

# **THE MAGIC MEAN MACHINE**

**by Beatrice Gormley**

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to Judy, the friend I found through book magic

## 1. It's Only a Game

“Your move, Alison.” There was an expectant note in Denise’s voice, and a gleam in her eyes behind her glasses. She straightened one of her knights so that the black plastic horse’s head was pointing exactly forward. Denise liked things nice and tidy.

Alison knew that tone of voice meant that Denise was going to spring a trap on her. Her heart began to pound, and her throat tightened. She studied the board, trying to concentrate on all the different ways the different pieces could move.

Sleet slid down the classroom windows, faster than the thoughts trickling through Alison’s mind. All around the room pairs of chess players bent over their boards—on desks, on the carpet, on the counter at the back of the room. They were playing with quiet murmurs, except for a voice Alison knew too well. Spencer Cunningham’s voice. “Gotcha!”

Alison flinched. If I could just keep from getting so nervous, she thought, I might like chess a lot. Thinking of all the moves together was like seeing the insides of a machine, like a clock—all the parts of the machinery working together. The queen’s moves radiated from it like long beams, the bishop moved kitty-corner, the knight made L-shaped leaps. . . .

“Go, Alison,” said Denise.

If Alison moved that pawn over—but no, pawns could only move straight ahead. Then she should protect the pawn with that knight—no, the knight wouldn’t end up on the square where she wanted it. If she had a queen . . . but Denise had captured her queen at the beginning of the game. The white queen, actually a pawn from another set with a Band-Aid wrapped around her head, stood in back of the other captive white pieces on Denise’s side of the desk.

“Dead in the water!”

At Spencer’s victory cry, Alison jumped. She wished Mr. Donatelli, the teacher in charge of chess practice, would make him shut up.

“You’re taking all day.” Denise sighed.

Searching for a move, any move, Alison noticed the bishop. Hah! Her one remaining bishop was on a dark square, luckily, and in position to take Denise’s rook. Alison swooped her bishop slantwise over the board, nudging the rook, and picked it up. “There,” she said, trying not to sound too triumphant.

A smile spread over Denise's round face. At the same time, a boy stooped over their board, his bright blue eyes gleaming. "Wow, what a stupid move!" exclaimed Spencer. "Didn't you see her queen right—"

"Cut it out, Spencer." Denise frowned up at the boy. To Alison she said, "Check."

Now that Spencer had pointed it out, Alison saw the black queen, Denise's queen, poised to take Alison's king and win the game.

"There's nothing you can do about it, either," said Spencer with relish. "You can't move the king over there, because that would put it in check from the pawn, and it wouldn't do any good to move it up, because the queen could still get it. Checkmate."

"I can say checkmate myself, Spencer, Why don't you go away?" Not looking at him, Denise pushed her glasses up on her nose.

"I'm playing the winner. And you just won. Move over, loser."

"Hey!" protested Alison as Spencer elbowed her out of her seat. She had just seen another play she could have made—in fact, a way she could have won. "That *wasn't* checkmate, because I could have gotten her queen with—"

"Too late." Spencer quickly put back all the white pieces that Denise had captured from Alison. "White goes first."

Alison's heart raced, and her voice came out in a choked whisper. "Denise, that wasn't checkmate."

Denise just gave her a look as if she thought Alison was being a poor sport. To Spencer she said pointedly, "I wish it'd been a draw." But she began to arrange her pieces and pawns for the beginning of a new game.

Alison was supposed to go find someone else to play with, but she lingered beside the desk. Now that the game was over, she felt shaky and tired. And angry—why couldn't she stay calm and concentrate? She should have won from Denise.

"You don't have a chance," Spencer told Denise as she moved a pawn at the end of the row. "Why'd you do that? You *never* start with the pawns on the outside." Denise glared at him without answering, but he went on. "I've been playing chess for three years, you know. My father taught me. he's so good he could make a living playing chess if he wanted to."

"Hooray for you," said Denise.

Folding her arms, Alison leaned against a nearby desk to watch. Maybe Mom—Dad didn't play chess—would play with *her* for practice. She had to get better, somehow.

Spencer picked up one of his knights by its horse head, placed it on another square, frowned, and picked it up again.

“Hey!” Denise's eyes widened. “You have to leave it there. If you let go of the piece, that's the end of your move. You let go.”

“Not really,” said Spencer blandly. He sat up very straight, as always, his eyes sparkling.

