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# 1

“Gotcha!”

Although I recognized the voice instantly, I was still surprised by the tight hands grasping my waist. I jumped and dropped my water balloon that I had been filling up at the spigot on the outside of our house. It exploded when it hit the grass, spraying cold water all over my bare legs and feet.

I spun.

Just as I expected, there stood Mandy McKinley, my neighbor from across the street. If it had been anyone else that had surprised me like that, I would have been mad. Especially since it

had cost me a balloon.

But it was Mandy. One of my very best friends.

"You made me waste a balloon," I said, frowning.

Mandy shrugged and dug into the pocket of her denim cutoffs. She pulled out a handful of balloons.

"Where did you get those?!" I gasped.

"I swiped them from Eddie Finkbinder," she replied with a crafty smirk.

My jaw dropped. Eddie Finkbinder was nothing but a bully. If he knew that Mandy had swiped his balloons, he'd be furious.

"You're kidding!" I exclaimed.

"Nope!" Mandy replied. "He owes them to you, anyway. So it wasn't like I stole them. I just got back the ones that he took from you."

Mandy was right. Last week I had a brand-new bag of balloons that I was going to fill with water. I left them on my porch when I was mowing the back lawn, and Eddie swiped them. I knew he did because I saw him with them a few days later. Plus, he was bragging to all of his

friends that he'd taken them.

Problem is, Eddie is in seventh grade. I'm only in fifth, and Eddie is a lot bigger than me. I think just about everyone on our block is afraid of Eddie Finkbinder.

Myself included.

But what was going to happen to Mandy and me later that day would be a lot scarier than Eddie Finkbinder.

In fact, now that I think about it, what was about to happen would scare the daylights out of anyone . . . and it all started with a simple trip to the river.

My name is Travis Kramer, and I live in Elkhart, Indiana. I think Elkhart is one of the coolest places to live on the planet. We live near the St. Joseph River, and there's lots of things to do all year round. Among other things, Elkhart is known as the 'band instrument capital of the world'. As a matter of fact, my dad works at a factory that makes musical instruments.

But in the summertime, my favorite thing to do is go to hang out by the river . . . that is, when I'm not having water balloon fights with my

friends.

And that's what Mandy and I had planned for this particular day. The sun was out, the temperature was warm, and it would be a perfect afternoon for swimming, Frisbee, and just plain having fun in the water.

We rode our bikes to a park by the St. Joseph River. It's not very far from where we live. Lots of other people go there, too, especially on the really hot days.

When we got there, I spread out my blanket on the grass, and Mandy spread hers out next to mine.

"Want to catch frogs?" I asked her.

She shook her head. "Nah. I'm going to swim for a while."

And with that she jumped up, kicked off her sandals, and ran through the hot sand. She plunged head first into the cool, blue water.

I took off my sneakers and walked down to the shore. There were a few other people milling about in the water and along the shore. Mostly little kids with their parents.

I walked along the shoreline. Not far away,

the swimming area ends and tall cattails grow on the shore and in the water. It's one of the best places I know of to catch frogs.

Sure enough, I spotted one right away. A big, fat leopard frog. Leopard frogs are bright green with black spots . . . that's how they got their name. They're really fast, too . . . but I'm faster.

I froze. Then, I slowly leaned forward, reaching out with my arms. The trick is to move real slow so the frog doesn't know you're going to grab him. When your hand is in reach of the frog—*zappo!* You reach out and catch him.

I was just about to lunge when I felt something on my arm. I barely noticed it at first, but then it felt heavier. I was sure it was some kind of bug, but if I swatted it now, I would scare the frog.

But suddenly it scratched my skin! The bug felt heavy, and I stood straight up and slapped at my arm. I was sure that it was a huge bee or maybe a hornet.

But that's not what it was.

When I smacked it, the insect buzzed off, but it didn't go very far. It landed on a cattail reed

only a few feet away.

And I couldn't believe my eyes.

*"Holy smokes!"* I said quietly.

Right then and there I knew that this wasn't going to be just another day at the park.

## 2

I forgot all about the frog. What I was looking at made me forget about everything.

The insect—the bug that had landed on my arm—was all shiny and silver. It was kind of big, too . . . about the size of a Matchbox car.

