



Copyright 2024 by Ron Knight and 81 Minute Books.

All rights reserved.

No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, without the written permission of the publisher and author/illustrator.

Cover Art and Layout by 81 Minute Books.

www.RonKnightEntertainment.biz

81 Minute Books Presents

Ghosts & Ladders

Written by Ron Knight

Part 1

“For every ladder you hope to climb...a snake is waiting just around the corner.” ~
Midnight's Children by Salman Rushdie

Based on true events.

Names have been changed to protect their identities.

Carter pointed to the *Chutes & Ladders* game. “What the heck is that?”

(Let’s pause right here.)

To better understand this story, you should know there are four main characters who are teenagers.

Emma, the sweetheart.

Liam, the stud.

Carter, the paranoid.

Ava, the Goth.

Oh, and Emma has a sister in 2nd grade named Regan. If you Google the name, you’ll probably see *The Exorcist* come up. (Yeah, freaky.)

Regan has a best friend named, Poe. Anyone named Poe will have enough problems as a child. When he becomes a teenager, chances are he’ll be wearing black lipstick and matching eyeliner.

If you haven’t figured it out yet, Poe was named after Edgar Allan Poe. If you Google Edgar’s images, there’re all pretty much the same. (Weird.) So you can get a sense of how Poe will turn out.

Okay, you’re caught up. Proceed...

~

“What the heck is that?” Carter repeated.

Emma rolled her eyes. “I heard you the first time.”

Carter kept pointing to the *Chutes & Ladders* game on the dining room table. “Are you aware that basically it’s a Ouija Board with a cute picture slapped over it for kids to play, opening up the floodgates for demons and evil to roam freely?”

Emma: “You’re being a little extreme.”

Carter: “I’m not going to hangout here and babysit with you if that game is going to be on the table.”

Emma: “Where would you suggest-”

Doorbell.

Carter: “You see, the game is already attracting evil. The doorbell only rings when someone is babysitting. It’s probably a demon here to suck our souls.”

Emma walked towards the door. “Yeah, or its Ava and Liam.” Emma pulled the door open. “Hey.”

Ava looked past Emma at Carter. “Why is Carter-The-Strange here?”

Emma: “My little sister actually listens to him. Also, that freaky kid Poe is here.”

Liam: “Your parents let a boy sleep over?”

Emma: “They’re in second grade. Plus, they’re best friends.”

Liam: “When are your parents coming home?”

Emma: “I don’t know. Late. But they won’t care you’re here.”

Liam: “Can we sleep over?”

Emma: “Um...no. You can work on popcorn, I’ll work on baths, Carter you get a movie ready for the kids in my sister’s room, and Ava you pick up all toys in living room.”

Ava sat on the couch and began texting. “Not going to happen. I’m just here to play *Chutes and Ladders*.”

Carter: “What!”

Liam gently patted Carter on his back. “Sorry, man. But tonight we get a little crazy.”

Twenty minutes later, Regan and Poe were bathed, in their pajamas, and laying down watching the movie, *Coraline*.

The four teens turned off all the lights around the house and dimmed the lights in the dining room. They placed a large bowl of popcorn on the table along with four sodas.

Carter: “Your little sister and her twisted friend shouldn’t be watching *Coraline*.”

Emma: “Why?”

Carter: “The movie is programmed to make a slave of their minds, causing them to be controlled by a hidden being.”

Ava: “Yeah, well Regan and Poe are probably traveling to an alternate reality as we speak.”

Emma flew up from her chair. “You know what? I’ll be right back.”

Liam: “Great. Now Emma’s paranoid.”

Emma raced upstairs and slowly opened Regan’s bedroom door. (Yes, it creaked.)

She noticed both were watching the movie on the floor, blankets over them, eyes fixed and not blinking.

Emma quietly closed the door. She was about to walk away, then for some reason decided to check on them again. She opened the door, trying to limit the creaking.

Regan and Poe were standing in the middle of the room, staring at her.

Emma’s skin chilled to her bones. “What are you two doing?”

Regan: “We want to play Ghosts and Ladders.”

Emma walked in the room. “Stop calling it that. It’s *Chutes and Ladders* and you can’t play. It’s late. Lie down and watch your movie.”

Both crawled under the blankets.

Poe: “There’s a metal hand in the movie.”

Emma looked at the screen, seeing the metal hand reconstructing a doll. “So?”

Poe: “Who’s controlling the hand?”

Emma: “I don’t know. Maybe one day you’ll write a poem about it. I have to get back downstairs.”

Emma left the room, closed the door, and was about to walk away. She debated on opening the door again.

Instead, she decided to keep going. What if they were standing in the middle of the room, just waiting for her?

She hurried downstairs through the dark house, to the living room.

Carter: “Where’ve you been? We’ve been sitting here with this game staring at us.”

Emma plopped into her chair. “The game doesn’t stare.”

Carter: “Yeah right. I’m not playing.”

Ava: “We’re all playing. Now get your game pieces out. It has to be something small and an item you only use.” Ava slid her skull ring off her finger and placed it on square “One.”

Carter: “You’re not listing...I’m not playing.”

Liam: “Stop being a dweeb.” Liam undid the dog tag off his necklace with the engraving, 9-9-99, representing his older brother’s birthdate. (Liam’s older brother, Tristin, went missing after football practice last year. He was sixteen, the same age as Liam is now.)

Carter: “Do you even know what a dweeb is?”

Ava: “Geek? Nerd? Loser?”

Carter: “A socially inept person.”

Ava: “Perfect.”

Carter: “It means, I shouldn’t be playing board games, especially not this one!”

Emma placed her heart shaped sapphire ring on the game board. (A gift from her parents when she turned sixteen.) “Let’s go. We’re wasting time. Put something on the table.”

Carter sighed. “Fine.” He reached into his pocket and pulled out his lucky Buffalo Nickel, placing the Native American face down and the buffalo face up. “There. Are you guys happy?”

A child’s voice appeared behind them, causing the four teens to practically jump from their chairs.

They turned to see Regan and Poe standing in the dark living room.

Carter: “There you go. Exhibit A. Two freaky kids appear and we haven’t even started yet.”

Emma: “Shut up.” She approached the kids. “Why are you two out of the room?”

Regan: “We want to play Ghosts and Ladders.” She held up a red crayon. “I’ll use this to play with.”

Poe held up a tiny toy raven. “Here’s mine.”

Emma: “No. You both need to lay down and watch your movie.” She turned to Carter. “They listen to you. Help me.”

Carter stood. “Okay kiddies. Up to your room.”

Poe narrowed his eyes. “If you don’t let us play, I’ll stab you!”

Emma: “Poe! Where did you learn that?”

