

# The Secret Zoo

## The Final Fight

Bryan Chick

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*For Ricky*

## Prelude

### The Storm

Mr. Darby was in the Library of the Secret Society when the end began. He was standing by a towering bookcase, watching a monkey in a blue vest select a book from the top.

“No, no, that can’t be the one!” he politely called out. “Look for the thick green spine!”

The monkey shrieked, partly out of irritation, it seemed, and then ran across a new shelf, his fingers grazing the books. He plucked one with a wide green spine, flipped through a few pages, and then put it back, having decided it wasn’t the right one.

“*Mr. Darby!*” a voice rang out.

The old man turned and saw Solana running toward him from one of the eight entrances to the octagonal building. Behind her, the strings of beads across the doorway were still swaying. She had her quills out, her Descender gear ready. Something was wrong—a fact Mr. Darby knew before he saw the terror in her eyes.

He rushed toward Solana, the end of his long jacket stirring up colorful leaves that had fallen from the indoor trees. The commotion in the crowded library died, and Mr. Darby could feel the stares of all the patrons, animals and people alike. He stopped in front of Solana. “What is it?”

“I don’t know!” She pointed to the doorway and added, “The sky!”

Mr. Darby quickly made his way out of the library and then suddenly stopped. Low, dark, swirling clouds seemed to be devouring the tops of buildings and trees like a monster made of fog, and deep shadows were falling across the city.

“What...what kind of storm is this?” Solana asked from beside him.

“It’s not just a storm,” Mr. Darby said. “It’s DeGraff.”

Solana flinched. Then she shook her head, as if unwilling to believe it.

The birds that couldn’t get out from beneath the clouds began to fly in erratic paths and drop from the sky. On the crowded streets, animals and people recognized the danger and began to run

for cover in the buildings.

Solana turned to go back into the library, but Mr. Darby grabbed her arm, stopping her. “The roof is made of glass,” he said. Then he gestured toward the dark clouds and added, “It won’t protect from that.”

“Then where?” Solana asked.

The old man looked around and saw a nearby building that seemed safe: the Institute of Light, a museum as old as the Secret Zoo. He touched the transmit button on his headset and, to the Crossers who were listening, said, “This storm is DeGraff’s! Find cover—fast! Get to the Institute of Light if you can!” Then he turned his attention to the people and animals near him. “Everyone—follow us!”

Together, he and Solana led the charge away from the deadly looking storm front.

## Chapter 1

### It's in the Bag

*3 Days Later*

“Noah...*hurry!*”

Ella's voice was barely a whisper. Noah turned his attention to the object in his hand. A key. *The* key. The magic gold key that could open any lock. The key that a cheetah had once delivered to Noah's house in the middle of the night. The key that, in a way, had started this incredible, magical, and dizzying adventure with the Secret Zoo.

When Noah held the key to the jagged-edged slot in the door, it melted and slid into the lock. Then it solidified again. Noah turned his wrist. *Click!* The door was open.

“Go,” Megan said.

Noah hesitated. He glanced over his shoulder and saw the playground of Clarksville Elementary—a weedy lawn partly blanketed in crisp autumn leaves. In the darkness, he could faintly make out the swings, the climbing walls, the basketball court. He'd lost count of how many times he and his friends had snuck into their school.

Ella brushed past Noah and pushed through the door. As she stepped inside, the other scouts followed—Megan, Richie, and finally, Noah. The west wing of Clarksville Elementary was dimly lit by a few overhead lights. The four friends looked up and down the halls.

“All clear,” Noah said.

His friends knew this meant it was safe to come out of their camouflage. Together, they opened the zippers on their Specter pants, prompting the chameleons on their bodies to crawl through the magic portals in their pockets and return to the Secret Zoo.

“The maintenance room?” Megan asked as she slowly became visible.

Noah turned to his year-younger sister and nodded. The maintenance room seemed the best place to start. It held the only entrance to the cellar—the abandoned dirt cellar from the old school that had once stood on the same grounds as the new Clarksville Elementary. If the rumors

were true—the stories being passed around by excited voices in the halls and cafeteria—and tarantulas were really being spotted on the property, then the place to begin looking for them was the cellar, the room where DeGraff, the Shadowist, had once built a portal.

Noah checked the clock on a nearby wall: 7:26. All their parents, who'd gone out for dinner and a movie, wouldn't be home for at least two hours—the scouts had plenty of time. He led a cautious charge up the hall.

The scouts had other reasons to be worried. They hadn't heard from Mr. Darby or the Descenders in three days. No messages from Marlo, no communications in their headsets, no late-night visits. It wasn't normal.

The four friends turned down a new hall and suddenly stopped. A noise, from one of the classrooms.