Alison remembered the first time she saw Spencer. She had thought he looked cheerful and lively, like a nice kid. Hah! Spencer was the one who had started the fad of “kneeing” at recess, last week. He'd sneak up behind some unsuspecting person, jab his knees into the backs of her knees, and run away snickering.

“Yes really,” insisted Denise. “I'm not going to play if you cheat. It's right in the rules: if you move a piece and let go of it—”

“Don't have a fit,” said Spencer. “It's only a game. Your move.”

Alison turned away, almost glad she had lost so that she didn't have to play with Spencer. But the best thing would be to play with him and beat him, really wipe him off the board. Oh, if only she could!

Across the room, Karen was motioning to her. “Want to play?”

Gladly Alison hurried to her and knelt down on the carpet. Karen couldn't play chess very well, but at least Alison wouldn't get all shaky over this game.

“Wipeout!” At Spencer's triumphant cry, Alison and Karen raised their heads. “I wasted her!” he went on, smiling around the classroom.

Denise got up and stalked off as a boy took her place at the board. Her eyes burning through her glasses, she sat down cross-legged next to Alison. “He cheats.”

Alison looked at her friend sympathetically, but she knew that Spencer Cunningham was a better chess player than Denise. He *did* break the rules, and he *was* a poor sport, but he would win from Denise even if he played politely, without cheating.

“Your move, Alison,” said Karen,

Denise giggled, and Alison glanced up from making her move to see two knobs sticking out from the sides of Karen's head. Alison giggled, too—Karen was wearing pawns in her ears.

“I am Mik-mak from Plan-et Kre-on.” She spoke in a robotlike voice, picking up a chess piece with jerky motions. Karen’s hair was short about the ears, so the pawns, two red ones, showed up well.

“Watch out, Alison,” said Denise. “That Mik-mak’s got special extraterrestrial powers.”

Alison just smiled and moved a knight. If Karen thought the pawns in her ears would take Alison’s mind off the game, she was wrong.

Other kids gathered around them, giggling and pointing at the knobs sticking out from the sides of Karen’s head. They began to raid an extra chessboard for pairs of pawns, fitting them into their ears.

“What in blue blazes is going on over there?” Mr. Donatelli stood up from his desk, frowning at all the boys and girls with knobs on the sides of their heads.

“Blue blaz-es,” said Karen, still using her mechanical voice. “We do not know this word on Plan-et Kre-on.”

The group around Karen laughed, but Mr. Donatelli strode toward them with a horrified expression. “Don’t you people know how dangerous it is to put things in your ears? Didn’t you learn anything from our science unit on the ear? You could damage your hearing!”

“No, we couldn’t,” explained Denise. “Look, the pawns just fit in the outside of—

“And furthermore, this is how pieces get lost, fooling around with them. That’s the end of chess practice for today. Take those pawns *out*. All of you.”

“There go my spec-ial pow-ers,” said Karen.

Ms. Welgloss’s people, including Alison and Denise and Karen, trooped across the hall, back to their room. Suddenly it came over Alison that she was fed up with getting nervous and upset, over and over, every time she played chess. Playing with Karen didn’t count, because Karen just fooled around. “Hey, let’s not play in the chess tournament,” she whispered to Denise. “Ms. Welgloss said we could do a report on chess instead. Let’s do a report together.”

“You shouldn’t get discouraged right away,” said Denise in a kindly tone. “We haven’t been practicing that long. You might get a lot better.”

Alison felt a flash of anger. Who did Denise think she was? Then she sighed. “It’s not that. Whenever I play, I get so—I don’t know. My stomach gets all squeezed up. Let’s not play in the tournament.”

“Okay, maybe. We don’t have to make up our minds yet. Anyway, we’ll either both play or both not play.” Denise went on thoughtfully, “We can still be in the living chess game at the end, even if we don’t play in the tournament. My mother’s making me a velvet queen robe.”

Alison smiled with relief. “Yeah, good. We’ll either both play or both not play. ‘We *stick* together,’ right?” That was the motto of the Candy Club, Alison and Denise’s private club.

As soon as she got home that afternoon, Alison hurried to her room and pulled her diary out of the bookshelf. She had just gotten the diary for her birthday last week, and so far she had written in it every day. Taking the shiny little key from its hiding place in a roll of socks in her dresser drawer, Alison unlocked the strap that held the diary shut. She sat cross-legged on the bed and wrote with the diary propped on one knee.

