

# THE SCIENCE INSPECTORS

BOOK ONE

## The Case of the Old Hot Rod



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## CHAPTER ONE

# NEW KID IN TOWN

It was the first week of September in Chicago. Deep in the heart of the Near West Side in a small neighborhood called Brundon Park, a thirteen-year-old girl looked at her new school and took a deep breath of the cool morning air.

Her name was Angela Moretti. She had dark curly hair, carried a navy-blue backpack most of the time, and possessed what her mom used to call “a bit of a temper.” And at the moment, she had more than her share of butterflies.

The last year had been hard. Moving away from her home in Wisconsin, the only home she’d ever known, had been hard. And trying to make a fresh start of it in a huge middle school in one of the oldest neighborhoods in Chicago?

*Very* hard.

So as Angela Moretti walked through the front doors of Beveridge Middle School, she expected something bad. Maybe threatening looks from the cool kids ready to devour the new kid. Or possibly a stuffed-shirt principal ready to explain how things were done in the big city of Chicago. Or, really, any number of things that might make a new kid at school feel terrible about being... well... new.

But Angela Moretti didn't find something bad.

She found something weird.

Very weird.

"My name's Howie, I have fifteen pieces of bubble gum stuck in my hair, and I'm prepared for you to be my second-best friend... under certain conditions."

Howie was a boy. He was short. His hair looked like one of those Troll dolls except that, as he'd said, he had bubble gum stuck in it. He wore dirty gray coveralls, and a pair of plastic goggles hung from his neck.

He held out a piece of paper to Angela.

"What is this?" she asked, taking it.

"That's my list of conditions."

Angela quickly scanned the paper, then looked back up. "For being your best friend?"

"Correction," Howie said, pointing to a spot near the top of the paper. "My *best* friend is Norah Sloan and has

been since we were eight. I would need an entirely different contract for you to take Norah's place. Such a contract would require you to finish my sentences, help me overcome my frequent bouts of vertigo, and cut my sandwiches into animal shapes." He smiled. "This contract is just for being my *second*-best friend."

Angela looked around, suspecting that someone was playing a practical joke on her. But when she spotted no evidence of a prank—no cameras, no kids giggling from behind a locker—she looked back at the boy in front of her.

The strange boy named Howie.

He wasn't a cool kid. And he clearly wasn't a bully. He would have no reason to mess around with a new kid like her.

"Sorry," she said. "But I need to find my first class."

"What do you think a second-best friend is for? That's how this works, by the way. You become my second-best friend, and I become yours. Anyhoo, your first class of the day is history with Mr. Davis. I'm heading there myself." Howie spun Angela in the right direction, put his arm around her, and gave her a little half hug. "We can negotiate terms while we walk."

Howie led Angela away from the front doors of the school and down one of Beveridge's impossibly long

hallways, weaving past other kids going about their business. This school was packed.

She was no different from these other kids—that’s what she kept telling herself. But the truth was more complicated. She was from Wisconsin. They were from Chicago. They’d known each other their whole lives. She was the new kid. They fit in. They’d found their place. And despite this friendly but weird boy at her side, Angela wasn’t sure she’d *ever* fit in.

“I’m not really a fine print sort of girl,” she said as she tried to read the contract Howie had given her. “So, how about you bottom-line this for me?”

“Fine,” Howie said. “As I’m sure you’re aware, you... are new. You have no friends. And you need me.”

Angela gave Howie a puzzled look. “I need the kid with fifteen pieces of bubble gum in his hair?”

Howie pulled Angela out of the way of a boy riding toward them on his skateboard. “Exactly. Because when you’re with me, nobody will *ever* think you’re the weirdest kid in school.”

Angela looked at Howie’s hair, goggles, and dirty gray coveralls. She had to admit, the boy made a pretty fair point.

“So, you offer me a sort of layer of nerd protection?”

Howie gave her a look of great pride. “Exactly.”



He stopped at a drinking fountain and took a sip. When his head popped up again, Angela was ready with a question for him.

“So, you’ve made your case for why I need your help. But there’s something I don’t get.”

“Which is?”

