

misfits inc.
no. 6

hit
and
run

mark
delaney

*For my dear sister Theresa,
because she asked.
With lots of love...*



A FREESTONE PUBLICATION

Published by
PEACHTREE PUBLISHERS LTD.
1700 Chattahoochee Avenue
Atlanta, GA 30318-2112

www.peachtree-online.com

Text © 2002 by Mark Delaney

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means—electronic, mechanical, photocopy, recording, or any other—except for brief quotations in printed reviews, without the prior permission of the publisher.

Book and cover design by Loraine M. Joyner
Book composition by Melanie M. McMahon

Manufactured in the United States of America

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

First Edition

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Delaney, Mark.

Hit and run / Mark Delaney.

p. cm. -- (Misfits, Inc. ; no. 6)

Summary: When his mother, whom he has not seen in years, is falsely accused of a hit-and-run, Mattie finds himself and his fellow Misfits investigating a gang-controlled car-theft ring.

ISBN 1-56145-275-0

[1. Mystery and detective stories.] I. Title.

PZ7.D373185 Hi 2002

[Fic]--dc21

2002004832

E-mail the author at: misfitsink@aol.com

table of contents

prologue	1
chapter one	6
chapter two	28
chapter three	44
chapter four	64
chapter five	82
chapter six	108
chapter seven	128
chapter eight	155
chapter nine	177
chapter ten	192
chapter eleven	211
chapter twelve	229
epilogue	239

prologue

g etting the wheels right was the hardest part. Micah Washington held the model Corvette at the tips of his fingers. He rotated it under the desk lamp, squinting because the hundred-watt bulb was too bright and threw down irritating shadows. He frowned over the assembly directions and felt his tongue start to poke out from between his lips—a little kid’s gesture he often made when he was trying to concentrate.

The wheels. Worry about the wheels. When he first started building model kits, Micah would squeeze out a big dollop of Testor’s Model Cement onto the tips of the axles. But when he popped the wheels on, he found he’d glued the axles right in place. Micah’s first three model cars all had wheels that wouldn’t turn and hard, transparent glue balls at most of the joints.

He heard movement on the linoleum floor and looked up to see his five-year-old sister Tanaya shuffling toward him. “Whatcha doing?” she asked.

Micah squeezed a drop of Testor’s onto a sheet of newspaper. Then he dipped the point of a toothpick into

2 the drop and rubbed just a tiny bit of the glue onto the tip of one axle. “Building a 1961 Corvette convertible,” he said without looking up. “With scoops on the sides.”

“What’s are scoops?”

Micah pointed to a splash of white that started from behind the car’s front wheel and arced across a portion of the door. “This,” he said.

“What’s it do?” Tanaya asked.

Micah paused. He brought the model closer and studied the scoop for several moments. Then he looked at his sister again. “Go away,” he said.

Instead of leaving, Tanaya drew nearer, her small hand reaching into the box of model parts. She pulled out the windshield and propped it in her eye, like an old man wearing a monocle. “Can I put a window in?” she asked.

“Nope.”

She pouted. “How come?”

“Because,” Micah said, “you’ll get glue on your fingers and smudge it all over the window and ruin it. Then you’ll lick the glue off and die.”

Tanaya’s eyes widened. “Moooooommm!”

Micah’s mother, Corie, stood a few feet away in the kitchen, spooning macaroni and cheese into plastic bowls. It wasn’t a kitchen really. The apartment manager called it a *kitchenette*. And the green card table where he sat building his model was a *dinette*. The apartment consisted of one room. His mom could hear every word he and his sister were speaking.

“Micah,” she said, “do not tell your sister she’s going to eat glue and die. Now take your Mustang off the table, so we can eat.”

“Corvette,” Micah muttered to himself. He scooped the unused model pieces back inside their cardboard box and laid the unfinished model on top of them. He then slipped the lid back on the box and paused for a moment to examine the painting on the cover. A red Corvette tore down a city street, light glinting off its windshield and front bumper. The background of the picture was a haze of streaky speed lines.

