

Storybook Square

Book 1: Adventures in Oz

By Jody Studdard

Twelve-year-old Brooklyn Davis sat on the ground under a large oak tree in her back yard. Her eight-year-old brother, Cameron, sat next to her. He had their Shetland sheepdog puppy, Charles Barkley, on his lap, and the two were playing with an old tennis ball.

Brooklyn sighed. "Life is so boring during the summer," she said.

Cameron nodded. "You can say that again," he said.

Charles Barkley barked. That was his way of saying he agreed.

"The first few weeks were fun," Brooklyn said. "No home work, no getting up early, no teachers with bad attitudes. But now I'm so bored I can't even think straight."

"Me, too," Cameron said. "There's got to be something we can do. Maybe we should go down to McCall Park."

Brooklyn and Cameron lived in Cedar Hills, Washington, which was a small town about an hour northeast of Seattle. McCall Park was a Little League field within walking distance of their house.

Brooklyn sighed. They had already been to McCall Park four times that week, and it was only Wednesday. It was a nice park, with several baseball fields, a swing set, slides, and a large, wooden jungle gym, but she was sick of it.

"What about the river?" Cameron asked. "The river is always fun. We can play on the tire swing."

At first, Brooklyn liked the idea. The river was great, but there was an obvious, insurmountable problem. "Mom doesn't like it when we go to the river without supervision," she said. "And since she's at the store right now, she won't be able to go with us."

"Maybe when she gets back," Cameron said.

"Maybe," Brooklyn said. "But she may not be back for hours. You know how long mom spends at the grocery store. And if she stops at the mall, we probably won't see her until dinner."

Cameron grimaced. It was true. Their mom took an eternity when she went shopping.

"Maybe we should head over to Logan's house and see what he's doing," Cameron said.

Logan was their older half brother. He was their father's son from his first marriage. He lived with his mom in a small house on the other side of town, but Cedar Hills was relatively small, so it was still within walking distance. Brooklyn and Cameron visited him on occasion, and they sometimes went to the local movie theater together.

To be perfectly honest, Brooklyn wasn't too enthused with the idea, for it was doubtful Logan would have anything exciting for them to do either, but she had nothing else to offer, and she was sick of sitting around in the back yard, so she turned to Charles Barkley and patted him lightly on the back.

"What do you think, boy?" she asked.

Charles Barkley barked. Once again, that was his way of saying he agreed.

Being a dog, Charles Barkley agreed with most things.

Without another word, they hopped up, smoothed out their clothing to make it look somewhat presentable, and headed along one of the narrow, winding streets that made its way through Cedar Hills. About half way to Logan's house, and near the exact center of town, they entered what was called 'Old Town', an area that had once been really nice but was now rundown and quite seedy. Most of the stores in the area had closed and left town years ago, and their windows were covered with plywood. Graffiti lined the walls, and a dumpster in a nearby alley was overflowing and looked like it hadn't been emptied in years. The two children stopped briefly in front of a tall, skinny building made primarily of brick and mortar. Like all of the buildings in the area, it looked like it hadn't seen a visitor in the past twenty years, if not more. The sign that hung from its front was badly faded, and what little paint that was still on it was cracked and peeling, but still legible. It read, 'Storybook Square.'

"Look at that," Cameron said. "The front door of the old bookstore is open."

"That's strange," Brooklyn said. "I wonder who opened it? And why?"

"I don't see anyone around," Cameron said. "Maybe the wind blew it open."

"Maybe," Brooklyn said.

"Do you think we should check it out?" Cameron asked.

"I don't know," Brooklyn said. "I don't think mom would approve if we entered a strange building by ourselves."

Cameron didn't look too happy with her response, but he knew she was right, so he didn't say anything more. They were just about to continue by when something inside Storybook Square (probably a mouse) caught Charles Barkley's eye. He let out an excited bark and darted forward so quickly and so unexpectedly he was able to slip from Cameron's grasp.

"Charles Barkley!" the two children called as he zipped through the bookstore's front door and entered the old building. His leash trailed on the ground behind him as he ran.

Almost without thinking, Brooklyn and Cameron darted after him and chased him inside the store. They were all the way in before they stopped and realized what they had done. Abruptly, they came to a halt and took a look around.

The interior of Storybook Square was as unimpressive as its exterior. It was dark, dusty, and filled with cobwebs (one of them wrapped around Brooklyn's head, and she quickly wiped it away). Old, leather-bound books filled the shelves along the store's walls, and there was a small, winding staircase that led up to an atrium high above. A podium stood on the far side of the room. Charles Barkley chased a small mouse past the podium and growled in frustration as it disappeared into a hole in the far wall.

"Bad dog," Brooklyn said as she ran up and recovered his leash.

"Don't be so hard on him," Cameron said. "Like us, he was just looking for a little adventure."

