

11

NAME: **HUGH WINKLEMAN**

This was shaping up into the greatest school year ever. True, my grades were no better than usual (straight A's), and I still couldn't climb the ropes in the gym. I was laying waste to the competition in the chess club, but that always happened. I wasn't popular, or even borderline acceptable.

But I had something going for me that was pure gold.

I was anonymous.

That may not sound like much. But to me, it was my birthday, Christmas, and the Fourth of July all wrapped into one.

No longer did I feel the ridiculing eyes boring into me as I walked the halls of C Average. Those eyes bored elsewhere. No longer did I have to watch my step for the feet

that would trip or kick me. Those feet were otherwise engaged. I could barely remember my last wedgie.

And it was all thanks to Cap Anderson.

I liked Cap. Really, I did. But I'd be less than honest if I didn't admit that the best thing about him was the fact that he took the heat off me. I was allowed to live because the pack was in full cry after him.

So I was happy, but also guilty for being happy. And the happier I got, the more the guilt spoiled my happiness.

Of all the guff I'd taken from Zach Powers over the years, this had to be the worst—that *I* was feeling bad for something *he* was doing. My only crime was *benefiting* from it. It wasn't like I could have helped Cap. If I had the power to control Zach, Lena, Darryl, and those vipers, then I wouldn't be a victim. Victims have no power. That's what makes us victims.

Anyway, this had gone far beyond just Zach's crew. It was the Luke Simard thing all over again. A wide-scale war of little attacks on Cap.

The school bus was the bloodiest battlefield. In the building itself, there was a degree of order because there were teachers around. But on the bus the only authority was the driver, Mr. Rodrigo, and he wasn't exactly the kind of deputy you listen to. He was older, and standoffish. He kept his eyes on the road, because if he checked the mirror, he might see something. We could have held

a luau on that bus, with a roast pig and hula dancers, and he would have been none the wiser.

The first projectile came sailing up the aisle, spinning like a miniature torch. The Winkleman Encyclopedia of Bullying Techniques identified it instantly. A bunch of jerks at the back were flicking lit matches at Cap.

I brushed it from the seat, genuinely alarmed. This may have been business as usual in my life, but I had short hair. Cap's flyaway mop was a forest fire waiting to happen.

Another flickering shot bounced off the armrest and extinguished itself on the floor. "Cap," I whispered urgently. "Duck."

He looked up, mystified. "Why?"

And at that very instant, Mr. Rodrigo let out a loud groan, clutched his chest, and toppled out of his seat.

The raucous clamor of the bus died as if someone had pulled the plug. Was Mr. Rodrigo having a heart attack?

We were so frozen with shock, nobody noticed that the bus was *moving*, inching forward into oncoming traffic.

"Hey!" Cap shoved me out of the way and hit the floor running. He leaped over Mr. Rodrigo's still form and landed in the driver's seat, stomping on the accelerator. With a roar of the big motor, the bus lurched through the intersection, missing a dump truck by inches.

"Where's the hospital?" Cap barked over his shoulder.

We all sat there like dummies, scared out of our wits.

“The hospital!” Cap repeated. “Now!”

Suddenly, Naomi was sprinting up the aisle. “Turn here!”

It took all Cap’s wingspan to move the huge steering wheel, swinging the bus into a tight right and speeding off down the street.

I found my voice at last. “But, Cap—you can’t drive a bus!” Which was maybe the stupidest remark that could have been made. Because that’s exactly what he was doing.

He shifted gears and we picked up speed. What a sight we must have been—a giant, speeding yellow school bus, weaving in and out of traffic, horn blasting.

“Turn left!” bawled Naomi.

Cap heaved on the wheel. The front tires bounced over a low concrete median, jostling passengers and rattling windows. A painful screech of metal on cement raked our ears as the chassis bottomed out. I thought we were hung up for sure, but the bus sprang forward and jolted back onto the road.

I scrambled on all fours down the aisle, maneuvering around kids who had been tossed out of their seats. Mr. Rodrigo’s face was pale, but his chest was moving up and down. “He’s still breathing!” I called to Cap.

All at once, the radio burst to life. “Base to forty-one,” crackled the dispatcher’s voice. “Come in forty-one.”

Cap looked at the set as if he’d never seen one in his

life—which he probably hadn't. I reached around him and took hold of the microphone. "Hello?"

"Rodrigo, is that you? We just got a report that you're way off course and driving erratically. What's going on?"

"Uh—Mr. Rodrigo can't come to the phone—" I began.

"Who is this?" the dispatcher demanded.

"Hugh Winkleman."

"Who?"

"A passenger! Mr. Rodrigo's unconscious! We think he might be having a heart attack."

"Who's driving the bus?"

I hesitated. "Capricorn Anderson."

"Stop right there!" the voice ordered. "We'll send an ambulance for the driver."

"No," Cap told me.

"But the dispatcher said—"

"We have to get to the hospital," he interrupted. "There's no time to wait for an ambulance."

I spoke into the microphone. "He says no."

"He can't say no!" the man exploded. "He's endangering the lives of everybody on board!"

Cap glanced at the radio in annoyance. "Does this have an off button? It's very distracting."

"Uh—gotta go. Bye." I cut power to the set. To Cap I wheezed, "You sure you know what you're doing?"

“Rain says you always know what you’re doing when you’re doing the right thing.”

About sixty seconds later, we heard the sirens.

Some kid in the last row made the identification. “Cops!”

By the time I got back there, two police cruisers were on our tail, lights flashing.

One of them activated the outside speaker. “Pull over to the side of the road!”

“You better do it, Cap!” I called. “The cops are chasing us!”

His expression was hidden behind all that hair, but he crouched lower over the wheel. It was a wordless statement—it would take an M1 tank to stop us now. I hoped this “Rain” was a reliable source. If Cap was just talking about wet weather, we were all up the creek without a paddle.

As we barreled across town in the direction of the hospital, the line of police cars continued to grow until we were leading a parade of seven black-and-whites and at least a couple of unmarked vehicles. The kids on board were totally cowed. Except for the engine noise and Naomi’s shouted directions, there was utter silence. We had to be the best-behaved busload of kids in the history of C Average Middle School. I would have enjoyed the sight of so many people who had terrorized me being

terrorized themselves, except that I was twice as scared as they were.

By the time we pulled into the entrance of Metro East Medical Center, we looked like a scene from *Thelma and Louise*, with half the police department strung out in back of us in pursuit, sirens blaring. I could see nurses and paramedics diving out of the way as the big bus rocketed up the drive to Emergency. Cap stomped on the brakes, and we squealed to a halt behind a parked ambulance. A whole lot of cruisers surrounded us on all sides.

The hospital guys were angry at first, but as soon as they caught a glimpse of Mr. Rodrigo, they were all business. The fallen driver was rushed into the building on a stretcher.

No sooner had the automatic doors swallowed him up than the first officer stomped up the stairs of the bus.

"You're in a lot of trouble, kid!"

The police made Cap lie facedown in the aisle while they cuffed his hands behind his back. It was like something out of an episode of *Cops*. They were treating him like a criminal—which I guess a school bus hijacker technically was.

We watched in awe as they hauled him roughly to his feet and marched him out to a squad car.

Naomi was the first to speak up. "Cap didn't do anything wrong! He was just trying to save Mr. Rodrigo!"

The stunned passengers came alive at last. It started off as a rumbling of discontent, bubbling over into a chorus of outrage on Cap's behalf.

