

# **MADISON BILLSBY: TACO DEFENDER**

**By Courtney Sirotin**

*EXCERPT*

## CHAPTER 1

### Monday

#### Class Picture Time

I'm Madison Billsby and I'm the only girl in my seventh grade class who has to stand in the back row with the boys on picture day. It's not because I'm tall and blessed with long legs like Giselle Bundchen or a swan-like torso like Paris Hilton; quite frankly, it's because I'm too wide. Mr. Denton, Mount Vernon Junior High's official art teacher and unofficial school photographer, took one look at me next to Katy Bloom, the tiniest girl in school, and suggested I move to the back. I understood his predicament; artistically speaking, my stomach *was* casting shadows. I shrugged it off and went back to stand with my best friend Chris Wheeler. Chris and I spent the rest of fourth period making fun of Mr. Denton's smock.

Being an art teacher, Mr. D can get away with wearing smocks, but he abuses this power by wearing electric *pink* smocks and by wearing them every day; even at school football games *on the weekends*. That's just an invitation for smockery...er, mockery. I thought about this as he snapped pictures from every angle of the room, pausing only long enough to climb up on a windowsill for an overhead shot.

Chris squinted as he studied Mr. Denton. "The color doesn't bother me nearly as much as the fluorescence." He shielded his eyes with his hands and winced, "I think it's burning my corneas."

I giggled and Mr. Denton shushed me. "Quite, Madison! I need absolute silence to capture *the money shot*."

I'm not sure exactly what a "money shot" is, but it must be fairly bizarre because Mr.

Denton finally announced that he'd achieved it while crouched in the corner of the room like a tiger.

### **Every Full Figured Girl Needs A Lanky Best Bud**

“Hey Billsby, wait up!”

Chris was chasing me down the hallway but I couldn't slow down; today was tater tot day and I was a woman on a mission. Tater tots are my second favorite item on the hot lunch menu and we only get them on Mondays. My first favorite are Taco Tuesdays!

Chris power walked alongside me. “Wanna help me forge a doctor's note to get out of gym?”

Chris has made a career out of finding new and exciting ways to get out of gym class and I am his partner in crime.

“Sure,” I said, “what'll it be this time? Irritable bowel syndrome again? Maybe we should go back to the tried and true toenail infection. It's been a while since you've had a fungus flare up; I think he'd buy it.”

“Not necessary.” Chris extracted a piece of paper from his back pocket and unfolded it. It was a printout from WebMD. “I have a new ailment and this one's a real winner. I've done thorough research and this infliction could keep me out of gym for at least a month!”

“Really?” I slowed my pace and tried to read the paper. “What is it? Can I catch it? Please tell me it contagious!”

We reached the cafeteria and Chris lowered his voice to keep the teachers patrolling the entrance from overhearing our conversation. “Nope, you can't catch it, but you *can* use it next year in Miss Murphy's class.”

I considered it. Miss Murphy is the eighth grade gym teacher and she makes you run laps at the start of every class. Being a heavy set girl, I don't particularly care for running. We grabbed trays and got in line. *Tater tots, I'm on my way!*

"Alright," I sighed, "I'm no good with delayed gratification, but you make a valid point; I'll still need good excuses next year. What is it?"

Chris grinned and handed me the paper. "PTSD."

"Come again?"

"PTSD. Stands for Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. It's like, what soldiers get when they come back from war and freak out when they hear a loud noise. PTSD is serious and it can happen to anyone after a really stressful event. People in car crashes get it too."

We moved through the line and I motioned to Gilda, the German lunch lady and best darn tater tot fryer this side of the Mississippi, for an extra helping of her famous 'taters. She gave me a wink and piled them high.

"But what are you PTSDing over? Nothing's ever happened to you."

"Not true!" Chris squirted ketchup on his potato mound with gusto. "Remember a couple weeks ago when my mom made me go to Six Flags with my uncle Dwayne and he was maniacal and forced me to go on the Batman roller coaster five times in a row even though I puked after the second time?"

"Yeah."

"Well, last weekend some kid snuck over a fence into the restricted area behind that very same ride and ended up getting his head chopped off!"

"No way!"

"Gross, right? So I'm gonna pretend I was there when it happened and now I'm

suffering from PTSD. It's brilliant, if I do say so myself."

"Which you do."

"Which I do," he agreed.

We made our way to an empty table and sprawled out with our bags and trays. I dug into my tater tots and congratulated Chris on his plan. "I like it. It's elaborate but solid. Let's set it in ink and see if it works."

Chris rifled through his bag and pulled out our usual supplies: a small square notepad, a ballpoint pen, and the old doctor's note we've been using for years. He began tracing the handwriting with familiar ease.

The old note itself is legitimate; it was written by Doctor Hebert back when Chris really did have a toenail infection...in the fifth grade. The paper's battered and worn now, and the ink's starting to fade, but it's still good enough to trace.

### **A Cafeteria Divided**

Chris continued to work his magic while I savored my 'taters and took in the scene around me. Lunch time at Mount Vernon is like a weird social experiment that begins the moment you enter the cafeteria.

The room consists of row upon row of spacious tables; enough tables, in fact, that we could all sit comfortably with our books sprawled out and still have room for high-fives and air guitar. But rather than take advantage of all the elbow room, most people cluster into groups and squish themselves into a handful of tables in the corners of the room, leaving a sea of empty ones for the rest of us. I sit in the middle of the room because I like to sprawl out and give high-fives on occasion. Not so much for the air guitar.

A quick scan of the room presents the following cliques that make up the social strata of my school: the Skater Kids, the Preps, the Barney's Girls, and the Wannabes.

First up are the Skater Kids who reside in the back, left-hand corner of the room. They claim the tables by the stairwell because it makes it easier for them to sneak out when no one's looking and skateboard in the back parking lot. The skaters are discernable by their tight black jeans, checkerboard sneakers, shaggy hair cuts, and heavily stickered skateboards.

The Preps make up the back, right-hand corner of the room, next to the bulletin boards and vending machines. These sporty kids are walking catalogues of their favorite fashion brands like American Eagle, Hollister, and Abercrombie & Fitch. The perpetually perfect preppy girls are easy to spot by their sun-kissed skin, khaki skirts, fitted t-shirts, and bright, colorful headbands. Their counterparts, the preppy boys, are distinguishable by their standard uniform of Bermuda shorts, polo shirts (yes, that's *shirts* in the plural; they like to wear them layered and with both collars up), and flip flops. Refusing to give up on summer, both preppy girls and preppy boys will continue to wear flip flops well into winter.

The Barney's Girls claim the front, left-hand side of the room. Chris and I prefer to call them the *Barf Me Girls* because their idea of fashion makes us gag. These upper crust miniature elderly women spend their weekends shopping at Barney's in New York and come into school on Monday wearing cashmere sweater sets, pearl earrings, and severe six inch pumps. A Barney's Girl's signature item is her designer handbag, typically adorned with a shiny gold clasp. They tend to snap and unsnap these clasps all day long during classes, as if they're trying to convey a point I've yet to understand. My running theory is that they all suffer from severe glandular problems because they're forever pulling out mirrored compacts and powdering their noses *over* and *over* again. Honestly, how much shine can a seventh grade girl really accumulate on her nose

in ten minutes?

Last but not least, the Wannabes make up the front, right-hand side of the room, positioned directly in front of the lunch line. The Wannabes are a collection of kids who “wanna be” in one of the other cliques but haven’t been accepted yet. They’re constantly giggling harder than necessary and trying to look cooler and more self-confident than they actually are. But what they’re really doing is stalking the lunch line and trying to start up conversations with people who aren’t listening. I think this group has it the worst because they practically salivate for an invitation to switch tables, but the invitations never come. Like it or not, junior high cliques are as impenetrable as a starless night. At least, that is what I observe when I muse about these things over a steaming pile of tater tots.

It’s an unofficial title, but I guess you could call Chris and me the Everything Elasers. We spread out and sit comfortably in the company of everyone else existing on the fringes. I can’t fit into the doll-sized clothes they sell at Hollister, so I don’t see myself becoming a Prep. I couldn’t stay upright on a skateboard if my life depended on it, so I won’t be getting an invitation to join the Skater Kids. The last time I wore pearls was never and I don’t think my nose is shiny enough to be a Barney’s Girl. And to be honest, I don’t wannabe in any of cliques, so I guess that leaves me out of the Wannabes too! As things stand, I’m just me, Madison Billsby, and I’m now accepting applications to join the Be Whatever The Heck You Feel Like Club!

### **Gym Class**

The worst thing in the entire world transpired during gym today. We were assigned UNIFORMS! Big-boned girls like *moi* do not thrive in a simplified world of Small, Medium, and Large. Got any size Fats in my color, coach? Not cool, Coach Brewster! Not cool! Apparently

the new health codes require all students to wear designated gym clothes during P.E. and that means I'm stuck squeezing my size-awesome body into a size large-but-not-large-enough gym uniform! While lucky Chris is merrily, cheerily avoiding psychosis in study hall, I'm left alone to suffer from a very real traumatic event that will no doubt have me shaking in terror every time I see mesh shorts for the rest of my life!

