



# **SLIMED**

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# CHAPTER ONE

(Billy)

On the third day of fourth grade, the teacher went around and made everyone in our class say what their favorite part of school was. I've always hated being singled out like that, so when it got to me I sort of panicked and—bad idea—told him the truth. I told him my favorite part of school was when it was over.

That got a note sent home to my parents. The first of *many*.

But hey, was I wrong? The end of the day is the best. All the rules get flipped, and suddenly it's okay to talk, and run around, and stop paying attention, and—if you live close, like me—walk right off school property.

That was my *really* favorite part: the moment I crossed that invisible line. Because school couldn't follow me home.

Well, not normally it couldn't. It did last Wednesday, though.

“Hey! Billy! Billy Hamilton! Wait up!”

I'd only just made it across the street when I looked back.

Sam Baptiste was racing down the school steps toward me, her backpack bouncing along with the colorful beads in her braids.

I groaned, but I stopped and waited for her. There was no point trying to escape. Not only was Sam a really fast runner, but her mom was our school principal. If I took off, her mom would definitely hear about it, and I'd already seen the principal too many times that year. In fact, the last time she'd told me that if my grades didn't improve, I wasn't going to pass fourth grade.

One parent-teacher conference later I'd been signed up for every extra-credit assignment that came along. A week after that, I was Sam's science partner for the most annoying project imaginable.

“I can't believe you forgot we were meeting after class!” Sam yelled, waiting for the crossing guard to let her across the street. “We've only got three days left before tryouts!”

When the guard finally raised her flag, Sam raced across, pulling a piece of paper from her pocket and shoving it right



in my face as she skidded to a halt. It was the announcement our teacher had passed out two weeks earlier.

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TEAM WILL GO ON TO THE NATIONAL COMPETITION ON LIVE TV,  
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At the bottom there was a lot of small print spelling out the rules and requirements and stuff.

“Three days!” Sam repeated, waving the colorful flyer

like a flag. She'd sprinted to catch up with me, but I noticed she wasn't breathing hard at all, and her dark brown skin wasn't even the tiniest bit sweaty from running. I might have been sweating, though. I could definitely feel my face turning pink. I always turned pink when I was under pressure.

"Sorry," I mumbled. "I forgot."

That wasn't true at all. I knew we were supposed to meet after class, only I'd been trying to skip. This project was going to be so much *work*, and I'd wanted one more day of freedom. One more day without being dragged through some boring experiment by Sam Baptiste, or writing out an official lab journal, or giving a presentation in front of TV cameras and hundreds of other kids and grown-ups and Professor Quandary and everybody. I just wanted the whole thing over with, and I figured the less time we spent working on it, the shorter it would be. I felt the same way about the contest as I felt about science and math class and school in general: blah, blah, blah.

Which was why it was the worst luck in the world that Sam and I were partners. Sam loved school. I mean, she *loved* it. Plus, Professor Quandary was basically her hero, so this contest was like Sam's personal dream come true.

And she wanted to win. Boy, she really, *really* wanted to win.

At first, I think she'd been just as unhappy about us working together as I was. But it seemed like not many people hung out with Sam, since she was the principal's kid and all. Plus all the other kids entering from our school already had partners, and the rules said we had to work in pairs.

I needed the extra credit. Sam needed a teammate. We were stuck with each other.

"Well," Sam said, putting the flyer back in her bag, "we're both here now, so let's see what we can do!" She sounded like her mom whenever I got sent to the office. "We agreed to have four more project ideas by today. Are yours ready?"

I shrugged and looked away.

"Billy . . ." Sam narrowed her eyes.

"Yeah, I guess," I said. Actually, I only had one idea, and Sam really wasn't going to like it. "But you go first."

"Okay!" Sam's frown flipped into a smile. She always smiled when she was talking about science. Or even just thinking about school. I didn't get her at all. "I thought it might be fun to test the chemical impact of salt water and chlorine on the plastic of different pool floaties!"

I shook my head. "I can't swim."

"Oh." Sam blinked, but her smile stayed on. "How about a pollution-absorbing paper that can be added to cardboard

boxes to offset the impact of online shopping? Make them clean the air while they get shipped all over?”

“Cardboard makes me itch.”

“No kidding. Well, my *favorite* idea was to design a deep-space telescope that can send greetings from Earth while it’s busy looking and measuring.” She grinned. “It would do multiple jobs at once!”

It was my turn to blink. Sam had been throwing complicated project ideas at me for two whole weeks. I’d shot them all down, figuring she’d run out of steam and finally suggest something easy, but that hadn’t happened. Her ideas were still, like, high-school-level ambitious. I couldn’t help feeling kind of impressed.

“Aren’t telescopes sort of Professor Quandary’s thing?” I said. “Didn’t he invent one just like that?”

Sam made a disbelieving noise. “Professor Quandary invented the *Hyper-Quantum Telescope*, the one that let scientists finally see all the dark energy highways arcing between the stars. That’s what made him famous and got him his weekly TV show. My telescope idea is *completely* different!”

“Oh. But okay, wait,” I said, thinking fast. Designing a telescope sounded hard. “Isn’t there kind of a risk people will still call us copycats?”

“Fine.” Sam’s eyebrows pressed together. “No telescopes.

But since you never, ever like any of my suggestions, why don't you tell me what brilliant ideas you've got?"

"Um, sure, yeah." I felt my face going pink again. I faked a cough. "I actually only have one idea today. I was thinking we could maybe do, you know, a sort of model volcano. You know, showing how they work? With, maybe, baking soda?"

Sam paused, letting her eyes go very wide. "A baking soda . . . volcano . . . That's your idea? Your *only* idea?"

Before I knew what was happening Sam had grabbed the top handle of my backpack and started pushing me down the street.

"Come on," she said. "That does it. We are going to your house right now, and I'm not leaving until we've got a *real* project idea and a plan to get it done. I am *not* losing this contest because of you, Billy Hamilton!"

I groaned, but I let her march me along. We did need *something* to present on Saturday, or I'd wind up the oldest kid in next year's fourth grade. It was a huge pain, sure, and it would definitely be super embarrassing standing in front of those TV cameras at tryouts. But it wasn't like it would be the end of the world or anything.

What was the worst that could happen?