





“Mara! We’re going to be late!”

Mara ignored her father’s call. She was painting the window trim in the attic bedroom, and was nearly finished.

“Mara!” her father called again, a little more loudly.

“You’d better go,” her mother said. “This can wait.”

Mara set her paintbrush down and untied

the strings of the apron she had on over her school clothes. “All right,” she said as she hung the apron on a hook. “But don’t do any more work until I get home. Promise.”

“I promise,” her mother said. “I have to work on the plans for the Hudsons’ house today anyway.”

Mara went over to where her mother was seated at her drafting table and gave her a hug. “I’m sure the house you’re designing for them is nice,” she said. “But not as nice as *my* house.”

Her mother laughed. “Of course not,” she said. “I save all my best ideas for you.”

“Mara!”

“Coming!” Mara shouted as she took one last look at the huge dollhouse sitting on the workbench and reluctantly went downstairs.

Her father was waiting by the front door, the car keys in his hand. Mara's little brother, Jesse, was standing beside him, his backpack on and an impatient look on his seven-year-old face.

"Sorry," Mara said as she grabbed her coat from the closet and snatched up her own backpack. "We were working on the house."

"We're going to be *late*," Jesse said. "And I have a spelling test today."

"Which I'm sure you'll get a perfect score on," Mara said, putting her arm around him as they exited the house. "I'll quiz you on the way to school."

As she predicted, he got every word right. Mara, however, realized that she'd left her math homework sitting on the desk in her room and her gym clothes on top of the dryer, where her father had left them for her.

It was going to be that kind of day.

“I’ll see you this afternoon,” her father called out the car window as Mara and Jesse walked into school. “Love you!”

“Love you back!” Mara and Jesse shouted in unison.

Once they were inside the doors of Crowleyville Central School, Jesse headed left to the second-grade classrooms while Mara turned right and went up the stairs to where the fifth-grade rooms were. When she got to homeroom, she found everyone standing around Krish Dhawan’s desk. Mara hung up her coat and put her things away in her cubby, then went to see what all the excitement was about.

“What’s going on?” she asked as she peered

over the shoulder of her best friend, Olivia Winters. Krish had what looked like several small action figures set out on his desk.

“I think this one is my favorite,” Krish said, picking up one of the figures and holding it out for everyone to see. “He’s called the Fishman of the Lost Lagoon.”

Mara leaned over and picked up one of the other figures.

“That one is the Werewolf Bride,” Krish told her. “Look at the flowers in her crown. They’re covered in *blood*.”

“She’s cool,” said Mara. “And the perfect size to live in my dollhouse.”

“Maybe if your dollhouse was a castle in Transylvania,” Olivia joked.

“Where’d you get these?” Mara asked Krish.