"Quit pushing the guy around!"

"He's a hero!"

"He didn't hit anything!"

The arresting officer wasn't buying it. "*Qui-et!!*" he bellowed. "Now, listen—I'm sending a patrolman in to drive this bus back to school. I don't want to hear a peep out of any of you in the meantime."

A door slammed as Cap was locked in the back of a cruiser. It was a terrible moment—and doubly terrible for me. Because I wasn't proud of what was going on in my head just then.

Cap had just been arrested at gunpoint; Mr. Rodrigo was in danger of his life. And what was I thinking about? That if Cap went to jail, *I* would be back in business as the number-one punching bag at C Average Middle School.

I was a worm, but at least I had the strength of character to be ashamed of it.



12

NAME: **CAPRICORN ANDERSON**

I don't think I ever would have learned to understand regular school if it hadn't been for *Trigonometry and Tears*.

It was Sophie's favorite show. I watched it with her every day after school when I didn't have something else to do, like being under arrest.

There was no TV at Garland, and it wasn't just because our generator barely had enough power to run the lights and refrigerator. Rain said television was a vast wasteland that lowered our standards until we couldn't tell the difference between bad and good. I would never disagree with Rain, but I thought *T & T* was fantastic. When I watched it, everything around me seemed to disappear, and the whole world was happening on that little screen. Those people were so *real*, with true-to-life problems and big

decisions that had to be made. I kept wishing that the characters had someone like Rain to turn to in times of trouble, but they didn't. They had their parents, who were even more messed up and confused than the kids were. It was a perfect symbol for life outside Garland—huge, complicated, and full of hidden traps and pitfalls. Plus, every now and then, the program stops and the TV tells you about all the great things you can buy, like a miracle cream that makes it scientifically impossible to get a pimple.

If it hadn't been for the show, I would have been really bewildered by the huge fuss everybody was making over driving one little school bus less than five miles. The adults on *T & T* were always going bananas over something, so I wasn't surprised when the police, the superintendent, the principal, the bus company owner, and Mrs. Donnelly all took turns screaming at me. They even made Rain call from the rehab center, and gosh, it was good to hear her voice.

"I'm supposed to talk some sense into you," she told me. "But what I really want to say is congratulations. You did the right thing."

"The police don't think so."

"Typical," she clucked. "Getting hung up on the numbers on your birth certificate when you probably saved a life."

"They made me lie on my stomach while they cuffed

my hands behind my back,” I complained.

“Does that bring back memories!” she exclaimed. “Every time I protested the Vietnam War, I wound up in the same position. Those were the days!”

“It was horrible.”

“Don’t worry, Cap,” she said comfortingly. “I’m getting stronger every day. In no time at all, we’ll both be back to the sanity of Garland.”

Just the thought of it warmed me all over. Maybe we could get a stronger generator so we could watch *Trigonometry and Tears* there. I knew someone as smart as Rain would appreciate it if she’d just give it a chance.

I’d been doing tai chi since I was five. Rain was my teacher. She explained that if you concentrate to the point where your mind and body become one, all outward awareness melts away.

It was the first day after I drove Mr. Rodrigo to the hospital. I was halfway through my routine, when there, performing the moves beside me, was that girl Naomi. I recognized her instantly—she was one of the fifty-four names I had managed to learn so far.

“Extend your fingers,” I whispered. “The energy should begin in your core and flow out through your extremities.”

She made the adjustment. “Thanks.”

She turned out to be a natural, but I had to cut the workout short. Zach had scheduled another press briefing for that morning. Hard experience had taught me to leave extra time to find the room.

“Well, uh, good-bye.”

“Wait!” she exclaimed.

“But I have to go to a—”

“I know.” She looked unhappy. Maybe she understood how difficult these briefings were for me. How I could never answer any of the questions, yet the reporters kept asking more and more.

“Cap, there’s something I need to tell you.”

I assumed she was going to give me directions to the journalism lab. Instead she said, “Watch out for Zach and Lena. Watch out for all of us. We’re not as nice as we pretend to be.”

“You’re nice,” I told her.

“You’re the nice one, Cap.” And she ran into the school, leaving me wondering if I would ever understand people outside Garland, or if I even wanted to try.

I was a little late for the briefing because no one had heard of the journalism lab, which turned out to be just an ordinary classroom. Even more surprising, in addition to the usual reporters—Zach, Lena, and Darryl—there were at least twenty kids seated at the desks.

“Where did you learn to drive a school bus?” came the

first question, from a dark-haired boy in the second row.

"Nowhere," I said honestly. Then I realized that this could be a chance to learn some new names. "And you are—?"

"Trent Davidoff."

I took out a small notepad and wrote it down. "I usually drive a pickup truck. That's why I had a little trouble on the corners."

"How did you know Mr. Rodrigo was having a heart attack?" queried the girl next to Trent.

"And your name is—?" I prompted.

"Caitlin Rankin."

I wrote that down too. "I couldn't be sure it was a heart attack. But he was lying on the floor, unconscious, and that can't be good."

A boy near the back spoke up. "What did the police say to you?" He added, "I'm Trevor Mardukas."

I scribbled it at the bottom of the page as I recalled the arresting officer's exact words. "He said, 'Keep your nose clean or next time you're looking at Juvie.'"

"Didn't you explain about Mr. Rodrigo?" asked Caitlin.

"No, I blew my nose and wiped it very carefully."

Zach was looking annoyed, which was odd. After all, these press briefings had been his idea in the first place. He raised a hand. "Is it true that you haven't even started planning the Halloween dance?"

The dance again. The entire entrance foyer was taken up with a floor-to-ceiling poster about it. There was even a picture of me, with a dialogue balloon coming out of my mouth, saying: QUESTIONS? ASK ME!

It was probably unrealistic to hope that nobody would.

“Yes, it’s true,” I admitted.

“Aren’t you worried that you won’t be ready when the time comes?” he persisted.

“I don’t know anything about parties,” I said honestly.

“I only know fifty-seven people, including you guys.”

Luckily, the bell rang, saving me from having to answer any more questions. But as we headed into the corridor, Trent approached me.

“You know, if you’re looking for party music, my cousin’s Bar Mitzvah had this deejay—the guy was amazing! Even the blue-hair crowd was getting down with the hip-hop moves.”

I frowned. “How about the people with regular hair?”

“Kids were going nuts!” Trent assured me. “They loved it!”

I thought of something Rain once said. Back in the sixties, when Garland was a working commune, the biggest jobs went to the people who were best qualified to handle them. Why should I make decisions about a party when I’d never been to one?

I faced Trent. “You should look after the music.”

He was amazed. "You're putting *me* in charge of hiring a deejay?" he asked breathlessly.

"Not 'in charge.' Authority is a power trip. A community thrives when each member does what he or she is best at. Your strength is the music."

Trent nodded. "But how do I pay the guy?"

"It's a shame that money has to enter into everything," I lamented.

"Don't worry about that," Caitlin jumped in. "The school must have a budget for the dance." She turned to me. "Right?"

I had absolutely no idea. Rain used cash to buy supplies for the commune, but I'd never even held a dollar bill in my hand. We believed that the money-crazy mind-set was a big part of what was wrong with the world.

So I said what Caitlin and Trent seemed to expect to hear: "Right."

I hoped it was the correct answer.

13

NAME: **SOPHIE DONNELLY**

The freakazoid just might be my good-luck charm. A few days after my first driving lesson, Dad resurfaced. His job involved a lot of traveling, but this time he said he was going to be around for a few months.