“As you yourself pointed out, I’m new. I have no friends. And just to correct any false ideas, I also have no money. So, what could *I* possibly offer *you*?”

Howie smiled wide. “Italian food. You can offer me Italian food.”

Angela wasn’t expecting that.

“What did you just say?”

“Italian food,” Howie repeated. “It’s food... made by Italians. Lots of sauce. Really tasty.”

“And... what?” Angela asked as her temper started to flare. “You think that just because I have an Italian last name, I have access to Italian food?”

“No, I think you have access to Italian food because you work in your family’s Italian restaurant.”

Angela’s heart skipped a beat.

“How could you possibly know that? Have you been looking into me?”

Howie bit his lip. “I’ve been looking *at* you, mostly.”

Angela was sure her face betrayed her emotions. It

was more than a little creepy that this kid knew stuff about her. That he was looking *at* her. But she also wondered what he meant by that.

Howie must have sensed something was wrong. He extended his hands, palms out, and said, “Relax. I haven’t been following you around. It’s just . . . I live in the building across the street from you. I noticed you move in, so I asked around, and when I learned that you were coming to Beveridge, I asked Principal Nugget if I could help you out. And—well, here I am!”

Angela gave him another look. A good, long look. He didn’t *seem* like a creep. He seemed... harmless.

“So, you really are just weird?” she asked.

He flashed two fingers across his heart. “Just weird. Scout’s honor.”

The two of them started to walk again.

“Should I ask what the bubble gum in the hair is all about?”

“You should,” Howie said. “It’s a scientific experiment.”

“Really? I love science.”

Howie stopped and grabbed Angela by both shoulders. “You’re messing with me, right?”

“I don’t know. This is one of the oddest encounters of my life.”

“You really love science? Like, for reals?”

“Yes, Howie, I really love science. For reals. Always have. My favorite Christmas was the year my dad bought me my first microscope.”

Howie’s face lit up. “You have your own microscope? I have my own microscope. In fact, I have several! I’m pretty amazing at choosing second-best friends, aren’t I?”

“Yes, Howie, it appears you are. Now let me go and tell me about this experiment.”

They kept moving while Howie explained.

“It’s simple, really. I want to see what’s better for removing gum from hair—peanut butter or lemon juice.”

“Oh... of course...” Angela said. “Because who doesn’t want to know that?”

He looked at her and smiled. “Precisely.”

“What’s your hypothesis?” Angela asked.

“Peanut butter, of course,” Howie replied. “So I stuck a bunch of bubble gum in my hair and tonight before I go to bed, I will use peanut butter on one half of my head, and lemon juice on the other.”

“Which means that by tomorrow, you’ll have your answer. For the record, I’m Team Lemon Juice all the way.”

Howie grinned from ear to ear. “I can’t wait to tell Norah that you love science.”

Howie slowed as they approached a classroom door where other kids were already filing in. He led Angela inside, and she took a seat next to his near the center of the room. She deliberately didn't look at any of the other kids. She was afraid they might look at her right back.

After a couple of minutes, the bell rang, and the teacher, Mr. Davis, introduced himself by writing his name on the whiteboard in big letters, like all teachers do. Then he called attendance.

When he said Angela's name, he paused. "The new kid. From Wisconsin?"

"Yes, from Madison," she said.

Mr. Davis made a face. Apparently being from Madison was frown-worthy.

As Mr. Davis explained the rules and procedures of his sixth-grade history class, Angela finally took the opportunity to observe the kids of Beveridge Middle School. At first glance, they weren't much different from the kids at her old middle school in Madison. Well, except for Howie. *He* was different. Right now he was taking apart a pen and using it to build some sort of medieval contraption.

She spotted a few students to one side who looked like the athletic kids. One was named Robby. He was bigger than everyone else, looked like he already shaved, and

made goofy faces each time the teacher turned his back. On the other side of her were a few girls who looked like the academics—the ones who care a *lot* about getting good grades. Near the front of the class were three girls who were pretty, dressed cute, and looked two years older than everybody else. The cool girls. Angela could already tell which one was the leader—a girl named Nina Marcus. She was really cool. Angela could spot girls like Nina a mile away, and she knew that the *really* cool girls were almost never nice.

