

ONE

The hunter would not be denied.

His spear drawn and ready, he crashed his way over, under, around, and through the bushes and brambles in his path. His arms and legs were getting mightily scratched up, but that wouldn't slow him down, not today. He focused on his fleeing prey with a big cat's intensity, determined that it would not escape. He was, after all, the king of the forest, the Master Huntsman.

Of course, Martin wasn't really a Masai tribesman with a spear; he was an eleven-year-old kid with a bug net. And his prey was no swift and nimble antelope; it was a black swallowtail butterfly. But somehow the chase was more fun if he let his imagination fly a bit.

Besides, he really needed that swallowtail for his collection. So he summoned his inner warrior and charged after the fluttering bug as it led him deeper and deeper into the woods, a good quarter mile beyond his usual hiking range.

"Come on, *land*," he commanded through clenched teeth. "You know you have to!"

He wasn't supposed to stray that far from the path, but the longer the chase went on, the more determined he was to make his catch. So, when the crafty butterfly found its way to the Kinnewoc limestone quarry and headed down the ramp, Martin didn't slow down to read the sign on the traffic gate:

DANGER!
ROCKSLIDE AREA
KEEP OUT

He slid underneath the gate and sprinted down the steep dirt roadway, following the darting, dodging insect

all the way down to the bottom of the quarry. The work crews were gone, and they had taken all their trucks and digging machines with them. So there was nothing blocking the way as Martin chased his six-legged prey across the quarry floor. He was huffing and wheezing, exhausted by the long chase, and now, for the first time, he couldn't escape the thought that the Master Huntsman might just have to go home, get a sandwich, and try again some other time.

Then, silently, almost right in front of him, the butterfly circled in and made a slow, graceful landing on a clump of rock sticking out from the wall. His focus revived, Martin raised his net and tiptoed forward. The swallowtail slowly opened and closed its wings, the black-and-yellow scales glistening in the sunlight.

Closer . . . closer . . . that's it, hold steady . . .

The instant Martin got within striking range, *whoosh-whap!* He smacked the net against the wall.

But this day would belong to the hunted, not the hunter. The butterfly slipped away just in the nick of time, and all Martin could do was watch as it spiraled straight up, up, up, and over the quarry wall, free to flit among the trees and torment other young bug hunters for the rest of its days.

"Aaaaaaaach," Martin groaned. "How could you be that quick?"

But his disappointment quickly vanished; now an oddly bright glimmer in the wall caught his attention. What was all that *ice* doing mixed in with the rocks? It seemed to be melting quickly in the sun—water was dripping down across the whole length of the rock face. And what kind of rocks were those? Limestone, right, but other kinds were mixed in with the ice, strange ones he couldn't remember ever seeing before—and he considered himself something of a rock expert.

Martin touched the cold, wet surface of the wall, and a small chunk fell off. He picked it up and brought it close to his face, rubbing his thumb across the flat surface. No, this was definitely not an ordinary piece of

limestone. Right there on the smooth face of the stone was the clear outline of . . . what? A bird's foot? Maybe, or maybe not, but it was definitely something that once was alive—and a long, *long* time ago.

“Wow. A fossil!”

Martin had seen pictures of fossils before, but he never imagined he would find one just a twenty-minute hike from his own backyard. The quarrymen must have dug straight into an ancient dying ground for creatures that lived millions of years ago.

As he reached over his shoulder and dropped the fossil into his backpack, all thoughts of hunters and antelopes and butterflies disappeared from Martin's head. *If there's one fossil here, there could be hundreds.* Imagine being the only kid in this corner of Wisconsin with his own, personally gathered fossil collection!

Fascinated, he reached for the wall again. But the instant his hand touched it, another rock came loose—a bigger one, higher up. Martin flinched as it hit the ground behind him with a loud *thud*. Then came a sharp *crackle*, and he had to duck and cover his head as more rocks rained down around him.

That's it—I'm out of here!

He spun on his heel to make a dash away from the rock face. But before he could take a second step, there was a tremendous RUMBLE and a giant slab of rock came crashing down from the wall, blocking his way. He gave a loud grunt and took a big hop backward, trying to keep his balance. Then, before he could even think about where to go next, there was an even bigger *rumble* and *crash*, and the very ground under his feet gave way!

