

of Rick? Does she think he's cute or something? Finally she says, "I feel so stupid. Samantha's gonna think I look like this every day, with this dorky skirt. And then I go on about the stupid state fair. Why did I say that? And this stupid briefcase. Did you see her earrings? And her toenails were red!"

"I won't ask why you were looking at her feet. But why do you care if some girl you don't even know thinks you look like this every day? What's wrong with the way you look?"

"Oh, never mind," she says. "You don't understand girls at all." She walks faster, almost jogging, and I have to hurry to keep up. Well, at least the spring is back in her step.

Chapter 6: The Office

Mitch is just opening the locks on the front door of Fink's Comics and Magic when we arrive. I can't help noticing the large ring of keys in his hands.

"Hey, dude and dudette," he says in a kind of drawl. He's always trying to sound like he's from California, when I know he's never even been there. It is my secret hope that he'll move there for real after he graduates. Then maybe Uncle Arthur will retire, and I'll take over the store. A kid can dream, can't he?

Mitch gives Lizzy's outfit an approving glance, but she doesn't notice. She's too busy eyeing the key ring, too.

As we follow him inside, I whisper to Lizzy, "We should check his keys in case my mom is wrong and my dad *did* leave an extra set in the store. Then we wouldn't have to go uptown."

She nods in agreement. "I was thinking the same thing."

"I'll go ask Mitch for them."

"Wait," Lizzy says, pulling me back. "He's gonna want to know why you want them. Do you really want him to tell him about the box?"

She's right. I don't want him to know about it. He might try to lay claim to it somehow, or at the very least make fun of me. I know they store the keys under the counter, so all we have to do is wait until an opportune

moment to grab them. We pretend to be looking through the comics while Mitch finishes opening the register. He asks me to watch the front for a minute while he gets a new cash drawer ready in the back.

"No problem," Lizzy and I reply at the same time.

"That was too easy," Lizzy whispers once he disappears into the back room. We run behind the counter, and she grabs the keys. I unzip my bag and we quickly try the keys in each keyhole. No luck. Not even a nibble. Well, at least now I'm convinced that Harold's office is our only hope. My uncle heads behind the counter just as I'm zipping up my bag. He gives me a suspicious look.

"Whatcha doing?" he asks, glancing from me to my bag to Lizzy. Besides his physical resemblance to my dad, his voice is identical to Dad's, too. This always creeps me out (when it doesn't make me want to cry, that is).

"Nothing," I answer, swinging the bag over my shoulder. "Mitch asked us to watch the front, so we were just, you know, watching the front."

"Yeah," Lizzy says, sliding past Uncle Arthur and around to the front of the counter. "And now we're going to buy some candy."

I smile weakly at my uncle and join Lizzy on the other side. She's already placed two bags of Twizzlers and a king-sized Snickers on the countertop.

"Job interview?" my uncle asks, giving my outfit the once-over.

I shake my head. "Lizzy's dad is bringing us to work with him." It's amazing how easily I can lie to my uncle. All I have to do is remember the time he was supposed to

take me on the father-son campout in sixth grade and never showed up. It may not excuse the lying, but it makes me feel less guilty.

He gives Lizzy her change and puts her candy in a bag. She flashes him a bright smile and says, "Thanks!"

We wave as we go through the door. "That was a close one," she says when we're halfway down the block.

"Why?" I ask, watching as she unwraps one of the packs of Twizzlers. "It's not like we stole anything."

She hands me a Twizzler, and I remember who I'm talking to. "We didn't steal anything, right?" I ask.

"No, we didn't steal anything!" she says. "But I wouldn't be surprised if that uncle of yours thinks we did."

"I guess I can't blame him," I say. "Each year the store loses a few hundred dollars in stolen candy and comics."

"That's so like you," she says, sucking on her Twizzler. "Always trying to find the best in people, even him."

"Hey, weren't you going to buy Skittles for the security guard, not Twizzlers?"