“Micah!” snapped his mother, and he slid the box under his chair.

He ate dinner in silence. Tanaya chattered about something she had colored that afternoon and scurried from the table to find it. Mom asked Micah a couple of questions about school—*What did you learn in English today? Do you have any homework?* Micah grunted some answers.

He was eating a chocolate chip cookie for dessert when he heard the squeal of rubber burning tracks onto pavement. Micah rushed to the apartment’s only window and stared down into the street. His mother ran to join him, and Tanaya crawled onto a chair so she could see too. A car barreling down Eighth Avenue fishtailed, ran up onto the sidewalk, and plowed into a pair of metal garbage cans. They flew into the air and landed behind the car in a loud clatter and spray of garbage. As he watched, Micah felt his mother’s hand grip his shoulder.

4 Old Mr. Underwood, who let even the little kids call him Joseph, stood on the sidewalk below. Micah watched the old man step back as the car raced toward him—it must have been doing sixty. It jumped the curb again and slammed into Mr. Underwood. Micah watched as though it were a movie playing in slo-mo, his sister’s shrieks an odd sound effect behind him. He felt his mother’s arms wrap around his chest. She tried to draw him away, but at ten he was already nearly as strong as she was, and he’d planted his feet. Mr. Underwood rolled up the hood of the car, then over the roof and trunk, before falling again to the pavement. Micah saw the whole scene frame by frame, a series of still-clicks, and then it all speeded up again. A woman in another apartment screamed. The car sped away.

“Oh, my God,” said Micah’s mom. “Oh, my God.”

Micah felt her arms leave him. He heard her footsteps cover the few feet into the kitchenette and the faint tones as she punched three buttons on the phone. A crowd gathered below, and minutes later an ambulance arrived.

A knock came at the door. When Micah’s mom answered it, two uniformed policemen looked back at her from the hallway. One of them, a woman with brown hair pulled back in a tight bun, asked if they could come in. Had Corie seen the accident? The cop held out a clipboard and wanted Micah’s mom to fill out a statement describing the whole thing. “Can you tell us about the car?” she asked.

Corie Washington shook her head. “It—it all happened so fast. A car—blue, I think—hit that man.”

Micah walked toward his mother, eyeing the two policemen as he did. The woman was scribbling something down in a small spiral notebook. When she finished, she looked up at her partner, a tall, narrow-faced cop whose gleaming uniform cap made him look a little silly, Micah thought—like a kid playing policeman. “We’re not going to get anywhere if no one got a good look at the car,” muttered the woman.

“It was a Chevy Malibu,” Micah said.

Both cops turned and stared at him. “What?” said the man.

“Chevy Malibu,” said Micah. “1982 model. Blue. The license plate number was 1XGP394.”

The woman grunted and half smiled. She wrote the description down in her notebook. “Are you positive?” she asked. “It’s important that you’re absolutely sure.”

Micah nodded.

“What’s your name?” she asked.

“Micah Washington.”

She wrote that down too. “Okay, Micah,” she said. “Thank you. That’s great. Did you know the man who was hurt?” she asked.

Micah nodded again.

“Well,” she said, “we’re going to do our best to find the person who did this to Mr. Underwood. Does that make you feel better?”

Micah stared at her, blinking. “His name was Joseph,” he said.

chapter one

*Wednesday, 7:59 A.M.
Bugle Point High School*

mattie Ramiro's first period class began with the sound of footsteps just outside the door. A knuckle rapped on the window, and when Mrs. Molina opened the door, a hand fed a slip of paper to her through the narrow opening. The teacher glanced at the note, nodding to the faceless messenger. Her eyes then scanned the classroom, settling in a very long gaze...on Mattie Ramiro. She strode down the row where he sat and handed him the note. *Oh great*, Mattie thought. *Merry Christmas in March.*

Mattie had never received a note from the office, other than the time he had tried to fix a drinking fountain and ended up breaking the pipe underneath it, sending a spray of water down the long, linoleum-floored hallway of the D-wing. So now he felt warmth pouring into his face. He was fair-skinned, and so blushed a plum color. Thirty pairs of eyes stared at him.

