

Chapter 1



In a little school surrounded by farmland, far away from any town, Gemma's day starts like any other. But today – like when birds stop chirping just before a storm, or when music in a film softens right before something leaps out of the darkness – Gemma can't shake the feeling that something horrible is going to happen.

Perhaps it's because this morning Gemma's mum and dad spoke about moving, and she doesn't want to leave Nullaboo. Perhaps it's because the result of the upcoming science competition rides on a topic assigned to

students by nothing more than luck. Perhaps it's both of these things.

As the school bell sounds, Gemma's stomach knots into a tight ball. Her chair scuffs the carpet as she pulls it underneath her desk. She sits and waits, minutes away from finding out her topic for the state science competition.

This is the big one. The competition every student in the state, years three and up, is desperate to win. Gemma is in with a shot. Science is her thing, and this year's theme is insects. Gemma wants butterflies. She would definitely win with butterflies.

The topics have already been chosen and drawn from a hat. Gemma turns in her seat and catches a glimpse of Nina. She smiles as Mrs Merrylock hands her an envelope.



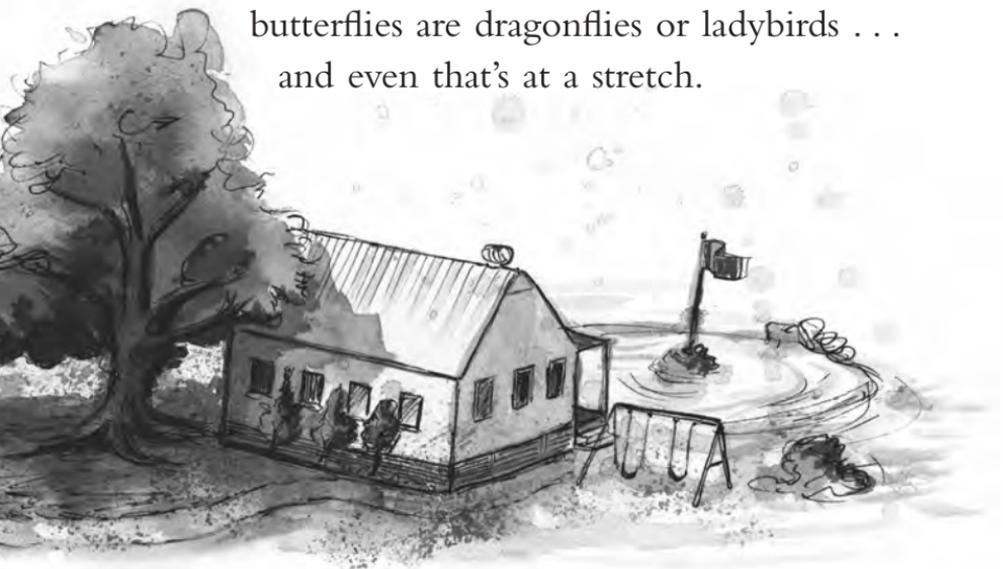
‘Thank you, Mrs Merrylock.’ Nina says it loudly to emphasise how good her manners are. She waits for Mrs Merrylock to move on to the next desk before looking over at Gemma. Nina’s hair – shiny, perfect and straight – swishes back and forth as her head moves. The exact opposite to Gemma’s wild mop. Nina’s smile feels less friendly when Mrs Merrylock isn’t looking.

Gemma watches her rip open the envelope. Nina scans down the page, punches the air and whisper-shouts, ‘Yes!’ She looks at Gemma and mouths, ‘Butterflies.’

Spewing.

Nina won last year. This is catastrophic.

The only topics left that could compete with butterflies are dragonflies or ladybirds . . . and even that’s at a stretch.



Mrs Merrylock places an envelope on Gemma's desk.

Gemma mumbles a 'thank you', lifts the sticky fold and pulls out the sheet of paper. Holding her breath, she closes her eyes and tries to cross her toes in her shoes.