And finally, sitting against the back wall was a boy who piqued Angela's interest. He wore a short-sleeved gray T-shirt, faded blue jeans, and brown leather boots. They weren't shiny new "going to school" boots, either. These were *work* boots. His brown hair was short on the sides and a bit curly on top. He looked like the kind of kid who *could* be an athlete, but he didn't give that vibe. Like he didn't care one way or the other. His name was Jamie. Jamie McDermott.

And there was something about him.

As Angela finished checking out her new peers, she realized that Mr. Davis was *still* talking about the rules and procedures of history class. And because Angela didn't particularly care about the rules and procedures of history class, she did what she always did when she

was bored. She took out a book.

And not just any book.

The newest Missy Price mystery.

Missy Price was a forensic scientist who used her amazing detective skills to solve crimes and keep people safe. And even though Missy herself was quite fictional, she was Angela's very real hero.

Ever since she was little, Angela had loved mystery stories. Her mom would read them to her every night. Sometimes, when Angela was especially lucky, her mom would make up her own stories. And then, a year ago, Angela had discovered the Missy Price books. Her dad thought crime fiction was too dark for his little girl, but Angela disagreed. She loved the intricate puzzles behind each mystery, and she especially cared about how Missy used forensic science to help solve them.

Angela was on the second page of chapter seventeen when she heard a voice that belonged to someone other than Mr. Davis. She looked up.

The really cool girl, Nina, was talking. She was looking directly at Angela.

And pointing at her.

"See, Mr. Davis? The new girl from Wisconsin is reading a book. Is that what she's supposed to be doing, or is she *supposed* to be paying attention?" Nina smiled

a tiny, yet undeniably evil smile. Then she added, “I wasn’t sure.”

Mr. Davis walked toward Angela, grabbed her book, and loomed over her desk. “I’m ten minutes into the first day of class and you’re already bored?”

“Um, no.”

“Then why are you reading a novel in my class?”

“I just wanted to know who stole the diamonds from Mr. Barlett’s red trunk.”

Mr. Davis narrowed his eyes at her. “Do you think this is funny, young lady?”

“Not at all.”

Mr. Davis frowned at Angela for the second time. “You can pick this book up at the end of the day.” He walked back to the front of the class and started to go over the syllabus.

“You’re already in trouble,” Howie whispered. “Wow, that’s got to be some kind of school record.”

Angela’s gaze was fixed on Nina and her friends. “What’s her problem?” she asked.

Howie leaned over. “Nina? Don’t mind her. She’s just horrible. You learn to get used to her, like a foot fungus that never goes away. Oh, and speaking of foot fungus, I’ve got some interesting experiments...”

Angela did her best to tune Howie out. Instead, she

allowed herself to drift away in thought. Mr. Davis could take away her book, but he couldn't take away her imagination.

At the end of class, she picked up her Missy Price novel from Mr. Davis—receiving his third frown of the day—and left class with Howie.

Nina and her friends were standing in the hallway, and they laughed as Angela and Howie walked past.

Angela growled. “Can I just punch her now? I mean, I'm going to punch her at some point. Why not just get it over with?”

“Hey, what did I miss?” said an unfamiliar voice.

A tall, thin girl had come up alongside Howie. She had dark hair pulled into a tight ponytail, dark brown eyes, and a sharp nose.

Howie smiled at her. “Angela was just saying how she wants to punch Nina.”

“Then it would appear that I might just like the new girl.” The dark-haired girl stuck out her hand. “Norah Sloan.”

Angela took the hand and shook it. You can tell a lot about a person from their handshake—or at least, that's what Angela's grandmother, her nonna, always said. Norah might be skinny, but she was strong.

“Angela Moretti,” Angela said.



The three of them turned a corner and started down another impossibly long hallway. Beveridge Middle School was huge—three or four times bigger than Angela’s old school back in Madison.

“Nina is a predator,” Howie explained. “She picks on people who are either (a), a threat to her spot at the top of the Brundon Park social hierarchy, or (b), a helpless baby wildebeest who’s ripe for the kill.”