“So now we can see about turning you into a licensed driver.” He beamed at me.

My mother gave him the Look. “Sophie was really disappointed when you didn’t show up last week.”

“Mother—” I said warningly. I didn’t need a trained social worker nagging interference for me.

Dad chose not to pick up on the vibe. “Well, I’m here now,” he said cheerfully. “Let’s go.”

And we did. I have to say, I wish he was as patient as Cap. But now that our houseguest was on the cops’ A-list

for grand-theft school bus, it would probably be too risky to go out driving with him anymore.

Cap was doing his tai chi under the weeping willow when I maneuvered Dad's Saab into the driveway.

"God bless America!" Dad was astonished. "That's the stray your mother brought home?"

"The very same," I sighed.

"Does he have to do that right out in the open in broad daylight?"

"He used to stick closer to the house," I admitted. "I persuaded him not to. Three buckets of water did the trick." One thing about Cap—it *did* take a brick building to fall on him.

Dad laughed. "You're a saint to put up with it, Soph. This is cruel and unusual."

We agreed on that, especially the part about me being a saint. That was another advantage of having Dad around. Mom was so nice, so kind, so understanding that she made the rest of us seem like insensitive jerks. But Dad took one look at Cap Anderson and instantly understood my side of the story. Moments like this really made me miss him when he was away, which was most of the time.

Dad waved to our houseguest as he walked me to the door. "Nice moves, kid. I used to do a little kendo in my younger days." He could make conversation with a brick wall—part of his salesman DNA.

Cap looked disapproving. "That's with swords, isn't it? Rain would never teach me anything that uses weapons."

Dad nodded in agreement. "We trained with padded sticks so no one got hurt—purely ceremonial. It was all about pressure points and energy flow. I'll show you, one of these days."

To me, he said, "Gotta run. But first—" He reached into his pocket and pulled out a small jewelry box. "—belated birthday present."

Yeah, seven months belated.

I took it from him, thrilled. It was a silver bangle, set with multicolored stones. "Love it. Thanks, Dad."

I was about to try it on when he snatched it back. "Not so fast. I just wanted to make sure you like it before I have it engraved."

Cap stared at the bracelet, hypnotized. "That," he said in a hushed voice, "is the most beautiful thing I've ever seen."

Leave it to him. The kid grew up surrounded by wooden planks and fertilizer—the shiniest object in his life was probably an old pitchfork. No wonder he took a few rhinestones for the crown jewels.

Dad tried to make it into a joke. "I guess you don't get out much."

"I didn't get out at all until I came here. We never left Garland except to lay in supplies."

Dad looked profoundly interested. “I forgot—you’re from Garland. Sophie’s mom grew up there. What’s it like these days?”

There followed a description of this year’s turnip crop that would have put a Tasmanian devil to sleep. Dad was classy. He looked totally fascinated by the whole thing. But every now and then he would shoot me a smirk that had me thinking sad thoughts just to keep from cracking up.

Oh, it was great to have Dad back again!

14

NAME: CAPRICORN ANDERSON

It was true that I now knew 129 people. But in a school of 1100, that hardly made a dent.

Rain always said, “Don’t give up, and don’t give in.” Of course, she was talking about civil rights or protesting a war or something. But I was sure it counted for this too.

The good news was that more students were coming up to me, which was a chance for me to ask their names. Usually, they wanted to talk about the time I drove Mr. Rodrigo to the hospital. I was amazed that people seemed less interested in Mr. Rodrigo’s recovery than the details of how he got to the emergency room.

Rain explained it to me the last time I spoke to her on the phone. “That’s society for you, Cap. Following rules



is more important than living your life. The law says you can't drive until you're sixteen. So if somebody does it, it's a huge deal. You should feel sorry for these poor kids. They're prisoners, and they don't even know it."

"That explains why Sophie is so obsessed with getting her license," I concluded.

"Exactly. What's a license? A piece of paper. That's the *real* story, Cap—that we've allowed ourselves to be enslaved by our own laws."

She was so sensible. I wish I could have talked to her twenty times a day. It was almost like I was piloting a ship through a blinding fog, and Rain was an experienced captain. I wished I could have asked her how to play every wave. But it just wasn't possible.

"Are you feeling better? When can we both go home?"

"Soon, Cap," she promised. "And in the meantime, you stay true to yourself. Don't change because everybody around you is spiritually handicapped. I don't know this Sophie girl, but her mother, Floramundi—well, let's say that she wasn't one of Garland's bigger successes. They say the apple never falls far from the tree, you know."

"Rain," I reminded her gently, "that sounds like a negativity trip."

Rain taught me that when people are negative, they're trying to put duct tape on their own damaged souls. And

while we were all for using duct tape on a drainpipe or a fender, it could never hold together something as important as a soul.

"You're right," she admitted with a sigh. "It's hard to stay positive when you're surrounded by psychic zombies. I find myself slipping back to the Dark Ages before Garland. Yesterday I made a hand gesture to one of the so-called doctors—let's just hope it was muscle memory from my taxi-driving career."

It made me feel weird to hear Rain speaking ill about Sophie without even meeting her. Of course, I was partly to blame for that. I'd told Rain some of the mean stuff Sophie had said and done. I had to tell her the *good* about Sophie, but it was hard to nail down. Like when Sophie smiled, just for that instant, there was almost no such thing as sadness. Would Rain even understand that? I wasn't sure I did myself.

Everything about Sophie had a kind of shine to it. After years of studying art with Rain, I still couldn't remember a color as intense as the glitter polish Sophie painted on her toenails. Even her shelf in the bathroom was a wondrous sight—a skyline of bottles, tubes, and jars of all shapes and hues. And the names! Passion Fruit Heel Softener with Volcanic Pumice; Bird of Paradise Exfoliating Scrub; Honey-Infused Moisturizing Lotion with Ylang Ylang. I used her Pomegranate Shampoo with

Giga-Volumizing Power once, and when I looked in the mirror, I couldn't believe my eyes. My hair was standing up straight in all directions—a huge sphere of blond fuzz surrounding me like a giant halo.

I tried brushing it down, but all it did was crackle and stand even stiffer. Somehow this Giga-Volumizing Power filled your hair with static electricity as if you'd stuck your finger in a light socket.

To make matters worse, there was urgent pounding, and Sophie snarled, "Get out of there! You're hogging the bathroom!"

When I opened the door, she stumbled back three steps and gawked at me. "I've heard of bad hair days, but wow! You look like your head exploded!"

"I tried your shampoo," I confessed.

She was disgusted. "If you're going to use the Giga-Volumizer, you've got to use the conditioner that comes with it. Otherwise you might as well be pumping ten thousand volts through your hair."

I must have looked completely helpless, because she took pity on me. She grabbed a bottle, marched me to the kitchen, and shoved my head in the sink. As she wet me down with the vegetable sprayer, I could feel my hair collapsing from its planetoid shape.

"When was your last haircut?" Sophie marveled.

"I've never had one," I replied.

"Never?"

"Well, there was the time I whacked my head on the pump handle of our well. Doc Cafferty shaved part of my scalp so he could put in stitches."

She poured on some sweet-smelling stuff and started to massage it in. "Who's he? Your pediatrician?"

"No, the vet."

The massaging hands froze. "Do me a favor," she said finally. "What you just told me—never repeat that to anyone. Especially if they have Child Services on their name tag."

