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NAME: **DARRYL PENNYFIELD**

The Rhinecliff game always cranked school spirit up to fever pitch, and the pep rally proved it. When that guy in the Rhinecliff jersey stepped onto the turf, the whole place went nuts. Sure, we understood that it wasn't a real Rhinecliff Raider who had wandered into our stadium. But every single player knew exactly what was supposed to come next.

By the time Zach yelled, "Get him!" most of us were already up to full speed.

I wasn't the fastest guy on the Condors. But I was the best tackler, and I was determined to get there first. I let the roar of the crowd fill me like rocket fuel, powering me past my teammates.

I swear—it never once crossed my mind to wonder

who this kid was, this hero who was ready to be plowed down by the entire squad just to put on a good show. Whoever it was, it had to be a good athlete who could take a big hit.

The instant I made contact, I realized I was dead wrong. It was like tackling a punter. No, a punter's little sister. It was the worst feeling I ever had.

I tried to roll off, screaming at the others, "Stop!"

Too late. They were already airborne, coming in like a wave of guided missiles. I can't even describe the crunch. It wasn't pleasant for me either, because I was at the bottom. I can only imagine how it must have been for a skinny nonathlete who had no business setting foot on a gridiron. A bomb blast, an earthquake.

The crowd was in a frenzy, howling every time another Condor piled on.

Suddenly, the coaches were there, reaching into the tangle of arms and legs, pulling off bodies and tossing them aside. I heard Coach Pulaski bellowing, "What's the matter with you people? What was that all about?"

I jumped up and stared at him. "Wait a minute! That wasn't planned?"

The coach didn't answer. He was too busy getting the helmet off the guy in the Rhinecliff jersey.

About thirty pounds of hair spilled out onto the turf. Eleven hundred screaming, cheering kids went suddenly

silent at the sight of the eighth grade president stretched out, dazed, on the grass.

I dropped to my knees beside him. "Cap, are you okay?"

Cap reached up and brushed at a clump of mud that had penetrated his faceguard. He started to say something, but it came out a low gurgle.

The coach and one of the trainers hauled Cap to his feet. Supporting him, one on each side, they began walking him back to the school building and the nurse's office. There was a smattering of applause like they give injured players at sporting events. But not much. Everybody was too shocked.

Before leaving the field, Coach Pulaski turned back to the team. "Nobody moves. Not a muscle. You hear me?"

They hustled Cap away. He was taking the occasional step, but if they hadn't been holding him up, he would have been flat on his face for sure.

Still silent, the crowd began to file out in an orderly fashion. They fell in line behind Cap and the coaches, like mourners in a funeral procession. There was none of the rowdiness and high spirits from before. Cap's injury had sucked all the pep out of this rally.

I looked at my teammates, moving from face to face, not sure if I was upset or just confused. "What happened? Why was Cap in that uniform?"

"I guess he volunteered," offered our kicker.

"Volunteered for what? That wasn't supposed to be part of the rally. The coaches knew nothing about it."

"Maybe Cap did the whole thing on his own," suggested Zach. "He's a bit of a nut job. Even you have to admit he's not Joe Average."

That should have been enough for me. It always had been before. The word of Zach Powers. He was the guy who convinced me I wasn't as stupid as I think I probably am. Before Zach, school was pure torture for me. Imagine spending 180 days a year in a place that's designed to take everything you're not good at and make it important. Zach rewrote those rules for me. School had nothing to do with learning and knowing and getting the right answers. School was about sports and girls and fun and being popular, because you're good at sports, hang out with the right girls, and have a lot of fun.

But Zach had gotten so weird lately on the subject of Cap, how could I trust what he was saying? There was something about this disaster that just didn't add up.

I was still chewing on it when Coach Pulaski burst back upon us, his face a thundercloud.

"If there's one thing I tried to teach you besides the fundamentals of football, it's to use your head for something more than a place to put your helmet! What in God's name were you thinking?"

"Honest, Coach," protested one of the receivers. "We didn't know it was Cap."

Pulaski's eyes bulged. "But you knew it was *somebody*! Why would you think it's *ever* okay for twenty guys to pile on some poor kid like he's a tackling dummy? And not just for *his* sake! What about your own? You risk your bones, your knees, any chance of playing in high school—and for what? To beat up on a jersey that once belonged to Rhinecliff?"

"Is Cap going to be okay?" I asked in a small voice.

"Probably—no thanks to you. For crying out loud, Pennyfield, I haven't seen you run that hard all season! Now, I've got to ask you—all of you: who put that boy up to playing kamikaze?"

I studied my cleats, and everybody else studied theirs.

"Come on," prodded the coach. "Somebody had to know about this." Again, dead silence. "Fine, don't tell me. But this isn't over. When Mr. Kasigi gets back, he's going to ask you these same questions and probably a lot more. I'm disgusted with every last one of you!"

We changed and went back to class, but there was no escaping the events of the pep rally. The whole school had been there to see what happened, and no one could talk about anything else. What went wrong? What did the team know, and when did they know it? Was Cap going to be all right?

The speculation got wilder every minute. One rumor actually had it that Cap might take revenge on the team by running us over with a school bus.

"Come on!" I exploded. "There's no revenge! It was an accident!"

Naomi was beyond furious. "Oh, sure, twenty guys *accidentally* jumped on him."

"Okay, that part was on purpose," I admitted. "But we didn't mean for it to be Cap. We didn't mean for it to be *anybody*. It was a stunt—like the guy in the jersey was Rhinecliff."

"Some stunt," she snapped. "Cap has never played football. You could have put him in the hospital!"

"Calm down," soothed Lena. "He isn't in any hospital. The word is he's still at school, and he's going to his after-noon classes. Limping a little, but not really hurt."

When Lena used the phrase "the word is," you could take it to the bank. She knew *everybody*. It was like she had her own private network of spies.

I heaved a sigh of relief. I'd been the first to hit Cap, after all. The shame brought sudden tears to my eyes.

Lena stuck her finger in my face. "Don't you dare start blubbering on me. None of this was your fault. It was Winkleman."

I was blown away. "*Hugh* Winkleman?"

"Phil saw him in the office getting bawled out for it."

None of us were Winkleman fans, but I couldn't believe Hugh would do anything to hurt Cap. Cap was the closest thing he had to a friend. Not to mention that the wuss didn't have the guts to hurt a fly—not unless someone else was pulling his strings.

I had a haunting vision from lunch yesterday. Hugh at a corner table, deep in conversation with Zach. Those two were worst enemies. Yet they had been hunched over that table almost like they were—plotting something?

Zach was the captain of the Condors. He knew about the pep rally. He knew the locker room setup and the longtime rivalry with Rhinecliff. And he had a grudge against Cap that was growing bigger every minute. . . .

I guess I must have looked like the Incredible Hulk—sickly green and bursting out of my shirt in sheer rage. My own best friend, the guy I admired so much that I tried to be just like him—

“Darryl, what's wrong?” Lena asked in alarm.

Without answering, I raced down the hall toward Zach's locker, each stride longer than the last. How many times had I gone there to be his sidekick and his yes-man, to tell him what he wanted to hear? Well, he wasn't going to want to hear this!

It was class change, so the corridor was crowded. I kept on moving. There was no point being a linebacker if you couldn't clear a path with your shoulder.

If I'd doubted Zach's guilt, the expression on his face when he saw me gave it all away. He knew I knew.

"*You!*" I accused. "You did that to Cap! You couldn't fight your own battles! You had to use the whole football team as a weapon!"

He played dumb. "What are you babbling about? I didn't do anything to Cap. It was Winkleman! Haven't you heard? It's all over the school."

"And who put him up to it?" I ranted. "I know it's you! I saw you two planning it in the cafeteria!"

"You're delusional!" It was classic Zach—the sneering, superior put-down tone that he used on other people, but never on me. "You're just feeling guilty because you're the one who hit him!"

"We *all* hit him!" I said hotly.

"But who got there first? You practically broke your neck doing it. No way were you going to be denied the pleasure of planting your helmet right between those numbers."

The fact that he was one hundred percent right made me that much madder. I was so pumped with rage that I didn't notice Cap himself joining the spectators around us.

Zach wasn't done yet. "To be honest, I'm kind of impressed, Darryl. I never knew you could get that kind of speed out of that fat caboose of yours."

And I snapped. Totally. Zach was smarter than I was, and I was never going to win this argument using just my mouth. It was time for my knuckles to take over.

Honest—I didn't even know Cap was there. I didn't recognize the voice that said, "Violence is not the answer." All I felt was my fist slamming into something about eighteen inches closer than its intended receiver.

When the burning haze cleared from my eyes, the first person I saw was Zach, untouched and laughing at me. Down at my feet lay Cap, out cold, his nose gushing blood like a geyser.

"Not again! No!" I whimpered, horror-struck.

The hall just about exploded with agitated chatter. The news spread like wildfire that the eighth grade president was down again.