Not only was I informed that I'm now required to wear an ill-fitting mustard-yellow and cobalt-blue uniform during every gym period for the rest of the year, but I also have to change into said uniform *in the locker room* in front of all the other girls in my class too! Up until now, I've successfully avoided even stepping into a locker room, let alone undressing in it, and now that moldy, grey, concrete room of gloom is going to be part of my daily routine. And in the nude no less! Well, that's just it, I'm left no other option; I'm going to have to jump a fence at Six Flags.

\*\*\*

My Language Arts assignment was to compose a two hundred and fifty word essay highlighting any injustice I see happening in the world around me and what I have the power to do to help stop it. *Easiest. Assignment. Ever.*

### When Bad Gym Clothes Happen To Good People

By Madison Billsby

While some unlucky people in the world suffer from poverty, starvation, and oppression under the dictatorship of evil leaders, when it comes right down to it, there is no greater injustice

than that which is suffered by a fat girl forced to participate in gym class wearing scandalously small shorts and a mesh tank top that doesn't entirely cover her abdomen.

Should she manage to forget how high the shorts are riding up on her legs, the chaffing of her inner-thighs rubbing together violently, skin on skin, with no soft fabric to break the friction, is sure to remind her. And if, for a moment, she were to forget that her stomach is on display for her classmates to marvel at, a quick glance around at the unreasonably petite girls having the opposite problem – of having to hold up their size-small shorts as they run so they don't fall down – is sure to remind her that she is, indeed, larger than everyone else.

What is this monument of a girl to do in the face of such humiliation and injustice? What am I, Madison Billsby, going to do? Will I hold my head high, powder my thighs, and flaunt what I got in the honor of bad gym clothes forced upon good people everywhere? Or will I, Madison Billsby, tackle the problem at its source and request an audience with the principal to air my grievances?

To any self-respecting person, the answer is clear: Madison Billsby ain't givin' away the goods for free. This issue is going before the powers that be.

### Weight Watchers and Gate Keepers

I found Chris between classes and convinced him to wait for me after school while I requested an audience with Principal Ferrari. The sooner I put this uniform crisis behind me, the better. Chris and I walk home together since we live on the same street. Most kids take the bus but our moms are of the opinion that there's safety in numbers. Chris and I won't be much help to each other in the event of an attack; I'm not exactly swift on my feet and Chris has a tendency to trip on his, but anything's better than the bus!

As soon as my last period Spanish class was over, I said *adios* to *la professor* and made my way through a sea of backpacks to the main office. Mrs. Murdoch, the school secretary, was finishing her end-of-the-day announcements over the loud speaker.

“And this concludes another wonderful day at Mount Vernon Junior High,” she said, eyeing me over her glasses. “I leave you with an inspirational quote-of-the-day by the poet Maya Angelou. Ms. Angelou reminds us that quote, ‘A bird doesn't sing because it has an answer, it sings because it has a song.’ Now be safe getting home and don't forget to sing your own song even if you sing out of tune.”

Mrs. Murdoch clicked off the microphone and adjusted the silk scarf around her neck. She paused in reverence of her own words. She takes announcement duty very seriously. Nearly a minute passed before she looked up pointedly and asked, “What is it, Madison?”

“Lovely words, Mrs. Murdoch, just lovely. Your quotes are always so...inspirational!”

“Thank you, dear. Now what do you need?”

“I'd like to see Principal Ferrari about an important matter,” I replied, looking grave.

Mrs. Murdoch glanced at her wrist watch and frowned. “Can't this wait until tomorrow? I leave early on Wednesdays for Weight Watchers and I need to be heading out now.”

I feigned shock. “*You* do Weight Watchers? But you're so skinny!”

She blushed at the compliment, her face turning the same color red as her hair, which was piled on the top of her head in a bun resembling a bird’s nest. The hint of a smile twitched at the corners of her tightly pursed lips and then she caved in completely and picked up the phone. Flattery will get you everywhere. I listened to her announce my arrival and then she hung up and instructed me to wait in the seat by the principal’s door, the one reserved for troublemakers.

### **The Powers That Be Are...Male Models?**

I sat in silence for a while; alternately counting ceiling panels and watching buses come and go outside the window when Principal Ferrari finally called me into his office.

“Madison, you can come in now.”

*Showtime!* I grabbed the hideous gym uniform out of my book bag and headed into battle. My challenge here was to stay focused on my mission and not allow myself to get distracted by my sexy principal’s bulging biceps and pearly white teeth. Principal Ferrari is good looking (understatement) and that can be an obstacle during negotiations; pretty people have a hard time taking criticism because it threatens their likeability factor. But like it or not, criticism is exactly what I was about to deliver.

I marched in and sat down. “Principal Ferrari, thank you for seeing me on such short notice.”

“No problem. What can I do you for?” He leaned forward on his elbows and flashed me his winningest smile.

*Ugh!* When Principal Ferrari smiles, dimples *explode* on both sides of his cheeks and I’m a sucker for dimples. I dug my nails into my leg in an effort to stay focused. Leave it to me to

end up in a school where the policy maker is a tall, dark, and handsome, Italian Stallion with the last name “Ferrari”.

“I’m here to discuss the matter of gym uniforms, sir.”

“Hideous things, aren’t they?”

“Yes...yes! So you agree; we need to get rid of them.” *Bingo!*

“Well, I agree they’re a bit outdated, style-wise; but no, we can’t get rid of them. Your new uniform is mandated by health codes and there’s nothing I can do about that.”

“Oh,” I sighed, “I see. That does put you in a pickle.” I thought about it for a moment. I was getting nowhere, but then it dawned on me that pretty people like to be appreciated for their minds, not just their looks. I’d take a fresh approach!

“You know, Principal Ferrari, you are a powerful school administrator and you have a reputation for being a strong negotiator, too. Everyone was *blown away* last year when you convinced the school board to let us stay overnight at science camp. Surely you can persuade whoever is making up these silly health codes that they’re totally off target in regards to these uniforms! Quite frankly, I feel my health is at risk now more than ever if I have to wear this uniform. Did you know that viruses thrive in damp, humid environments? A single virus could easily infect my whole class if we’re forced to change in those hot, moldy locker rooms where bacteria spread like frosting on cake. Do you really want a school-wide epidemic on your hands? *Do you?*”

I paused and waited for his reaction. He was thinking it over! “Principal Ferrari,” I pressed on, “the future of the school is in *your* hands and you have to do what’s right. Our parents would be devastated if we all died of an incurable illness because *you* forced us to wear gym uniforms. I’m sure they would sue.”

Uh-oh. I'd gone too far. At this last bit, the part about certain death and lawsuits, Ferrari snapped to attention and shook his head in exacerbation. "Madison, look, I appreciate your passion for this...cause...but there's really nothing I can do. You have to wear the uniform and I'm willing to take my chances on the deadly plague. Now why don't you tell me what's really bothering you. It's not the uniform, is it?"

"Yes, it *is* the uniform!" I assured him. "Maybe not that it's hideous, which it is, but it's bothering me because, and I'm going to be frank with you here, sir, because I can see you're a straight-shooter; its *bothering* me because it doesn't fit. At all!" I listed the reasons on my fingers, "My stomach hangs out, it's a tank top and I don't wear sleeveless shirts, and my thighs rub together when I run in this thing." I shook the shorts in the air for emphasis. So honestly, how can you make me wear this? My mother doesn't allow me to reveal my midriff in public because she thinks it's too provocative, so I think it's just shameful that you're now *requiring* it. And on top of all that, I have to admit, I feel a bit discriminated against because of my... *curves...*" I let the word hang in the air.

Principal Ferrari stared at me, blinking, for what seemed like forever. Finally, he cleared his throat and spoke cautiously. "You bring up some valid points, Madison. I certainly don't want you to feel uncomfortable. However, since you *do* have to wear a uniform, and I can't do anything about that, tell me what we need to do to make you feel more comfortable."

I realized at this point that I wasn't going to get *exactly* what I wanted, that is, out of gym class completely, but I wasn't about to leave until I got something, so I moved on to plan B.

"You could order me a special size," I said, handing him the answer. "I suppose I'd be willing to wear a uniform if it fit me properly."

"Of course!" he beamed, his dimples exploding, "Why didn't I think of that? We'll just

get you a different size. Fantastic. I'll talk to Mrs. Murdoch in the morning and arrange a special order."

"Yes, that's fine," I nodded, "but what will I do in the meantime? Until it arrives? You can't make me wear this scrap of fabric around. It would be obscene."

Principal Ferrari looked flustered again. "You can't skip gym class, if that's what you're getting at. P.E. is good for you!"

I didn't say anything and looked at my hands. For my last trick I was going to look defeated. Even a good looking principal should take pity on a sad, fat girl.

It worked. Principal Ferrari softened a bit and sat back in his chair. "Look, don't get upset. I'll allow you to wear your regular school clothes until your new uniform comes in, okay? Problem solved."

