

THE SAUCER CLUB

Eleven was that magical age when just about anything was possible.

SAM PARKER SAT AT HIS DESK chewing on his pencil, his blue eyes staring pensively out the window where a yellow butterfly danced catching his attention; he would soon be as free as the day-flying insect but for now only his mind wandered out there. He could also see someone flying a red dragon kite in the distance and it looked like fun. With the Rocky Mountains in the background it was a picture perfect scenario, mostly sunny with some puffy white clouds against the deep blue sky. He could feel the excitement in the pit of his stomach. He felt like a dog being held back from the ball that had just been thrown.

"What?" Sam said to Michael.

"I didn't say anything," said Michael.

The warmth of the sun shone through the window onto his left hand, and because of yesterday's class he knew that the light had travelled 93 million miles to get there. He knew it wasn't supposed to be possible to travel faster than the speed of light but he wasn't so sure because scientists didn't always know what they thought they knew. Sam sighed impatiently. Each second seemed like an hour as time crawled forward like a wounded dragon. If only dragons were real instead of mythical; how amazing would it be to fly on the back of a black dragon? Looking down on the farms and oceans from thousands of feet up; swooping down over a baseball game and catching the ball, flying away with it. He could definitely imagine himself on the back of a dragon.

"Stop it Harold!" Aidan could feel the tug on her ponytail. He had been forced to change desks several times during the year and unfortunately had ended up behind her, and talking to him was like talking to a brick wall.

Sam could smell the bag of cotton candy that he had in his desk; he pulled out a wad of it and let it melt in his mouth, licking the pinkness off his fingers. He was eleven and considered this to be the best day of the year, except maybe Christmas morning before the presents were opened. His imagination was usually better than the presents, not that his gifts were terrible. Last year he enjoyed his new telescope until it fell off the garage roof while watching a naked woman sunbathe; it turned out that he hadn't tightened one of the tripod legs properly. Some would say that it served him

right. He sometimes still thought of her lying on her lawn chair near the birdfeeder in her backyard.

"What?" Sam said to Jake.

"I didn't say anything."

Sam had tried hard that summer to see the lunar module's decent stage through his telescope's eyepiece, where Neil Armstrong had landed on The Sea of Tranquility, but he couldn't; his telescope simply hadn't been powerful enough to see it on the surface of the moon. Sam now thought it might be impossible for any Earth telescope to see it. Maybe the Hubble could but then again maybe it couldn't. It was his dream to go into space and he would work hard to become an astronaut.

There was a blue jay beyond the window making tootle-do sounds as it was appreciating the nature of such a beautiful day, but even if there had been a tornado with a cow flying by it still would have been the best day of the year as long as it didn't hit the school. The anticipation of it had been building for weeks, plans were being made and imaginations were kicking into high gear. This time of the year always made students restless because not many things could match the last day of school. A treasure chest full of doubloons might do it. The thought of staying up late and sleeping until noon if he so desired made Sam smile; he would feel like a caged bird being set free. Youth infused energy running free under the summer sun equaled fun.

Was that stupid clock going backwards? How was it possible to move that slow?

Summer was the time for the Saucer Club to become a lot more active. After school all four members were heading straight for Sam's tree house where they would make plans to head out into the forest. Summer was always an adventure, but the last two years it had become amazing, unbelievable even. Even with their ocean-sized imaginations they had trouble believing what they had found. Nobody knew their secret and it was going to stay that way, it was so important to keep it from adults because they knew it would be taken from them for sure. Sam's stomach felt like bees were fighting with hornets in there. That stupid clock; he'd kick it if he could.

"Come on clock move your ass!" Johnny shouted at the clock.

Everyone laughed.

Michael stared at the word of the day on the blackboard: serendipity. The luck of finding something great that was not sought after. That might be the

perfect name for the club if they ever wanted to change it. The teacher didn't know about their secret but boy did she hit the bullseye on that one. If she was psychic they would be in big trouble because the secret that they were keeping might actually be against the law; they would probably have the CIA and the FBI after them. They might all end up in the same prison cell.

The class talked louder than they should have because Miss Pennington was across the hall talking with Miss Taylor about what they were going to accomplish during the summer and how they weren't going to miss their students. They made enough noise for two classes. Miss Taylor would soon be on a plane flying across the ocean to Hawaii. Miss Pennington was looking forward to the purchase of a new Chevy Malibu and lying in the sun. She said that she had always wanted a Chevy Malibu and this year she was getting one. No more papers to mark or assignments to prepare. Hallelujah. Miss Pennington was happy that next year someone else would have to deal with Harold.