“Which one am I?” Angela asked.

Norah studied her. “You don’t look like a four-legged, even-toed ungulate to me.”

“Excuse me?”

“I think Norah just said you didn’t look like a wildebeest. My best friend’s wicked smart like that. And don’t worry—Nina’s not in any more of your classes today.”

“Good. So, where’s our next class?”

“For me and Norah? It’s reading with Mrs. Wilmers. For you, it’s gym class with Mr. Oxnard.”

“Gym class?” Angela groaned.

“I know,” Norah said. “It’s a cruel injustice foisted upon those of us with brains by those who can move projectiles through space. But you have to do it.”

Howie patted Angela on the back. “Have no fear, Angela Moretti. After gym comes a good class—one you have with both of us.”

“Which class is that?”

“Science. And guess what, Norah? Angela told me she loves science!”

Angela felt herself relax. “I really do.”

Howie and Norah exchanged a grin.

“She might be a keeper,” Norah said.

“She’s freaked out by the bubble gum in my hair,” Howie said.

“No, I’m pretty sure she’s more freaked out by the dunking-your-hair-into-a-tub-of-urine thing,” Norah said.

Howie looked shocked. “I never dunked my hair in urine. I used a spray bottle. And that was my last experiment, which I did to see if human urine did a good job of getting soil out of human hair. It did, by the way. Amazingly. But this is an entirely different experiment. I’m trying to figure out what *food product* does a better job of getting *bubble gum* out of hair.”

“Science or no science, the urine thing is super disgusting,” Angela said. “But can I just ask why you’re doing this?”

Howie grabbed one of the globs of gum and pulled. “Because gum is a hydrophobic material! It doesn’t like to mix with water, so it’s almost impossible to get out of your hair by washing it. It’s important that we learn what *does* get it out.”

“Because you often get gum stuck in your hair?”

Howie smiled. “Of course. Doesn’t everyone?”

Angela was about to ask something else, but Norah cut her off.

“He’ll never shut up if you keep asking him questions,” she said. “Go twenty meters down this hall, and you’ll hit the gymnasium.” Norah smiled. “Enjoy Oxnard, and we’ll see you in a little bit.”

“So, you’re leaving me?”

Howie winked. “You’re gonna do great!”

Angela spent the next forty-five minutes *not* liking Oxnard and *not* enjoying gym class. They played kickball, Angela struck out twice, and Oxnard announced to the class that the new kid would need to “get used to” Chicago-style kickball. That was just lovely. New kids love having the teacher call attention to the fact that they’re new. Not.

When the bell rang, Angela dragged herself into the hallway. Norah and Howie were already waiting for her.

“By the look on your face, I’d say it was somewhere between really terrible and getting your teeth pulled,” Howie said.

Angela faked a smile. “That Oxnard’s a real charmer.”

“Well, forget about him,” Howie said. “Not only are we going to a real class, but you get the best teacher in the entire school.”

“Jacqueline Dupree,” Norah said with a sophisticated roll of the tongue.

“She sounds like a queen,” Angela said.

“Better than a queen. She got her PhD in chemistry. Only started teaching a few years ago. Before that? Nobody knows. Total mystery. But I know one thing—she’s the smartest, classiest lady you’ll ever meet.”

Norah was right about Mrs. Dupree. The woman spent a few minutes on attendance, smiled warmly at Angela when she called her name, and then immediately went into the lesson. No time wasted on rules and procedures, and her lesson for the day was simple—the scientific method. The way she brought such a simple lesson to life was mesmerizing. She commanded the classroom, and the students hung on her every word.

When class ended and the students were filing out, Mrs. Dupree pointed to the book in Angela’s hands.

“You’re reading a Missy Price novel?”

“Oh!” Angela said. “I’m sorry. I won’t bring it out in class again.”

Mrs. Dupree shook her head. “That’s not what I meant. I’m a fan too.”

Angela was shocked. “*You* like Missy Price?”

Mrs. Dupree smiled. “A strong and beautiful woman who uses science to solve crimes? What’s not to love?”

