If one of Errol Roy’s fans had passed him on the street, they wouldn’t have known who he was. With the wispy white hair that covered most of his head and nearly reached his shoulders, and his long cottony beard tinged with yellow, he was more likely to be mistaken for Santa Claus than for himself. Nobody knew what Errol Roy looked like, but his books were recognized around the world.

On this day in mid-March, the author stood at the bay window of his San Francisco apartment.

“It’s been a long road, Dash,” Errol said aloud to his cat, who was stretched across the windowsill. Dash swatted his tail in response.

Errol was thinking about his personal favorite of his own books. He doubted any of his readers could correctly guess which it was out of the twenty-some mysteries
he’d written. It was arguably the most obscure: *A Body in the Alley*. A horrible title. Maybe that was why it hadn’t sold well.

In *A Body in the Alley*, Mickey Jones is a crook who continuously finds himself in the wrong place at the wrong time but finally pulls off the bank heist of his dreams. At the book’s close, he sails into the sunset while the detective on his trail watches him get away. The book ends with this line:

*The boat disappeared over the horizon, rings spreading behind like a peacock fanning its tail.*

Errol Roy had written millions of sentences in his lifetime, but that was one he had never forgotten. It wasn’t so much the writing he was fond of, but the image it painted and the feeling of freedom it gave him. It was an ending Errol had always wanted to try, but it turned out critics and readers didn’t like it when their detective hero lost.

Dash sat up and stretched out a paw to tap his owner’s hand, as though encouraging Errol to look up. The view below was of a hillside gouged from its quarry days, now covered in vines and shrubs. The scene straight ahead could be a San Francisco postcard.

On a crisp, clear day you could see all the way from the Golden Gate Bridge to the tiny stump of Gull Island, which had been on the news because two kids and their teacher had found buried treasure there. And if the bay was a stage, then front and center was Alcatraz.

Errol Roy rested his eyes on the famous former
prison, which had had a reputation for being inescapable. Now Alcatraz was a popular tourist destination, attracting travelers from around the world, and soon it would be the setting of the latest cockamamie game creation by Garrison Griswold, the city’s beloved book publisher and game enthusiast.

Errol sighed.

Last fall, his most recent mystery had been published to great fanfare, not that he had participated in any of it. He never did. That decision had started out as a spontaneous choice made decades ago, which grew into his
reputation. His “branding,” as the publishing industry termed it today. The most popular mysteries in America, written by a man who was himself a mystery. Once, he had stood in line at the grocery store behind a woman who had piled produce, a plastic tray of muffins, and his latest paperback onto the conveyor belt. She and the cashier had had a lively discussion about his books, never realizing the author stood right beside them.

Errol had planned for his most recent book to be the final of his career, but when Garrison Griswold announced this new game, he knew it was time to tell the last story he had in him. There would be considerable risk, but it rankled him to leave loose ends dangling. He was a novelist, after all.

“It’s time, Dash,” he said, and turned from the view.

The cat meowed, as though hoping his owner meant it was time for dinner, and dropped to the floor with a gentle thud. When the man crossed the room to his computer desk instead of the kitchen, Dash meowed again. His tail quirked into a question mark.

Errol lowered himself into his chair and opened his laptop. He bent over his keyboard and began to type.
EMILY CRANE and her best friend, James, ran along a dirt alley closed in by a graffiti-covered fence on one side and a vine-covered fence on the other. The path cut horizontally across a hill. Emily couldn’t see the two- and three-story buildings above and below them, but she knew they were there.

“They’re going to catch up to us,” James panted.

Emily looked back. The path behind them was empty, all the way to the arched trellis they’d entered under. Their feet pounded past weeds that grew to their ears. An enormous shrub spilled over the top of a fence like it was trying to jump into the alley and make a break for it. The path curved, and there was the exit back onto a street in Emily and James’s San Francisco neighborhood.

“We’re almost there—we can make it!” Emily shouted, but a hooded figure jumped in front of the exit
and blocked their way. Emily hadn’t anticipated that they’d be stopped from the front. She and James stumbled a bit, trying to change course and run back the way they’d come. Before they could fully turn around, there was a soft pop, and purple powder splattered across their shirts.