The class was raring to go; just like the cars at the Indy 500 they were anticipating the flag. If they were cartoons their legs would have already been a blur with smoke flying from their feet. If someone was in the hall when that bell sounded they might get run over, ending up with a hundred sets of footprints all over them. Sam pictured it, the dust flying from their heels with cartoon sound effects. While watching the seconds tick away it was obvious that Miss Pennington and her pretty blue eyes had lost track of time; she was a cute little thing but those eyes could scan as well as any x-ray machine, and sometimes it seemed that she knew exactly what they were thinking. Her laughter drifted in from across the hall and made everyone smile; she was a ball of energy and definitely one of the good teachers.

Sam looked at Johnny. "What?"

"I didn't say anything." Johnny had to laugh at their silliness. It was simply something they liked to say.

There were three others in the club and they all wore identical t-shirts emboldened with a large golden S; Michael, Jake and Johnny were also eating cotton candy. They liked to be tuned into the same frequency. They played together and even fought together when necessary, a little like the four musketeers. When Johnny's parents got divorced and his dad moved away, they had given him a lot of extra attention to cheer him up and take his mind off it as best they could. They couldn't replace his Dad but they

certainly tried hard to distract him.

Michael Boyd was African American and about twenty pounds overweight. Miss Pennington loved his beautiful brown eyes and his positive attitude. He had pretty much always been a Mars freak; he was obsessed with the red planet, being convinced that he was going to be the first one to walk on it. A month ago when Michael discovered that his science project was on the forth planet from the sun he was up and dancing, literally. His weight bothered him a little but his father told him that he had also been overweight as a child, however his Dad was now the perfect size and shape for an astronaut, and that certainly gave him hope. He never went more than 24 hours without surfing the Internet for Mars photos, and lately he was focused on the rover Curiosity. He loved to draw the red planet.

"What?" Michael said to Sam.

"I didn't say anything."

Michael couldn't wait until people wanted his autograph just like they collected Neil Armstrong's. He often thought about what he'd say when he took that first step onto the Martian surface, but he couldn't come up with anything close to what Neil had said. "That's one small step for man, one giant leap for mankind." "I'm on Mars and you're not!" "This is mankind's first step on the way to the stars?"

Hmm. That last one wasn't bad and he had to write it down so he wouldn't forget.

Everyone in the Saucer Club wanted to be an astronaut; it was a bit of an unwritten rule. The thought of going somewhere that no one else had ever been was very appealing. The idea of being first to walk on Mars was exciting; the first people to throw rocks up there. If they ended up being the first four on Mars then everything they did up there would be a first. He could be the first man to spit on a Martian rock. Michael imagined a plaque on a large Martian rock far into the future as tourists walked past it: "Michael was the first person to spit on this Martian rock July 4th, 2031." Since he would need a breathing apparatus he wasn't sure how that would work. Of course they wouldn't mark that milestone but it did make him smile.

Michael stood up and announced to the class. "I used to be black but I'm all white now!"

Harold was confused. "What is he talking about? He's still black."

"Just joking Harold."

"That's not funny. That is that the dumbest joke ever told. I don't get it."

That doesn't make any sense!" Harold didn't get a lot of things, including decent grades.

Sam smiled. "Michael, I think you just broke Harold's brain."

Harold walked up to Randy who looked up at him from his wheelchair; he knew some sort of insult was on the way. Harold was a year older than most of the others in the class, with the disposition of a tied up, ignored, barnyard dog. "Hey Randy, better watch out for traffic this summer; you don't want to end up in two wheelchairs." He laughed like a true moron, a machine gun laugh that made the students want to rip their own ears off. Even if he was from a huge village he'd still be the idiot. Sam considered that perhaps Harold's father was a jackass too and maybe his meanness had been passed down but he'd never met him. "Now that's a joke."

Randy thought that Harold's brown eyes were awful mean looking; Frankenstein probably had the same kind of eyes. Randy had been confined to his wheelchair for almost three years now, and the worst part was that he had run across the street without looking. That second of not paying attention had cost him a lot. Randy didn't like his naturally curly brown hair; he had tried to straighten it many times but finally gave up.

Harold tried hard to annoy everyone in the club but Sam in particular, but then again he irritated a lot of people. Sam hated bullies; Harold and his two cronies were good at being nasty. Timothy and Rolland were just as bad. They figured that they could get away with saying anything as long as they pretended that it was a joke. Whatever horrible Harold was up to they were happy to follow his lead. The dark haired twins were almost always up to no good. There were days where Miss Pennington didn't know what to do with them or their antics. She had preached over and over not to make fun of others, but she may as well have been talking to the flagpole.