Zach was practically hysterical. "That's the second time today that you've decked this kid. You're building a great relationship. If you get any closer, you'll probably kill him!"

The reality of what I'd done overpowered even the desire to shut Zach's big mouth. I hauled Cap off the floor. "Help me!" I bawled at the crowd.

A couple of sixth graders rushed up to support Cap on the other side. We hustled him through the maze of gawkers. I noticed he was starting to come around, because he was mumbling about peace and nonviolence.

His breathing blew pink bubbles in the torrent of blood that was still pouring from his nose.

I was so flustered that it never even occurred to me to lie when Nurse Myerson asked what happened.

"You were in a fight?" she demanded.

"Not with Cap! I was trying to punch someone else, but his face got in the way! It was all because of nonviolence!"

"I can see that," she said coldly.

But her attention was on Cap, so I got sent to wait for her in the principal's office. I sat there through the final period of the day, not even agonizing over what "I'll deal with you later" might mean. Whatever happened to me, I definitely had it coming.

The rest of the school seemed to think so too, because I got a lot of dirty looks as I stewed there in full view behind the glass. The condemned man on public display—the guy who had KOed Cap, and tackled him before that.

The worst part was that I liked Cap now. Sure, I'd been awful to him. But that had been back in the days when we'd made him president as a joke and sent him wandering after fake press conferences and stole his shoes while he was meditating. Back when Zach had been calling the shots. What a bunch of jerks we'd been, firing spitballs at a kid just because his hippie hair made a big target.

And in spite of everything we threw at him, Cap never

fell apart, or ratted us out, or even got mad. For weeks it had been open season on the eighth grade president, but he hung in there. That's what first brought me around to admire the guy. I didn't care that he could drive a bus or plan a dance. Cap Anderson was *quality*.

I didn't see that before. I saw it now. Yet now was when I'd really hurt him.

I was never going to forgive myself.

The bell rang, but Nurse Myerson still hadn't appeared. The halls filled with students packing up for the day. Through the main doors, I could see the fleet of yellow buses coming up the circular drive. And there, between the third and fourth—

An ambulance.

No. It couldn't be. Not for Cap. There was no siren. It was driving normal speed, taking its turn in the queue. Still—what would an ambulance be doing in a line of school buses?

The answer rounded the corner ten feet in front of me. It was Nurse Myerson, escorting a shaky, blood-spattered Cap toward the front door. The crowd parted to let them through. Outside, kids waiting to board their buses formed an aisle that led to the rear of the EMS unit.

I didn't care how much trouble I was in. I raced out of the office and blasted through the double doors. The scene was eerie. All eyes were on Cap, but no one was

saying a word—not a peep, not even a whisper. The only sounds were the idling engines and the flapping of the flag on the pole.

I cupped my hands to my mouth. “Cap, I’m sorry! It was an accident! Both times!”

I was too late. Nurse Myerson helped him up into the ambulance, and the greatest eighth grade president we ever had was gone.



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NAME: **CAPRICORN ANDERSON**

The back doors of the ambulance swung open, and there she was.

She sat in a wheelchair that was anchored to the floor. She looked paler and thinner, but never better—not to me.

I hugged her. “Rain, I missed you so much.”

She hugged me back, then pulled away and held me at arm’s length. “I see that. Have you been in a fight?”

“I tried to stop one,” I admitted. “I guess I’ve got a lot to learn about peacemaking.”

She nodded proudly. “Good for you. We always try to save the world. But sometimes the world doesn’t want to be saved.” She looked at me critically. “You’re going to have two black eyes, you know.”

I grinned at her. “I’ll take *four* black eyes if you

tell me we're going back to Garland."

"We're going home, Cap. I think the rehab center was glad to get rid of me. Some of my opinions didn't sit well with my fellow patients. Like it's a crime to speak your mind." She beamed. "I insisted we come straight here to pick you up. I didn't want you to have to spend an extra minute in this awful place."

"It's not *so* bad," I told her. "Different. Crazy. But there are good things about it too."

"You're a kind soul," she praised me. "But it's all over now. We just have to stop at Floramundi's and pick up your things."

The EMS tech slammed the door and turned to Rain. "We've got to run the siren for a few seconds or we're not allowed to pass the school buses. Nothing to worry about."

The vehicle whooped and wailed off school property, then returned to making its silent way through traffic to the Donnellys'.

I ran into the house calling, "Mrs. Donnelly! Mrs. Donnelly!" I was anxious to share my good news with the lady who had been so nice to me.

Sophie looked up from the depths of a Department of Motor Vehicles pamphlet entitled *Welcome New Driver*. "She's at work, just like every other day. What's so important?"

"I'm leaving," I told her.

"Don't let the door slap you in the butt on the way

out," she said, stifling a yawn. "When will you be back?"

"Never," I replied. "Rain picked me up straight from the hospital. We're going home."

She put down the manual. "No fooling." She peered out the kitchen window at the ambulance parked in the driveway. "Sweet ride. Your grandmother's in there?"

I nodded. "She can't come in. She's still not getting around so well. Do you want to go out and meet her?"

"That's okay," she said quickly. "My mother's been telling me Rain stories for years. I feel like I already know her." She took in my swollen face and blood-spattered tie-dye. "Whoa! You sure that ambulance isn't for you?"

I was embarrassed. "My nose started bleeding at school. I'm fine."

"You looked like you killed and ate a wild boar," she commented mildly. "Come on, I'll help you get your stuff together."

It took barely a few minutes to fill my duffel bag and erase the fact that I'd ever lived in this house. I'm not sure what made me ask if I could have the Claverage year-books. All that was behind me now. But studying them had become almost like a hobby.

"Knock yourself out," Sophie insisted. "You're doing us a favor by making that stuff disappear."

I wrote a note to Mrs. Donnelly, thanking her for letting me stay there. I could have ended up in some kind of

group home for all those weeks. I made sure to tell her that Rain was grateful too, since they had known each other.

"I guess this is it, then," said Sophie.

I paused at the TV, the only one I might ever get to watch *Trigonometry and Tears* on. "I can't believe I'm never going to find out how Rishon does in college."

"Oh, he never makes it to college," she informed me. "He gets run over by a cement truck on the way to freshman orientation."

I was shattered. "No!"

She laughed. "I'm just pulling your chain. I'm sure he lives on to be a total basket case just like everybody else on *T & T*. He doesn't exist, remember? I'd say 'get a clue,' but where you're going, you're probably better off without one."

We exchanged a very awkward good-bye. I wished her luck with the driving test, and she told me to have a nice life. It gave me a special glow to note that she was wearing the bracelet she thought was a gift from her father.

"It was real, it was fun, but it wasn't real fun," she called as I headed down the front walk.

It seemed fitting that the last thing she said to me was something I didn't understand.

I got back into the ambulance and we drove off. I knew I'd never forget Sophie Donnelly.

“Next stop, Garland,” Rain told me.

I couldn’t keep myself from grinning, which made my nose hurt.

It was about an hour’s drive. It would have taken even longer, but the driver used his siren to open up some snarled traffic.

I could tell the instant we turned onto the dirt road that led to the community. I had memorized every pothole and rut in that driveway, and they were all precious to me. The fact of returning hadn’t become real until that moment.

The ambulance stopped, and the attendants helped us out and up onto our own porch. The first thing I noticed was that the duct tape had come off my Foucault pendulum. The bowling-ball weight had fallen, cracking the floorboards.

I took in the sights and smells of the only home I’d ever known up until several weeks ago. It looked smaller than I remembered it, and more—used. The colors and textures seemed very bland compared to the warm and bright bricks and stuccos of the houses around C Average.

I felt a pang of guilt for my disloyal thought. This was the greatest, most beloved spot on earth! If it looked a little run-down, it was from all the weeks standing empty.

Rain could always read my mind. “The place is lonely. It missed us.”

Not half as much as I missed it.

23

NAME: **MR. KASIGI**

The conference could not possibly have gone better. I was congratulated by so many people that it was almost embarrassing. Our own district superintendent confided that the principalship of North High would be opening up in a couple of years, and the job was mine for the asking.

I felt fantastic. Why wouldn't I? I returned to Claverage flushed with victory. I had no way of knowing that the key word in that sentence was going to be "flushed."

I'd expected a huge pile of mail, and a lot of phone messages and e-mails. But as I sifted through the papers and envelopes on my desk, the familiar logo of the Consolidated Savings Bank kept turning up.

I opened the one marked “Urgent” and unfolded the computer-generated page inside.

Dear Customer,

We are returning this check to you because your account is overdrawn and the transaction cannot be honored. A service fee of \$30.00 has been charged to your account.

Stapled to the page was a Claverage Middle School check with INSUFFICIENT FUNDS stamped across it in red. It was made out to the American Cancer Society in the amount of five hundred dollars. My own signature appeared on one of the lines. On the second was written *Capricorn Anderson*.

