

Excerpt from DON'T BUG ME! by Pam Zollman (Holiday House, 2001, middle-grade novel; Bank Street College of Education: Best Books of 2002; 2003-2004 Sunshine State Young Readers' Choice Award nominee; Florida's Battle of the Books 2004; featured on the Highlights for Children's website [www.highlightskids.com](http://www.highlightskids.com))

## Chapter 1

Screams from the girls' bathroom echoed down the hall. I'd been on my way back to class after lunch, but those screams made me rush back the way I'd come.

Only two things make us girls scream like that.

Boys – or bugs!

Just as I reached the bathroom door, Charlie Bettencourt bumped into me. The prime suspect at the scene of the screams, Charlie could never hide his guilt. If it weren't for his cute smile, he wouldn't get away with anything.

“What'd you do no?” I asked.

Charlie tried to look innocent. “Me? Why nothing, Megan.” He grinned, showing his dimples. “Except maybe dare Oscar to kiss Rita.”

“He wouldn't!”

More shrieks made us both turn back toward the door.

Shrugging, Charlie said, “Sounds like maybe he did.”

I shouldered my way through everyone inside and found my best friend, Belinda. “What happened?” I asked. “Did Oscar kiss Rita?”

“Even better,” she told me, her face flushed with excitement. “A roach!” She spread her arms wide. “Megan, it's the biggest, hairiest tree roach I've ever seen.”

I tried to peer through the crowd. A swarm of girls huddled in one corner, trapping the insect between them and the sinks. “Roaches aren’t really hairy, are they?” I asked.

Belinda shrugged. “Ask Tamika. It flew right in her face.”

“Oh, gross!” I said, wrinkling my nose.

I could see the back of Tamika’s head, her dark, tight curls bobbing. She had her sneaker in one hand, and she was trying to herd the reluctant roach into it. Last year she would have squished that bug flat. This year she acted like a concerned cowboy trying to round up a beloved stray.

Since our school, DeMitre Intermediate, is only for sixth graders, we all have the same science assignments. And our current assignment is to capture and kill twenty-five different insects, pin them to corkboard, and label them.

Most of us girls would have run away from a bug last year in elementary school. Not this year. Now we all run toward a bug, hoping to catch it. Insects don’t have a chance in our school. Personally I think it’s a plot to save on the cost of exterminating the building.

Now, I don’t like bugs any better than last year. They’re nasty, and I shudder when I have to pick one up. But those bugs will help me pass science. And, believe me, I need all the help I can get.

Shrieking again, the crowd parted when the roach tried to escape. As it scurried toward me, I saw it clearly.

It was huge! A true monster!

Before it reached me, Tamika scooped it up in her shoe, covered the opening with her hand, and yelled in triumph.

“Hey,” Charlie Bettencourt called from the bathroom doorway, “what’s all the shouting about?”

“Bugs,” Belinda said. “Tamika found a huge one.”

He looked disappointed. “So it wasn’t about Rita?”

“I’m going to warn her,” I said.

Charlie grinned, his dimples showing in full force. “That wouldn’t be any fun, Megan. Here comes Mrs. Matzke.” He hurried down the hall in the opposite direction.

Two seconds later our history teacher stood in the doorway, hands on hips, frown on face. “What’s going on in here?” she demanded.

“Tamika caught a roach,” Belinda explained. Some of the girls behind me grumbled in disappointment.

“All right, everyone clear out of here,” Mrs. Matzke said. “Get back to your classes.”

As we filed out, the teacher put a firm hand on Tamika’s shoulder. “You and I are going to find a container for that roach.”

Grinning, Tamika held up her sneaker. “It’s a beaut, Mrs. M. Want to see it?”

“Most certainly not!” The teacher prodded Tamika toward the science room, keeping a wary eye on the sneaker in Tamika’s hand. “Be sure that thing doesn’t get out.”

Belinda whispered, “I wish it would. Then maybe I could catch it.”

“I know where you can get lots of insects,” I said. “But they won’t let us go there.”

“Where?”