Sam gave Harold a dirty look. "Harold, shut the hell up. What are you going to do this summer? Let me guess egg people's houses all night and sleep all day. This guy won't even mow the lawn for his grandmother. I'm not kidding; his 80-year-old grandmother was doing the lawn last summer and she can barely walk.

Harold was fighting mad. "Shut up Sam before I come over there and pound your face! She's only seventy-nine. Besides, she needs the exercise more than I do. How do you think she got to be that old?"

"You come over and I'll give you a one way ticket right back to where you're standing and you'll have a bloody nose to go with your ugly face." Sam was mad enough to give him a good punch.

"Here we go again," said a girl from the back of the class. "It's the last day of school so smarten the hell up."

"He wants to be Randy's hero," Harold said sarcastically. "If you love Randy so much why don't you let him join your stupid club?"

Sam shook his head. It's not that it was such a bad idea if Randy wasn't in a wheelchair. "Harold, are you that stupid? How are we going to get him up into the clubhouse? He's in a wheelchair you dumbass. And don't think we don't see you walking by Randy and slapping him in the back of the head every chance you get." Sam had fought Harold four times during the school year, with each winning two, so they were evenly matched. "What a doofus, picking on a guy in a wheelchair."

Harold could justify every stupid thing he did, at least to himself. "He doesn't want to be treated special. You're the doofus. He wants to be one of us. Don't you Randy?"

Who the hell would want to be like you? Randy thought it but he didn't say it. Being in the condition he was in certainly left him at a disadvantage. Maybe he could fight another guy in a wheelchair but he certainly couldn't fight Harold. It was best to keep his mouth shut when it came to Harold but sometimes that was easier said than done.

"You did it more than once Harold," said Jake. He was one of the four in the S club, along with Johnny and Michael, with Sam being the founder. Today they were all wearing their club T-shirts, a colorful S CLUB on a white background. They had designed it on Sam's laptop in the clubhouse. They definitely couldn't put what the S stood for; their club was the best on the planet.

Harold was now sufficiently angry and he rushed Sam but three other guys got in between them and stopped the fight before it started. They were all used to them fighting and also tired of it. They listened to see if the ruckus had gotten Miss Pennington's attention, but apparently she was too busy yakking. Her laughter again floated in from across the hall.

"Come on guys it's the last day of school. You don't have to fight until September." Sandra was the classes' prettiest girl with blond hair and blue eyes. "Give it a break already."

Harold thought that was another good thing about the last day of school, no detention for fighting, at least he didn't think so. The teachers would be as happy to get out of there as they would and he didn't think they would want to be stuck in school for an extra hour. He whispered into Timothy's ear and then they both laughed. "What does the S stand for in your stupid

club? I'm guessing sucker."

"Or stupid," said Timothy. He was the tallest and the skinniest in the class, and although Roland was his twin they weren't identical. "Sam is the president of the stupid club."

Sam thought that Harold probably wanted to be in the club because he was always bringing it up, but a hundred ninjas wouldn't be able to get that out of Harold. Sam would rather die a horrible death than to reveal what the club was all about, even though at times it was difficult to keep the biggest secret in the world. Harold wasn't trustworthy enough nor would he ever be. One had to be able to deal with top-secret information to be a member. One day Sam had told Harold that the S stood for secret, but on another day he had said it was for Sam.

Harold rolled up a piece of paper and bounced it off Randy's head. "Bullseye!"

Johnny thought that the reason Harold picked on Randy so much was because it bothered all of the club members. "Knock it off."

"I should put a rock in a piece of crumpled up paper and ricochet it off his head." Sam turned his attention to Randy. "What are you gonna do this summer Randy?"

"I don't know yet."

Harold thought that one day he just might be a comedian making millions, and then he would get the last laugh. "He's gonna roll around in a wheelchair. What do you think he's gonna do?"

Just then their teacher walked in with a big smile. "Class dismissed. Have a good summer and play safe. By the way class, the buzzer is broken and we've all been here five minutes longer than we needed to be. The clock needs a new battery."

There was a simultaneous moan from the class. Five minutes of summer had been wasted and they'd never ever get it back but it was best not to think about it. They stampeded for the door as Miss Pennington told them not to run but it would have taken a whip to stop them. Summer was waiting and they were late.

