



UNSCHOOLED

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1

GEORGE

As we enter the school gym, the heat hits me like a steam train. I scrunch my nose to keep sweat stink from entering my nostrils. The gym is always hot, but today it feels hotter.

“Please take a seat,” Mr. Foley, my teacher, instructs my class, his forehead dotted with beads of sweat. “And no running.”

To my left, I see my best friend, Lilly, already sprinting past a few slower kids. I lose sight of her for a moment, but it’s easy to spot her red hair and flapping ponytails.

“Lilly! Hold up!” I call out.

“You’re as slow as Elvis,” she teases, waiting. Elvis is her class’s pet turtle, and he’s so slow I bet he couldn’t outrace a snail. “I am just super excited for the assembly to begin.”

“As long as we’re on the same team.”

“Of course we’ll be on the same team. Stop always being a worrywart.”

“I would hate not being together . . .”

“We’ll be on the same team,” she insists.

We walk up the middle bleacher aisle, and Lilly sits next to Sarah and Grace. They are in Lilly’s class. They both have curly hair, are dressed in identical skirts, and grumble when they need to slide over to make room for us.

“Do you think Principal Klein will announce the prize?” Lilly asks me. She wiggles on the wooden bleacher bench. She’s wiry and springy and bouncy.

I blink and scratch my head. “Prize?”

Lilly looks at me like I’m an alien from another planet. “The prize! Don’t tell me you forgot. The school is giving away a prize to whichever team wins Spirit Week.”

I’ve heard about the prize, of course. Everyone has. “I think we should just play for fun,” I say.

Lilly shakes her head. “Are you crazy? Playing for fun isn’t fun at all.”

Luke sits right above me, and he wiggles and fidgets on his seat almost as much as Lilly. “I heard the prize is ice-cream cones. All you can eat ice-cream cones forever and ever. A truck a week.” Luke’s leg dances up and down and his body wriggles. “Or maybe popcorn balls.”

Sarah leans closer to us and shakes her head. “I heard the winning team gets to be on the front cover of *Tween Beat* magazine.” She fluffs her hair. “Perfect for me.”

“With a pullout poster, too,” says Grace, also fluffing her hair.

“That would be awesomesauce,” says Lilly, still bouncing. “But we’ll hear what the prize will be soon.” With her and Luke springing up and down, I’m getting seasick.

Principal Klein walks to the microphone in the center of the gym. The fifth-grade teachers stand behind him. Principal Klein clears his throat. I pull out my notebook.

“Why do you have a notebook?” asks Sarah, rolling her eyes.

“I don’t think we’re going to be tested on an assembly,” adds Grace, also with an eye roll.

Lilly pats me on the shoulder. “George always brings a notebook.” She flashes me a smile and whispers in my ear, “It’s a little weird. But I like you anyway.” She gives my arm a playful squeeze.

Our principal taps the microphone to make sure it’s working. A big BOOM, like a thunderclap, bursts forth from the speakers and echoes through the gym.

Lilly’s green eyes light up and shift back and forth, which they sometimes do when her mind is racing all over the place. “Maybe we can choose our own snacks if we win. Or maybe we’ll all win jelly beans. Or phones. Or electric scooters.”

“Good morning, students,” says Principal Klein. A hush falls over the bleachers.

“Maybe everyone will win a puppy!” exclaims Lilly. “I’ve always wanted a puppy.”

“I don’t like puppies,” says Sarah, wrinkling her nose. Grace nods in agreement.

“Please be quiet,” says Principal Klein. He has a loud and commanding voice. I uncap my pen. Our principal raises his hand, motioning us to silence.

“Maybe we will win a moon rock,” suggests Lilly. She is the only one speaking, but I’m not sure she notices. “I don’t know what you would do with a moon rock, but that would be, like, the best prize ever.”

“I need everyone quiet,” says Principal Klein. He’s a big man, and even though he always wears an orange cardigan sweater, he reminds me of an army general, if army generals wore orange sweaters.

The bleachers are silent. Lilly opens her mouth to speak, but then changes her mind and closes her lips. But she still bounces, and so does Luke behind me.

Principal Klein smiles and says, “I’m delighted to be here with you, fifth graders. I have some exciting news.”

“I bet it’s about the prize,” says Lilly between bounces.

“Ssshhh,” I urge with some exasperation, my finger over my mouth.



2

LILLY

George has a serious look on his face, like usual, but he needs to lighten up because he's actually funny sometimes, only you wouldn't know it by looking at him.

He furiously scribbles notes while Principal Klein speaks.

"As you know, on Monday we continue a long Liberty Falls Elementary School tradition," our principal says. "Monday marks the beginning of Spirit Week, and it's only for our fifth graders."

I let out a loud "Woo-hoo!" and a bunch of other kids yell, too. I've looked forward to this week all year, but the absolutely most amazing part of Spirit Week is Field Day. Field Day is filled with events like balloon fights and egg tosses.

Last year I snuck out of class to watch Field Day. My teacher yelled at me for sneaking out of class, and so did my parents, and so did Principal Klein.

But it was worth every yell. Field Day was awesomesauce.

“Spirit Week is about fair play,” continues our principal. “It’s about teamwork and friendship. It’s a reward for your hard work the last five years. A celebration of sorts before you go on to Liberty Falls Middle School.”

