

# **SCHOOLED**

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**GORDON KORMAN**

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## *For my Aunt Shirley*

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# 1

## NAME: **CAPRICORN ANDERSON**

I was thirteen the first time I saw a police officer up close. He was arresting me for driving without a license. At the time, I didn't even know what a license was. I wasn't too clear on what being arrested meant either.

But by then they were loading Rain onto a stretcher to rush her in for X-rays. So I barely noticed the handcuffs the officer slapped on my wrists.

“Who's the owner of this pickup?”

“It belongs to the community,” I told him.

He made a note on a ring-bound pad. “What community? Golf club? Condo deal?”

“Garland Farm.”

He frowned. “Never heard of that one.”

Rain would have been pleased. That was the whole point of the community—to allow us to escape the money-hungry rat race of modern society. If people didn’t know us, they couldn’t find us, and we could live our lives in peace.

“It’s an alternative farm commune,” I explained.

The officer goggled at me. “Alternative—you mean like *hippies*?”

“Rain used to be one, back in the sixties. There were fourteen families at Garland then. Now it’s just Rain and me.” I tried to edge my way toward the nursing station. “I have to make sure she’s okay.”

He was unmoved. “Who is this Rain? According to her Social Security card, the patient’s name is Rachel Esther Rosenblatt.”

“Her name is Rain, and she’s my grandmother,” I said stiffly. “She fell out of a tree.”

He stared at his notes. “What was a sixty-seven-year-old woman doing up a tree?”

“Picking plums,” I replied defensively. “She slipped.”

“So you drove her here. At thirteen.”

“I drive all the time,” I informed him. “Rain

taught me when I was eight.”

Sweat appeared on his upper lip. “And you never thought of just dialing 911?”

I regarded him blankly. “What’s nine-one-one?”

“The emergency number! On the telephone!”

I told him the truth. “I’ve talked on a telephone a couple of times. In town. But we don’t have one.”

He looked at me for what seemed like forever. “What’s your name, son?”

“Cap. It’s short for Capricorn.”

He unlocked my handcuffs. I was un-arrested.

How could an able-bodied teenager allow his grand-mother to scale a plum tree? Simple. She wasn’t my grandmother at the time. She was my teacher.

I was homeschooled. That was the law. Even on a tiny farm like ours, you had to get an education. No school bus could ever make it up the rutted, snaking dirt road that led to Garland. But transportation wasn’t the only problem. If we’d been serviced by an eight-lane highway, Rain still would have handled my schooling personally. We wanted to avoid the low standards and cultural poison of a world that had lost its way.

So that's what I was doing when Rain fell—working on a vocabulary lesson. Most of the list came from the state eighth grade curriculum: *barometer, decagon, perpendicular* . . .

I could always spot the extra words Rain threw in: *nonviolence, Zen Buddhism, psychedelic* . . .

*Microprocessor?* I frowned at the paper on the unpainted wooden table. Was that Rain or the state? I'd never heard that term before.

I stepped out of the house, careful not to disturb my science project—the Foucault pendulum suspended from the porch roof. The tester from the education department thought it was good enough to enter in the county science fair. Too bad we didn't believe in competition—all that emphasis on trophies and medals, the shiny symbols of an empty soul. Anyway, Rain said the whole thing was a trick to get me to go to regular school.

“If your project is excellent, it only proves that you're getting a superior education right here with me” had been her reasoning.

I spotted her up in the tree, reaching across a limb to pick a plum. “Rain,” I called, “there's a word I don't under—”

And it happened. One minute she was on the

branch; the next she was on the ground. I don't even recall seeing her fall. Just the faint cry followed by the dull clunk.

“Aaah!” *Whump.*

“Rain!”

She was lying on her side amid the scattered plums when I pounded onto the scene. Her face was very pale. She wasn't moving.

My terror was total. Rain was everything to me—my teacher, my family, my whole universe. Garland was a community, but *we* were the community—the two of us!

I knelt beside her. “Rain—are you okay? Please be okay!”

Her eyes fluttered open and focused on me. She tried to smile, but the pain contorted her expression into a grimace. “Cap—” she began faintly.

I leaped back to my feet. “I'll get Doc Cafferty!”

Doc Cafferty lived a few miles away. He was technically a veterinarian. But he was used to working on humans, since he had six kids. He'd given me stitches once when I was eight.

She reached up a tremulous hand and gripped my arm. “We need a real doctor this time. A people doctor.”

I stared at her like she was speaking a foreign language. Doc Cafferty had filled all of Garland's medical needs as long as I could remember.

She spelled it out. "You're going to have to take me to the hospital."

Rain always said that anger upsets the balance inside a person. So when you yell at somebody, you're attacking yourself more than whoever it is you're yelling at.

Falling out of the tree must have made her forget this. Because when the nurses finally let me in to see her, she was screaming at the doctor at top volume. "*I can't do eight weeks of rehab! I can't do eight days!*"

"You've got no choice," the doctor said matter-of-factly. "You have a broken hip. It has to be pinned. After that you'll need extensive physical therapy. It's a long process, and you can't ignore it just because it doesn't fit in with your plans."

"You're not listening!" Rain shrieked. "I'm the caregiver to my grandson! The *only* caregiver!"

"What about the parents?" the doctor asked. "Where are they?"

She shook her head. "Long dead. Malaria. They



were with the Peace Corps in Namibia. They gave their lives for what they believed in.”

That sounds worse than it is. But I never knew my parents except from old pictures. They left when I was little. Besides, the rule at Garland back then was that we all belonged to each other, and it didn’t matter who was related by blood. I have a few vague recollections of other people in the community when I was really young. But whether they were my parents or not, I can’t tell. Anyway, it’s impossible to miss what you never had.

I rushed to my grandmother’s bedside. “Are you okay? Is your leg all fixed up?”

She looked grave. “We’ve got a problem, Cap. And you know what we do with problems.”

“We talk it out, think it out, work it out,” I said readily. It had been that way since the very beginning of Garland in 1967, long before I was born. Now that there were only two of us, Rain still gave me a full vote. She never treated me like I was just a kid.

The doctor was growing impatient. “How about cousins? Or maybe a close friend from school?”

“I’m homeschooled,” I supplied.

The doctor sighed. “Mrs. Rosenblatt—”

“That name hasn’t applied to me for decades. You can call me Rain.”

“All right. Rain. I’m admitting you now. We’ll operate in the morning. And I’ll call social services to see what arrangements can be made for your grandson.”

That was when I started to worry about what was going to happen to me.