He looked at the name at the top of the message—

Rebecca Kaidanov. *Rebecca! Maybe this isn't so bad after all*, he decided. And the words, too, seemed innocent.

7

*Need to talk to you and the other Misfits.
Will stop by school at 3:00. Meet you near
the flagpole.*

—Rebecca K.

The words were on a square message slip used by the school's front office: Astrobrite paper, so glaringly pink it almost hurt Mattie's eyes to read it. The words **Important Message** appeared in boldfaced type at the top, and below were spaces for the time and date of the call, the name of the caller, and the caller's number. Below that was a series of check boxes. The Urgent box had a check in it.

Mattie refolded the note and tapped it against his desktop. Rebecca Kaidanov was a reporter for the *Bugle Point Courier*. When Mattie and his friends had uncovered a plot to kill off a rare species of kingfisher, Rebecca had written a story about them—but certain people had wanted her to keep her mouth shut, so she got fairly roughed up in the process. Some time later, Mattie and his friends had learned the truth surrounding a missing protest singer and the bombing that had ended his career. With that story, Mattie recalled, Rebecca had earned her first front-page byline.

“Back to work everybody,” said Mrs. Molina.

Mattie stuffed the message in his pocket and reached

8 for his spiral notebook. Mrs. Molina always began the English 10 class by having students write a short essay response to a question. She had, as usual, scrawled the topic across the dry-erase board. Mattie's stomach sank as he read it: *In the poem "The Road Not Taken," the speaker remarks on how the choices he made in the past have brought him to the life he leads today. Imagine your life as you would like it to be twenty years from now. What choices are you making now that might affect your future? What choices might you later regret?*

Twenty years from now? Mattie thought. *I have enough trouble keeping up with tomorrow's homework assignments.* Sighing, he reached for a pen. First off, he imagined a world in which there were no Robert Frost poems. However, knowing Mrs. Molina, he would have to move past that point pretty quickly. *Twenty years from now,* he scribbled, *I will single-handedly save the planet Earth from an alien invasion. I will receive the Nobel Prize for discovering a cure for acne. I will end world hunger by making the school open up an extra snack line in the cafeteria...*

A few moments later the classroom door creaked open, and a girl with short, spiky blond hair strode into the room. She said nothing, just signed the tardy sheet at Mrs. Molina's desk and slid into her seat. The girl—her name was Heather something—dropped her backpack to the floor with a tremendous *thunk*, then folded her arms in front of her and stared at the board sullenly.

After Mrs. Molina had collected the essays, she rubbed her hands together briskly. "Today, class," she boomed,

“we will begin the Shakespeare projects I discussed earlier in the week.” She handed the first person in each row a stack of sheets describing the assignment. Mattie took one and glanced at it as he passed the remainder of the stack to the classmate behind him.

The assignment was pretty much what he expected. Mrs. Molina grouped students in twos and asked each pair to paraphrase a scene from *The Tragedy of Julius Caesar*. She began—her loud voice occasionally rattling the door—to call out the pairs she had assigned. “Amy Attleberry and Philip Manetti...Jeremy Yuan and Stephen McKnight...Mattie Ramiro and Heather Connelly...”

Mattie didn’t hear the rest. His face warmed, and a tingling started in his shoulders and traced its way to the tips of his fingers. Heather Connelly. That was the girl’s name. *Greeaaaat*, he thought. Here they were starting one of most heavily weighted assignments of the semester, and he just got paired with a student who missed class practically every other day. Mattie couldn’t recall her ever speaking in class, except for a few times at the very beginning of the semester when she responded to the roll call too softly, and Mrs. Molina had to repeat her name. He looked across the room. The girl was slumped over with her face buried in her hands. She lifted her head and, without so much as a glance at Mattie, scooped up her books and shot past him, then ran out the classroom door.

Mrs. Molina strode to the door and yanked it open. When she closed it behind her, she closed it quietly. Mrs.