I giggled. “The school kitchen.”

Belinda pretended to gag. “I just ate lunch! Thanks a lot, Megan.”

“What are friends for?”

Belinda looked behind her, then on both sides, checking if anyone could hear her.

“Maybe we should raid the kitchen sometime,” she whispered.

“You’re crazy!” I laughed. “You don’t really mean it...do you?”

“You’re right. It’s a crazy idea.”

Charlie Bettencourt was standing near the door to our English class. “What’s crazy?”

“You,” said Belinda, “for daring Oscar to kiss Rita.”

He shrugged. “He said he liked her.”

“That was an awful dare. Poor Rita!” I said.

Charlie followed me into the classroom. “It doesn’t matter. Oscar would never do it, anyway.”

“But you embarrassed him,” I scolded.

Dimples creased Charlie’s cheeks. “Yeah, his face did turn a nice shade of red. So, what embarrasses you, Megan?”

I didn’t reply. Instead, I flopped down in my seat. My cheeks suddenly flushed, and I didn’t know why.

Miss Rosenbloom began teaching us the merits of diagramming sentences. I couldn't see any merits in that. Nor could I see any merits in Charlie Bettencourt. He was as much of a pest as my little brother.

When school was finally over, Belinda and I sat next to each other on the bus, as usual. Tamika sat across the aisle, showing everyone her monster roach in a glass jar.

The moment Oscar stepped through the bus doors, Charlie led the boys in making smacking kissing noises. Before Oscar ducked his head, I saw his face flame with color. Even his ears and the back of his neck were burning. I was glad Rita didn't ride the same bus.

Belinda leaned close to me and whispered, "I heard Charlie like you."

"Me?" My mouth dropped open. "Well, I can't stand him."

"You talk to him all the time."

"So do you."

Belinda smiled. "But it's not me he likes."

"I don't believe it," I said indignantly.

She shifted her backpack to the floor and put her feet on top. "He said the only reason he doesn't sit next to you on the bus is because of our assigned seats."

"Did he tell you this?"

"No, Hector did."

I frowned. Hector Salinas and Charlie had been best friends since fourth grade when Charlie moved here. Was Belinda right?

"Hey, Megan," Tamika called, "how many bugs do you have?"

“Not as many as you do,” I said. “How about giving me your roach?”

She clutched the jar close to her heart. “No way. I worked hard to capture Bob.”

Belinda laughed. “You named it?”

“I name all my bugs,” Tamika said.

“So how are you going to kill it?” I asked.

“In the freezer,” she said. “I just can’t do it any other way.”

“Me neither,” Belinda agreed. “But I think you might be too attached to your bugs if you name them all.”

“Hey, Tamika!” Charlie yelled from two rows behind us. “Are you going to name one after me?”

“I’m saving your name for the ugliest one,” she replied, and everyone laughed. Oscar laughed the loudest.

Charlie grinned. “I’ll be famous. Tamika, you’re too kind. We should share the honor.”

She just rolled her eyes.

Brakes squealing, the school bus pulled to a stop at my street corner. As the doors whooshed open, Belinda promised to call me later. We were going on a bug hunt.

Dry brown leaves swirled around me. It was the first week of October and still warm. But that’s the way the weather always is in Houston.

As I walked four doors down to my house, I noticed the garage door was open. That meant Mom had been painting her ceramics for the upcoming craft shows.

I peeked inside the garage. No sign of Mom. The front door slammed as Alexander, my little brother, ran outside, a paper bag clutched in one hand. He paused uncertainly when he saw me, then waved.

“Hi, Meggie,” he called. Then he dashed across the yard to our neighbor’s house.

“Mom, I’m home,” I yelled as I came in and started up the stairs to my room.

My bedroom door was open. I never, ever leave it open.

Someone had been in my room.

Not Mom, because she respects my privacy and I’m supposed to clean my own room.

Not Dad, because he goes to work before I leave for school and doesn’t come home until after six.

Alexander.

Taking a deep breath, I walked into my room.

And then I saw it.

(end of chapter 1)