From directly behind them, and with no warning whatsoever, they heard a voice.

"If you're looking for adventure," it said. "You've come to the right place."

The voice was so unexpected and so sudden it nearly scared them to death. But when they turned and saw its source, they saw they had nothing to fear at all. It came from a little, old lady, who wore an old fashioned shawl and a long, brown dress. Her hair was gray, as were her eyes, and she had a large, kind smile on her lips. She made her way down the staircase from the atrium, and in no time was standing directly in front of them.

"We're sorry," Brooklyn said. "We didn't mean to intrude. We were just chasing our dog. He can be pretty mischievous at times."

“You’re not intruding at all,” the old lady said. “This is a bookstore. It was built so people could come here and enjoy it.”

“We thought this store was closed,” Brooklyn said. “We come by here several times a week, but we’ve never seen the door open before.”

The old lady smiled. “This is Storybook Square,” she said. “It is a special bookstore, and it only opens on special occasions.”

She put extra emphasis on the word ‘special.’

“What do you mean?” Brooklyn asked.

“Storybook Square is for people who are looking for something a little different,” the old lady explained. “For people who are looking for an adventure that is larger than life.”

Cameron raised an eyebrow. “An adventure?” he asked. “It doesn’t look like this place has seen an adventure in a long, long time.”

The old lady laughed. “You’d be surprised,” she said. “Perhaps the two of you are ready for an adventure.”

“What do you mean?” Brooklyn asked.

“This store is full of books,” the old lady said. “Each of them contains an adventure. Some are better than others, but all of them are fun, if you give them a chance. Are the two of you willing to give them a chance?”

Once again, Cameron raised an eyebrow. “You want us to read a book?” he asked.

The old lady smiled. “I used to be a librarian,” she said. “And now I’m a bookstore owner. Of course I want you to read a book.”

Cameron frowned. To be perfectly honest, reading wasn’t one of his favorite activities. He ranked it right up there with going to see the dentist.

The old lady smiled. “I see you’re like a lot of kids these days,” she said. “You prefer video games, and movies, and those types of things, right?”

Brooklyn and Cameron nodded.

“That’s understandable,” she said. “Those things are fun. I saw a movie last week and it was delightful. But books can be fun, too. Especially the books in this store. These books are magical.”

Now it was Brooklyn’s turn to raise an eyebrow. “Magical?” she asked. There was more than a little skepticism in her voice.

“Take one and try,” the old lady said. “Here’s one of my favorites.” She walked over to a nearby shelf and pulled a book from within. She turned back and handed the book to Brooklyn. Brooklyn turned it over and glanced at the title on its cover.

The Wonderful Wizard of Oz

By L. Frank Baum

“The Wizard of Oz?” Brooklyn asked. “I think I saw the movie once. Isn’t that the one where a girl from Kansas gets caught in a twister and is taken to a magical land called Oz?”

“And aren’t there flying monkeys at the end?” Cameron asked.

The old lady chuckled. “That is a fun movie,” she said. “Judy Garland is spectacular as young Dorothy. But the book is good, too. It was written in the year 1900 by a man named Lyman Frank Baum.”

“Lyman?” the kids asked, in unison. They had never heard that name before.

“It is an unusual name,” the old lady said, “and it probably explains why he is more commonly referred to by his pen name, L. Frank Baum. But anyway, he was an American

writer, originally from Chittenango, New York, and he was one of the most popular children's writers of his time. His books about Oz were loved so much that children wrote him letters begging him to write more. Originally, he had only intended to write one Oz novel, but after receiving so many requests, he felt he had no choice but to write more. In total, he wrote fourteen. The one I just handed you, *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*, was the first. Give it a try. Set it on the podium over there, open it up, and your adventure will begin."

Brooklyn and Cameron looked at her skeptically. They didn't want to be rude, but to be perfectly honest, neither of them was excited, not in the least, about reading a book. This was summer. They were supposed to be playing and having fun. Not reading. That was what you did during the school year.

The old lady saw their hesitation. "Trust me," she said. "You won't be disappointed."

Somewhat hesitantly, but not knowing what else to do, and not wanting to offend the lady, since she seemed so friendly and nice, Brooklyn took the book and walked up to the podium, dusted it off (it was absolutely filthy), and set the book on top of it. A second later, she opened the book and read its first page to herself.

"Read it aloud," the old lady said. "So your brother can enjoy it, too."

Charles Barkley barked.

"And Charles Barkley, too," the old lady said. "Even dogs like a good adventure, you know?"

Brooklyn hesitated briefly as she realized something. "How did you know his name was Charles Barkley?" she asked.

"Like I said," the old lady explained. "I used to be a librarian. Librarians know a lot of things."

Brooklyn wasn't completely satisfied with the old lady's answer, for it didn't explain much, but not knowing what else to do, she turned back to the old book and read its first page aloud.

