

THE BUG BANDITS

JENNI L. WALSH

 ZONDER**kidz**



ZONDERKIDZ

The Bug Bandits

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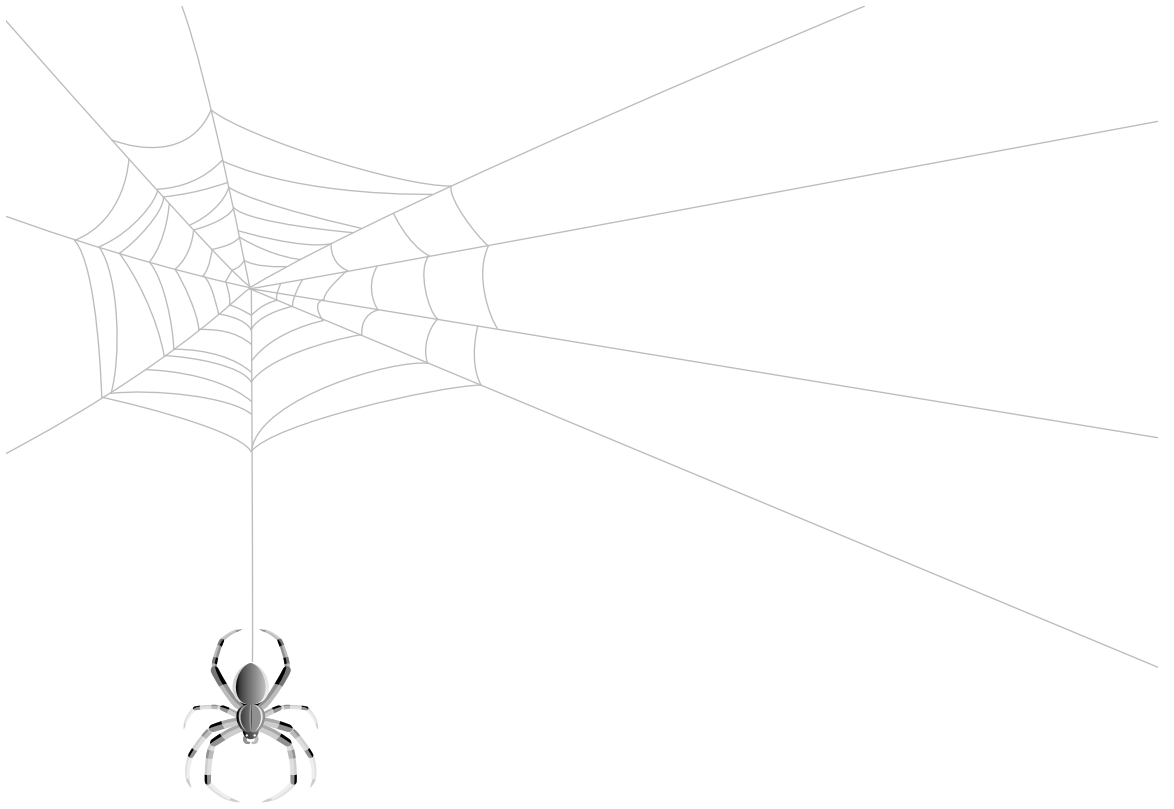
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WELCOME TO THE WALNUT STREET INSECTARIUM

FIRST FLOOR

Information desk
Gift shop
Coffee bar
Butterfly Haven
Chrysalis Chamber
Workshare tables
Restrooms

SECOND FLOOR

Tree house
Honeycomb exhibit
Ant Farm Maze
Restrooms

THIRD FLOOR

Living Collections Room
Hands-on Habitat

FOURTH FLOOR

Private residence

HOURS

MONDAY-FRIDAY	9:00 AM-5:00 PM
SATURDAY	9:00 AM-3:00 PM
SUNDAY	CLOSED

CURRENT ANIMALS ON EXHIBIT

FIRST FLOOR

Butterflies (over 50 species)

Boa constrictor

Green iguana

Koi fish

Red-eared slider turtle

THIRD FLOOR

African millipede

American cockroach

Box turtle

Golden-eyed stick insect

Hercules beetle

Leopard gecko

Madagascar hissing cockroach

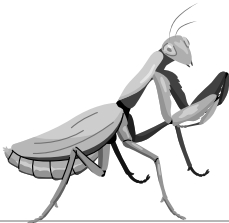
Mantis

Pink katydid

Scorpion

Stag beetle

Tarantula



SCHEDULE

TARANTULA MEET & GREET (LIVING COLLECTIONS ROOM)

