



Hide & seek

KATY GRANT

CHAPTER 1

On a warm fall afternoon a few days after my fourteenth birthday, I was about to leave on an adventure I'd been planning for weeks. Treasure hunting out in the wild. How cool was that? I pushed my mountain bike out of the shed and was ready to take off, when my little sister came racing down the back steps of the house.

"Chase, can I come too? My bike doesn't have a flat anymore."

I tried not to look annoyed, but there was no way I wanted Shea along today. She'd slow me down. She didn't know where I was going; she just figured it was a bike ride.

"Not this time, Shea. I'm going pretty far. Trust me, you'd be bored." Shea frowned at me, obviously not believing that lame excuse. "Anyway, Rick needs you to help out at the register, remember?"

"I hate working in the store." She narrowed her eyes at me and crossed her arms.

"No you don't."

She could frown all she wanted. I knew that Shea loved working in the store. She's only ten, but she's just as good at working the register as my older sister Kendra or me. She'd

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always sit behind the counter on a stool and count change and give all the tourists fishing advice. Not that there'd be any tourists today. Labor Day was last week, and all the tourists had gone home to Phoenix. Rick would be lucky to sell one carton of night crawlers all afternoon.

I swung one leg over my bike and when Dexter saw what I was up to, he raced over, his ears pushed forward and his tail spinning like a windmill.

"What's in your backpack? It looks heavy," Shea asked me as I rolled through the gravel.

"Water bottles and some trail mix and stuff." I didn't tell her exactly what stuff because that would give away what I was doing, and then she'd definitely want to come along. Dexter ran ahead of me. He knew if I was on my bike, it had to be an afternoon of fun. "Tell Rick I'll be home by six!" I yelled over my shoulder. It was four o'clock now, so that gave me two whole hours.

Whew! Finally. Freedom. All summer I've been cooped up in our store with my family. Working the register and stocking shelves. Selling tourists bait, tackle, soft drinks, and marshmallows. Or anything else they need when they're camping.

Got any hand sanitizer? Yes sir, second aisle, on the left—top shelf.

Do you guys sell popcorn? We sure do. Did you want Jiffy Pop or a bag of already-popped?

Besides the store, my family also owns six cabins, and almost every weekend in the summer, we're booked solid. The cabins have to be cleaned, the store shelves have to be stocked, the wood pile has to be replenished. There is *always* something to do.

It's enough to drive a guy crazy. All three of us kids help out. We have to in the summer. Then when summer ends and

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the tourists go home, school starts, and I'm stuck in a classroom all day. Sometimes you just need to get out and breathe.

This was going to be the first geocache I'd ever done completely on my own, so I'd planned everything carefully. Shea was right—my backpack was heavy. It was full of stuff I might need. Two water bottles—one for me, one for Dexter—a plastic bowl for him, some trail mix, beef jerky, binoculars, some extra AA batteries, and a Swiss army knife. And then the other items—a few treasures to trade for the geocache, and my GPS so I could find the treasure.

Dexter and I headed north on the 373. "Get in the gravel, Dext," I told him, and he trotted over to the side of the highway and stayed in the gravel. He could understand practically everything I say to him because I talk to him all the time. Pete Dawson passed by in his old Bronco and tooted at us. I waved back. But other than that, there wasn't a car in sight. The only people on the 373 are either driving into Greer or driving out of it, because once you get through town, the highway just ends.

Dexter had a pattern. He'd run ahead of me about twenty feet, then stop, sniff, and squirt. Run, stop, sniff, squirt. He wanted to make sure every animal for miles around knew this was his rock, his tree, his highway. He stopped at one patch of grass and sniffed for so long I passed him on my bike.

"Anyone you know?" I called over my shoulder. He squirted and ran ahead of me.

It was a perfect afternoon. The sky was a deep, deep blue and there wasn't a cloud anywhere. The sun was warm on the back of my neck and my shoulders—T-shirt weather. A great day for hunting hidden treasure.

I pulled off the highway and Dexter stopped too, waiting a little ahead of me to see if I was coming. I shrugged off my

backpack and pulled out my hand-held GPS. Dad had given it to me as an early birthday present the last time I saw him in August. "In case you ever get lost up there in the boonies," he'd said. He still finds it hard to believe Mom moved us up to the White Mountains after she married Rick. Dad would never leave Phoenix.

He wasn't really worried about me getting lost. He knew I'd been wanting a GPS of my own so I could try geocaching. We did a few together around Phoenix, and he thought it was pretty cool. Today was the first chance I'd had to use my new GPS around here. It took me awhile to figure out all the different features.

I turned it on and waited for it to find the satellites within range. People take GPS systems totally for granted, but there is amazing technology behind them. This little thing in my hand picks up satellite signals orbiting the earth, way up there in the sky.