"I panicked, all right? Just eat your Twizzler."

At that moment we catch sight of the bus rounding the corner. We run toward it, the bag thumping against my back. Two businessmen are waiting at the stop, both holding bus passes in their hands. The bus pulls up to the curb, and I ask Lizzy if she knows how much the bus costs. Mom has always taken care of this sort of thing. I've really got to start paying more attention.

"Two dollars each way," she says. "I checked this time. You have money, right?"

"You don't?"

"I just spent it on the candy!"

I pull out my wallet as a Girl Scout troop gets in line behind us, giggling and pushing each other. The two men step on, stick their bus passes in the slot, and pull them back out. They're the same MetroCards we were supposed to use on the subway. Those things carry a lot of power in this city! The driver is waiting for us. I hand him our four dollars. It's a good thing I have my usual eight, or else we wouldn't have enough to get home.

"Quarters only," the driver says, not even looking at us.

"We don't have any quarters," I say meekly.

The driver rolls his eyes and booms, "Anyone got a card?"

The Girl Scouts behind us are getting restless. I hear one of them mutter, "Dorks!" and a few others giggle. For their rudeness, I may just demand a free box of cookies this year.

"I'll do it," a middle-aged woman in the front seat says, standing up. I elbow Lizzy when I see the woman is wearing a Yankees cap and sweatshirt, just like the guy who helped us in the subway. Good thing baseball fans are so superstitious! The woman lowers her card into the slot twice, and then grabs the four dollars from my hand.

Anxious to be away from the front of the bus, we make our way to the back and take the last two seats. Lizzy immediately turns and stares out the window. I know she feels bad for messing up our second mode of public transportation.

"Hey, Lizzy, one of the Girl Scouts just made another one cry. That should make you feel better."

I can see her smile in the reflection of the glass. Lizzy gets upset easily, but it doesn't take much to cheer her up.

I take out my book, glad to have a few minutes to study the diagram on time travel and string theory. But before I can build a time machine out of strings, I need to figure out what the heck they are talking about.

I have just opened the dog-eared page when I am hit by the overpowering stench of garlic that has suddenly engulfed the bus. I look around wildly for the source, and find a man in a construction worker's outfit nibbling on what can only be a sandwich made completely out of garlic cloves. Why does no one else notice? I can't say anything to Lizzy without him hearing, and he doesn't look like the type of person I'd want to insult. With his insanely small nibbles, it takes him ten blocks to finish it off. By that time, beads of sweat are clearly visible on his forehead. He crumples the wrapper and sticks it back in his lunchbox. He may be smelly, but at least he's tidy.

"Ours is the next stop," Lizzy says, folding her small city map. I nod, afraid to open my mouth lest the smell get inside. Although the sandwich is gone, the stench has gained in strength. I would not have thought this possible. The man is superhuman. Move over Superman, here comes Garlicman, able to leap tall buildings in a single smelly breath.

I put my book away in preparation for our arrival. All I managed to learn is that string theory doesn't actually involve strings, but rather tiny bands of energy waves. Those will be harder to find than regular string.

We get out of our seats and hold onto the poles by the back door. The bus slows as it approaches the corner, but

then it rolls right past. At first this registers only faintly, but as the back half of the bus fully passes the stop, I realize the driver isn't going to pull over at all.

"Wait!" Lizzy yells up to the front. "You just passed our stop!"

The driver doesn't slow down. A woman with white hair and a silver cane leans forward and says to Lizzy, "Young lady, if the driver doesn't see anyone waiting at a stop, he will not pull over. If you want the bus to stop, you have to press that yellow strip up there. You see?" We follow as she points shakily to a thick strip of what looks like yellow tape. I realize I've seen people pressing it before, but never paid much attention.

"Oh, right," Lizzy mumbles. "Thanks."

"Can I still press it now?" I ask the woman.