Both Regan and Poe pointed to the table. Poe said, “Ghosts and Ladders.”

Carter shook his head. “This is going to be a long, terrifying night.”

To be continued...

You completed 9 minutes of this book.

Part 2

While Carter gently placed the blankets over the kids, Poe asked to start the *Coraline* movie over again, because he, “Likes the metal hand.”

Carter started the movie over and returned to the dining room table. “Those are the freakiest kids on the planet.”

Ava: “Are we going to play or not?”

Liam began reading the instructions. “Everyone spins the spinner. The player with the highest number goes first. Play proceeds to the left.”

Ava: “What in all that is holy are you doing? Do you really need the directions to Chutes and Ladders?”

Liam: “I’ve never played before.”

Ava: “You spin, you move, you go up ladders and down chutes.”

Carter: “The average winner spins thirty-nine point six times. The person who goes first has a point zero nine percent better chance of winning.”

Emma: “There’s so many things wrong with what you just said I’m not sure where to begin.”

Liam: “Wait a second. Carter, you’ve played before?”

Carter: “No. I just studied the horrors of the game and came across the statistics.”

Liam: “You studied the *horrors* of the game?”

Emma: “He did a paper on it for Language Arts.”

Liam: “Really? Why?”

Carter: “In Chutes and Ladders, you can continue forever, falling down the slides, going backwards, not getting anywhere. If you do get close to winning, you need a perfect number. You could be trapped in this game forever, not to mention the strange things that happen when you play. It’s a cycle of aimless drifting, wandering in a mundane existence.”

Ava: “Awesome. Let’s spin to see who goes first.”

Emma pulled an object from her pocket. “Actually, I have something from back when the game was first Snakes and Ladders.”

She placed a bone die on the table.

Liam picked it up. “Why does it look like the three and six have been dipped in blood?”

Emma shrugged her shoulders. “I don’t know. It’s probably just red paint.”

Carter: “Probably? Or maybe it’s the blood of teenage souls who played before us.”

Emma: “I don’t think so.”

Liam: “Where did you get it?”

Emma: “From Salem Gifts in Rose Water.”

Carter: “That place is a hotbed for witches!”

Emma: “Or, it’s a place to get cool things like a dice dipped in blood...I mean...red paint.”

Ava snagged the die and rolled. “Six! I go first!”

Emma: “No. All of us get a chance to roll.” Emma picked up the die and rolled a five. “Dang.”

Liam took his turn. Four.

Carter hesitated, then rolled. Three.

Ava: "It's official, I go first!"

Emma: "Wait a second. Roll again."

Ava: "I go first! Like Carter said, I have a point zero nine percent chance of winning over you three losers."

Emma: "I just want to see something. This turn doesn't count. Just roll."

Ava: "Fine." She snatched up the die and rolled.

Two.

Emma: "It's like the die is doing a countdown. Ava rolled a six. I rolled a five. Liam a four. Carter three. Ava then rolled a two."

Emma, Ava, and Liam looked at Carter.

With a shaken hand, he picked up the die and rolled.

One...

Ava: "Okay, well, this is an official roll." She let go of the die.

Six.

Ava moved her skull ring forward to space number six at the bottom of the slide with the picture of a sad boy.

Ava: "I didn't go down the slide, so there shouldn't be a picture of a sad boy on this space. Also, I rolled a six, which is good."

Emma: "Dang, Ava. Don't take it so seriously. It's just a picture."

Carter: "All the good qualities are represented by ladders. Our darkest, most foul secrets are represented by slides."

Emma looked around the dark room. "Maybe we should turn on another light."

Liam: "It would blow the mood." He picked up the die and handed it to Emma. "Roll."

Emma's eyes shifted around the dining room table. Something wasn't right. "I think someone is watching us."

Liam: "Just roll."

After taking one more look around, Emma tossed the die on the table. It bounced several times and came to a stop at the very edge.

That's when Emma saw a pair of tiny hands holding on the table.

Emma screamed so loud, Carter almost fell off his chair. She bolted to the floor and looked under table. "Regan! Is that you?"

Carter, Liam, and Ava looked under the table as well. It was difficult to see in the dark, but no one was there.

Emma stood and turned the dining room lights all the way up. She then looked again under the table.

Nothing.

Emma: "I'm going to check on the kids."

Liam: "Oh come on. Leave them alone."

Emma: "I saw a pair of hands reaching up and holding the table. It was probably Regan."

Carter looked once again under the table. "I didn't see her."

Liam pointed to the die. "You rolled a six. Move your ring next to Ava's skull."

Emma: "Fine." She snatched up the ring and moved it to the sixth space, at the bottom of the slide next to Ava. "I'm going to check on the kids." She hurried out of the dining room, through the dark house, up the stairs.

Liam stood and dimmed the light again. "Okay, my turn."

Ava: "Shouldn't we wait for Emma?"

Liam: "We'll be here all night. I'm rolling."

Two.

Liam moved his dog tag two spaces forward, just ahead of the ladder. "Shoot! So close!"

Carter: "This game was created to teach little kids right from wrong. From there, the game became more aggressive, wanting all who played to consider their evil deeds."

Ava: "The only evil deed I'm considering is ripping your head off. Roll!"

Carter ignored her, pointing to the first row. "This row represents our inner conscious. Hidden there, whether we know it or not, is our deepest fears and sinister thoughts."

Liam: "What's the next level?"

Ava: "Don't fall for this."

Liam: "I'm actually curious."

Carter continued. "As we fight our fears and combat our evil thoughts, moving up level by level, we gain enlightenment."

Liam: "What does that mean?"

Ava answered. "It means we would understand things that we previously didn't understand." She looked at Carter. "Roll!"

Liam: "What happens when we reach the end?"

Carter: "Moksha."

Liam: "Moksha? What's that?"

Carter: "Freedom from death's rotation."

Now, Ava was interested. "What is death's rotation?"

Carter's eyes were locked on the game board and the four pieces. "Once the game starts, it will attempt to unlock our most inner fears. Anyone who makes it to the finish will have peace." Carter looked at Ava and Liam. "For those who can't seem to rise to the top, death will come back around and collect their souls."

Ava gazed at Carter, barely able to see from the dim light. "I'm sure we'll be fine."

Carter brought his eyes on Ava. "If children were playing, yes, it would be fine." He paused. "But we're playing a kid's game without kids. It could cost us our souls."

To be continued...

You completed 9 minutes of this book.

Part 3

Emma eased open the bedroom door and poked her head inside. Both kids were sound asleep. One of them must have shut off the movie. Only the red nightlight gave a slight glow over Regan and Poe's faces.