My office tilted, and I clung to the arms of my chair for fear of winding up on the carpet. This was one of the checks I’d given Anderson! Why was he donating five hundred dollars to the American Cancer Society? Not that it wasn’t a worthy cause. But this money was supposed to pay for the Halloween dance!

Hands shaking, I opened a few more envelopes. They were all the same—the March of Dimes, Habitat for Humanity, Cystic Fibrosis Foundation, all for hundreds.

An icy feeling spread northward from the base of my spine. If these checks were bouncing, it meant the money in the Student Activities Fund was *gone*! There

had been four thousand dollars in that account!

I waded into the mountain of mail with both hands, tossing envelopes in all directions, until I came up with the bank statement. On it, the whole terrible story was laid out for me in detail.

There were the checks that I'd countersigned, the ones that had bounced, and the ones that hadn't. I saw the deposits for the food and music, and one or two other expenses that probably had to do with the dance. The rest were all made out to charities. One, to the March of Dimes, was for a thousand dollars!

What was going on here?

I buzzed my secretary. "Get Capricorn Anderson down to my office. Immediately!"

"Capricorn Anderson is no longer a registered student here."

I nearly inhaled my tie. "Since when?"

"He left the school last Wednesday," came the reply. "His grandmother was released from the hospital."

"Get her on the phone!"

There was a brief pause, then, "It says here they don't have a phone."

I did the only thing I could think of. I called Flora Donnelly. I left messages at her home, office, and cell number. I must have sounded pretty desperate, because she turned up within the hour.

By that time, I had already spoken to my bank manager and a very unfriendly assistant to the deejay, who accused me of “. . . hangin’ rubber paper offa my man, yo,” whatever that meant.

I turned beseeching eyes to the social worker. “This is your case, Flora. I know you have a special connection to the kid. Can you shine any light on this for me?”

She examined the evidence—the bank statements and the bounced checks. Her face was a sickly shade of gray. She looked like I felt.

Then she said something I didn’t expect: “Frank, this is all your fault.”

“*My* fault?”

“What possessed you to give him signed checks?”

“I was going out of town!” I defended myself. “I didn’t want him to be caught short. Besides, we always give the kids some responsibility with the Student Activity Fund. They’re teenagers. They’re supposed to be able to handle it.”

“I warned you that Cap Anderson is a boy who may as well have been raised on another planet.”

“Okay,” I admitted, “I noticed he wasn’t exactly street-wise. But that didn’t stop him from committing fraud.”

“He’s no more capable of fraud than of flying,” she said flatly.

“It’s right there in black and white!” I insisted. “He

found a way to take the school's money and make it look like he donated it to charity. I've got no choice but to call the police."

She was suddenly patient. "When you gave him those checks, did you explain to him what a check is and how it works?"

"Of course. I'm not a fool."

"No," she said. "I mean *exactly* how it works. That the amount of the check is deducted from the balance in the account? And that the money can run out?"

"Everybody knows you can't spend more than you have!"

"Frank, I never told you this. I lived on Garland Farm until I was twelve. When my family moved, I had never handled money. Not even a penny. Money was the key to everything that was wrong with the world, and the leaders of the community kept any kind of financial dealings completely hidden from us kids. I *guarantee* you that Cap had no idea that anyone had to pay for the checks he was writing. And the power to write them must have seemed almost magical. Once he realized that he could use that power to help people, there was no limit to how much he might try to give away."

I was thunderstruck. "Are you telling me that he really *did* take the entire Student Activity Fund and donate it to charity?"

She nodded. "He's got all the idealism of the sixties with none of the reality checks. He's not a criminal, he's the exact opposite—totally innocent in every sense of the word."

I held my head. "It would have been easier if he'd robbed the school at gunpoint and taken off for the Mexican border. *That* I could have explained to the board, and insurance would have covered it. What am I going to do? Call the March of Dimes and demand my money back?"

"You could try," she suggested reasonably. "This can't be the first time an unauthorized person misspent money."

"Yeah, to buy a plasma TV, not to donate to charity."

Her face betrayed a ghost of a smile. "Don't worry. At Garland there's nowhere to plug in a plasma TV."

"Here's a charge that doesn't look very charitable," I muttered, still studying the bank statement. "It's to a jewelry store on Main Street."

She looked over my shoulder. "I'm sure there's some explanation. Prizes, probably. Best dancer, best rap, most outrageous outfit—that kind of thing."

I nodded numbly. That was the moment when I realized there would be no dancing prizes, because there would be no dance.

It wouldn't be a popular decision, but I saw now that

this was the only way. Sure, I could fight with the bank, or plead with the charities. But it would just make me look like a fool. Or I could drive out to this Garland place and demand that the grandmother replace the funds Cap frittered away. Still—who knew if they had any money at all? They were living an alternative lifestyle forty years after the rest of the world had given it up. The local papers would have a field day reporting that while I was running a principals' conference in Las Vegas, my trusted eighth grade president was emptying my treasury.

The job at North High was not going to be offered to a court jester.

No, I had to cancel the dance, recoup what I could, and eat the rest.

Flora Donnelly was right. This *was* my fault. But not for her reasons. I had long suspected how the kids went about picking their eighth grade president. And when I chose to look the other way, I was sort of putting a stamp of approval on it. But I always knew that one day it would blow up in their faces.

I just never thought it would blow up in mine.

24

NAME: **NAOMI ERLANGER**

What were we supposed to think?

First Cap gets crushed by the entire football team, and the coaches practically have to carry him to the nurse. Three hours later, he gets decked by Darryl Pennyfield—I'm never speaking to *him* again. Next thing you know, he's being taken away by ambulance.

I hadn't seen him since.

Okay, for the first couple of days, nobody was surprised Cap was absent from school. He was hurting. Who wouldn't be? Then the weekend—the Condors game on Saturday. Well, who could blame him for blowing off that event after what the team did to him? Lena only went because she's a cheerleader, and she said it was the lousiest turnout she'd ever seen for a Condors-Raiders

matchup. (C Average and Rhinecliff battled to a 3-3 tie, in case you're one of the few who cares.)

Serves those jerks right.

Anyway, I figured I'd catch Cap on Monday. Wrong. And by Tuesday, I was getting worried. It was almost a full week since anybody had laid eyes on the eighth grade president.

Okay, I was extra upset because Cap was extra special to me. But everyone was talking about it. You'd see a bunch of kids in a huddle in the hall, and you didn't have to eavesdrop to figure out the topic of conversation. Where was Cap? Why hadn't he come back yet? Could he be really hurt? The custodians were still trying to scrub his blood off the terrazzo in the corridor where the big punch had been thrown.

He must have been in bad shape. What else would keep him away from what was brewing between the two of us? "To be continued"—I *meant* that. This wasn't another shallow middle school crush like the one I'd had on Zach. This was a *relationship*. And besides, the Halloween dance was on Saturday night. Cap had to realize we could never pull it off without him.

When I asked Mrs. Vogel, my homeroom teacher, she replied, "I don't think Cap Anderson is a student here anymore."

"*What?*" She might as well have told me that the

school was slated for demolition with all of us inside it. "Of course he's a student! He's the eighth grade president!"

She looked uncomfortable. "I don't want to argue with you, Naomi. I've told you what I know."

"I'm going to ask Mr. Kasigi!" I stormed.

"Who do you think told me?" she said, not unkindly. "Mr. Kasigi held an emergency staff meeting to bring all the teachers up to speed. I don't recommend that you mention Cap's name to him. He gets very emotional on the subject."

"But the dance is Saturday night! Who's going to run it if Cap isn't here?"

She wouldn't look me in the eye. "The announcement is going to be made at lunch. The dance has been canceled."

I felt like I'd been hit in the stomach with a two-by-four. "You can't be serious!"

She was serious enough to kick me out of the room. By the time I staggered into the hall, the first of the notices was being posted:

DUE TO UNFORTUNATE CIRCUMSTANCES,
THE HALLOWEEN DANCE HAS BEEN CALLED OFF.

As you can imagine, the chaos was rising. There was

only one middle school in Claverage. Our neighbors had all gone here; our older brothers and sisters. A lot of our parents had attended C Average. There had *always* been a Halloween dance.

"They can't cancel the dance!" wailed Tiffany Peterson. "It's a tradition!"

"They can and they did," Lena said darkly. "Kasigi's such a jerk. He spends the week partying at some fancy convention, and then comes home to pull the plug on anybody else having fun."

"But it's our trademark!" Tiffany persisted. "The elementaries have holiday pageants; the high school has Homecoming. Halloween is *our thing*! How can Mr. Kasigi do this to us?"

Zach put his two cents in. "Kasigi isn't the problem. Since when do the teachers have much to say about what goes on in this place? You're ignoring the obvious: the dance got canceled because Cap screwed up somehow."

"How do you figure that?" asked Lena. "The details are all set, and Cap isn't even here."

"Exactly," Zach agree. "It's *his* party. Where is he?"