As I watched, it crawled up the stem of the cattail. The insect was so heavy that it bent the stalk. I wasn't sure what kind of insect it was, either. It looked like it might be a locust. But then again, there's no locust I know of that's made of metal!

The creature moved slow and methodical, robot-like, until it reached the top of the cattail. By now the plant was almost completely bent over



from the weight of the insect.

Then, without warning, the insect flew. It came right at me and I ducked just as it went by my ear. Its wings drummed the air like a tiny airplane motor. I turned and watched it as it buzzed up into the air, then swooped around and disappeared into the trees.

I stood in the water for a moment, wondering if there might be any more. That was the freakiest thing I'd ever seen! Maybe there really *was* such a thing as insects made out of metal.

*Or, maybe it's not metal at all,* I thought. *Maybe it just looked like metal.*

No. I know what I saw.

A few minutes passed, and I still hadn't spotted any more of the bizarre insects.

*I've got to tell Mandy about this,* I thought, and I turned around and sloshed through the water back to the swimming area.

Mandy was on her towel. She had her sunglasses on, and she was reading a book.

"You're not going to believe what I saw!" I exclaimed.

"A frog," she said without interest, not

looking up from her book.

"Better!" I said excitedly. I plopped down on my towel.

"Okay," she said, turning a page. "You found a turtle."

"I saw a bug!" I said.

She looked up at me like I was crazy. "So what?" she said.

"Mandy . . . the bug was made out of steel or something! Honest!"

At this, she placed the book in her lap and lowered her sunglasses.

"I think you've been out in the sun too long," she said.

"Mandy, I'm not kidding! It was a real, live insect of some sort . . . only it was made out of metal! It was shiny and silver like a pop can."

Mandy's frown faded.

"You're . . . you're serious?" she asked.

I nodded. "No tricks. I wouldn't have believed it myself if I hadn't seen it."

"Are there any more?" she asked.

"I didn't see any." I turned and pointed. "It was over there, where the swimming area ends."

Over where the cattails grow.”

Mandy leapt up. “Let’s go see if there are any more!” she exclaimed.

We had just started out across the grass . . . but we didn’t get far. The scream of a little girl caused us to stop in our tracks.

*“He’s going to bite me!”* she shrieked. *“He’s going to bite me! Help! Help!”*

“It’s one of those nasty insects!” I said. “Come on! We’ve got to help her before it bites her!”

We sprinted across the grass, and we could only hope to get to the little girl before the awful insect stung.

# 3

Thankfully, the little girl wasn't far away. Her mother was close by, too, and she was there before we were.

"What is it?" the woman exclaimed frantically. With one quick motion, she swept up her frantic daughter in her arms.

Safe with her mom, the little girl turned and pointed.

"Bad!" she said. "Bad, bad!"

We ran up to them.

"What is it?" I asked. My eyes scanned the ground.

"Bad!" the little girl said again, still pointing at the grass.

*"Oh, for goodness sake,"* Mandy whispered in my ear. *"Look, Travis."* She pointed.

On the ground near her towel was a toad.

That's it.

A plain, ordinary toad, no bigger than the palm of my hand.

"Sweetheart," the little girl's mother said, "toads don't bite. Toads are our friends."

"Bad!" the little girl shouted defiantly.

The mother turned to us. "I'm sorry we disturbed you," she said. "But thank you just the same."

"Hey, no problem," I said. "I'm just glad she's all right."

Mandy and I turned and walked back to our blankets. Mandy started snickering.

"I can't believe she was freaked out by a toad," she said. "When I was her age, I was catching them and putting them in a shoe box."

"Me too," I said with a laugh.

We walked across the grass and over to where the marsh begins. We searched and searched, but we didn't see any more of the strange, silvery insects.

"I'm telling you, I know what I saw," I said.

"I believe you, Travis," Mandy said. "I just wish that I could see one, too."

After an hour of looking, we gave up. I was really disappointed, and I was sure that I probably wouldn't ever see another one of those insects again in my life.

Which, of course, wasn't going to be the case . . . because it just so happened that I *would* see another one.

Not only would I *see* it, but I would *catch* it.