After another moment of looking at the kids sleeping soundly under their blanket, Emma gently closed the door.

She turned, seeing both kids standing in the hallway by the steps, staring at her.

Emma's heart thundered against her chest. "What..." She couldn't catch her breath.

Regan narrowed her eyes. "We want to play Ghosts and Ladders."

Emma began to tremble. She opened the bedroom door, looked inside, seeing the blanket balled up on the floor.

Did she imagine them in the room? Was her mind playing tricks?

Emma turned. Poe now stood directly under her.

He looked up with his dark eyes and said, "Why are you scared?"

"I'm not," Emma managed to say. "Both of you get in the room."

Poe giggled and ran into the bedroom.

As Regan smiled and headed to the room, Emma grabbed her by the arm. "This is the last time you sneak out of your bedroom. Go lay down or I'm calling Poe's parents."

Regan shrugged her off, gazing up with cold eyes. "Don't threaten me. I have ghosts on my side." She ran into the bedroom and flew under the blankets.

Poe turned the movie back on, rewinding it to the part with the metal hand working on the doll.

Emma shook her head, closed the door, and hurried back downstairs to her friends.

She plopped down on her chair. "I'm ready to strangle those kids." She looked at the board. "Carter, you haven't rolled yet?"

Ava: "He was giving us a history lesson on Chutes and Ladders, along with how we shouldn't play without children."

Liam: "Actually, it's cool stuff. Did you know this game was used to teach kids right from wrong?"

Emma spoke under her breath. "I know two kids who need a lesson."

Liam: "Also, those who get higher and higher on the levels will become really smart and those who don't will eventually die."

Emma narrowed her eyes. "Wait...what?"

Ava: "Don't pay any attention to him." She looked at Carter. "You going to roll or not?"

Carter examined the die made of bone with a splash of red. "This die represents Karma. Everything we do from this point on threatens our current existence and the fate of our actions."

Ava: "Would you just please roll!"

Carter closed his eyes, took in a deep breath, reopened his eyes and rolled.

Three.

He was ahead of Liam, behind Emma and Ava, just one spot away from the ladder. Ava scooped up the die and studied the board. “Why does the finish seem so far away?”

Just then, the power in the house went off and they were engulfed in darkness.

All four turned the flashlight on their cellphones.

Emma: “Okay, let’s not panic.” Her voice was anything but calm. “Ava, I think my mom has candles in the kitchen drawer by the coffee maker. Liam, make sure all the doors are locked.”

Liam: “Why?”

Emma looked around. “For some reason I have the willies.” She looked at Carter. “Come with me to check on the kids. I can’t do it alone.”

Ava and Liam headed off without saying a word.

As Emma and Carter climbed the stairs, Carter whispered, “Why are you afraid of the kids?”

Emma: “Why are you whispering?”

Carter: “So they can’t hear me.”

Emma: “What happens if they hear you?”

Carter: “I’m sure the game will let us know.”

Emma didn’t respond. She continued holding her cellphone ahead to shine light on the stairs, then the hallway to the bedroom. Carter also held his cellphone with the flashlight on, but shook so bad it created a strobe effect.

Emma placed her hand on the knob, gripped it with her sweaty palm and opened.

It felt as if a gust of wind flew by them, ripping the giraffe poster from the bedroom wall, followed by the ABC’s poster with Elmo.

Carter’s cellphone continued to shake. “What was that?”

Emma: “A wind tunnel I suppose. Maybe Liam had a door open downstairs.” She positioned the cellphone so the light was on the floor.

Angry faces and skulls appeared, along with several ghostly snakes.

Emma screamed, dropping her cellphone.

A tiny hand snatched the cellphone away. Sounds of kids giggling echoed throughout the bedroom.

Carter bravely moved forward, pointing his cellphone. He also saw the faces, skulls, and ghostly snakes on the floor.

The kids continued giggling from somewhere in the room.

Emma: “Regan! Poe! Come to the door! Bring back my phone!”

Carter stepped forward. “Wait a second.” He lowered himself to one knee and placed the light of his cellphone towards the floor. “These are crumpled shirts and belts.”

Emma: “What? Are you sure?”

Carter picked up a shirt. “Yeah. Looks like they’re yours.”

Emma took the shirt from Carter's hand. "This is my Nightmare Before Christmas t-shirt. It was stuffed in my closet."

Carter: "They must have dug it out." He picked up a few more things. "Here's your Sugar Skull shirt, belts, and other things they took from your closet."

Emma shouted, "Regan! Poe! Come to me right now!"

More giggling.

"You little brats!" Emma screamed. "Carter, let's go."

Carter stood. "What about your phone?"

Emma: "At the moment, I really don't care."

She waited for Carter to leave the bedroom and then slammed the door shut. With Carter leading the way using his cellphone light, they headed back downstairs.

Ava lit two candles and placed them on the dining room table next to the game. Liam sat in silence, gazing forward.

When Emma and Carter approached, Ava said, "Maybe playing this game wasn't such a good idea."

Emma: "Are you kidding me? It's just a power outage."

Liam spoke in a low voice. "I agree with Ava. This wasn't the best of ideas."

Carter: "I tried to convince you not to play, but now it's too late. We have to play and someone has to finish."

Ava: "Why?"

Carter: "We entered the lower level of our souls and opened our subconscious. Whatever fears and wickedness we have, was released from the time we rolled the die. We have to finish the game."

Liam: "But what happens to the three people who don't win?"

Carter shrugged his shoulders. "I don't know. This wasn't my idea. You bullied me into playing. Peer pressure is the reason teens do these stupid things."

Emma: "I'm not scared of any kid's game, but at this point, we need to play just to show we aren't afraid of...well...a kid's game."

Ava: "What's going on with Regan and Poe?"

Emma: "I'm going to kill them."

Ava: "Really?"

Emma rolled her eyes. "Figure of speech."

Liam looked over the board. "Who's turn?"

Ava picked up the die. "It's my turn."

Without giving it another thought, she rolled.

To be continued...

You completed 9 minutes of this book.

Part 4

Ava rolled a three and moved her skull to space number nine, which happened to be a ladder. She slid the skull up the ladder to a picture of a happy kid on space thirty-one.

Liam: "I need to charge my phone."

Emma: "My charger is in the bedroom, but the power is still off."

Carter: "Even so, I don't suggest going upstairs by yourself. Who knows what evil plans Regan and Poe have ready for us."

Liam: "I'm not afraid of two second graders."

Carter: "You will be. Look at Emma. She's terrified of her own little sister."

Emma picked up the die. "I'm angry, not terrified." She rolled.

Three.

Emma moved her ring the same exact way as Ava; to space nine, then up the ladder to thirty-one.