I shook my head. "Well...not quite, sir. I admit I really do like your idea of ordering me a special size; it shows that you care about the special needs of exceptional students, like myself, who is an exception. But I have to confess, I would feel *exceptionally* on display being the only person in gym class *not* wearing a uniform."

"But you just said you hated them!"

"Not to mention the health codes," I continued, ignoring him. "If it ever got out that you let one of your students participate in gym class in her *street* clothes in clear violation of the state health department, your job would be on the line. I can't let you take that risk."

I put a grave expression on my face and spoke slowly, "Principal Ferrari, I'm willing, just this once, to forfeit my gym period until such a time that my new uniform can be specially ordered, hand sewn at a factory in China, and shipped here on a cargo boat. I'm willing to do that. For you." I stole a quick glance at his face. He looked defeated. *Yes!* Plan B was working!

A moment passed when to my surprise, he threw up his hands and started to laugh. “Fine, Madison, you win. Geez, I might need your help during salary negotiations! Look, we’ll order you a new uniform and you can attend study hall during your gym periods until it arrives, but once it gets here you absolutely have to go back. No exceptions. And, I’m going to put a rush on the order. I don’t think it needs to be handmade in China, or shipped on a boat, but I’m not taking any chances with you!”

I nodded officially and put the uniform back in my bag. “Thank you, sir. I respect your decision. Our business here is done, so I best be on my way. Chris Wheeler’s waiting for me at the flagpole.”

I rose to my feet and extended my hand. It was a formal gesture, I know, but I couldn’t take any chances with a verbal agreement. If I’ve learned anything from watching Judge Judy, it’s that when in doubt, shake on it; handshakes are admissible in court.

“Have you ever considered running for student council?” he asked, returning to his seat. “Elections are coming up. You should run for an office.”

It was a complicated question (considering the Billsby Curse) but Chris was waiting so I opted for the least complicated response, trying my best to sound convincing. “Nah,” I shrugged, “I’ve got no interest in politics.”

### **Biscuits and World Peace**

I left school through the main entrance and headed for the flagpole. It’s a busy meet-up spot but Chris was easy to spot with his messy hair, electric blue eyes, and signature red Converse sneakers. Not to mention he’s about a foot taller and fifty pounds lighter than anyone else in our grade, achieving the willowy silhouette of a piece of cooked spaghetti. Whatever I eat

makes me grow outward while whatever Chris eats makes him grow upward. The end result is a funny pair of shadows walking ahead of us on the sidewalk.

Chris has a distinct waiter-meets-circus-clown kind of style. He mixes formal articles of clothing with colorful ones and makes small fashion statements each day. He especially loves wearing suits and has confided in me that he intends to wear one every single day when he grows up, even if he's a house-husband, which, by the way, he desperately wants to be. He has a black tuxedo suit that he got last year for his dad's third wedding (to a flight attendant named Candy) and he wears at least one item from it every day. Today he was wearing the bowtie and yesterday he had on the vest. My favorite is when he wears the cumerbund.

I told Chris all about my meeting with Ferrari on our way to KFC. Three of my favorite restaurants are lined up on our short walk home: KFC, Taco Bell, and Wendy's. Depending on our moods, we'll stop for biscuits at KFC, burritos at Taco Bell, or Frostys at Wendy's. Today, I was in the mood for comfort food.

We paused in front of the Wachovia Bank sign next to KFC and Chris pulled a pink daisy out of the flower bed. We crossed the divide and walked through the KFC drive thru because it's always crowded inside and we hate waiting in lines.

Frizzy haired Patty works the pick-up window in the afternoons and we've pretty much trained her to let us order outside with the cars. She didn't allow this at first, but one day I dared Chris to give her a flower, just to butter her up, and it actually worked. She practically started crying she liked it so much and now she lets us do whatever we want. The only downside is that Chris has become her favorite customer and feels obligated to bring her flowers whenever we crave biscuits. I, of course, encourage this behavior because when Patty is in a good mood we get extra biscuits.

Patty slid open the take-out window and beamed. Chris bowed deeply at the waist and presented her with the flower. “For you, my queen.”

“How lovely!” She pressed the flower to her chest, effectively smashing it. “If I was thirty years younger I’d sweep you up in an instant!”

Chris grinned as Patty passed me a bag of hot biscuits. I opened the bag and sized up the bounty while Chris continued flirting. He isn’t a big talker at school but I’ve noticed that he likes to strike up conversations with people on the outside. Mostly older women. He’s a total player.

We bid Patty *adieu* and continued on our way, making one last stop at the stone wishing well in the center of town. We toss pennies in the well almost every day, operating under the theory that while wishing wells may or may not work, and they probably don’t, we might as well get our wishes in *just in case* they do. But first, we sat on the bench in front of the well and ate our biscuits while people and cars pass by. When we were properly nourished, we got up and made our wishes.

I tossed my penny then looked at Chris. “What’d you wish for?”

“World peace. You?”

“Justice for all.”

We left the wishing well and turned onto Wellington Lane, where Chris and I both live. I split from him at my house and said I’d head over to his in a bit for an afternoon of digging. I live in a grey colonial-style house with black shutters, white trim, and a cherry-red door that I helped my father paint over the summer. My house looks downright festive compared to Chris’s big, square, Federal-style brick house at the end of the cul-de-sac.

Outward appearances aside, we call my house The Fun House and Chris’s house The Jail because my mom’s easy going and his is *super* strict. Chris’s mom, Linda, makes him follow

convoluted rules posted on charts and graphs all over their house. There's a Chore Board in the kitchen, a Homework Board in the bedroom, a Meal Plan on the refrigerator, and even a Hygiene Chart in the bathroom. Chris has to update the Hygiene Chart every time he takes a shower or brushes his teeth! Linda is a corrections officer at the Mount Vernon Penitentiary and if you ask me, she's better suited at manhandling prisoners than mothering Chris. But on the upside, Chris doesn't have any cavities.

Chris and I usually hang out at my house but lately we've been digging in his back yard. When his cat, Pants, died a few weeks ago, Chris dug a grave in his backyard and happened across an honest to goodness gold necklace about a foot below the earth. We buried Pants and said our farewells, but when the mourning period was over we set off to find some more treasures.

Chris's mother was even more excited about the gold necklace than we were. She went to city hall and looked up the history of their property and discovered that years ago there was a mansion there that was destroyed in a fire. She's hoping that even more valuables from the mansion got buried in the earth during the destruction. She might be right; we've already dug up a bounty of things. We found the necklace, of course, but also less impressive things, like shards of ceramic plates, bent nails, chunks of metal, and a perfectly intact glass milk bottle. Linda likes the idea of buried treasures, but even more than that, I think she likes that Chris is doing manual labor, which is so unlike him. She told us to go nuts and dig as much as we want...as long as we don't dig up Pants.

### **Carob Cookies and Other Natural Disasters**

I grabbed the mail and looked it over as I headed up the path to my front door. I sign up

for free samples online, kind of as a hobby, so I get tons of really cool things in the mail. Today I was happy to discover a free sample of cookies and a pack of dryer sheets in a limited edition Apple Orchard scent.

I opened the door and dropped my bag by the stairs. I immediately tore into the cookies. “Mom! Where are you?” I called loudly as I shoved a cookie in my mouth. I started to chew and the experience started out fine, but then all of a sudden I had the most horrible taste in my mouth. The cookie tasted like bitter chalk! I ran to the kitchen and spit the glob of half-chewed cookie mush in the trash compactor then turned the bag over to read the description. *Made With Carob Chips*. Gross! I grabbed milk from the fridge and took a giant gulp straight from the carton. No time for a glass.

I entered the den which doubles as my mother’s office and found her wrapping up a phone call. She hung up the phone and smiled at me brightly. “Hi, sweetie pie. How was school?”

“It was fine. You want a cookie?”

“No thanks. I just got off the phone with your father. He's bringing home a new motherboard for your computer.”

“But I don't need a new motherboard, Mother.” I flung myself on our orange suede couch and hugged a pillow to my chest. “My computer's perfectly fine as it is. Tell him he’s not allowed to take it apart anymore. *Please?* My iTunes are on there!”

She turned back to her computer and sighed. “Just humor him, okay? He’s not going to ruin it...again. The last time was just a fluke because he spilled his coffee. He can't help it if he's a hopeless computer nerd...and clumsy.” She clicked on her mouse and the printer next to her desk whirled to life. “Besides, you have nothing to complain about. At least he doesn't make *you*

go to the conventions.”

The thought of my mother wandering around aimlessly at the annual Robotics and Artificial Intelligence Expo forced me to agree. “Point taken. Can I dig at Chris's house?”

She swiveled to face me, her eyes wide with excitement. “Yes you can! I want new earrings. Find me a pair in silver.

“I'll dig really hard,” I promised. “Extreme digging.”

She glanced at her computer clock. “Is Linda home?”

I rolled my eyes. “Yeah, she's on house patrol.”

“I'll walk over with you and make sure.” She collected a stack of printouts from the printer. “I need to give her some of these fliers anyway.”