Tuesday, April 6

Dear Diary: I hate Spencer!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

I wish I could get smart enough to beat him.

What else should she write? Alison nibbled the end of her pen, then added, *It sleeted today.* Another pause, and then one more line: *MAUREEN: If you sneak in and read this, you will get a horrible curse like the curse of the Mummy!!!*

Feeling better, Alison turned to the secret compartment at the back of the diary. What could she hide in there? Denise might have some ideas—Alison couldn’t wait to show it to her. She closed and locked the diary, put it back on her bookshelf, and replaced the key in the socks. Then she went to the kitchen to get a snack.

But halfway down the hall she paused, hearing loud voices in the kitchen: Maureen and Mon, having another argument.

“I did the best I could, all right?” Maureen was saying. “A lot of other kids got D’s on that lab report, too.”

“Maureen,” said Mrs. Harrity in a patient tone, “I’m looking at your answers”—a piece of paper rattled—“and I *know* you could have done better than this. How could you possibly think the sun was only five thousand miles away? That’s not even as far away as china. If you had just thought about it a little bit, you wouldn’t have—”

“All right, I’m terrible at science,” Maureen exclaimed. “It’s not my fault. I take after Dad, not you.”

“That’s just an excuse. You’re talking as if there weren’t anything you could do, but that’s not true.”

“Oh, sure, there’s lots of things I could do. For instance, what?”

“For instance, get some help from a good student. From Marvin Smith, for instance.”

Alison leaned against the wall, torn between wanting a snack and wanting to hear the whole argument. If Maureen and her mother knew Alison was listening, they would stop.

“*Marvin.*” Maureen’s tone said that was a stupid idea. “Marvin didn’t even do the lab with the rest of the class. The teacher lets him work on his own special science projects.”

“But he could still help you with your labs. I’m sure he would understand how to do them.”

Maureen snorted. “*You* don’t understand. Marvin is so advanced, he thinks stuff like figuring out the distance to the sun is boring. He’s all wrapped up in his research about the brain. About how to increase intelligence.”

“How to increase intelligence?” Mrs. Harrity laughed. “I don’t think Marvin needs that. He’s Mr. Wizard himself.”

“You mean like that science show on TV?” Maureen laughed, too. “Marvin’s smarter than that. If Marvin went on *Mr. Wizard*, he’d make that scientist guy look like an idiot.”

The argument dwindled away, and Maureen and Mrs. Harrity talked on in calmer tones. But Alison still leaned against the wall outside the kitchen, an idea tingling in her head. Increasing intelligence! What if Marvin had actually found out how to do it? Maybe he could help Alison get just a little smarter.

Maybe he could help her beat Spencer at chess.

## 2. A Visit to the Wizard

In the next moment, Alison felt her face get warm, as if someone might find out what a silly thing she had just thought. Mom might call Marvin Mr. Wizard, but Alison knew that science wasn't magic.

Still . . . what if Marvin *did* find out how to make people smarter? Maybe some special chemical you could drink. Of course Marvin was just a kid Maureen's age, but everyone said he was a science genius. He was taking college science classes in his spare time. Who knew what he might come up with? It wouldn't hurt to meet him at the middle school bus stop tomorrow and ask him. Just ask.

No, not the bus stop. Alison pictured the groups of older boys in denim jackets, the older girls with their eye makeup. In front of those kids, Marvin wouldn't even speak to her, a fifth grader.

"Mom," said Alison, stepping into the kitchen, "can I have a ride to Marvin's house? It's started to rain."

"Marvin?" Mrs. Harrity looked at Alison in surprise. "Marvin Smith? Why do you want to go to his house?"

"I bet *he* doesn't want to see *you*." Maureen turned away from the wall, where she had been studying her reflection in the bottom of a copper pan. "Anyway, Mom, you were going to take me to get shoes."

But Alison had already thought of a good reason to want to see Marvin. "I'm supposed to interview him for the school newspaper. And describe his room, using colorful words and phrases. I'm getting graded on it, too."

"We can drop Alison off on the way to the shoe store, and pick her up on the way back." Mrs. Harrity pulled her handbag strap over her shoulder. "Get your slickers on, girls."

"Slickers are totally gross," said Maureen. "I might see somebody I know."

"And of course they'll have a higher opinion of you if you're soaking wet," said Mrs. Harrity. "I wish you had mentioned last fall, when I bought you the slicker, that you had no intention of wearing it."