Liam stood. "The flashlight app ate up my battery. I need to charge it right now or it will go dead."

Emma glared at him. "What does it matter? Are you expecting an important text?"

Liam eased back to his seat. "No."

Emma lifted the die and handed it to him. "Then roll."

Liam shoved the phone into his pocket and rolled the die.

Three.

Liam moved the dog tag three spaces to number five, in-between the ladder and the slide.

Emma: "We rolled the number three, three times in a row."

Liam's phone buzzed, followed by Carter's and Ava's. They looked at the message, which was sent from Emma's phone.

It said, "Three phones to go."

Ava said to Emma. "Where's your phone?"

Emma: "The brats have it."

Liam: "What if they start sending messages to everyone on your contact list?"

Carter: "Is that what you're concerned about? Aren't you concerned that they just sent a message saying, 'Three phones to go.' Isn't that a bit strange for two second graders?"

Emma: "Second graders are a lot smarter than we used to be. Plus, both Regan and Poe are in the Red Crayons class, which is for brilliant, creative children."

Ava: "Brilliant? Creative? They're in second grade!"

Liam: "Yeah but, Emma still needs her phone."

Emma screamed, "Will you forget about my phone! Stop bugging me about it!"

Carter picked up the die. "It's my turn."

Carter rolled a six. He moved his buffalo nickel to the ninth space, went up the ladder and joined Ava and Emma.

The three of them stared at Liam. He was still on the first level while all three of them had moved up the ladder to the fourth level.

Carter: "It's okay, Liam. You'll catch up."

Liam: "I don't care. Unlike Emma and her cellphone, I can handle it."

Emma: "I was just saying you didn't have to keep bringing it up. The kids have it. Who cares? Once the battery runs out, it won't matter. I'll get it later."

Carter: "Speaking of battery, my phone is now officially dead."

Ava and Liam both looked at their phones.

Dead.

Carter: "Let's review. The lights went out. Our phones are dead. And the brilliant-creative-Red-Crayons-kids are suddenly in control of the house. This is why I didn't want to play Chutes and Ladders."

Ava picked up the die. "If it starts thundering outside, I'm out of here." She rolled.

Two.

Near her game pieces were two slides and a ladder. The more she looked at the game board, the more she could envision the slides being ghostly snakes.

"Ghosts," a voice said next to her.

Ava screamed.

Another voice said, "Ghosts! Ghosts!"

Emma reached down and grabbed Regan by the arm. "What are you two doing?"

Regan handed Emma her cellphone and said, "Here."

Emma pressed the power button. "It's dead of course. Thanks."

Carter: "Did you kids send us a message about the other phones?"

Both stared at him, but said nothing.

Emma: "Go lay on the couch."

Poe reached up and touched her hand. "Monsters under the couch. They are more dangerous than under the bed." He laughed, grabbed Regan's hand, and they ran into the darkness.

The sounds of them giggling and going upstairs could be heard, followed by a door slamming at their bedroom.

Ava: "Well, I'm sure glad I came over here on a Saturday night. This is really, really fun."

Emma rolled.

Six.

She moved her sapphire ring, just missing a short ladder leading to the next level.

Carter: "You know games like Monopoly are based on skill, which is the free will to make decisions."

Liam: "And your point is?"

Carter: “For Chutes and Ladders, the only free will we had was when we started while making the decision to play without Regan and Poe. Once we passed that point and rolled the freaky bone die, it’s all up to the game what happens to us.”

Liam picked up the die. “I have the free will to roll this die,” he said sarcastically.

Carter: “But you don’t have the free will after you let go of-”

Liam rolled the die.

Three.

He moved forward to space number eight, just one away from going up the ladder. He had a chance to catchup with everyone else.

Carter sighed. “Poor Liam.”

Liam punched Carter on the arm. “Don’t feel sorry for me!”

Carter rubbed his arm. “Dang. That hurt.” He looked at the board. “If the game thinks you’re nice, you could roll a one and go up the ladder, so don’t hit me again.”

Liam: “The game doesn’t *think*, moron.”

Carter: “With that attitude, the game is going think you’re a bully, become angry and you’ll be stuck on these lower levels.”

Liam stood. “The game doesn’t THINK!”

Just then his chair dropped backwards and banged on the floor.

He turned to pick it up, but saw something strange.

Liam shouted, “SNAKES!”

Emma and Ava screamed, jumping up, standing on their chairs. Carter crawled on top of the table.

As for Liam...well...he ran towards the stairs and disappeared in the darkness.

Ava: “Carter! Do something!”

Carter remained on the table next to the game. “Not a chance!”

The candles on the table flickered as they stared in horror at the snakes on the floor.

Emma’s eyes shifted into the darkness. She couldn’t believe Liam took off and left them.

Emma looked at the board game. She could swear all the pictures of kids were smiling at her.

To be continued...

You completed 9 minutes of this book.

Part 5

Liam was terrified of snakes. Just the sight of those crawling beasts on the floor near the dining room table caused him to run at full speed towards the stairs, racing up, heading down the hallway, and...

BANG!

A bedroom door slowly opened in the darkness. Liam never saw it, smacking his head at full speed and falling hard to the floor.

The hallway swirled as two figures appeared, standing over him.

Regan and Poe looked down, smiling at Liam.

Suddenly, he felt the world slip away...

~

Carter was still on the table, hands shaking as he picked up the bone die.

Ava and Emma now both stood on the same chair, arms wrapped around each other. Ava noticed Carter roll the die. "What are you doing?"

Carter picked up his buffalo nickel. "I'm trying to finish this game!" He rolled a three, moved the nickel forward, putting him in second place between Emma and Ava. "We need to keep going!"

On his knees, he crawled across the table and handed Ava the die.

She took it, then smacked Carter on the back of his head. "You need to deal with the sna-"

Emma lost her balance, screamed, still holding onto Ava, sending them both sailing into the air, their bodies slamming hard on the floor next to the snakes.

The air blew from Emma's lungs. She was now face-to-face with the..." Wait a second," she muttered, catching her breath. She reached over and picked up a pile of mangled hair, then showed Ava. "Regan must have pulled the hair from her brush and left it here. She does it all the time."

Ava was breathing heavy. "Are you kidding me? We were afraid of hair?"

Emma dropped the mangled mess to the floor. "The flickering from the candles must have played tricks on our minds."

Carter was still on the table. "Are you sure? It still looks like snakes from up here."

Emma: "I'm sure, you idiot. I wouldn't pick up the snakes and show you."

Carter eased off the table. "Well, I still think we should finish the game." He stared into the darkness toward the stairs. "Where's Liam?"

