



UNSCHOOLED

ALLAN WOODROW

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George and Lilly are best friends, but when they end up leading separate teams competing for the Spirit Week prize, it puts a strain on their friendship, especially when the competition generates a host of nasty pranks designed to sabotage their teams—and if Principal Klein finds out what is going on Spirit Week will be canceled and everybody concerned will spend the rest of the year in detention.

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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.