Marvin lived on the other side of Rushfield, in a part that was all news houses in winding dirt roads back in the woods. Turning the car onto the Smiths' lane, Mrs. Harrity stopped short in front of a puddle wider than the lane itself. "No, thank you! Alison, I'm sorry to drop you off

here, but I got stuck in mud like this once before. Look, I'll pick you up again at"—she glanced at her watch—"five o'clock. There's a shelter for the school bus stop across the street, so you can wait under that if I'm late."

Standing at the edge of the puddle as her mother backed the car onto the street, Alison suddenly thought that the best thing to do was probably go wait under the shelter until her mother came back. How could she possibly knock on Marvin's door and ask him to make her smarter? She couldn't.

But as Alison stood there with rain dripping from the visor of her slicker and running off the arms onto her fingers, she saw in her mind Spencer's blue eyes glittering, and she heard him shout, "Dead in the water!" She clenched her jaw. If there was any chance she could beat Mr. Tough Guy, she had to try it.

Skirting the puddle, Alison brushed through the bare twigs along the lane. After all, she didn't have to tell Marvin exactly why she had come. Not at first. She would say what she had told Mom—that she was interviewing him for the Standish School newspaper. When she asked him about his research, he would think that was just part of the interview. If it turned out he did know how to make people smarter. *Then* she could ask him to help her.

When Alison rang the doorbell, the door was opened by Mrs. Smith, Marvin's mother. She looked a lot like Marvin, thought Alison. Funny, because she didn't look like Curious George, the way Marvin did. She was tall and plump, instead of short and wiry like Marvin.

Alison explained about interviewing Marvin, holding up her notebook and pencil for proof.

"Oh, how nice," said Mrs. Smith. "Want to go around to the side door, dear? Then you can take your boots off in the mud room." She met Alison at the other door and led her into the kitchen. "What's your name? Oh, you're Maureen Harrity's little sister. Let me call Marvin down for you." Stepping to the stairs, she yelled his name.

Alison waited at the front of the stairs, while Mrs. Smith hurried back to the kitchen table. Two girls of about kindergarten age were stirring something in a mixing bowl, each with her own missing spoon. Globes of batter flew onto the table as their spoons clashed.

After a minute or so Mrs. Smith glanced up from the table, looking surprised to see Alison still there. "Didn't Marvin hear me? He must be working on one of his science projects. He's taking college-level courses, you know, and he gets very involved. Why don't you go on up and tap on his door?"

At the closed door of Marvin's room Alison hesitated. She could hear weird noises, a sort of creaking and wailing with sounds like huge rubber bands snapping now and then. Marvin might be pretty angry if she interrupted an experiment. She might ruin it.

But this was Alison's chance to find out if Marvin *could* help her. By the time she got another chance to come over here, it might be too late. Spencer Cunningham might be the chess champion of the fifth grade by then.

Pressing her lips together, Alison tapped on the door.

The door opened a crack, showing a purplish light. The strange sounds came out louder, and Alison realized it was some kind of music. "What do you want?" demanded Marvin's voice.

"I—I just wanted to interview you for—Aak!" Alison yelled as the door opened wide and she saw the figure in the doorway. He was wearing a sleeveless black T-shirt and dark glasses, and a heavy chain around his neck. Back lit by the purple glow, he looked like the main character in a story called *Curious George Makes a Rock Video*.

"What's the matter with you?" asked Marvin.

She didn't know what to say, but just then his mother called from downstairs, "Marvin, I hope you're being nice to little Alison."

With a disgusted expression, Marvin motioned Alison inside and turned on a regular light. He lifted the chain off his neck—it was a bicycle lock, Alison realized—and turned down the weird music. Noticing the mirror over Marvin's dresser, Alison knew in a flash what he had been doing: posing in front of the mirror. Just like Maureen. Some scientific research!

Then Alison forgot about how funny Marvin looked, because she was staring around his room. This *was* a room you could write colorful words and phrases about, thought Alison, if that's what you wanted to do. In the first place, the ceiling was black. No, not black—very dark blue, with groups of stars connected with lines, and a dusty path arching overhead which had to be the Milky Way.

"Didn't you ever see star maps before?" Marvin sounded pleased, though, that she was impressed. Actually I'm not so much into astronomy anymore. I'm interested in brain research now." He waved at a poster on the closet door, a picture of the brain.

"How interesting," said Alison, opening her notebook and sitting down on the bed. "Have you found out how to make people smarter yet?"

Marvin looked astonished. “How to make people smarter! What made you think I was trying to do that?”

