

Spider Summer

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Chapter One

First Impressions

When my parents and I moved into our tiny apartment here in London, England—a flat, they call it—I figured my life was over. Dad would be busy taking art classes at summer school. I didn't know anybody to hang around with. Plus, we had to leave my dog Rusty behind in Canada with my best friend. The summer stretched ahead of me like a dead snake.

I knew the summer would be bad, but I didn't know just how bad until I learned we wouldn't even have a TV.

"I understand there's a public television in one of the common rooms on the main floor," Dad said to the lady at the front desk when we arrived.

"That's correct," she said in this clipped English accent, "but it isn't for use by children. Unless, of course, a parent accompanies them."

"Children?" I asked, looking around. I'm almost ten, hardly a child!

“I’ll give you the key to the TV room along with your flat key, Mr. Paylor,” the woman told my father.

“Isn’t there a flat screen in my bedroom?” I asked Mom. That’s what I’d been used to at home.

My parents just looked at each other and then smiled at me with these big fake smiles.

“It’ll be good for you to do other things,” Dad said. “And we can go watch some things as a family.”

I groaned. My parents hate TV! And I would hate watching anything with them!

“We also have a playroom here at Students’ House,” the front desk lady went on, “with toys and things like that.”

I groaned again, louder and longer. I’m pretty short, and people are always mistaking me for younger than nine, but toys?

Get me out of here! I thought.

“Be sure to lock your door,” the woman was saying. “The House has had a number of break-ins recently.”

I instantly perked up. “Break-ins? You mean robberies?”

“Exactly.” She pressed her bright red lips firmly shut.

“Do they suspect anyone? I mean, do they think it’s somebody from the inside?” I was a big fan of detective movies. That’s what I did back home when it was too cold to go outside: watch detective shows on Net Flicks.

“Excuse me—” she interrupted, rolling her eyes between me and my parents. “There are a few things about the building I need to explain.” She reached under the counter and handed my father a list of rules.

“Because this building is a temporary home for university students who are often studying in their flats,” she went on, “it is important that all children be kept quiet in the halls. Rule number 10.”

I slid down the side of the desk and thumped onto the floor.

“Kill me now,” I said. “Just kill me now.”

I could see my dad nodding as he looked at the list, the flabby skin under his chin wobbling up and down.

So much for equal rights, I thought. My parents thanked the woman and started pulling their suitcases across the lobby, going around the round wooden table in the centre of the room.

I got to my feet and shot the desk clerk a look of disgust. Then I headed after my folks who were going into the elevator—*lift* it’s called here. I walked carefully around the table but a wheel of my suitcase must have caught the table leg because the whole thing moved and the vase of flowers in the middle tipped over.

“Luke, you’ve got to be more careful!” my mother yelled.

The woman behind the desk came running over and grabbed the vase. “It’s not broken, but what a mess!” she said.

There was water on the table, and a few leaves, but it wasn't the end of the world or anything. She shot me a look of hatred and I scowled and got into the lift, my face hot. Some people think kids aren't worth the time of day. But maybe I'd show that lady. If I kept my eyes peeled and found their robber, wouldn't that make her eyes pop out of her head!

Back in our flat, Mom started unpacking the boxes that had been shipped to London ahead of us. Her short grey hair had gotten even curlier from the damp air. She looked more like a poodle than ever.

"Here, Luke," she said, shoving a box at me. "This goes in the kitchen." Mom believes that when she's working, everyone has to work. This time I didn't argue. As I took the box into the kitchen, a rotten smell hit me.

"Phew, what a stench!" I said.

"Take one of the cloths and some soap and wipe out the shelves before you put things away," called Mom. "The last tenants may not have left things too clean."

I should have kept my mouth shut! I thought, running water into the sink. As I wiped out the fridge, I called, "What did the mayonnaise say to the refrigerator?"

"What?" my mother answered after a few moments.

“Close the door, I’m dressing!” I said. I could at least practise my comedy routines while I worked. My best friend Marty and I are planning to be comedians, but he’ll probably end up being a drummer because he’s already very good at it. He is also a better joke-teller than I am. Some people are like that, good at everything. But I’m working on it. Joke-telling, that is.

“You look kind of green,” said Dad, coming in and getting himself a drink of water.

I went to the bathroom and looked in the mirror. I did look green. Although it was four o’clock here, back home it would be early morning and we had missed a night’s sleep. My eyes, normally a clear blue, were bloodshot. We weren’t supposed to sleep today because then we’d have a good rest tonight and wake up feeling normal. I yawned and brushed through my longish blond hair with my fingers. Mom and Dad were always after me to cut it, but I figured it looked pretty cool which is especially important if I’m going to have a career in show business.

“What did the toothbrush say to the toothpaste?” I said.

“Stick to me and we’ll go places!” Dad answered, poking his head through the bathroom doorway. The bald spot on top gleamed in the light of the bare bulb. “You told me that one on the airplane.”

Well, I thought, Maybe I'll work in a band after all. I mean, they always need somebody to carry their equipment or something.

When most of the boxes had been unpacked, Dad lay down on their bed with a long groan. "Call me in the morning!" he said. "I don't care what the experts on jet lag say. I'm beat and I'm going to bed now!" And then he leaped up again with a yell.

"Hey, there's something on the wall!"

Mom and I went to look. It was a bug of some sort, just kind of hanging there on long spidery legs.

"I think it's a daddy longlegs," said Dad. "Somebody get a Kleenex."

Dad has always been really squeamish about bugs. No way would he try to tackle anything with more than four legs.

"I'll get it," I said, reaching up and batting with my fist.

"Oops, missed it."

"Where did it go?" hollered Dad, his thin hair sticking up in tufts.

"Never mind," Mom told him. "If you can't see it, it probably can't see you."

"And one good thing," I added. "If I'd killed it, it would have rained. You know, kill a spider and the river gets wider."

Mom laughed. "I have a feeling we'll be seeing lots of rain here anyway. We're in London, England, remember?"

Dad settled down again on the bed after looking suspiciously under the covers. As a last precaution, he covered his face with the sheet.

Mom snorted and then headed back to the kitchen.

I looked out the window. No rain in sight—in fact, the sun was brightly shining. There were tall brick buildings everywhere. The street below looked like it was made of bricks too—I found out later it was cobblestone—and cars were going down it the wrong way. Instead of driving on the right-hand side like we do at home, they were driving on the left. A big, black taxi slid by. *Cool!* I thought. *I'd really like to ride in one of those!*

I couldn't believe the number of cars that went by. In Wakaw—the Saskatchewan town I was from—we'd be lucky if five cars passed our house in a day. And chances were we'd know who was driving each of them. That's why nobody back home bothers to lock their doors—we know everyone around.

It gave me a funny feeling to see so many buildings all around. Kind of a smothery feeling. I thought about the park we'd passed close by here. I slipped on my sunglasses and headed for the door. I figured I'd done enough cleaning for the day.

“And where do you think you're going?” said Mom.

“Just out. Maybe to the park.”

“Not on your own, Luke,” she said firmly. “We talked about this before. London is a big city and it can be dangerous. You’ll have to wait, and I’ll go exploring with you later.”

“Aw, Mom!” I said. “It’s just across the street!”

“No way. Why don’t you look around inside the building instead?”

I slouched out the door and down the hall.

Then I perked up. Maybe I’d find some clues to the robberies. Or maybe I’d even catch the thief in action. I walked as softly as I could, my running shoes barely squeaking against the shiny tiles.

We were on the third floor. I soon found out that the floor above and the floor below were almost identical to this one—white doors set in cream-coloured walls, with a long hallway of single rooms and then family flats like ours towards each end. I’d read about this place on the internet before we came, but I hadn’t imagined it would be so large. There was a lift and a set of stairs at both ends of the hall, and public washrooms in the middle for the singles.

In the basement there was a huge garbage room, and the laundry. A row of ten washing machines hummed away, each one a Cyclops with one dark eye facing out, and beyond them stood a wall of dryers. Outside the laundry there was a pocked bulletin

board with various notices. As I walked by, one of the ads caught my eye.

For Sale: Tarantula Spider. Room 19. I stood rooted to the spot and read it three times. A tarantula spider!

I found Room 19 and knocked on the door. After a few seconds, it was opened by a young guy who looked as if he'd been sleeping. His clothes were rumpled and his hair stuck out.

"G'day, mate!" he said.

"I—I saw your poster. About the—the tarantula. Do you still have it?"

"Right-o. Come on in. Croc's just over here."

"Croc?"

"Yeah, short for Crocodile."

"Wicked!" I breathed. The spider was half the size of my hand, with a dark grey back and furry black and orange legs. "Does he bite?"

"Nah. He's not poisonous, anyway. A bite would be more like a sting. But he's pretty good spirited. Never bitten anyone as far as I know."

"Why are you selling him?"

"I'm off home to Australia. Tomorrow, actually. Haven't had much luck selling this old bloke. You want him?" The guy

picked up the spider from the small plastic cage and set him on his palm.

