

Grades 7–8: Honorable Mention  
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### The Volunteers

Claire was ecstatic. Her short brown hair seemed to just bounce on its own. “Claire, I know you’re really excited about the service project, but don’t get too excited!” a calm voice beside her said.

“Taylor, don’t worry, I won’t get too excited.” Taylor’s hazel eyes stared at her in disbelief.

“I understand that you want to win the contest, but ...”

Taylor and Claire belonged to a youth ministry group and their youth minister, Mr. Gwellwit, started a service contest to see which team in the youth group could do the most hours. “Don’t get your hopes up,” Taylor added as the two girls continued walking to their youth group meeting.

“Good day, everybody!” boomed Mr. Gwellwit’s voice. “I hope you’re all ready for the meeting today!”

Claire and Taylor snuck into the back of the room. There was nothing Mr. Gwellwit hated more than tardiness.

“Claire! Taylor! Where have you guys been?” Mr. Gwellwit’s voice was steaming with anger.

“Sorry, sir,” both girls murmured as they sat down in the nearest seats beside Taylor’s twin brother Bernie. Like Taylor, he was tall with platinum blond hair, but unlike his sister, Bernie was loud and obnoxious.

“Hey, Tay-Tay,” Bernie taunted. “Oh, darn, you brought Claire, and it was so nice without her here.” Mr. Gwellit was busy going around the room checking off names on his clipboard. So he didn’t hear Bernie’s sarcastic remarks.

As Mr. Gwellwit finished checking off the names on his clipboard he made a booming announcement. “Everyone listen up, I’ve got our first assignment for the service contest. Mr. Fraybush informed me that he fired his housekeeper, so he needs some volunteers to help him clean up his house and yard. I need ten volunteers to help Mr. Fraybush.”

Almost every hand went up and Mr. Gwellwit pondered for a moment. “We’ll need Bernie, Jenny, Bill, and uh ... Jeff.” Mr. Gwellwit stopped as he heard Bernie yelp in delight. “I’ll also take Mary and Joey and ...” Mr. Gwellwit looked troubled, as if he couldn’t make up his mind. “Yes! I’ll also need Claire and Taylor. Stanley and Phillip, why don’t you come along, too?”

“You want me, sir?” a small boy with red hair and glasses said.

“Yes, Phillip, why not!” Phillip didn’t get to go on many of the projects, so he frantically shook his head.

“Everyone meet at Mr. Fraybush’s house around six o’clock,” Mr. Gwellwit proclaimed. “His address is 1868 Flowerpine Avenue. I expect all ten of you to be there.”

The volunteers yelled, “Yes, sir!” then they scrambled out of the large room.

As Claire and Taylor were getting ready to leave, Jenny came over to them with a smug look on her face. “So, you guys excited?”

“Um yeah, I guess?” Claire said hesitantly.

“Well, don’t get your hopes up. ‘Cause you know that you’re not going to get the most hours ‘cause I am.”

“How do you know that you will?” Taylor asked.

“Because I’m not chicken!” she smiled smugly.

“How does being chicken have anything to do with it?”

“You know the story about the last little girl that went inside Mr. Fraybush’s house. He invited her in and no one ever saw her again!”

“No way!” Claire exclaimed.

“Yeah! And all they found, when they looked through the old man’s house, was her right shoe.” Claire’s eyes widened but Taylor just stared at Jenny in disbelief.

“They say that the same little girl still haunts the place, forever searching for her right shoe.” Jenny’s smug smile faded as Bernie strode over. All he had to do was glare at her and in a blink of an eye Jenny was running out of the room. Then Bernie gave Taylor and Claire a comforting smile and the three walked out together.

As six o’clock chimed through Areville, Bernie, Claire and Taylor dashed down Flowerpine. They cut through several yards until they came to Mr. Fraybush’s house where the other seven volunteers were crowded around a tall man in a gray jumpsuit. The man raised his hand and the children became quiet. The tall man removed his hood. He was as pale as his faded jumpsuit, showing his black and yellow teeth as he grinned. He also had dread white hair with eyes that seemed to follow you every which way.

“Now, now, children, I’m Mr. Gardnier.”

“Mr. Garner?” someone asked.

“Mr. Gard-ni-er! Gardnier!” He looked like he wanted to kill the child that asked him the question, and then instantly regained his cool.

“Now Mr. Fraybush is a little ... tied up. So I’ll be giving you instructions today.”