Angela didn't know what to say. "Right. She... she's pretty amazing." She gave Mrs. Dupree a quick wave and headed out into the hallway.

Norah and Howie were waiting outside the door.

"So?" Norah asked.

"Best teacher ever," Angela said. She couldn't hold back a huge grin.

"I *know*!" Norah and Howie said in unison.

"Unfortunately," Howie added, "your next teacher is *not* the best teacher ever. Norah and I are heading to pre-algebra, but you've got English with Mrs. Babcott. But hey, at least today's a half day, so after that, you're done."

"Meet up with us in the quad after the dismissal bell," Norah said.

"What's the quad?"

"The ginormous courtyard that the school surrounds," Howie said. "We'll meet you at the flagpole in the middle."

"And Angela?" Norah added over her shoulder as she walked off. "Cover your ears if you must."

It took only five words from Mrs. Babcott before Angela understood what Norah had meant by that comment. The English teacher's voice sounded like a fork scraping across a plate except somehow, even worse. When the final bell rang, it was a mercy.

Angela followed the other students out of the classroom and down the hall. They were all going in the same direction. They tumbled out of the school doors and onto a vast green commons area surrounded by the school on three sides.

So, this was the quad.

Hundreds of kids were hanging out, talking with each other, playing on their phones, smiling and laughing. These kids already knew each other. They had probably grown up in Chicago together and been friends all their lives.

Not Angela.

Still, for a first day at a new school, it could have been a lot worse. Gym was terrible, and so was English. History was tolerable. Science was awesome, but the best was that she'd already made two new friends.

She looked around for them, and when she didn't see them, she started walking toward the flagpole. She had to dodge a kid diving for a football, and as she did, she heard giggles from a group of girls. She snapped her head over to see who was giggling—though she already knew. It was Nina Marcus and her friends.

Somehow, Angela was pretty sure she'd already made herself a new enemy. Boy, did she want to punch that girl.

When she reached the flagpole, she looked around once more for Norah and Howie. She was amazed at the sheer size of it all, and she couldn't believe just how many kids attended this school. Her school in Madison was so much more... comfortable.

As she turned in place, Angela felt something under her foot, and she heard a pop—followed by a loud hiss. All at once, thousands of tiny white bits filled the air. The kids around her started screaming.

The surprise of it caused Angela to lose her balance. She fell backward into the grass.

When she opened her eyes, she saw kids standing around her, staring down at her. Some were laughing. One kid was reaching for his phone, like he was going to take a picture.

Angela examined herself. The white stuff was all over her. She, Angela Moretti, the new kid from Wisconsin, was completely covered in thousands of tiny bits of... toilet paper.



## CHAPTER TWO

# SCENES FROM AN ITALIAN RESTAURANT

As Angela lay on the ground, thousands of little white toilet paper bits still showering down on her, a man flashed into her view. He wore a red sweater vest, a black bow tie, and a very stern expression. He yelled at all the kids gathered around, then stepped over Angela. He picked up something—it looked like a broken flowerpot—then yelled at a few more kids to move. He angrily jogged away from the quad.

As the man left, the kids once more formed a circle around Angela. Nina Marcus had managed to find her way to the front. She was pointing and laughing harder than anyone, and Angela felt her face burn with rage. She really wanted to punch this girl.

Angela jumped to her feet. “Okay, princess, I’ve had just about enough of you.”

Nina laughed and arched one eyebrow. “What are you going to do? *Wipe* me to death?”



Angela tightened her fists. “Oh, I’m gonna do a lot more than that.”

Nina smirked. “You have no idea who my father is, do you?”

Angela launched herself at Nina Marcus.

But Norah stepped in her way and stopped her cold. “Not now,” Norah said firmly.

“But she—”

“I know. Trust me, I know.”

Norah grabbed Angela by the shoulders and escorted her out of the quad.

“Why did you stop me?”

“First, because you almost just got yourself kicked out of school. On day one.”

“And second?”

“Because Nina’s right. You don’t know who her father is... and let’s just say, he’s not a very good guy.”

“What do you mean?”

“Leave it alone, Moretti.”