10 Molina had a fondness for loud noises. When she closed the door gently, you knew she was angry.

Mattie felt each second tick by. *Mrs. Molina pairs Heather with me... and then the girl walks out of the classroom?* He tapped his knuckles against the top of his desk. He took out his pen—four buttons, one for each color—and disassembled it, leaving the pieces scattered on his desktop. Finally, having run out of distractions, he threw up his hands and grinned at the class. “That’s right, folks,” he said. His voice tore right through the uncomfortable silence. “She didn’t wanna work with me, so she walked right out. Bet we’ll all be talking about that for the rest of the semester, don’tcha think?” He held an imaginary microphone, faking an announcer’s voice. “What are you gonna do now, Mattie?” Then, in his own voice: “I’m going to Disneyland!” He cupped his hands and hissed into them. It sounded like a vast audience applauding.

“Perfect pair,” someone whispered. “Gone and goner.” Several kids laughed.

Moments later the teacher opened the door again and guided Heather back into the room. The girl, her eyes red, took the desk next to Mattie. Mrs. Molina lowered her gaze and let it pan, radarlike, across the classroom. “Get to work, everybody,” she said.

Heather scooted her desk closer. “Sorry,” she said. “It wasn’t about you. I’m—I’m just not having a good day.” She sniffled and ran a finger underneath her nose. Then she averted her eyes from Mattie and reached for her copy of the handout. “So what’s this about?”

Mattie had had one class with her in middle school. She had been cute, bright, always answering questions. Yet now, sophomore year in high school, Heather's hair and clothing were one step above a total mess. Her face was full and round. She wore baggy jeans, the ends torn and frayed because they were too long and she'd been walking on them. Her sweatshirt was huge, wrinkled, and fell almost to her knees. A yellow stain marked the front of it. She was sickly pale. The freckles across her nose were more noticeable than he remembered. Her skin had broken out.

"What are you staring at?" she demanded, finally looking at him.

"Let's just get this done," muttered Mattie.

According to the handout, they had to find a scene in *Julius Caesar*, put it in their own words, and memorize it. Then they had to perform it in front of the class.

"How about the scene with Caesar and Calpurnia?" Mattie suggested. "You know, when she tells him about her nightmare?"

Heather wasn't even on the right page in the text. She flipped the pages so that they crackled, stopping when she reached the Shakespeare unit. She said nothing about Mattie's idea.

"...Or not," said Mattie.

While the rest of the class chattered excitedly, buzzing with ideas, Mattie struggled with his stony partner. He suggested two more scenes. She shrugged. He suggested *she* could pick the scene. He fidgeted, his foot tapping angrily in the silence. After a while, he could no longer

stand to just sit there. He reached for the pieces of his pen and reassembled them. Then, holding it between thumb and forefinger, he made the pen vanish. A moment later it reappeared. Smiling, he did the trick over and over, staring vaguely as the pen popped into his hands, popped out, and popped in again. Finally, it must have reappeared one too many times. Heather reached over and snatched it away.

“Enough,” she said. “I’ve heard about you. Next thing it’ll be card tricks, and I’m really not in the mood.”

He considered that a moment. “Can I get my pen back?”

“Whatever,” she said in a dull voice. *Either she’s tired, Mattie thought, or just really unhappy.* She gave him the pen and sniffled. Mattie ran his suggestions by her again, and after a moment’s conversation, they turned to the scene where Brutus talks to his wife, Portia. Miraculously, over the next twenty minutes, they managed to compose a short scene. It was one of those lame efforts calculated to earn a C, Mattie knew, but he figured that a B or an A required more energy and will than Heather possessed. Then Heather surprised him: “Portia’s crazy,” she said. “She jabs a knife into her leg to make a point to her husband. I like that.”

Well, Mattie thought, that’s a contribution.

With three minutes left in the period, Mattie could feel the noise level in the room ratcheting up. The room felt rowdy, freer as students finished their work and began aimlessly chatting. Mattie scooted his desk back into its row, zipped his text and his notebook into his backpack,

and once again averted his eyes from Heather. He heard her backpack *thunk* against the desktop, heard the zipper buzz.