3:00 PM M-F, 1:00 PM SAT

BUTTERFLY RELEASE (BUTTERFLY HAVEN)

10:00 AM (DAYS VARY)

BOX TURTLE FEEDING (HANDS-ON HABITAT)

12:00 PM DAILY



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CHAPTER

SUNDAY

ONE WEEK AND
ONE DAY TO GO





I could witness the magic that is metamorphosis a thousand times and it'd never get old. In fact, I *have* witnessed this a thousand times.

“Ohh!” Emmy exclaims.

My thoughts exactly. I edge closer to the Chrysalis Chamber just as another butterfly escapes from the cocoon that has been its home for the past few weeks. It's funny how it happens, the insect tumbling out—butt first—from the green chrysalis, with its feet still clinging to the silk casing so it doesn't fall to the ground.

Emmy asks, “How many is that so far?”

“It's our third hatching of the day.”

The new little arrival slowly uncurls its wings, but it hasn't started flapping yet. Its wings are still wet and, right now, it's brown with four darker brown circles. Some could call it plain or dull, but I call it strategic.

“Will you show me one that's all dry and flapping?”

I scan the glass chamber, about the size of double doors. There are around a hundred pupae hanging within their chrysalides. Lots of different species too, all on their own timetable. The first butterfly that hatched today has crawled off its cocoon and is walking along the bottom of the enclosure. As it does, it beats its wings.

I position my phone so Emmy can see what I'm seeing.
"Wow," she says.

I can't see her because of how I have my phone angled, but I can picture her face, her big green eyes even bigger. I once told Emmy her eyes reminded me of a green robber fly. I meant it as a compliment. She said, "A fly, really?"

I could've added how her freckles reminded me of a spotted gecko, but I resisted. And now, after moving to Florida last summer, the number of freckles has tripled. I guess that's why it's called the Sunshine State.

Pennsylvania, where I am, doesn't have such an exciting nickname: we're the Keystone State. Though I guess it's pretty cool that Thomas Jefferson said Pennsylvania was the "keystone of the federal union" back when the United States was being founded.

My dad's definitely into all the historical stuff, almost as much as he's into bug stuff. He loves that we live in Philadelphia, the country's one-time capital.

Home of the Liberty Bell.

And me—Liberty Jacobs.

"He's so pretty," Emmy remarks of the flapping butterfly. "What's it called again? Blue something . . ."

I switch the phone's camera, frowning at my screen, trying to keep my face serious instead of laughing.

"Don't look at me like that, Libs. Your dad has hatched over fifty species of butterflies."

I'm shaking my head. "Sure, but this one is practically flapping its name at you."

“Blue . . .” she begins again.

I turn the camera back toward the butterfly so she can see it in action.

One second, it’s brown.

The next second, it’s blue.

Then brown.

And blue.

When it’s brown, it all but disappears into the dirt.

Then, *wham*, blue again. A bright, vibrant, beautiful blue.

“Morpho!” Emmy blurts out.

Bingo. When the blue morpho flies, the change from blue to brown makes it seem like it’s appearing and disappearing.

Sometimes I wish I could appear and disappear, especially now that Emmy’s so far away. School’s not as fun without her. And since her mom won’t let her text, we don’t get to talk much, but at least we have our phone dates. Five o’clock, every day. We haven’t missed a single one since she moved.

“You got it!” I say to her, just as a tiger longwing lands on my arm. At any time, hundreds or even thousands of butterflies float and fly around the Butterfly Haven. It’ll create the perfect setting for my dad to dazzle the men from the bank—the investors—who’ll be coming in to meet with him in exactly one week and one day. My shoulders tense at the thought. I asked Dad what happens if the investor meeting doesn’t go well. Dad went white as a ghost and said he couldn’t let himself even think about it going poorly. Too much is riding on them saying yes.

“The blue morpho may be my favorite,” Emmy considers.

“Yeah?” I say, turning the screen to see her bobbing head. She kind of reminds me of the blue morpho. Her hair is dark brown, but with bright purple streaks. Very artistic. Very Emmy.

She asks, “Are you going to use them in *Life and Liberty*?”

