



Chapter One

Want to know what the most fantastically radical game *ever* is?

I can tell you.

It's Real-Life Mario Kart.

And we're playing it right now.

My best buddies, June, Quint, and Dirk, are speeding along in some fresh post-apocalyptic vehicles of awesomeness: souped-up bumper cars that we call BoomKarts. Dirk built the BoomKarts, and Quint loaded 'em up with wicked vehicular combat coolness: paintball blasters, defensive marble spillers, spiked

tires, gas-powered slingshots—the works.

But me, Jack Sullivan? I don't need a BoomKart because I race atop my awesome monster-dog, Rover.

There's a reason for this game of Real-Life Mario Kart. I noticed that the energy and enthusiasm levels of my buddies were a little low. I mean, I was having trouble distinguishing them from the zombies. . . .



So I was like, “What's more exciting than building an epic, winding go-kart course, complete with jumps, oil slicks, and a spinning

speedway through creepy old man Aiken's house?”

That's one of the perks of life after the Monster Apocalypse—you can build giant Mario Kart-style tracks through your hometown.

Right now, June's winning, and I *must* take her out! She's claimed first place *three races in a row!* I yank my T-shirt cannon from Rover's saddlebag and . . .



Direct hit! June's kart slices around the corner, spins, then *slams* into the local fire station.

"Don't mess with the king!" I shout. Rover woofs triumphantly as we stampede into first place. But I throw a glance behind me and see June's BoomKart is totally out of commission.

Crud. The idea is to win, not to knock your buddies unconscious! I know a good amount about buddies, 'cause I have the *best* buddies, and I'm quite sure they don't like being knocked out.

I tug on Rover's reins and he turns. "June, you okay?" I begin to call out, but then—



THWACK! The football knocks me clean out of Rover's saddle. I fall onto the grass. Surprise football crossbow booms are *the worst*.

"Your problem, Jack, is that you're too *nice*," June teases. "You don't have that competitive spirit like me."

She's about to speed ahead when something **INSANE** happens.

And I don't use the term "INSANE" lightly, since pretty much everything that happens during the Monster Apocalypse could be classified as insane or, at the very minimum, pretty much bonkers bananas.

We hear a voice.

A *human* voice.

I can't make out the words, but the voice is coming from inside the fire station. We've seen or heard *zero other humans* since the Monster Apocalypse began. So like I said, yeah, **INSANE**.

June and I are instantly hurrying to the station and pressing our ears to the red metal door.

We hear the voice again.

June looks at me, eyes bulging. **CONFIRMED:** this is both **INSANE** *and* **BONKERS BANANAS**.

I spin around, cupping my hands to my mouth. "Quint! Dirk! Time-out!"

“No way, friend!” Quint shouts as his BoomKart whips around the corner. “Not falling for that ruse again!”

“Not a ruse time-out! A real time-out!” I shout. “Really real!”

June points out that I should *not* be yelling, since we have *no clue* who is inside the fire station. Good point. I do a quick brain scan of possibilities—and the results are pretty gnarly. . . .

Terrifying Wasteland Marauders!



Tires screech, and Quint and Dirk skid to a stop and hop from their BoomKarts. “What’s up?” Dirk asks.

“Human-sounding voices,” June whispers. “Inside the fire station!”

“We’ve never investigated the fire station,” Quint says. “I am quite curious.”

“Of course you’re curious!” I say. “We haven’t heard a single other human voice in months! We’ve heard *monster* voices, but those are all, like, *deep* and monster-y. The only human voices we’ve heard are *our own*.”



Suddenly, my mind is in a whole different place, thinking about how I had no idea my voice was nasally, and could that possibly explain years of difficulty making friends, 'cause who wants to be friends with the kid with the lousy voice, but if it's nasally, why did no one tell me before, I could have worked on it, even tried to put on a cool Australian accent or something, maybe even—

“Jack!” June snaps me back to attention, hooking a thumb at the fire station door. Dirk is tugging the handle, opening the door, and—