“I’m not used to letting people treat me like that.”

“I can tell. You’re feisty. I like that. But you’re also too emotional. Thankfully, I’m not. Here’s the deal. Howie is my best friend, and that contract you signed says you are now his second-best friend. That makes us friends-in-law... or something like that. Which means I have to look

out for you. Which includes saving you from yourself.”

Howie pushed through the other kids and ran up to them. When he saw Angela, his eyes got big. “So, it’s true? There was a toilet paper bomb? And you were...?”

Angela pulled some pieces of toilet paper out of her hair. “The one who got bombed? Why, yes, I was.”

“That’s terrible.”

“Not a bad way to finish off my first day at my new school. I think I’ll go home and die now.”

“You’ll do no such thing,” Howie said. “If you look at section 3-A of our contract, I’m obligated to cheer you up in your time of need.” He leaned in close and blew several more bits of toilet paper out of her hair. “And a toilet paper bomb is *definitely* a time of need. Come on.”

“Where are we going?” Angela asked.

“We’re going to your house. But not to die.” Howie smiled. “We’re going to eat.”

“I knew it. You’re just using me to get Italian food.”

“That’s only partially true. But Angela, you can’t blame me. My family’s Irish. All we have going for us is the potato, and it’s really not that interesting. Pasta’s like a much better form of potato, plus you get sauce and meatballs and Parmesan. So, I guess the real question is... will you hook an Irish brother up?”

Angela sighed. “Okay. On one condition.”

“Anything.”

“Anything, Howie?” Norah said skeptically. “What if she wants us to use her silverware?”

Angela gave Howie a puzzled look.

“Norah’s a bit of a germ freak,” Howie explained.

“Howie,” Norah said, “a ‘freak’ is a person with an unusual physical abnormality. I have no such thing. I am above average in attractiveness and height, and my IQ is off the charts. But just because I know that industrialized dishwashing machines do a poor job of cleaning silverware, you need to call me names?”

“Would it help if I gave you new silverware?” Angela asked.

Norah rolled her eyes. “Don’t worry. I’ve got my own.” She patted her jacket like she was packing heat. “For occasions just like this.”

“Okay, fair enough. Norah, you can use your own silverware. And Howie, I’ll get you all the pasta and meatballs you want.”

“Great!” Howie said. “Now, what’s this condition you mentioned?”

Angela looked her two new friends in the eyes. “I started the day as Angela, the weird new girl from Wisconsin. I ended it as Angela, the *super* weird new girl from Wisconsin who will probably forever be known as

the toilet paper kid. Somebody out there planted a bomb that made me look like a complete loser in front of the entire school. I aim to figure out who. And you two? You're going to help me."

Norah and Howie exchanged a look. Then Howie smiled. "What are second-best friends for?"

They left the school and weaved through the charming streets of Brundon Park. Along the way, Norah and Howie pointed out shops and restaurants and apartments and row houses. They talked about the things and people Angela should know—the things and people any native of Brundon Park would know. The kinds of things her dad knew because he had grown up here. To her dad, moving from Wisconsin to Brundon Park was like coming back home again.

But to Angela, it was all new.

She had come to Brundon Park before, of course, when visiting her dad's family, who still lived here. But it wasn't like she'd explored the area or had even taken any notice of it. They'd always stayed with her dad's family above the Italian restaurant that bore their name, and Angela spent most of her visits working alongside Nonna in the kitchen. But now, what was once just a place to visit had become Angela's whole life. She and her dad were living with Nonna above Moretti's, and her

dad was working in the family business.

And that meant Angela worked in the family business too.

The three kids took a left onto Hooper Street, the busiest street in Brundon. Half a block up and to the right was Moretti's Italian Restaurant. Started years ago by Angela's late grandfather and her nonna, Moretti's was, according to its frequent patrons, the best Italian place in all of Chicago.

As they approached the restaurant, Angela glanced at the four-story apartment building across the street. *That must be where Howie lives*, she thought.