I swallowed. “How much . . . how much do you want for him?”

“Twenty pounds is what I paid.”

My jaw felt as though it weighed a ton. That was about forty dollars! I looked at Croc and said nothing.

“Is that too much for you, mate?”

I nodded. He set Croc on the window ledge where he started to move delicately toward me. I put down my open hand and he crawled up on it, his body surprisingly light for so large a creature. When he got to my wrist, he raised his front toward me and sat still.

“I think he likes you, mate.”

“Yeah,” I said softly. Croc’s big furry jaws did look as if they were smiling.

“Do you want him?”

“But I—I can’t—”

“Don’t worry,” the guy told me. “I’ve got to get rid of him. It’s a long plane ride to Australia and I can’t take him with me. He’s yours, chap.”

“Wow. Thanks!” I breathed. I gently touched Croc’s silky back while the guy told me how to take care of him and gave me a

booklet about tarantulas so I could read up. Then he handed me the cage.

“Better put him in here for the move,” he said.

I reverently placed Croc inside and shut the lid. Then I carried him toward the hall.

“I’ll take real good care of him!” I promised.

“Good on you, mate,” said the guy, and closed the door behind me. Suddenly, I thought of my dad. With his bug phobia, there was no way he was going to let me keep a tarantula. No way at all!

Chapter Two

The Thief Strikes

I stared at the closed door. Then I looked down at spider. Croc was crouched in one corner of the cage, his little ball of eyes gleaming up at me. He raised himself slightly and there was that smile again. I couldn’t let him down. He needed me! Slowly, I took the stairs up to the third floor. As I opened the door into the hall, a woman burst out past me, nearly knocking me off my feet.

“I’ve been robbed!” she yelled. “Did you see anyone on the stairs?”

“No!” My eye caught sight of the red numbers above the elevator, going down, down, down.

“But I bet he took the elevator!” The numbers stopped at the main floor.

“You’re right,” she called, hitting the button and then heading down the stairs two at a time. I was torn between wanting to follow and needing to get Croc safely stashed away in my room. The elevator came back up to my floor and the door opened. I jumped on and pressed M. Maybe when the door opened again, I’d nab whoever it was. But when the elevator stopped, I was disappointed. The lobby was empty, except for the woman and a desk clerk—a man this time.

“Must be an inside job,” I muttered to myself.

“I was in our sitting room, and I thought I heard the door click shut. When I went to look, I noticed that our kitchen things were gone from the shelf—the toaster, the coffee-maker, the electric kettle. I ran after him but no luck!”

“Was anyone else in the hall, anyone who might have seen anything?” asked the clerk.

“Yes—” the woman turned and pointed at me. “He was!”

“Did you see anybody?” the desk clerk asked.

“No,” I said, “not this time. But I’ll keep my eyes peeled.”

The two of them laughed and then the clerk told the woman she’d better notify the police.

I didn’t know what they were laughing about. All I needed were a few clues and I could catch that thief, I just knew I could!

I looked down at Croc and turned towards the lift. After all, pets might be illegal here. I figured I’d better not give anyone a chance to make me get rid of him.

The woman called after me, “The police may want your name, seeing as how you were on the scene.”

She waited. I opened my mouth.

“Detective Paylor,” I said.

“Thank you for your help, Master Paylor,” the desk clerk said, laughing. “We’ll call you if we need you.”

I knew when I wasn’t wanted. I headed back to my flat, listening for a moment outside the door. I could just make out Dad’s snoring. And then I heard Mom’s voice. “She must be on the telephone,” I thought. “Good timing!” I quietly opened the door and crept into my room.

“You’ll be safe here,” I told Croc as I slid his little cage under the bed. Then I slipped into the kitchen and got an egg cup which I filled with water. As I took it back to my room, I heard my mom.

“So it would be just for the mornings, then. I won’t need a babysitter after one p.m.”

I froze. A babysitter? The hair on the back of my neck stood on end.

“We’ll come by tonight, after supper, to meet you,” Mom went on. “It sounds like a very good arrangement.”

I quickly put the water in Croc’s cage and came out, closing the door behind me, as Mom dialled the phone again.

“Yes, I’m just calling to check some references,” she said.

“What’s that about a babysitter?” I interrupted, but she ignored me. After she put down the phone, she smiled.

“I saw an ad in the House Newsletter,” she said enthusiastically. “I’ve been wanting to take a course myself this summer—there’s a fairly cheap class nearby, on British books—and a family in the adjoining building are offering to—to look after kids.” She took a look at my face and went on more slowly. “It would only be for—uh—for a couple of hours each day. And then I’d have the afternoons to go with you where you wanted.”

“No way!” I yelled. “I don’t need a babysitter.”

“Well, you can’t stay by yourself,” said Mom. “London’s a big city and it’s just not safe for you to be alone.”

Then Dad’s sleepy voice broke in.

“It won’t be so bad. I’m going to be too busy with my art courses to do much with you. You’ll probably have more fun with other kids around.”

I took a deep breath. It might not be bad to get to know some other kids.

“How old are the kids?” I asked.

“Well, there’s just one, and he’s younger than you,” said Mom quickly. “But we’ll meet the family after supper. I’m sure you’ll like them. Elvira, that’s the mother, sounded really nice on the phone. And she’s babysat for people in the House before. She’s got great references. Now, you guys get ready and we’ll go over to the cafeteria and splurge on dinner. I’m not cooking tonight!”

Dinner. I’d have to figure out what to feed Croc. The guy had told me he’d found worms in the garden, but I’d have to think of a way to get in there without my parents seeing me.

Dad made a big deal out of locking the flat door behind us and then we headed to the cafeteria. When we got there, I couldn’t believe my eyes. It looked like it was equipped to feed hundreds. At one end was a whole room where people with aprons and caps served you from tables of food.

“Oh great!” said Mom, reading the blackboard on the wall. “Tonight’s vegetarian night.”

I left them at the salad bar and went over and pointed to a big burger. My mouth watered. I love hamburgers.

“I’ll have one of those, please,” I said to the man. Then I added my plate to the tray Dad was carrying to the till and grabbed a can of lemonade.

“Twenty-five pounds, fifty,” said the cashier after ringing up our items.

“Twenty-five pounds, fifty!” repeated Dad. “That can’t be right. That’s—that’s about fifty-one dollars! Look, all we have is a burger, two salads, and three drinks.”

“Check the receipt,” said the woman impatiently, tugging at her hairnet. “Fifty pence for the lettuce, fifty for cucumbers, fifty for cottage cheese....”

“You mean each item in the salad is charged separately?” said Dad, his face red.

“That’s right.”

“Okay, I’ll know for next time,” he muttered, handing her the money. All the way to the table, he kept saying, “Fifty-one bucks, fifty-one bucks!”

By this time I was really starving. We sat down and I took a huge bite out of my burger, chewed, and choked.

“This is awful!” I sputtered. “This hamburger tastes like—like cardboard!”

“It isn’t a hamburger, Luke, it’s beans,” said Mom, picking through her salad for beets, which are her favourite vegetable.

“Remember, it’s vegetarian night.”

“Beans?” I said. “Beans all ground up to look like meat?”

“Yup.”

“What a mean trick!”

“Better for you, though,” she said mildly, poking a beet into her mouth. “Meat is high in fat.”

“But I like meat. And this—” I said, flicking at the hamburger—beanburger—with my finger, “this should be against the law!”

“It cost ten bucks,” said Dad. “So eat it anyway.”

I took a drink of my lemonade. It was awful too, really fizzy and without any lemon taste at all.

“Can’t I buy something else?” I asked.

“Are you kidding?” said Dad, really losing his cool. “This meal took all our spare money for the week! We’ve got to budget very carefully here. The flat’s already costing us more than double what our house payments cost back home. And I won’t be getting a paycheck until I get back to teaching high school in the fall.”

“But—”

“Eat it!” he said. And the case was closed.

I began to understand why someone would go around robbing other people in our apartment block. He was probably driven to it by starvation!

I watched Mom eat through all the items in her salad, one by one. *She could have been a herbivore in another life*, I thought. I managed to eat the bun from around my burger, but the rest was just too gross. It was a relief when we finally got up to go.

“I know it isn’t easy getting used to a new place,” said Mom, patting me on the back. “But give it time. You’ll learn to like things here.”

I had my doubts. No freedom. No TV. No hamburgers. But then I thought of Croc and smiled. At least one thing had turned out okay. Boy, would my parents ever freak if they knew! Then I thought of the babysitter and the smile dropped away. I bet I’d hate her.

Chapter Three

Babysitter Blues

On the way to the babysitter's flat, I tried one more time to persuade my parents to see things my way.

“But I could find lots of things to do on my own. I mean, there's a library close by, isn't there? ”

Dad snorted.

“You want to spend the whole summer in the library? Now there's a *novel* idea!” he said.

“Very funny,” I answered, wishing he'd leave the jokes to me. “C'mon, give me a break!”