“I remember you from middle school,” Mattie blurted. “You used to smile a lot.” The words came out so quickly, Mattie was unable to stop them. His eyes met Heather’s.

“What?” she asked. The single word was harsh and clipped. She didn’t look at him, only stuffed her books into the bag.

Now that he had gotten the first words out, he couldn’t stop himself. “You answered questions in class all the time. You did really well. I didn’t see your grade on our last test, but I could see the red ink all over it even from here.” He knew he was being rude, but he pressed on. “What happened?”

Heather paused. For the first time Mattie had the sense she was really looking at him. Her eyebrows furrowed, but she was smiling too, as though she were both amazed and charmed by the fact that Mattie had asked such a stupid question. “You mean you don’t know?” she asked.

Mattie shook his head.

Heather stood and slung her backpack over her shoulder. “I had a kid is what happened,” she said.

Then the bell rang and she was gone.



8:52 A.M.

Like lurching zombies in some cheesy horror movie, one very large boy appeared from behind a bank of lockers,

and another one came from a classroom that lay just ahead. The zombies were wearing Abercrombie & Fitch khakis and letterman jackets.

Football players.

When Peter Braddock saw them, he stopped. They were the biggest players on the team. Peter sensed instantly the makings of an ambush, an attempt to catch him by surprise—though Peter was never very surprised when others ganged up on him.

Students in the crowded hallway pushed past the group, slamming locker doors, laughing, chattering loudly with friends. Anything that happened in the next few moments would be lost amid the commotion. “Smart,” Peter said. “The busiest hallway in school.” People jostled to get through to their classes. Peter couldn’t run away even if he wanted to.

As the football players drew closer, Peter struggled to remember their names but couldn’t. He didn’t hang out with athletes much, and with their hair shaved down to almost nothing—something all the varsity players did—he had a difficult time latching onto ways to distinguish them. “We just want to have a little conversation,” one said, grinning.

Peter forced himself to remain calm. His father was a special agent for the FBI, and Peter had long ago learned—or perhaps he had been born with—his father’s abilities to observe and deduce. His eyes scanned the football players: He saw greenish ink lines on one boy’s wrist, poking out from the sleeve of a jacket. A

tattoo, Peter concluded. *A dinosaur? No, a dragon.* He noted a tiny hole in the guy's left nostril, surrounded by reddened skin. The boy had removed his nose ring so he wouldn't violate the school dress-code policy. The other one shifted his weight nervously from one foot to the other. A white plastic object poked out of his pocket. *An inhaler*, mused Peter. *Either this one's asthmatic, or he has really bad allergies.* "You know," the one with the tattoo said, stepping closer, "nobody likes a guy who goes out of his way to get someone in trouble."

Peter held his hands up, palms out. "Hey," he said, "if you're here to warn me that you're going to beat the snot out of me later, fine—but at least get your facts straight. I did *not* tell on Jeremy Roulston."

"Did you know Roulston is an all-state player who happens to be averaging twelve catches, almost two hundred and forty yards, and two touchdowns every game?" the boy demanded.

"He was my chemistry lab partner," Peter replied. "And he was letting me do all the work while he sat back and did nothing."

The guy doing all the talking drew nose to nose with Peter. "So you whined to the teacher."

Peter stepped back to put a little space between him and the football player. He had an irrational urge to laugh in the guy's face but bit the inside of his cheek to stop himself. "Listen," he said. "I didn't say a word about Jeremy. All I did was ask if I could work on the lab by myself, and the teacher said yes."

“Which left Jeremy without a lab partner,” said the guy.

“And let me guess,” said Peter. “He never did the lab.”

The football players closed in on Peter. A few students must have noted their threatening posture, because several stopped talking and glanced at the scene as they passed.

“He got a D on his progress report,” said the other guy, finally deciding to join in. He took out his inhaler, popped off the cap, and sprayed a dose of medicine into his mouth. Peter could smell it when the boy spoke. “Which meant that his grades dropped below a C average.”