Because it was lunchtime, Angela knew better than to go through the crowded restaurant's front door. She led Howie and Norah through the side alley and around to the kitchen entrance in the back. As soon as they entered, the familiar sounds and smells of Moretti's hit Angela's nostrils. Sauce, Parmesan cheese, the clanking of pots and pans—Angela's father, near the front of the kitchen, yelling in frustration. He was still getting used to the business after being away for all those years.

And in the middle of all the chaos, standing on her wooden footstool and stirring the homemade sauce that she had so lovingly made for so many years, was Angela's nonna.

She still spoke English with a thick Italian accent. At four feet ten inches, she was a tiny woman—but her height was the only thing small about her. Nonna was the mightiest woman Angela had ever known.

When her grandmother saw Angela, her eyes sparkled, her mouth widened into a wide, crooked smile, and she stepped off her stool. She spread out her hands, and Angela dutifully leaned forward. Nonna took her face in her old, wrinkly hands and kissed Angela on each cheek. She greeted everyone in the family this way. There was something both embarrassing and awesome about it all at the same time.

“So, my Angela,” Nonna said in her thick Italian accent. “How was your first day?”

“A little good. A little bad.”

Nonna tilted her head. “So, it was life.” She stepped back and examined Howie and Norah. “But probably more good than bad if you’ve brought stragglers home.”

“This is Howie. He lives across the street.”

“He also attends our church,” Nonna said. “Although he does not always pay attention during Mass,” she added disapprovingly.

“And this is Norah,” Angela said. “She lives two blocks over.”

“I’m Methodist,” Norah said. “I hope that’s okay.”

Nonna laughed. “Even the Methodists have to eat. Am I right to suspect at least one of you kids is hungry?”

Angela smiled.

“Then take your friends to our special room before your father sees you.”

Angela hugged her. “Thanks, Nonna.”

She led her friends through the back of the kitchen and down an aisle filled with huge cans of sauce and diced tomatoes to what looked like a closet door.

“Don’t worry,” Angela said. “No one will bother us in here.”

The room was nothing more than a glorified storage closet. Shelves lined the walls, and cardboard boxes filled the shelves. But in the middle was a simple wooden table with six chairs.

“Special room?” Howie asked.

“This is where my nonna comes to do her crossword puzzles, knit, or hide from the world. She lets me use it. No one else is allowed. Except, apparently, you two.”

They all took seats at the table.

“So, what’s it like to live above an Italian restaurant?” Howie asked.

“Pretty crazy,” Angela said.

“And what’s it like to *work* in an Italian restaurant?” Norah asked.

“Even crazier. There’s my nonna—that’s Italian for ‘grandmother’—my dad, Uncle Ricky, and then I’ve got first cousins, second cousins, and all sorts of other people who don’t look anything like me, but Dad says we’re related. It’s like a big loud family reunion every day. Lots of shouting. More than a few swear words. Plenty of laughter. Like I said, pretty crazy. Aren’t I a lucky girl?”

Norah smiled. “You kind of are.”

The door to the special room opened, and Angela’s nonna appeared with a big bowl of spaghetti noodles in one hand, a bowl of meatballs and sauce in the other, and plates, silverware, and napkins balanced in the crook of her elbow. As she set everything down on the table, Angela couldn’t help but notice Norah’s face contort in revulsion at the sight of the fork and spoon sitting in front of her. Finally, Nonna pulled three soda cans from her apron, placed them on the table, and smiled.

“Enjoy.”

“Thank you, Nonna. You’re the best.”

“Yes, thank you, Mrs. Moretti,” Howie and Norah added.

As Nonna left the room, Howie scooped an enormous serving of pasta onto his plate. Norah pulled what looked like a large pen case from inside her jacket. She



opened it to reveal the shiniest fork, knife, and spoon Angela had ever seen. Angela served herself some food and began to eat. As many times as she'd eaten her grandmother's food, she was sure she would never, ever get tired of it.

Howie was clearly enjoying it as well. "Greatest second-best friend of all time," he said, "and it's not even close."

Norah, meanwhile, ate her food delicately with her perfectly clean fork. But she was clearly loving it too.

Finally, Angela thought she'd address the elephant in the room. "So... you're not going to ask about my mom?"