“We are giving you a break,” Dad answered, his thin hair standing on end. “We could enroll you in summer school. Now, put your best foot forward. We are here.”

Mom pressed the button on the outside of the building and in a moment a burst of static issued from the speaker. Then we heard a deep voice.

“Come in, come in,” he or she said.

The building had really ugly yellow carpet on the floor and smelled like dirty socks. A door down the hallway burst open and a woman poked out her head.

“Come in!” she boomed, a huge smile on her face. She had a big gap between her front teeth and I couldn’t believe her voice. It had some sort of accent I couldn’t identify.

“I just have to run and get a damp cloth for Thomas,” she went on. “Please, make yourselves at home!”

Inside, a toddler was sitting on a blanket on the matted carpet, playing with crumpled tinfoil and margarine containers. He had a mass of curly black hair and his cheeks were smeared with jam. He looked up at me and began making fierce growling sounds.

“Please, sit down!” Elvira bellowed, returning with a cloth.

“This is a BABY!” I said, looking at my parents in disbelief.

“He’s just turned two,” Elvira said proudly, trying to wipe his face. “You can guess what he had for supper?”

“Raw meat,” I muttered.

“Luke,” warned Mom quietly. Then she turned to Elvira.

“And your husband? Is he home?”

“No, he had to go back to the lab.” My eyebrows shot up.

“Rajitt is studying as a zoologist,” she continued. “His PhD. It will be a few more years yet, and it is hard here to make ends meet, but we manage. “She patted Thomas’ hair and beamed down at him.

“He is our entertainment, pretty cheap!”

I slumped into an easy chair and then yelled as the bottom cushion dropped out and I went right through the frame onto the floor.

“Oh, that chair is—how would you call it—booby trapped!” exclaimed Elvira. “Sorry! You see, we just use it to play on. Or in! I’m sorry!”

Would she never stop grinning! I scrambled to my feet. The baby stood up and began to scream and stamp his foot. Then he ran over and growled at me. Elvira only laughed.

“He feels that is his chair,” she apologized. “He will take a bit of time getting used to you. But it will be good for him. Last year we looked after a baby and he was so interested in her. This time too he will have fun. It is not good for a child to be the only child.”

Mom nodded her head.

“You’re right,” she said. “Luke will enjoy the company, too.”

Everyone looked at me and I scowled. Then the baby whacked me across the legs with one of his containers.

“OWW! This place could be a hazard to my health!” I said.

“Luke is feeling a bit badly about having to be looked after,” Mom said hastily. “It would be easier if Thomas were a few years older.”

Elvira laughed. It made me dizzy just to look at her—I mean, she and the Grand Canyon had a lot in common! I could see all the way down to her tonsils!

“I’m sure things will be fine once Luke gets to know us!” she said.

“Why don’t you get out of that chair and play with Thomas for a few minutes? Keep him entertained so Dad and I can talk to Elvira,” Mom said. “I’ll bet he’d like you to read to him.”

Before I could decide what to do, Thomas, who had been staring at me with his beady brown eyes, reached out and grabbed my leg. Then the little Piranha actually bit my knee.

“Oh, Luke, I’m sorry! And I forgot to wipe his fingers. Thomas, *nicht tun!*” Elvira grabbed the Piranha and scrubbed his hands. “Now, say you’re sorry.”

He just looked at me, his tongue flicking from side to side.

“Oh, that’s okay,” said Mom. “Luke used to do things like that too, when he was—how old did you say Thomas was?”

“He is one month past two years old.”

“He’s big for his age. Luke has always been a bit small.”

I stared at her.

“But I’m sure he’ll shoot up one of these days,” Mom added quickly. I gave her a withering glance and then stared at my big toe which stuck out of a hole in my sock. I hoped the Piranha wouldn’t see it. Just one bite and that toe would be gone.

Dad picked up a jar from the shelf and then put it down. I could see something green and fuzzy on what looked like a piece of bread.

“That looks—uh—interesting,” he commented.

“Oh, that’s just our little experiment!” explained Elvira, laughing. “Rajitt, my husband, is always trying to get Thomas interested in science. Maybe Luke would like to make one, too—” she looked at me grinning, “—an experiment? You come here for one week and see if you like it with us?”

“I’m not a science man myself,” Dad went on, “but I sure appreciate what science can do. Mould like you have here gave us penicillin, didn’t it?”

“Right,” Elvira nodded enthusiastically. Some hairpins flew from the thick braid of yellow hair she had pinned on top of her

head and landed on the coffee table. Tufts of hair stuck up like antennae.

“And is this what your husband is studying in the lab?” Dad went on.

“No, Rajitt is an entomologist—he looks at insects.”

“That figures,” I thought.

The Piranha grabbed the hairpins and stuck them in his mouth.

“Oh, come now, Thomas, not in the mouth.” Elvira tried to retrieve the hairpins, but Thomas began to wail. I rolled my eyes.

“We’d better go, now,” said Mom, standing up. “We’ll—” She looked at Dad, who nodded. “We’ll try Luke with you tomorrow, if that’s okay with you? Around eight-thirty?”

I opened my mouth to protest, but Mom took my arm.

“Early to bed, early to rise,” she said firmly. The door shut behind us. I could hear the Piranha howling, “Bapoo, Bapoo, Bapoo.”

“You had better behave yourself,” Mom warned. “Elvira seems like a very nice person and I think you will like it here if you give them a chance. And maybe she’ll teach you some German.”

German! So that was her accent.

I looked at Dad but he was obviously on Mom's side. It just wasn't fair!

That night, I went to bed with my mind racing. What I needed was a plan, but everything I thought of was stupid. I could act sick for a few days maybe, but not for the whole summer. And if I locked myself in the bathroom, I'd starve to death. I sighed and kneeled down beside the bed. Croc's little eyes gleamed up at me sympathetically when I lifted the lid of his cage.

"I wonder if Elvira is afraid of spiders," I muttered, reaching in and stroking his silky fur. "But Thomas would probably just squash you before I had a chance to scare her."

Croc stretched out and crept forward, his dark body steady over his eight striped legs. I watched as he maneuvered around the cage, gently tapping the corners with his two front legs.

"I bet you're looking for the door," I said. "Sorry. I can't let you out."

Then I thought about it. Maybe I could let him out. He'd walked on the window ledge of that Australian guy.

"Just a minute!" I told him excitedly. I ran out to the sitting room where my parents were reading.

"I need a pen and a piece of paper," I said. Mom looked up, surprised, but pointed to her letter-writing case.

"Go ahead, take what you need."

“Luke, check the lock on your way past,” Dad said. “We’ve got to make sure we keep the flat locked.”

When I got back to my room I made a sign which I fixed to the outside of my door with some bubble gum I’d been saving.

PRIVATE, it said. *ADULTS KEEP OUT*.

“That should do it,” I muttered. I picked up Croc between my thumb and index finger and set him on the floor. He drew in his legs for a moment and then began to crawl forward. I put out my hand, palm up, and he climbed onto it. His movements were slow and graceful and his little claws tickled. Again, I was surprised to feel how light he was.

“Man, what a cool thing you are!” I breathed. “Tomorrow I’m going to have to find something to feed you. The Australian guy said earthworms, or raw ground beef, every couple of days.” Maybe I could persuade Elvira to take me over to the park to dig some worms. That way Mom and Dad wouldn’t have to know anything about it!

I lightly tapped the top of Croc’s head. Like lightning, he reared up and spread open his fangs.

I jerked away.

“Hold on, I won’t hurt you!” I cried.

He settled down and kind of smiled at me and then curled up.

Suddenly, my eyelids felt like rocks. I carefully put Croc back in his cage. He looked kind of lonely stuck in the middle of it.

“I know how you feel,” I whispered. Then I shoved the cage back under my bed.

“Sweet dreams!” I whispered.

As I drifted off to sleep, one last thought swam into my head. The way that robber disappeared after his last crime—I’d be willing to bet he lived in the building. Maybe even on our floor!

Chapter Four

Piranhas and Cockroaches

The next morning as I ate my cereal, I looked up “piranha” on Dad’s laptop.

“Piranha,” it said. “A small, South American fish with strong jaws and triangular, razor sharp teeth; extremely aggressive and flesh-eating, each fish bites its prey once but because piranhas often travel in shoals, large animals can be stripped to the bone in a few minutes.”

I shivered. That little Piranha might not finish me off today, he would do it slowly... one day at a time.

Soon I was reluctantly following Dad across the street to Elvira’s flat, staring at his shirt tail which hung outside his trousers. I needed a plan, but my brain wasn’t working quickly enough.

I tried out a few jokes to help my mind wake up.

“Why did the Piranha prop his mouth open when he slept?”

I asked.

My father turned to me and raised his eyebrows.

“Because he didn’t want any lip for breakfast!” I said.

“Oh, I see,” he said. “Very funny.”

I kept on. A real comedian wouldn’t be discouraged by a deadpan audience.

“Why did the Piranha swim by himself?”

“Don’t know. Why?”

“It was too dangerous in the school.”