Fliers? Boo! That meant *yard sale*. I'd forgotten all about the neighborhood yard sale scheduled for Saturday. Giving away the corny Hannah Montana bedspread my grandmother gave me for my birthday is easy, but standing around while strangers pick through my old training bras is asking too much. I thought about ways to get out of the yard sale as I ran upstairs and changed into digging clothes, which consisted of old jeans, rubber boots, and the pink smock I wore last Halloween as an homage to Mr. Denton.

### **Like Mother Like Daughter**

We left the house and turned right at the gate. My mother is constantly busy planning one thing or another now that she doesn't have to work at a real job anymore, so seeing her with a stack of fliers is nothing unusual. My dad received a big promotion for writing a special computer code that gives robots the ability to recognize human emotions a couple years ago and now he's the Chief Technology Officer at RoboCorp, Inc., a giant robotics company with its

headquarters in an industrial park just outside of town. When my father got his big raise my mother celebrated harder than anyone because it meant she could stop working as a real estate agent, which she never really liked, and could start volunteering full-time, which she always wanted to do.

As one of the only full-time volunteers under the age of seventy, my mother is in charge of organizing all the big community events, everything from blood drives to craft festivals. But the thing about my mother is, she tends to do things a little left of center from the norm. Don't get me wrong, sometimes she throws traditional events, like book drives to raise money for school trips and car washes to help pay for new fire trucks, but there are other times when her events are a little strange, like the backwards 5K race to raise awareness for dyslexia. Everyone who signed up had to run backwards down Main Street and got t-shirts that read, "I Survived The SDRAWKCAB Run!" It raised a lot of money, but four people had to go to the hospital.

My mother's pretty in a 1980s kind of way. She still teases her hair and matches her socks to her sweaters, but if you look at her face and ignore her clothes, you might think you were looking at a slightly older Marilyn Monroe. She has a nicely shaped nose, full lips, almond-shaped eyes, and naturally arched eyebrows. I'm grateful when people say I have my mom's face, and even more grateful when they leave out the fact that I also have my dad's round body. I figure it's not *so* bad being round as long as you're proportional and I'm pleased to say my roundness is equally divided between my upper and lower halves.

I share my mom's facial features but not much else; I have brown hair and blue eyes whereas she has frizzy bottle-blond hair and chestnut brown eyes. I'm not sure what color her hair is naturally because as long as I've known her she's been a blonde.

"How was school today?" she asked as we took turns kicking a rock and keeping it ahead

of us.

I shrugged. “It was school. You can imagine.”

“C'mon, I like details! Tell me about one interesting thing that happened today.”

I thought about it. “I found out that Mrs. Murdoch goes to Weight Watchers.”

“That's interesting.”

“Yeah, I thought so. How about you?”

“My day was interesting too, actually. We had a strategy meeting this morning and Luanne Carmichael, you remember Mrs. Carmichael, right? The president of the volunteer committee?”

“The lady with the beehive?”

“Right. So she announced that she's stepping down from the committee because she has to have back surgery. We voted on her replacement and guess what?”

“What?”

“Everyone picked *me*.”

“Shut up!” I slapped her on the arm. “That's big news, Mom! You should have led with that. Congratulations.”

“Yeah,” she grinned, rubbing her arm, “I think it'll be kind of neat. Now that I'm the president it'll be so much easier to organize my more *creative* events. Don't get me wrong, Luanne did a great job, but she was always second-guessing my vision. She gave me a heck of a time when I wanted to throw that high-fiber bake sale at the Senior Center. She refused to admit that older people go crazy for fiber.”

“Because it helps them stay regular.”

“Right. And of course my bran muffins sold out while her sugar cookies went nowhere. I

even told her, ‘Luanne, you gotta know your audience.’ But she didn’t listen.”

“Well, you were the obvious choice for the position because *no one* knows this town better than you.”

“You didn’t hear the bad part yet.” She kicked the rock a little harder and it flew into the Kirkpatrick’s front yard. They have a Doberman Pinscher so we let it go. “Part of my new set of responsibilities includes being the official *spokesperson* for our community events. You know how much I despise public speaking! My heart races, my mouth gets dry, my armpits get sweaty, and let’s not forget about the croaking sound that creeps out of the back of my throat--”

“Yeah, I know,” I cut her off, “it’s the Billsby Curse! Thanks for that, by the way.”

### **Who Needs A PS3 When You’ve Got A Shovel?**

I found Chris knee-deep in a hole wearing a floral apron. “You look lovely, *Christina*,” I teased. “Where did you get your *gorgeous* apron?” I sniffed at the air. “Are those mud pies I smell? How delightful!”

“The mud pies are still baking. Care for some escargot instead?” He jumped out of the hole and shoved a slimy snail down the back of my shirt!

“Stop it!” I shrieked and squirmed around until the slime ball fell out. I cursed at the creature and threw it over the fence.

“Nice smock.”

“Nice apron.”

“My mom made me wear it so I wouldn’t get my clothes dirty. She’s obsessed with keeping my t-shirts white. Have I ever told you that she bleaches them *every time* I wear them? I constantly smell like a pool.”

“So *that's* why I get swimmer's ear around you.”

Chris rolled his eyes and tossed me a shovel. “Less talking, more digging.”

He'd already found what appeared to be the handle of a mug before I'd arrived, so we kept working the same area. Once we find something in a particular part of the yard, we label that area a *hot spot* and concentrate our efforts there until we've unearthed everything we can without the help of an excavator.

We'd nearly reconstructed the whole mug when Linda called Chris to dinner. As soon as I heard the back door open I said goodbye to Chris and got lost fast. I've made the mistake of eating dinner at their house once before and my stomach suffered the consequences for a week. I won't make that mistake twice.

### **Dinner Time!**

“Hey, champ,” my father greeted me from his recliner as I walked through the front door. He was watching the news and eating Cheez-Its out of the box. I gave him a hearty salute and ran upstairs for a quick shower before dinner. I could smell one of my all-time favorites wafting from the kitchen. Tuna noodle casserole!

I munched away at the dinner table, switching between the casserole I loved and the spinach salad my mother was forcing me to eat. She's not very strict about my diet, but she does insist that I eat vegetables. If it were up to her, my father and I would both eat healthier, but she still buys us whatever we want at the store. She says my grandmother was overly strict with her when she was growing up so now she's determined to make sure that I don't get a complex about food. I think she's succeeding because the only complex I ever face is what to eat for dessert. For the record, it's usually ice cream of the cookies and cream variety.

My father was going on and on about a new robot he's developing that, "Has the power to change the way we do laundry forever!"

"Just imagine," he nudged my mother excitedly, "you'll never have to wash, dry, or fold again!" Then he frowned and scratched his chin, "We just need to fine-tune the damp-dry sensors. We hit a few roadblocks on the dry cycle but," he brightened again, "we've got the cleaning cycle locked down and that was a major milestone!"

"Will it be able to put away the clean clothes too?" I asked, stabbing at a piece of the crispy casserole topping. The topping is my favorite part because my mother uses crackers *and* butter.

"That's the million dollar question," he said earnestly. "In theory, we *absotootenlutely* have the technology for LaundroBot to go mobile, but setting her free into everyday households poses far too many safety hazards at this point, both to the robot and her humans. In controlled environments at the lab we've got prototypes putting away clothes in drawers, hanging them on hangers, even organizing socks by length and color," he waved his hand dismissively, "but we're gonna hold off on all that functionality in the first release, at least until we build in some serious safety features."

My father turned thoughtful again, no doubt writing some computer codes in his head, while my mother and I exchanged grins. We often find ourselves at the dinner table watching him get lost in his head. His brain never shuts off but my mom says that's one of the things that makes him so special.

I looked at my empty plate and went for a second helping. "Well, fascinating stuff, Dad. If it can out-bleach Chris's mom, I think you've got a hit on your hands.

## CHAPTER 2

### Tuesday

#### The End of an Era

Tragedy struck at lunch today. I was devastated. It pains me to announce that Taco Tuesdays have been...murdered. Cancelled. Obliterated. They served us *fish sticks* instead! As if they could ever compare!

Gilda was devastated, too. She had a tear in her eye as she told me what happened. “Dey say Gilda’s recipe for tacos is too expensive with da special spices an’ da blend of three cheeses. Dey tell Gilda to make tacos *plain* an save money. But I say no! Gilda no make bad tacos!” She punctuated her disapproval with a *tsk tsk tsk* and a shake of her head. “Now, instead of tacos you get fish stick because fish is cheap.”

“You’re right, Gil. You can’t just swap a taco with a fish stick and expect people to play along. It’s a whole different taste experience. Don’t they know they’re in the presence of a culinary genius? Making you change your taco recipe is like asking Leonardo da Vinci to paint a bigger smile on the Mona Lisa! You just don’t mess with high art! I promise you this, Gilda: we haven’t seen the last of Taco Tuesdays. I’ll get to the bottom of this if it’s the last thing I do!”

And I meant it.

