The Mystery of

Something evil is going on at the pet store. Can Jeremy find out the truth before it’s too late?

BY LAUREN TARSHIS | ART BY DAVID CATROW

The bird wouldn’t talk. That was the first clue that something was very wrong.

It was a cold Monday afternoon. As usual, Jeremy Milligan had walked from his elementary school to his uncle’s pet store. With him was his friend Molly, a skinny girl with bright-orange hair.

The two 11-year-olds arrived at Noah’s Pets and walked directly to the back of the store. Zimmerman, an African grey parrot, was perched in his large antique cage.

“Hey, Zimmerman!” Jeremy said. “We’re back!”

Normally, Zimmerman would fluff his gray feathers and squawk, “Jeremy, Jeremy, Jeremy.”

But that day, he said nothing. He stood on his perch, perfectly still.

“Hey, Zimmy,” Jeremy repeated, reaching in through the cage’s open door and inviting Zimmerman to hop onto his forearm.

Zimmerman said nothing. He didn’t move. He just stared silently at Jeremy through his tiny pinpoint eyes.

“He could be sick,” said Molly.

Jeremy carefully lifted Zimmerman from the cage and placed him on his shoulder. He reached up and gently scratched Zimmy’s head, feeling tiny bones through warm feathers.

Jeremy looked across the store to where a group of scruffy young men stood around the cash register. In the center of them was Anthony, the store’s manager.

“Anthony,” Jeremy called. “Something’s wrong with Zimmy. Can’t you see?”

“Why don’t you call 911?” Anthony called back with an impatient wave of his hand. His friends grunted with laughter.

Jeremy and Molly looked at each other and curled up their lips. Like many close friends, they sometimes argued over important issues, like which basketball team would win the playoffs and whether pizza was better with extra cheese or with meatballs. But on one topic they agreed completely: Anthony was a jerk. He’d been the store manager for the past eight weeks, since Uncle Noah went into the hospital for an operation on his hip.

Of course, Jeremy had wanted the job himself. After all, he’d been helping his uncle for years, and nobody knew the store’s animals better than he did. “No doubt you’re capable of watching the place until I’m back on my feet,” Uncle Noah had said. “But there are laws against keeping 11-year-olds out of school to run pet stores.”

So Anthony was hired. “He’ll do a good job,” Uncle Noah assured Jeremy. “And I know everything will be fine because you’ll be here
Snake Egg
to keep an eye on things.” Most of all, Uncle Noah wanted Jeremy to keep an eye on Zimmy, his beloved parrot that lived at the store.

“Hey,” Anthony yelled to Jeremy. “The basement stinks. You gonna stand there or clean it up?”

Jeremy, Molly, and Zimmerman went downstairs to Uncle Noah's basement office. Molly wrinkled her nose.

“It does stink,” she said.

Jeremy sighed, and Zimmerman leaned heavily against Jeremy’s freckled cheek. Jeremy went to the supply closet and took out a bucket and mop.

“I'll help,” Molly said. “Tell me what to do.”

“Do me a favor and move that box for me,” Jeremy said, pointing to a cardboard crate behind the bathroom door. “What's in there?”

Molly opened the lid. “Just a bunch of used tape and cardboard.”

Jeremy peered inside. “I don’t know where that came from. You can toss it into the dumpster for me.”

Together, Jeremy and Molly mopped the bathroom floor. Jeremy paused every few minutes to give Zimmerman a scratch. Molly whistled the parrot’s favorite song, “The Star-Spangled Banner,” hoping the bird would chime in as he usually did. Not only could Zimmerman speak hundreds of words, he could imitate almost any sound—the buzz of the front doorbell, the ring of the phone, Uncle Noah’s Brooklyn accent, even Anthony’s disgusting salami sandwich burps. But this afternoon the bird remained silent.