"Dorothy lived in the midst of the great Kansas prairies, with Uncle Henry, who was a farmer, and Aunt Em, who was the farmer's wife. Their house was small, for the lumber to build it had to be carried by wagon many miles. There were four walls, a floor and a roof, which made one room; and this room contained a rusty looking cookstove, a cupboard for the dishes, a table, three or four chairs, and the beds. Uncle Henry and Aunt Em had a big bed in one corner, and Dorothy a little bed in another corner. There was no garret at all, and no cellar — except a small hole dug in the ground, called a cyclone cellar, where the family could go in case one of those great whirlwinds arose, mighty enough to crush any building in its path."

Brooklyn finished the first page and turned to the next. The book was ancient and its pages were old and stiff, and somewhat difficult to turn. When she got to the next page, something completely unexpected and truly amazing happened.

The book started to glow.

At first, the glow was very faint, and it emanated only from the book's spine, but within seconds it had spread immensely and become much, much brighter. Seconds after that, blinding flashes of light began to appear and shoot through the room, basking them all in brilliant shades of color. Brooklyn had to shade her eyes to protect them from the sheer brightness.

"What's happening?" she asked.

"Your adventure is about to begin," the old lady said. "Enjoy yourself."

Without warning, the room began to transform all around them. Where once there had been nothing but dust and grime, now there were brilliant flowers in every color of the rainbow.

Where once there had been books, shelves, and chairs, now there was a large, beautiful meadow, lined on all sides with small, blue houses.

Brooklyn, Cameron, and Charles Barkley stood there in complete shock. They had never experienced anything like it. Within seconds, the entire bookstore had disappeared, and they had been left standing in the middle of the most gorgeous place they had ever seen. Brooklyn's eyes grew large with interest as she admired the beauty all around her, including lovely patches of greensward, stately trees bearing some of the most luscious and colorful fruits she had ever seen, banks of gorgeous, multicolored flowers, and birds with rare and brilliant feathers. In the distance was a small brook with water that sparkled in the sunlight.

"We're not in Cedar Hills anymore," Brooklyn said.

"You can say that again," Cameron said.

Charles Barkley was speechless. He was so surprised he couldn't even bark.

They all turned to the old lady, hoping for an explanation of what had just happened, but much to their dismay, she, like Storybook Square itself, had disappeared.

"Where did the bookstore go?" Cameron asked. "And the old lady?"

"I have no idea," Brooklyn said.

They had little time to contemplate the matter further. Within seconds, a group of people appeared, and they approached them rapidly. But these weren't ordinary people, and neither Brooklyn, Cameron, nor Charles Barkley had seen anything like them before. Their faces looked as old as adults, and two of them had long, flowing beards, like the ones you would see on elderly men, but they were the height of children. Brooklyn was actually taller than most of them, and Cameron was taller than some. They were oddly dressed (to say the least), and they wore round hats that rose to a small point a foot above their heads, with little bells that hung from the brims and tinkled softly as they walked. The hats were bright blue, as was the majority of the rest of their clothing.

"Welcome," their leader said. He was the tallest and oldest of the bunch. "My name is Boq. Welcome to the land of the Munchkins."

"Munchkins?" Cameron asked.

"Indeed," Boq said.

"You've got to be kidding me," Brooklyn said. Her mind was on overdrive, still trying to figure out what had happened to them. "You're Munchkins, like in the book?"

Boq nodded. "You look so surprised," he said. "Didn't Beverly tell you how things worked before she sent you here?"

"Beverly?" Brooklyn asked.

"Storybook Square's owner," Boq said. "It's her job to send bored children on wondrous adventures. That's probably why she sent you here. You would like a wondrous adventure, wouldn't you?"

Brooklyn and Cameron looked at each other. They were still speechless, and neither really knew what to think, let alone what to say. So Charles Barkley, who had apparently recovered the quickest, took the initiative and answered for them.

He barked. That was his way of saying yes.

"Brilliant," Boq answered. "Then you've come to the right place. There's no better place for an adventure than the marvelous land of Oz. But if I were you, I'd start on the voyage immediately, for I hear something big is brewing in the Emerald City, and you don't want to miss it. Our whole fate, and the safety of Oz itself, may depend on it."

"What do you mean?" Brooklyn asked.

“Word is,” Boq said, “the evil Nome King has formed an army, and he has led it here to invade Oz. For years he was unable to leave his land and come here, due to the mighty desert separating the two countries, but he has united with the old witch, Mombi, and somehow they found a way. Even now, his forces are heading toward the Emerald City. You would be wise to get there before they do.”

“Okay,” Brooklyn said. “How do we get there?”

A huge smile crossed Boq’s face. “That’s an easy one,” he said. “Just follow the yellow brick road.”