“Mmhmm,” Dad said.

“Did you know that piranhas can be cannibals in a feeding frenzy?” I continued. “That’s why a school of them can be dangerous...”

Dad buzzed Elvira’s flat. I stared at the number beside her name. Thirteen.

“You can’t get much worse than this,” I muttered.

Dad looked down at me.

“Your jokes aren’t so bad,” he said, misunderstanding. “I’m just thinking about the art history class I’m supposed to get to by ten. I’ll have to figure out which subway to take to get there. Subways aren’t my favourite thing.”

“Why not?” I asked as he opened the door to the building.

“They’re underground. I’d rather take a bus so I can see where I’m going. But my university is a ways out, and the subways are faster.” As we walked down the hall, I spotted an oily looking, oval bug on the baseboard.

“Hey, look at that!” I said, pointing.

“It’s a cockroach.” Dad’s voice had a funny wrinkle in it. Boy, does he hate bugs! And then I thought of a plan.

“This place is probably really unhealthy. I mean, if the building’s infested, I shouldn’t be eating here or anything, ’cause cockroaches carry germs, don’t they?”

Dad swallowed. I knew I had him worried.

“Well, I’ll talk to Elvira about it. I’m sure—”

Suddenly, her door opened and the Piranha darted out.

“Wahoo! Wahoo!” He was jumping up and down and looking like we were the best thing to happen to him since breakfast.

Elvira was inside, smiling broadly.

“Come in, come in! Thomas just can’t wait to play with you!”

Spare me! I thought, looking at the Piranha who was poking his head out from behind her legs. I made fish lips at him.

“He will nap this morning, Luke, and you and I will get to know each other, yes?” Elvira motioned me into the kitchen.

“Have you had breakfast? Do you want something to eat?”

“No thanks.” I stared at Dad. “Aren’t you going to ask her?” I whispered.

He cleared his throat and looked around.

“Have you—are you troubled by—by cockroaches here?” he stuttered.

Elvira’s eyes sparkled. She flung open the cupboards, singing, “Not here!” She pointed to rows of containers, labelled neatly *Flour, Oatmeal, Sugar*.

“Not a crumb for them to eat here! So we are safe! Sometimes I see them in the bathroom, from the drain, but not in

the kitchen. Now, are you sure I can't get you anything? Eggs?
Toast? Or some nice cakes?"

Dad backed toward the door, fiddling with a button that
hung from his shirt.

"No thanks. I'll leave you to it, then," he said. "Bye, Luke."

I did not respond. Plan Number One hadn't worked, but I'd
think of another.

"Are you hungry?" Elvira asked again.

"No."

"Well, I am. I'll put out some extra things in case you
change your mind. I'm eating for two, you know."

"What?" I looked at her blankly.

"For two. I'm eating for two. I'm expecting a baby in the
winter." She patted her stomach.

I looked at the front of her shirt. I'd just thought she was
kind of fat. But a baby? In there? I looked away. It didn't seem
right to keep staring.

Elvira put a plate of cupcakes on the table, a mug of coffee,
and two plastic cups of milk.

"For now or later," she said. "Whenever you like. Thomas,
come to the table!"

Piranhas eat necks to nothing, I thought, grinning at my own joke. Then I looked at the cupcakes. *If he eats only one bite, I'll know he's a piranha for sure.*

Thomas scrambled up into his highchair and drank some of his milk, spilling most of it on his bib. Then he stuffed a whole cupcake into his mouth all at once. Crumbs flew out onto the table.

Well, that was actually just one bite, I thought. *Piranha for sure!*

Elvira sat and nibbled at a cupcake. Just like a big insect. And that's when I thought of Plan Number Two. I smiled to myself.

"You're very like your father, do you know that?" Elvira was studying my face. "Same blue eyes, same shape of head. Do other people say this?"

"No," I lied.

After they ate, Elvira took the Piranha for his bath. I sat on a chair, pretending to read the comics from a newspaper. When the coast was clear, I sneaked into the hall. The cockroach was still there. I scraped it onto the newspaper and took it back to the kitchen where I dropped it into the cake tin. It raced about happily, twiddling its feelers. I shut the lid.

"Enjoy!" I whispered.

The bathroom door opened. The Piranha charged out naked, dripping water all over the place. He made a beeline straight for me and grabbed my legs, his teeth sinking into my thigh. He was out for blood!

“Stop that!” I yelled, jumping back and reaching for the cupboard to steady myself.

The Piranha’s eyes spotted the tin.

“CAKES!” he yelled.

Elvira appeared with his clothes.

“Now Thomas,” she said, “You’ve already had your snack.”

“Cakes,” he whimpered, looking at her beseechingly, “Mmmm!”

“Well, maybe just one...” She took off the lid and then slammed it on again, fast. Then she looked at me. I was torn between trying to look innocent and trying to let her know I’d done it. I mean, that was the point, wasn’t it? But she got the picture.

“Oh! Oh, Luke,” she laughed. “This is quite a joke. Come on, then, we’ll take it out with a tissue.” Then her face grew serious. “But of course, all these cakes are ruined. So it is not so funny after all. But I will not tell your parents. This is only our first day.”

As she opened the lid again, the cockroach darted over the side of the tin and onto the counter.

“*Du Bösewicht!*” she said, her fist smashing down on it.

Man! I thought, staring at the flattened bug. *She means business!*

“CAKES!” screamed the Piranha, jumping up and down.

“CAKES, CAKES, CAKES!”

I looked at the calendar hanging on the wall. Eight more weeks I’d be spending here, if I couldn’t convince her to give me up. If only I could throw her a curve ball, something to really....

“What do you feed a piranha?” I muttered. Elvira was too busy dragging Thomas out of the kitchen to hear me.

“Someone else,” I answered. “Where do you keep a pet piranha?” I went on. “Next door.” I was really on a roll!

“How do you catch your limit of piranhas? Very carefully!”

Suddenly, I realized that Elvira was back in the kitchen.

“What is this...piranha?” she asked.

I stared back, stunned that she’d heard me.

“Uh. Fish,” I said, finally.

“Fish. Fish?” she asked. “You like fish?”

“Yeah,” I said. “I guess so.”

Elvira smiled and nodded thoughtfully.

“Watch TV if you like,” she said, pointing at a tiny set on their bookshelf. “I’m going to have to put Thomas down for his nap.”

A TV! Well, that was one thing in their favour. I flipped the switch and settled on the couch to rest. And to think. There had to be a way to get Elvira to decide that I was too much trouble!

Chapter Five

Fish 'N' Chips

I spent the morning watching TV and trying to irritate Elvira by making fish faces at the Piranha when he woke up from his nap, but it didn't seem to work. At least, she didn't say anything about it. We had an early lunch and then we went down to the park for a half hour. Thomas played on the swings and I crept around behind some bushes to dig for worms. I found two nice ones and I put them in my pocket for Croc.

“See you tomorrow,” Elvira said when Mom appeared outside the fence.

“See you,” I muttered.

When we got home, Mom made a big deal out of locking the flat door behind us.

“There was another robbery this morning,” she said.

“Someone on the second floor went down to the laundry and when they came back, they were missing some things.”

“What things?” I asked. It was important to get all the facts.

“Kitchen things, mostly. Electrical stuff. The police have told everyone to please make sure they lock their flats.”

I pondered the situation. It looked like the thief was pretty desperate—one robbery per day wasn’t playing it safe! I figured that he would strike again soon and I planned to be ready.

“I’m going to lie down for a few minutes,” Mom said. “I’ve got a blistering headache. I should have worn my sunglasses this morning. Everything’s so bright today. Can you entertain yourself for a while? You could go and pick up the mail if you like. And there’s some donuts in the kitchen for later.”

“Okay,” I said. “First I’ve got something to do in my room.”

The tarantula was still hunched in the corner.

I fished the earthworms from my pocket and dropped them into the box. Croc slowly eased out of his resting place and headed

toward one of the worms. His front legs touched it and he suddenly jumped back.

“You’re not supposed to be afraid of it!” I scolded. “It’s your lunch!”

The earthworm began to squirm toward him.

“Not very wise!” I warned it.

As quick as anything the spider pounced, his front legs whipping out and grabbing the worm and shoving it up against his mouth. The furry jaws spread open and the earthworm stopped moving.

Then Croc began to sway, moving his abdomen in a figure eight. I saw a white thread coming out and soon there was a thin web on the floor of the box. The spider set the limp earthworm on the web. Then he lowered himself and sank in his fangs. As he sucked, his two front palps—looking like short, furry legs—pressed against the earthworm, keeping it firmly in place. In fifteen minutes, the earthworm had been reduced to a small ball of dried skin. The spider dropped it and climbed onto the rim of the egg cup for a drink.

His eyes gleamed up at me. He looked like a spider with intelligence and a sense of humour.

“What did the spider do when he hurt his toe?” I asked.

One of Croc's legs waved in the air. Maybe some kind of sign language?

"He called the toe truck!" I told him.

Croc widened his fangs in a smile. Then he headed over to work on the other worm.