She nods happily. I reach up easily and push hard on the tape. A bell dings once. I guess short people just have to ride around and around the city until a taller person helps them.

"Now the driver will pull over at the next stop. You see?" the woman says. "You're only two blocks from where you wanted to be." She settles back in her seat.

Who says New Yorkers aren't helpful? Of course two more blocks means we're stuck with Garlicman for that much longer. I wonder if anyone ever died from odor assault.

It turns out the next stop is full of people waiting, so the driver would have stopped anyway. The bus pulls over, and the front door opens, but not the back. Lizzy yanks at

the handle, but it doesn't budge. Garlicman reaches over and pushes a metal strip next to the door, and the door swings open. I take back my mean thoughts about him. He is obviously another caring citizen.

We hurry down the three steps before the driver can change his mind and pull away. My left foot sticks to each step as I descend, having picked up gum somewhere along the way. When we are clear of the crowd, I ask Lizzy to wait while I use the curb to scrape the gum off the bottom of my shoe.

"Holy cow!" she says, grabbing my arm tight. (When she was six, Lizzy's dad trained her to use expletives like *holy cow* and *good golly* instead of the other more colorful ones she had brought home from her first day of kindergarten.)

I almost lose my balance since I have one foot in the air and one arm being pulled nearly out of its socket. I follow her gaze. In the gutter about two feet away from us is a playing card. Face up, its bottom half is hidden under a Chinese food takeout menu. It's the eight of hearts, one of the last three missing cards in Lizzy's collection. It's been at least six months since she had found a card. I was beginning to think the final three would never turn up.

Lizzy breaks her grip on my arm and bends down over the card. Fingers shaking, she grasps it by one corner. She doesn't pull yet though, and I know she's saying one of her little prayers in hopes that the card will be intact. All too often she'll find torn cards, and she won't put those in her collection.

Finally, she gives the card a gentle tug and it slips out, fully intact. She heaves a sigh of relief and then holds it high above her head like she's the winning boxer in a prize fight. "Ta da!" she announces. "Only two more to go!"

She snaps open her briefcase and slides the card carefully in one of the pockets on the top. She takes a few steps in the direction of the office but stops when I don't move from my spot. "What's up?" she asks. "Aren't you psyched that I found my card?"

I nod, not really hearing her. If we hadn't missed our stop, if we hadn't veered away from our original plan, we wouldn't have gotten off here, and she wouldn't have found her card. But was it fate that brought us to this spot, or just good luck? What about fate and *bad* luck?

If Dad had taken a different route that day, or sat at a red light one second longer, he wouldn't have died. What if the lady who he swerved to avoid hitting had waited one more second before crossing the street? Or if she had been holding her package from underneath instead of by the handle, which had broken halfway across the intersection and caused her to stop walking?

Or what if it hadn't rained that morning so the street wasn't so slick that Dad's tires lost their grip on the road? Or what if I hadn't been sick that day and had been able to go with him? We might have stopped for ice cream first, and then —

"Are you all right?" Lizzy asks, peering into my face and interrupting my thoughts. It isn't like I'll ever get a chance to find out what would have happened if any of

those other things had taken place. Unless I do manage to build a time machine. And that isn't looking too promising.

I take a deep breath. And another. "I'm fine," I reply. "Let's go."

"Me finding that card, that was a good sign," she says as we continue walking. "A good sign for sure!"

I hope she's right. Now that we're close by, I'm starting to get nervous. After a few blocks, Lizzy stops in front of a tall building. She consults the letterhead of my mom's letter from Harold and says, "This is it. The former offices of Harold Folgard, Esquire."

I have to tilt my head all the way back to see the top of it. Neither of us makes a move to go inside. "It's so . . . tall," I say, shading my eyes.

"Good thing you won't have to scale the outside and use a glass cutter to break into the offices," she says, leading me toward the revolving door. "That was my backup plan."