Just hearing my business name—well, what I hope will be my summer business—makes me feel all fluttery inside. A butterfly release program has been my dream for as long as I can remember. We do them here at the museum. Starting as an egg. Hatching as a caterpillar. Building a cocoon. Breaking free as a butterfly. Then being released to live their best life.

How cool would it be if people could experience the magic of metamorphosis from their living room, using their very own butterfly habitat?

Emmy and I decided on the name *Life & Liberty* just last week. But as far as using blue morphos in my program . . .

“If only,” I say. “They really are one of the most beautiful butterflies we have. But I can’t for a few reasons. They’re really big, for starters. I think a smaller butterfly would work better. Then, there’s the fact it takes a pretty long time, like over a hundred days, for them to go from egg to larva to pupa to adult. That’s only a single hatching each summer. They’re also not native to here. I’d rather use a butterfly that can hatch in Philly year after year. Something like the monarch.”

“Well, okay—”

“But not the monarch because I feel like everyone has seen a monarch. I want something more unique.”

Emmy tilts her head and raises her brows. “Like . . .”

I press my lips together. “I think I know the butterfly I want to use.” But when I don’t immediately reveal my choice, Emmy urges, “Tell me!”

I make a sound that’s close enough to a drumroll. “The pipevine swallowtail.”

“Ohhhh,” Emmy gushes.

I laugh. “You don’t have a clue which butterfly that is, do you?”

“Nope,” she says, with a pop of her lips.

I have to give her credit for being endlessly supportive. It’s one of the many reasons I love my best friend. While there are some kids at school who find me . . . strange . . . because of my passion for all things six- and eight-legged, Emmy embraces my love of bugs and insects.

It’s just part of who I am. I grew up at my dad’s museum. The Walnut Street Insectarium is home. And I’d like it to stay that way. That’s why Dad’s big investor meeting is so important—he’s planning to ask for funding to keep the museum going. And, hopefully, get money for my program too. I’d love the chance to show even more people how amazing butterflies are and how important they are to the ecosystem. And the pipevine swallowtail would be perfect for that.

I smile, then explain, “They’re a similar color to the blue morpho, but with these super pretty orange dots on their wings. They’re smaller, native to Philly.”

“Your dad will love it, Libs. So will the investors.”

“I sure hope so.” Another reason Life & Liberty is so important to me: it’ll create bug enthusiasts who’ll increase foot traffic here at the insectarium. It’d be a win for my program. A win for the museum. A win for keeping my home. “I can’t imagine not living here.”

Emmy frowns. “That’d suck. Moving sucks. I really don’t want to—” Emmy’s head darts to the side, looking off-camera.

“What is it?” I ask her.

Emmy’s brows are furrowed. “It’s my mom. She wants me off the phone.”

I glance at the clock on my phone screen. “But we haven’t been talking that long.”

“I know . . .” Emmy says distractedly, her attention still off to the right. I recognize her mom’s familiar voice but can’t make out what she’s saying. “But, hey, Libs, I really have to go. Same time tomorrow?”

It’s how we end every call. Only we don’t usually end them abruptly like this one.

“Oh,” Emmy adds, “and good luck pitching your dad tomorrow. I know I already said it, but he’s going to love Life and Liberty. I know it.”

I close my eyes and inhale deeply. I sure hope so. Dad doesn’t even know about my program yet.

I know how his brain works, and I wanted to have it perfect before breathing a word about it to him.

Life & Liberty is more than just one of those really big

wins. It could also be a solution to my Emmy problem: not getting to actually see her in person.

When I asked my dad about visiting Emmy in Florida, he said a plane ticket isn't in our budget. He's already putting almost all our own money into the insectarium. "Sorry, Libs," he told me. "We just don't have enough to get you to Florida anytime soon."

"But if I pay my own way?" I had asked him.

At the time, my dad was distracted, biting his bottom lip as he studied his accounting ledger, mumbling about how he still can't afford to turn on the security cameras he had installed years ago.

"Sure thing, honeybee," he'd said.

And while he said it while distracted, it still counts. It counts, and after I raise enough money for a ticket through my butterfly release program, I'll be hopping a plane before summer's over to see my best friend for the first time in an entire year.

But first, I need Dad's blessing to even add Life & Liberty to the big meeting he's having with the bank people next week.