I had found the coordinates of the cache I was looking for on the internet and entered the waypoint into the GPS, so now I could see that we were 5.2 miles away from our destination. I switched screens to the navigation page, the one that looks like a compass, and the arrow pointed slightly northwest. Okay. I knew we were going in the right direction.

Five miles out there and five miles back. That would take a good forty-five minutes at least. Probably even longer, depending on how rough the terrain was and how fast I could go. Plus I'd need time to find the geocache. I might find it in a few minutes, or it could take me half an hour. And there was always a chance I might not even find it today. I'd be lucky to be home by six. But I'd better try to be. After six o'clock, I'd start running out of daylight fast.

I slung my backpack on my shoulders and we took off, still

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heading north on the 373. I held the GPS in one hand, propping my wrist against the handlebars for balance when I needed to, but I really only needed one hand to steer with. We were coming up to Gray Wolf Crossing, and I watched the navigation arrow point west.

“Turn!” I yelled to Dexter, and he turned left, like he knew exactly where we were going. Now we were off the highway, and cabins were on one side of this winding mountain road, tucked away behind firs and spruce trees. The other side of the road dropped off to a sheer hillside, covered in trees. Most of these cabins were rentals that were full all summer, but they looked empty now. We passed two new cabins under construction. This stretch of road was nice and shady, with thick stands of trees all around, and the evergreens gave off that warm, piney smell in the afternoon sun. The road was climbing pretty steep now, and I had to stand up and pedal to get up enough momentum. I was having trouble holding the GPS in one hand, so I slipped it into my pocket. I always wear cargo shorts because they’ve got big pockets. Anyway, I knew we were going in the right direction. Our geocache was hidden somewhere out on this road—3.9 miles away to be exact.

After a while, we’d gone far enough up the road that there were no more cabins in sight—just a windy, mountain road that kept climbing. I pumped hard, hoping I wouldn’t have to get off my bike and push if the hills got too steep. This was a narrow road; two cars passing each other would have a tight squeeze, but we didn’t see a single car.

Finally the road leveled off and I could sit back in the seat again. Dexter trotted along, having the time of his life—run, stop, sniff, squirt. He never got tired. He’s part German shepherd, part something else. His back has the black saddle like most shepherds, and his legs are tan, but his ears flop down

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instead of standing up, and his fur is shorter than a shepherd's. But he's smart like a German shepherd, and he's a great tracking dog. He was always on the trail of some interesting smell.

We came to the top of the hill and the road rose up out of the trees, and now we were in open meadows. All around us was wide-open space as far as the eye could see. I took a deep breath. "Dexter, notice something?" I yelled to him as he ran ahead of me. Now that we'd leveled off, I could pick up speed. "We've got the mountains to ourselves again. No tourists!" I whooped at the top of my lungs.

Mom and Rick didn't like us to say anything even slightly negative about tourists. Rick always called them our "lifeblood." "We couldn't survive without them. So smile and tell every one of them to come back soon. And remember—they don't have to come to Greer. They could take their dollars to Strawberry or Forest Lakes or Pinetop. But we want them right here in Greer." *Get your rear to Greer!* our postcards say on the little metal stand by the door.

I knew we needed them. But it's so crowded in the summer. I have to admit that the fall and spring—the "lean months" as Mom and Rick call them—are my favorite times. It's so peaceful up here when there aren't crowds of people around.

We came to a trailhead and I stopped to check the GPS. The navigation arrow pointed west. We were going to have to leave the road here and follow this hiking trail that stretched out in front of us. Now we were 2.3 miles away from our geocache. We went across a little footbridge over a gully, and then the hiking trail followed an old railroad bed across the open meadows. The trail was paved with a bunch of cinder rocks that crunched under my tires. Even on a mountain bike, the cinders were a little hard to ride on.

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Now all around us were open fields, and we could see for miles and miles. According to the GPS, we were at an elevation of 8,562 feet. Up here, there weren't a lot of trees, but there were little stands of white-trunked aspen clustered together. Their leaves were still pale green, fluttering silver in the breeze. The aspen hadn't started to turn yet, but pretty soon the whole mountain would be covered in yellow, gold, and orange.

I was glad to have Dexter with me to keep me company. It still made me a little nervous to go out in the wilderness all alone. And I just couldn't take Shea along. I knew she'd get tired on such a long bike ride. Anyway, part of me wanted to be alone. I felt like this was something I needed to do. It was like a test I had to pass. Could I go out on my own and guide myself to my destination, and then get home safe again? It was something I wanted to try.

My uncle first took us geocaching when he came out to visit us from Nashville. He showed me how to look up geocache locations on a website and put in the waypoint on his GPS; then he took Shea and me out and we found a few caches around Big Lake.