The lobby is marble and glass with tall ceilings and two banks of elevators. It's quiet, too, like a library. "The office is on the fourteenth floor," Lizzy says. Her voice echoes. There are only a few people in the lobby, none of them paying the slightest attention to us.

I move closer to the wall to read the signs. "It's this one," I say softly, pointing to the elevators on our right. "Floors one through sixteen."

"Look like you belong," she whispers back, flipping her hair behind her shoulders. She swings her briefcase gently back and forth as she walks toward the first elevator.

I straighten my back and lift my chin a little. I am sure

with my height I could easily pass as a businessman from behind — a very skinny, backpack-wearing businessman.

Lizzy is about to press the UP button when a voice booms out from across the lobby, “Where do you think you’re going?”

We freeze. My heart starts racing. A man comes up behind us, and we slowly turn around. He is wearing a black security guard uniform. We’d already agreed that if we got stopped, Lizzy would do the talking. To be honest, I don’t think I could speak anyway. I hope she doesn’t try to pull out the feminine wiles.

To her credit, Lizzy is very composed. She looks the guard in the eye and says calmly, “Our uncle works on the fourteenth floor. We wanted to surprise him.”

He doesn’t answer right away, and I try sending Lizzy a telepathic message: *Offer him the king-sized Snickers . . . the Snickers!* But she either doesn’t receive my message or is ignoring it. The guard finally says, “All visitors need to check in at the front desk. Follow me.”

Our shoulders sag with relief as we follow him to the long marble desk in the corner of the lobby that we somehow managed to miss seeing when we came in. He steps behind the desk and puts out his hand. “Driver’s license,” he says in a tone that indicates he has asked this many times before.

Lizzy and I exchange a look of surprise. I *knew* I could pass for a businessman! “Um, we’re only twelve,” Lizzy says.

“Almost thirteen,” I quickly add.

“School ID?” he asks.

“It’s *summer*,” Lizzy replies.

The guard sighs. “All right. I’ll need you to sign in here.” He pushes a clipboard across the counter to us. “And then one at a time I’ll take your picture.”

“Our picture?” I ask.

He nods. “Every visitor’s pass has your picture on it now.”

This isn’t going as smoothly as I’d hoped.

Lizzy signs the clipboard and pushes it over to me. She signed in as *Tia Castaway*, the name of the little girl in our favorite Disney movie when we were little, *Escape to Witch Mountain*. She gives me a little kick on the shin, and since we’re supposed to be brother and sister, I carefully write *Tony Castaway* and push the clipboard back to the man.

He takes our picture with a camera that is attached to the computer behind the desk. A few seconds later two visitor badges spew out of the printer. He hands them over and instructs us to peel off the back and wear them “on our person” at all times. We hurry toward the elevator, sticking the badges on our chests without even looking at them. Only when we’re safely on the elevator do I notice my face staring back at me from Lizzy’s shirt, one eye closed, the name *Tony Castaway* typed underneath. We quickly switch badges.

“This is a really slow elevator,” I observe.

“Yeah,” Lizzy says. “It’s almost like we’re not moving.”

I look at the panel of numbers. “That’s because neither of us pushed the button for our floor!” I lean over and push 14. The elevator jumps a little and begins to ascend.

We start to laugh. Lizzy says, “You’d think we’d never been out of the house before.”

I watch the floor numbers light up one at a time as we approach each one. "Did you know," I tell Lizzy, "that most buildings don't have a thirteenth floor because the number 13 is supposed to be bad luck? Of course there still is a thirteenth floor; they just call it the fourteenth floor."

Lizzy narrows her eyes. "So what you're saying is that since we're going to the fourteenth floor, we're gonna have bad luck?"

Maybe it's better when Lizzy doesn't listen when I share my knowledge of the world. "Um, forget I said anything."