Please be dragonflies or ladybirds. Please be dragonflies or ladybirds . . .

She unfolds her paper.

Nullaboo Public School Science Competition

Year Four Entry

You must prepare a five-minute presentation.

You may include photos, graphs, video footage, handouts or any other effective means to communicate your research to the audience.

Nullaboo Public School teachers, students, parents and judges will be invited to attend.

Two students will be selected to represent the school at the Sydney Science Competition and have the chance to win \$10,000 for our school.

Good luck.

Your topic is:

March fly

Gemma groans. March flies are stupid insects; they bite and they're ugly.

Nina giggles at the equipment table. Gemma glances back to see what she's doing. A butterfly net is slung over her shoulder. She picks up a plastic specimen jar, giggles once more, and then skips out the door to start looking for her subject. Gemma stares after her then lowers her eyes back to the words *march fly*. She can't possibly win with march flies. Besides, it's February. Are they even around yet?

As the classroom empties, Gemma screws up her page and pelts it towards the rubbish bin.

'Gemma Hart!' Mrs Merrylock snaps. 'What did you just do?'

Gemma jumps. She can feel Mrs Merrylock standing right behind her.

'Ah . . .' She can't deny anything. Mrs Merrylock saw her do it. She turns around, red-faced.

'Sit down,' Mrs Merrylock instructs.

Gemma does as she's told.

Mrs Merrylock sits down in front of her. She tucks a dark curl behind her ear and softens her voice.

‘Gemma, it’s not like you to do something like that. What’s wrong?’

Gemma lets out a sharp breath. ‘I really wanted butterflies, that’s all. Nina got the best topic *again*. I just wanted . . .’ Gemma stops, embarrassed by her whininess. She drops her voice. ‘I wanted to be the one to go to Sydney. I wanted to bring back the cup this year.’

Nina is the standing champion. Never before has the cup gone to the same school two years running. Not only would winning be a humungous personal achievement, but it would also make history for the school.

Mrs Merrylock walks over to the bin and picks up the ball of paper. She unravels it and glances at Gemma’s topic. She sits back down and pauses for a moment before saying, ‘It may be that you just don’t know anything about the march fly yet. You wait until you catch one and look at it up close. You’ll see its big beady eyes –’ Mrs Merrylock opens her eyes as wide as she can ‘– and its funny beaky mouth . . . and its beautiful transparent wings.’

Gemma laughs at Mrs Merrylock’s actions. She looks more like a startled duck than a fly.

‘You might be surprised,’ Mrs Merrylock continues. ‘The march fly can definitely win this competition.’

‘You really think so?’

‘If you change your attitude. It’s your presentation that’s being judged, not your subject.’

Gemma considers Mrs Merrylock’s words. ‘I’ve even borrowed Mum’s special bug catcher.’

Gemma’s mum is an entomologist. She does important research studying insects found in the Nullaboo rice fields.

‘You have? I’d love to see it.’ Mrs Merrylock’s always interested in new gadgets.

Gemma fishes the bug catcher out of her bag.

‘It magnifies things to two hundred and fifty times their size, and has a microphone and earbuds so you can hear even the quietest bug sounds . . . and you want to know the best thing?’

‘Absolutely.’

‘It records everything – so I can download it onto my computer.’

‘That really is an amazing bug catcher. If you win the Sydney Science Competition, maybe we’ll be able to buy one for the school.’

Gemma nods. 'I'd better go and get started. Um, where do march flies hang out?'

'I'm not sure.' Mrs Merrylock laughs. 'I hope to find out when you do your presentation.'



Gemma steps outside the classroom into the hot morning sun. Nullaboo can reach fifty degrees Celsius in summer, but today is only going to be thirty-eight. Nina's already flitting around the lawn chasing butterflies. Ned is climbing a tree. Isla's crawling, nose down, along the concrete. Someone else has their head buried in a flowerbed with their backside in the air.