## CHAPTER 3

### Friday

#### Homeroom

Of all my teachers, Miss Rodman is the best. She's young for a teacher, in her mid-twenties, and cheerful, but not in an annoying way. I saw her at the grocery store once with her boyfriend, *who looks just like Robert Pattinson!*, and she had on a pair of ripped up jeans and a black t-shirt that said, “Visualize Whirled Peas”. She introduced herself to my mom and said I was her favorite student. I remember I blushed at the compliment...or was it at her boyfriend? *Wink. Wink.* I'll never tell!

“Madison,” Miss Rodman called from her desk as everyone filed out of the classroom. “Hang back a minute?”

I was half-way out the door so I stopped and spun around. I couldn't think of anything I'd done to get in trouble, but that didn't mean much. “Okay,” I said tentatively, “but I'll be late for math. Mr. Marigold deducts points if we're late.”

“That's okay; I'll write you a pass.” She reached into her top drawer and pulled out a notepad. “I want to talk to you about the writing assignment you handed in yesterday. I got the impression you were really upset about the new gym uniforms. Have you talked to Principal Ferrari yet?”

“Oh, *that*,” I let out a sigh of relief. “Sure, we talked on Wednesday and worked out a solution. He's ordering me a new uniform that will supposedly fit and I get to skip gym until it gets here.”

“Well, that's good,” she smiled, “sounds like you've got it sorted out. I just wanted to see

if you needed any help. I went through my share of phys-ed nightmares when I was growing up, so your essay really hit home when I read it. I understand where you're coming from; I had to wear a one-piece uniform that was so tight my mother had to cut it into two pieces just so I could breathe during gym class. So yeah, if you ever need someone on the faculty to back you up, let me know, okay?

I was shocked. “*You* can relate? To me? But you're perfect.”

Miss Rodman guffawed. “Perfect? Me? *Ha!* Not quite. Nobody's perfect, Madison, and especially not me! It's true; I was overweight when I was your age...and not just a little. Over the years I've learned how to eat better. I also exercise on a regular basis and that helps a lot. These days I can pretty much keep the extra weight off, but it's not easy; I still have to work at it.”

“So there's hope for me yet?”

“Of course!” she laughed and then her expression turned serious. “I know you said you've got things under control but keep in mind that my offer still stands; if you ever want to talk about any of this stuff, I hope you'll come to me. I really *do* know what you're going through.” She looked at her hands thoughtfully. “Sometimes when I go running, even now, all these years later, I still have flashbacks to this one particular field day in junior high when I had to run the sixty meter dash. I was so out of breath by the end of the race that they had to carry me off the track on a stretcher.” She shuddered. “I think that's why I run so fast now. It's like I'm running away from the memories.”

I gasped. Poor Miss Rodman is still hung up on her seventh grade field day! “Has it scarred you for life?” I asked gently.

She laughed and snapped out of her reverie. “Oh, no, I guess it's not that bad. I was being

a bit dramatic.”

“You might want to work on your pep talks,” I suggested. “Try ending with something more positive next time. Pep talks are generally more effective when you finish on an upbeat note.”

She eyed me quizzically then she sat up with a start. “That reminds me. I had a *great* idea. It might sound lame to you, but I teach a boxing class at the YMCA on Wednesdays and Saturdays. Maybe you could come by this weekend? It’s open to all levels.”

“A boxing class?” I looked at her skeptically. “How’d you get into *boxing*?”

“My boyfriend got me into it. He brought me along to a boxing class he was taking and I liked it so much I signed up for the training course and received my certification. Now I teach the class and he’s one of my students! But I really think *you’d* like it, Madison. It's not complicated. You just hit the bag and get a little exercise at the same time.”

“Do you pretend it's your old gym teacher's face?” I teased.

She shook her head and laughed, “I swear I'm over that!”

I shrugged. “Okay, I'll check it out. My mom's throwing a yard sale Saturday and this might be the only thing that can get me out of it. I can't imagine her telling me *not* to exercise.”

*Perfect*, I thought. In one fell swoop I would get out of the yard sale *and* have the opportunity to gaze at Miss Rodman’s super-hot boyfriend. *Bonus!*

Miss Rodman looked delighted. “You're going to have fun! I promise! And everything is going to turn out just great for you, too!”

I was starting to wonder when she’d turned into such a cheerleader when she dropped her voice conspiratorially, “So how was that? Upbeat enough? Too generic? I'll keep working on my closings.”

I smiled reassuringly. “It wasn’t bad. Keep practicing and you’ll get the hang of it!”  
Wouldn’t you know it? *I* ended up giving *her* the pep talk!

Miss Rodman handed me the late pass and I was on my way, making sure to pace myself. Having a legitimate late pass in my pocket was an unexpected surprise, like finding a twenty dollar bill in an old pair of jeans, and I intended to relish every second of it. I grabbed the math book from the top shelf of my locker and took advantage of my newfound freedom to rearrange my magnet collection and inhale the sweet aroma of my peaches ‘n cream air freshener. I even got a paper towel out of the bathroom and polished my pet rock, Dave. Having completed these vital tasks, I began the journey to math class.

### **The Ghost of Peter McDougall**

All MVJH math classes are taught on the bottom level of school at the end of a long corridor and past a glass atrium. Legend has it the atrium is haunted by the ghost of Peter McDougall.

Peter McDougall was a student who died in the atrium *waaay* back when my mom used to go here. It happened one day after school while he was waiting for his ride. His mother was late picking him up and that mistake ultimately cost Peter his life. It turns out he was severely allergic to bees and went into fatal anaphylactic shock after getting bit by a bee that was trapped inside the atrium. Peter was dead before anyone found him.

To this day Peter McDougall continues to haunt the atrium, waiting for students who pass through alone, like he was when he died. Those who’ve experienced a haunting say you know that it’s him because of the buzzing in your ear. It’s an unwritten rule among students never to walk through the Atrium of Doom alone. The teachers get annoyed with us and insist that it’s

safe, that the buzzing is coming from the overhead lights, but we know better.

Any student heading toward the atrium alone has to retreat halfway down the hallway and sneak into the custodian's elevator. If you take the elevator up a level you can access the service stairs that lead back down to the math corridor but, thankfully, let out on the other side of the atrium, bypassing Peter's ghost. It's a pain in the *you-know-what*, but a necessary precaution that I suddenly found myself needing to take on this particular journey to math class.

### **Charlotte DuVain...In My Butt**

I retreated to the service elevator and waited for the old beast to wake up. The lift is ancient and when it's been asleep for a while it can take upwards of five minutes to move between floors. I was getting nervous that a teacher might walk by and catch me where I shouldn't be when the doors finally opened and I stepped out of view of the hallway. I pushed the button to go up and leaned back. I was just about home free when out of nowhere a perfectly manicured hand decorated in gold rings and bracelets shot through the sliver of the opening and prevented the doors from closing.

I had nowhere to hide, but I could tell by the size of the hand that it was probably another student and not Larry, the janitor, or a teacher. The doors crept apart again and then I could see that attached to the heavily adorned hand was none other than Charlotte DuVain, an eighth grade Barney's Girl of the highest order. Charlotte stepped into the elevator and moved as far away from me as she could without letting her exquisitely tailored ivory pencil skirt rub against the dingy elevator walls.

I smiled politely, as one does in an elevator. "Sorry I didn't hold the door. I didn't see you coming."

“Of course you didn’t,” she said curtly, “a proper lady always step softly.”

I glanced at her five-inch heels and marveled, “If I were wearing those shoes you’d hear me coming from Canada.”

“Yes,” she said dryly, “my point exactly.”

“Are you trying to get to math class too? We can go through the atrium together if you want. It would be faster.”

She eyed me coolly. “Not that it’s any of your business, but I’m going to *Français* on the *third* floor. Besides, I always take the elevator. Stairs are for trolls.”

I ignored the comment and willed the elevator to start moving. I watched Charlotte studying her cuticles out of the corner of my eye. The overall effect of her pencil skirt, cashmere sweater, designer hand bag, and pointy black shoes made her look like she was heading for Milan rather than French class. I couldn’t imagine putting so much effort into my school clothes.

“Do you ever get caught?” I asked, breaking an awkward silence. “Becky Thompson got a detention last week for taking the elevator.”

Charlotte huffed. “Me get caught? *As if*. I do what I want around here. My father donated the computers in the media room and had the entire football field replaced when my brother went here. He was the quarterback. The DuVains basically own this school, so whatever about the elevator.”

*Well, aren't you something*, I thought to myself.

Charlotte was squinting at me like she was trying to remember something. “You’re Madison, right?”

“Yeah. I’m surprised you know my name.”

“Me too. I shop on Madison Avenue in New York *all the time* so I guess it stood out to

me. I find it rather sad that someone with no fashion sense is to have the name Madison. It doesn't seem right.”

“I was named after my great-grandmother, not the street. I don't think my parents were trying to make a fashion statement when they named me.”

She gave a half laugh. “That's obvious. You're about as fashionable as a fanny pack.”

“And you're as charming as a fart.”