Outside, Sam, Johnny, Jake and Michael met near the slides to discuss business. They were all on their identical black BMX Fly Bikes, and Sam noticed that Randy was alone near the parking lot waiting for his mother to pick him in their white van. Randy didn't look very happy on the happiest day of the year. He did feel sorry for him at times but unfortunately Randy was stuck in that chair. He was probably used to it but still.

"I'm so happy I could explode," said Michael.

"Hey guys, you know what would really piss Harold off is if we did let Randy in the club." Sam raised his eyebrows and showed them his cute smile. He wasn't sure if it was possible but he was willing to give it a try.

Johnny had red hair and freckles and shook his head as he thought that it was an impossible idea. "How are we supposed to get him in the clubhouse? And how the hell would we get him out to the you-know-what? It is miles and miles into the woods. I wouldn't mind but it's impossible."

They could see the look on Sam's face; they could almost hear the gears in his brain turning. He was of course trying to figure out a solution. "That just it. Getting Randy out there would be half the fun. I bet we can do it. We'll make a stretcher and carry him into the forest, what so hard about that?"

"Carry him more than ten miles?" said Jake.

Michael didn't look convinced. "What if he gets hurt? And how the hell are we supposed to get him across the river? Sam, are you forgetting about the river?"

Sam considered it. "The river is not too deep in the summer. I'm not saying it'll be easy but it'll be fun."

"How you gonna get him up in the clubhouse. He can't really be a member if he can't get in the clubhouse. I like Randy but I really don't know how we can do it?" Jake popped a wheelie. "I like the idea of the challenge though, that would probably be fun. Just to see the look on Randy's face when he sees the you-know-what would be worth it."

Michael was a little worried about Randy giving up their secret. What they had was no ordinary secret, it was classified information that some would probably kill for. "What if he tells? Then we're screwed. Maybe people wouldn't believe him but it would only take one."

"I gave him a test in May, and as far as I know he told no one." Randy turned his bike to face Michael. "I told him that we had naked photos of Miss Pennington, told him to keep it a secret, and never heard anything else about it. That's how you tell if someone can keep a secret, tell them something so juicy that they have to tell someone else."

Michael nodded. "All right, I'll vote him in. We can give it a try and if it doesn't work it doesn't work. It could be even more dangerous carrying a stretcher. How we gonna run away from a bear?"

Johnny shrugged. "I don't know guys. I abstain. Is that the right word?"

"Well, that's two votes for yes so you guys don't even need my vote

because he's in." Jake stared at Randy. "Call him over. We're gonna need extra food for energy."

Sam shouted a little louder than he had to. "Hey Randy come here!"

Harold took off for home, almost hitting Sam with his bike, accidentally on purpose. He was such a jerk that Sam would like to put him in a catapult and fling him. He could imagine him as a speck flying through the blue sky and hitting with a cartoon splat!

Randy turned and wheeled over, noticing that the guys all have weird looking smiles. His parents were a little late as usual. "Hey guys what's up?"

"Randy, how would you like to join our club?" Sam nudged Jonny.

"I'm not in the mood for jokes guys. I think my parents are getting a divorce. All they do is fight. There's more fighting at my house than in a boxing ring."

The silence was awkward. With something that serious there were no easy solutions. That was adult business. If they did get divorced Randy knew that a lot of things would change because some had already changed. His father was spending too much time in the bar after work, probably spending too much money too. They would make promises they wouldn't keep. Life had thrown a curveball that was impossible to hit, and unlike a real one there was nothing to be appreciated where belligerent parents were concerned. Johnny had gone through it with his parents and he felt sorry for Randy.

Sam popped a wheelie with his bike. "That's too bad but we're not joking. It might take us a week to figure out how to get you up in the clubhouse for the oath but if you want in we'll do it. But you have to be able to keep a big secret."

Randy thought about it and what they were saying sounded impossible to him, but anything would be better than listening to his mother and father scream all summer. "Sure I'm in. But if you guys drop me and I end up in two wheelchairs like Harold said I'm not gonna be happy."

"Yeah," said Jake. "You could have your head in one and your body in the other."

"You really have to be able to keep a secret. Even if you got drunk you still couldn't spill it. And even if they pull your finger nails out, one by one, with blood oozing everywhere and the burning and the pain." Johnny wiggled his eyebrows for emphasis.

"Oh yes I'm gonna get drunk now. If they pull my nails out I'll tell them that the president is white. Holy geeze I can keep a secret already. Have you

guys captured a Russian spy and you're keeping him in a box in the woods or what?"

Sam held his hand out for Randy to slap it. "Meet us at the clubhouse at around six tonight and we'll talk about it."