I took out my CD player and stuck in my favourite band. When the percussion started, Croc braced himself against the wall of the box.

"It's okay!" I said. "It's just drums!"

After a few minutes he relaxed and sank down with the worm.

"You like it, don't you?" I asked. "If you like it, keep eating." He continued eating.

"If you don't like it, keep eating," I said.

He kept eating. Maybe not so intelligent after all. But the sense of humour I was sure of.

After a while, I put the cage under the bed and went out to the kitchen where Mom had left the key to our door.

"See you later," she called weakly. "Lock the door!"

"See you," I said as I left the flat. I had a hunch that the thief was going to strike again soon. I needed more evidence, and fast.

“A good detective,” I thought, “would have things pretty well wrapped up by now.”

I asked at the front desk for our mail.

“Wait a moment,” said the man. “We’re just changing over. You’ll have to ask the afternoon clerk in a minute.”

Soon Red Lips was back on duty but an old guy was ahead of me.

“I’ve locked myself out,” he said crossly.

She handed him a spare key from the set inside her cupboard.

“Bring it right back, please,” she called after him.

When I told her what I wanted she shook her head.

“Sorry, I can’t give out the mail without a parent’s authorization.”

“What? But my mom just sent me down here....”

“She’ll have to sign this consent form then.” She handed me a sheet of paper. I sighed and headed for the stairs. Instead of going home, though, I made a tour of the building. There had to be something, some clue ... but I saw nothing out of the ordinary. As I headed past the single rooms on our floor, I smelled something. A singed smell—like burnt toast.

When I got back, I opened the donut bag in the kitchen. In a few minutes, Dad came in. He

“I survived the subway!” he said. “It wasn’t too bad, either! Where’s Mom?”

“Sleeping. She’s got a headache.”

“How about coming with me to a fish market?” he asked.

“What’s a fish market?”

“A place where they sell seafood. Let’s go see if they have something we haven’t tried before.”

“Well ... okay. If it’s not too gross, like squid or something.” I grabbed my sunglasses and headed after him.

We walked for about ten minutes, down cobblestone streets with brick buildings on either side. Suddenly, it began to rain. Dad looked up at the sky, which was dark all over.

“I guess it’s not a great day for a walk,” he said. “We’ll go another time.”

On the way back, I spotted a Fish ’N’ Chips shop.

“Let’s go in there!” I said.

We went inside and the buttery smell of frying batter made my mouth water. Dad pulled out his wallet and looked reluctantly at the few bills tucked inside.

“After this we’ll really have to stick to our budget,” he said.

We bought crispy sole and French fries—here they call them *chips*—wrapped up in newspaper and tied with string.

Then it really started to pour. Dad looked out from the doorway.

“Wait a few minutes,” the lady advised. “It’ll lighten up soon.”

We stood and watched the rain fall. My stomach growled loudly and to cover up, I said, “What did the rooster say when he heard thunder?”

“Hmm? Oh, I don’t know,” Dad answered, rumpling his thin, wet hair.

“Nothing! Roosters can’t talk!”

He groaned. Then he walked over to the little table and started undoing the package.

“Let’s just say this is a snack,” he grinned, his eyes twinkling. “I can’t wait another minute!”

“Neither can I!” I said.

Dad ordered two cans of pop, and we sat and stuffed ourselves with the sweet fish. Dad showed me how to pour vinegar on the thick, crispy chips.

“What do you think of it, my dearies?” asked the lady.

“Wonderful!” I said. And it was.

When we had finished it all, Dad looked at me with a guilty expression.

“We should have saved some for your mom,” he said.

“But she has a headache,” I reminded him. “She probably wouldn’t have wanted it anyway.”

He looked relieved and nodded.

The rain had almost stopped and we stepped out into the moist air. We went along not saying much and I suddenly felt happy. It was good to be alive and walking around in this new city. I grinned and Dad must have felt the same way because he smiled too.

As we crossed the street to get to our building, something on the ground caught my eye.

Dad was a little ahead and I bent down and picked up the juiciest worm yet.

“Suppertime, Croc!” I whispered.

We hadn’t been home two minutes when someone pounded at our door.

I got to the door first, and there stood a guy with wet hair, looking really mad.

“Are your parents home?” he said, staring at me suspiciously.

Dad appeared behind me and the man went on.

“Someone’s been in my flat and taken my computer,” he said. “And my toaster, too! I didn’t notice them missing until now

because I worked all night and just woke up. I'm right next door to you. Did you hear anything?"

"No, sorry," said Dad. "I've been out and my wife's been asleep. Did you leave the place unlocked?"

"No," said the man. "At least, I don't think I did. I mean, I was working in my room until early morning and then I went down the hall to the shower room. Then I was so tired, I crashed until now. I thought I locked up, but"

"Sorry," Dad repeated.

"And the worst thing is I hadn't saved the last chapter I was working on!" moaned the man. "All that work down the drain! I mean, the computer is insured, but the work—poof! Gone!" He looked sharply at me.

"I'm really sorry," said Dad. "You'd better call the police."

The guy left and we shut the door.

"Boy!" said Dad. "This is getting really close to home!"

"Yeah," I said, and then it came to me. The most obvious plan in the world to catch the thief!

I went into my room and sat down. I'd have to work it out very carefully, so there'd be no mistakes.

Chapter Six

An Unhappy Day

The next morning, I woke to find Croc behaving strangely. He was curled up in the corner and hardly moved when I tapped his back. The worm I'd picked up the day before floated in the egg cup. Gently, I stroked one of his legs. He drew it in toward himself, and then kept still.

“What’s the matter?” I asked him. “Are you sick?”

He didn’t move a hair.

I sneaked out and looked up “sick tarantulas” on Dad’s laptop, but I couldn’t find anything helpful. Then I went to my room and looked at Croc again. His eyes were a dull grey.

“Luke!” Mom called. “Time for breakfast!”

“In a minute,” I answered. I took the egg cup and cleaned it in the bathroom, bringing it back minus the dead worm.

“Please be okay,” I whispered as I left my spider.

When I got to Elvira’s, she and Thomas already had their raincoats on.

“I’ve packed one of Rajitt’s coats for you,” she informed me. “Thomas has a shot today at the doctor’s and we’ll stop at the market first. You can get good bargains if you get there early.

Morgenstund hat Gold im Mund, we call it in German. *The morning hour has gold in its mouth!* Now, let’s see. Have I forgotten anything? Here’s the nappy bag, the stroller, and—oh yes, I’d better get his medical booklet for the nurse to update.”

Elvira hurried around hunting for the booklet, and I looked at the Piranha. He was crouched on the floor, pulling out my shoelaces.

“The better to catch you with,” I growled. Then I had an idea. I reached down into the diaper bag and pulled out the diapers, stuffing them into the coat closet.

“This should be fun!” I thought.

The market was already busy by the time we got there. Stalls lined both sides of the street and people of every colour, shape, and size were bustling along. There were woman in bright saris and women with white veils over their faces so that only their dark eyes showed. Men in suit jackets held up watches, calling to us in hoarse voices. I breathed in the sweetish smell of leather from

a rack of purses. Then I wrinkled my nose. Seafood! A huge silver fish glared down at me from a hook. On trays of ice lay shrimp, oysters, clams, and other things I couldn't name. A pan of minnows gleamed in the sun.

“Special on salmon today,” rasped the fish man. “Get your salmon here!”

I looked at one of the salmon. It looked back with glassy eyes.

“Sorry, Red,” I muttered. “Nothing I can do.”

“Pardon me?” said Elvira.

“Nothing.”

“Smell these fish! *Igitt, igitt ... yuk!* You like them, Luke?”

“I like 'em alive,” I said. These fish didn't look anything like the fish I'd had yesterday with the chips. That fish hadn't looked like a fish at all.

“Have you ever had fish for pets?” Elvira asked.

“No,” I said. “But I have a dog at home. Rusty. We had to—to give him to my friend before we came here.” I suddenly felt like crying.

“And you miss him, this dog Rusty of yours?”

I nodded. I knew Marty would be good to him, but it had been really hard to take him over there.

“FISS!” The Piranha was pointing and shouting.

“Yes, yes, fish, fish. Now we must hurry—we have shopping to do,” said Elvira, handing him a chocolate biscuit from her purse. She bought a long-handled mop from a man with only nine fingers. She bought a pint of strawberries and a big bunch of rhubarb. She bought a silver scarf from a woman in a bright pink dress who smiled at me with gleaming teeth. And she bought a huge bag of coloured toilet paper from a woman whose hair was bright orange.

“Twelve rolls for a pound, very good! Here, Luke, you can carry this,” she said, handing me the big bag.

I took it and felt my ears start to burn. It was a clear plastic bag and you could see what was inside. “You wouldn’t catch a detective holding toilet paper, that’s for sure,” I thought. “Unless he was on some undercover mission. Pretending to be ... a maintenance man”

As soon as we got to the doctor’s office, I stuffed the bag under a chair. The Piranha ran up and down, bashing toys about. For some crazy reason, all the old ladies smiled at him.