“Holy mama!” he yowled, and he squeezed his eyes shut as he suddenly felt himself dropping straight down as though a trapdoor had opened up right underneath him, and rocks and boulders and chunks of ice came thundering down, completely burying the spot where he had just been standing.

Then . . . silence.

Anybody watching what had just happened would definitely think that was the end of Martin Tinker. But as it turned out, that swallowtail was not the only one having a lucky day. Underneath all those rocks and ice chunks, below ground level, there was one really, really small open space—and Martin somehow had managed to end up inside it.

“Wow,” he whispered. “Am I still alive?”

It was just about pitch-black in there, but he was able to move around a little—one of the few times, he realized, when it was actually a good thing to be skinny.

As he took a few long, deep breaths to help settle his nerves, he suddenly remembered something. The other day they’d said on the TV news that the Kinnewoc crew had accidentally drilled into a vein of dark ice, so now the quarry wall was unstable. It wasn’t safe to work on, and the quarry would be shut down.

Martin felt like kicking himself for not thinking of that before he went charging down there—but he could barely move, so any kicking was out of the question.

Okay, don’t panic, he thought. You can get out of this . . .

He awkwardly reached around behind his back and unzipped his backpack. It took a good half minute or so of groping, but he finally got his hand around his cell phone. And when he pressed the switch with his thumb and the screen lit up, he felt a surge of relief.

First he reached over with the phone light to check out a nasty scrape on his elbow—by some crazy stroke of luck, his only real injury from the fall. Then, hands jittering, he shined the light around his rocky cubbyhole. He could see a crack of daylight through a narrow chute above; with determination and a little luck, a short crawl should get him up and out.

“All right . . . okay. I’ve got this . . .”

As he clamped his lips tight and got set to start crawling, he could see in the dim light that there were even more of those mysterious fossils all around him. Even though he knew it was probably not the smartest

thing to do just now, he couldn't resist the urge to pick up a few of the smaller ones and slip them into his backpack—no easy maneuver when you're stuck in a rocky, icy space not much bigger than the trunk of a Buick.

When he had gathered a few handfuls of the fossils, Martin decided he'd better not mess around any longer, and began his uncomfortable crawl toward the opening above. He slithered his way along, holding his breath as he carefully navigated the jagged rock edges. Then, when he was halfway there . . . his knee banged on something cold.

“Ow!”

He reached down with the phone and saw that he had bumped something very odd—a smooth, oval object, a bit smaller than a football, grayish-brown and covered with . . . were those speckles, or just chunks of dirt? Hard to tell, because half of the thing was covered with ice, and the other half had a crust of grit and hard clay stuck to it. Martin edged backward a few inches to get a closer look. If this was a fossil, it was nothing at all like the others.

Another *rumble* in the rocks above sent a new shot of jitter-juice surging through his stomach. With no time to wrangle the heavy object into his backpack, he quickly scooped it up with his left hand, tucked it tight against his rib cage, and scrambled the rest of the way up to the narrow opening—and, with one last big push, popped out into the open air. Freedom!

Stooped over from the weight in his hand, he sprinted away from the wall as fast as his spindly legs would carry him. And his escape came not a moment too soon, because now there was an enormous CRASH, and suddenly the whole quarry wall gave way, cascading down in an avalanche of rocks and ice—and totally obliterating the small crevasse he had been trapped inside only a few brief seconds ago.

Having made it a safe distance away, he straightened up and turned to watch the spectacular scene, slack-jawed and wide-eyed. He stood there, his

heart thumping like a tommy-gun, hacking and coughing from the tons of dust, until all the rocks had finally settled. *So that's what it's like to almost die*, he thought. Then he thought of what his mom and dad might do if they ever found out how close he had come to an early grave. So of course, they would never hear a thing about it.

Realizing his fingers and left side were starting to feel numb, Martin looked down at the frozen stone he had forgotten he was holding. He brushed away some frost and dust, held it to his ear, knocked on it lightly, took a sniff—but it was not a thing that would give up its secrets easily.

He knew what he would do: take it home, set it up in his backyard barn lab, and get going on some serious research.

What he didn't know was that this strange, cold stone was going to change his life forever.