

ONE

Toby Scudder, sixth grader, was in a hurry. A person could never be too early for the first day of school. There was territory to claim. New faces to check out. Summer gossip to swap.

Stopping at the corner, Toby plucked the metal spiral of his new five-subject notebook as a bus full of high schoolers passed. A tall, geeky-looking kid in the back of the bus made a face out the window, mouth opening wide and eyes bulging as if to scare Toby. Toby only smirked, thinking how he could take the skinny kid hands down...make him cry "Uncle" right there on the corner. When the bus turned, Toby heard the *click-click* of the kid's window as it was lowered. Then: "Hey, blubber gut!"

Toby raised his fist, his middle finger pronging high and straight. Satisfaction swept over him as he caught first the surprise, then the anger on the kid's face before the bus rushed away.

For half a block, Toby pictured himself and the kid fighting it out. Each fantasy ended with Toby forcing the kid's face into the ground and yelling, "Blubber *what?* Blubber *what?*" Passing the Texaco, Toby took a deep breath, the spring suddenly returning to his step. He didn't want any geeky high-school freshman ruining the start of what was sure to be his best year ever. *Top of the Heap. Kind of the School. The Year of Tobias Michael Scudder.*

Toby liked putting titles to things. Liked seeing bold headlines and newsflashes in his head. The headlines he saw just then were accompanied by pictures of kids scurrying to

do his bidding. Teachers wringing their hands. Crowds parting in the halls. *It's him! It's Toby! Make way! Make way!*

Respect. What was that song? "R-E-S-P-E-C-T." No matter how you cut it, Toby had it.

Reaching into the cargo pocket of his new camouflage pants, Toby grabbed a handful of Screaming Yellow Zonkers. As he crunched, waves of sugary sweetness filled his mouth. He popping in another handful. Even breakfast tasted better this morning.

At Leo's, Toby swallowed the last of the Zonkers and finger whistled.

Leo bolted out his door with a sack lunch dangling from his hand. "Sixth grade rules!" he shouted.

"Got that right," Toby said. "Hey, cool shirt."

Leo puffed his chest wide so Toby could get a good look. An orange-colored Pluto dog covered most of the T-shirt. The thick, black letters below spelled, *I'm Pluto... You Must Be Goofy!*

"Some hippie guy was selling them near where my uncle lives in California," Leo said. "The guy has to keep moving his stuff on account of the Disneyland people are out to get him."

They turned off Thirty-eighth Street and onto Alameda, then cut through the park that backed into the school's playground.

"The way I see it," Leo said, "only David Ferraro would be dumb enough to fight you this year, and I heard he moved."

"I'll take care of him if he's there," Toby answered.

"Don't hurt him too bad," Leo said with a laugh.

Toby laughed too. He liked Leo. Leo was *bad*. Leo had moved to Vancouver from Portland in the middle of last year. On his first day at Broughton Elementary, Leo had used a whole dispenser of paper towels to stuff up the toilets in the boys' bathroom. Toby had been the only witness. He'd thought it was a gutsy move for a short kid with glasses. Although neither boy had come right out and said it, it was clear there was a secret agreement between them. Toby never made fun of Leo's height. And Leo never dared mention Toby's weight.

Reaching the school grounds, Toby yelled toward a group of fifth-grade boys standing near the bike rack. "Hey, Gleason! Does your mother know you're a sissy?"

Kirk Gleason's face turned the color of his new red hightops. "No," he blustered. "I mean, yes...I mean—"

Toby watched to see if any of the other fifth-grade boys was going to start something. When no one did, he and Leo high fived it and sauntered over to where a bunch of sixth-grade girls stood in front of the class lists taped to the door.

"He's new," Melissa was saying.

"And cute," Veronica said. "My mother met him."

"Who's new?" Toby asked.

"Our *teacher*," Veronica replied in a tone that let Toby know she was relating information that any moron should have known. Ever since Veronica's mom had been elected president of the Broughton PTA, Veronica had become even more of a know-it-all than she'd been before. Toby looked at the huge binder and the stack of notebooks

Veronica had cradled in her arms. He thought she had enough notebooks to start a store. He also thought her fresh perm made her look like a poodle.

"Mrs. *Crestfield* is taking a *year* off to be with her husband in *China*," Veronica added. "Her husband found out he'd be teaching there just last week. He's a *professor*, don't ya know? Mr. Fenning is her replacement."

"Wonder if he's mean," Josie said.

"Probably," Melissa said. "Most guy teachers are. Mean...and lean." She pumped her eyebrows twice as if what she'd said was a secret, girls-only kind of thing.

Josie snickered. "A lean, mean loving machine."

All three girls burst out laughing.

Toby pretended the hair over his forehead was bothering him. He swished his head from side to side real quick, hoping the girls would notice how he'd let the back grow out. He wondered if any of the girls thought he could be a loving machine. He wasn't lean, he knew that. But neither was Macho Man Randy Savage or Ultimate Warrior, or any of the big-time wrestlers, for that matter. They were big and muscled. Like Toby. Well, maybe a little more muscled. But they were big. And women went crazy for them. All you had to do was watch a match or two on TV, and you could see how the women in the audience screamed like they'd faint dead away if one of the big guys asked them out for a date. Toby drew in a breath and held it, his shoulders squaring, his new double-zero football jersey filling out.

"All I know," he said when he had to breathe again, "is no new teacher's gonna ruin this year for us. We'll show this Fenning guy what's what. We're sixth graders, right?"

Leo slapped Toby's upraised hand. "Yeah," he said. "Sixth grade rules!"

Veronica, Melissa, and Josie took up the chant. Soon the group had swelled, every sixth grader in earshot coming over. Toby pumped his arm out and back to keep the beat. The others followed suit, hands fisted. The two staff assistants monitoring the playground shook their heads and appeared to sigh as the chanting grew louder. It gave Toby a good feeling to see the kids from all the other classes watching in awe.

"Sixth grade rules! Sixth grade rules! Sixth grade rules!"

And I rule the sixth grade, Toby told himself. The thought made him work his arm faster, the others following, their voices quickening. The sound became deafening.

Yep. It was going to be a great year.