“What was that?” Richie whispered.

Noah held his finger to his lips and turned to his best friend, Richie, who was wearing his favorite stocking cap with the wide ribbed cuff and oversized pom-pom.

They stayed quiet and held their awkward poses, arms and legs stretched out at different angles. Everyone from the school should have gone home for the day. The scouts had seen the last car drive out of the parking lot twenty minutes ago—Mrs. Mathers, a fifth-grade teacher with bushy hair, weary eyes, and a permanent stack of papers under her arm.

But maybe something else was in Clarksville Elementary. Noah thought of all the visitors the Secret Zoo had brought to the school. Blizzard and Little Bighorn—a polar bear and a rhinoceros. Sasquatches. The Descenders and Specters. Even DeGraff, the feared enemy of the Secret Zoo.

“Probably the pipes,” Noah said after a minute of silence had passed.

They headed out again, perhaps a little more quickly this time. Near the middle of a long hall was a room marked MAINTENANCE AND ELECTRICAL. Noah checked the door—open—and pushed his way inside.

In the maintenance room, large boxy appliances steamed and spat. A web of pipes covered the ceiling and crossed the open spaces above. Noah glanced to one side of the room, where an old door was closed and sealed with a padlock. The cellar. He went to it and used his magic key. The shackle sprang from the steel body with such a loud *click!* that Richie jumped, sending the pom-pom on his hat into a dance.

“Ready?” Noah asked.

Megan answered with a quick nod that made her pigtails swing.

The door creaked as it opened, and a cool draft stroked Noah’s skin. Darkness. Noah reached into the space and slid his hand along the wall until he found a light switch. A steep flight of concrete steps led to a dirt floor below. He remembered the last time the scouts had been here. DeGraff had hidden in one of the rooms and attacked them, capturing the Descenders.

Noah gathered what he could of his courage and walked onto the first step. Then he moved to the second, then the third. The smell of must and earth invaded his senses. He took the fourth step, the fifth, conscious of how closely his friends were following. He paused when he reached the dirt floor, and the scouts crowded around him. Just in front of the staircase was a hall, roughly six feet across and a hundred feet long. Both of the concrete walls had four carved-out sections—doorless entryways to other places. Light bulbs dangled from simple fixtures.

“No tarantulas,” Richie said, taking a step back.

As he turned to go, Noah grabbed his arm. “We have to check,” Noah said. “The rooms.”

His friend opened his mouth to protest but then closed it. Two years of dealing with the Secret Zoo had taught Richie to be brave, at least a little. He’d come a long way from being the boy with a childish hat, shiny shoes, and a perpetual wedgie.

The scouts eased down the hall, looking through the entryways as they passed. Most of the rooms were empty, but one held an old furnace covered with dust. Noah’s heart raced as he neared the entryway at the end of the hall—the passage that DeGraff had dragged the Descenders through to get to the portal in the back of the room. Noah took a deep breath. Then he turned and walked inside.

The room was empty, and the portal to the Secret Zoo that had once been in the far wall was still gone. There were no tarantulas, and no sign that any had been here.

“Nothing,” Megan said.

“Good,” Richie said. “Let’s go—I hate this place.”

Noah stared at the far wall, remembering the dark tunnel, and DeGraff dragging Solana into it. He imagined DeGraff’s face: the two skull cavities where his nose should have been, the bugs squirming in his flesh. DeGraff. A corpse kept alive by the magic in the shadows. A creature bent on taking over the Secret Zoo and destroying the world.

Noah felt a tug on his sleeve, and then he heard a voice, his sister’s. “Noah, we should go.”

Noah nodded, but he didn't move. He thought of the last time he'd seen DeGraff, eight days ago in the City of Species after the rescue of Tank and the Descenders. DeGraff had narrowly avoided capture, and then he'd escaped into the Creepy Critters sector, sealing its only passageway behind him.

"C'mon, Noah!"

His sister tugged so hard this time that he stumbled backward. He turned and followed the scouts out of the room, suddenly anxious to get away from his memories of this place. The friends charged up the hall and took the steps two at a time. Back in the maintenance room, Noah closed and locked the door.

"Let's get out of here," Ella said.

They fled the room and rushed down the hall, no longer concerned about being quiet. When they reached the glass wall of the media center, Megan and Ella stopped so suddenly that Noah and Richie practically fell over them. Something was crawling on the floor. Noah thought it was a rat, but then he saw the creature's eight legs and bulbous body. A tarantula. The spider froze in place. Then it quickly crawled through a gap beneath the front door of the media center.

"Guys," Ella said, "what do we do?"

Megan answered by holding her palm out to Noah, who dropped the magic key onto it. She walked to the entrance of the media center and opened the door. The scouts followed her into the room, which was softly lit by a few lamps.

