

Chapter One

A Dirty Trick

Harry Corbett was turning in at Pete Hollis's gate when the front door flew open.

"Have you seen Sparky?" Pete yelled, easing his wheelchair out onto the porch.

Harry stopped and looked up and down the street, expecting to see the little black-tan-and-white beagle trotting toward him. But there was no sign of the dog.

"I don't see him anywhere, but I'll call him." Harry cupped his hands around his mouth and yelled, "Here, Sparky! Here, boy!" Harry called again, slapping his plump thighs. "Come on, Spark!" It had never failed to bring the dog running before. "I don't see him," Harry called as he started up the walk.

Pete's pale, thin face was puckered into a worried frown. "Sparky has never stayed away this long before."

"How long has he been gone?" Harry asked as he pushed Pete's wheelchair out onto the sidewalk.

"I let him out right after I got up this morning, and he didn't come back." Pete slicked his straight, dark hair back with a nervous hand.

"Don't worry; he'll show up. Sparky never goes very far." Harry stopped to close the gate and turned to push Pete's chair. But Pete had crossed the sidewalk and stopped at the edge of the curb. Leaning forward, he took a long look up and down the street. Harry was glad Pete didn't find what he was looking for.

"Old Spark isn't dead. He's probably just out chasing squirrels. You know how he loves to go nosing around."

"I hope you're right." Pete backed his wheelchair around and turned up the street.

"Hey, school is this way, and spring vacation doesn't start until tomorrow," Harry reminded him.

"I know, but I want to go around the block to look for Sparky. I've got a funny feeling something has happened to him." Pete gave the wheels on his chair a determined push. "Come on, Harry," he pleaded. "It won't take long."

Harry pulled off his blue cap and raked his fingers through his thick, wavy, brown hair. He didn't want to be late for school. If they

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fooled around too long looking for Sparky, he would have to run to get there on time. And he wasn't that great at running. He was the slowest runner in the whole fifth grade.

But he couldn't desert his best friend when he needed help.

"OK," Harry agreed. "But we can't spend too much time." Harry lumbered along, pushing Pete's chair.

"Did you hear about the Founder's Day competition?" Harry asked, trying to take Pete's mind off of Sparky. "This year it's supposed to be something special."

"I heard about it." Pete didn't sound the least bit interested.

"Sam's mom is on the committee, and he said that this year, instead of writing an essay, the contestants are supposed to do some kind of outdoor project. You gonna sign up?"

Pete jerked his head around and looked up at Harry. "Are you kidding?" he demanded in a voice filled with disgust. "In case you haven't noticed, this is a wheelchair, not a bicycle. No, I'm not going to sign up. Are you?"

Harry wished for the zillionth time he was slim, with big muscles, instead of being round and chunky. He didn't like to say the word fat even to himself. He tried to suck in his stomach and stretch himself a little taller.

"I might. I just might sign up." But Harry knew he wouldn't. He wasn't much good at doing outdoor stuff.

They turned the corner. Pete and Harry forgot about the contest. They asked everybody they met about Sparky. But nobody had seen him.

Pete slowed the wheelchair down as they came near the entrance to Maple Street Park. "Let's look in the park for Sparky."

"You want to go in there?" asked Harry, his blue eyes wide with surprise.

The park used to be a nice place, with swings and a slide, picnic tables, wide lawns, and even a duck pond. All the neighborhood kids used to play there. But last summer, a gang moved in and took over the park. They partied there and trashed the place. Nobody went there anymore.

"Sure. Remember how Sparky used to love to bark at the ducks when we came here?" Pete turned his chair in at the entrance and stopped to look at the pond. "See, some of the ducks are still there."

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“Well, I don’t hear any barking, and I don’t see Sparky anywhere, so he must not be here.” Harry stepped behind Pete’s chair again. “We’d better go, or we’ll be late.”

“Can’t we just take a quick look around?” Pete pleaded. “It won’t take long.”

A rustling in the bushes made them both turn around fast. It was only a bag lady shuffling out from behind a clump of bushes near one side of the park entrance. She was wearing a long, ragged coat; dirty tennis shoes that were too big; and a black stocking cap over her long, scraggly gray hair.

Pete’s face brightened. “Hey, lady,” he called. “Have you seen a little dog in the park anywhere? He’s about this big.”

Pete held his hand about a foot off the ground. “He’s black and tan and white, and he’s got droopy ears.”

The woman shuffled to a stop and turned half way around. “A dog, you say?”

Pete nodded eagerly. “He might have been down by the pond, barking at the ducks.”

The bag lady shook her head. “I don’t recall seeing any dog in the park today.” She adjusted the rope that ran across her chest like a sash. The ends were tied to the top corners of a burlap sack that hung at her side. The empty cans inside rattled as she turned and shuffled off down the street.

“Sparky isn’t here,” said Harry, turning Pete’s chair around. “We’d better get on to school.”