Alison’s heart sank. “Oh. But Maureen said—”

“*Maureen*,” said Marvin scornfully. “Why can’t she get things right? I know how to make young *rats* smarter, but that doesn’t—”

“*How?*” Alison forgot that she was just supposed to be interviewing Marvin for the paper. Her voice came out hoarse and strained. “Do you think if it works on rats, it might work on me?”

Marvin put his dark glasses back on and stared at her. “You didn’t really come here to interview me, did you?”

“Well . . . *would* you help me get smarter? Before the chess tournament starts.”

Taking off his dark glasses, Marvin laughed disbelievingly. “Get smarter! Before the chess tournament! What do you think I am, a wizard?” He dropped down on his bed, still shaking his head.

Alison’s heart sank. “But Maureen said—”

There were footsteps on the stairs, and Mrs. Smith appeared, carrying a plate. “I thought you’d like some of the girls’ cupcakes while you’re talking. Alison, did you notice Marvin’s mobile of the solar system?” She nodded at the circles of wire around a yellow ball suspended over the bed. “Marvin designed it and put it together himself. You might want to mention that in your article.”

“It *is* nice,” said Alison. She and Marvin waited for his mother to put down the plate and leave.

When his mother’s footsteps reached the bottom of the stairs, Marvin spoke again. “I can’t believe this. Maureen actually told you that I could make you smarter?”

“Not exactly,” said Alison. She couldn’t remember, now, what it was that Maureen *had* said. “I just thought . . .”

Sighing, Marvin bit into a cupcake. “She probably got that idea from the rat research I told her about. Some scientists did an experiment: they put one group of young rats in regular cages, and they put another group of young rats in a special cage like a rat nursery school, with a lot of things to play with and learn about. And the rats in the nursery school cage got smarter—they even grew bigger brains.”

“Oh,” said Alison. “I’ve already been to nursery school.” She felt embarrassed.

“So have my sisters, and it didn’t do them any good. Well, have a cupcake, if you want.” Marvin waved at the plate. He seemed friendlier, as if he didn’t mind Alison thinking that he could do more than he actually could. “You want to win the chess tournament, huh?”

“Yes,” said Alison breathlessly. “First I have to win all my games in my class. That’ll make me class champion. Then I’ll play the champion of Mr. Donatelli’s class in the living chess game.”

“Living chess?” asked Marvin. “What’s that?”

“The gym is set up like a huge chessboard,” Alison explained. “Then the kids dress up like chess pieces, and the two class champions call out to moves to them.”

“That sounds like fun,” Marvin said. “I wish they’d done living chess when *I* was chess champion o the fifth grade. But anyway, I could give you a few pointers.” Going to a cupboard, he took out a flat box with a checkered design on the top. “Let’s see how you do.”

The minute she saw the chessboard, Alison’s mouth went dry. “I don’t know . . .” The cupcake stuck in her throat. Probably Marvin would think she wasn’t any good. Probably he wouldn’t even want to help her, as soon as he realized that.

But playing with Marvin was a lot different from playing with Spencer or even with Denise. Marvin didn’t talk. He didn’t seem excited at all. After a few moves Alison relaxed and stopped worrying.

Then she started to see the chess game in a different way. Everything except the chessboard and the pieces on it blurred out of focus. But on the board, it was as if she could see into the future. The different moves each piece could make streamed out from them, forming patterns like the headlights of cars in a time-lapse picture of traffic. Every move she made, and every move Marvin made, shifted the patterns.

“Check. And checkmate.” Of course Marvin had won, but he didn’t seem to care much. “Not a bad game,” he said. “You could be a good player, if you keep practicing. Get a chess book from the library. Look at the chess problems they put in the Sunday paper. Who knows, you might get to be almost as good as me.”

Alison flushed, pleased. Then she sighed. “I don’t know if I can ever beat Spencer, though.”

“Why—is he some kind of chess genius?”

“I don’t think he is,” aid Alison slowly. “But I get all nervous when I play with him. I can’t think.”

“Well, why didn’t you say so?” Marvin looked annoyed. “You don’t even have the problem you think you have. Don’t you know the first step in solving a problem is finding out what the problem really is?”

“What do you mean?” Alison felt confused. “Why wouldn’t getting smarter help me beat him?”

Marvin rolled his eyes up. “Because *that’s not the problem*. Even though you’re acting pretty space-brained right now. Look, here’s an example: in *The Return of the Brain-Exchangers*—”

“I didn’t see that movie,” interrupted Alison.