I jumped on that so fast, the wind should have knocked him over. "Where is he? It was your precious football team that tried to put him through the crust of the earth. And don't forget the punch that leveled him was meant for you."

He shrugged. "It's not my fault Pennyfield's gone over the edge."

"Nothing's ever your fault," I snarled at him. "When you couldn't use Cap as your clown, you tried to use him as your crash-test dummy. I've had it up to here with you, Zach Powers! You and I are *through*!"

As rattled as I was, I took some satisfaction in the expression of total shock on his face. I laid it on even thicker. "Did it ever occur to you that 'unfortunate circumstances' might not be just a lame excuse? What if it means—what if it means—"

Well, what *could* it mean? No one had the guts to say it, but it was in everybody's thoughts. Stone-faced Mr. Kasigi couldn't hear Cap's name because it made him too emotional. What unfortunate circumstances could cause that? Add in the fact that Cap had dropped off the face of the earth. . . .

"Let's get to the bottom of this," Lena decided.

Good old Lena. She was a tough nut, but she could be so sensible sometimes. Plus, she had tons of connections, and everybody seemed to owe her a favor. Phil Ruiz helped out around the office, so Lena made it his job to get into student records and pull Cap's file.

He snuck the folder out in the kangaroo pocket of his hooded sweatshirt and showed it to us in the stairwell by the gym.

This is what it contained: nothing. No papers, no grades, no test scores, not so much as an index card.

"How is it possible to have an empty file?" Lena demanded.

"It isn't," Phil told her. "It should have transcripts, transfer forms from his old school, and emergency contact information."

"That's what we need!" I exploded. "We have to contact him. This is an emergency!"

"Don't worry," Lena said darkly. "Somebody must have his address."

I rode the same bus as Cap, but my stop was before his, so I had no idea where he got off. We couldn't find anyone who knew which house was his.

Then, at last, a breakthrough. Olivia Weintraub had a brother who had once dated a girl named Sophie Donnelly. He had talked about a longhaired sixties-type staying with the Donnellys. It could only have been Cap.

Lena and I took Cap's bus after school and found the right house, a well-kept split level on a quiet side street. Just the thought that he lived and slept here made me feel warm inside. I was positive we had the right place.

"This is it," Lena confirmed. "191 Rockcrest."

As we marched up the walk to the front door, the window of a car parked in the driveway whispered

open. A very pretty high school girl leaned out and called, "Something I can do for you?"

"Does Cap Anderson live here?" I asked anxiously.

"No." She started to roll the window up again.

The passenger door opened and an older lady got out. "You girls are too late. Cap is—no longer at this address."

You could hear she was choosing her words carefully.

"Well," Lena persisted, "can you tell us where he is now?"

"I'm afraid that's not possible."

"But why?" I wailed. "We really need to talk to him!"

The daughter lowered her window again. "My driving test is the day after tomorrow. We're busy."

"Sorry, girls," the mother added. "I'm sure you're just friends, with the best of intentions. But a lot of things have happened that I'm not at liberty to talk about." She got back inside and shut the door.

"Can't you just give us his phone number?" I begged.

The teenager gave me an odd smile. "Where he is they don't have a phone."

They drove away, leaving us standing on their doorstep, stunned.

Finally, Lena spoke, her voice subdued. "I think I might know why we can't find Cap."

Meltdown—that's the only word to describe my state of mind. For months I had been wandering the desert,

throwing myself at that undeserving creep Zach. Now—*finally*—I understood my true feelings.

And it was too late.

Up until that moment, no one had dared to speak the awful words out loud. But I couldn't keep them bottled inside me any longer.

“What if he's dead?”

25

NAME: **ZACH POWERS**

First things first: I didn't believe it for a heartbeat.

The rumors were beyond nuts. Cap's in the hospital . . . He's in the morgue . . . He's in a persistent vegetative state . . . He's suffering from amnesia . . . He's upside down in a fish tank. . . .

I'd lost all respect for the intelligence level in this place. They should raffle off the Brooklyn Bridge at the next PTA fund-raiser.

I couldn't explain where Cap was, and frankly, I didn't care. Not only was my year in ruins, but my name was mud at C Average. Me—Zach Powers! And it was all thanks to the Case of the Disappearing Hairball.

People were nuts on the subject. I don't think I heard a single conversation on any other topic. Teachers were

complaining that their students could focus on nothing else. I figured most of the kids were just bummed that the dance had been canceled. No—people were genuinely worried about the hippie!

“What’s the big deal?” I said for the umpteenth time. “So he slipped back through the same time warp he dropped out of in the first place.”

Naomi cut me dead with a flamethrower glare. “You never liked him! You tried to make a fool of him!”

It was scary how much that girl hated me now. I used to think she was kind of hot for me. Maybe I misread the signs.

“Yeah,” I admitted. “So did you. So did the whole eighth grade.”

“But then *some of us* saw the kind of person Cap was,” Lena put in. “*Some of us* appreciate how he devoted his heart and soul to the school.”

“Heart and soul?” I exploded. “He held a funeral for a bird! He danced on the front lawn! He played senior citizen music! The Beatles and that other grandpa—Guitarfunkel, or whatever his name is.”

“Garfunkel,” Naomi corrected icily. “Simon and Garfunkel.”

“Listen,” Lena told me, “Cap gave his *life*—”

“He *didn’t*—”

But I was fighting a losing battle. If Lena believed it, it

might as well have been the lead story on CNN. Cap put his all into C Average, and for that he was struck down. If he wasn't dead, he was seriously messed up.

"Just because you can't find someone doesn't mean he's at death's door!" I argued with at least twenty people. "I can't tell you exactly where Tom Cruise is, either. That doesn't make him a corpse."

Talk to the wall. Eleven hundred kids were absolutely convinced that the eighth grade president had come to tragedy. And it was all thanks to the football team, Darryl Pennyfield, and me.

I couldn't take three steps in the hall without getting a dirty look from somebody. Even sixth graders felt they had the right to scowl in my direction. Every time I came back to my locker there was a fresh insult scratched into the paint: *jerk*, *dope*, or something else with the same number of letters.

"Has everybody gone off the deep end?" I complained to Hugh in the cafeteria. "When the Garrets redid their kitchen, nobody saw Alicia for like, three weeks. Not one person thought she was dead."

"Yeah, but the whole school didn't watch Alicia Garret being loaded into an ambulance," he pointed out. "And the biggest party of the year wasn't canceled right after that."

I scowled at him. "Don't tell me you're about to join

the chorus of mourners for our dear departed Sasquatch.”

“Of course not,” he told me. “I think it’s a load of hooey. But I can’t say I’m surprised. If this school was full of geniuses, I’d have a lot more company on the chess team.”

It was the ultimate barometer of my plummeting status. The only person willing to eat lunch with me was Hugh. If I could track Cap down using hippie LoJack, I wouldn’t know whether to haul him back or hide out with him. Part of me just wanted to disappear.

“Hey, what’s that?” Suddenly, Hugh reached over and began rifling through my hair.

I slapped his arm away. “Cut it out, man!”

“Look!” He plucked a small object from behind my ear and held it in front of me—a pea-size blob of soggy white paper.

A spitball.

I examined it, unbelieving. “That’s impossible—”

He was disgusted. “Spitballs can travel both ways, you know. You don’t have a force field around you.”

I stared at him, the target of more of my spitballs than everybody else put together. “I suppose you’re waiting for an apology.”

“I’m just enjoying my front row seat at Payback Fest,” he sneered.

“Hey, you bring a lot of it on yourself,” I accused.

"It's *my* fault I get picked on?"

"From the first day of kindergarten, everything about you screamed *dweeb*—your clothes, your hobbies, your vocabulary—"

He scowled. "And you're perfect."

I told the truth. "My whole life, it's always been obvious what sports to play, what bands to listen to, what people to hang out with. It's as if I was born with a natural guidance system inside my head, showing me how to be cool." My brow clouded. "But Cap Anderson doesn't come with a book of instructions."

Instead of gloating, he actually seemed to understand. For Hugh Winkleman, the whole planet didn't come with a book of instructions.

He said, "Too bad you can't just start liking him."

If he had smacked me with a brick, I couldn't have been any more stunned. How could I have missed something so obvious? "Hugh, that's it!" I exclaimed. "If we can't stop this hippie bandwagon, we'll have to find a way to jump on."

"Isn't it a little too late for that?" he challenged. "Cap may not be dead, but he's definitely gone."

"We might be able to work that to our advantage. Come on."

I strode out of the lunchroom and across the hall to the library. He wolfed down what was left of his sandwich and followed.

I logged on to a computer, pounded the keyboard for a few moments, and swiveled the screen toward him. His eyes widened as he read:

A TRIBUTE TO CAP ANDERSON

PAY YOUR RESPECTS TO
THE BEST 8TH GRADE PRESIDENT EVER
SATURDAY, 7 P.M.
(THE TIME OF THE HALLOWEEN DANCE
HE NEVER GOT TO GIVE US)
IN THE PARKING LOT

DO NOT SHOW TO ANY TEACHERS!