“Found you!” their friend Maddie crowed, her sweatshirt hood falling back off her head. She was nearly a head taller than both of them, so when she triumphantly held up the plastic bottle of colored cornstarch and squeezed, more violet dust rained down over Emily and James.

“You’re out,” Maddie said.

“Aw, man!” James stomped a foot in mock disgust. The purple-dusted black cowlick atop his head, which James affectionately called Steve, bobbed indignantly.

“You could have let the birthday boy win, you know.”

Maddie rolled her eyes. “Right. Like I’m going to do that.”

James aimed his squeeze bottle at Maddie, and a puff of green powder blasted toward her. She jumped aside so only her shoulder got hit. Laughing, she said, “Too late! Purple team still won!”

Footsteps came up behind them, and Emily turned to see their other friends, Devin, Kevin, Nisha, and Vivian, coming down the path. Devin had been on their team, but he and his twin brother had blasted each other with powder within minutes of the game starting, leaving only Emily and James to fend for Team Green.
“I told you I could beat them to the end of the path, Vivian,” Maddie called over.

Vivian frowned—she was more comfortable doing the correcting than being corrected—but she nodded and said, “Good job.” Vivian looked even more crisp and polished than usual, being the only one of the group without green or purple splattered across her face and clothes.

“Do we win anything?” Nisha asked, removing her glasses. She attempted to clean them with her shirt, but only succeeded in smearing green dust across the lens.

“Here.” James plucked Nisha’s glasses from her hands. “The back of my shirt is clean.” He tugged a corner of fabric forward and rubbed furiously, then handed them back. “Your team wins my undying admiration—even you, Maddie.”

Maddie and James had a competitive history that dated back to their elementary school days, long before Emily had known either of them. Recently the rivalry had taken on a friendly tone. Which still felt totally weird, if you asked Emily.

“You can keep the T-shirts, too,” James added.

Nisha lifted her shirt like an old-timey lady curtseying in a petticoat. She was the smallest in their group, and her shirt hung to her knees. “My mom’s always telling me to wear more dresses.”

Maddie peeled off her shirt from over her sweatshirt. “The winners also get first choice for pizza,” she declared. James shrugged. “Sure. Speaking of, let’s eat!”
He led the group back the way he and Emily had come. The alley connected to a very narrow, vertical public garden that was broken into tiers, with stairs zigzagging the slope. The group climbed the stairs, weaving around rosebushes and daylilies until they reached the halfway point, where James’s mom sat on one of two benches that faced the San Francisco Bay.

His mom held two pizza boxes in one hand and slid her sunglasses onto her head with the other. “Wow . . .,” she said, taking in their green- and purple-stained faces, arms, legs, and clothes. “Your parents are going to kill me.”

“It washes out, Mom. I told you,” James said.

His hand darted forward and his mom yelped, trying to dodge, but James was too fast and wiped a purple streak on her cheek.

She laughed. “You’re lucky it’s your birthday,” she said.

Maddie’s team chose their slices; then the others took their turn. After distributing napkins and drinks, James’s mom balanced the empty boxes on one hand and hiked the stairs that continued up the hill. She called back, “Parent pickup in forty-five minutes!”

Emily sat on a bench with James and Nisha; Maddie and Vivian sat on the other bench that was on the tier below them. The twins stretched out on the five stairs in between.

Everyone ate quietly until Maddie asked, “Is
everyone trying out?” She straddled the bench so she could face Vivian and the rest of the group sitting up the hill behind the two girls.

They all knew she was talking about Unlock the Rock, Mr. Griswold’s upcoming game. From where they sat eating their lunch, they could see Alcatraz down below on the water, framed in the corridor between buildings on either side.

Vivian folded her napkin and pressed it to her lips. “My parents won’t let me miss my flute lesson, plus it’s a school night.”