Gemma doesn't know where to start. At home, flies hang around in the shade when it's this hot. She looks about the school yard and heads towards the Moreton Bay Fig – the largest, shadiest tree in the centre of the playground.

Gemma circles the wide girth of the trunk, stepping over the large, protruding roots. No march flies. No any sort of flies, which is strange. When you don't want flies they seem to have no trouble finding you. She looks

up into the thick canopy of leaves, then sits and leans against the tree trunk. Maybe the computer will have to be the first step after all.

Just then, something catches Gemma's eye. It must be caught by a sunray because it's glowing. It's a feather. Not a big, long feather, but a tiny fluffy feather. The sort that would come from a bird's chest. It moves like a graceful, powdery snowflake, floating on a soft breeze. Gemma holds out her bug catcher and moves slowly so she doesn't disturb the air around it. It floats into the catcher and Gemma carefully moves the base up and . . . Gotcha!

Gemma brings her eye down to the magnifying glass.

'Ahhhh!' Gemma drops the bug catcher and springs to her feet.

What was that? What was that? WHAT WAS THAT?

She looks around the playground.

Where is everyone? Even Nina would be a welcome sight right now. *What was that?*

Gemma edges forward again, leans in and tries to see but the bug catcher has fallen upside

down. Her heart hammers in her chest. She holds her breath and shifts in a little bit more.

Here goes.

Gemma flips the catcher back onto its base and pulls her hand away as if it's a hot coal. She waits a few seconds before moving in closer. She crouches down slowly and looks through the clear plastic. A feather. A glowing feather, no bigger than a bull ant. Gemma shades it with her hands, but the glow stays. It's glowing on its own. But that face . . . Gemma was sure she saw a face. She must be seeing things. Feathers don't have faces, nor do they glow.

Gemma takes another deep breath, musters up all of her courage and brings her eye back down to the magnifying glass.

A tiny face looks up at Gemma's oversized, distorted eye.

Pfff!

The face disappears and turns into a feather. Gemma resists the urge to jerk her head away and forces herself to watch.

The face reappears and looks up at her.

Pfff.

It changes back into a feather.

Gemma scrambles for the earbuds. Her hands tremble as she plugs them in.

Pfff.

The tiny face reappears out of the feather and makes a whimpering sound. It's a girl. She closes her eyes, like she's concentrating, then *pfff!* She's gone. Gemma watches this a few more times before her brain can fathom what she's seeing.

'Don't be frightened,' Gemma says. 'I won't hurt you.'

The face reappears and looks up at Gemma. This time the girl stays, her twinkling emerald eyes filled with fear.

'What are you? Are you real?' Gemma whispers, almost to herself.

Slowly, the feather settles and the tiny girl emerges. She's wearing a shaggy white dress with shimmers of milky blue and grey around the hem. Her arms and feet are bare, her hair a light golden blonde. As she moves, silver dust swirls in her wake. Gemma blinks in disbelief.

'I'm not supposed to talk to you,' whispers the feather girl.

She speaks!



‘How come?’ Gemma asks.

‘It’s too dangerous.’

‘I’m not dangerous.’ Gemma laughs. ‘I’m just looking for march flies. I don’t even know what you are.’

‘I’m going to get into so much trouble for this . . .’ The tiny girl looks around anxiously. ‘Your species is our biggest threat.’ She rakes her hands through her hair. ‘You must never tell anyone about me. Can you do that, Gemma? Can you keep a secret forever?’

Gemma blinks a few times. Is she seeing *and* hearing things? Did this tiny feather girl just say her name?

‘Wait . . .’ Gemma shakes her head in disbelief. ‘Go back. What are you?’

‘I’m a fairy. Well, I will be when I grow up. We’re born as Glints, then we grow into Twinkles, then just before we get our wings and magic we are Sparkles. I’m a Sparkle – I’ll get my wings and magic any day now.’

Pfff!

Gemma is startled by a voice behind her.

‘Gemma, what are you doing?’ It’s Nina. She’s standing with her hands on her hips, frowning.