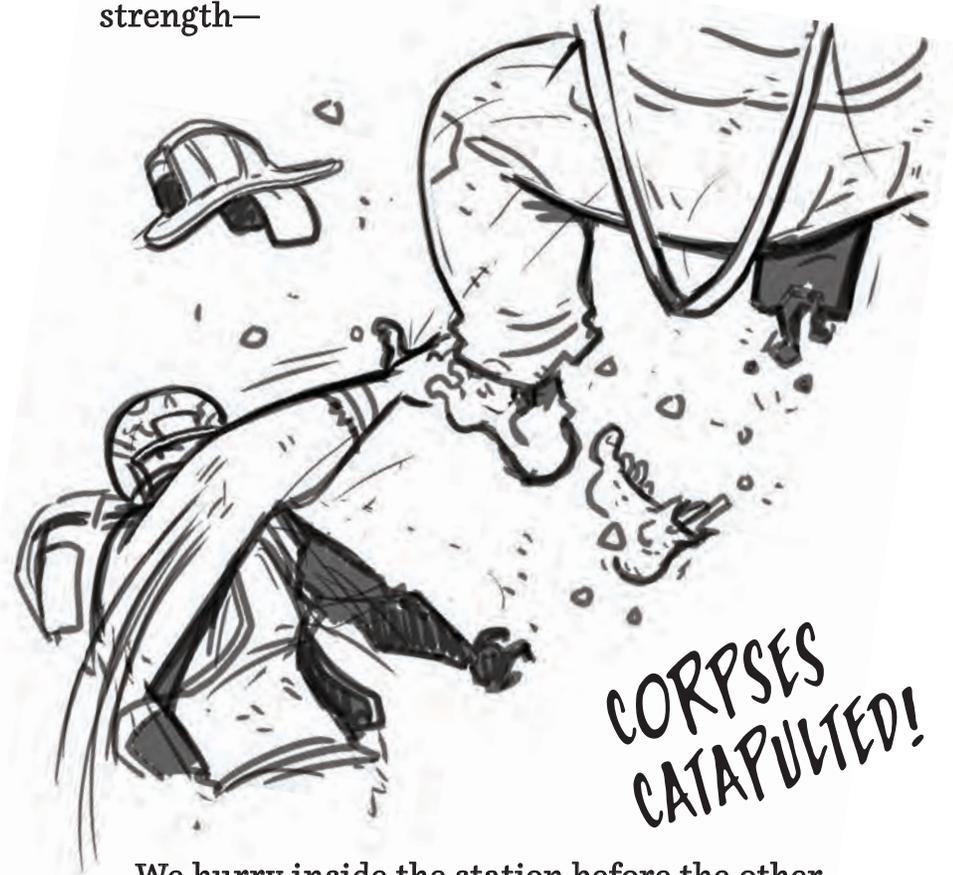
FIREFIGHTER ZOMBIES!

UHHHGGHNNN!



“Watch out!” June cries. One massive zombie—the chief?—lunges at Quint.

Quint immediately curls up into a ball and plays dead like it's a bear attack or something. Thankfully, Dirk is there. He snags both zombies by their ankles and using his ludicrous strength—



We hurry inside the station before the other zombies can get their awful arms around us. Rover bolts in behind us, barely squeezing through the door as I slam it shut.

The fire station is chilly, and the whole place smells like rotted people and curdled milk and old ham sandwiches.

And what, exactly, do we see inside?

Pretty much nothing. Now that the zombies are gone, the fire station is empty.

So *who* did we just hear talking? It definitely wasn't the zombies, 'cause they don't talk—they moan.

"C'mon," I say. "We'll check every room. *Someone* was in here yapping away."

Moving together for prime safety and battle readiness, we search the station.

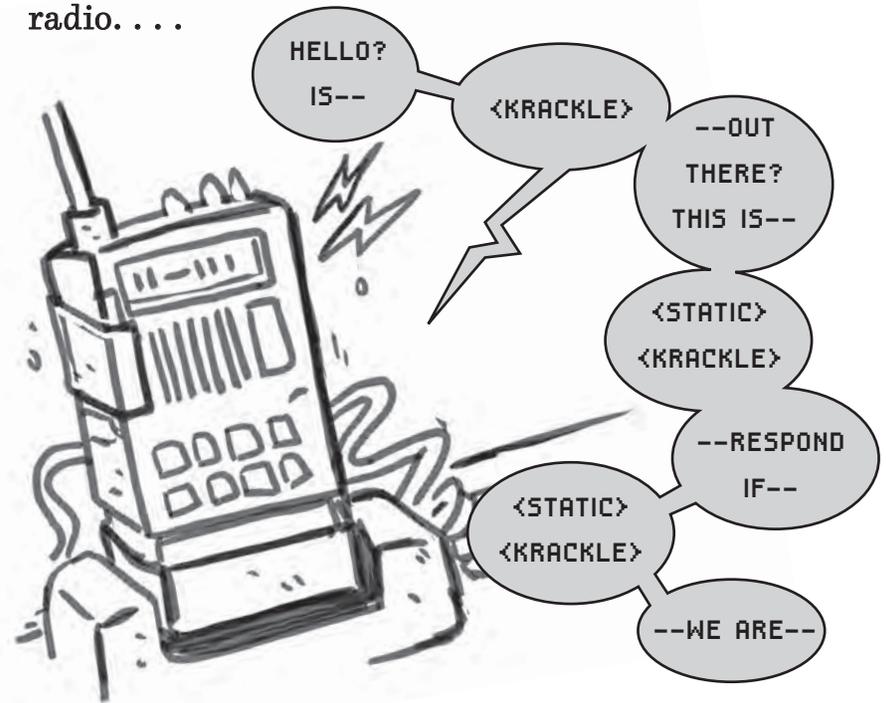
We soon determine that there is no one else—zombified or not zombified—inside the station. I lean against a dusty fire truck. "I don't get this," I say. "We heard voices!"