“Failed the entry puzzle,” Devin announced. “Big time.”
“You sound proud,” Maddie said.
“It was a pretty spectacular failing.”
His brother nodded in agreement. “If they gave grades for failing, he would have gotten an A-plus.”
Maddie rolled her eyes and turned to Emily and James. “You two are probably automatically entered, being on Mr. Griswold’s teen advisory board and everything,” she said.
“Do you know what he’s planning?” Nisha asked.
“We don’t know anything.” Emily spoke up while James finished chewing. “At least no more than what he told all of us when we were painting Hollister’s bookstore: It will be like an escape room set on Alcatraz.”
“And we aren’t automatically entered,” James added. “We told Mr. Griswold we wanted to play the game, and he said we’d be treated like every other book scavenger. I solved my entry puzzle and got a ticket yesterday.” Each Book Scavenger user was assigned a unique entry puzzle, so no two people had the same one.
“Have you done yours yet?” James asked Emily.
She shook her head and took a bite of pizza, unable to look James in the eye. The truth was she had attempted her puzzle, but she’d gotten the wrong answer. She had two more tries left, but she didn’t want to admit to her friends that she was struggling.
James squinted at her, and Steve tilted skeptically on top of his head. “I thought you would have been one of the first entered.”
Emily held a crumpled paper towel to her mouth as she swallowed her bite, trying to buy herself some time. “I keep meaning to do it and then something comes up. Like last weekend I was going to, but then my parents wanted to take that hike in the Presidio, and I was too tired when we got home.”

That was all true—going on the hike and being tired—and James nodded like he understood, but he still had that pinched, pensive look on his face that made her wonder if he could tell she wasn’t being completely honest.

“You’d better get on it, because the game’s Wednesday. There are only a few days left,” James said.

“You can always hunt for a golden ticket if you can’t solve your puzzle,” Maddie added.

A week ago Mr. Griswold had posted a video to the Book Scavenger site in which he’d announced that in a nod to his nickname, “the Willy Wonka of book publishing,” he was offering fifty golden tickets for hopeful attendees who hadn’t been able to solve the entry puzzles. The tickets could be found inside fifty copies of the book *Infinite City: A San Francisco Atlas*, which were hidden through Book Scavenger across the Bay Area. The day Mr. Griswold announced their existence, seven golden tickets were found, and more had been claimed every day since.

Nisha and Vivian laughed good-naturedly at the idea of Emily needing to use a golden ticket to gain her...
entry, but Emily wasn’t sure if Maddie had been joking. Was she trying to get under her skin, as usual, or could she tell Emily was stumped by a puzzle?

“Is that what you’re doing, Maddie?” James retorted. “Using a golden ticket?”

“I already solved my puzzle,” Maddie said. “It was super easy.” She said these last words like she was throwing them at Devin, trying to rub in the fact that she had passed and he’d failed. He shrugged in response, unfazed, but Emily slumped even more, feeling miserable to be struggling with something Maddie had found easy. That it was something Emily had a reputation for doing well made it sting even worse.

“I’m not sure I’ll try out,” Nisha said. “I’ve heard Alcatraz is haunted.”
“Oh, it is,” Maddie agreed. “I took the tour with my mom and her boyfriend a couple of years ago. It’s super creepy. When it was a prison, the worst criminals were sent there. Murderers and psychopaths—”

“They weren’t all murderers and psychopaths,” James interjected. “I’ve taken the tour, too, and I remember our guide said some convicts were sent there not because their crimes were so awful, but because they were disruptive prisoners or had a habit of trying to escape.”

Considering the island ahead of them, Emily could see how it had gotten the reputation for being inescapable. It was small but formidable. The perimeter of the island looked steep and rocky, so even if you were able to get out of the massive cell house that crowned the top, it would surely be daunting or perhaps impossible to get down to the water. And if you managed that, well, then you were in the middle of a cold bay known for strong currents that could pull you out to the Pacific Ocean, not to mention the occasional shark.

“Maybe the prisoners weren’t all violent and dangerous,” Maddie said. “But some were, and people did die on Alcatraz.”

“Stop trying to scare Nisha,” Vivian scolded. “There are tons of creepy stories about Alcatraz, but that doesn’t mean it’s haunted.”

“That’s not very reassuring,” Nisha said.

Emily nudged her knee against Nisha’s. “This is Mr. Griswold we’re talking about. With him in charge, any
ghosts on Alcatraz will end up falling into line like the ones at Hogwarts.”

“Emily’s right,” Vivian said. “You should go if you can, Nisha. I wish I could. It’s guaranteed to be fun—not scary. And besides, you’ll all be together, right?”

“Right,” everyone said in unison, except for Devin, who happily sang out, “Wrong!” and Emily, who shoved her last bite of pizza in her mouth.