He tried to say something, and began to choke on a mouthful of peanut butter and jelly.

I pounded him on the back, cackling with glee. Zach Powers was down but not out!

“Load the paper tray. We’ve got a lot of printing to do.”

26

NAME: **SOPHIE DONNELLY**

T-day at last. My driving test.

Things were finally falling into place. Dad had come through with the bracelet. I was an only child again. Life was even looking up on the boyfriend front—for the last couple of days I'd been on the receiving end of some intense glances from Martin Enfield, a senior on the lacrosse team.

Now I just had to pass this test. Dad phoned to wish me luck, going on and on about how proud he was. He talked as if he'd been my mentor and not someone who'd finally showed up to give me a few lessons before blowing town. But it was good to hear his voice. And anyway, I had something to say to him on a previous topic.

"Thanks for getting the bracelet back to me. The inscription—it was really sweet."

There was dead silence on the other end of the line.

"Dad, are you there?"

"Yeah, Soph, I'm here," the reply came at last. "I'm on my cell, and the connection isn't great. What was that about the bracelet?"

"Just thank you. The inscription—I never knew you were so sentimental."

"Glad your old man can still get the job done," he said smoothly. "Listen, Soph, you're breaking up. I can barely hear you. Good luck on the test. Knock 'em dead—"

The line went silent.

I hung up, frowning. The connection hadn't seemed so terrible to me. Even more confusing was his reaction to my thank-you for the bracelet. For a moment there I could have sworn he didn't have the faintest idea what I was talking about.

My mother bustled in. "Ready to go?"

"Mother, do you think Dad could have already forgotten about sending back the engraved bangle?"

She gave me that sympathetic social-worker look that she normally reserved for her loser clients like Cap Anderson. "Your father loves you, and he always has the best of intentions."

Ask a simple question, get a load of touchy-feely psychobabble in return. "So I should take that as a yes?"

"Honey, this is such a big day for you. Why would you

dwel on something that's only going to make you unhappy?"

Whatever.

The waiting room at the DMV was decorated with large, mounted photographs of multivehicle pileups. Real subtle. Truth be told, I was scared to death. When the examiner got into the car, I honestly thought I might lose my lunch.

"Make a left out of the parking lot," he instructed.

It was a wet day—not pouring rain, but misty. That spooked me too. Turning the wheel, working the pedals—these things should have been second nature. Today they seemed awkward and complicated, like I was defusing a bomb. One wrong move and—*boom*.

To calm my nerves I tried to replace the instructor with a mental image of Dad in the passenger seat. Yet, for some reason, the imaginary companion my brain conjured up was not my father, but Cap. I shook my head to reboot, but he was still there. The freakazoid was coming with me on the most important test of my life!

And why did the examiner have to take me down such a narrow street? There were parked cars on both sides, with very little road between them. Oh, no—

I was on the edge of panic when a familiar voice sounded inside my skull: *If the front gets through, the rest will drag.*

Gritting my teeth, I aimed the hood into the tight

passage and held on for dear life. It was all I could do to keep from cheering as the Saturn threaded the needle.

Thanks, Cap. It was a good thing Rain drove a taxi before devoting her life to terrorizing my mother.

"Turn on to the interstate," the examiner ordered.

I took it slow merging onto the highway. As we picked up speed, droplets of water began running down the windshield. I set the wipers on intermittent, feeling a little more confident.

Still, my mind kept returning to the phone conversation with Dad. Believe me, I knew the man was a flake. But how could he forget about the bracelet? He didn't just give it to me—he presented it, took it away, had it engraved, and then brought it to the post office to mail. Anything with that many steps would stick in your mind, wouldn't it?

"Exit here and head east on Fillmore . . ."

I obsessed on the subject until the bangle on my wrist felt like an iron shackle from some medieval dungeon. How I managed to operate the car was a total mystery. I was completely distracted. And the more I twisted the facts, the more they pointed to a single inescapable conclusion.

Dad didn't *forget* about the engraved bracelet. He never sent it to me in the first place. It must have been Mother.

That wasn't her style, though. Not that she wanted me to be miserable. But the one thing she always said about

her job was, "I can't let these kids live in a fantasy land." She was always nagging people to face reality, even me. *Especially* me, when the subject was my father.

It made no sense that she'd go through an elaborate ruse to trick me into believing that he'd followed through on his promise.

But if not her, then who?

". . . and I just need you to parallel park between these orange cones," the examiner was saying. "Run the defogger a minute to make sure you can see out the back."

I reached for the button and missed. Instead, my finger hit the *on* switch for the radio. Music filled the car—the Beatles singing the chorus of "All You Need Is Love."

"Anyone who lived through the sixties will remember this old classic," came the deejay's voice as the song began its slow fade.

And suddenly, there were tears streaming down my cheeks.

The examiner was appalled. "There's no need to cry, miss! It's no big deal—you just hit the wrong button. I won't take off any points for that!"

"No, it's not that—" I managed, still blubbering. But how could I ever explain it? The radio! The *song*!

That engraved bangle wasn't from Dad *or* Mother! All You Need Is Love? There was only one person who could have come up with that inscription.

Cap.

I crunched all four orange cones. The examiner passed me anyway. I think he just felt sorry for me.

At that point, I was so broken up I don't think I would have noticed if the car had burst into flames. Cap had bought the bracelet and had it engraved just so I wouldn't feel bad about Dad blowing me off. He got absolutely nothing in return. He wasn't my boyfriend; he wasn't even my friend. He couldn't expect so much as a thank-you, since the gift was supposed to be from someone else. He did this for no other reason than to make me happy.

When I got back to the waiting room, Mother took one look at my red eyes and ashen complexion and assumed the worst.

"Never mind, honey. You'll take the test again."

I lashed out at her. "Get a clue, Mother! I have to go pick up my license."

She was astonished. "Then why are you crying?"

Why? Because I had never said a civil word to Capricorn Anderson. From the day he'd first set foot in our house, I'd declared war on the poor kid. I'd called him freakazoid, poured water on him, and never missed a chance to point out what a loser he was.

And he'd responded by doing the most wonderful thing anyone had ever done for me.

I clamped my jaw shut. The last thing I wanted was to

let this slip in front of my mother. I felt horrible enough as it was.

I couldn't even enjoy the moment of being a licensed driver—almost as if it was unfair for something good to happen to a rotten person like me.

And the worst part was it was too late for me ever to make it up to Cap. He was gone, sucked back into 1967. His last chance at having a life was shot.

I thought back to myself in eighth grade—all the good times still to come. But not for him. He was buried in his ponchos and peace signs.

Tomorrow was Halloween. Those Halloween dances were the best thing about middle school. The poor guy got hauled off to the freak farm before he even had a chance to party, get wild, actually dance with a girl.

And there was nothing anybody could do about it.

Unless . . .

27

NAME: **CAPRICORN ANDERSON**

I gave the picking pole an expert twist. When I felt the weight of the apple in the canvas catcher, I lowered it to deposit yet another MacIntosh into the basket. It was overripe and not as firm as it should be.

Everything at Garland was like that—neglected. And with Rain still hobbling around on a cane, most of the extra work was falling on me.

On the whole, we'd been lucky. The fruit was a little past its prime, but the potatoes, carrots, and turnips were in good shape.

The really great news was that Rain was making a full recovery. Just being at Garland seemed to energize her. By the second day home, she was driving again, taking our truck into town to restock our supplies.

She didn't even need me to go with her.

"There's plenty to be done right here," she told me. "Besides, I think you've had enough of civilization for a while."

I got her point. I had two black eyes, and my nose still hurt where Darryl had punched it. A wounded raccoon—that's how Rain described me.

So off she went, leaving me filling the root cellar with bushel baskets of vegetables, pruning the fruit trees, spreading the compost—getting ready for winter.

It was Garland—my Garland—everything I'd longed for all these weeks. And I was happy to be home.

But . . .

My mind kept wandering back to the halls of C Average Middle School—the crash of locker doors, the babble of excited conversation. The ringing of cell phones, the beeping of Game Boys, the traces of far-off rap music escaping the ear buds of a hundred iPods.

It was crowded, noisy, obnoxious, and even scary. But it had its own rhythm and urgency and life. And I missed it so much it was almost like an ache.

At night I spent hours poring over the yearbooks. Each familiar face triggered an avalanche of memories: tai chi on the lawn, singalongs in the music room, tie-dyeing, the hundreds upon hundreds of Halloween dance volunteers.

I looked around Garland, and in my heart, I knew it

was the best place for me. But the quiet, the dull beiges and greens, the familiar farm chores, the complete lack of other people—this used to be my life; it used to be enough. Before.

Did I want to go back? How could I? I spent all my time *there* wishing I was *here*. Yet that life kept calling me. I wanted to eat food that was scooped onto my tray by crabby ladies in hairnets and greasy aprons. I wanted to watch reruns of *Trigonometry and Tears*. I wanted to twist the little metal dial to those mysterious numbers that would magically open my locker. I wanted Sophie Donnelly to call me freakazoid one more time.