Ava gripped the die. "Maybe we should just quit the game. I'm ready to go home."

Carter: "The ladders are honor and the slides are disgrace. I can't imagine what it means to quit, but I'm sure it wouldn't end well for you."

Ava: "Fine." Without sitting down, she tossed the die on the table, rolling across the board over Liam's dog tag, landing near her skull ring.

Three.

She moved the ring forward three spaces, just missing the ladder and now even with Emma.

Emma: "I'm going to find Liam and check on the kids."

Both Ava and Carter yelled, "Roll first!"

Emma: "Geeez. Okay you freaks'." She picked up the die and rolled.

One.

She moved her ring forward one space.

Emma sighed, grabbed one of the candles, and headed towards the stairs. She carefully went up with the candle flickering to the point that she was sure it would blow out.

After finally making it to the top of the stairs, she stopped, witnessing something horrifying.

Liam was on the floor, face first, arms stretched out, being dragged into Regan's bedroom. Regan had a hold of one arm and Poe the other.

Emma started to jog, but then abruptly stopped, not wanting the candle to go out. Meanwhile, Liam was still being dragged by her little sister and her terrifying friend. Liam's body was now halfway in the doorway.

She couldn't see Regan or Poe, but knew they were still tugging on Liam's arms because he was slowly being pulled inside the bedroom.

Trying to hurry, but not lose the flame on the candle, Emma reached the door with Liam's legs poking into the hallway and his upper half lying in the bedroom, arms stretched.

Regan and Poe were nowhere to be found.

Emma placed the candle down in the hallway. She stepped over Liam and knelt by him. "Liam." She reached her hand down and carefully turned his head. "Liam. Are you okay?"

He groaned, rolled on his back, then pulled his knees up. "I hit...a door."

Emma looked around the dark bedroom. "Regan! Where are you?"

Liam sat up, placing his hand on Emma's shoulder. "Did you get rid of the snakes?"

Emma knocked his hand away. "It wasn't snakes, Chicken Little. It was mangled hair."

"Oh." He looked back. "There's your sister."

Emma quickly turned, barely able to see Regan and Poe under the blankets on the floor.

The candle suddenly blew out and a flash of light appeared in the hallway.

Ava and Carter were sharing a flashlight while walking to the bedroom.

Ava: "What are you two doing on the floor? At least go somewhere so your sister can't see you."

Emma stood, pulling Liam up with her. "We weren't doing anything." She grabbed the flashlight from Ava and pointed it in the bedroom. Her sister's eyes were closed and Poe was lying on his stomach. Both seemed out cold.

Ava snatched the flashlight back. "Let them sleep."

Emma took in deep breath, thinking how just a few moments ago, Regan and Poe were just dragging Liam into the bedroom.

Or maybe it wasn't them? Maybe the game was really coming alive. Could it have been ghosts?

She looked at Carter. "You were right...we shouldn't have played Chutes and Ladders."

Emma picked up the unlit candle. The four of them slowly returned to the dining room table. They relit the candle using the flame from the other one, setting it on the table.

They sat down, gazing at the board. They never really looked at the pictures of the game, but the eyes on the kids were small, round, and full of terror. The kids who appeared to be smiling were actually screaming.

One boy, on space sixteen, appeared to be reading a history book, but there was another book closer to him which he was really reading.

What was the book? Why hide it behind the history book?

On space forty-eight, the boy's teeth were cracked.

The girl on space eighty-seven had her finger up over her mouth as if telling the players to not make sound.

The boy on space ninety-five held a baseball bat in front of a broken window.

Emma picked up the die and handed it to Liam. "It's your turn. We need to finish this."

To be continued...

You completed 9 minutes of this book.

Part 6

Liam was in last place and way behind the others. He rolled the die, hoping for a big number.

He got it! Six! He moved to space fourteen, still two rows behind his friends.

Ava quickly scooped up the die and rolled.

Five.

She moved forward and caught up with Emma; one ahead of Carter.

Emma rolled.

Two.

She moved forward, realizing not one of them had hit a slide.

Carter rolled.

Six!

He now took the lead and was a row ahead.

Liam picked up the die and rolled a four, moved ahead, still way behind.

A pounding on the front door froze them in fear.

Emma grabbed the flashlight and headed for the door. As she reached for the doorknob, she turned to see her three friends bravely staying behind at the table, staring at her.

Emma unlocked the door and opened it.

A girl about Emma's age was looking towards the street and quickly turned. "What took so long? Were you sleeping?"

"Um..." Emma didn't know what to say.

The girl had fire-orange hair, black eyeliner and a white t-shirt with a picture of the Joker from Batman. She once again looked towards the street. "There's two clowns following me."

"Clowns?" Emma stepped outside. "Where?"

The girl pointed across the street. "See."

Emma took another step outside. The entire street still without power. It was windy, but no storm or even rain. Her eyes narrowed, seeing two small figures on the sidewalk across from them.

“It’s two little kids dressed up like clowns,” Emma said, finding it difficult to believe.

“Yeah,” the girl responded. “Weird, especially at this time of night.”

Emma looked at the girl. “Do you need to wait inside?”

The girl suddenly began laughing. “I’m sorry. I just realized you don’t know who I am. I’m Perla, Poe’s older sister.”

“Oh,” Emma said. “Come on in.” Emma waited for Perla to walk inside, then checked across the street.

The two clown kids were gone.

Emma closed the door, gripping the flashlight, guiding Perla to the table.

Emma: “Everyone, this is Perla, Poe’s older sister.”

Carter: “I’ve never seen you before. Do you go to our school?”

Perla laughed. “Not a chance. I’m homeschooled. I don’t want to spend time with sheep.”

Liam rubbed his aching head. “Sheep?”

Perla: “Yeah. You know. Teenagers who are easily influenced by others.”

Carter: “I read that homeschoolers have social issues.”

Perla looked at the table. “Um...you’re playing Chutes and Ladders. Who has social issues?”

Carter: “Good point.”

Emma: “Are you here to check up on Poe?”

Perla: “No way. I’m glad when the little freak sleeps over here. I just wanted to get away from the clowns. I’m on my way to a friend’s house.”

Carter: “This late?”

Perla: “What? Are you my mother?”

Carter: “No. It’s just...never mind.”

Liam: “Did you say there were clowns outside?”

Perla: “Yeah. Kid clowns.” She once again looked at the game. “I feel better now, because I know for sure that they weren’t after me, so I can go.”

Ava: “Wait a second. What do you mean?”

Perla: “You’re playing Chutes and Ladders. To make it worse, you didn’t let the kids play with you.”

Carter: “Yep. I tried to tell everyone, but they didn’t listen.”