“Right,” said Peter. “And so he didn’t meet the eligibility requirements.”

League rules required athletes to maintain a C average and have no failing grades. The principal, Mr. Steadham, had expanded that policy so that it applied to school-wide activities as well—from band to theater arts. Everyone knew the rule. “So,” Peter went on, “Roulston doesn’t get to play until next grading period. That’s *my* fault?”

The guy with the tattoo whipped off his jacket and let it drop to the floor, revealing the full dragon, which ran from his elbow to the strap of his wristwatch. Peter thought the whole tough guy display was pretty pathetic. At the same time, it sent a blast of adrenaline down Peter’s spine and out to the tips of his fingers. Any guy stupid enough to think that throwing his jacket on the ground and showing off a tattoo made him look tough was also stupid enough to start throwing punches right in the hallway at school. Peter took another step back. A

pair of hands hit his shoulder blades and shoved him forward again.

Then a figure appeared alongside Peter—in fact, it loomed over him. Of course, he knew who it was even before he turned and saw the clarinet case. The tingling Peter felt in his arms fizzled, like sparks from an electrical fire spitting one last time before dying out.

Jake Armstrong grinned. “Hey, Peter,” he said. He nodded a careful greeting to each of the football players. “Will...” Then, before addressing the other football player, the one with the tattoo, Jake bent down and picked the jacket up off the floor. His tone went icy. “And Mike Gilbert. How’s it going, Mike?” He tossed the jacket so that it slapped sharply into the boy’s stomach. “I see you’re on varsity again. Congratulations.”

No one spoke. Jake was six foot two and a powerful two hundred pounds. Will threw a glance at the one named Mike Gilbert. Gilbert, apparently less certain now about the odds in this fight, tugged his jacket back on and shook his head. “You know,” he said, “I get so sick of you *smacks*.”

Peter stiffened. “Smack” was a word for any student for whom good grades and studying came easily. Last year someone had soaped it across the windshield of his prized ’67 VW convertible.

Gilbert sneered at Peter. “You think you’re so smart. Like you’re so much better than the rest of us.”

Peter tapped his finger against his chin, looking at each of the football players in turn. “A football field,” he said,

18 “is a hundred yards long, but how many yards wide is it?”

“Fifty,” said Gilbert. “Everyone knows that.”

“Fifty-three and one-third,” corrected Peter. “One hundred and sixty feet. Our quarterback, Barry Concannon, can throw a football sixty yards, but he keeps under-throwing Roulston on that forty-yard post pattern your coach likes to call on third and long. Know why?”

Neither of the football players spoke. Last week, Peter knew, their coach had called this very play with seconds left in the game. Roulston had been wide open, only to have the pass bounce off the back of his right knee.

“It’s because Barry is left-handed.” Peter went on. “He runs to his left just before throwing, and Roulston’s pattern takes him almost to the far side of the field. To gain forty yards, Barry has to throw the length of the *diagonal* from corner to corner, which is—” Peter did some quick calculations in his head. *The square of the hypotenuse is equal to the sum of the square...* “—sixty-six and two-thirds yards. Tell Concannon not to peel to his left, and tell Roulston to shorten the pattern a bit, and you’ll win more games.”

“You don’t know football,” spat Gilbert.

Peter shrugged. “This is geometry.”

The two players huddled together. Will pulled a folded sheet of paper from his pocket and spread it out on the floor. “See?” he said. He started drawing Xs and Os, followed by a long angled line to indicate Jeremy Roulston’s failing post pattern. But Mike Gilbert remained

unmoved. He stood to one side, glaring at Peter and fiddling with the zipper on his jacket.

“Come on,” Peter said to Jake. “Let’s go.”

They headed down the hall toward Peter’s locker. When Peter shifted his heavy backpack from one shoulder to the other, he couldn’t help noticing that, while his backpack bulged with a nine-hundred-page literature text, a Warriner’s grammar book, a Permabound copy of *The Scarlet Letter*, and three spiral notebooks, Jake carried only a six-pound clarinet case.