In just a couple of hours, the Halloween dance would be starting. It was the responsibility of the eighth grade president. Okay, I knew nothing about dances and had planned zero percent of this one. But I should be there.

I'd asked Rain just that morning if I could go, and she'd said no.

"All that's behind you now, Cap. Our life is here."

"I know that," I told her. "But my name is on all the posters. How can I let everybody down?"

"They won't even notice you're not there," she assured me. "You know how people are in the outside world. Only interested in themselves and their own mindless fun."

I tried another argument. "But you always said we should finish what we start, see things through to the end—"

"Cap, when you left that school, that *was* the end. And a good thing too. You were only there for a couple of months, and see how much you've changed: you talk about television programs and waste your time staring at silly yearbooks. Thank goodness I was able to take you away before the contamination got any worse."

Contamination. That was the word she kept using. Like I'd spent her recovery wallowing in a toxic waste dump. Sure, the Donnelly house and C Average weren't much like the life Rain and I had built at Garland. But different didn't automatically mean bad.

Yet the more I talked about my experiences of the past eight weeks, the more upset she got. Not angry—that would be a sign of spiritual imbalance. Just really, really *worried*.

Maybe she was right. I *was* contaminated. Would I ever have stood up to her before my time away from Garland?

And for sure I never would have done what I was about to do.

I tore a small piece from the duct tape roll and fastened the note to our refrigerator.

DEAR RAIN,

I'M SORRY, BUT THIS IS JUST TOO IMPORTANT.

DON'T WORRY ABOUT ME, I'LL BE HOME SOON.

CAP

Rain had the pickup, so that left me on foot. There was a gas station a few miles away. My plan was to go there and use the phone to call a taxi. I didn't have any money, but I still had one last check. That would get me anywhere I wanted to go.

I hadn't made this walk since the time the truck ran out of gas. I'd forgotten how long and dusty it was. The whole way I didn't see a single vehicle. I couldn't help thinking of the crowded streets around C Average.

Finally, through the red-gold of the autumn underbrush, I could make out the Service King sign.

Maybe it was because I was upset about disobeying Rain. Whatever the reason, I didn't notice the car until I was in the middle of the road. The driver slammed on the brakes, and the tires shrieked their protest against the asphalt. The sedan spun around, its rear end swinging toward me at incredible speed. Desperately, I flung myself out of its path. The taillight missed me by inches, and I tumbled into the ditch.

The driver jumped out. "Mister, are you okay?"

I would have known that voice anywhere. "*Sophie?*"

I sat up, and there she was, peering anxiously down at me. "You maniac, where do you get off running into the middle of the road like that?"

She was right to be upset. It had been a very close call. But all I could think of was, "You got your license!"

"And they would have taken it back for running over some *freakazoid* the very first day!"

"What are you *doing* here?" I asked, climbing out of the ditch and brushing myself off. "You're almost at Garland, you know."

"I'm taking a victory lap sixty miles from where I live. I came to find *you*, you idiot! And don't think I don't already regret it."

"Me?"

"That bracelet—when it came back engraved," she accused. "That wasn't from my dad, was it? *You* sent it."

I could feel my face burning bright red.

She leaned over and kissed my cheek. *Supernova* was a word I'd read in science books, but this was the first time I'd ever experienced the power of one.

"Now get in the car," she ordered. "We're going to the Halloween dance."

"What a coincidence!" As we made a U-turn and headed away from Garland, I explained my plan for the trip to C Average.

"You're crazy," she scoffed. "No taxi driver would take

a check. And even if he did, how were you planning to get home?"

"I figured he'd wait until the dance was over and then—"

Her sigh cut me off. "Maybe you're better off at Camp Purple Haze. I hate to think what would happen to you in the real world."

"Well, anyway," I told her, "thanks for picking me up."

"I'm a saint," she noted. "My father said that once, but it wasn't true until right now."

As we approached the outskirts of town, there was traffic, and buildings, and lights, and people on the streets. I drank in the hustle and bustle, greeting it like an old friend. But I couldn't suppress a pang of guilt, wondering if Rain had come home and found my note.

Night had fallen by the time we reached C Average.

Sophie frowned. "Why is the building dark?"

"Power failure?" I suggested. But the nearby houses had lights on.

We turned the corner and pulled around the side of the school, stopping just short of the main driveway. There was no going in. The parking lot was jam-packed, not with cars, but with people. It would have been every bit as dark as the school, if not for hundreds and hundreds of flickering candles.

Sophie was bug-eyed. "What's going on?"

"I guess it's the Halloween dance."

"Oh, come on, even you can't think that! People dance at a dance—that's why they call it a dance! There isn't even any music!"

I had to admit it seemed pretty strange to decorate the gym and then hold the party in the parking lot.

We pulled over to the curb, and she handed me a rubber mask with a round black nose and large ears.

"What's this?" I asked.

She took a deep breath. "Costumes? Halloween? You're Mickey; I'm Minnie. Best I could do on short notice."

We put the heads on and waded into the mob. It wasn't loud, but I realized there *was* music. Somewhere in the crowd, a single boom box was playing the Beatles' *Abbey Road* album, Rain's favorite.

I surveyed the crowd through the eyeholes of my mask. "Sophie, how come we're the only ones wearing costumes?"

All at once, she put a death grip on my shoulder. "Look around—ponchos, tie-dyes, peace signs. Cap—they *are* in costume. They're dressed as *you*!"

28

NAME: **MRS. DONNELLY**

Well, of course I was worried. It was only her first full day as a licensed driver, and she'd been gone for three hours. I'd moved past the anger stage. I was no longer even miffed about being stranded at home without transportation. I was already making deals: *If Sophie comes home in one piece, I won't strangle her or even ground her. Please, please, let her be okay!*

To take my mind off the anxiety, I was cleaning out the spare room where Cap had lived for two months. I have to say he was the tidiest person in the house, as opposed to Sophie, who used the floor as a display rack for her clothing choices. I couldn't find so much as a speck of dust that had come from Cap. As for clutter—the boy had nothing, so he couldn't possibly leave it lying around. There were a

few pieces of schoolwork. One was an essay entitled: "The Most Important Invention of the Twentieth Century." What had Cap chosen to write about? The telephone? The computer? No, duct tape. In spite of my nervousness, I couldn't contain a chuckle. I remembered Garland, where duct tape had served every purpose but food.

In fact, my sweep netted only one other item—a slip of paper neatly folded in the nightstand drawer.

1 "Effervescence" bangle, multicolor stones

Engraving: ALL YOU NEED IS LOVE

My heart turned over in my chest. Sophie's bangle—it was from *Cap*? He had that much of a crush on her?

No, he'd pretended it was a gift from Bill. In my job, I knew that pure kindness, with no strings attached, was pretty rare. The boy was an *angel*! Whatever problems I had with Rain, I had to admit that she'd raised a truly wonderful kid.

I stared at the scrawl at the bottom of the receipt: Paid by check.

Oh, no.

I remembered the school's bank statement—the check to the jewelry store. In his innocence, Cap had purchased Sophie's bracelet with money from the Student Activity Fund!

I raced to the phone and dialed Frank Kasigi. He wasn't picking up so I tried his cell.

"What?" barked the assistant principal in a very harried tone.

"It's Flora Donnelly, Frank. I found out about the check Cap wrote to the jewelry store."

"Never mind that!" he snapped. "Meet me at the school! There's some kind of riot going on!"

I was alarmed. "Because you canceled the Halloween dance?"

"I don't think so. My custodian called me. The parking lot is full of kids with candles. They told him it's a memorial service for Cap Anderson!"

I was thunderstruck. "A *memorial service*? Cap isn't dead!"

"Well, you seem to be the only one who knows that. That's why I need you there. You're the closest thing to family he has in this town. Maybe you can convince everybody!"

"I can't get to the school," I protested. "Sophie has the car."

"Sit tight. I'll pick you up in five minutes."

My hands were shaking as I hung up the phone. Sophie AWOL, the school in turmoil, rumors Cap was dead.

What was going on here?

29

NAME: **HUGH WINKLEMAN**

In the great encyclopedia of history, if you look up *mass stupidity*, this was the picture you'd see: eleven hundred kids dressed as hippies, crammed belly to belly in a parking lot, having a candlelight memorial for someone who was probably just fine.

The idea to dress as Cap hadn't been part of Zach's original plan. Maybe it was the Halloween spirit, but the word had started spreading almost as soon as Zach and I had begun passing the flyers around the school. Picture it: the entire student body decked out in Day-Glo and beads—all except for one brain-dead pair wearing Mickey Mouse masks.

The candles had been Zach's idea. "We'll need the light," he'd told me on the way to the Dollar Store. But

their effect was more than either of us could have imagined. Hundreds of tiny flames glowing orange in the dark just screamed *mourning*. Dull flickering shadows reflected off somber faces. Eerie.