Howie and Norah exchanged an odd look. "Why would we?" Howie asked.

"Because most people have moms, and I just got done telling you about my big crazy family except I didn't say anything about mine. So, the natural question would be, 'Hey, Toilet Paper Girl, where's your mom?'"

Norah stayed silent and stiff. Howie's eyes darted back and forth. They both looked uncomfortable.

Angela leaned forward. "You're hiding something, Howie. You feel trapped—I can tell. Your eyes are darting back and forth. It's an evolutionary thing—instinct. You're looking for an escape route. You *already* know about my mom, don't you?"

Howie looked even more nervous. “Know what about your mom?”

“And now you’re deflecting. I saw you write in history class, and I’ve spent the last two minutes watching you eat. You’re right-handed. And at the moment, you’re looking up and to your right. You’re trying to access your imagination. You’re trying to create an answer to hide the truth, which is that you already know.”

“I, um, don’t know anything.”

“And now you’re sweating. Wow, Howie, you are a terrible liar.”

Norah shook her head. “Yes, Howie is a terrible liar. And yes, Angela, we know.”

“How much do you know?” Angela asked.

Howie looked at her with kind eyes. “Enough to say we’re really sorry.”

Angela hesitated. She looked to her left. But she wasn’t accessing her imagination—she was accessing her memory. She stayed there for a long moment.

Then she took a breath. “Well, what’s done is done. So, why don’t you tell me why I got blown up by a toilet paper bomb today?”

Howie grabbed some pasta and twirled it around his fork. “That mystery is easy to solve.” He shoved the pasta in his mouth and started to chew outrageously

while he made a series of unintelligible sounds. *Loud* unintelligible sounds.

“Norah? What is he saying?”

Norah put down her special fork. “I’ll translate. In two weeks, our school, Beveridge, will face off against Dowden Middle School. They’re less than a mile from us, and they’re our fiercest rival. It’s the biggest game of the year. In the two weeks before the big game, there’s a tradition of each school playing pranks on the other.”

“So, you’re saying somebody from Dowden did this to me?”

“No,” Norah said. “I’m saying somebody from Dowden did this to Beveridge.” She pointed her shiny fork at Angela. “You? You just happened to get in the way.”

Angela threw her fork down on her plate. Spaghetti sauce flew up and showered Howie in the face. “I was hoping that evil Barbie, Nina, was responsible. I really, really, *really* want to punch her. You said her dad wasn’t a good guy. What did you mean by that?”

Howie hesitated. “His name is Gregori Marcus, and he is a... local *businessman*.” He did air quotes when he said the word “businessman.” Angela knew what that meant. “And although he doesn’t live in Brundon Park, his dirty tentacles reach here. And of all the schools in Chicago, he had to send his daughter to ours.”

“So, you’re saying Gregori Marcus is a really bad guy—a dangerous criminal?” Angela said. “And because everyone’s afraid of him, I’m just supposed to stay away from his daughter and let her terrorize me?”

“That’s pretty much it, yeah,” Norah said.

That wasn’t the answer Angela wanted to hear. And as she watched Howie lick the spaghetti sauce off his fingers and Norah nibble at her food carefully with her sterilized silverware, Angela made a decision.

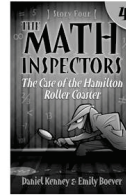
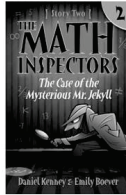
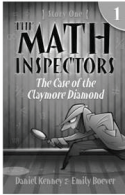
“You see, guys, that’s just it. It wasn’t Dowden who blew me up with toilet paper. It was *one person* at Dowden. Maybe two. And I want to find them.”

“And how exactly do you plan on doing that?” Howie asked.

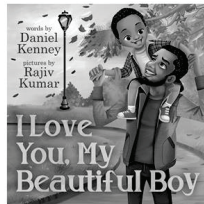
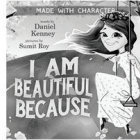
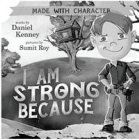
“That’s the best part. We’re going to use something we all love. A little thing called ... science.”

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