My older sister Kendra thought it was weird. "You mean people just hide a bunch of junk in some container for strangers to find later? What's the point?"

Uncle Andy raised one eyebrow at her. "What's the point of 'Dance Dance Revolution'?" he asked, to tease her, because at that time she was totally addicted to that game.

"It's good exercise," she told him.

"Well, so is this, because you're walking around. Plus you're outside."

Shea and I loved it. "It's like hide-n-seek," she said. The thing I thought was so cool was that non-geocachers—

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muggles—could pass right by a hidden cache and they'd never know it was there. It was like a secret club. And there are over 300,000 geocaches hidden all over the globe. Pretty amazing, considering this sport has only been around since 2000. That was when GPS systems got a lot more accurate and people started using them to guide them to different locations. I haven't hidden my own geocache yet, but I'm going to soon. That would be pretty cool.

"Dexter, want to find some treasure?" I asked, and his ears pushed forward. We stopped and I took a drink out of a water bottle and poured some in the plastic bowl for him. At first he wasn't interested. He was busy sniffing at a patch of dry grass. Then he came over and sniffed the bowl and took a long, sloppy drink, his muzzle dripping beads of water when he held his head up to look around.

My eyes scanned the meadows around us, and that's when I spotted them. There, a good five hundred feet to the north of us just over the rise of a hill, was a herd of elk grazing in the field.

"Wow!" I whispered to Dexter, "There must be thirty of them!" I dug inside my backpack for my binoculars. It doesn't matter that I've lived in the White Mountains of Arizona almost my whole life, and I see wildlife at least once or twice a week. I still think it's exciting.

I watched the elk herd through my binoculars for a while. I wished we could move closer, but I knew if we tried to, they'd see us and move off into the trees. We were far enough away that Dexter didn't really notice them, but if we got close enough for him to see them, he'd want to chase them. This way, we were keeping a safe distance. They all still had their reddish brown summer coats, but pretty soon they'd be shedding those for the darker coats of winter. I could see several

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calves standing near their mothers, but their coats had lost their baby spots.

September and October are rutting season, and whenever I'm outside during this time of year, I could usually hear elk bugling. It sounded sort of like a really bad bugle player blowing on a horn, but the elk sure seemed to like it. I guess it meant love was in the air.

"We better get going," I said, as if Dexter was the one holding us up. I stuffed the binoculars inside my backpack and we took off. We kept going down the hiking trail, with me bumping along through the cinders on my bike and Dexter trotting ahead of me. Every now and then I'd stop and check the GPS. The navigation arrow still pointed west, pretty much straight ahead, so I knew we'd find the geocache somewhere along this trail.

We were getting closer and closer—.7 miles, then .4, then .3. Pretty soon we were down to a matter of feet. At that point, I got off my bike and left it beside the trail because it was easier now to navigate on foot. I kept my eye on the screen, and with every step I took, the number of feet ticked down like seconds on a watch: 62 feet, 59, 53, 48, 44 feet—and then I was within 23 feet of the geocache. Now I didn't really need the GPS any more, so I slipped it into the pocket of my cargo shorts. It had brought me to within a matter of feet of the waypoint I'd marked, but I had to find the hidden cache on my own.

I scouted out the area. This was an awesome place to hide a geocache because the hiking trail had come right up to a little grove of trees and bushes. Very good spot. Lots of potential hiding places.

I started looking in the bushes, pushing back branches and searching underneath for any signs of a hidden treasure. At the base of a bush was a pile of dead leaves and plant matter, and

the soil around it was loose, so someone could easily hide something in here.

Dexter watched me pawing through the underbrush and ran over, his ears pushed forward and his forehead wrinkled. His face pretty much asked, "See something alive in there?" but I told him no, we were looking for something else. He wandered off to sniff some elk nuggets.

Since I didn't have much luck in the bushes, I walked around the little grove of trees, looking up in the branches for any signs of a container, maybe hidden in the crook of a branch. There were piles of rocks nearby, and I picked through those to see if anything was buried underneath. So far, nothing. But this was the part I loved—when you know you're within feet of the geocache and you just have to find where it's hidden.

I walked around the trees, and that's when I saw it. "That's gotta be it," I said out loud. It was a fallen log. Wouldn't that be a perfect hiding spot? I was halfway to the log when I spotted a couple of objects nearby in the dirt. Seeing those things stopped me right in my tracks.

Uh oh. This was not a good sign. My heart sank at the sight of the small toys scattered around by the fallen log.

A little green army man was lying on his side in the dust. Next to him was a diecast Jeep. I could still see the tracks in the dust where the toy Jeep had been doing doughnuts. Dexter walked over to them cautiously and gave them a thorough sniff.

"Who is it, Dexter? Does it smell like muggles?"