They finished the bathroom and moved on to the rest of the basement. Jeremy crouched down to pick up what looked to be a piece of white plastic. Suddenly, Zimmerman leapt into the air. In a fit of squawks and shrieks, the bird flew in crooked circles before escaping into the supply closet through its open door.

Jeremy sat on the floor in shock. Never had he seen Zimmerman panic like that.

What had spooked the bird so much?

Jeremy reached for the piece of plastic. His hand froze in the air as he saw that it wasn’t plastic at all. His heart fluttered as he gently picked it up. It was white and shaped like a small sausage.

“What's that?” Molly asked, putting down her mop.

Jeremy held out his hand to Molly.

“A snake egg,” he said, admire it. “See its skin? It’s like leather. No question about it. Snake.”

“Is it going to hatch?” Molly said.

The egg felt hard and cold.

“No,” Jeremy said. “Whatever was in here died a while ago.”

They were interrupted by Anthony and his friends stomping down the stairs.

“Hey, what's that?” Anthony said, grabbing a bag of chips from Uncle Noah’s desk and stuffing a fistful into his mouth.
“Snake egg,” Jeremy said.
Anthony stopped chewing.
“You should throw that out,” said Anthony’s friend with the bushy beard.
“That’s OK,” Jeremy said, slipping it into his pocket.
“Be careful,” Anthony said, leading his friends back upstairs. “Could be dangerous.”
Molly and Jeremy waited until the men were out of sight.
“Your uncle doesn’t sell snakes,” Molly whispered. “So how’d an egg just suddenly appear in the basement?”
“I don’t know,” Jeremy said, looking over at the supply closet. “But I have a feeling Zimmerman does.”

Normally, the discovery of a snake egg would make Jeremy Milligan the happiest boy in the world. At home, his bookshelves were crammed with bugs, bones, and other specimens from trips he’d taken with his mother.

He put his newest find in a plastic box on his dresser, between a fox skull and a fan he’d made out of turkey feathers. But Jeremy wasn’t happy. Staring at the egg didn’t make him feel fascinated. It didn’t make him think of the wild world he loved to explore. It made him nervous. And the more he looked at the egg, the more nervous he got. How could a snake egg get into the basement of the pet store? Why did the basement smell so bad? And most troubling of all, why was Zimmerman so spooked? Tossing in his bed, Jeremy worried that something was happening at the pet store. Something bad.

But he had no idea what it could be.

The next day, Zimmerman still wouldn’t talk. He wouldn’t even come out of his cage. The smell in the basement was worse. And Jeremy, while mopping the basement, discovered three turquoise bird feathers on the floor behind the couch.

“Look at these,” he whispered to Molly.
“Are they from a parrot?” Molly said.
Jeremy nodded. “But my uncle doesn’t sell birds at the store. And Zimmerman doesn’t have turquoise feathers.”

They could hear Anthony and his friends laughing upstairs.

“I know he has something to do with this,” Jeremy said. “I’m going to stay at the store for a few hours tonight—to see what’s going on.”

“That’s crazy. Your uncle’s almost better. He’ll be back next week.”

“I have to know what’s happening here. I promised Uncle Noah I’d take care of things.”
Molly chewed a piece of her orange hair.
“All right,” she sighed. “I’ll stay with you. I’ll tell my mom I’m going to the library.”
At 5:30, Jeremy and Molly said overly cheerful goodbyes to Anthony and his pals. They hid in the pizza parlor next door until Anthony had locked the front door and driven away.

Jeremy used his key to let himself and Molly
into the store. They made their way down to the basement. It was pitch-dark. They sat next to each other on the floor of the supply closet, leaving the door open just a crack, listening to the nocturnal scruffles and gurgles of the animals upstairs.

Nearly two hours passed. Jeremy was starving, and he could hear Molly’s stomach grumbling. He was ready to end the spying mission when a truck growled loudly outside the back door. The engine revved up, then stopped. They heard footsteps and somebody fumbling with the basement door.

Molly took hold of Jeremy’s hand.
“Come on, hurry up,” a man said gruffly. “Get the light on.”

