reddish hair long, just like his older brothers, much to his parents’ annoyance. Darwin was, much to Solomon’s envy, totally awesome with computers and he had the most amazing memory. Lillian, Solomon and Darwin may have

driven each other crazy at times, but all of them genuinely cared for each other, if the truth be known.

“Well at least they haven’t burned the place down,” she thought. As she got closer to the house, she reduced her speed to a walk.

Lillian stopped at the end of the driveway and took a deep breath. “Time to face frick and frack”, she sighed. The thought of spending the evening with her two brothers loomed in front of her. “First they’ll argue about what to take out of the freezer for dinner and then they’ll argue about what to watch on TV”, she thought. Yes, Lillian felt grown-up with the responsibility of taking care of her younger brothers and she really liked the fact that her parents were paying her, but she was not looking forward to the bickering that she knew would fill the evening.

Lillian walked up the front walk-way of the house. She gave a quick glance at the begonias and day lilies she had helped her mother plant. The blossoms had fallen off the begonias and the lilies were wilted. She bent down and fingered one of the limp stalks. “I thought I’d just watered these,” she said to herself. Lillian stood up and sighed and then turned towards the house. “Those twits,” she snorted, “they’ve left the front door open!” The front door of 87 Leafy Glen Drive was slightly ajar. Lillian sighed again and pushed open the door. “Solomon, Darwin! Where are you?” Not unexpectedly, she didn’t get a response. She bent down and picked up a Crunchy Chew candy wrapper off the floor. There was still half of the bar left. “Darwin, you slob,” she thought. Crunchy Chews were Darwin’s favourite. Lillian headed to the kitchen and got the disaster she expected. The stove wasn’t on, thank goodness, but there was soup left in the pot and a loaf of bread and the milk had been left out on the counter. “Solomon, you jerk, you could have at least put the milk away!” She cleaned off the counter, put the remainder of the soup in a container and then into the fridge. “Okay, now where are those two worms,” Lillian muttered under her breath.

She quickly checked the rest of the downstairs for toys and boy detritus, but the living room and family room were surprisingly junk free. As Lillian climbed the stairs, she could hear the sound-effects from Solomon’s computer game. “I bet he’s been glued to that all afternoon,” she thought, shaking her head. “Well, at least it has kept them quiet.” Lillian got to the door of Solomon’s room and knocked twice. No answer. “He probably can’t hear me for that stupid game,” she thought. She opened the door and sure enough, there was Solomon hunched over his computer, mouse in one hand and control in the other, totally absorbed in his game. Lillian walked over and tapped him on the shoulder.

“Aggh!” Solomon shrieked and spun in his chair. “Geez Lil, you scared me into next week! When did you get home?” Solomon asked as he untangled himself from his stereo headset. “Just a few minutes ago,” said Lillian, surveying the room, “thanks for the mess in the kitchen, dog-breath.”

“Hey, no problem, it’s my job,” smirked Solomon, making a face at his sister.

“Yeah, well listen jerk-brain, where’s Darwin?”

“I dunno.” Solomon stretched and yawned. “Downstairs I think, I made him lunch and then came back up here. The little creep broke some of Terr’s Warhammer.”

“Well, he’s not downstairs,” said Lillian, “and I didn’t hear any noise blasting from the basement. Is he in his room?”

“Who knows where the little twerp is,” shrugged Solomon. “He’s a complete

pest.”

“You’re going to have to help me find him, or I’ll tell Mom and Dad that you were picking on him again.”

“Oh yeah,” bristled Solomon. “Well, I guess I’ll just have to tell them about your little shopping trip to the Dipsy Doodle and how you left us poor, unprotected, under-age children alone for hours and hours.”

Lillian scowled at Solomon. “You really are a jerk. Okay, you search his room and I’ll check the basement. Oh, and by the way thanks for leaving the front door wide open. You might as well have put a sign on the front lawn saying robbers, come-on in.”

“Whoa, you can’t pin that on me. I told you, I made snot-nose his lunch and then came right back up here. When I left him he was wolfing down a Crunchy Chew in the kitchen.”

Lillian all of sudden felt uneasy. She wasn’t sure why. She looked around Solomon’s room again. Her eyes flitted over the Warhammer. She noticed the slightly chipped edge on one of the pieces. She turned her head and her eyes roved over Solomon’s incredibly messy desk. Then she focused on his computer screen. Solomon had advanced quite far in the Gnomes and Trolls game according to his score in the upper right-hand corner. She watched as the Trolls herded the Gnomes. “Stupid game,” she thought. Her eyes played over the other figures moving around on the screen. Then something at the bottom of the screen caught her eye. It was a small cage. The attention to the details of the cage was extraordinary, compared to the cruder graphics of the Trolls and Gnomes. Even the small creature in the cage was quite realistic. Lillian looked closer. Then she gasped. The creature in the cage was Darwin.