"I just really need this program to happen," I say.

Emmy's smiling when I open my eyes. "We need it to happen. No way my mom can afford a plane ticket either." Emmy looks again to the right. "Coming!" she calls loudly, then to me, "See ya later, alligator."

"In a while, crocodile."

Then the call ends.

JENNI L. WALSH

I sigh. I hate that my best friend lives so far away now. I look again at the blue morpho, such a beautiful creature. But I shift to another row of cocoons hanging in our Chrysalis Chamber.

The pipevine swallowtails.

The stars of my show.

I could burst waiting for them to hatch. It could be as early as tonight. And, as soon as one does, I'll be ready to pitch the little guy to my dad.



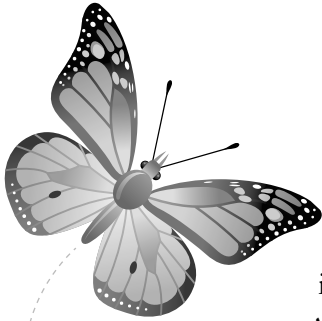
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CHAPTER

MONDAY

ONE WEEK TO GO





School slogs by. Mondays are sometimes that way, but today it feels like I'm walking through molasses.

Actually, I have no clue what that feels like.

I've just heard my dad and Mary Sue—who works at the information desk and rings up anything from the gift shop—use that phrase before.

I think it's a type of thick sugar syrup.

It sounds like something our butterflies would like.

It's no surprise my brain goes there: to butterflies. They're the reason I can't wait to get home today. The pipe-vine swallowtails didn't hatch last night or this morning before school like I'd hoped.

I'm dying to see if they've made their debut while I've been gone. If so, I'll be ready to do my big presentation for Dad.

Finally, the loudspeaker announcement says walkers are allowed to leave school. We get to go first, before the kids who take buses or get picked up.

I hastily slip on my backpack and sprint-walk out of the building. Once I turn the corner at the Chinese restaurant, I further quicken my pace down the sidewalk toward the museum.

I cross the street. I'm passing the barbershop when I get a weird, tingly sensation that someone is following me. I

tell myself I'm just feeling excited. But when I look over my shoulder, there's a boy. Super tall. Short, black hair. Cam Jones from school.

Shouldn't he be at track practice?

Is it strange how he quickly jerks his head toward the street, like he doesn't want me to know he's there?

My relationship with kids at school is almost nonexistent, especially now that Emmy's gone. Mostly, I keep to myself.

There was a time I didn't. I remember how in the first grade, I brought in a glowworm—not a real one, but a stuffy—for show-and-tell. It even lit up in all its simulated bioluminescent glory. And that glowworm was a hit.

I stood, proud as a peacock butterfly, and explained how a glowworm will eventually turn into a firefly, a lightning bug, whatever you want to call it. A species in the *Lampyridae* family, if you're being scientific.

My classmates loved it. You know what they didn't love? When I kept talking about bugs. In second grade, I rattled off how a cockroach can live for a week without a head. I saw it with my own eyes when two of our American cockroaches faced off, and I gave a play-by-play of the whole thing. I later shared how houseflies vomit on food to soften it, then suck it up. Then in third grade, I explained how female praying mantises eat their mates.

"Gross," said Mackenzie Drable.

"Nope," said Duncan Montgomery. "I'm out."

After that, I decided to separate school and home—home being Dad's insectarium and all the creepy-crawly

things that go with it. Though I don't try to hide who I am, Emmy's the only one who knows the real me. We've been "thick as thieves," as my Grams says, ever since we were little. I lost my mom, Emmy lost her dad, and Grams was there to keep an eye on both of us.

That was back when the museum was thriving and Dad had a bunch of really cool rare insects, and I got to see Emmy every day.

I swallow down the lump in my throat and take my usual shortcut between a consignment shop and a pet hospital. Fortunately, when I check again, there's no Cam.

Relieved, I enter the museum. Maybe it's because I'm at risk of losing all of this, but I pause, taking it in.

The building used to be a mansion. The hardwood floors are pretty, but Dad's business partner, Dr. Rosetti, who I've called Rosie ever since I first tried—and failed—to pronounce her name when I was little, says wood floors are a pain to keep looking nice. She voted for a more durable tile. Dad wouldn't hear of it.