“Your brother has a lot of energy!” one of them laughed.

“He’s not my brother,” I said quickly.

Then the receptionist called, “Thomas Singh!”

Elvira picked up the Piranha and took him down the hall. I could smell something as they went by.

“Be back soon,” she called over her shoulder. In a minute, she rushed back for the nappy bag. I smiled. This was gonna be good!

In about ten minutes, they returned. The Piranha was howling and Elvira had this really burned look on her face. For once she’d stopped smiling.

“He’s had the shot. Now we’ve got to get home. I am out of nappies.” She looked at me. I looked down at the floor.

“Don’t forget the toilet paper,” she said, turning on her heel and walking towards the door.

With every eye on me, I fished out the bag. Phew, the kid was sure smelly! He yelled off and on the whole way home, and everyone stared at him, and then at me carrying the toilet paper. This wasn’t exactly how I’d planned it.

When we got inside, Elvira whisked him off to be changed and I flicked on the TV. *The Flintstones* were on! I love *The Flintstones!* I put my feet up and reached for the open bag of chocolate biscuits that had rolled out of Elvira’s purse.

By the time the show ended, lunch was on the table. I sat up but wasn’t feeling too hungry. The Piranha stuffed his face and then began to throw food. Splat! I got a hunk of bread and jam right on the chest.

“Hey!” I yelled.

“Just ignore him,” said Elvira sharply. “He only wants your attention.” She went to make tea and get dessert, picking up the empty biscuit wrapper from the floor where I’d left it. I began tossing pieces of my sandwich behind the stove. She turned on her heel and stared at me.

“This should do the trick!” I thought.

“What are you doing?” she asked slowly.

“Feeding the animals,” I said.

An earthquake hit her face, making her eyebrows go up and her mouth go down.

“Leave the table! Go and sit on Thomas’ bed. I will think a minute!”

She looked suddenly white and tired. I wished I hadn’t said that about the animals. I sat on the bed and the Piranha came running in and jumped up beside me waving a book in my face. I grabbed onto the book and he pulled and suddenly it tore in two. Elvira came hurtling in, and the look on her face struck fear in my heart. I mean, I’d seen what she’d done to that cockroach—

Du Bösewicht!

But all she said was, “Come and get your shoes on, Luke. It is time for your mother to come.”

As I grabbed my shoes from the closet, she said,
“Tomorrow, we make a deal.”

“A deal?” I said, but then the buzzer rang and she opened the door.

“Tomorrow,” she said, closing it behind me.

I didn’t have much time to think about what she’d said because it was time to try out another plan—the plan for catching the robber. I had worked it all out last night, and it was going to be perfect!

When Mom and I got back to the flat, I told her she could go and lie down and I would be fine alone. But she surprised me.

“Nothing doing! Today we’re going to see some sights.”

“But—”

“There’s the science museum, the wax museum, Regent’s Park, the Palace, Trafalgar Square ... take your pick!”

“But—” I repeated.

“Come now, you don’t think we’re going to spend the summer inside, you do? Now, what’ll it be?”

“Uh, the—the wax museum,” I said, disappointed that my plan would have to wait.

We took the subway, or the Underground as it’s called here. You walk down these really steep steps into a place that’s crammed with people rushing in every direction. You can hear the rumbling of trains and the air is thick with bad smells. There are people wandering around that look like they live down there—all

dirty, with milk white faces. One man had his pants tied up with yellow rope. Another woman lay beside a sign that said, “Spare Change Please.”

The train sure didn’t wait long—we jumped on as soon as it stopped, and it took off in just a few seconds. I could tell Mom was kind of nervous; she kept twisting her map and peering out at the stops we passed, muttering about where we’d have to get off.

The wax museum was pretty neat. There were all sorts of people made out of wax—their faces and everything. Some of them looked real enough to speak! I got my picture taken with my arm around Strong Man Dan, who looked perfect, muscles and all. I got two copies, one to send to Marty. He’d think that was pretty cool!

Marty and I had made up some good jokes about Strong Man Dan. Like: “What are Dan’s favourite vegetables? Squash and strong beans!” And, “Why did Dan throw his rolling pin out the window? He thought it was a toothpick!” I wished Marty were here with me now. And Rusty.

When we got home, Mom looked frazzled.

“I think I’ll take you up now about that offer to lie down,” she told me. I tried not to cheer.

“What are you going to do?” she said, looking back from the doorway.

“Oh, I think I’ll just go down and look at the notice boards,” I said. “See if there’s anything for—uh—for sale that we need.”

“We could use a toaster,” Mom said. “If there’s a cheap one.”

She headed into her room and I quickly went to check on Croc. He was still in the corner looking miserable. I changed the water again; it was the only thing I could think of to do for him. Then I slipped out of the flat, leaving the door unlocked. As I went out, I called down the stairs, “Mom? Dad? Wait! You’ve forgotten to leave me a key! Oh, darn, I guess I’ll have to go out without locking the door.”

I know it sounded pretty corny, but I figured the thief, if he heard me, would be too desperate to notice. I went to the bottom of the stairs, then doubled back and stopped halfway down the hall in the doorway of the men’s public washroom. There I stayed, watching the hall.

If I was lucky, he’d play right into my hands. If I was lucky, I could have the whole thing wrapped up by suppertime.

Chapter Seven

Making a Bargain

I waited for a good fifteen minutes, and then I suddenly had to go to the bathroom myself. I took one careful look down the hall

in both directions. Then I went in and the door closed behind me. In a few moments, I heard footsteps outside the bathroom. They passed me and went toward my flat. I quickly finished, gave the door a tremendous heave, and bounded into the hallway.

There he was, right at my door! It was a man!

“Got you! “ I yelled.

He turned. It was Dad.

“What—Luke! What are you doing? And why is this door unlocked?”

“I—uh—I just went to the bathroom. I—didn’t want to disturb Mom, so I came out here.”

Dad gave me a funny look.

“Next time, lock the flat,” he said. “Even if it’s only for a few minutes. We can’t afford to be robbed.”

To my disappointment, I had no more chances to try out my plan that day, and the next day there I was back at Elvira’s.

The Piranha had really flushed cheeks and started wailing as soon as he saw me. Elvira went to get him some fever medicine and he ran over and wiped his runny nose on my jeans. I could tell it was not going to be a good day.

Rajitt hadn’t left for work yet because he couldn’t find his glasses. Then he couldn’t find his watch.

“Elfi, where are my shoes?” he yelled.

“If you’d put your things away, you’d know where they are,” Elvira snapped.

Rajitt looked at me and suddenly his face broke into a smile.

“She’s right, you know,” he chuckled. “But why put them away when you’ve got to take them out again, eh?”

Suddenly, a brain wave hit me.

“So you study insects?” I said.

“That’s right.”

“What would make a tarantula sick?” I blurted.

Rajitt looked surprised.

“An interesting question,” he said. “I don’t know. It sort of depends. Actually, tarantulas are spiders, not insects. True insects have six legs, for one thing, and spiders have eight ... and spiders have two body parts, a cephalothorax and a thorax, while insects—but, back to your question. Perhaps old age, or maybe it was stung by its only natural enemy—the pepsis wasp. Or maybe it ate contaminated food—”

Contaminated food! That worm I’d gotten from the street could have been dirty with gasoline or something!

“What would happen to a tarantula if it ate contaminated food?” I interrupted.

“Well, it depends on how much it had,” Rajitt answered, pulling his shoes from under the couch. “Now I must be going, as I am already late. But one of these days I’ll come back early and make you all lunch. Do you like Indian food, Luke?”

“I’ve never had it,” I said.

“Ah, then you are in for a treat!” he smiled. “Maybe a nice curry, and some rice, with a cool lassi....”

“A lassi?” I said.

“That’s an Indian drink that complements spicy food. Made with yogurt.” He smiled again. “One of these days, yes?”

After he had gone, Elvira looked at me.

“Now it is time for our deal,” she said. “Come.” I followed her into the kitchen. On top of the fridge was a fish tank.

“See,” she went on. “I found it in the rubbish room. But luckily, no cracks! If you can get along with us until Friday, you earn it. To keep. Then we will go to King’s Cross and I will buy you a guppy from the pet store. I read that guppies can live in tap water.”

“A guppy?” I said, sort of stunned. “This is a bribe, right?”

“Right,” she grinned. “*Einverstanden?* A deal?”

“But—”

“I need this job, Luke. Money runs out of our flat like water. Okay?”

I thought for a minute. That aquarium would be just right for Croc. Maybe he needed more space and was pining for freedom. I could cover the bottom with earth and rocks, and it would be a real tarantula playground when I'd finished!

“Okay,” I said.

The Piranha, who had been sitting unusually quietly under the table, began to make some funny coughing noises. Suddenly he crawled out and threw up—all over my feet!

“Gross!” I yelled.

“Quick, step onto this newspaper,” said Elvira. “I’ll fix you up in a minute.”

