

## CHAPTER ONE

O, How the Innocent Must Suffer!

So there I am, sitting in Mr. Culpepper's office being my natural self, which is pretty cool, and there is Ashley Schmidt like she's ready to punch out the world, starting with me.

"So what exactly is your complaint, Miss Schmidt?"

"My complaint," said Ashley, shooting another glance in my direction, "is that the School Journalism Association has just put out its list of best school newspapers. The *Spectator* is published at Stuyvesant and that came out in first place."

"Stuyvesant is a respectable high school." Mr. Culpepper's voice sounded tired. "And the Da Vinci Academy for the Gifted and Talented is a middle school."

"*The Verdict*, published at Cardozo, came in second." Ashley's fists were balled up.

“Yes, another high-school paper.” Mr. Culpepper glanced over at me.

“And *The Cruiser* came in third!” Ashley shot a mean look in my direction. “That poor excuse for journalism is not even the official Da Vinci newspaper!”

“And the School Journalism Association has no official standing, either,” Mr. Culpepper said. “So whatever they said or however they ranked the newspapers makes no difference.”

“It makes a difference to me!” Ashley protested. “I didn’t even know they were ranking the papers, but someone — someone must have sent them copies of *The Cruiser* without even letting me or the school know. And I think that *someone* was Alexander Scott!”

“Mr. Scott?” Our assistant principal raised one eyebrow as he glared at me.

“Some kids from Frederick Douglass Academy asked me for some back copies of *The Cruiser*,” I said. “I didn’t know what they were going to do with them. Ashley is just mad because *The Cruiser* is a better paper than *The Palette*. I mean, everybody knows that.”

“I wouldn’t go that — Ashley, do not cry in my office.” Mr. Culpepper rolled his eyes upward. “Look, I think

you're making a rather inflated deal over nothing. Why not look at this as a challenge to *The Palette*?"

"Yes, sir." Ashley was talking through clenched teeth. "I will do exactly that. Did you get the letter I sent you?"

"Yes, and I think it's a brilliant idea to reprint two hundred words from the British newspaper the *Guardian* each month," Mr. Culpepper said, handing Ashley a tissue. "I used to read the *Guardian* on a regular basis when I worked in London. And now that you have their official permission to reprint from their editorial pages it should add significantly to Da Vinci's official paper."

Ashley stood and gave me another mean look. She didn't say anything in front of Mr. Culpepper, but outside of the assistant principal's office she made herself pretty clear.

"I'm going to bury you and your stupid newspaper!" she hissed at me before starting down the hall.

In a way I could see her point. As the editor of *The Palette* she had a lot of pride in the paper. She also worked hard to keep up its standards. But, hey, it wasn't my fault if *The Cruiser* got third citywide.

I called a meeting of the Cruisers for 11:15 in the media center. When we got there I saw the staff of *The Palette*

already in one corner, so we took the corner nearest the window.

“Why are they giving us dirty looks?” LaShonda asked.

“Because of us being picked as third-best newspaper,” I said.

“They don’t know that it doesn’t mean anything?” Kambui asked.

“Ashley is hurt because they picked *The Cruiser* over her paper,” I said. “She would have been fine if they had picked another high-school paper or even a middle-school paper, but she’s embarrassed that they picked us.”

“So let’s just tell them to forget about it.” Bobbi McCall was being cool, as per usual. “Ashley’s good people.”

“She’s good, but she said that *The Palette* is going to bury us,” I said. “And that sucks.”

“Yo, dueling editorials,” Kambui said. “That’s kind of all right. I like it.”

“Yo, Zander, check this out.” LaShonda put her hands palms down on the media center table. “We’re the Cruisers because we don’t get into that competition thing. If Ashley wants to get all worked up over it, let her go for it.”