And then it happens. Again.

IT.

Capital letters "IT" 'cause IT is BIG.

We hear the voice. It's coming from a radio. . . .



My heart just about seizes up and my blood starts pumping to the rhythm of *Holy. Moley. Holy. Moley. Holy. Moley.*

June dashes toward the radio, kneeling, practically sliding across the floor. “We’re here!” she cries. “We are here! Come in! Repeat, we are here! Other people! Humans! Four of us!”

And then it comes again: “REPEATING, THIS IS—*STATIC, KRACKLE*—WE ARE—*KRACKLE*—RESPOND IF—*STATIC*—WE WILL TRY AGAIN IN—*STATIC, KRACKLE*—”

The radio cuts off completely, then. No hissing static. Just total silence. The broadcast, it appears, is over.

June gently reaches out and places her hand on the radio, like it’s some magic artifact. Her eyes are saucers. “I don’t get it. I responded,” she says. “But they didn’t hear. . . .”

After a quick examination of the radio, Quint says, “We *can’t* respond. This is a radio scanner—one way only.”

June sinks. “Oh.”

“Do not distress,” Quint says. “Simply *hearing* from these other humans is huge! However, it appears the signal is weak. That’s why there was so much static. If we get it back to the tree house, I can look into amplifying the signal.”

June looks hard at the radio. She gently chews her lower lip, and then . . .



Dirk just stands stiff, arms crossed. But after a moment, his mouth forms a wide, square smile.

My friends are just *really really happy*. And there isn’t much that’s better than watching your friends be, just, *really really happy*.

I once heard some old gray-haired lady say that the best part of holidays was *giving* gifts, not getting them. And I thought, lady, you’re a lunatic—getting a bunch of stuff is the total greatest. Of

course, as an orphan, my holidays were never, like, *big*, but still, c'mon. Free gifts, yo!

But right now, I understand what that old gray-haired lady meant.

"Well, let's go!" June exclaims. "What are we waiting for?! Let's go find those people! Whoever's talking—we've got to seek them out! Now! No delay!"

Quint shakes his head. "June, we don't know where to start. When the Monster Apocalypse began, there were rumors that some people had gone out west. But that was months ago! That broadcast could be coming from *anywhere*! A different country, even! We need to know *where* those humans are before we do anything."

"Oh," June says. "Right."