She pulled the Piranha into the bathroom. I began to regret my decision to get along.

“What did the piranha say when he had a stomach ache?” I cracked. “Must have been someone I ate!”

Elvira bustled out with a cloth and took off my socks.

“He’s feeling really sick,” she said. “And I have put him in his bed. He must be reacting to that shot yesterday.”

“So what do I do?” I asked.

“I have wiped your feet already. Go and wash them in the tub, then you will be fine. Good thing he didn’t get your pants!”

I did as I was told. Man, little kids were disgusting!

When I came out of the bathroom, the phone rang and Elvira went to answer it. Then the Piranha started crying. I went into his room and there he was, huddled on his bed, bawling his head off. I could still hear Elvira on the phone, so I went in and patted him on the back.

“It’ll be okay,” I said. “You’ll feel better soon.” I touched his back where the shirt had pulled up. Was it ever hot! It felt like his blood was boiling. He stopped crying and peeked up at me from between his elbows.

“It’ll be okay,” I repeated. “Would you like me to read you a story?”

He nodded, so I pulled a book from his shelf and sat down on the bed. Suddenly, he shook his head and got another book, which he put down on top of the one I had.

“You want this one instead?”

He nodded.

I started to read. The book was about jungle animals and the Piranha got really excited when I turned to the tigers.

“You like tigers, eh?”

He laughed and pointed to them with a stubby finger. Then he leaned his hot little head against my shoulder. It was funny, sitting with him like this. He reminded me of my dog. Lots of times I’d be sitting doing homework or watching TV and Rusty

would just rest against me. I read a few more pages, and then when I looked at the Piranha his eyes were shut. I didn't want to move for fear I'd waken him, so I just sat like that until Elvira appeared.

“*Toll!*” she said. “Very good! Here, I'll lie him down so you can get up.”

I went back to the kitchen to look at the fish tank, and Elvira came in.

“What's that in the bowl?” I asked, noticing a funny smell in the kitchen.

“Bread,” Elvira replied, lifting the towel to look at it. “And it is ready to knead. Here, you can help me. Wash your hands, and then come to the table. We will push the air out of it.”

She punched the bread with the heels of her hands to show me, and then I tried it. Funny popping sounds came out of the dough.

“Now divide it and set three of the balls in the loaf pans,” she said. “It will rise again, and then we'll bake it.”

“What makes it rise?” I asked.

“The yeast in it is alive. It's a kind of *pilz*—what would you call it—a fungus.”

“A fungus? In bread?”

“And when we cook the bread, we kill the yeast, but the bread stays puffed up.”

“Wow,” I said.

Elvira was standing beside me, and suddenly I was aware of her stomach. I looked at it. It was puffed up too.

“Do you ever wish for a brother or sister?” Elvira asked gently.

“Nah,” I said. “I mean, I’d rather have a pet.”

She nodded. “Pets are good.”

“I’ll never forget the look on Rusty’s face,” I said without meaning to talk about it, “when I left him with Marty. I mean, he trusted me and everything, and there I was taking him somewhere and just leaving him. I wish I could have explained things to him.”

Elvira nodded again.

“Did you ever have a pet?” I asked.

“Once I had a lizard, which I loved very much,” she said.

“But I was lucky. He lived with us until he was very old.”

“Did he die?”

“Yes, and I buried him in the vegetable garden. My Papa was not pleased when he discovered him there ... in the spring.”

Our eyes met and we both burst out laughing.

“Are we going to eat the bread for lunch?” I asked.

“Even better,” she said. “We are going to make cinnamon rolls out of the last dough. I will show you.”

After a while the Piranha started hollering. Elvira brought him out and got him some milk. I turned on the TV and in a minute he came bouncing toward me.

“Go on, drink your bottle,” I said encouragingly. And he cuddled in beside me and drank. The warm smell of cinnamon filled the air. I thought about my plan to catch the robber. It was going to be hard to test it, especially with my parents around—they were so careful about keeping the door locked. But there had to be a way!

Chapter Eight

More Surprises

The first thing I did when Mom and I got back to the flat was rush in to check on Croc. I expected to find him curled up in the corner where I'd left him. When I lifted the lid, though, I got the surprise of my life. Croc was sitting in the container, all right, just as I'd thought. But over in the middle of the cage was another tarantula!

I closed my eyes and opened them again. It couldn't be possible! But there they were—two of them! Gingerly, I reached in and tapped the back of the spider in the corner. He startled and

drew his legs in close to his body. I nudged the other spider. It slid forward. I flicked it and then flipped it over. It was hollow!

“Cool!” I breathed. “He shed his skin!” I pulled it out to have a closer look. It was incredibly real, furry legs and all. The only visible difference between the skin and a live spider was that the skin had a hole in the centre under a kind of flap that used to be the top of the body, where Croc must have pulled himself out. No wonder he hadn’t been feeling well! His skin had been too tight!

I looked at the size of the hole in the skin and then back at Croc. It must have been pretty hard for him to squeeze through—like jumping out of long underwear without using your hands! I felt the bumps along the legs of the skin. There were three knees on each of them. No wonder he could move so gracefully!

The most interesting part of the skin was inside the body. Ridges under the skin formed a sort of honeycomb pattern. It was hard, like a shield, to protect the inner body and help it keep its shape because tarantulas, I’d read, have no bones.

I gently touched Croc’s front legs but instead of rearing up and grinning, he just pulled them in a little tighter and kept still.

“Go ahead and have a rest,” I said. “You deserve it!”

I got out my CD player and popped in CD. It played one song and then the batteries died. I opened the back and removed them, only to hear Mom calling from outside the door.

“Luke,” she said, “can I come in?”

“Just a minute!” I cried, sticking the shed skin into the cage and shoving it under my bed.

“It’s time you started doing a few chores around here,” Mom said when I opened the door.

“Okay.” I would have agreed to anything, just to get her out of my room.

“You’re getting older now, and you’re part of this family too.”

“I said *okay*, Mom. I’ll do some stuff!”

“You will? Just like that?”

“Yeah! Now, if you’ll just excuse me....”

“No, I mean now. Like, the garbage needs to be taken down to the rubbish room, and the laundry has to be folded.”

“Aw, Mom”

“Now.”

I went and got the bags from the kitchen and headed down the stairs. The rubbish room was in the basement, and you could smell it all the way down the hall. As I set our bags into some empty cans, I saw an open bag spilling out all over the floor. In amidst the garbage was a toaster.

“I wonder if it works,” I thought, fishing it out. Maybe someone had been moving and needed to get rid of it. I headed

back up the stairs with the toaster held gingerly in one hand. First of all, it needed to be washed.

As I started to unlock our flat, the guy who lived next door appeared and spotted me.

“Hey, that’s my toaster!” he yelled. “You—I knew it! You were the one who robbed my flat!”

“No, really, I didn’t—” I started but the guy interrupted.

“Don’t try to tell me that isn’t my toaster! I’d know it anywhere. And it burns the toast if you don’t pop it up yourself!”

Then my dad came up the stairs.

“What’s this all about?” he asked.

“He says—” I began.

“Your son—” the guy yelled.

“Hold on, now, one at a time,” my dad said. He looked at our neighbour. “You first.”

“Your son stole my toaster, and probably my computer too,” the guy said.

Dad looked at me.

“No, I didn’t!” I replied, hotly. “I found this toaster in the rubbish room. Look, it has stuff all over it. Egg yolk or something. I brought it up here because I thought it might work and we need one.”

Dad looked at the toaster. So did our neighbour.

“I see what you mean,” the guy finally said. “Okay. I’m sorry I jumped to conclusions.”

I handed it to him, egg yolk and all.

“Here,” I said. “Take it.” Then I turned and started back down the stairs.

“Now where are you going?” Dad said.

“Back to the rubbish room. That bag of garbage—it might have some clues as to who the robber really is!” I said.

“Hold on!” yelled the guy. “I’ll call the police. Don’t touch anything!”

“He’s right,” Dad said to me. “You and I will go down and make sure nothing happens to that bag of garbage before the police come!”

I figured we’d probably catch the thief for sure, but although the police went through the garbage bag very carefully, they didn’t find anything very revealing. Lots of vegetable peelings, egg shells, and an old lipstick tube just about summed it up. Oh, and some burnt toast.

Lipstick. Maybe the robber was a woman! And the toast... I remembered smelling burnt toast the other afternoon, in our hallway. Like maybe someone was using a toaster they weren’t familiar with—a toaster they had stolen! I was about to tell the police my deductions, but I held my tongue. They’d probably just

think I was trying to be smart. “Wait until I really catch the thief,” I thought. “That’ll show them!”

As Dad and I went up the stairs, we met Mom coming down.

“There you are!” she said to me, looking relieved. “I wondered what had happened to you!”

We told her the whole story and lucky for me it took her mind off the laundry I was supposed to fold.

“Let’s pack a picnic supper and go somewhere,” she said when we were back inside.

“Great idea! I’ll boil some eggs,” Dad volunteered.