The ceiling is fancy too, with designs and engravings. Dad also insisted they keep the original, ginormous chandelier. It hangs over the information desk.

Behind Mary Sue's desk is our tiny gift shop. Basically a few shelves with mugs, rubber bugs, T-shirts, bumper stickers, and various greeting cards:

BUGS AND KISSES, FROM THE
WALNUT STREET INSECTARIUM

YOU'RE SO FLY

HEY, LOVEBUG

Then, of course, there's my favorite part of the lobby: a big butterfly mural on the wall. Dad put an old-school-looking gold frame around it to make it really stand out. I smile, just like I do every time I see it.

Emmy painted the mural a few years ago. My best friend is a lot of things. She's really good at chess. But also art. She says her interests are a lot alike: When she's painting, she sees the full picture from the start and is always thinking three strokes ahead. In chess, she's three plays ahead. It works for both. Her artwork is all over the insectarium. The one here in the lobby is just the wings of the butterfly. Lots of people take photos there, standing in the middle like they're the thorax, abdomen, and head.

Emmy painted other stuff in the lobby too, like beetles. Only the antennae are actually gold contracks. It's spring, so not everyone has a jacket, but I still frown that not more of the antennae are filled with coats or scarves. Last year, an illness spread throughout our museum and killed a lot of our insects. It was horrible. So instead of advertising, Dad's been spending money on trying to rebuild our bug collection.

Mary Sue looks up from the information desk, where she's massaging lotion into her hands. The smell of vanilla and peppermint fills the air. "Hey, honeybee," she says, having adopted Dad's pet name for me—probably not knowing

it started because honeybees never sleep and I apparently was a restless baby who cried. A lot. “How was school today?”

“Slow,” I say. “Do you know if the pipevine swallowtails have started to hatch yet?”

“Not since I last checked,” she says, squeezing my chin as I go behind the desk. “But before you skedaddle in there, your dad needs new orange slices put out in the haven. There aren’t any in the employee kitchen, but he says you have some in the apartment.”

I grimace, looking up in the direction of our apartment. It feels far when the employee kitchen is on this floor.

The fancy coffee machine Dad splurged on at the small coffee bar hisses, the barista in the middle of making someone a drink.

I feel like hissing too. But I end up sighing as I take a walkie-talkie from under the information desk, then cross to the elevator.

There are stairs and elevators that go to the second and third floors. But to use them to get to the fourth-story attic, where I live, there’s a keypad with a code.

People get turned around in the museum all the time, and it would be really awkward if they ended up in the apartment my dad and I share.

The elevator itself looks very historic, with a metal cage-like door that slides across for safety. Once inside, I punch in my birth date and the button for the attic glows. As I’m riding up, I hear Mary Sue over the walkie-talkie: “The queen’s home.”

The elevator opens into my living room. This top level is all sloped walls, exposed beams, and stained-glass windows. It's the best.

I call out, "Dad?" just in case he's up here. No answer. He's likely in his office down on the third floor.

I drop my book bag on our kitchen table and get started on the orange slices.

I quickly pile the slices on a paper plate and jog for a set of stairs, eager to check on the pipevine swallowtails. This particular staircase isn't one the museumgoers use. It's a secret, tucked behind the walls—another fun aspect of this being an old, historical mansion. Servants once used this back staircase so they could move about the home without being seen.

I head down, stairs illuminating with a *click, click, click* as I go. The motion sensors were something else Dad spent a lot of money on . . . not knowing so many of our bugs would get sick soon after. That's when he had an entire security system installed too, with cameras and everything. Only the cameras never got used, because they were too expensive to keep on.

I emerge on the first floor, at an employee's-only back entrance to the Butterfly Haven. I have to enter carefully so no butterflies escape. There's another entrance too, the main one that our visitors use, where there are two sets of doors—an inner door and an outer door—with a vestibule in between. It's a safety measure so the butterflies can't get into the lobby.

The first thing I notice in the haven is the silence. By the afternoon, most of the moms with their toddlers are gone. Any school trips have left. We do private tours, but those

are usually wrapped up by now as well. Dad talked about extending our hours past dinnertime to try to bring in families where both parents were at work all day, but that also meant paying our employees for the extra time. So we stuck with five o'clock.

I make a beeline for the Chrysalis Chamber, ducking and winding around a leopard lacewing, a forest mort blue, a giant owl butterfly. Then a blue morpho, most likely one of the little guys that hatched yesterday.