Jeremy recognized the voice. It was Anthony’s.

“Where do you want the suitcase?” another voice said as the light switched on. Jeremy was pretty sure it was the man with the bushy beard.

“On the desk. Get the duffel too. Careful. Don’t damage the merchandise.”

There was a zipping sound, and suddenly the basement’s terrible smell became more potent. Jeremy held his breath and squeezed Molly’s hand.

“Oh, jeez,” Anthony bellowed. “These birds stink worse than the others. I have a big mess here. Get me a garbage bag. From the closet.”

Jeremy and Molly tried to shrink to the back of the closet.

But the door opened, and the man with the bushy beard stared down at them.

“We got company,” he yelled, glowering at them.

Jeremy and Molly sprang to their feet and ran out of the closet toward the staircase.

But Anthony blocked their path. Behind him, on Uncle Noah’s desk, Jeremy saw a gruesome sight: parrots stuffed in cardboard tubes wrapped tightly with masking tape. Only their heads stuck out. None of them were moving.

Now Jeremy understood: the snake egg, the turquoise feathers, the cardboard tubes and masking tape. And Zimmerman’s terrified silence.

These men were animal smugglers. Jeremy had read a story about this in one of his nature magazines. There were people around the world who sold illegal pets: endangered birds and snakes and turtles robbed from jungles and rainforests and sold to collectors.

“Did your egg hatch?” Anthony sneered.

“No,” Jeremy said. “It was dead when I found it.”

“Lucky for you,” Anthony said. “It was a cobra. I could’ve sold the baby for $500.”

Jeremy’s heart pounded thinking of a deadly snake hatching a foot from his bed.

“What kind of person would want a pet cobra?” Jeremy said.

“Hey kid, some people don’t want a cute little golden retriever. They wanna be unique. They want a Komodo dragon, maybe. Or some endangered parrot nobody else’s got. That’s what they want. That’s what I give ’em. So long as they’re willing to pay the big bucks.”

“But what they want is against the law,” Jeremy said. Bushy-beard looked impatient.

“What are we going to do with these two?”

Anthony never
got to answer. Because suddenly, from upstairs, came an ear-bursting sound.

“Beep! Beep! Beep! Beep!”

“What’s that?” Bushy-beard cried, covering his ears. “You said this place had no alarm!”

Jeremy’s eyes flew up the stairs and saw what the men couldn’t see: Zimmerman, perched high on the ceiling light. “Beep! Beep! Beep!” the parrot called in a perfect imitation of the loudest burglar alarm ever made.

Molly and Jeremy sprinted up the stairs. Zimmy swooped down from the light and landed on Jeremy’s shoulder. They ran out the door into the dark night.

Later that night, Jeremy, Molly and Zimmerman were riding home from the police station in Uncle Noah’s car.

“I still can’t believe it,” said Uncle Noah. He was limping on his bad hip, but otherwise he looked strong. “Of all the guys in the world, I hire a guy who sells illegal pets. He was using my store to unpack his animals and get them ready to sell to his customers.”

“What’ll happen to the birds?” Molly asked.

“They were drugged for their trip,” Uncle Noah said. “Two didn’t make it. The others are squawking like crazy in the evidence room. I told the chief we’ll find them good homes when all this is over.”

“And what about Anthony?” Jeremy asked.

“Jail,” Uncle Noah said. “No doubt about it. He was selling hundreds of animals a year. Birds and reptiles. What I want to know is how you guys knew something was up?”

“It was Zimmerman,” Jeremy said. “He let us know. He’s the hero.”

Zimmy fluffed his feathers.


What motivates Anthony to commit a crime? What motivates Jeremy to help solve it? Send two well-supported paragraphs to “Snake Egg Contest” by March 15, 2014. Ten winners will each receive a copy of Emma-Jean Lazarus Fell Out of a Tree by Lauren Tarshis. See page 2 for details.