The doors started to open and Charlotte pivoted around to look me directly in the eyes. Her gaze was so cold my whole body shivered. “Technically, *Madison*,” she bit each word, “you're not supposed to be here and I *much* prefer riding alone. Next time, take the stairs with the other trolls,” she cocked her head to the side, “okay?” She smoothed down her skirt and stepped out of the elevator.

I was stunned, unable to move. I listened to the echo of her heels as she marched down the hall and they were no longer the graceful footsteps of a proper lady. The doors started to close before I finally snapped to and pushed my way out. I started down the service stairs and with every step I took my anger grew stronger. *How dare she treat me like that?!* Charlotte DuVain better watch out, I decided. Nobody puts Billsby in the corner.

I arrived to math class still steaming. Mr. Marigold stopped his lecture mid-sentence and greeted me with the predictable, “How nice of you to join us today, Miss Billsby.” It was all I could do not to roll my eyes directly at him. I held out my late pass and took a seat in the back of the room behind Chris.

Marigold was going on about polygons and there was no chance I was going to understand what he was saying after missing the beginning of class, so I wrote Chris a note instead.

C-

*I just got served! Charlotte DuVain was sooo mean to me on  
the elevator =(*

-M

I slid the note into the back of his shirt collar. He waited a beat before pretending to scratch his neck and retrieving it. A minute later he passed a note back to me.

M-

*What happened!? Want me to pour a soda in her locker?*

-C

Pouring sodas through the slits of closed lockers is Chris's signature way of getting back at people who bug him. Everyone at school knows there's a culprit, but no one's figured out that it's Chris yet. I wrote back.

C-

*No! Then she'll think I'm the Soda Slayer! She'll assume it was  
me...unless she's this mean to people all the time, which I wouldn't  
doubt. She's very good at it. We'll come up with something better  
at lunch. I do my best thinking with my mouth full. Speaking  
of...you got any more of that Hubba Bubba left?*

-M

### **Venting Over Nachos**

"It was totally unprovoked," I told Chris as I poured cheese over my nachos in lunch line. I was still irritated by the elevator snub and preparing to drown my sorrows in cheesy comfort

food. “That’s the part that bugs me the most. I could understand her being mean if I’d just pointed out she has a pig nose or something, but compared to her I was being pretty nice.”

Chris looked over at Charlotte’s table and tilted his head in consideration. “I never noticed her porcine features before, but you’re absolutely right.”

I pushed my tray down the line and grabbed a Snickers bar. “And I don’t really care what Charlotte DuVain thinks of me, I just can’t stand it when someone’s mean for no reason. I feel like I need to teach her a lesson.” I don’t really like to be petty or vindictive, but I do like to entertain my options.

“Maybe we should pour soda directly over her head,” Chris suggested, “and bypass her locker.” He paused and thought better of it. “Never mind, she probably has her hair stylist on speed dial. The locker it is!”

“Um, Chris. I’m not really feeling the soda thing for this.” I tried to break the news gently as we made our way to a table. He had already bought a Cherry Coke and was determined to vandalize Charlotte’s locker with it. “The Soda Slayer’s a good back-up, but let’s try to customize something instead. This retaliation has to have meaning. I want Charlotte *DuVain-in-my-butt* to realize she’s not better than everyone else just because she stuffs her bra with thousand dollar bills.”

We ate in silence and considered our options. I was starting to generate a few solid ideas so I pulled out a notebook and flipped to a fresh page.

Ideas for Revenge on Charlotte

by C. Wheeler and M. Billsby

1. Pour soda over her head! (Chris)
2. Put crazy glue on the elevator buttons so the next time she uses it her hand gets stuck. (Me)
3. Smear Vaseline on the handle of her locker so it grosses her out when she switches her books. (Chris)
4. Replace the center of her Oreos with a toothpaste/garlic mixture. (Me)
5. Start a rumor that she shops at Target. (Me)
6. Start a rumor that she's had a nose job...er, who would want a pig nose? Maybe a tummy tuck? (Chris)
7. Report her fur coat to PETA and suggest they do a “red paint protest”. (Chris)
8. Prank call (\*67) her mom and pretend I work at

Barney's and say we have footage of Charlotte shoplifting. Tell Mrs. DuVain that Charlotte is banned from the store forever and that we'll press charges if she ever steps foot in a Barney's again. (Me)

9. Glue a picture of a pig onto that little mirror in her powder compact. (Chris)

10. Rearrange the letters on the welcome sign outside the school from: "Mount Vernon Junior High School Pep Rally This Week!" to: "Hey – charlotte STinks! eeW"

11. *POUR SODA DIRECTLY OVER HER HEAD!!!*

(Chris...again)

Nothing on the list was good enough and number ten was just time consuming. The winning idea would have to teach Charlotte a lesson and not just gross her out or annoy her because I wasn't just out for revenge; I was out for justice. Chris and I decided we needed to gather more information on Ms. DuVain before we could pinpoint her Achilles' heel. Only then could we design a plan that cuts right to her core. We were just wrapping up when Chris took on a serious tone.

"I have one condition," he said, twisting the top off his POWERade. "You have to promise that no matter what we decide to do you're going to follow through with it. You can't

leave me stranded even if it gets stressful or something goes wrong. I covered for you once and I'm still living it down. My reputation can't handle another mini skirt."

I knew exactly what he was talking about...The Macy's Incident.

### **The Macy's Incident**

It was last year, a few weeks before Christmas, and Chris and I were at the Macy's store in the mall shopping with my mother. She helps organize a Christmas play at the community theater every year (of course) and the cast was going to celebrate the opening night by throwing a giant party at The Manor, an old mansion that's been turned into a function hall and overlooks Mount Vernon.

Chris and I were getting bored watching my mother try on dresses, so we left her in the dress department and went around the store picking out bizarre outfits and daring each other to try them on. I picked out a gold sequined mini skirt with a matching tube top and tried to convince Chris to try it on, which he flatly refused. It was easier for Chris to convince me to try on a puffy green party dress with a big cream bow around the stomach and a red fedora hat.

I brought both outfits into the dressing room and tried on the green dress first. Chris sat in the chair outside the fitting rooms and waited for my big reveal. I looked absolutely ridiculous. I was engulfed in so much puffy fabric that I could barely squeeze through the dressing room door. When I finally broke free I threw my arms in the air and twirled around for Chris in front of the three-way mirrors outside the dressing room, letting the dress blow up around me like an inflated raft. I got so dizzy from twirling I fell right on my butt.

Chris and I were laughing like crazy when all of a sudden I realized I was laughing alone. He had become quiet. *Too* quiet. I looked up and immediately understood what had muted him.

Josh Albright and Cindy Taylor, the most popular couple at school, were standing by a belt rack staring at me their mouths open. Cindy and Josh rule the Preps. Cindy's the head cheerleader and Josh is the captain of the football team. As a couple, they've taken it upon themselves to decide who's cool and who's not for the entire junior high. If you're a Prep and Cindy or Josh hang out with you, you've made it for the school year, but if you're Madison Billsby and Cindy and Josh are watching you twirl around in a puffy green dress with a big fat bow across your big fat stomach and a red fedora hat on your head, you're in supreme trouble.

“Look at that,” Josh call out, loud enough for me and everyone in the vicinity to hear him, “its Fatty Billsby all dressed up! She looks like the Christmas tree on Main Street!”

Cindy laughed shoved Josh. “Stop it, Josh. I think she looks *FAT*tractive. I mean it, Madison,” she called out to me, “you look *FAT*tastic!”

Their insults kept flying and it got to the point where all the other shoppers and even the sales clerks were standing around watching my worst nightmare come true. Being the center of attention for all the wrong reasons made the Billsby Curse rear her ugly head and I became paralyzed with fear and embarrassment. The worst of it was, Chris had completely deserted me! Sure, he'd tried to pull me back into the dressing rooms, but when I didn't budge, *couldn't budge*, because of my superior weight and inability to function like a normal human being at that particular moment, he gave up on me and took off into the dressing rooms, saving himself and leaving me to wolves.

I was standing there on display and everyone was gawking at me. Part of me wanted to say something back to Cindy and Josh, something clever like, “I know you guys don't think much, but why don't you think about getting lost!” Or maybe even something sincere like, “Seriously, guys, I'm really not a very good victim and this kind of embarrassment could scar me

for life. Please stop.” The other part of me wished I could run back into the dressing room and hide there with Chris until everyone in the entire mall had gone home for the day. Unfortunately, the part of me with the Billsby Curse won over and I didn’t do anything.

Just when I thought my junior high school career was over, Chris did the most unbelievable thing. He came running out of the dressing room dressed in the gold sequined tube top and mini skirt! Everyone’s focus immediately left me and narrowed in on him. Cindy and Josh burst into a new round of laughter as Chris put his hands on his hips and modeled his glittery outfit like he was posing for the paparazzi. Back at school on Monday everyone was talking about *Chris* dressing up like a show girl and prancing around Macy’s and no one even mentioned my name. And that, in a nutshell, is why Chris is so great. He sacrificed himself to save me.