My hair was fine after that, and I never again used anything from Sophie's beautiful bathroom shelf. But it wasn't because she said I couldn't. She even gave me some advice about cream for oily skin. I never touched it, though. I know when I'm playing with fire.

I think she was in a better mood because her father was in town, and her driving lessons were going well. Mr. Donnelly was a really nice person, although whenever he was around, his ex-wife looked pained and squinty, like she was trying to read something off a sign that was very far away.

Mr. Donnelly even took the time to teach me some of his kendo positions. I couldn't wait to show them to Rain when we got back home.

* * *

Another reason more people were speaking to me at school was this Halloween dance.

Luckily, there was a dance on *Trigonometry and Tears*, so I sort of knew what to expect. It looked a lot like Rain's description of riots back in the sixties—hundreds of people crammed belly to belly, waving their fists and shouting. I couldn't figure out why anyone would want to do that for fun. But they did. It was all they talked about.

"I don't know what kind of food to get for the dance," I said for at least the tenth time. "I didn't even know people ate at a dance. I thought they danced."

"Yeah, but you need snacks and drinks and desserts," said Holly van Arden (No. 130). "My neighbor goes to St. Andrews, and at their last prom, they had Create-Your-Own-Pizza. You design the pie, toss the dough, add the toppings, and it cooks while you're dancing. People are still raving about it."

"Well, I think we should have that," I decided. "Go ahead and set it up."

"It's not cheap," she warned. "They have to bring in these giant ovens on wheels."

I told her what Rain told me when I asked what would happen if we weren't able to afford our monthly trips for supplies. "When you spend your life worrying about money, pretty soon money *becomes* your life."

"Cool!" she exclaimed. And she took on the job.

In the identical way, people volunteered to handle drinks, desserts, posters, and decorations.

The next morning when I arrived at school to do my tai chi, Holly van Arden asked if she could join me. Naomi was already waiting for us.



15

NAME: **HUGH WINKLEMAN**

Cap's best friend.

I was surprised when I overheard someone calling me that. Not that I had a problem with it. When people discussed me, the sentence usually began with “The biggest dork in the whole school is . . .” *Friend* had to be a promotion from that.

And it was true. Well, true-ish. If anybody was his friend around here, I was. We spent a lot of time together, but only at school. For all I knew, he stepped off that bus every afternoon and was *whooshed* into Dimension X—which might have explained a thing or two about his personality.

I tried to take the friendship further a couple of times, but he didn't want to join the chess club—he gave me a

whole speech on the evils of competition. And when I invited him over to my house, he just said no. He wasn't being rude; he was just being Cap. Obviously, I couldn't invite myself to the place where he was staying, since that wasn't really his home.

Okay, I figured, how about neutral territory? Maybe I could coax him into a trip to the mall.

"That's a really cool shirt," I told him. "Where did you buy it?"

Another dead end. "Rain and I do our own tie-dyeing at the community." Then he caught me off guard. "Do you want me to teach you?"

Breakthrough.

We reconvened the next morning in the art room before classes. I brought a couple of plain white T-shirts, and Cap showed me how to scrunch, twist, and tie them up, securing them with rubber bands. Then he rummaged through the cabinets and took out enough chemicals to create a small nuclear bomb. Well, not really, but it was a lot of stuff—mostly paints and dyes, and solutions to make the colors permanent.

We were dipping the first shirt in a tub of purple when Miss Agnew came in to get ready for first period. Uh-oh, I thought, we'll be finishing this job in detention.

"Hugh Winkleman, I hope you've got permission—" Her eyes fell on my partner in crime. "You're Capricorn

Anderson! I heard about what you did for Mr. Rodrigo. You're a hero!" She peered into the sink. "Wow, tie-dyeing! I haven't done that since college!"

When Miss Agnew's first period class showed up at the bell, they found the three of us up to our elbows in color and wet fabric. She sent them back to their lockers for T-shirts and gym shorts—anything that would take paint.

"But I thought we were drawing the human figure in motion," said one seventh grader.

"Tomorrow," Miss Agnew promised absently. "Today we tie-dye."

She even called down to the office and got Cap and me excused from period one so we wouldn't get in trouble. But I guess the conversation didn't stop there, because a few minutes later, an announcement came over the PA:

"Those students interested in tie-dyeing with eighth grade president Capricorn Anderson should report to the art room."

Well, what self-respecting middle school kid would turn down a free pass to get out of work? We were mobbed in there. People were lined up with their towels, socks, underwear, and any canvas bag that was supple enough to be twisted and tied. Miss Agnew was in her glory. Never before had her art room seen such enthusiasm.

The star of the show was definitely Cap. He was

demonstrating, helping, mixing colors, and hanging up finished work. This was more than just Tie-Dye Palooza. Kids were asking him about the bus-driving incident and the Halloween dance, and hanging on his every word. It hit me then—everybody had seen Cap at the assembly, and around the halls here and there, but no one really knew him. Today had started out as my attempt to get a couple of shirts tie-dyed and hang out with Cap in the process. Yet before my eyes, it had turned into the eighth grade president's coming-out party. There must have been eighty students in that room, and I'll bet ninety-five percent of them approached him at some point.

True to character, he asked all their names and wrote them in his notebook.

For the rest of the day, the halls were ablaze with color as the artists proudly wore their creations, most of them still wet. It was a carnival atmosphere, with lots of pointing and laughing and high fives.

Which might explain why I almost didn't notice something else that was different about today: there wasn't a single spitball lodged in Cap Anderson's hair.

Not one.

16

NAME: **CAPRICORN ANDERSON**

I knew something was wrong the minute I got off the bus and walked to the Donnellys'. The Saturn was in the driveway, which meant that Mrs. Donnelly was home early. And the TV was off, even though *T & T* would be on in a few minutes.

Sophie and her mom were in the kitchen. I heard Mrs. Donnelly's voice first:

"Oh, honey, don't feel bad. You know how he is."

I hurried into the room. "What happened? Is everything all right?"

An empty Dasani bottle missed my ear by inches. "Get out of here!" Sophie shrieked. "Mind your own business!"

"Sophie!" her mother exclaimed in horror. "You apologize to Cap!"

In answer, she leaped out of her chair and raced for the stairs. "Mother, don't you dare tell the freakazoid anything about this!" She pounded up to her bedroom and slammed the door.

I looked at Mrs. Donnelly. "What did I do?" It was a silly question. What did I ever do? Nothing. And Sophie still treated me as if I'd crawled in from the septic tank.

"Please forgive Sophie," Mrs. Donnelly begged. "She's just had some bad news."

I was worried. "Did something happen to Mr. Donnelly?"

"Nothing that hasn't happened before," she sighed. "He took off without so much as a good-bye."

"But what about the driving test?" I protested. A license might have been just a piece of paper, but to Sophie it meant everything.

She shrugged. "We'll just have to reschedule for when I can take her. My ex-husband is not a terrible person, but he doesn't see things through. He rolls into town, gets everybody's hopes up, and then he's gone until the next time, when he does it all over again. I learned my lesson and got off the roller coaster. My daughter hasn't figured it out yet."

I felt terrible for Sophie. She was really crushed. Mr. Donnelly left town so suddenly that she hadn't even

gotten her bracelet back from the engraver. Who knew if she'd ever see it again? But, of course, it was a lot more than losing a silver bangle that upset her.

Life certainly gets complicated when you know more than one person. I could only imagine what it would be like when I knew eleven hundred.