Perla: “It’s a game that exposes the good and evil emotions in our life, drawing in the malevolent to prevent you from finishing. The fact I’m here disrupting the game is probably just another way for the game to keep you from having a winner.”

Ava: “Geeze. You sound like Carter?”

Perla: “Who?”

Carter raised his hand. “Me.”

Perla looked at Carter. “So you tried to warn them not to play, but they didn’t listen to you? Also, you were stupid enough to join them? Not very smart.”

Emma: “Okay, thanks for the constructive criticism, but unless you’re here to check on Poe, it’s time for you to leave.”

Liam stood. “Wait. I think Perla should stay. She seems to know a lot about this stuff.”

Carter: “I know things! I tried telling you!”

Liam: “Yeah, but Perla explains it much better.” He looked at her. “Plus, you don’t want to be outside with the clowns.”

Emma glared at Liam. “I guess your head is feeling better?”

Liam: “Sure...kind of.”

Perla: “Like I said, the clowns aren’t here for me, they’re after you. Also, I don’t want to stay. I’m assuming you already have been seeing things in the dark, created by ghosts in the game. I also assume things will get worse before they get better. I’m outta here.”

Liam: “Wait! At least give us some advice.”

Carter: “I can give you advice.”

Liam: “Shut up. I want to hear from Perla.”

Emma: “Really? Can you flirt with her a little more?”

Perla: “All I can say is the entire board represents your lives.”

Carter: “Exactly!”

Perla: “Each space represents success. Each ladder is wealth and each slide is poverty.”

Carter: “Yep!”

Perla: “The final space represents rebirth and a fresh start. However, only one can win. So the other three will suffer in emotional shame.”

Carter: “I tried to warn everyone.”

Ava: “Will you shut up!”

Perla looked over the board. “You’re in a state of mind in which no one can escape. It’s called, ‘Absorbing State.’ Once you enter, you cannot leave. It’s like taking a random walk and never stopping.”

Liam: “We’re in a trance? By just playing this game?”

Perla: “Yes. It’s possible for you to enter a trance and never be able to see reality ever again. You will move square to square, drifting farther and farther into a child’s nightmare, with only one person who can survive.”

Liam: “Only one can survive?”

Perla: “Yes, but that’s if this game ever finishes.”

To be continued...

You completed 9 minutes of this book.

Part 7

Perla walked with Emma to check on Poe. He was sound asleep on the floor, under the blankets next to Regan with the red nightlight comforting them.

Emma led the way back downstairs with the flashlight. Then Emma walked with Perla to the front door, opened it and stepped outside.

Emma: “It is late. You can stay if you want.”

Perla looked back inside the doorway. “You shouldn’t have played that game.” She surprised Emma with a hug and a kiss on her cheek. “Goodbye.”

Emma watched Perla hurry down the sidewalk.

After Perla disappeared, Emma expected to see the clown-kids reappear, but they didn’t.

Suddenly the streetlights buzzed and popped on.

Emma went back inside and closed the door, pleased to see the lights in the dining room on again.

“Okay,” Emma said, shutting off the flashlight. “Who’s turn?”

Ava rolled the die.

Three. She moved on the next level with Carter.

Emma rolled.

Six. This gave her the lead.

Liam rolled.

Two. He was now three levels behind and didn’t seem to have a shot at winning. Perhaps that’s why he wanted Perla to explain more about the game. It’s obvious he wasn’t going to win and there would be consequences.

Carter rolled a five. He was excited, until...

He landed on the kid with broken teeth who now looked like he pushed Carter down the slide. This put him just six spaces ahead of Liam.

Carter: “That really hurt. I was going to win, but now I’m way behind.”

Ava ignored Carter and rolled the die.

One.

Emma rolled.

Five. She moved forward, landed on a ladder and slid her sapphire earring up two more levels. She tried to contain her smile, wanting to badly win.

Liam sighed and rolled.

Two. He moved his dog tag, still in last place and now way behind Emma.

Liam rubbed his head. “I don’t feel so good. My head is killing me.”

Carter grabbed the die. “Let’s just hurry up and finish.” He rolled.

Six. He moved the buffalo nickel ahead.

Ava picked up the die. “I have a feeling that just like in life, sometimes things work out for you, and other times things go wrong. But no matter what, you can’t rush your dreams. The harder you try, the more ghosts will appear to hold you back.”

No one responded.

Ava rolled.

Four. She moved her skull ring forward. The mood of Ava, Liam, and Carter seemed to have gone sour.

As for Emma, her eyes were bright and full of hope. She looked at her friends and noticed they were glaring at her.

Emma gripped the die, shook it in both hands, wanting to have a good roll. She let it go, watching the die bounce on the table and rolled several times.

Two. It wasn’t much, but at least she was still in the lead.

Liam rolled.

He moved the dog tag to space twenty-six with a picture of a boy sitting in a puddle, feeling dejected.

Liam felt the same way.

He thought about Emma, wanting so badly for them to date, but things didn't seem to be working in his favor.

Then Perla arrived, but as soon as he tried to gain her attention, she disappeared.

For a guy who was good looking, a star football player, he felt more alone than ever.

Also, he really missed his brother and wanted him to come home.

Carter rolled.

The die stuck on his sweaty hand for a moment, then fell awkwardly to the table.

Four. He moved the nickel forward and up a small ladder.

That summed up his life. Small ladders. He never could achieve something big. The only reason Emma invited him tonight was because he's good with kids.

Carter felt a tear slip from his eye. He quickly wiped it before anyone noticed.

Ava rolled.

Three. As she moved her skull ring forward, gasped, seeing a pink slide. "Are you kidding me!"

She looked over the group, sighed, then slid the skull ring down...way down...all the way to space eleven and now in last place.

The picture of the space was of a smiling blonde hair girl, eating a pan of cookies. It reminded Ava of Emma's smug look that she had right now.

"You don't have to be so happy," Ava snapped.

Emma: "You talking to me?"

Ava: "Yeah I'm talking to you. Stop smiling."

Emma: "I'm not." Emma picked up the die.

Ava now glared at Liam. "And you. Just because I'm in last place now, doesn't mean you should brag."

Liam: "I didn't say anything."

Ava: "Just in case you think about opening your mouth, remember I'll pounce on you. I don't care how much bigger you are than me."

Emma: "Okay, calm down."

Ava: "Easy for you to say. You're winning."

Emma rolled the die.

Three. She picked up the sapphire ring with excitement, moved three spaces, just two levels away from winning.

It seemed so long ago when she made her first move. Now, she's getting close to beating her friends, gaining more and more success by the minute while they suffered like children living in poverty.

Liam picked up the die and rolled. He really didn't feel like living...wait...he meant playing.