Hearing this, Claire was troubled, because Mr. Gwellwit told everyone earlier that Mr. Fraybush recently fired his housekeeper. Quickly she raised her hand. “Sir,” Claire asked, “We heard that you were just recently fired and that Mr. Fraybush was alone.” Several other volunteers looked suspiciously at Mr. Gardnier.

“Well, there was a misunderstanding because I am most certainly not fired!” Mr. Gardnier yelled. He looked over the volunteers and then stopped and stared at three of them.

“You, you and you,” he pointed to Jenny, Mary and Joey. “All of you will be cleaning the inside of Mr. Fraybush’s house today. As for you four,” he pointed at Phillip, Bill, Jeff and Stanley, “you will be working in the front yard.” He paused for a moment and stared at the three remaining volunteers. “I want you three to work in the back yard. I will be in the cellar if you need me.”

The ten children immediately went to work. Jenny, Mary, and Joey went inside the house while the others worked in the yard. As sunset approached and all the volunteers were tired and ready to go home, a blood-curdling scream echoed all the way down Flowerpine Avenue.

All the volunteers working outside rushed into Mr. Fraybush’s house to see Mary holding a broom and Joey standing next to a broken vase with fists raised, ready to punch. They all stared blankly at the two volunteers. Someone asked, “Where is Jenny?”

“I ... don’t know,” Mary stuttered. “It was like she was there one second and then screamed and ran.”

“Where did she run?” Phillip asked.

“By the window,” Mary replied as she pointed to the nearest window. “There, right next to the lamp is where Jenny’s right shoe was.”

“Where did she go?” asked one of the volunteers. “I bet that creepy housekeeper got her.”

Most of the volunteers went into a panicked frenzy, until Taylor calmed them all down. She told them that they should try to find Mr. Gardnier and get him to help. The volunteers split up and searched throughout Mr. Fraybush’s house and lawn, but no one could find Mr. Gardnier. When they all met up in the living room, three more volunteers were missing.

Bill decided to look in the kitchen one more time. Just moments later, the remaining volunteers heard a terrifying scream from the kitchen. They all ran to the kitchen and saw Bill’s right shoe lying in the middle of the floor.

The remaining volunteers panicked and ran out of the house. Taylor took control. “Everyone, listen. There is nothing to be worried about. I’m sure everyone just got scared and went home.”

“Maybe,” Phillip said. “Or maybe not. I bet Mr. Gardnier got them.” Just then, an even more terrifying scream came from the back yard.

“Bernie!” Taylor yelled as she rushed to the backyard. The three remaining volunteers got there a minute later. There was no sign of Taylor or Bernie. As Mary and Claire hung their heads in silence, Phillip noticed that a trail of leaves led to the house.

“Come on!” Phillip yelled at the girls. He led them straight through the yard following the trail of leaves into Mr. Fraybush’s house. The trail ended where Jenny had disappeared. On the tile next to her shoe were three or four leaves crumpled together that weren’t there before. Phillip raised the tile from the floor. Mary, Claire and Phillip saw there was a hole in the living room floor under the tile.

“I knew it!” Phillip yelled. “I think Taylor left a leaf trail as she was being taken away.”

“Are there more leaves at the bottom of the tunnel?” Mary asked.

“Is there even a bottom of the tunnel? It’s so dark!” Claire stammered.

Phillip fumbled throughout the house until he found a flashlight and beamed it into the hold. At the bottom of the tunnel, there was a single crimson yellow leaf.

“I bet this tunnel leads right to Taylor and Bernie. Maybe we will find the other volunteers, too.”

All three of them dove into the tunnel. They immediately noticed that they were in a cave with rocky and jagged walls. Since it was dark and they were so close together, they feared some one might sneak up on them. As they crammed through the tight tunnel, Phillip’s flashlight crossed over something truly horrific. There in the distance was Mr. Gardnier. All three of the volunteers screamed as the housekeeper’s hideous face cackled with delight. The three volunteers ran past him as quickly as they could.

After they had put some distance between themselves and the evil housekeeper, Claire shouted that they should split up the first chance they get. The other children nodded in understanding.

Right after Claire said this, two other tunnels appeared and the three volunteers split up.

As Mary veered to the left and Claire to the right, Phillip stayed on the middle path and soon came to a well-lit room with several chairs and filing desks with projectors on top of them. Phillip also noticed that there was a couple of projection screens hung on the wall. In the middle of the row of chairs was what seemed a sack of potatoes, but was in reality the crumbled form of Mr. Fraybush.