"Where did it go?"

The scouts scanned the floor as they paced between the chest-high bookcases.

"It's gone," Megan said.

"How can it be *gone*?" Ella shot back.

Noah walked around the media specialist's desk. There was nothing beneath it but a pair of rubber boots that Ms. Anderson wore to go outside on rainy days.

"The books," Megan said. "Check the shelves."

"For *one* tarantula?" Ella said.

Megan shook her head. "No. For more."

Noah cringed at the thought, but he knew his sister was right. With the Secret Zoo, things rarely happened in moderation.

Noah squatted beside a bookcase and began to pull back the books to look behind them.

Nothing. When he got to the end of the bookcase, he went to another, and another. Still nothing. He stood up straight and saw Richie's head pop up like a gopher's.

"Anything?" Noah asked.

Richie shook his head.

"Uhh...*guys*..."

Noah turned and saw Ella looking up. He followed her gaze. Dozens of tarantulas were crawling aimlessly along the ceiling.

Richie gasped and backed into a bookcase. Ella, her eyes wide, slowly shook her head.

"How did they get in here?" Megan asked.

"I have no idea," Noah said. "But we have to round them up."

"And put them *where*?"

Noah didn't have an answer. He touched the transmit button on the tiny headset in his ear and tried to contact the Descenders again: "Solana? Sam? Guys—it's Noah."

The other scouts stayed quiet as they listened to their own headsets. The four friends had worn them every day since the headsets had been given to them by the Descenders to secretly communicate back and forth.

"Guys?" Noah said, still touching his ear. "Tank? Anyone there?"

"Forget it," Megan said.

Noah looked up and saw the tarantulas again. Then he glanced around the room for something to put them in. Next to the checkout counter was a stack of book bags. As Noah ran to it, the other scouts followed.

"Here," he said as he tossed one to each of his friends.

"Book bags?" Richie said.

"Fill them up," Noah said. He held his book bag out to show that it had a Velcro strap that folded over the top. "That should keep them in."

"*Should*?" Richie said.

"You got a better idea?"

Richie thought about it for a few seconds and then shrugged.

Noah walked to a spot beneath the tarantulas and carefully climbed up a low bookcase, using the shelves as steps. The bookcase wobbled but didn't fall. He stood on the top and found that the ceiling was just out of reach.

“Throw me a book.”

Megan tossed one up. Noah grabbed it out of the air and then held it so the spine was pressed flat against the ceiling. He held up the bag. When a tarantula crawled close enough, he used the book to sweep it into the bag.

“Go,” he said to the other scouts. “Spread out.”

Each of his friends grabbed a book, hurried off in a different direction, and climbed a bookcase. They walked along the tops, using their books the way Noah had. Tarantulas began to fill their bags. Megan jumped from her bookcase to another. She captured the two tarantulas overhead and then leaped to a new bookcase. Noah followed her lead. At his new location, he reached up and claimed another tarantula. Then he jumped to a new spot.

Ella and Richie joined in, and for a few minutes, the scouts looked like frogs hopping across lily pads to stay out of the water. At one point, a tarantula fell off the ceiling and landed on Richie’s head. Before Richie could panic, Noah jumped to the top of his best friend’s bookcase, grabbed the tarantula with his free hand, and dropped it into his bag. Then he wiped his hand on his pants and tried to forget the way the big spider’s hairy legs had felt against his skin.

Richie, his face pale with shock, simply said, “Thanks, man.”

“No problem,” Noah said. Then he jumped back to his bookcase, which teetered but didn’t fall.

Before long—and after a couple more small mishaps—all the tarantulas were caught. The friends sealed their bags and climbed down to the ground.

“Now what?” Ella asked. When she held up her arm, Noah saw the tarantulas’ bodies pushing against the side of her book bag. “You want to leave ’em in the drop box for Ms. Anderson to deal with?”

Noah imagined a second grader opening the book drop and then shrieking as a tarantula scurried out onto her Beverly Cleary book.

“The Secret Zoo,” Noah said. “We have to take them back.” He glanced at a nearby clock and added, “We have time.”

As his friends thought about this, Noah saw several hairy legs curling out from a small opening in the top of his bag. He shook his arm and the tarantula dropped back down.

“Okay,” Megan said. “Let’s do it.”

Noah nodded. Then he led the group out of the media center. In the halls, the scouts used the

chameleons to camouflage themselves again. Seconds later, they pushed through the exit in the west wing, and Noah locked the door behind them. As they hurried onto Jenkins Street toward the Clarksville Zoo, Noah hoped they could make it to the Secret Zoo and back before their parents got home. And he hoped they wouldn't run into any more trouble.