Zach. I'd spent most of my life either afraid of him, jealous of him, or just hanging there while he stretched the waistband of my underwear over a parking meter. We were never going to be best friends, but I had to admire the guy. He was a genius! Not book-smart, but a master when it came to crafting his public image. Somehow, he had positioned himself as head mourner of the Anderson tragedy. Not bad, considering that a couple of days ago he was the villain of the school—him and me.

Okay, we deserved that. Setting Cap up at the pep rally was an awful thing to do, and I felt terrible about my part in it. Being angry at Cap was no excuse. I knew better than anyone what it was like to be a target for the Zachs of the world. A lot more than just my conscience was suffering. I was kicked out of the chess club for good. I had a month of detentions and a black mark on my permanent record.

And how's this for ironic: the only way to avoid being branded Cap's backstabber was to get myself embroiled in yet another scheme with the same Zach Powers.

Beam me up, Scotty. There's no intelligent life on this planet.

I approached Zach. "So now what? We're not just going to stand around all night, are we?"

"Chill," he said serenely, jiggling his Dixie cup to keep his candle from going out. "We're basking in our sorrow."

I was uneasy. "I don't know. A third of these kids are positive Cap's dead, a third have him in intensive care, and the rest are just here because everyone else is. The last thing we want to do is give people too much time to think."

"Good point," Zach agreed. He hoisted himself onto the payload of the school district's flatbed truck and stopped the tape on the boom box, which was playing "Here Comes the Sun." He took the karaoke mike and flipped the switch.

"Attention, everybody! Can I have your attention up here?"

Considering the size of the crowd, we were a quiet group, gathered in clusters, speaking in hushed tones—almost like this really was a funeral. It only took a few seconds before all eyes were on Zach.

"Thanks for coming. I know if Cap could be here, he'd thank you too. Cap Anderson was our eighth grade president for just two months—two wild, fantastic months. Now he's gone, and the best way to celebrate his life is to talk about the way he touched our lives."

Then, before my amazed eyes, people began to push

forward through the crowd and mount the flatbed, awaiting their turn at the microphone.

Naomi got there first. "I wasn't a nice person," she announced. "I was mean to Cap because I thought it would get me what I wanted. Then I started watching him. He showed me a whole different way to be. How to be sensitive and generous—and not just so people will say thank you, but because it's right." She drew in a tremulous breath. "I never even had a chance to tell him there's no Lorelei Lumley!"

Overcome, she gave up the mike to the seventh grader beside her. "I used to be really shy. I didn't have any friends," he confessed. "Then Cap let me work on the Halloween dance . . ."

I was blown away. One after another, these kids took center stage and poured their hearts out about how Cap had changed their lives.

"His tai chi class helped me lose eleven pounds . . ."

"I stopped picking on my little brother . . ."

"I started giving some of my paper route money to charity . . ."

"Learning about the sixties helped me get along better with my grandparents . . ."

My mind was in a whirl. The kids at C Average wouldn't share their innermost feelings if you held a machete to their throats. We lived in constant terror of

letting slip some personal or embarrassing detail. We went to incredible lengths to avoid looking vulnerable or uncool.

Yet here they were, lined up to spill their guts like this was an episode of *Dr. Phil*. Because Cap had made everything A-OK.

Well, I was the number-one victim around here. And suddenly, right in front of me, was a golden opportunity to paint myself with the Cap Anderson brush that would make me A-OK too. I just had to get up there in front of the entire student body and join the fan club.

As I climbed onto the flatbed, I got my first sense of just how big this event had become. I knew the whole school was here. But now adults were starting to gather around the perimeter. The neighbors, probably. And passersby. Oh, no—it was Mr. Kasigi! I had to say my piece before our assistant principal shut the whole thing down.

I grabbed the microphone from a sixth-grade girl who insisted that tai chi had made her unbeatable at gymnastics.

“My name is Hugh Winkleman, and I was Cap’s first friend at school.” I experienced a brief moment of panic. I’d been so intent on getting the floor that I hadn’t given a thought to what I should say. Eleven hundred faces peered earnestly up at me. This was no time to be timid.

If I was going to do this, I had to let it all hang out.

I bit down hard on the side of my mouth until I felt two giant tears well out of my eyes and roll down my cheeks.

“Cap Anderson was the greatest person it’s ever been my honor to know. How are we ever going to get along without our president?”

I could see Mr. Kasigi pushing through the crowd. It was time to give this a big finish. This was my shining hour. Hugh Winkleman would be the school joke no longer!

I dropped the mike to the flatbed, raised both arms to the heavens, and howled, “*Cap! You were too young to die!*”

I could hear sobs breaking out all around me. And then a muffled but strangely familiar voice called, “Hugh—don’t cry!”

I goggled. One of the kids in Mickey Mouse masks waded through the crush to reach the truck. He stopped just below me and pulled off the mouse head.

“See?” announced Cap Anderson. “Everything’s okay! I’m not dead!”

30

NAME: **ZACH POWERS**

Wow.

What a lightning strike. Like crashing your own funeral.

Hugh fell off the flatbed. I didn't blame him. I was seriously thinking about taking a dive myself. This didn't make me look so great either.

The people close in realized who had just shown up. They went berserk, hugging Cap and shrieking with joy. Farther back, there was a buzz of confusion. Something was going on, but nobody could figure out what.

Finally, a couple of guys in the front row helped Cap onto the truck. The wind took his long blond hair and blew it into a halo around his face, backlit by a streetlamp.

The roar from eleven hundred throats combined

shock, disbelief, happiness, and even love. I was used to crowd noise from playing football, but I never experienced anything like this. The ground shook. The echoes bounced off houses and buildings. It was unreal.

The hairball tried to say something. Forget it. There was no way anyone was going to hear him over the sounds of celebration that he was still among us. He had a couple of shiners and a cut on his nose where Darryl had decked him. Yet it was obvious to everybody that the eighth grade president was not hospitalized, not suffering from amnesia, not in a vegetative state, and was very, very much alive.

Naomi, her face glowing and streaked with tears, reached down for the fallen microphone and handed it to Cap. Still the thunderous ovation went on. I clocked six full minutes, but it might have been longer.

Finally, the tumult died away, and an expectant silence covered the crowd.

Cap shuffled uncomfortably and said, "This isn't the Halloween dance . . . is it?"

A wave of laughter greeted this. I'll bet I was the only one out of the eleven hundred who knew that he wasn't joking—me and Winkleman.

"I can't believe so many people were worried about me," he went on. "I'm fine. I just had to go home because Rain got out of the hospital. My life isn't here anymore. I live at Garland Farm."

He seemed to spot someone at the edge of the crowd and gave a shy wave in that direction. I followed his line of vision and noticed an older lady who waved back with a cane. Even if she hadn't made that gesture, I would have been able to pick her out. She was the only adult in hippie clothes—peasant blouse, long cotton skirt, Day-Glo headband with a yin/yang disk in the center of her forehead. Stunned disbelief was the only way to describe her reaction to the sight of Cap on the receiving end of all that love. Trust me, I could relate.

"Rain," he said gravely, "I'm sorry I came here when you said not to. I only did it because I really wanted to see a dance. But there was another reason too. I left school before I had a chance to say good-bye to everybody. So I guess I should start that now."

He turned to the right side of the front row. "Good-bye Jason . . . good-bye Trudy . . . good-bye Leo . . . good-bye Ariel . . . good-bye Trevor . . . good-bye Mike . . ."

There was a titter of amusement that died out quickly when people realized that he wasn't stopping.

". . . Good-bye Daniel . . . good-bye Raj . . . good-bye Heather . . . good-bye Naomi . . . good-bye Jordan . . . good-bye Lena . . . good-bye Hugh . . ."

This was getting weird. He went all the way across the first row, and then started along the second in the

opposite direction. By this time, there was absolute silence in the parking lot.

“... Good-bye Daisy ... good-bye Emily ... good-bye Julius ... good-bye Sam ...”

He was halfway down the third row when I finally clued in. Cap wasn't planning to say, “Good-bye, everybody.” He was saying good-bye—to *everybody*!

I had a flashback to the assembly two months ago, when Kasigi had first proclaimed him president. As a goof, I'd told the kid that he had to learn everyone's name. And somehow, by some *miracle*, he'd actually done it!

“... Good-bye Severin ... good-bye Jay ... good-bye Kelly ... good-bye Phil ...”

No football player could fail to recognize what I was experiencing right then. It was the moment on the field when you realize that you're completely, hopelessly out-classed. When I looked at the hairball on the payload, I didn't see the eighth grade president; I saw the Super Bowl champions. There was no defeating a kid who could memorize an entire school.

“... Good-bye Natasha ... good-bye Annabel ... good-bye Patrick ... good-bye Marco ...”