‘Nothing, Nina. Just . . . er . . . looking for my subject.’

‘Who are you talking to?’

‘Was I talking? Ah . . .’

‘Let me see that.’ Nina tries to grab the bug catcher.

‘No.’ Gemma jerks it away and shields it behind her back. ‘Ah, I mean, I’m using it. It’s just a bug catcher. Not that you need one for butterflies.’

A smile spreads over Nina’s face.

‘I caught a big one.’

Nina holds out her specimen jar. Inside is a large orange and black butterfly.

Gemma gasps. ‘It’s beautiful, Nina. You’re so lucky.’

‘I know, I couldn’t believe it,’ Nina gushes. ‘With butterflies, I really think I can win again. That will be two years running! So, what did you get?’

‘March flies.’

Nina throws her head back and laughs. ‘Oh man, I’m sorry. But don’t worry, the subject isn’t everything.’ She laughs again as she turns on her heel and flicks her perfect hair off

her shoulders. ‘Good luck catching *march flies*, Gemma,’ she adds as she strides away.

‘The subject isn’t everything,’ Gemma mimics under her breath.

When Nina is out of earshot Gemma turns back to her bug catcher. ‘Are you still there? How do you do that feather thing?’

The fluffy feather slowly becomes a tiny girl again. ‘I can’t help it. It happens when I’m frightened.’

‘Like a pufferfish?’

‘I don’t know about pufferfish, but when I’m scared I fluff out. My magic is coming, so I can hang onto that feeling and stay like that now. That’s how I was watching you. When I was a Twinkle I couldn’t control it at all.’

‘You were watching me?’

‘Yes. We do it all the time. That’s how I know your name. We sit in your classes, on the windowsill where you can’t see us. We learn what you learn, only we call it Human Studies.’

‘There are more of you?’

‘Of course. Thousands. Our whole colony lives here.’

Gemma's eyes pop at the thought of thousands of fairies. 'Really? Of all the places in the world, you choose to live here?'

The Sparkle smiles. 'Nullaboo is our home. It's perfect for us. The clay soil means there are fine particles that float in the air and make it easy for us to hover, while the gum trees provide us with food and shelter. We can't live in deciduous trees, and further north the humidity clogs our wings and slows us down. Salt from the sea makes us itch, and smog from the cities makes us cough. But the main thing is that this place is chemical free. The school gardener only uses organic sprays and fertilisers so the conditions are just right. Well, except for the silver spiders . . .'

A pale pink tear trickles from the Sparkle's eye. She dabs at it with the back of her hand. 'That's why I let you catch me. I need your help. I don't know what else to do. Queen Bernini, their leader, wants us gone because our fairy dust keeps away flies and other insects spiders like to eat. She's always envied our colony and wants our land for herself. Last night she stormed the Council Chambers with her army and captured my Papa Faff.'

Gemma blinks a few times and shakes her head. ‘I can’t believe this,’ she says under her breath. ‘I thought you guys were make-believe, in story books.’

‘Yes, that’s what keeps us safe. We’ve worked hard for thousands of years to stay out of sight. There are accidental sightings, of course, but thankfully they’re mostly with children, and grown-up humans never believe them. There have been a few sightings by grown-ups over the centuries too. Unfortunately for them, other humans just think they’re telling stories. That’s one of the reasons I chose you, Gemma. As well as being kind, you’re young enough not to be considered mad, but you’re old enough to help me.’

The Sparkle pauses before looking right into Gemma’s eyes. ‘Can you help me? Please? My Papa Faff doesn’t have much longer. He was taken prisoner last night. He refused to leave his chambers until everyone else was safely out first.’

‘Can’t someone with magic save him?’

‘No.’ The tiny girl looks at her bare feet. ‘We don’t have that kind of magic, and the magic

we do have can't penetrate silver. You're our only hope, Gemma. We are defenceless against Queen Bernini and her army.'

'What will she do to him?'