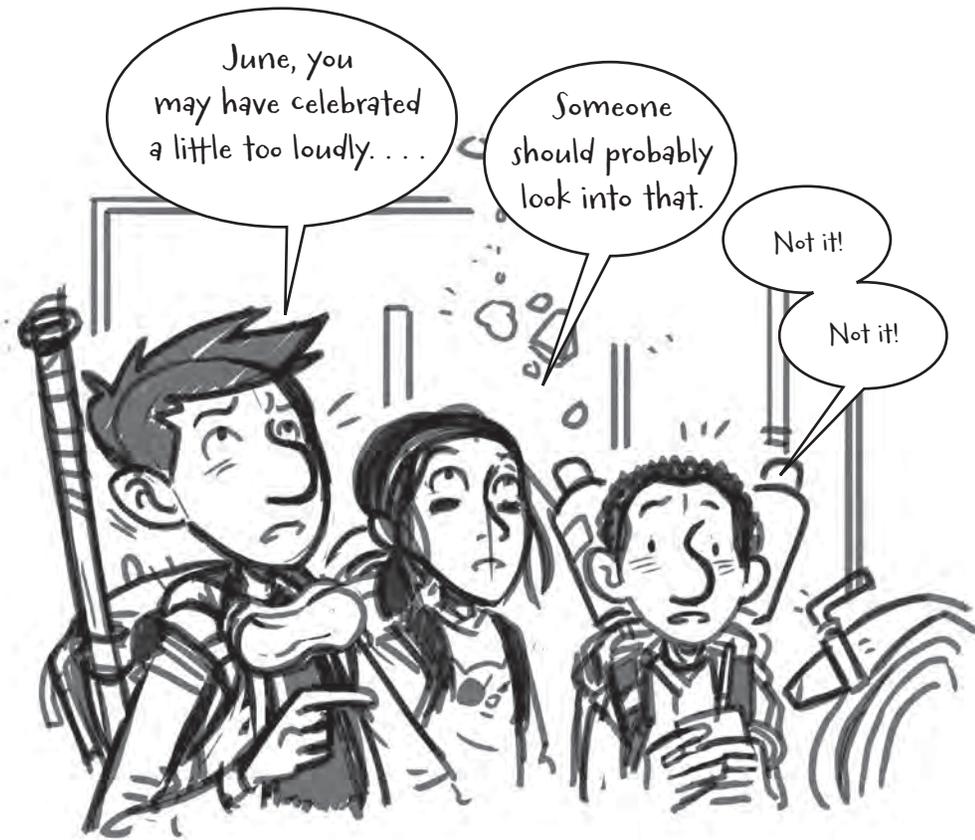
Suddenly, I have this odd feeling in my stomach—a creeping feeling of confused fright.

"Guys," I say. "I just want to point out—the voice was really static-y and faint."

June squeezes my hand. "Jack, that doesn't matter. What matters is, there are people still alive. There are other humans out there! We are *not* the last—"

KA-KRAK!

The entire building shakes. The ceiling cracks, and bits of tile and dust sprinkle down. Something just *landed* on the roof. . . .



Dirk and I head to the third floor to check out the roof situation. I quietly hoist open a window—whatever is on the roof is *big*, and I have zero interest in alerting it to my presence.

“Be careful,” Dirk says.

“Look who you’re talking to!” I reply, grinning as I bump his fist.

“I know who I’m talking to. That’s why I said it.”

“Yeah, yeah,” I mutter. I inch out the window and onto the ledge. I shimmy over and grip the drainpipe. I’ve been playing a lot of *Uncharted* and *Tomb Raider* recently, so I’m *pretty* confident in my radical parkour-climbing abilities.