Dexter walked away and squirted in the grass to let the muggles know he'd been here too. I looked around as if I expected to see the people who'd taken the toys out of the geo-

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cache, but of course no one was around. Dexter and I were all alone out here.

I bent down and looked inside the end of the log, but I didn't see anything. I grabbed a stick and poked around inside till I hit something hard. It made a hollow metal sound when I hit it with the stick. I reached inside the log and felt around. Under a pile of leaves I could feel some kind of metal box.

I pulled it out and brushed it off. It was a green ammunition box, like soldiers out in the field might use. "Perfect stash for a cache," I said to Dexter. He wasn't impressed with my rhyme.

But the thrill of finding the geocache was slightly spoiled by the fact that it had definitely been mugged. The lid wasn't fastened down right. When I opened up the box, I saw that dirt and leaves had gotten inside. I found the logbook and the empty plastic bag it was supposed to have been stored in to keep it from getting wet or dirty. But other than that, there wasn't too much damage. It could've been worse. At least it hadn't gotten wet from rain.

I inspected the treasures inside. There were three more army men, one purple and one gold strand of beads, two rubber snakes, a small set of Allen wrenches, a little padlock and key, and a wooden nickel that said *Pinnacle Peak Patio* on it.

I smiled because that was a steakhouse in Scottsdale. Kendra, Shea, and I go there with Dad sometimes.

I took the wooden nickel, but the best treasure of all in the whole box was a turkey call. I took it out and blew into it. It made a weird sound that I guess was sort of like a turkey gobbling. Dexter's ears shot up like a couple of antennas. The look on his face was so surprised I had to blow into it again. Up went the ears. Maybe just one more time. Boing! I cracked up over the way Dexter's ears moved every time I made the call.

“Cool! A turkey call, Dexter. In case we want to hunt wild turkeys sometime, huh?” I held out the little plastic mouth-piece for him to sniff and examine. I definitely wanted to keep this treasure.

Then I slid my backpack off my shoulders and unzipped it to take out my treasures for exchange. That’s the rule—you can take whatever items you want from a geocache as long as you leave something behind. I left a new red bandana in the ammo box. I figured bandanas were always a good thing to leave because you can do so many things with them when you’re hiking—use them as a headband, make them into a sling, carry stuff in them, cover your neck when you start to get sunburned—whatever. I’d also brought a combination can opener/bottle opener/corkscrew. We sell about a thousand of these in the store every summer so it seemed like something that people would find useful.

Then I took out the pencil stub and opened up the log-book, which was just a little spiral memo pad. I turned to the first page and saw that the first logged visit was last year on April Second, so this was still a fairly new geocache. Flipping through the pages, I noticed that quite a few people had found this cache over the summer—about nine different visits. Then I flipped to the end of the logs so I could record my find.

Except the last thing recorded wasn’t a log.

It was a message.

HELP

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Help? Help Wene? What was that supposed to mean? I stared at the handwriting. It looked like some little kid had written it. Either that or someone trying to disguise their handwriting. All the letters were capitalized. Was this some kind of joke?

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I sighed. Some kids must have done this. Stumbled on the geocache by accident, opened it up, scattered the toys around, and then left this stupid message.

But what would kids be doing way out here? I looked around. We were miles from any houses, and we were 2.3 miles from the road. Maybe it wasn't kids. But I knew one thing. No geocaching parents would let their kids scatter the cache contents around and mess up the logbook. There were certain rules everyone followed. I was disgusted. This was the first muggled cache I'd ever found.

On the page right before the message, someone had logged this:

9/3—last day of the long weekend & we're heading back to Tempe in an hour. Our 3rd cache of the trip. Beautiful hike and great views! We hate to leave the mountains and go back to the desert heat. TNLN. Team Sparky

Okay, September Third. That was just last Monday—Labor Day, so the geocache had been muggled sometime during the last week. TNLN meant “took nothing, left nothing.” Some people did geocaches just for the sport of finding them. I turned to the page after the scrawled message and logged my visit:

9/12—looks like cache was muggled. Lid not on tight, stuff scattered around, logbook out of the plastic. Cleaned it up. T turkey call & wooden nickel. L bandana & bottle opener. C&D

“C&D” was for Chase and Dexter of course. Then I cleaned out all the dirt and leaves in the ammo box, put the logbook and pencil stub in the plastic ziplock bag where they belonged, dusted off the AWOL army guy and his vehicle, and returned them to the box. I made sure the lid was fastened tight to protect it from the elements before I buried it in the leaves inside the log.

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We'd found our geocache, and it was still fun, even if it was a little muddled.

"Okay, Dexter. Let's go home."

But by the time we made it back to the road, I couldn't stop thinking. *HELP WENE*. Was Wene somebody's name? And why did they need help?

"Dexter," I called to him and he looked over his shoulder at me, his ears up.

"What if it wasn't a joke?"