It took almost an hour. Nobody moved. We barely uttered a sound. It was the kind of performance that came along once in a lifetime, and you didn't want to miss one second. It was like being a part of history.

Eleven hundred students. Eleven hundred names. He never hesitated, and he never got one wrong.

We wouldn't even have known he was finished except that he set the microphone down on the flatbed and started to climb off.

Nobody let him. Darryl rushed over, hoisted him onto his shoulders, and began to tote him through the cheering crowd. Naomi and Lena were at their side, screaming their heads off. I waded over to join them. After all, they were my friends, and it was time to bury the hatchet. Hippie-loving friends were better than no friends at all.

Cap called down to us, "Rain's waiting," so we headed for the older lady in the yin/yang headband.

It was slow going, because everybody in the place wanted to high-five the living legend. Navigating all those outstretched arms was like plowing through a field of bamboo.

When Darryl finally deposited Cap onto the tarmac beside Rain, she barely noticed him. She was being chewed out by a younger woman who I'd seen around the school a few times.

"... What he did with those checks—as an adult, he could go to jail for that!"

Rain's face was ashen. "He tried to give the school's money to charity?"

"Who taught him any different?" the woman ranted. "I

remember your brand of education! None of us had the faintest idea how to survive in the real world! I was lucky—I had parents. Who's Cap going to turn to? You won't live forever, you know. . . ."

So that was what happened with the checks! It wasn't Kasigi; it was pure Cap, taking the hippie thing too far, as usual. And instead of getting arrested for it—which would have happened to the rest of us—he was elevated to rock-star status.

Cap regarded his grandmother nervously. "There was supposed to be a dance. I'm not sure what happened. Are you mad at me?"

"Of course not," she told him. Then she turned to the younger woman. "Good-bye, Floramundi." It didn't sound friendly.

"Bye, Cap!" piped up Darryl as grandmother and grandson got into a double-parked pickup truck.

"We love you!" Naomi yelled as the two sets of hippie hair disappeared down the street.

The woman called Floramundi hugged a really good-looking high school girl who was holding a rubber Minnie Mouse mask. I did a double take. *She* was Cap's *date*? The Minnie to his Mickey?

Unbelievable! While he was busy turning C Average on its ear, Cap still had time to pick up a supermodel. Had the whole world gone crazy? I spun around like a victim

of amnesia, desperately searching the parking lot for a glimpse of something—*anything*—that made sense.

And there, in the dispersing crowd, my eyes found Hugh Winkleman. He looked terrible—his clothes disheveled, his glasses bent and askew. He was such a dweeb, but he was almost *my* dweeb now—the only kid who'd stuck by me while the whole school flocked to the hairball.

I was kind of starting to appreciate that guy.

31

NAME: **CAPRICORN ANDERSON**

I was driving the pickup on the dirt lane alongside our orchard when I got arrested again.

I was surprised when the siren blurped and the lights started flashing. Rain had told me to stay off the county roads, but that I'd be okay so long as I stuck to Garland property.

When I said that to the officer, though, his answer shocked me: "This isn't Garland anymore. The land belongs to Skyline Realty and Development. And you're driving without a license."

With that, he loaded me into the back of his squad car.

The county sheriff's office was a lot smaller than the police station they'd taken me to after I drove Mr. Rodrigo to the hospital in the school bus. It had only one

room, and there wasn't even a lockup—just a metal ring they could handcuff people to.

They didn't do that to me. They just sat me in a chair and told me to wait while they made phone calls.

I stared out the window, feeling pretty low. Rain was going to be mad when she found out about Skyline Realty and Development. Dealing with big companies was one of the things she'd formed Garland to get away from. Who knew what a hassle it was going to be to straighten out this mistake?

She'd been so busy lately—away a lot, and really quiet when she was home, listening to her favorite songs from the sixties on our record player. “The Times They Are A-Changin’” by Bob Dylan especially seemed to fascinate her. She let it repeat over and over again.

“Bob Dylan was right,” I'd said one night.

She looked sad. “I used to think change was a *choice*. That you could avoid it if you stuck with your convictions. Now—” She shook her head. “I just don't know.”

I'd almost asked her if she'd heard that they hardly ever made vinyl records anymore—that it was all CDs and MP3s and DAT files. I decided not to. Even more change was probably the last thing she wanted to deal with.

It had been a tough couple of weeks since the Halloween dance that wasn't a dance at all. I wondered if I'd ever be happy again. I knew I didn't fit in at C Average,

but Garland wasn't exactly right for me either.

Knowing eleven hundred people can spoil you for being alone.

I didn't regret my time in real school. I learned a lot—like when you have a checking account, your money is separate from all the other money in the bank. And when you write a check, the number you put in the little box gets subtracted from what you have.

I learned that you can't fix a china figurine with duct tape because it doesn't look right. And I learned a new vocabulary word: klutz.

I learned about lockers and reruns and Giga-Volumizer. I almost learned about dances, but I didn't.

The most important thing I learned is how many things out there I still needed to learn about. I wanted to, but it didn't seem like I was going to get the chance.

On the other side of the window, the sunlit world had never appeared so wide and tempting.

A very fancy car with a shiny new paint job screeched up to the curb. I recognized the hood ornament that looked sort of like a peace sign. I knew from *Trigonometry and Tears* that it was called a Mercedes, and it cost a lot of money. I was puzzled to notice a yellowed bumper sticker on the back—*War Is Not Healthy for Children and Other Living Things*. The only place I'd ever seen one like it was on our old pickup truck.

A blond, stylishly dressed woman slipped from behind the wheel, talking on her cell phone. With her free hand, she reached back into the car and pulled out a cane.

Rain's cane!

I did a double take. The hair was different, the clothes were different, and I'd never seen the car. But this was Rain!

She came in and gave me a hug. I felt the familiar contours of her love beads through the fabric of her designer blouse.

She announced, "Not bad for an old grandma, right?"

"Rain, what happened? You've—*changed!*"

She took a deep breath. "Brace yourself, Capricorn. I've got a lot to tell you."

"I've got a lot to tell *you*," I interrupted. "I got arrested again. And the police say some development company owns Garland! What are we going to do?"

"Some development company *does* own Garland. I should know. I sold it to them."

I was horrified. "*Sold?* You always said no one owns the earth, so no one can buy it or sell it!"

She was patient. "That wasn't me, Cap. I was quoting the ancient Hopi Indians. Forty years ago, when Garland began, I purchased the land with money I borrowed from my parents. We lived as a true commune, sharing everything, and I was a partner—nothing more, nothing less.

But the deed was always in my name, so it was always mine to sell.” She waved her hand to quell my protest. “Calm down. I wouldn’t let them build some gated fortress of McMansions for the masters of the universe. There’s going to be affordable housing for all income levels. And a park with a flower garden. I thought that was a nice touch.”

I was distraught. This went against everything I’d been taught to believe in. She was taking the entire Garland value system and junking it! I understood that she had the *legal* right to sell it; what I didn’t understand was—

“*Why?*” I demanded. “You lived this way for forty years! You kept on long after all the other communities and communes shut down and disappeared! Why stop now?”

“Oh, Cap, I thought you knew. I did it for you.”

“*Me?*”

“My accident was a wake-up call. I’m not planning on dying anytime soon, but you’ll eventually outlive me. When I’m gone, you’ll have to get along in the real world. That just won’t happen if we stay at Garland. It would be criminal for me to let you face life with no more street smarts than a newborn baby. Although,” she added meaningfully, “nobody could say that your first try wasn’t a success. How many people get to attend their own memorial service—along with eleven hundred of their closest friends?”

It was as if my entire universe had been twisted inside out. Was this Rain, or some stranger who had taken control of her body? Yet, in a way, I was seeing my grandmother more clearly than ever before. *I* was the one who had been born and raised at Garland; Rain grew up in San Francisco. I may have been completely helpless in the outside world, but she wasn't.

"Besides," she went on, her eyes twinkling, "some incredible things have been happening in the real estate market since the sixties. I just sold Garland for seventeen million dollars."

I stared at her for a long time. "That's a lot, isn't it?"

She nodded. "We're rich. But don't worry. We're not turning our backs on what Garland represents. With this money, we can accomplish more than we could by living there for a thousand years. You had the right idea with those Student Activity Fund checks. I see a charitable foundation—the Garland Foundation, maybe. The sixties may be over, but the spirit is stronger than ever."

I chewed on this. "So what happens now? Where are we going to live?"

"I bought us a condo," she replied. "It won't be ready for a few days, and I'll be tied up with the details. So I've arranged for you to stay with a family near the new school you'll be attending."

I must have looked miserable, because she added,

“You’ll like these people. Honestly.” She took the cell phone from her suit pocket, flipped it open, and handed it to me.

“Uh—hello?”

A voice said, “Hey, freakazoid, I hear you’re moving back in.”

The grin must have split my face. “So the new school is—”

Rain smiled too. “I can think of eleven hundred kids who are going to be really happy to have you back.”

And I already knew all their names.

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