“In *The Return of the Brain-Exchangers*,” Marvin went on with a frown, “the kid thought his parents were made at him because he spilled epoxy glue all over his room. So he tried doing chores to make up for that. But the real reason his parents were being mean was that their brains had been replaced by brains of aliens from Aldebaran. So it didn’t matter how many chores he did, they still wouldn’t like him. See?”

Actually Alison didn’t quite see, but it made her curious. “Well, how *did* he solve that problem, after he found out what it was?”

Marvin waved his hand. “Rent the movie sometime and find out. The point is, you don’t need to be smarter, you need to stop being nervous.”

To Alison, that sounded like unhelpful grown-up advice. “That’s easy to *say*.”

“I wouldn’t just *say* it, I’d *do* it, if you were a laboratory rat,” said Marvin calmly. “Let me finish explaining, will you? Okay.” He ticked off points on his fingers. “One, you need to stop being nervous so you can use your ability to win chess games. Two, the simplest way to stop being nervous is to *start* being something else. Like aggressive.”

“Aggressive?” repeated Alison. It was a word she didn’t know, but she liked the pushy sound of it.

“‘Aggressive,’ ” explained Marvin patiently, “means you want to fight, to push other people around. If you’re aggressive, that’s all you care about.”

The minute he said it, Alison knew he was right. “Yeah! That’s how Spencer wins. Do—do you know anything about making people more aggressive?”

“Well . . . It can be done.” Marvin spoke slowly. “But I couldn’t do it for you.”

“Why not?” Her stomach fluttered. “I mean, how do they do it?”

“Here’s how scientists do it.” Turning, Marvin pointed with his dark glasses to the brain poster. “See this little part way down inside? That’s the hypothalamus. By sticking electric wires into that part, they can make rats—or monkeys or even people—ready to fight. If you had that kind of fighting spirit, you wouldn’t even think about being nervous.”

Staring at the bulging naked masses of the brain in the poster, Alison felt sick. “I don’t want you to stick anything into my brain.”

“That’s what I *told* you. I’m not exactly a brain surgeon. But if they did it, it would probably work.” Marvin squinted thoughtfully at the poster. “There was one experiment with rats . . . They stimulated a certain part of the hypothalamus, and wham, the rat was crazy to fight. It jumped on a mouse”—he grabbed the back of Alison’s neck to demonstrate—“and bits its spinal cord, just like that.”

“Yuck!” Alison squirmed away, but then she laughed as a picture came to her mind. “If I jumped on Spencer and chomped his neck, he’d be pretty surprised.”

Marvin grinned. “Too bad I can’t do brain surgery on you. Well, good luck with the chess.” He stood up.

As Alison clumped back down the muddy lane toward the street, she felt cheerful. Marvin had been pretty nice to her. Of course, she wasn’t any closer to beating Spencer than before.

The image of the brain, with that important little part for feelings deep inside, floated in her mind. Just a little electricity inside there, and she would feel so different when she played chess. She wouldn’t be nervous—she would just think about winning.

Such a little change, and there was no way to make it happen! Alison put her hand inside the hood of her slicker, pressing her forefinger against her skull as if she could change her brain that way.

### 3. A Foolproof Hiding Place

The next day was sunny, which meant outdoor recess and no chess practice, thank goodness. Shadows of the puffy clouds slid across the playground as Alison and Denise joined the line for foursquare.

Denise leaned toward Alison, whispering, “Did you bring your money?”

Alison nodded, digging her zippered coin purse from her pocket and holding it up for Denise to see. She knew Denise meant money for the Candy Club.

Alison and Denise were the only two members of the Candy Club. They had started it last Halloween, to share all the candy they got from trick-or-treating, and it had worked out so well that they kept it up. At first they were going to let other kids in the club so they could have a really big selection, but then Denise decided she didn’t quite trust any of the other girls in their class.

Valentine’s Day had been almost as good as Halloween for getting a big supply of candy, but they had eaten the last stale little hearts, the kind that said Be Mine or Tru Luv, a week ago. Yesterday they had agreed to bring money to school today and walk to the 7-Eleven store on their way home for a fresh supply.

“We could ask Karen to join in,” suggested Alison, nodding at the girl with long, thin legs poised on square one. Karen was making a face at the girl about to bounce the ball toward her.