On *Trigonometry and Tears*, there was a character named Rishon, who really bothered me. He didn't cheat on his girlfriend like Nick, or spread computer viruses just for fun like Aurora. But his irresponsible behavior was almost impossible to bear.

Sophie definitely didn't agree. "What do you care? It's a TV show." Her mood had been in free fall since Mr. Donnelly's departure.

"But if he doesn't retake the SAT to bring up his score, the University of Florida is going to withdraw his acceptance!" I exclaimed.

She looked at me pityingly. "So?"

"He hasn't even started studying! And he overslept and missed the practice test!"

"That's what they do on *T & T*," she explained. "They take perfectly normal people and turn their lives into pond scum. That's why it's fun to watch. If everything was perfect, there'd be no story."

"But what's Rishon going to do next year?" I persisted.

“Probably find a part on a different show. He’s an actor.”

Because Sophie had been watching TV her whole life, and not just a few weeks like me, it was easier for her to watch Rishon throw his whole future away. For me it was agony.

Rain always said that when we judge others, we’re really judging ourselves. That was the real reason Rishon upset me. How could he think his SAT scores were going to go up by themselves? How could he ignore the fact that he was about to lose his spot in college?

It was all too familiar. As eighth grade president, I was in charge of the Halloween dance, and I was giving it the Rishon treatment. I was ignoring the whole thing, almost as if I thought it might go away.

Then, on *T & T*, it all worked out for Rishon. One of Aurora’s viruses found its way into the admissions department computer at the University of Florida, wiping out half their records. All that were left indicated that Rishon was accepted. He ignored his problem—and the problem just sort of melted away.

With a growing sense of wonder, I realized that the same thing was happening with the dance. I was still doing nothing, yet somehow, the arrangements were being made. Students would come up to me in the halls; they would sing along when I played guitar in the music room;

they would join in my morning tai chi routine—and then they would volunteer to help. So many people were working on the party that I was beginning to think we were actually going to have one.

No wonder *T & T* was such a popular show. It was practically an instruction manual for life.

Garland Farm followed simple logic: you plant tomato seeds, you get tomato plants. No seeds, no tomatoes. Cause and effect. But a real school was so messy and random that solutions sometimes fell into place by sheer luck. It was almost like getting tomatoes without first planting seeds.

I thought I'd never get used to the outside world, with its chaos and clutter. But with millions of puzzle pieces being tossed up into the air, it really did stand to reason that the occasional one would come down in the right place. That was why Rishon would go to college, and C Average would have its Halloween dance.

Even Rain would have to admit that there was something kind of impressive about that.

“Anderson—come over here! I need a word with you.”

The words jolted me out of deep meditation. I looked up to see Mr. Kasigi glaring down at me.

“Why haven't you come to meet with me yet?”

I was floored. “I did—the day I registered.”

“Don’t play dumb with me, mister! I’m hearing talk of deejays and pizza ovens on wheels! How were you going to pay for all that?”

“I don’t have any money.”

He was getting red in the face. “Nobody expects *you* to pay for it! The school has money set aside for the dance. But if you don’t present your budget, I can’t release one penny!”

“I don’t have a budget,” I explained honestly. “I just have people who help me do things.”

“Like what? Fix your cuckoo clock?” He launched into a long speech about how he had volunteered to be on the program committee for some principals’ conference, so he didn’t have time to nursemaid me through Finance 101, whatever that was.

“But it’s all taken care of,” I tried to tell him. “The food, the music, the decorations—it all just worked out.” I stopped myself before telling him about Rishon. I had a feeling Mr. Kasigi was not a *T & T* fan.

“And who’s writing the checks?” he demanded.

“Checks?”

Rain had a checkbook, but I never saw her touch it. “Sometimes we use money to get along,” she used to tell me, “but that doesn’t mean we have to become its slave.” To Rain, financial matters were a distasteful but necessary private function, like going to the bathroom.

Mr. Kasigi said I would have to write checks. Not only that, but he would have to cosign them or they wouldn't count.

After school, he drove me to the bank. I'd never been in one before. But the instant I stepped inside, I knew this was a place that represented everything Rain and I were rejecting by living at Garland. Money was all that was important here. People were depositing it, withdrawing it, borrowing it, and paying it back. They were counting it in broad daylight. I honestly felt like running away.

But how could I? For one thing, there was a man in uniform guarding the door. I practically jumped out of my skin when I realized that he had a great big gun strapped to his hip.

Mr. Kasigi noticed my reaction. "Calm down, Anderson. He's a security man, not a bank robber."

Every time I thought I was fitting into my temporary life, something would remind me just how much of an outsider I still was. I wanted less than nothing of what this place had to offer. But to people outside Garland, money was so desirable that the bank had to hire armed guards to keep criminals from stealing it. When I finally got back home, I was going to drop to my knees and kiss the ground.

Mr. Kasigi and I met with an assistant manager. And when it was all over, I was holding a book of checks

marked Claverage Middle School: Student Activity Fund.

"You'll need these to pay for music and food," he explained, signing the first twelve checks on the spot. "And I'm sure there will be other expenses that come up. They always do."

I tried to tell him that I didn't know the deejay *or* the pizza company—that other students had made the arrangements. But he interrupted me with this long lecture about how this money belonged to everybody, not just me, and how I had to be responsible. And I would have been—if I had the slightest idea what he was talking about.

All I wanted was for him to leave so I could get out of this awful place. I wouldn't even let him drive me to the Donnellys'. I needed to walk there in the fresh air, just to get the smell of banking out of my nostrils.

A few blocks down the street, a sight met my eyes that stopped me in my tracks. There, in the display window of a small jewelry shop, gleamed a silver bangle with multi-color stones. It was exactly the same as Sophie's birthday gift from her father—the one he'd taken for engraving and never brought back.

I stepped into the store for a closer look. It was beautiful, but also kind of sad, because it reminded me of how upset Sophie had been lately.

The idea came immediately. If I bought this bracelet,

had it engraved, and sent it to Sophie, she'd never know that it hadn't come from her father. And it would make her happy.

I didn't have any money. But I had something even better—checks, which automatically counted as exactly as much money as you wrote in that little box. It probably wasn't what Mr. Kasigi had in mind. But I remembered his exact words: *Be responsible*.

Rain always said that nothing was more responsible than doing what was in your power to make another human being happy.

"I'll take it," I told the woman behind the counter.

"It's a hundred and seventy-five dollars." She was wary.

"Do you accept checks?"



17

NAME: **MRS. DONNELLY**

I left four messages for Frank Kasigi before he finally called me back.

He was apologetic. "Sorry, Flora. You know I'm chairing the principals' conference this year, and it's just details, details, details."

"Sorry to bother you when you're so busy. I thought I'd better check up on Cap Anderson. Has he been fitting in any better?"

"Fitting into what?" he asked. "The Age of Aquarius?"

I felt my heart sink. "That bad, huh?"

"Actually, not really. I had the boy pegged as a train wreck. But considering how odd he is, and how sheltered his life has been, things could be a lot worse."

"He has friends?" I asked hopefully.

"Not friends, exactly. More like followers."

"Followers?"

"Ever since that stunt with the school bus, the kids just flock to him. He put together a tie-dyeing clinic with the art teacher. You wouldn't believe the turnout! It was"—he chuckled—"what did they call big events back in the sixties?"

"A happening," I supplied automatically.