Six. Big deal. He moved the dog tag and stood up. "I need to go to the bathroom."

Carter quickly picked up the die and rolled.

Five. He moved forward and landed on the same pink slide that Ava had landed on. He slid the buffalo nickel down the slide next to Ava's skull ring.

Ava flicked the nickel with her finger. "Get that thing away from me."

Carter picked the nickel off the table and placed it back on the space next to the skull ring, but didn't dare say anything.

Ava snatched the die and rolled.

Six. Who cares? She was now so far away from Emma that it didn't matter. Even Liam was still a level ahead of her and he'd been losing most of the game.

Emma picked up the die and rolled.

Four. She moved her sapphire ring forward. If she rolls another four, she would go up the special ladder and win.

Emma felt she was indeed more special than her loser friends.

Wait...that's not what she meant...

Emma blinked her eyes several times, attempting to focus.

To be continued...

You completed 9 minutes of this book.

Part 8

Liam used the upstairs bathroom, but he spent the time gazing into the mirror. He noticed a red mark on his forehead where he slammed into the door.

He remembered every moment as if being replayed in slow motion.

Snakes.

Running up the stairs.

Running down the hallway.

Door.

Two clowns dragging him into the...

Wait? Clowns?

Kid clowns.

Or was it Regan and Poe wearing clown masks? Weren't they sleeping?

Liam turned the water on and splashed his face. He quickly wiped with a towel and turned, seeing two kid clowns standing in the tub, holding hands.

The masks were white with black lines. Liam could see their eyes deep in the mask, both of them gazing in his direction.

They continued holding hands, stepped out of the tub and walked to him, looking straight up.

Both raised their hands, pointing to the mirror.

Liam slowly turned, looking in the mirror, but not seeing his reflection. Instead, it was his brother, Tristan.

Behind Liam, the door squeaked open, followed by the giggling of the two kid clowns hurrying across the hall to Regan's bedroom.

Liam continued gazing at his brother in the mirror. No one knew where he was, or what happened the day after he disappeared after football practice.

Was he kidnapped?

Ran away?

Liam and Tristan used to play *Chutes & Ladders* all the time when they were kids, but now, the game made Liam feel that Tristan was a thousand miles away, suffering and trying to find his way home.

Liam went back downstairs and plopped down on the chair at the dining room table.

Emma: "It's your turn. We've been waiting."

Ava: "Take it easy, princess. He's not feeling well."

Emma: "Just because I'm better than you—"

Ava: "What did you say?"

Emma: "I...meant...just because I'm winning—"

Ava: "Save it."

Liam's eyes seemed glossed in thought as he picked up the die and let it drop to the table.

Six. He moved the dog tag and sighed. Despite the good roll, it got him nowhere. Just like his brother, he would be lost...

Wait. His brother.

Lost.

Liam remembered his brother playing *Chutes & Ladders* with his girlfriend the night before he went missing. Liam saw what they were doing and he made fun of Tristan, calling him a loser.

Now Liam was the loser.

Tears flowed from his eyes.

Ava reached over and touched his arm. "What's the matter?"

Liam swallowed as tears drizzled down his face. "Nothing."

Carter: "Should I roll?"

Emma: "Yes you should roll!"

Ava glared at Emma. "Liam is clearly upset and all you can think about is winning this game!"

Emma: "It's Carter's turn! That's all I meant!"

Carter rolled.

Three. He picked up the buffalo nickel, moved three and...

"Oh my gosh!" Carter yelled. He landed on the huge ladder, which took him way up the board, literally past Emma's sapphire ring, giving him the lead. "I'm winning! I'm winning!"

Emma: "It doesn't matter. It's just a game."

Ava: "Who's the loser now?"

Emma surprised Ava with a smack to her face. "Shut up!"

Ava was frozen for a moment. "Did you just hit me?"

Emma: "Yeah I did. Deal with it."

Ava jumped up and ran towards Emma, full of rage.

Just before she reached Emma, the lights went out, causing Ava to trip, flying forward, her body landing against Emma, sending them both to the floor.

Two giggling children ran by saying, “We shut the power off! We shut the power off!”

Emma attempted to get up, but felt a hard punch in the skull from Ava. It hurt so bad, Emma actually saw stars dancing in the pitch black room.

Emma rolled to the side. “Stop...” She felt sick to her stomach.

Ava blindly swung again, but this time missing, smashing her fist to the floor.

Suddenly Carter screamed in pain. “My thigh! Someone stabbed me!”

A voice appeared next to Carter’s ear. “I stab you,” the boy whispered.

Carter reached down and felt the handle, but it was only a butter knife, barely cutting into this leg. Despite that, the pain seemed as if he was stabbed with a steak knife.

Liam stood, walking like a zombie towards the dark kitchen. “I’ll turn the power back on.” He headed for the garage, but stopped when he saw the little girl clown standing by the door.

“No!” the clown yelled.

The little girl clown ran towards him at full speed. Liam stepped back, not realizing another clown was right behind him. He tripped, falling helplessly backwards, hitting his skull on the edge of the kitchen counter and once again, knocked unconscious.

~

Ava screamed, holding her fist, tears draining from her eyes. “I...think my hand is broken!”

She heard a scraping noise above from the table, realizing someone must have grabbed the flashlight and was dragging it away.

With the sudden burst of light, Ava saw a clown face next to her. She screamed, feeling the pain in her hand shoot into her arm and sizzle throughout her body.

When the flashlight turned off, Ava felt the room spin as she fell unconscious with the sound of two laughing children.

Emma crawled away from the table, wanting to increase her distance from Ava. “Carter! Liam! Where are you?”

A hand grabbed her ankle, stopping her from moving. At first Emma thought it was Ava, but the hand was small, yet strong.

Emma quickly pulled her leg free, turning, staring into the darkness while remaining on the floor.

Sounds of giggling echoed in the house.

Emma’s eyes darted in every direction, but she couldn’t see a thing. “Regan? Is that you?”

A cold, whispering voice appeared next to her ear. “Guess again.”

Emma screamed, jumped to her feet and blindly ran forward, tripping over a body and colliding with the chair, toppling hard the floor.

Her ribs burned with pain. “Liam?” she groaned. “Where are you?” Emma forced herself to take a breath. “Carter? You there?”

“I’m at the table,” he said.

“I...” A surge of pain gripped Emma’s insides like vice. “I need help.”

Carter's voice responded without emotion. "It's not my turn."

To be continued...

You completed 9 minutes of this book.

Part 9

Emma crawled forward. "Ava. Where are you?"

No response.

Emma continued crawling on the floor, found Ava, and blindly embraced her in a hug while crying uncontrollably.