Denise shook her head. “I don’t know if she’d remember all the rules. It would be a big pain to have anyone in the Candy Club who didn’t follow the rules.”

Sighing, Alison felt the quarters in her coin purse. Denise didn’t have any more money than she did, and their supply of candy was going to be pretty disappointing after the big satisfying piles from Halloween and Valentine’s Day. Besides, to tell the truth, Alison was getting a little bored with being in a club with only Denise. Of course, Denise was Alison’s best friend, but sometimes she could be annoying. Like about following rules.

Denise loved rules. When they first formed the Candy Club, Denise had made up seventeen rules and written them down on a piece of lined yellow paper that they kept in the secret club safe, a shoe box in Denise’s closet:

## Rules of the Candy Club

1. WE STICK TOGETHER!
2. Nobody eat candy unless other members are present.
3. Take turns choosing pieces of candy.
4. If it's something big, like a licorice whip, you have to measure it with a ruler and divide it.

The list went on like that in Denise's small, cramped handwriting, with careful curls on the capital letters. It was amazing, Alison thought, how many rules Denise had invented just for two people sharing candy.

It ran in the family, she supposed. Denise's mother had lots of rules, too. For instance, that one for eating vegetables and dip. If you dipped a carrot stick, say, in the dip and bit it, and then wanted to dip the rest of the carrot stick, you had to turn it around so that you didn't get the germs from the bitten part in the dip.

"Watch out, Alison!"

At Denise's scream, Alison whirled just in time to dodge Spencer's knees jabbing the backs of her knees. "Cut it out!"

But Spencer was already trotting off, laughing, followed by a pack of boys. Alison glanced toward the teacher on lunch duty, but she knew the teacher wouldn't do anything. Teachers didn't take "kneeing" very seriously, because it didn't actually hurt. It just startled the person who was kneed, and made her look stupid. And made her want to get revenge.

Later that afternoon, Alison and Denise met Karen coming out the door of the 7-Eleven store with a bag of potato chips. Already she had opened the bag, and there were salted crumbs around her mouth. "Hi, Alison. Hi, Denise."

"See?" said Denise. "Potato chips. She wouldn't want to be in the club, anyway."

A few minutes later Denise and Alison walked out of the store with a package of Gummi Bears (Alison's choice) and a chocolate bar (Denise's choice). The chocolate bar was all right to get, since it was divided into squares and therefore easy to share. But they couldn't get any candy bar, like a Milky Way, that was all one piece. That was Denise's rule number 13.

Swinging their small paper bags from the 7-Eleven, they walked along Main Street and up the back-and-forth curves of Chestnut Hill Road toward Alison's house. "I don't know about

keeping our supply at your house,” said Denise. “You said Maureen already sneaked two of the caramels your grandma sent you for your birthday.”

“I know—it drives her crazy when I save something,” said Alison. “Once we were riding to Boston in the car, and we each had a banana to eat on the way. Maureen ate her whole banana before we got out Rushfield, but I waited until we got on the expressway, and then I ate one bite for every town we drove through.”

Denise giggled. “And she was just sitting there, yelling at you to hurry up and finish?”

Alison nodded. “If my mom and dad hadn’t been in the car, she would have grabbed it and gobbled it down herself. But don’t worry, she doesn’t know about the Candy Club.” Alison peeked into her bag at the little plastic package with the wide-eyed bear on it. “She only goes looking for stuff she knows I have. Anyway, I’ve got a perfect, foolproof hiding place.”

“What is it?”

“I’ll show you,” said Alison with a kindly smile. Denise often kept Alison in suspense, so she was just paying her back now.

At Alison’s house they passed Maureen in the kitchen. She was standing at the counter with the telephone pressed to her ear, winding the cord around one finger. She didn’t speak, but she cast a sharp glance at their paper bags.

“Let’s get out of here!” whispered Denise, nudging Alison. They hurried down the hall to Alison’s room.

As soon as the door was shut, Denise faced Alison with an exasperated look. “She saw our bags! Now she knows we’ve got candy. That’s great—just great.”

Alison had noticed Maureen’s eagle-eyed glance at their little 7-Eleven paper bags, but she shrugged. “For all she knows, we’re going to eat it all right now. Why would she think we were going to save some?”

Denise frowned, as if she thought Maureen might have read rule number 8: If you get some new candy and there isn’t any in the supply, you have to save half of it for the next meeting. “Where’s the hiding place?” she asked, looking around the room.