Pete kept looking up and down the street as they went along. “Maybe by the time I get home this afternoon, that dumb dog will be there waiting for me.” Pete said it like he didn’t care one way or the other, but Harry knew he was still worried.

They were still a block from school when they saw Morg Greene boosting Nate Biggers up in a tree. They were too far away, and there were too many leaves in the way to see what Nate was doing.

“We would have to ran into those two guys,” Pete muttered. “The last time they caught me off the school grounds they tried to talk me into letting them use my wheelchair. They wanted to race it down the hill against somebody’s skateboard.”

“They’re so busy that they might not notice us,” Harry said in a low voice. He gripped the handles on the back of Pete’s chair and walked a little faster.

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Harry couldn't resist looking up as they passed under the tree. Nate was hanging somebody's jacket from a high branch. Harry wondered whom the jacket belonged to this time. Nate and Morg were always playing tricks on somebody.

Harry and Pete made it to Mr. Williams's fifth-grade classroom with a couple of minutes to spare. Just before the tardy bell rang, Nate and Morg rushed into the room, laughing and out of breath.

The teacher called the roll and said, "Get out your math books and do the problems on page one-ninety-two."

Harry was working on the last set of problems when the door opened. Everybody stopped what they were doing to see who came in. It was a tall woman with silver-gray hair and glasses.

Mr. Williams ran a hand over his smooth, bald head and said, "People, this is Miss Lockman. She has some very exciting news that you've all been waiting for. Please return to your seats and give her your undivided attention."

"It is once again time for the annual Founder's Day competition for the fifth-graders here at Lockhart Elementary," Miss Lockman began. She told them how, together, Mr. Gebhart and Mr. Lockman started the town of Lockhart back in 1897.

"This year the theme will be Clean Up and Beautify Our Town. In keeping with our founders' fine example of teamwork, you will join forces with Mrs. Goodman's fifth-grade class and form teams." Miss Lockman held up a large sign-up sheet. "Here is a list of projects in and around Lockhart that have been approved for your age group. Yesterday, Mrs. Goodman's students filled in their half of the sheet. Each team will put their ideas to work to clean up or beautify a place in our town."

Mindy Crowder raised her hand. "Will there be prizes again this year?"

"Yes," Miss Lockman answered. "Each member of the winning team will receive a gift certificate good at any shop at the Lockhart Mall. "Twenty dollars for the Most Original, fifteen dollars for the Most Artistic, and ten dollars for the Most Imaginative. All teams will receive an all-expense-paid trip to the new Nature Land Zoo." Even Nate and Morg stopped fooling around and paid attention when they heard that.

"The contest begins tomorrow morning at eight and ends at six the evening before Founders' Day," Miss Lockman said.

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Mindy raised her hand again. "Who will be our adult supervisors?" she asked.

"There will be only two adult advisors: Mr. Abrams and Ms. Hanley. You will be free to beautify your projects as you choose. Materials and tools will be provided, within reason, of course. I wish you all the best of luck." She handed the papers to Mr. Williams and left the room.

Mr. Williams went over the rules and answered a few questions. Then he thumb-tacked the papers to the bulletin board and went back to his desk.

"Those of you interested in entering the competition may go quietly and sign up."

Most of the kids forgot about the quiet part. They leapt out of their seats and stampeded down the aisles. Only Harry and Pete and a few other kids who were going away during vacation stayed seated. Harry leaned his chin in his hand and stared out the window, wishing just once he could win an award.

Suddenly a foot landed hard against Harry's seat, jarring him out of his daydream. "Hey, Lardo," Nate said. "You gonna sign up for the contest?"

Harry glanced toward the bulletin board. Most of the kids had already gone back to their seats.

"Yeah, El Blimpo, why don't you go check out the list?" asked Morg. "Maybe you can find something to clean up without bending over." Nate almost laughed out loud.

Harry wanted to punch them both in their silly grins. "Course I'm going to sign up." Harry hoisted himself out of his seat and lumbered up the aisle, wishing he'd kept his big mouth shut. With any luck, there wouldn't be anything left to sign up for.

He looked over the list. There were some great projects. Places in downtown Lockhart that people would be sure to notice. But they were already taken. In fact, there were no blank spaces under any of the projects. Except Maple Street Park, near the bottom of the page. That was a six-person project. But only two people had been dumb enough to sign up for it.

Harry started to turn away. Then he stopped dead still. He must have been seeing things. Harry swung around and looked at the list again. It was true!

Somebody had printed his name and Pete's under the Maple Street Park project with a ballpoint pen.

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“What a rotten thing to do,” Harry muttered under his breath as he tried to erase their names. It was no use. Maybe it wouldn’t be so bad. Maybe they would have some good partners. His eyes strayed to the names on the list from Mrs. Goodman’s room. There were only two names there too. Lorrinda Jefferson and Julia Fitzhugh.

Girls? Their partners were girls!

Harry was fuming when he turned to go back to his seat. Nate and Morg were both red in the face and shaking with silent laughter. It wasn’t hard to figure out who had signed their names to the sheet.