“Solomon,” she screamed, “what have you done?”

CHAPTER TWO

New Friends, New Enemies

S. Martin Boughtom stood looking forlornly up at his sign. He was getting a crick in his neck. He’d been standing looking and sighing for over fifteen minutes. Dirk Neigh had quickly removed his ladder and had scurried off back to his shop. The rest of the crowd had slowly drifted away.

“I know how you feel S. Martin”, said a voice at his right shoulder.

S. Martin slowly turned his head, wincing from the stiffness. Coach Dan Ribble from the Derry Recreation centre was standing beside him, gazing at the Fairy Inspection Agency sign.

“Yep”, continued the Coach, “You’ve been Dirked. I’ve been Dirked too.”

Coach Dan Ribble was the former principal of Derry Intermediate and Secondary School, or DISS for short. Often newcomers to Derry Dell were puzzled by what they thought was either horribly bad grammar or a speech impediment when they asked young people where they went to school. “Oh, I go to DISS,” was the usual reply. As Principal

of DISS, Dan Ribble had been firm but fair and the kids loved him. Dan Ribble was short and stocky. He was a former wrestler and had won a number of competitions years ago when he'd attended DISS. As Principal he'd worn your standard three-piece suit, typically grey, which made him look like a small grey refrigerator. Now he was usually decked out in a red-satin track suit. He looked like a short, squat Christmas present. You couldn't miss him on the streets of Derry Dell. When the new recreation centre needed someone to head it up, the community asked the retired principal if he would take on the responsibility. He leapt at the chance and soon became affectionately known as Coach Dribble.

"Ouch", said S. Martin as he slowly moved his head back and forth to relieve the stiffness. "What's your Dirk story?"

"Well, I guess it all started when some of the parents of the older boys came to me and wanted to figure out what programs I could put in place to pry their sons away from their computer screens".

"Yes, yes, go on", said S. Martin as he began patting down and searching his pockets. "I've got my key here somewhere."

"Seems there's a new computer game making the rounds and these boys and some of the girls too, just couldn't stay away from it".

"That's not unusual," observed S. Martin, as he continued pulling pockets inside-out. "The Twilger twins live next door to me and I swear their eyes have become small squares."

"I hear you S. Martin and you're right. But a couple of weeks ago I volunteered to kind of baby-sit the Flatchet boys, you know, Henry and Gavin and..."

"A ha!" said S. Martin triumphantly, as he found the key in his vest pocket. "But what does all that have to do with Dirk Neigh?"

"Oh, oh yes. Well, as I was saying, the parents wanted some ideas to get the kids to the recreation centre and make it a cool place to hang out, so I thought if we perked up the sign out front and if Doris, the receptionist could answer the phone in a, uhm, hipper way, maybe we could get the kids to the centre."

"So, you got Dirk to fix up the sign?" Said S. Martin, as he gave his neck a couple more slow rotations and headed to the door under the Fairy Inspection Agency sign.

"Yeah and I thought I had a great idea," sighed Coach Dribble, "before Dirk completely screwed it up."

S. Martin with a puzzled look on his face turned to Coach Dribble. "How can he screw-up Derry Recreation and Organization Centre?"

"You know Dirk. He managed to reverse the words and we got Derry Organization and Recreation Centre instead."

"That's not so bad," shrugged S. Martin as he tried the key in the very stiff lock.

"Nooo," said Coach Dribble slowly, "but I'd wanted Doris to answer the phone and say 'Hello, Derry ROC's' for Derry Recreation and Organization Centre. Instead, Doris was going to have to answer with 'Hello, Derry ORC' or worse 'Hello DORC'. You take your pick, but either way, not cool and definitely not hip." Coach Dribble let out a big sigh. "So we're back to Doris answering with 'Hello, Derry Organization and Recreation Centre'. What a twit Dirk is."

"You're right he is and that is bad," S. Martin gave a final shove on the door to his new Fairy Inspection Agency office and gasped, "but not as bad as this!" Coach

Dribble peered around S. Martin. He gasped too and then stood there slack-jawed.