Alison smiled, purposely not looking at the diary on the shelf. “I’ll show you after we divide the candy up and eat the part for today.” Alison was proud of her idea, which had come to her only this morning.

Getting scissors from her bookshelf, she cut open the plastic bag of Gummi Bears and sniffed their Jell-O-like scent. She began to count them into two piles. Denise slid the chocolate bar out of its paper, unfolding the foil wrapping. Frowning with concentration, she broke the bar into five pieces, and then broke each piece into two squares.

“One, one; two, two;” counted Alison, making two smaller piles of Gummi Bears for her and Denise to eat this afternoon. The other half she had already poured back in the plastic bag.

After she had eaten her six-and-a-half Gummi Bears and two-and-a-half squares of milk chocolate with crunchy bits of crisped rice, Alison picked a few chocolate crumbs from the knees of her jeans. Denise, who ate so neatly that she hadn’t dropped any crumbs, looked impatient. “Well? Where’s the hi—” Glancing at the closed door, she lowered her voice. “Where’s the hiding place?”

Alison pointed silently to the blue-bound diary on her bookshelf.

“This?” Denise hopped off the bed and picked up the diary, frowning. “It’s got a lock all right, but if we put the candy between the pages, it’ll get squished.”

“Watch this,” said Alison. Without hurrying, she took the bright little key from her sock drawer. She unlocked the clasp holding the strap across the pages of her diary, opened it to the hollow compartment in the back, and looked up at Denise with a grin.

“Hey!” Denise’s eyes widened. “That’s neat! It looks like a bunch of pages from the outside, but it’s really a little box.”

“Right,” said Alison. “It says in the diary that this place is to hide secret papers, like ‘letters from your sweetheart.’” They both giggled at that. “Anyway,” Alison went on, “see, we can fit in five squares of chocolate and the package of Gummi Bears, if make it flat.”

“Speaking of sweethearts,” said Denise, “I was thinking about the double wedding we’re going to have. We can’t really walk down the aisle at the same time, because we’ll have those big wide trains. How about if we go in alphabetical order?”

“Oh, sure,” said Alison with a snort. “You said that because Farino comes before Harrity.” Alison wasn’t nearly as interested in the plans for their double wedding as Denise was. How did they even know they were going to marry anyone? Still, she wasn’t going to let Denise get away with *that*.

“Maybe we should go by height, then,” suggested Denise. “It’s always good to put shorter people in front.”

Alison looked at Denise, who was an inch shorter than her, but she didn't argue. "I guess we can decide that later. Let's put our supply in the hiding place. I wish I'd thought of hiding my caramels here. But Maureen got to them first."

Wrapping up the extra chocolate squares in the foil, and folding and flattening the package with the remaining Gummi Bears, the girls fitted the candy inside the hiding place. Then Alison let Denise fasten the tab of the thick page that covered the secret compartment.

"Did you write in your diary already?" Denise flipped to the front.

"Hey, it's private." Grabbing the diary, Alison fastened the clasp. She had just remembered something she'd written a couple of days before: *Sometimes Denise is a pain. She made a list of who was better at chess, and she put herself before me.*

Denise looked like she was going to try to talk Alison into showing her the diary entries. But just then the door opened, and Maureen stuck her head in.

"Hey!" Alison put the diary behind her back. "This is private, Maureen."

"Oh! I'm sorry," said her sister. "I promise I'll never, ever let you know when somebody's on the phone for you, ever again. I'll tell him you don't want to talk to him."

"Wait!" Alison dropped the diary on her bed and rushed down the hall after Maureen. "Who? Who's 'he'?"

Maureen stopped in the middle of the kitchen, giving her a puzzled look. "As a matter of fact, it's Marvin. I don't know why, but he wants to talk to you." She nodded toward the receiver lying on the counter.

Her heart beating faster, Alison picked up the phone. "Hello?"

"Hi!" Marvin's voice was full of energy. "The DISAST is ready. Come on over."

"What?"

There was a pause, as if Marvin was trying to figure out why Alison didn't know what he was talking about. Then he tried again. "You know, that electrical brain change I was telling you about? To make you more aggressive?"

"Yes?" Alison was aware that Maureen was listening, pretending to read the comics in the newspaper on the kitchen table, and that Denise had poked her head into the kitchen. Why did Denise have that funny look on her face? Anyway, Alison had a feeling she didn't want either of them to know about this.

“Well, if you can come over, I’ve got something to show you. I think I found a way to do it without surgery.”

\* \* \* \*

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