### **Have You Got Spirit?**

Today’s pep rally was organized by Mrs. Murdoch and the Mount Vernon Spirit Squad (aka “the cheerleaders”) in order to get the Mount Vernon Tigers (aka “the football players”) energized for their big game this weekend. The cheerleaders wore football jerseys to school today to show school pride but the football players didn’t return the favor. The guys really should have worn cheerleading uniforms to celebrate the spirit squad. I’m not a sports fan, but I’d rally behind that for a laugh.

I was sitting next to Katy Bloom again, the tiniest girl in school, and wishing I’d had the forethought to get behind someone bigger when we were filing into the bleachers. The two of us sitting together looked like Kermit the Frog and Miss Piggy. Even *I* had to laugh at the image. Chris was sitting across the gym with his homeroom and I was sort of hoping he’d look over and

have a laugh too.

I noticed Katy watching the explosion of school spirit with the same glazed over expression that I had, so I figured I'd break the ice and strike up a conversation. "Hey Katy," I nudged her with my elbow, "what's half a tuba?"

She hesitated a moment, then gave a half-grin, "I don't know. What is half a tuba?"

"A one-ba. What's a cheerleader's favorite color?"

"I don't know, what?" Katy had an amused, if not confused expression on her face.

"Yeller. *D'uh*. So, why did the football coach go to the bank?"

"To get to the other side?" she looked at me hopefully, then scrunched up her nose and giggled, "I have no idea. Why did the football coach go to the other side?"

"To get his quarter-back! That was an easy one."

Katie covered her face with her hands and laughed, "Your jokes are so bad they're actually funny."

"Why thank you," I bowed in my seat.

Katie cocked an eyebrow. "Where were you last period? We played dodge ball and I noticed you weren't there."

"So you noticed the biggest human target was missing from the game?"

"No, I noticed you weren't there because you and I are always the last ones to get picked. No one wants the human target any more than they want the shrimp who can't throw a ball." Katy yanked on her arm as if trying to make it grow. "It's hard to get the ball across the gym when you have small arms. How'd you get out of gym anyway? You got a secret you can share?"

I was a little unsure if I wanted delve into uniform territory again, but Katy was making

me realize that we had similar situations except on opposite ends of the spectrum; I'm too big and she's too little. I decided to tell her the truth.

Katy listened intently as I told her about needing to order a special size uniform. "It's interesting you say that because my uniform doesn't fit either," she confessed. "I brought it home last night and my mother took it in. She added an elastic band to the shorts so they'll stay up when I run and sewed the neckline higher so it won't keep falling off my shoulders." She cringed, "Bottom line is, I stood out bad today. More than usual, if that's even possible."

I was about to suggest that she air her grievances with Principal Ferrari, the more people voicing their outrage against uniforms the better, when loud cheers and clapping interrupted our conversation. The football players charged through a giant paper banner with the words "Go Tigers!" scrawled across the front in blue and gold paint. Making up the rear of the procession was our less than ferocious school mascot, Vern, the Mount Vernon tiger, played by Peter Dingman, a notorious class clown.

Peter is the perfect person to play the school mascot because he'll do anything for a laugh. His mascot uniform consists of a blue football jersey with the name Vern written across the back in white letters, big furry tiger paw mittens on his hands, and an oversized tiger mask with eye holes in the nostrils. The bobbing mask makes Peter's long scrawny body look like it's going to topple over like a lollipop. I laughed along with everyone else as he ran along the bleachers trying to start a wave while simultaneously tripping over his feet every few seconds. Each time he fell he got back up and bowed.

I reluctantly tossed my hands in the air as the wave passed our section. "Peter Dingman's my hero," I confessed. "He's the biggest dork ever and he doesn't even care. You have to admire that."

Katy nodded. “He does stuff in public that I would only do alone.”

“Like sing into a hairbrush and pretend you’re Lady Gaga?” I suggested, thinking about my last Saturday night.

“Um, sort of,” she laughed. “For me it’s more like, hold a hairbrush and deliver an Oscar winning acceptance speech.”

“You want to be an actress?”

“Ever since I was five. I played Piglet in my Kindergarten play. We did *Winnie The Pooh In The Hundred Acre Wood*. It was a smash hit.”

“You should join the drama club here,” I suggested, laughing again as Peter tried to do a cartwheel and lost his tiger head in the process. He scrambled to his feet and chased after the mask pausing every few feet to bow to the crowd.

Katy sighed. “I tried to join. I auditioned for *Romeo and Juliet* last winter but they said I was too small for the part. I wanted to be Juliet’s mother, Lady Capulet.”

I turned to Katy in shock. “That’s ridiculous! They made a big mistake. You would’ve been perfect for the part. They obviously didn’t take into account that people were *much* shorter back when Shakespeare was alive. In fact, you’re probably Lady Capulet’s exact height. Not to mention the fact that people had really bad nutrition back then and it almost goes without saying that Lady Capulet had osteoporosis which would have made her even smaller. If anything, you’re too tall.”

Katy nodded and became animated. “Yeah, and not only that, but I practiced really hard for the audition and knew every single one of my lines while the girl who got the part messed up *all* of hers.”

“That’s *so* unfair,” I agreed, feeling my temperature rising. Injustice always irks me and I

was officially mad on Katy's behalf. "You suffered from height discrimination and that's just plain wrong. They have a moral obligation to cast people based on talent, not appearances. Katy, somebody has to do something about this before talented people like you give up on their dreams. This is horrible." I unzipped my sweatshirt and fanned my face with my hands.

Katy looked surprised. "Geez, I think you're more upset about it than I am! Maybe you should run for student council president. I'd vote for you."

I like Katy, but she definitely doesn't understand the Billsby Curse. I pointed at Peter Dingman, who was now in the center of the gym trying to break dance. "He might be willing to make a fool out of himself in front of the whole school, but I'm sure not. I suffer from a condition that basically prevents me from acting like, well, that," I pointed again at Peter again. He was now spinning on his butt.

Katy looked concerned. "Is it serious? My dad's a doctor. Maybe he can help."

I nodded slowly. "It *is* serious. Seriously annoying. If you think your dad might be able to help then I'll tell you all about it. Maybe there's a procedure he can do to get rid of it."

Katy listened as I filled her in on my family curse. When I was done she looked apologetic. "Actually, Madison, I might have misled you. I don't think my dad can treat your curse. Unless you need a root canal he probably won't be much help. I should have mentioned he's a dentist."

"That's okay," I shrugged, "I already knew that. I was that hoping maybe you knew something about teeth that I didn't...like if you pull out a certain molar it helps you become more confident or something."

Katy let out a howl of laughter. I was being serious but she thought the idea of tooth therapy was hysterical. Her laughter was contagious and we both ended up with a bad case of the

giggles.

\*\*\*

I was at my locker getting ready to leave while Mrs. Murdoch read the afterschool announcements. “It’s that time of year again,” her voice trilled through the loud speakers, “Student council elections are right around the corner and campaign committees can start forming on Monday. Sign-up sheets are in my office. If you want to run for a position you need to be part of a team, so call your friends and make plans this weekend.”

Chris popped out of nowhere and startled me. “Ready?”

I dropped the book I was holding and he caught it in mid air. “Since when do you have reflexes?”

“Since I’m all pumped up! I’ve got news. *Big news.*” He grabbed the rest of the books and papers out of my hands and started shoving them in my book bag. “I’ve gathered significant intel on our mark and we need to get out of here so we can talk freely.” He looked over his shoulder. “The coast is clear. Let’s make like a banana and split!”

### **A Plan Is Formed**

Chris called for a secret meeting at Wendy’s to discuss his Charlotte du Vain intel. He made me wait until we got our Frostys before he’d tell me the dirt, but it was definitely worth it.

“Charlotte du Vain is running for student council president!” He beamed and took a long sip of his Frosty while the news set in.

“You’re kidding, why?”

“Apparently, she’s trying to get into a swanky private high school in Manhattan, the kind you sleep at.”

“A boarding school?”

“Yep,” Chris nodded as he lifted the lid on his Frosty and used a spoon to get at the frozen chocolate reservoir. “Problem is, she doesn’t have the grades for it.”

“Cuz she doesn’t try at anything.”

“Exactly. And they wouldn’t accept her dad’s bribes either. So now she’s getting desperate and thinks that a role in student government will give her a leg up.”

The thought of Charlotte ruling my school made vomit rise in my throat. I shook off the image. “Does she realize she’ll actually have to go to meetings and *do* stuff if she wins?”

“I don’t think she’s planning on doing anything. She just wants the title. That’s what she told Lizzy Sears.”

“Truly excellent intel. Where did you get this?”

“I followed her gang after the pep rally. I followed real close so I wouldn’t miss a thing. I also discovered that Lizzy smells good, sort of like cotton candy.”

I held up my hand to stop him. “Hold on. Did you just say Lizzy Sears smells like cotton candy? Patty’s going to be *sooo* jealous.”

Chris immediately blushed. “Forget I said that. It was just a passing observation. But getting back to Charlotte, you know what this means right?” He smiled big and rubbed his hands together.

“Maybe?” I was still spinning the cotton candy imagery out of my brain.

