

## Chapter 1: Wake Up Call

It was Monday, and Alex awoke to the sound of his dad peeing. It was 6:30 a.m. exactly. Alex didn't have to look at his alarm clock, or even turn it off. His father was that reliable, and loud.

Alex's tiny bedroom was right next to the modest semi-detached home's only toilet, so he was mindful to close his door before going to bed. The sound of wee splashing into the toilet water was bad enough, but it was nothing compared to what usually followed.

FART! And there it was. The morning's release, ushering in the new day with an explosion of methane, built up by his dad's intestinal tract as it worked through the night on his diet of fast food and soda pop. A sound akin to a car tire exploding, combined with a noise you'd expect a dying duck to make. Alex smiled as he heard his two younger brothers, Graham and Robert, giggle in their room across the hall.

"Frank Adams!" complained Alex's mother, Sharon.

"What?"

Alex loved this bizarre family tradition.

After throwing back his solar system themed covers, Alex rolled his short chubby frame out of bed. After opening his curtains to let in the day, he got an unpleasant shock. Overnight, a spider had set up camp on his window, and had successfully built a large web connecting the latch to the frame. The spider waited for its next victim, using the latch for cover. Alex put on his glasses and carefully moved closer to the latch to get a better look. He could just make out the spider's thick body and legs. He hated that kind of spider the most. He could handle the tiny ones, and even the spiders with the long spindly legs and tiny bodies. The big ones, however, were too fast and too unpredictable for his liking.

Across the room, Alex heard a buzzing sound. He looked around but at first couldn't see what was making it—then he located it. A fly had also gotten into his room somehow, and was likely excited to see the light coming from the window. Alex ducked as the fly buzzed past him, and once the little bug reached the window, it repeatedly head-butted the glass looking for a way out.

Alex could see the spider pull back into its corner of the web, ready to pounce if the fly happened to get tangled in its trap. All three players in this morning's drama, didn't have to wait long before the action started. The fly, not looking where it was going, slammed into the spider's web.

The spider wasted no time, and crawled out from its hiding spot. Alex watched as the fly failed to break the sticky grip of the web. It was then overwhelmed by the large arachnid; a few seconds later, it was all over. The fly stopped moving, and the spider began wrapping it up as a present for later.

Alex saw this as an opportunity to let some fresh air into his room. With the spider now

preoccupied, he grabbed a pencil and broke the web's connection to the latch. The spider and the wrapped-up fly swung away, and Alex quickly opened his window. A gust of wind pushed into the room, causing the poorly anchored web to flap about. The spider was knocked off its home, landing on the window sill. From there it quickly crawled under the ledge and disappeared behind the bedside cabinet. Alex decided it was a good time to leave his bedroom.

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Alex marched into the kitchen, and opened the cabinets underneath the sink. Inside were all the supplies he needed. He grabbed a pair of pink rubber gloves and a large can of bug spray.

“What on earth are you doing?” asked Alex's mum, who was busily setting up breakfast.

“Spider, Mum,” he replied as he put on a pair of his dad's safety goggles and an old painters mask. He stood in front of his mother ready to do battle.

“Go get 'em tiger,” she said.

Alex charged back to his room to do battle with the spider.

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Sharon had perfected and loved her morning routine. The men came first in this household, or at least that's what she'd say to them. Her real objective was to get *her* house all to herself, as quickly as possible. She liked to think she was the calm guiding force getting each day off to the perfect start, stealthily navigating her short oval shaped frame around the house, strategically placing items her boys would need in places she knew they'd eventually be.

As the boys argued upstairs over the bathroom, she was downstairs in her favourite paisley quilted dressing gown, calmly putting their breakfast together—popping toast and arranging cereal choices, along with milk, sugar, jam and marmalade, all while brewing the tea. By the time the males had assembled themselves into some state of readiness for the day ahead,

the dining room table was ready to accept them—conditional on whether they passed her morning inspection, of course.

Once the boys were ready, Sharon walked down the line. Frank’s collar got adjusted and some stray shaving cream was found slowly sliding down his neck. Alex’s school tie looked like the minute and hour hands of a clock (it was 8:20, apparently), so Sharon re-tied it, made the hour hand longer, and set it to point at 6:30. Robert, the youngest Adams, had been known to show up wearing only his favourite red underwear, but today managed to find and wear most of his school uniform. He was, however, sporting mismatched socks, so was sent back upstairs to find a match to either one. Sharon merely glanced at Graham; she knew there’d be nothing to fix there. Graham was a middle-aged tailor trapped inside a nine-year-old's body.

After the inspection was over, Alex grabbed two slices of toast, and headed for the back door.

“Err, excuse me,” said Sharon, “where do you think you’re going?”

“Round Ian’s. We’ve got a war to finish.”

“Really? Couldn’t war wait until after school?”

“No, Mum. I’ve got a new plan of attack I want to try out. It’s going to be epic.”

Sharon rolled her eyes, already regretting the initial question. “Fine, go on then. Oh, and remember, your dad is driving you home after the school’s visit to the pit today.”

After breakfast, it was time for the males to go about their day. Robert and Graham grabbed their school bags and walked through the living room to stand by the front door. Frank followed but was stopped by Sharon. “Hold your horses there, Mr. Frank Adams.” She pointed to his lunch tin on the kitchen counter.

“I’ve packed a peanut butter sandwich, and two apples.”

Frank couldn't look less excited.

“Please don't throw it away and get burgers with your mates.”

Seeing Frank's phony hurt expression, Sharon moved in closer and patted Frank's large belly. “You know the doctor said you should watch what you eat.”

With a sigh, Frank nodded and picked up the tin. Sharon then pointed to her cheek, and Frank kissed it. “Okay?”

Frank hesitated.

“Okaaayyyy?”

“Yes, okay,” sighed Frank.

From the front door, arms crossed, Sharon watched Frank, Robert and Graham head out into the cool spring air and get into Frank's car parked in the street. Sharon was finally alone, and loved it. This was her favourite part of the day—the quiet after the storm. She poured herself a cup of tea, adding a splash of milk and half a teaspoon of sugar. She took her tea into the living room, carefully inspecting the carpet and furniture as she went, creating her mental to-do list for the day's chores. Some of her bowls of lavender-scented potpourri needed refreshing, and it had been at least two days since she last dusted her collection of decorative ornaments.

Sharon sat down on her favourite recliner and carefully pulled the wooden lever to extend the footrest. She then reached over to the end-table next to her chair, and opened the small drawer at the front. Inside was a black notebook. She picked it up, and unhooked the pen that was clipped to it. Flipping through the book, she stopped on a page half-filled with crossed out numbers. The most recent and untouched number was 825. She crossed that out and wrote 826 next to it.