**

“No, no, this can’t be,” wailed Solomon as he frantically typed in different commands to the game. “That can’t really be Darwin! It’s only a game! It’s just a good likeness that’s all!”

The flickering light on Solomon’s printer caught Lillian’s eye. It started printing. From downstairs Lillian heard the doorbell chimes and the tap-tapping of the ornamental bronze door knocker. Solomon heard it too and paused from his frantic typing.

“There you go, Lil,” said Solomon as he swiveled in his chair with an I-told-you-so look on his face, “the little twerps’ at the front door, I swear I’m going to pummel him.”

Both Lillian and Solomon raced down the stairs and along the hall-way to the front door, “Darwin,” they both said as they yanked open the door.

“Nope, great explorer though and still controversial, Gladly Yarble, at your service.”

The person at the door certainly wasn’t Darwin. Actually, person was a bit of a stretch. He was just over three feet tall and had on the most extraordinary clothing one could imagine. His jacket shimmered, yellow, then blue, then red and patterns seemed to move across the material and then disappear - stripes, then flowers, even a hounds-tooth check. The pants were somewhat plainer, but the bright red lace-up boots with pointy-toes and sparkles would have made Elton John weep. His hair was spiked and stuffed under a tweed cap. Lillian and Solomon stood transfixed.

“Hello you two! Wakey, wakey! Like I said, I’m Gladly Yarble!”

Lillian regained her composure first. “Yes, I’m sure you can yarble quite nicely, uh, sir, but we’re not interested in buying anything today.” Lillian was pushing Solomon back so she could close the door.

“No, the name is Gladly Yarble and I’m here to help you find...”

“Yes, thank you Mr. Yarble, but we’re really not interested,” said Lillian as she continued to close the door.

“Your brother.”

**

“Whew”, whistled Coach Dribble, as he surveyed S. Martin’s new office, “kinda takes your breath away.”

S. Martin just blinked and blinked. “All I’d asked for was wide burgundy and blue stripes on one wall and then one blue wall and one burgundy wall,” wailed S. Martin. “Well, you’ve got stripes, in spades,” said Coach Dribble, as he continued to look around the Fairy Inspection Agency office.

Stripes indeed – even a kind of plaid. Dirk had outdone himself. One wall was bright blue with tiny pink pin stripes. The back wall, the one anyone would face as they walked in the front door was, well, plaid. The wall to the right of the door was pink crosshatching with foot-wide blue stripes every two feet. The front wall of the office was practically all windows but the trim around the windows was painted pink and the door frame was painted blue. Now to give Dirk his due, the paint job was superb. All the stripes had been hand done and were perfectly straight. From a painter’s perspective, it was an excellent job. On the other hand, from an interior designer’s point of view it was a

head-ache inducing disaster.

Coach Dribble groped for something positive to say. "But your office furniture is great and wow, look at that phone system and your Whamo computer!"

The furniture was great. A large, gleaming cherry-wood desk was angled in the corner with an impressive burgundy-leather swivel chair behind it. Two very comfortable looking arm-chairs in dark-blue leather sat in front of the desk with a small coffee table between them. There was another comfy chair in the far corner of the office beside the long credenza that matched the desk. Dirk Neigh had thankfully not participated in the purchase of the furniture.

S. Martin shuffled slowly over to one of the chairs and flopped into it. "I'm ruined, ruined. After all those years in detective night school, I'm finished before I even began." He took a deep breath in and blew it out, puffing up his cheeks as he did. "Who on earth is going to walk through that door after they see the screaming-pink and loud-blue sign? And not only that, I'd have to hand out sunglasses once they walked into the office. And I'll have to have a steady supply of head-ache pills on hand because these walls would make anyone's head hurt." S. Martin sat forward and buried his face in his hands.

"Well, er, I'm here," said Coach Dribble, clearing his throat.

"Yes, thanks Coach, appreciate it."

S. Martin stood up and forlornly took a slow, sweeping look around the office.

"Well that's it then. I think I'll head home, stop at Mrs. Tingle's on the way and see if I can salvage any of the contracts I had with local businesses," said S. Martin, more to himself than Coach Dribble.

"But S. Martin," protested the Coach as he pulled out a number of folded papers from his jacket pocket, "I'm here to hire you as a detective!"

"What?" said S. Martin, shaking his head like he hadn't heard correctly.

"I want to hire you," said Coach Dribble as he shoved the papers into S. Martin's hands, "I want you to find out what's happened to Henry and Gavin Flatchet!"