"Right. And that's the least of it. He picks up a guitar in the music room and strums a few old Beatles tunes, and pretty soon he's got twenty people in there singing along. He's running some kind of martial arts class on the front lawn. He's got more kids working on the Halloween dance than will probably come that night. He's even got a few meditators. If I didn't know the kid's history, I'd probably have the police making sure he wasn't setting up a cult."

It triggered an explosion of images from my own childhood at Garland. Cult was exactly the word for it, with Rain as its philosopher/guru.

Still, the news made me breathe easier. "That's a load off my mind. When I found out they made him eighth grade president—well, Sophie filled me in on what that might mean."

"I've heard those rumors too," he admitted. "It certainly hasn't gone smoothly for the last few in that office."

But we don't want to be the only middle school in America with no student government. So we threw the dice, and this time we lucked out."

"Thank heaven." But maybe I should have realized that Cap was holding his own in his new life. He was still a fish out of water, but he didn't seem to be quite so thrown by every little thing as he had been when I'd first brought him home.

One major clue was the fact that he was taking a genuine interest in that school. As a social worker, I kept current yearbooks from all the buildings in my district. Not only was Cap borrowing the Claverage books, but he was spending hours studying them. Imagine, a boy who had never had even a single classmate now wanting to know about more than a thousand of them. I found it heart-warming.

Things were even thawing slightly between Cap and my daughter. Mind you, that had more to do with a change in Sophie than a change in Cap. She was in a better state of mind because her father had finally remembered to send back her extremely belated birthday present, duly engraved.

Truth be told, I'd never expected to see it again, and I don't think Sophie had either. So imagine my surprise when she opened a padded mailer with no return address and pulled out that silver bangle. There was no card, not

even a scribbled note. The only thing that spoke for this gift was the engraving on the inside of it:

ALL YOU NEED IS LOVE

To be honest, the inscription threw me a little. It certainly didn't sound like the Bill Donnelly I used to be married to. His idea of sentimentality was the presentation of the Lombardi trophy at the end of the Super Bowl. But I guess he could still surprise me. He certainly got this one right. Sophie was thrilled.

It almost made up for the fact that he had walked out of her life yet again.

Even with the new, kinder, gentler Sophie, Cap was still a whole lot nicer to her than she was to him. He probably had a crush on her. An attractive high school girl had to look good to an eighth grader, especially one who had barely laid eyes on a female who wasn't his grandmother.

I couldn't prove that, of course. But one day, I came home from work, and the two of them were on the couch in front of *Trigonometry and Tears*, that awful teen soap opera geared to the interest level of chimpanzees and various species of plant life. A steamy make-out scene was taking place on the screen. Sophie was watching it intently. And, more to the point, Cap was watching Sophie. He was a difficult one to read, but I believed he

was trying to work up the guts to lean over and put his arm around her.

So I slammed my briefcase down on the kitchen counter and said the first thing I could think of: “Who’s up for a nice tall glass of lemonade?”

“Mother!” Sophie exclaimed in exasperation. “What century is this?”

I told myself I was protecting my daughter. But the truth is, I was protecting Cap from what Sophie would have done to him if he’d made a move on her.

The pain of my own adjustment from Garland was decades in the past. But it felt like yesterday when I watched this poor boy. I took Frank Kasigi at his word when he said Cap was doing well. But I knew I wouldn’t sleep at night until he was once again with Rain, hobbling back toward the sixties as fast as her pinned hip would carry both of them.



18

NAME: **HUGH WINKLEMAN**

I was the first dropout from Cap's morning tai chi group. Literally.

Not that I'd ever been the star of the class. Two left feet weren't exactly an asset in martial arts. But I was Cap's friend—as much as it was possible to get close to someone like him. I wore my tie-dyes proudly, secure in the knowledge that I had more right than anybody. After all, who hung out with Cap *before* he ever drove a bus, or master-minded a dance?

So there I was, waving my arms and hopping around like a turkey amped up on Mountain Dew, when the planted foot was kicked out from under me. It was so sudden, so devastating, that to this day, I have no idea who did it to me. Darryl Pennyfield is my prime suspect,

because he was close by, but I didn't catch him in the act. One minute I was upright—the next, I was on the grass, rolling. To the other kids in the group, it must have looked like I'd just vanished into thin air.

Were my deepest, darkest fears coming true? This was a great school year because Cap was taking the heat off me. But he wasn't a target anymore. Target, heck, he was practically a celebrity! It was the bus-driving thing that started it. When your whole world is a cheesy, prepackaged rehearsal for being alive, like middle school, a kid your own age who can pilot a twenty-ton bus is impressive. Plus the fact that he saved somebody's life, obviously. Now people were treating the eighth grade president like—well, like an eighth grade president. Someone who was admired and popular, a student leader who took an active role in the school.

And that was great—for Cap. But what did it mean for me? Was I back in the crosshairs because he was out of them? Only time would tell.

Of all the newly minted Cap fans, the biggest surprise had to be Naomi Erlanger. She was with that whole Zach Powers crew, and not as a hanger-on either. She was part of the inner circle, Lena's best friend. That was royalty around here.

Needless to say, I didn't know her well. Steering clear

of that crowd was a good way to avoid being dangled by my ankles over a toilet bowl. But I'd heard that she had a big crush on Zach. And let's face it, if the rumor had made it down to my lowly rung on the ladder, you had to figure it was all over the school.

So what was her sudden fascination with Cap? She was star pupil of his tai chi group; she was constantly turning up at his locker to show him a new peace-sign bracelet she'd bought, or a magazine article on Vietnam or the Beatles or anything about the sixties. Come to think of it, hers had been the first face at the door after the PA announcement on tie-dyeing day. The eighth grade wing was on the opposite end of the building from the art room. She must have sprinted the entire distance.

Of course, she was still one of the beautiful people. So when I spotted her, flanked by Lena and Darryl, coming our way in the hall, I was on my guard.

"Hi, Cap," Naomi greeted us. Another thing about Naomi: I was invisible to her. Either that or I was like Cap's pet ferret—a subhuman companion, undeserving of attention. "We're walking in the March of Caring this weekend, and we need sponsors."

Darryl looked me up and down, a threatening expression on his face. "It's for a really good cause."

I pulled a pair of crumpled dollar bills from my pocket. It made no difference to me if the money was

going to support throwing puppies off thirty-story office towers. This wasn't a charitable donation. I was purchasing wedgie insurance, and Darryl was Allstate.

"Sorry it can't be more."

With a grunt of acknowledgment, Darryl snatched the money out of my hand and passed it on to Lena.

Naomi's worshipful eyes never left the eighth grade president. "What do you say, Cap?"

He took out the checkbook and began writing on it.

I frowned. "Isn't that the school's money?"

"Mr. Kasigi said spend it responsibly. What could be more responsible than giving to charity?"

"Paying for the dance," I replied. "That's what it's supposed to be for."

He was serene. "I've been inside that bank, Hugh. They've got plenty of money for everything." He tore off the check and handed it to Naomi.

She took one look at it and let out a shriek that raised the roof clean off the school.

Lena gawked over her shoulder. "*A thousand dollars?*"

"What?" I wheeled on Cap. "Are you *nuts*? You can't give away that much!"

"Rain says there should be no limit on giving," he lectured serenely. "Only taking."

"She's not the one Mr. Kasigi's going to *strangle*—"

But my words were lost in the excited buzz as students

flocked around to investigate the source of Naomi's scream. Lena took the check from her and held it up for the crowd. There were oohs and aahs.

"You're awesome, Cap!" Naomi cried emotionally. "Awesome!"