Mary dashed down the left path and soon wondered if Claire and Phillip were well. She had never really cared much for them before, but since they were in this predicament together she felt closer to them as friends. After a while she stumbled across a large rocky room with about twenty chairs lined up along the walls. Occupying half the seats were the other seven missing volunteers, gagged and tied to the wooden seats.

Phillip was speechless and quickly untied and pulled the gag off Mr. Fraybush.

“Oh ... oh thank you, thank you!” he panted. “I’ve been trapped down here for days now.” Phillip looked at the man in disbelief.

“Are you alone?” the old man asked.

“No,” Phillip replied. “There were ten of us but ...”

“Don’t worry,” the old man said. “Your friends will be fine. We need to worry about ourselves.” He led Phillip to another stony passageway and went up several stony steps and pushed up on a large circular plate. Phillip helped the old man push the plate up. They crawled out and found themselves on Flowerpine Avenue in front of Mr. Fraybush’s house.

Mary was so shocked that she stood still for what seemed hours. The frantic murmuring of the volunteers snapped her out of her shocked trance. She rushed over to the volunteers and ungagged and untied them from the chairs. Some of the volunteers were so frazzled that they couldn’t even speak. She looked around the large room and in the opposite corner was a large wooden door but it was locked. But with the help of the stronger more stable volunteers, they broke down the door. They landed in what seemed like a workshop with a table, bench and tools of every kind on the walls. Right across from her was a wide stone staircase and at the top a flat panel door. With all her might she broke down the door at the top of the steps and found herself in Mr. Fraybush’s yard. She helped the other volunteers up the steps and contacted the police and told them about Mr. Gardnier.

Claire ran down the right narrower path and could see Mr. Gardnier's flashlight right behind her. As the housekeeper approached her, Claire froze and became a complete victim of fear.

"So this is how it ends, dying in a dark tunnel at the hands of a crazy man," Claire muttered to herself.

"My dear girl, how did you ever come here?" the housekeeper's voice was like bitter sweet honey. "I thought that I would have to get you three little brats one by one, but you came to me. I'm flattered!"

Claire glared at him in disgust. There was nothing more she could do, she was trapped. "So that's your plan, huh? To just leave kids down here to starve?"

The housekeeper gave her a twisted smile. "Not entirely," he said proudly. "I'm part of a very important program. I 'borrow' children and record their reactions they have coping with my caves."

"But why?" Claire asked.

"To let the corporation I work for see how kidnapped children would react against a real kidnapper!"

"You are a real kidnapper!" Claire exclaimed. At this Mr. Gardnier lunged toward Claire. But she noticed that there were support beams all along the sides of the tunnel. She frantically kicked the nearest support beam until it collapsed, producing a large pile of rubble. Mr. Gardnier threw himself over the pile. Claire ducked and the housekeeper collided into another support beam, burying him alive in the pile of rubble. Claire sighed in relief, but then realized the mistake she had made. When Mr. Gardnier knocked over a support beam, it caused a chain reaction of the beams and they toppled like dominoes. Claire ran as fast as she could. She glanced back and noticed that where there were once passageways was now an avalanche of dirt. She quickly ran through the tunnel until a ladder came into view. She stared at it in delight and then heard the roar of the dirt avalanche. She barely made it to the ladder before a huge mound of earth covered the first four steps of the ladder. As she hurriedly climbed up the ladder, she found herself in the center of Mr. Fraybush's kitchen.

Claire was relieved to see that all the volunteers were safe and that Mr. Fraybush had been rescued. When the police came, Mr. Fraybush explained the whole dilemma to them. Mr. Gardnier had apparently perished in the rubble beneath the house. The policemen gave Mary, Phillip and Claire certificates of bravery for their actions.

"Thanks to you three, we can finally relax," One policeman told them. "You see, Mr. Gardnier was a prime suspect for kidnapping, but we could never get any solid evidence on him."

"You mean this happened before?" Mary exclaimed.

"Yes," the policeman said. "Only that time we weren't so fortunate. Mr. Gardnier worked for a company that studied the behavior of children. Unfortunately, he took it to the extreme. He kidnapped several children from another town. The children were never found."

"You mean they died in the tunnels!"

"We believe so," the policeman replied. "But now, no one has to worry."

As the week passed, Mr. Gwellwit cancelled the competition. Mr. Fraybush hired a friendlier housekeeper. Most of the volunteers tried to forget the whole experience, but Claire would never forget

the whole dilemma. She would always remember the evening when she saved the volunteers from the evil clutches of Mr. Gardnier.