“All we have to do is run against her and make it impossible for her to win. If she doesn’t win, she can’t get into Saint Catherine’s. If she can’t get into Saint Catherine’s, she has to go to public high school here in Mount Vernon. And that’s basically her worst nightmare. It’s the ultimate retaliation! We have the ability to change the whole course of Charlotte’s future. Well,

at least the course of her freshman year.”

“It would work,” I agreed, feeling the excitement. “But how do we keep her from winning? She’ll just pay off anyone that runs against her.”

“Then we’ll have to find a competitor that can’t be bought.”

“Like who?”

Chris shrugged and the question lingered. We walked in silence, finishing our Frosty’s, and thinking about our options. If the Terrible Charlotte DuVain actually became the student body president she wouldn’t do anything to improve the school and things definitely need improving. Charlotte certainly wouldn’t monitor drama club auditions or fight against ill-fitting uniforms. School would stink. Chris was right, we had to stop her. This was bigger than getting snubbed in an elevator; this was about quality of life.

“Chris,” I declared, “you’re right about this. It’s time we stand up for the underdogs at school and do something to make a difference. And the best part is, we’ll teach Charlotte a lesson while we do it!”

Chris perked up. “You mean it? It’s on?”

“Oh yeah,” I nodded, “it’s on. You’re going to be the best student body president Mount Vernon Junior High has ever seen!”

### **TV and Take-Out**

Occasionally on Friday nights Chris’s mom goes out with people from work (not the prisoners) and he’ll stay at my house until she gets home. We usually hang out in my basement and play videogames but tonight my dad got takeout from The China Palace and we ate dinner with my parents in front of our seventy-inch flat screen TV. At the Billsby house, we take TV

watching very seriously.

My dad's a huge Steve Carell fan so tonight we rented *Get Smart*. When my mom's in charge of the remote we usually end up with a romantic comedy or something starring George Clooney. Given the choice, I prefer Carell or anything with Michael Cera in it because he's a comedic genius.

The movie ended and my father clicked off the set. "If I could spend the day hanging out with anyone in the world, other than you guys, it would be Steve Carell. Hands down. He's brilliant!"

My mother yawned and snuggled into my father. "I'd spend the day with Oprah Winfrey and ask her to buy me an island in the Caribbean."

I gave my mother two thumbs-down. "Oprah? Boo! She's so full of herself. *I'd* spend the day with Barack Obama. He's the coolest dude ever!"

"I'd hang out with Miranda Cosgrove," Chris chimed in. "She's hot."

I threw a pillow at him. "You're going to spend the day with iCarly when you could spend the day with Barack Obama? Don't you want to find out what he gets in his morning news briefs? Or how he takes his coffee? I bet he likes it with milk, no sugar. Whole milk."

"Not all of us are into politics," Chris shot back. "iCarly's more interesting to *me* than Barack Obama."

My father nodded at Chris. "I hear ya. I'd probably want to spend the day with iCarly if I were your age. For me it was the girl who played Blair on *The Facts Of Life*. I thought she was the bee's knees."

"Fine then," I threw up my hands, "after Barack and I solve global warming we'll order Justin Bieber to perform for us in the Oval Office and Chris, if you're nice to me, I'll invite

iCarly to come too. And Blair whats-her-name. It'll be a party and you're all invited."

"Oprah?" my mom asked.

"Clooney." I countered.

She nodded swiftly. "Deal."

Chris became serious. "Madison, I don't get you. You're clearly obsessed with politics, why don't *you* run for school president. I'm not even that into it. The only reason I want to win is to help you get back at Charlotte, but you'd actually enjoy the position if you won."

My father cocked an eyebrow. "What's this about school president?"

"She wants to run for student council but she's worried about her stage fright," my mother explained. "I don't blame her."

He looked back and forth between me and my mother and sighed, "What am I going to do with you two? Debbie, you can't let Madison go around thinking she has a curse. And Madison, you can't let a little fear of public speaking get in the way of your dreams. I won't allow it. I'm ordering you to run for president!"

"No way!" I shot back.

"Yes way!" Chris said in unison with my father.

My mother inhaled sharply and gave my father a pointed look. "Lionel, you know I agree with you that Madison is gifted and would make an excellent president, but honestly, how can you call her stage fright a *little fear*? You don't understand what we suffer from. Our curse is debilitating. You *know* what happened to me in high school. Do you really want to put Madison through something like that?"

"What happened?" Chris asked, intrigue painted on his face.

My mother turned to Chris. "I had a panic--" she stopped mid-sentence and shivered.

“Sorry, it still gives me chills just to think of it.” She closed her eyes and tried again. “I had a panic attack and it was *so bad* that I had to go the hospital. I was the valedictorian of my class and it was my job to give a speech at graduation. My whole school and half the town was there. I should’ve been proud stand in front of everyone; I worked hard to make it to the top of my class and I wrote a great speech. If I could have delivered it, it would have blown everyone away. Wasn’t it good, Lionel?”

“It was,” he nodded. “It was inspired. I helped her write it.”

“You did not,” she shoved him playfully, “you helped me *type* it, there’s a difference.” She looked at Chris. “So I was standing there at the podium and managed to say, ‘Good afternoon Ladies and Gents!’ with lots of bravado...but that was all I ever got out. After that, my whole body turned against me. My heart started pounding out of my chest, my hands started shaking uncontrollably, my neck broke out in huge blotchy hives, and I couldn’t even speak. Well, that’s not *entirely* true,” she smile ruefully, “I did manage to grunt a few times, but it wasn’t anything coherent.”

She paused and took a deep breath. “If all that wasn’t bad enough, I then started *hyperventilating* right there on stage in front of *everyone in town!* People in the crowd thought I was dying! My father ran on stage and literally carried me off in his arms because I couldn’t even move by myself. It was the single most humiliating moment of my entire life. And I wasn’t just imagining how awful it was because it was on the front page of the newspaper the very next day. I still remember the headline, *Valedictorian Chokes On Own Words.*”

Chris gasped. “That’s horrible!”

My mother looked stricken. “Now that I really think about it, I don’t know how I’m going to deal with this new job. There’s no way I can be a spokesperson for the town.”

I covered my face and groaned. “See, Dad? This is a serious condition and I’ve got it even worse than Mom. At least *she* was popular in school; I don’t have the social capital to withstand a public humiliation.”

When my father spoke it was with finality. “Madison, you’re the best person for the job and that’s what matters. And Deborah, you’re going to be outstanding at your new job. Period. Listen up ladies; we’re going to tackle this problem head on, as a family. If you two are willing to be open-minded about this Billsby Curse *nonsense*, then I’ll come up with a plan to get you both over your stage fright.”

Chris gave my dad a high-five. “Now we’re talking! Finally someone with some sense around here.”

I looked at him skeptically. “What are *you* going to do? You design robots for a living. Unless you can make androids that look exactly like me and mom and program them to deliver our speeches for us, I don’t see how you’re qualified to help.” I raised an eyebrow. “Could you do that, by the way? A Madison robot would be *so* helpful. She could go to gym for me too.”

My father laughed, “Actually, I could. But that wouldn’t help you get over your stage fright and that’s our main objective. I agree that I’m not qualified to handle this kind of thing, but my plan is to talk to the staff psychologist at work to see if she has any ideas. She mostly works with robots but she’s very clever.”

I shrugged and picked up the Chinese takeout bag. “You can talk to her if you want but I’m still not convinced.” I dumped out the fortune cookies and tossed them around the room. “Let’s see what the cookies have to say on the matter. I’ll take advice from a cookie over a shrink any day.” I cracked open my fortune cookie and pulled out the little white paper. I scanned the message and had to laugh. “How’s this for timing? It says, ‘Decide what you want

and go for it.”

My father bowed his head in reverence. “The cookie has spoken.”

I hung my own head in defeat. “This is a sad day, people. A cookie has turned against me. Cookies are supposed to be my friends.” I flung back on the love seat and chomped on my new enemy.

Chris looked smug. “Timely little fortune, isn't it, Mad?”

I threw another pillow at him and he caught it in the air. My mother opened her cookie. “Mine says, ‘Grand adventures await those who are willing to turn the corner’.” She tossed the broken cookie and the fortune on the coffee table. “*Geez*, these things are persistent.”

“It sounds like the universe is trying to tell you two something,” my father said meaningfully. “I wouldn't take these messages lightly. One time I got a fortune that said I was about to get an unexpected surprise that would bring me great joy and two days later we found out we were pregnant with Madison. I dug through the trash and found the fortune and put it in your baby book.”

“Is that why my baby book smells like rotten bananas?”

My mother rolled her eyes. “It does not smell like bananas. It smells like roses and peppermints, just like you did when you were a baby.” She turned to Chris. “What does yours say, sweetie?”

Chris opened his cookie and pulled out the paper. “It says, ‘You will find a thing. It may be important.’” He looked confused. “I hope I don't find a baby like your Mr. Billsby. I'm too young to be a dad!”

I sat up quickly. “That's not about a baby, Chris! It's about your backyard! I think this means you have to keep digging!”