“Luke, you take my spare change and go buy some pop from the machine in the lobby,” Mom said when she had made some sandwiches. “We’ll meet you down there in five minutes.”

As I closed the door, I heard Dad fretting about his eggs.

“They’re still hot,” he was saying. “What can I put them in?”

I waited in the lobby for ten minutes, and then they appeared, my dad looking very pleased with himself and carrying a plastic bag.

“I’ve wrapped them in socks,” he announced. “They’ll stay warm, and in the meantime they won’t melt the bag!”

I grinned. What a goofball thing to do! We walked in silence for a few minutes. Then I asked “Did I get sick after my vaccinations when I was little?”

“Yes, you reacted like that sometimes, depending what the vaccination was,” Mom said. “Why?”

“No reason.”

“Has Thomas been vaccinated for something?”

“Yeah. Actually, he was pretty sick today.”

“As I recall, you’d have a high fever for maybe a day, and feel a bit off, and then you’d perk up. Little kids seem to get really sick really fast, but they get better much quicker than adults.”

“He threw up on my feet,” I said.

“Oh, Luke!” Dad exclaimed.

“It wasn’t so bad,” I hastened to add, in case they decided to keep me at home after all. I mean, I couldn’t give up the chance to earn that aquarium!

“Where are we going, anyway?” I asked, quickly changing the subject.

“Let’s try Regent’s Park,” Dad said. “It’s not too far and I can’t wait to eat these eggs!”

Chapter Nine

The Morning Hour Has Gold in Its Mouth

It was raining by the time we started home. None of us had brought a coat and we were soaked in no time. Dad spotted a big, black cab and stepped out into the street.

“Taxi!” he called, waving his arms.

The cab pulled up and we got in the back. Man, the thing was huge! There were these seats that folded down and I sat on one of them. A glass partition separated us from the driver. Dad gave him our address, and the cab slid into traffic, weaving around cars like a speedboat.

“Maximum cool!” I breathed.

The best part was that the ride only cost us five pounds. “We’ll have to use cabs more often,” Dad said. “They’re pretty cheap here.”

When we got up to our flat, there was a surprise waiting.

“Who forgot to lock the door?” Dad said, turning the handle.

Mom and I looked at each other.

“You were the last one out,” she said to him. “You and those eggs!”

We went in and looked around. Right away, Mom noticed the coffee-maker was missing.

“And my hair-dryer!” she moaned.

I charged into my room. My CD player had been on the floor by the bed. It wasn’t there now.

“My CD player’s been taken!” I yelled. Suddenly, fear hit me like a punch in the stomach. I looked under the bed. The cage was there. The skin was inside, but... Croc was gone.

“And the clock-radio!” Mom was shouting.

“Oh no!” I howled. “My spider! She’s stolen my spider!” I sat on the bed and put my head in my hands.

Mom and Dad came running in.

“What? What is it?” Mom cried.

“He said something about a spider,” Dad said. “A spider from the garden?” Mom asked. “You can find another one.”

“No, no, it was a tarantula spider,” I moaned. “I got him from this guy who was moving back to Australia, and I had him in this cage under my bed.”

“You—you had a tarantula spider under—your bed?” Dad asked in this real slow voice.

“You wouldn’t have let me keep him!” I yelled. “And now he’s gone!”

“Wait a minute,” said Mom. “But the cage is still here. Surely the thief wouldn’t have taken him without the cage. Maybe you left the lid off and he just crawled out....”

Dad started backing out of the room.

“You sort it out,” he said. “There’s a police patrol in the building. I’m going to get the night desk clerk to page them. Just— just leave the bedroom door shut!”

We searched every inch of the room but found nothing. I felt sick.

“Come on, Luke,” Dad said from the doorway. “The police are here to talk to you.”

I rubbed my eyes. “I don’t have anything to say to any police.”

He came over and laid a hand on my shoulder.

“Just come on out and tell them what’s missing. Then leave it to them. I’m sure they’ll do their best to help—”

Suddenly, Dad started to scream. A policewoman rushed in.

“There it is! In the cage—” Dad was yelling.

Hope flooded through me. Then I looked and shook my head.

“No, that’s just Croc’s old skin. Look, you can touch it. It’s just a shell.”

Dad stared at it in horror but he reached out and touched it.

“It’s—it’s soft!” he finally managed to say. “I didn’t—” he panted, “I didn’t think it’d be so—so furry! Like an animal!”

“Excuse me, Mr. Paylor,” said the policewoman. “We’d better go in now and make our report. Shall we go over the list one more time?”

“Okay, yes of course,” Dad said, but he was still breathing heavily.

“Don’t worry, son,” said the policewoman, looking at me sympathetically. “We’ll try to get your things back. Sometimes we find this stuff....”

“And sometimes you don’t,” I muttered, following her into the sitting room.

Later, when I went to bed, I couldn’t sleep. I kept thinking that there might be someplace I hadn’t looked, and Croc would be there. Finally, fed up with tossing around, I went to the kitchen to get a glass of milk. It was dark and I brushed against something on the counter. CRASH! Just as I got the light on, Dad came hurtling from the bedroom brandishing a slipper. His eyes were wild and his thin hair stood straight up.

“What in the—” he began, seeing me.

“I’ll clean it up. It was a glass,” I said. “Sorry.” Dad sighed and threw down the slipper.

“I thought I’d caught him for sure,” he said.

“With a pink slipper?” I said. We both looked at Mom’s slipper and started to laugh.

“Could be deadly,” he chortled, “in the right hands.”

I swept up the mess, furtively gulped some milk from the carton, and went back to bed. My body ached all over but I couldn’t seem to lie still and kept shifting from one side to the other. Finally, I drifted off and dreamed that Elvira was chasing me, trying to press money into my hands. Rajitt had taken Croc for an experiment in the lab and Elvira was trying to pay me back.

“Take the money!” she was calling. “Don’t tell him I told you!”

“I don’t want the money!” I screamed. “I just want my spider!”

Suddenly, I woke up. Someone really was screaming! I rushed out of my room just as my parents’ door opened. The sound was coming from down the hall.

“I’ll go check it out,” cried Dad.

“I’ll phone the police,” said Mom.

I followed Dad down the hall to one of the single rooms. A woman in her nightgown was standing in the doorway, shrieking. It looked like ...it couldn’t be...it was the afternoon desk clerk— Old Red Lips!

“What is it?” yelled Dad. “What’s the matter?”

“A HUGE SPIDER! ON MY BED!” she howled.

I pushed past them into the room. The bed was a mess of covers. And there, right on the pillow, was Croc! I rushed over and picked him up. He took a few tentative steps on my hand, and then stopped, pulling in his legs. What a relief! He was okay!

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw something else I recognized. My CD player! And in the corner of the room was a big box of stuff—toasters, a curling iron, radios.

“You’ve got quite a collection here,” said Dad to the woman. She had stopped screaming and was looking at me with wild eyes.

“Why did you steal my spider?” I said.

“Are you crazy?” she said, her voice high and hysterical. “I didn’t take that ugly thing! You’ve got to be out of your mind! As if anyone would want it!” Her shoulders began to shake and she started sort of laughing this really weird laugh.

The policewoman appeared with my mom.

“Trouble?” she asked.

“Looks like we’ve caught our thief,” Dad said, indicating the box of things in the corner.

“Thanks to my son, here, and his pet tarantula.”

“Let me get all the details,” said the policewoman.

When we had finished, she asked the woman to get dressed and come down to the station.

“And I’d like you to come too, Mr—”

“Paylor,” said Dad.

“If it’s not too early to get you up?”

“Fine,” he said.

“Should I come along?” I asked.

“That won’t be necessary,” said the policewoman, glancing uneasily at the tarantula on my hand.

I picked up the CD player and started for the door.

“Wait a bit,” she said. “That’ll have to stay as evidence.”

“But I can take my spider?”

“By all means!” She backed away.

As I put down the CD player, the empty battery case caught my eye. Suddenly, I knew what had happened.

“I’ve put it together!” I yelled.

Everyone stared at me.

“I left the lid open on his cage, and Croc crawled into the empty battery case on my tape deck, where it was warm. Then, when she stole the machine, he was a stowaway!”

The policewoman clicked her teeth.

“Well, I’ll be!” she said. “You’re quite the detective, you are!”

I caught a respectful look in Dad's eye as I passed him.

"Nice work," he said, quietly.

Mom and I walked back to our flat. The light was just beginning to soak through the sheer curtains and for once the sky was blue. Pigeons were purring on the ledges outside.

"The morning hour has gold in its mouth!" I said happily, and Croc lifted his head and grinned. I had the feeling it might be an okay summer after all.

About the Author

Beverley Brenna is a Saskatchewan teacher and storyteller who credits her love of spiders to Herbie, a tarantula that lived in the Brenna family for over ten years. *Spider Summer* was first drafted during a two-year period spent in London, England, and while the

characters are purely fictional, the setting of the novel is real.

Beverley Brenna has published ten books for young people.