A whole bunch of cheers erupt around us. I can’t wait until we start middle school next year, and I turn to George, but he’s still taking notes, so I turn to high-five Sarah instead. She looks at my palm, shrugs, and then slaps my hand.

“Each of you will be assigned to participate on one of two teams,” says our principal. “Team Red or Team Blue.”

“I hope we’re Team Red,” I whisper to George. Red is my favorite color, and not just because my hair is red. Well, maybe because my hair is red, but I’m glad my hair is red, because some people have boring-colored hair and that wouldn’t suit me at all.

George finally looks up from his notebook. “As long as we’re on the same team, I don’t care what color I am.” His teacher is Mr. Foley and mine is Mrs. Crawford. Every year their classes are on the same team.

This school year is the first time George and I have not had the same teacher. Last summer, when I found out we were going to be in different classes, I was so mad I almost made a giant sign that read UNFAIR CLASS ASSIGNMENTS!

I was going to march in front of the school with it, but Mom wouldn't let me.

I was also going to make a giant frown-y face out of clay. I'm pretty good at making things out of clay. It calms me. I can also hold my breath for forty-two seconds, which is a pretty long time.

But it's been a long year without George sitting next to me in class. At least we'll be together during Spirit Week.

Principal Klein continues. "As most of you know, each team wins points based on a different contest every day, culminating with Friday's Field Day. Field Day is worth half your team's points. In the past, we've played just for fun. But we're doing something new this year. At the end of the week, the team with the most points will win a special prize."

Almost everyone in the bleachers starts talking at once. I begin bouncing in my seat again because sometimes my legs just have to bounce. Behind me, Luke says, "I bet everyone wins an ant farm."

"A kitten!" shouts Jessie, who sits in front of me. "Wouldn't that just be incredible if everyone won a kitten?"

"No," says Sarah, while rolling her eyes. "I don't like kittens."

"Me neither," adds Grace.

Maggie, who sits in front of George, turns around and grins and straightens her glasses. “Maybe we’ll win a trip to the new science center that opened up downtown.”

“If the prize is a trip to the science center, I don’t want to win,” says Sarah.

“I don’t like science centers,” says Grace.

“Well, if I want to get into Harvard someday, I have to really know my science,” says Maggie, ignoring Sarah and Grace’s frowns. “Going to Harvard is sort of a family tradition. My great-great-great-uncle was one of the first African Americans to ever graduate from there.”

Maggie is the smartest kid in our school. I bet she’d make a great teacher someday. She’d probably make a great teacher now! She’s in Mrs. Rosenbloom’s class, and even though she’s new, I hear she’s pretty nice.

Everyone talks and argues about the mystery prize, and Principal Klein has to say “Please settle down” and raise his hands a bunch of times before we quiet.

“What’s the prize?” yells someone from across the bleachers.

“It’s a surprise,” answers Principal Klein. “The prize will be revealed at the end of the competition.”

Probably half the kids in the bleachers groan. I do.

Our principal continues. “This year, Mrs. Crawford’s and Mrs. Greeley’s classes will be on Team Red, while the students

from Mr. Foley's and Mrs. Rosenbloom's classes will be on Team Blue."

My mouth falls open and all bouncing leaves my legs. George and I are on different teams? Every time I've ever thought about Spirit Week—and I've thought about it a zillion times—I've always pictured George and me side by side, passing eggs or tossing water balloons together.

George's smile falls, too. "It'll still be fun," he says, but he doesn't sound like he means it.

"We need a volunteer from each team to lead their team to victory," announces Principal Klein. "Who wants to lead Team Red?"

Despite my disappointment, both my hands immediately shoot up as if pulled by invisible strings. Being a team leader wasn't something I had planned, but planning is overrated. Sometimes you just have to do what you have to do, and I do want to win the mystery prize, whatever it is.

Principal Klein looks right at me. "Okay, then. The Team Red captain will be Lilly Bloch."

"Yes!" I exclaim, and George looks up quickly enough to exchange my hand slap.

I just know I'll be the most fantastic team captain ever, because I hardly ever lose at anything. I was only in Adventure Scouts for one year, but I sold more cookies than anyone, and

I've won 228 straight games of tic-tac-toe against George. That has to be some sort of world record.

My team will win by so many points that the school will probably build a statue of me, or name the gym after me, or something like that.

“Congratulations,” says George.

I grin and grin and my cheeks hurt, I grin so hard. “I wonder if the team captain gets an extra prize? Like, if everyone got a puppy, maybe I'd get two puppies. Or two lifetime supplies of ice-cream cones.”

“I doubt it. But being a team captain is a lot of work,” George cautions, wearing his Mr. Serious look. It's a look he sometimes has when he thinks I'm not thinking, and I know he means well, but I can think perfectly well without his help. Most of the time anyway. “It takes organization to lead a team. And note taking. And arranging things.”

I laugh and look at his notebook. “Maybe you should be team leader, then. You've got the note-taking thing down.”

Then Principal Klein asks, “And who wants to be the Team Blue captain?”

George actually looks like he's thinking about it, but Maggie's hand quickly pops up.

“Thank you, Maggie Cranberry,” says Principal Klein. “Why don't our two team captains come down and get their team leader pins?”

I jump out of my seat as if my legs are on springs. I practically leap into the aisle, ready to head down the bleachers.

I don't know what that special prize is, but I know it will be extra, extra awesomesauce and that no one is going to stop me from winning.