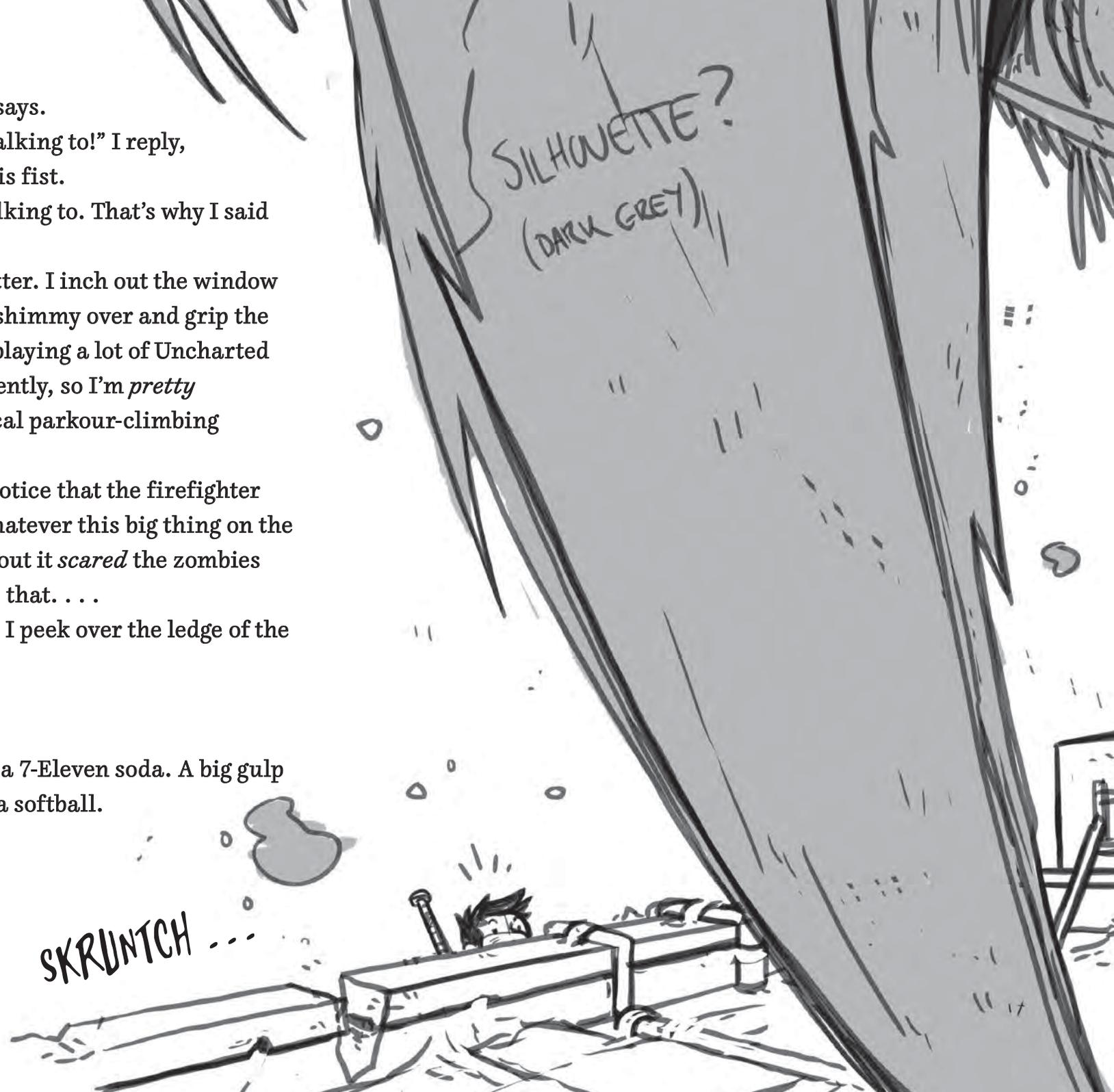
Glancing down, I notice that the firefighter zombies are gone. Whatever this big thing on the roof is, something about it *scared* the zombies away. And I don’t like that. . . .

Pulling my way up, I peek over the ledge of the roof.

And I gulp.

A big gulp.

Not a Big Gulp like a 7-Eleven soda. A big gulp like I just swallowed a softball.



I'm looking at some sort of terrible flying beast. This monster slightly resembles a Winged Wretch, but it's, like—WAY BIGGER and WAY MORE BLOODCURDLING. Oh, and if you're unfamiliar, this is a Winged Wretch. . . .



I haven't made a sound, but the monster's head suddenly swings down toward me. As if he *senses* me there. His eyes, like, *look* into mine and it's totally freaky and I feel frozen. This

thing is horribly horrifying. There are scars on his face, like he's been around the block a few times. Fear causes my fingers to squeeze the drainpipe, gripping tighter and tighter and, well . . .



A moment later, Dirk is yanking the entire drainpipe inside. I scramble off, happy to be on solid ground. I rush downstairs and my voice cracks as I say: "Dudes. It's bad. The thing up there is like a Winged Wretch but *bigger!*"

REALLY BIG. I know everyone's excited about the radio, but we are now trapped *inside* this fire station."

"I must point out," Quint says, "that it is very important that we escape with both our lives *and* the radio."

"We could just wait the monster out?" June suggests.

The instant June says that, the building quakes and ceiling chunks crash to the floor. The monster's talons are tightening around the walls.

"I don't think waiting him out is an option. . . ." I say quietly.

So with that, I announce a plan that kind of sounds thought-out, but I'm actually totally making it up as I go. "Here's the deal," I say. "I'm going to ride Rover *straight* out, a full-on stampede. That will distract this big flying freak while you hop in your BoomKarts and escape. We'll meet back home, at the tree house. Fun, right? Smart, right? Brave, right?"

Everyone begins protesting, telling me how dumb that plan is, but in my head I'm just thinking that right now, this moment—I need to protect my buddies.

I take the radio from June—and I can see how reluctant she is to let it go. "Don't worry," I say as I slip the radio into Rover's saddlebag. "I'll keep it safe. Promise."

And before anyone can say anything else, Dirk's lifting the fire engine garage door open, and . . .