Suddenly she felt Ava's hand. "It's okay. I'm sorry too."

Emma regained her composure. "We need to finish."

Ava: "But only one of us can win." Ava took in a deep breath. "Maybe we weren't meant to finish."

Emma forced herself up. Her ribs squeezed inside her with utter pain.

"Please...Ava...find the die and roll."

Liam blinked his eyes several times, but couldn't see, remembering he's still on the kitchen floor and the power had been shut off by those two little brats.

He forced himself up to his knees, feeling a wave of nausea.

After a minute, he stood, wobbling forward to the door. He opened it and stepped forward. The garage was even darker than the kitchen.

He put his hands out like a blind man, inching forward, knocking his leg into the lawnmower while becoming nauseated from the smell of gasoline.

Determined, he kept moving forward, banging his leg into a bike, finding the wall with the metal box, opened it, and felt for the biggest switch. He flicked it back and forth, turning the power on.

The lights came to life in the dining room. Emma and Ava painfully made their way to the table where Carter was sitting, gazing forward at the board without blinking.

Emma used all of her strength to pick up the chair and sit.

Ava looked at her hand, seeing a purple bruise, but she was able to move her fingers. She waited as Liam returned, walking as if he had just gone fifteen rounds in a boxing match, easing down to the chair.

Ava rolled.

Five. She moved forward, passing by the big ladder, landing on an insignificant space.

Emma picked up the die.

Ava took in a deep breath. "Although you're losing, if you roll a four, you'll go up the special ladder and win the game."

Emma stared at the board. "I'm not sure I want to win."

Ava reached out with her good hand and touched Emma's arm. "It's okay. One of us has to win and the rest will lose. That's life."

Emma swallowed, lifted her hand, and rolled the die.

One. She didn't really go anywhere.

Liam picked up the die and rolled.

Three. He moved the dog tag forward, now in last place behind Ava.

Carter still hadn't blinked, gazing at the board.

Emma winced in pain. "Carter. It's your turn."

He didn't move.

Ava: "Carter, just roll the die. Whatever you're thinking doesn't matter right now."

A voice said from behind them, "Carter is having a vision."

Emma, Ava, and Liam's skin turned to ice. Carter remained in a distant fog.

It was Perla. "Carter can see the game as it should be seen."

Emma wanted to stand, but her ribs burned with pain. "Why are you here? Did you knock?"

Perla ignored her and walked to the table. She leaned down, peeling a corner back on the board. "Look underneath."

Ava used her good hand to remove the two rings, dog tag, and the buffalo nickel. Liam and Emma helped her peel the cover off the board.

They couldn't believe their eyes.

The board was covered with symbolic images. There were gods, angels, and majestic beings, pictures of animals, flowers and faceless teenagers, surrounded by nine different colored ghosts.

Perla: "This is what you've been playing on this entire time."

Carter picked up his buffalo nickel and placed it on the space where he had been. He looked around, eyes like coal. "Put your pieces back."

Emma placed her sapphire ring back on the table. Ava returned her skull ring and Liam put his dog tag on the board.

Perla: "Only one of you will find harmony and success in your life. The other three will suffer the long walk to nowhere."

Liam looked at her. "Like my brother? He played and lost against his girlfriend. She ended up being homecoming queen and my brother disappeared."

Perla took in a deep breath. "Your brother made the choice to play the game and he made the choice to leave." She looked over the table. "This game represents your life. It's has all the power with the ladders of success and the snakes of evil. You just have to keep moving. Even if you lose, you can keep trying to live the best you can."

Carter picked up the die. "It's my turn." He gripped the die for a moment, then rolled.

One.

Ava rolled.

One.

Emma rolled.

One.

"You're never going to finish!" Regan yelled from the living room. "The ghosts won't let you! Never, ever, ever!"

Poe jogged up and down the stairs, banging his bare feet. "Never! Never! Never!"

Perla: "Just keep going. They represent life's distractions. You need to keep moving forward, even if it feels like you're not getting anywhere."

Liam picked up the die and rolled.

Two. He just missed the big ladder.

A knock on the door startled them.

Perla: "Don't get it. The game is trying to distract you."

More knocking, followed by a voice. "Liam! You in there!"

Liam turned in his chair. "Tristan?"

Perla: "Don't leave the table. Keep playing."

Liam ignored her and got up, heading to the door.

Regan smiled as Liam walked by. "Ghosts are going to get you."

Poe jogged up to Regan and smiled at Liam. "Ghosts are going to get you! Ghosts are going to get you!"

Carter rolled the die.

Six. He was on the last row, close to winning.

Liam opened the door. "Tristan! You're back!"

Ava rolled.

Five. She landed on the small ladder and moved up a level.

Emma rolled.

Two.

She reached for the sapphire ring, moved it forward two spaces and slid it up the golden ladder to space number one hundred.

She looked up with a river of tears draining from her eyes. "I won."

Suddenly, Liam was staring at nothing. His brother wasn't there.

Perla walked to him. "Never give up hope. Keep envisioning him calling your name." She kissed his cheek, walked outside and disappeared into the night.

Ava stood, giving Emma a hug. "I'm happy for you."

Carter also stood, approached Emma and hugged her. "Everything is going to be okay."

Tears continued welling up in Emma's eyes. "Just don't leave yet. I want to check on the kids first."

She hurried upstairs, seeing the kids watching the beginning of the *Coraline* movie, with the metal hand repairing the doll.

Both Regan and Poe were under the covers, eyes closed.

Emma knelt down, staring at them. Both seemed to be in a peaceful dream.

Suddenly, Poe's eyes popped open. "Perla isn't real." He rolled over, closed his eyes, and went back to sleep.

Emma stood, stared at Poe and Regan for a long moment, then turned to walk out of the bedroom.

That's when she saw the two kid clowns.

You have completed this 81 Minute Book.

However, there's something else you need to know.

Abbey's boyfriend, Willis, stood up before they began playing the game *Operation*.

"This is stupid. I'm not playing. Plus, my little sister wanted to play and I told her to go away because I thought you and I would fool around for a bit, not play this stupid game."

“Oh come on,” Abbey said, holding the tiny tweezers. “It’ll be fun.”

Willis glared at her. “You know what. I want to break up with you.”

“What!” Abbey dropped the tweezers. They landed on the mouth and caused the game to buzz.

Willis reached up and grabbed his mouth. “Dang, that hurt!”

Abbey looked at Willis, then the game. She picked up the tweezers and pressed them against the arm, causing the game to buzz again.

Willis grabbed his arm. “Ouch! Stop!”

Abby smiled. “I’m really starting to like kid’s games...”

Now you’re finished with this 81 Minute Book.