When the doors open we get out and follow the signs toward Suite 42. Along the way we pass assorted businessmen and women, all who either ignore us or give us the forced smile that adults usually give to kids, where just the corners of their mouths turn up. We finally find the right door. It still has the FOLGARD AND LEVINE, ESQUIRES brass nameplate on it. Lizzy steps back and motions for me to try the door. I take a deep breath and turn the handle. Of course it doesn't budge.

"Turn it the other way," Lizzy advises.

"That's not gonna work," I say. "You always turn a knob to the right to open it." Nevertheless, I try it. I'm so surprised to feel it twist under my hand that I don't even push the door open for a second.

"Wow, that actually worked!" Lizzy exclaims, pushing through the door. I quickly follow and close it behind us. There is no electricity in the office, but enough light

comes through the windows that we can easily see around us. It's like a ghost town of an office. Shells of desks and filing cabinets, stained carpet, empty cardboard boxes, a broken lamp.

"Let's get moving," Lizzy whispers. "You look in Harold's office, and I'll check out here in the waiting area."

I nod, and head into the office that has Harold's nameplate stuck on it. First I check the old wooden desk that sits in the center of the room. It's a nice desk. I wonder why he abandoned it. The drawers are all hanging out, which makes it easy. I feel around the insides of them, and also check the bottoms of each drawer in case the keys are taped there. All I come away with are a few splinters, three paper clips, and a business card for a moving company. I can hear Lizzy in the next room opening and closing drawers, too.

According to the plan, I crawl around on the carpet, feeling for lumps as I go along. About halfway around the room I actually feel something! It's about a foot away from one of the walls and is just the right size for a set of four keys and a key chain.

"Hey, Lizzy," I call out as loud as I dare. "I might have found something!"

She comes running in, and I point to the lump. She runs back out. When she returns, she is carrying her briefcase and my bag, which we had left by the front door. She unsnaps her briefcase and pulls out the screwdriver. She hands it to me, which I think is a nice gesture since I'm sure she'd be as capable as I in cutting the carpet. I would

feel guilty doing what we're about to do, but the carpet is so old and stained and torn that there's no question the new tenants are going to replace it. In a way, we're helping them out.

Using the sharp edge, I hook the screwdriver under the edge of the carpet where it meets the wall. Then I move it back and forth like a saw. Even though the carpet is old, the fiber is strong. Lizzy holds the two edges of the rug apart as I go along, revealing the concrete floor beneath. I'm sweating by the time I slice my way to the lump. One last slice and the carpet reveals its hidden treasure.

Lizzy screams and jumps back so fast that she crashes to the floor, limbs flying. She covers her mouth to keep herself from screaming again and finally manages to scramble to her feet.

"You're such a girl," I tell her, letting the carpet fall back into place. "It's long dead." Instead of the keys to my box, we have uncovered the final resting place of a little brown mouse.

Lizzy shivers. "Let's just finish looking around. This place is giving me the creeps."

The only place I haven't searched yet is the ceiling. It's one of those drop-down types where you can push on the panels and they lift up. "Flashlight," I say, holding out my hand. Like a nurse handing a doctor a scalpel, Lizzy repeats, "Flashlight," and lays it in my hand. I stand up on the desk and can easily reach the ceiling. Pushing up on one of the panels, I move it aside so I can stick my flashlight up there. I have to clear away a cobweb before sticking my head in. Good thing I'm doing this instead of

Lizzy. For a tough girl, she is brought to her knees by things with multiple legs.

"See anything?" she asks. Her voice sounds muffled from up here.

"Pipes, dust, and wires," I call down. I shine the light slowly around, but just see more of the same. "Do you want to take a look?"

She doesn't answer. I repeat my question. She still doesn't answer. I duck my head back out of the ceiling to see Lizzy standing stiffly in the center of the room. A very round and red-faced policeman, in a full-on NYPD outfit, stands at her side. The security guard from downstairs almost completely fills the doorway.

All I can think to say as I climb off the desk is, "I told you we should have given him the king-sized Snickers!"