**

Lillian yanked open the door sending Solomon skidding back into the hallway.

"Hey, Lil, watch it", griped Solomon rubbing his arm where it had hit the stairway banister.

"What did you say?" demanded Lillian.

"Your, brother, I can help you find your brother," said Gladly cheerfully, as he pushed past Lillian and into the front hallway, "nice house."

Lillian looked confused, "but how did...and who are..."

"Too many questions," said Gladly with a wave of his hand. He strolled into the living room, through the dining room and into the kitchen. "I'm starving!" He'd spied the refrigerator.

Lillian and Solomon trailed after him, Lillian sputtering and trying to say something and Solomon looking like he was trying to put two and two together. Lillian planted herself in front of the refrigerator.

"Tell us about Darwin," said Lillian tersely, "Now!"

"Hmm?" Gladly had spotted the bowl of fruit on the kitchen counter, "Ah yes, your brother. Well, first of all, you," he said pointing at Solomon, "be a good chap and

run up to your printer and bring down the documents that are in the tray.”

“But I haven’t printed anything!” Solomon looked confused.

“I assure you, there’ll be documents in your printer.” Gladly’s gaze had focused on the box of Crunchy Chews, by the sink. His eyes opened wide with delight. “Crunchy Chews, my favourite!”

Before Lillian and Solomon could blink, Gladly had snapped up a Crunchy Chew and was peeling back the wrapper. He looked over at Solomon again. “Get them. Get the documents from your printer and I’ll tell you about Herman.”

“Herman?” Puzzled Lillian

“Your brother.”

“You mean Darwin?”

“Yes, yes, whatever,” snorfelled Gladly as he stuffed the rest of the Crunchy Chew in his mouth. “Well, go!” He commanded, glancing at Solomon who still had a puzzled look on his face and hadn’t moved.

Solomon bolted out of the kitchen, leaving Lillian alone with Gladly. She’d regained some of her composure.

“So who exactly are you and why do you have information on Darwin? And how did you find our house and what do you want?”

“Questions, questions,” said Gladly, rolling his eyes and shaking his head. “I told you, I’ll give you answers when we look at the documents.”

Solomon came tearing back into the kitchen, he was holding a number of papers in his hand and he had a gleeful look on his face. “I know who you are!” he said triumphantly, “you’re the Recruiter!”

“Ah, right you are,” said Gladly, somewhat proudly, “good on you for figuring that out!”

“What’s a recruiter?” Asked Lillian, looking back forth between Gladly and Solomon who was grinning from ear to ear.

“He’s from my game,” boasted Solomon. “He’s the guy who gets you to entrap people to become workers for the Gnomes or Trolls and he gets you to name the people who are bugging you so you can trap them in the game and they all have to work in the mines and they have to win millions of points to win their way out, so they never can, or they can try and escape, but the Dragon-Dogs will get them and…” Solomon’s face fell. The enormity of what he’d just said to Lillian finally dawned on him.

“...and I gave him Darwin,” whispered Solomon.

“Solomon,” cried Lillian, “how could you!”

“It’s only a game; I thought...I mean I didn’t think that...” Solomon hung his head.

“Yes, didn’t think, that’s oh so typical of you Solomon,” said a furious Lillian, “too wrapped up in your own stupid games, too busy to pay attention to Darwin...you are so selfish! Now how are we going to explain this to mum and dad, hmm? Oh sorry mum, I sold Darwin in a game, but don’t worry, I got lots of points for him and if he works really hard maybe someday he’ll earn enough himself to pay his way out of the game.”

Lillian turned quickly and faced Gladly.

“And you, you’d better tell us how to get Darwin back, or I’ll, I’ll...” Lillian’s shoulders slumped and she hung her head too, “go down in the town history as the big sister who lost her baby brother to a bunch of dwarves and goblins.”

“Gnomes and trolls, actually, big difference.” Gladly mumbled as he proceeded to lick his fingers from the second Crunchy Chew he’d swiped. “And I’ve been trying to tell you, I *can* help you, but I better tell you what I think has happened first. Here, let me see those documents.” He grabbed them out of Solomon’s hand. “Hmmm, just as I thought. Okay, let’s get cozy and I’ll tell you all about K.O. Bolt and what we have to do to get Alvin back.”

“It’s Darwin,” a defeated Lillian sighed.

“Yeah, yeah, like I said, Darwin.”

Gladly Yarble swished into the living room, sat down and motioned for Lillian and Solomon to do the same. “Alright, let’s see, where should I begin?”