Dad likes to keep the new arrivals in a big mesh box until he's sure their wings are dry. Then he'll open the box during the morning rush. That's when most of the moms and dads come.

Wide-eyed, all the little kids stare, mesmerized as the butterflies swarm out, a blur of colors. It's one of my favorite things to watch and how I first got my idea for a butterfly release program.

I wanted others to experience watching butterflies go free. And that made me think, what if they could do it from the comfort of their own home? With an experienced butterfly enthusiast (me) hand delivering the mesh habitat and explaining the whole process of how an egg will hatch into a caterpillar, then eat and eat—just like Eric Carle wrote—then spin a cocoon, to emerge as a butterfly?

People will pay good money for that.

Forty-nine ninety-nine, I hope.

A steal for something that feels priceless to witness with your own two eyes.

I hurry down one of the many stone paths that weave throughout the Butterfly Haven.

I spot a man sipping his coffee and working at a table. I smile at the logo on the mug: a walnut tree leaf with a caterpillar munching away. Emmy designed it.

A butterfly release program may be my bright idea, but it was Dad's to offer workshare tables for people to use. Lots of people have bought a monthly or yearly membership to bring their laptops and headphones and work from here.

A perfect eighty degrees, even when it's snowing outside.
Surrounded by trees, flowers, and butterflies.

Koi and a turtle in a lily pad-covered pond.

Butterflies fluttering all around.

I can't think of a more perfect place.

My happy place.

I slide to a stop outside the Chrysalis Chamber, immediately letting out a low growl. Still not hatched.

For this particular species, the whole process of metamorphosis—from egg to larva to pupa to adult—takes about thirty-three days.

About being the key word. You can't rush nature, much as I'd like to. I watch a moment longer—willing the butterfly to make its debut—when one of the cocoons begins to shake.

"Sorry, little guys," I say, taking a step away. They do that sometimes when they're feeling threatened—wiggling, shaking, and even making a hissing sound to try to scare off whatever is scaring them.

In this case: me.

I take that as my cue to leave and begin switching out old orange slices for new ones along the paths. Almost instantly, a butterfly lands on a fresh orange.

“Hungry, aren’t ya?” I muse to myself.

Mary Sue’s voice comes through my walkie-talkie. “Dr. Jacobs, your four o’clock is here.”

A few seconds later, my dad replies, “Be right down.”

I wonder who it could be.

Even with Dad’s brilliant workshare idea, the museum still hasn’t been bringing in enough money since the sickness outbreak. It takes a lot to pay his employees fair wages, do all the regular maintenance and upkeep on such an old building, and pay the “exorbitant” (as Dad says) city mortgage. Dad had been hoping insurance would somehow help cover the cost of our lost bugs, but that’d only be the case if the insects were stolen or damaged. But who’s ever heard of heisting a bunch of bugs?

Ever since losing our little friends, we’ve been rebuilding with some new incredibly rare insects, like three pink katydids, an exotic tarantula, and even an afrolychas, which is an endangered scorpion. A few newspapers did some fancy write-ups about it.

It’s how Dad got a few investors interested.

Investors . . .

And Dad has a four o’clock . . .

Panic seizes me. What if the meeting with the investors from the bank got moved up? I haven’t talked to my dad

about my idea yet. Although, Dad is going to New York City this weekend for a rare insect convention to scope out new bugs for his collection so he can add those costs into his pitch. He wouldn't take a meeting before the convention, would he?

I quickly switch out the rest of my oranges, then head toward the lobby—ready to investigate. I pass Dad's business partner, Rosie, giving a tour to two nicely dressed men. They look like they could be professors of some sort. I smile politely, then use my shoulder to leave, since my fingers are too covered in orange juice to open the inner door. I pause, making sure no butterflies followed me. Then I push through the outer door, entering the lobby.

All right, mystery person, reveal yourself, I think as I focus on the lobby.

I pray Dad's still there and hasn't taken whoever it is to another part of the museum. I also cross my sticky fingers, hoping it's not someone in a suit. Most times, a suit means someone from the bank. But it's not someone in a suit.

It's a kid in a hoodie, track pants, and Converse.

It's Cam Jones.

And because I don't know how to act when someone from school is unexpectedly in my home, I drop to all fours in a desperate attempt not to be seen.