'She'll cocoon him in her web and leave him to die. By sundown today it will already be too late.' The Sparkle sits down, puts her head into her hands and sobs.

'That's awful,' says Gemma.

'I know,' the fairy cries. 'Once she spins him round and round with all those legs there is nothing he can do. But I can't let him die, I just can't. We need him. He's our leader, the only one who can keep the colony safe. Will you help us? Will you try to save my Papa Faff?'

Gemma swallows hard. 'Yes, of course,' she says.

The Sparkle breathes a sigh of relief. 'I knew I was right about you, Gemma. This was a huge risk. I'll be in big trouble when my family find out, but it will be worth it if it means Papa Faff is safe.'

'What's your name?' Gemma asks.

'Janomi.'

‘Janomi,’ Gemma repeats. ‘That’s a beautiful name. What will happen if I tell someone about you?’

‘No one will believe you, and if they did . . . I don’t know. Ever since I was a Glint I’ve been told to keep away from humans. You are the single greatest threat to our species, but no one has ever said what would happen if your people discovered our existence. Our elders say that we would have to leave immediately, but I don’t know where we would go. It would be terrible. My mother told me that hundreds of fairies died during the last unscheduled migration. She didn’t tell me any of the details herself, but I’ve heard rumours that all of the Glints, Twinkles and Sparkles were eaten by a plague of locusts. I hope it’s not true. I hope it’s just a story to scare us into being careful and hiding ourselves, but it’s why you can never tell anyone about me.’

Gemma remembers the last locust plague that tore through the fields like a violent squall a couple of years ago. She was playing in the front garden with her little sisters, Ivy and Meg. Suddenly the sun was blocked out and the sky

turned black. In a mad panic, they ran to the house and slammed the screen door shut behind them. Gemma looked back to see Meg still outside on the ground, screaming, locusts pelting into her. Meg had only just started walking and was slow and tottery. Gemma could hear her dad's footsteps sprinting down the hallway.

Gemma opened the door, covered her face with her forearm and dashed outside for her sister. She grabbed Meg under her arms and started dragging her towards the house. Suddenly her father's arms enveloped them both, scooped them up and shielded them from the bugs as he carried them to safety.

Her mum, Kendra, dashed around like a lunatic with cameras and specimen jars for the rest of the day. She wore white overalls and a helmet with a face shield, and exclaimed 'Amazing!', 'Remarkable!' and 'Incredible!' while the locusts ate everything green. The next day they were gone and the country was bare, brown and dusty. Kendra spent weeks in her laboratory studying her footage and specimens.

Baby fairies wouldn't stand a chance against locusts.

‘Gemma, there’s something I haven’t told you,’ says Janomi. She pauses and looks down before meeting Gemma’s eyes. ‘Queen Bernini and her army will be guarding Papa Faff. A silver spider can give a nasty bite. There could be thousands of them.’

Gemma considers this. ‘I’ll have to take special precautions. But don’t worry, I know what to do. I’ve seen what my mum does when she handles spiders, and she studies insects and arachnids. You’re standing in her bug catcher.’

Janomi walks to the edge of the plastic platform and runs her hand across the clear plastic. ‘Are you going to keep me locked up in here?’

‘Oh no, of course not! Here, I’ll take off the lid. But you might have to stay sitting on the base so the microphone can pick up your voice. I’m listening to you through this earpiece. You’re so tiny I won’t be able to hear you without it.’

‘Oh, it must be so good to have such magic. I can’t wait until I get mine.’

Gemma laughs. ‘I’m not magic.’

Janomi shakes her head. ‘All humans are magic – we see it all the time.’

Gemma giggles at the thought. ‘Janomi, will you be my friend, you know, after today?’

The Sparkle laughs. ‘I’ve been your friend since your first day of school.’

A warm feeling reaches all the way to Gemma’s toes.

‘So, thousands of silver spiders, huh?’ Gemma swallows hard. ‘Let’s go and find your Papa Faff.’