Darryl nodded fervently. "You're the man!"

Suddenly, everybody was clapping and cheering. I was blown away. Not one of those idiots had the faintest idea that Cap's donation came straight out of the budget for the Halloween dance.

I wanted to scream: *Look at the check! The school's name is printed right on it! This money is yours—mine—all of ours!*

That was when I experienced a moment of stunning understanding. Popularity had nothing to do with the truth. If these kids took a minute to ask themselves where Cap got off writing thousand-dollar checks, they'd be rioting, not applauding. But what really mattered was image. The eighth grade president was a star now. Nobody questioned it when he did something wonderful, because that's exactly what was *expected* of him.

All the adulation must have been overwhelming to someone like Cap, who was so accustomed to peace and quiet. He pushed his way through a barrage of high fives and ducked into the bathroom. I followed him, struggling with my own feelings about this. I wanted to be happy for the guy, but why? Because he did something stupid?

His entire rise to fame seemed bizarre. Random. Dumb.

"Must be nice," was all I could think to mutter.

"It *is* nice," he agreed in wonder. "I couldn't have imagined how good it feels when so many people like you."

I recoiled as if he'd slapped me. Being liked was a feeling I didn't know. That I might never know. And to have that rubbed in my face by my one kindred spirit, the only person around who was more of an outsider than I was—it was the ultimate insult.

I didn't care if he grew up on Pluto, let alone some hippie commune. To say that to *me*—someone who'd never experienced a popular *minute*, much less a popular day—was beyond cruel. Nothing could have made me feel worse than I did at that instant.

The door was flung mightily open, and into the boys' room burst Naomi, her face pink with daring. She threw her arms around Cap and pressed a long kiss right on his mouth.

Cap was so shocked that he crumpled against the stall door when she let go.

"To be continued," she said meaningfully, and ran out of the bathroom.

I glowered at him through eyes that were barely slits. Hero status wasn't good enough for him anymore. He had to be a heartthrob too.

I was finished with Capricorn Anderson.

19

NAME: **ZACH POWERS**

I saw a show last night with a bunch of scientists arguing over what the signs will be when the world is coming to an end. They talked about asteroids, volcanoes, and melting ice caps.

Small minds.

When Cap Anderson becomes the most popular, happening kid at C Average Middle School, *that's* the end of the world. Especially when you consider that the guy he replaced was *me*.

It was all because of that stupid dance. How could a hippie who knew less than nothing about parties organize the middle school bash of everybody's dreams?

"It's your own fault," Lena accused. "You recruited half the school to bug him, and he turned them into an army of volunteers."

She had a point. With the exception of me and the Hairball-in-Chief, *everyone* was working on the Halloween dance—even the cool people. Darryl was hauling huge rolls of construction paper to the decorations people in the art room. Naomi was designing reflective mobiles to hang from the basketball hoops. Lena was on the committee to cover the bleachers with orange-and-black bunting. Even cheap paper chains were impressive when you had eleven hundred kids stringing them.

“This is going to be the greatest party we’ve ever had!” Naomi enthused. “I’ll bet we get a thousand kids.”

“And that’s just the planning committee,” I added sourly.

“What’s wrong with that?”

“Ignore him,” Lena put in. “He’s in mourning because he thinks Cap stole his year.”

“*Our* year,” I corrected. “And he’s making it into 1967!”

“You shouldn’t be so hard on Cap,” Darryl told me. “Sure, he’s weird, but he’s the best eighth grade president we’ve ever had.”

“Eighth grade president isn’t a real job,” I seethed. “It’s a joke, remember?”

“Well, maybe it started that way,” Naomi said earnestly. “But Cap Anderson is the most amazing person I’ve ever known.”

I snorted. "Anybody can be amazing handing out thousand-dollar checks."

Now *that* had caught me off guard. What was up with all this charity? He gave eight hundred to the food drive in the cafeteria. Five hundred to cancer research. The same to Alzheimer's disease. They may have called it the March of Dimes, but that didn't stop Cap from forking over six-fifty. He even stuck checks into the slots of those cans designed for people to drop their spare change.

Mr. Kasigi had to be behind it somehow. Cap wouldn't be allowed to throw around big chunks of school money without permission from the office. Maybe the whole thing was a lesson about philanthropy. It bugged me. The eighth grade president wasn't supposed to set a good example. His job was to make an idiot out of himself and have a nervous breakdown. But no, the assistant principal had to set Cap up for sainthood!

Whatever Kasigi was thinking—if he was thinking—I was the one paying the price. I was spending more and more of my time arguing with my friends, and all because of that hairball.

My year. Yeah, right. More like my minute.

How do you think I felt at lunch on Tuesday when I walked out of the food line with my tray and found Cap Anderson at *my* table, in *my* seat? Okay, it was a big cafeteria, but I'd been working my way up to that position

since the very first day of sixth grade. It hadn't taken me more than thirty seconds to look around the room and know that this was the place where the masters of the universe ate their tuna fish sandwiches. It was near the wall of windows, but not so close as to get too hot on sunny days. Yet, at the end of the period, a shaft of light always seemed to shine down like a spotlight on the person sitting in the end chair. *My chair*—at least until today.

Those filtered rays were shining now on the haystack of Sasquatch hair. I stared at Darryl. The gutless wonder wouldn't even look me in the eye. He was concentrating on the exit sign over the door, which may or may not have been a message for me to get out. Naomi was focused on Cap, which meant nobody else in the building existed. Lena was the only one with the nerve to face me. Her look plainly announced that not only had I lost my spot, but I wasn't welcome to pull up a chair and squeeze in either.

Fuming, I turned away.

Crash!

It was a tray-to-tray collision. My split pea soup sloshed onto his egg-salad sandwich; his Tater Tots flipped into my banana cream pie; his Snapple tipped over, raining down on my shoes.

I stared at the idiot as iced tea soaked into my socks. The last person I wanted to see just then.

Hugh Winkleman.

He stood frozen with fear, probably straining all those math brain cells to calculate how big a wedgie he'd just earned himself. Let me tell you, he should have been thinking huge. I had half a mind to stick a booster rocket under his waistband and launch it into orbit.

"You—"

And then I took in the expression on his face, and it was like looking in a mirror. He was staring at his hippie friend, who now had no time for him. And I was staring at my friends—same story.

In a way, it was more depressing than anything that had happened so far. I, Zach Powers, had something in common with this loser. That had to be rock bottom.

Still, there was only one other person in the whole school who was as disgusted as I was by all this hippie-mania. And that person had just dropped his lunch on me.

"Uh—sorry," he said nervously.

I felt an odd rush of emotion. It wasn't affection, trust me. But Hugh represented an earlier time at this school—before the space capsule landed and barfed up Cap Anderson. A time when things made sense.

Hugh was the one who should have been eighth grade president all along. Heck, if I'd met Cap twenty-four hours later, it probably would have happened exactly that way. Then this would still be my year, and Cap would be nothing more than a walking bad-hair day nobody really knew.

"Don't worry about it," I told Hugh. "Listen—we've got to talk."

He looked so suspicious that I felt a pang of remorse for the mean things I'd said and done to him since kindergarten. In all the years I'd known him, we'd never had a conversation that hadn't been a sham to lure him through a door with a bucket of ice water balanced on top. Sure he was suspicious. Wouldn't you be?

"About Cap Anderson," I elaborated, "and everything that's been going on."