And *that's* what got me into serious trouble.

# 4

A few days went by, and I didn't think too much more about the strange insect at the river. I guess I just figured that it was one of those once-in-a-lifetime opportunities, and I wouldn't get a chance to see one up close again.

Whatever it was.

One afternoon I was in the garage working on my skateboard. It's one that I built from a kit, and it's really cool. I give it a tune-up once in a while to keep the wheel bearings in good shape. It's a fast skateboard, I can tell you that much. My friends will, too.

Suddenly, I heard a strange clapping noise. The clapping sound was really rapid, like —

*Wings.*

The garage door was open. Dad was at work, so his car was gone.

And while I watched, a large, shiny insect swooped up from the driveway, arced down, and landed in the very spot that Dad parks his car! The creature came to a rest on the cement, and just sat there. Like the insect I had found at the lake, this one, too, was all silvery and shiny, and about the size of a Matchbox car.

I was overcome with excitement. I had given up on ever seeing one of the unusual bugs again, but now there was one in my very own garage!

I didn't move a muscle for fear of scaring him away. So I just stood there, looking at him.

And there was no question what it was, either.

It was a grasshopper.

No doubt about it. I could see his long, bent legs and his two giant eyes.

A silver grasshopper.

And the longer I watched, the more excited I became. The more I realized that no one would believe that I had spotted such an insect unless I could show it to them.



So I began to think of a way to catch the little bugger.

I turned slowly and looked for some sort of container. The only thing that was in reach was an old mayonnaise jar on the workbench. It was filled with nuts and bolts that Dad had been saving.

That would have to work. I leaned over the desk and grasped the jar without taking my eyes away from the shiny insect on the garage floor. I unscrewed the lid. As gently as I could, I emptied the nuts and bolts onto the workbench. They clanked against the glass jar and thumped on the wood, but the grasshopper in the garage didn't seem to care.

Then, with the jar in my left hand and the lid in my right, I began to tiptoe slowly toward the insect.

As I drew nearer, I could feel my heart pounding heavier and heavier. I slowly sank to my knees.

I was only a few feet from the creature, and I could see it really good. It was a grasshopper, all right, but it looked like some sort of machine.

Like it was some kind of mechanical, motorized grasshopper.

Which was impossible, of course — but that's what it looked like.

*"Hey there, buddy," I whispered, leaning closer and closer to the insect. "I'm not going to hurt you. I just need you to hang out for a while so people will believe me."*

I leaned closer still. Sensing my presence, the insect took several small steps backward.

I realized that if I didn't make my move, I risked losing the bug altogether. Catching insects is a lot like catching frogs. If you're not quick, you'll never catch them.

I sprang, snapping the jar out and over the insect. I had to be careful, since the floor of the garage is made of cement, and the jar is glass. If I smacked it down too hard, the glass might crack or break.

But it didn't. And better still —

*I caught the grasshopper!*

He hopped up and down, up and down, smacking against the glass, and it sounded like a knife tapping a window. The creature must really

be made out of some kind of metal!

Very carefully, I lifted the edge of the glass and slid the lid underneath. After a moment of wiggling, I was able to get the lid on. Then I picked it up and screwed it on tight.

And the jar felt heavy! Man! The insect must weigh a pound!

I felt like jumping up and down. I couldn't believe my luck! I had to show Mandy right away.

I hurried out the garage door and down the driveway, stopping only long enough to make sure there were no cars coming. We live in a small subdivision, and not too many cars go by, but you've got to be careful, anyway.

I didn't see any cars . . . but another thing I didn't see was the dark figure hiding in the bushes near Mandy's house—and I didn't even see him until it was too late.

I caught a movement off to the side, just in time to see a water balloon leave the hand of Eddie Finkbinder. Eddie is a pitcher on the school baseball team, and he has a pitching arm that's as fast as a rattlesnake.

I tried to get out of the way of the oncoming projectile, knowing that if I didn't I was in for a good soaker.

And I almost made it.

*Almost.*

Because the water balloon hit my arm and exploded, spraying me with chilly water.

But that wasn't the worst part.

The jolt had caused me to lose my grip on the jar. Suddenly, it was sent flying into the air, out of my grasp.