Hugh expanded his tunnel vision on Cap to include an inventory of the guy's tablemates. He sneered at me. "Oh-ho-ho! Looks like somebody's been replaced!"

I swallowed my pride. "You'll notice Cap isn't hanging with you anymore."

"I was his friend when no one else would talk to him," Hugh said resentfully. "When you and your cronies were trying to ruin his life."

"Well, whatever we were plotting, it obviously didn't happen. He's practically the king of the school."

Hugh nodded slowly. "I don't like it either."

"It doesn't have to be this way," I pressed on.

He rounded on me. "You are such a *jerk*! Whoever told you that the whole world performs according to your instructions? That's what started this whole mess—you trying to make poor Cap dance to your tune!"

"I don't remember you warning the guy off when we nominated him for eighth grade president," I snarled.

"Because I was grateful the nominee didn't turn out to be *me*."

I pounced on this. "So you let Cap swallow the hook. Now who's the manipulator? You're just as guilty as I am."

"Maybe so, but I'm not stupid," he said hotly. "Making Cap your victim blew up in your face. Now you want him out so you can stick me in his place."

"It's not like that," I pleaded. "Look, Cap's president. We're stuck with that. But there's still time to puncture the tires of this bandwagon before the Halloween dance ratchets him up to icon status."

"No way! Just because I'm mad at Cap doesn't mean I'm going to help you stab him in the back!"

At *my* table, Naomi leaned over and dabbed delicately at a ketchup smear on the side of Cap's mouth. I almost upchucked. "Will you look at that!"

Hugh had been watching too, his face twisted with distaste. He said, "To be continued."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Nothing," he muttered, not quite meeting my eyes. "What do you need me to do?"

I shrugged. "Simple. The whole school thinks he's immortal. We just have to show them they're wrong."

20

NAME: **CAPRICORN ANDERSON**

I don't remember exactly when I stopped keeping count of how many people's names I knew. It was somewhere in the three hundreds, and the total had to be even higher now.

The yearbooks made the biggest difference. I'd look at those little black-and-white pictures, and suddenly an image of someone I'd seen around school would pop into my head. And *poof*, I'd know another student.

I was kind of lagging behind on the sixth graders because they weren't in the C Average yearbook. But Mrs. Donnelly had the elementary books as well. And there they were—the graduating fifth-grade class.

Rain would be proud. I used the memory technique she had learned from a college professor who'd passed through Garland in the early seventies. You find a connection

between the name and something about the person. For example, Monique rhymes with streak, and she had a blond streak in her dark hair. Darryl was built like a huge barrel. But sometimes I had to be a little more creative. Seventh-grade Ron had a birthmark shaped like a crab, which made me think of the Crab Nebula. AstRONomy. It sounds difficult. But once your brain is used to working that way, it happens almost automatically.

For someone who grew up knowing only one person, suddenly knowing hundreds of them was a little intimidating. But I had to admit it was kind of wonderful too.

In Sophie's opinion, studying old yearbooks was just another reason why I had to "get a life." Of all the things she said to me, this was maybe the most baffling. How could I get a life when I was obviously already alive?

We were seeing less and less of each other, despite the fact that we were in the same house. Sophie's driving test was in a week, so she never passed up a chance to practice with her mother. And she wasn't watching TV with me anymore because *Trigonometry and Tears* had gone into reruns, which meant they were showing old stories that we'd already seen.

I thought it was fantastic, because it gave you another chance to notice things you might have missed the first time around.

She rolled her eyes at me. "We just saw this episode

two weeks ago. Lashonda flunks home ec and gets caught lending Troy's letter jacket to that college guy she's been dating on the side."

I wished she hadn't said that, because I wanted to be surprised again, even though I knew it was going to happen.

But she'd been fairly upbeat lately. She was excited about her road test, and so happy with her bracelet. I was thrilled that I'd been able to do that for her.

The best thing about being eighth grade president was definitely the checks Mr. Kasigi had given me. It was funny—a money-obsessed world was the main reason Rain had dropped out and formed Garland. Yet, in my experience, money was really excellent, and every time I spent it, someone ended up smiling.

I was planning to mention it the next time Rain and I spoke on the telephone. Money could help hospitals and disaster victims and starving orphans. What was so terrible about it? Thanks to Mr. Kasigi's checks, I was in a position to lend a hand. It was everything she had taught me to believe in.

Mr. Kasigi would be back from his conference next week. I couldn't wait to show him how good I'd become at using money. Also, I needed some more checks. The first batch was almost finished.

He was going to be impressed.

* * *

C Average Middle School had three lunch periods of forty minutes each. On Wednesday, classes were canceled during that two-hour block so everyone could go to the football field.

Hugh explained it to me. "It's a pep rally."

"Pep?" I repeated.

"You know, cheering, excitement, rah, rah, rah. The whole school gets together to watch the players bonk helmets and beat their chests."

"And that takes two hours?" I queried. I was getting better at understanding school customs, but this one didn't make much sense to me.

"Not really," Hugh admitted. "Most of that time is getting everybody in and out again. But it's pretty intense. We play Rhinecliff on Saturday, and they're our biggest rivals."

"Over what?"

"Football, of course. And as the eighth grade president, you have an important role."

Rain and I weren't sports fans, what with the obsession over winning and losing. But I couldn't disappoint everybody after they'd made me feel so welcome.

I followed Hugh into the mass migration of students heading out of the building at eleven fifteen. We were a noisy procession, with horns and cowbells and excited voices chanting rhyming cheers.

It was hard not to be swept up in it, even though I wasn't sure what it was about. So much of school was like that—more a feeling than anything of substance.

“What's my part in all this?” I asked Hugh.

He led me away from the crowd thundering onto the metal bleachers and into a low hut marked LOCKER ROOMS. We slipped through a door that said VISITORS.

Hugh plucked a set of large pads off a wall hook and placed them on my shoulders. “You're going to be out there with the team.”

I was alarmed. “I don't know how to do football.”

“Don't worry,” he soothed me. “It isn't a game. You just have to show your support for the team.”

As if on cue, the PA system crackled to life. “Faculty and students, give it up for your very own Claverage Condors!”

Running feet clattered in the hall outside. The field exploded with cheers. Even more deafening was the metallic boom of thousands of feet on the bleachers. A band was playing, but it was barely audible over the crowd noise.

“Am I late?” I asked anxiously.

“No,” Hugh replied, “you're going to be right on time.” He eased a yellow football jersey over my head and began tucking my hair under a matching helmet.

“Maybe I need a bigger hat,” I suggested.

"Maybe you need a haircut," he countered, cramming the bulky headgear into place.

A faceguard lowered itself into my field of vision. I felt like I was peering out from behind a fence.

"Is that really necessary?" I asked.

"Definitely."

For an instant, I thought he looked kind of sad. I was concerned. "Is everything okay?"

"When is everything ever okay with me?" he complained. "Now get out there and make the school proud." He pointed me through the doorway, which led down a concrete tunnel and onto the field.

The crowd noise swelled to a deafening crescendo. But you know how cheers sound friendly? This was different—angrier. Mean, even. I scanned the bleachers and saw a sea of hostile faces staring straight at me

But I was here to support our team. I started walking toward the players just as they started toward me—and began to pick up speed. I could feel the ground shake as they reached a full-on stampede.

It was then that I made a startling discovery. They were all dressed in football uniforms like I was, but their jerseys were blue and red, not yellow like mine. I peered down at my chest and read, upside down, a single word: RHINECLIFF.

Why was I dressed as the other team?