*Oh no! My jar . . . and my silver grasshopper . . . were going to smash into a million pieces!*

# 5

I heard Eddie laughing as the jar flew up into the air.

*"Bullseye!"* he shouted.

But I was too worried about breaking the jar and losing my grasshopper to even care what he was saying or doing.

I leapt forward and dove. I knew that my chances of catching the jar in mid-air weren't very good, but I had to try.

*I had* to.

I threw myself forward, arms outstretched like a football player trying to catch a pass. My eyes never left the jar that tumbled through the air. I could still hear Eddie Finkbinder laughing at me,

but I didn't pay any attention. I was too focused on the jar.

And at the very last second, I knew I wasn't going to catch it. The jar was just out of reach, just a hair too far to grab onto. I could see the silver grasshopper inside the glass, fluttering around like a mad fishing lure.

I reached, reached, as far as I could —

My fingers touched the jar. I couldn't catch it, but my fingers touching the jar knocked it up into the air just enough to break its fall. The jar hit the grass hard, but it didn't break. My elbows plunged into the grass at the exact same time. It hurt, but I didn't care. I was just glad that the jar hadn't broken.

"Hahaha!" chortled Eddie. "That was a good one, squirrel-breath!" he sneered. Then he lobbed another water balloon.

I was ready this time, and I easily got out of the way of the red blob heading for me.

"I missed on purpose," Eddie claimed.

*Oh man, I thought. I'm in for it now. Eddie is going to squish me like a blueberry.*

But he didn't. Instead, he turned, shook his

head, and walked away. "You're no fun," he said. But I think he only left because he ran out of water balloons.

Whatever the reason, I was glad.

But sadly, I had another problem.

My grasshopper wasn't moving. It was just laying at the bottom of the jar on its side. I was certain that the fall had killed it.

Now I was mad. I was mad and I was sad. I didn't want to hurt it, but now it was too late.

I stared at the creature for a few moments, and decided to show Mandy anyway. Even if the grasshopper wasn't alive, she'd still want to see it.

I walked up to her door and knocked, but no one answered. I knocked again and called out her name.

Still no answer.

*Darn*, I thought. I was hoping that she would have been home.

I turned around and walked back to my house. It was time for dinner, anyway. At least I would be able to show Mom and Dad what I found. I have an older sister named Lisa, but I'm sure she wouldn't care at all. She hates bugs.

When Dad got home, I showed him my grasshopper. He said he thought it looked really cool, but I don't think he believed me when I told him it had been alive. Mom didn't either. I tried to explain, but they just rolled their eyes.

But I knew Mandy would believe me. She had been with me at the river on the day I had first discovered one of the strange silver insects.

I called her on the phone, but no one answered. The answering machine picked up and I left a message for her to call me in the morning.

I took my jar and placed it on my dresser. Even though the grasshopper was dead, it was still pretty cool looking. When school started back up in the fall, I planned on taking it in for show and tell.

Mandy didn't call me back, and I figured that she'd gone to the movies or something with her mom and dad. I watched television for a while, then read a book in bed until I got tired. I could hear the soft murmur of crickets outside my open window, and I heard a car drive by on the street. My eyes grew heavy.

I fell asleep.



When I awoke in the morning, I knew something was wrong.

I could *feel* it. I just had some kind of creepy feeling that all was not well.

And I was right.

I got out of bed.

Suddenly, I gasped.

Then I gasped again.

The mayonnaise jar on my dresser was still there, but there was a large hole in the lid!

*The jar was empty!*

I spun, expecting to see the silver grasshopper sitting on the floor. I expected to see him on my chair, maybe, or even on a book shelf. I expected that he'd be right around the room somewhere.

What I didn't expect to see was the dollar-sized hole in my screen. It looked like it had been chewed away by something with razor-sharp teeth.

There was a hole in the jar, a hole in the screen . . . *and my silver grasshopper was nowhere to be found!*

And that was just the beginning of how we discovered that the silver metal insects weren't

bugs, after all.

What I didn't know at the time was that there  
were a lot more . . . thousands more.

They were ugly.

They were dangerous.

And they were about to invade.

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