As they made their way through the crowded hallway, neither of them spoke. But Jake wore an odd half-smile and kept stealing glances at Peter, which Peter found inordinately annoying.

“Okay...” said Peter. He had known it was coming. It was just a matter of which of his friends decided to tease him first.

“So you *have* heard.”

“Byte told me.”

“Ah...” said Jake. He paused. “Well then, I’m surprised you’re not talking about it, since she *was*...you know—”

“Change the subject,” said Peter.

“Sure,” said Jake. More silence, then: “I mean, I’m just surprised—”

“Is this a new subject?”

“No.”

“Then I’m not talking.”

Peter spun the dial on his locker.

“She likes you,” said Jake.

“Oh, do you *think?*” Peter yanked on his locker handle. “Ow!”

Peter’s thumbnail had caught on the sharp edge of the handle. He shook the hand, and then stuck his thumb in his mouth. Jake started to speak again, but Peter held up his free hand, silencing him.

It took a moment or two for Peter to dump his English books and exchange them for trig and Survey of American History. As he was sliding the trig book into his backpack, he heard a light humming noise come up from behind him. The hallway had thinned out as students made their way to class, but a few students remained, and Peter heard them laughing. He turned to find a ten-inch-long radio-controlled car racing toward him. It buzzed as it approached, curving to make its way around moving students, and stopped three inches in front of his shoes. A lever fell forward, and the car deposited two folded slips of paper at Peter’s feet. Each slip bore an emblem—a circle intersecting a square. It had been Peter’s design, the two shapes suggesting a round hole and square peg, two things that could never fit together. It had become the symbol for Misfits, Inc., the group he had formed with his friends. Peter picked up the notes, handing one to Jake. The car, its mission accomplished, executed a perfect Y-turn and sped off, no doubt with a note for the group’s remaining member.

“It’s from Mattie,” said Peter.

Jake unfolded his note. “How in the world did you guess?” he asked.

“He wants us to meet him at the flagpole after school. Doesn’t say why.”

He folded the note back up and stuck it in his pocket. The two headed off to their next classes.

“Getting back to our first subject—” said Jake.

“I’m not listening,” said Peter.

“She’s gonna get you, you know.”



Fifth period

Eugenia “Byte” Salzman pursed her lips and made a sound like that of air flubbing out of the end of a balloon. Of all the thoughts that could be occupying her mind, trigonometry was at the bottom of the list. She glanced around the room. Other students seemed to have little trouble concentrating. Some stared down with their noses inches from their desktops, pencils scritch across graph paper. Others fussed over calculators with tiny graphing screens. Sighing, Byte could only stare helplessly at her laptop monitor, which glowed with her lame attempt at wrestling with trigonometric identities. She rarely used paper or a calculator. Byte did all her schoolwork on her laptop, and the device never left her side. The problem staring up at her involved calculating the values of various angles within a group of oddly intersecting triangles. Worse, the shape of the triangles changed depending on how she plotted them. Sometimes they were sharp and lean, almost

22 spikes, and under other values they were broad pyramids. *Augh!*

Byte closed out her trig program and decided she'd finish the work that night.

Just to keep her mind empty Byte began doodling with her computer's draw function. She colored the bottom half of her screen forest green. A field of grass, she supposed. The top half of her screen she filled with blue. Probably a sky.

The reason she couldn't concentrate, she knew, was Jake Armstrong.

Byte tried to shut out the image of Jake that came to her mind, but she couldn't. For months Byte had been doing all she could to send the right messages—the smiles, the warm hellos, the supportive pats on the arm, the *I'm-soooo-glad-you-called* brightness on the telephone. She had even sat in Jake's garage while he worked on his car, downloading directions for replacing a head gasket. But she finally had to face facts. Jake was a lug, as dense as they came. Worse, he was as shy with girls as she was with guys.

Within the green field, Byte drew a vertical line that had a slight curve to it. She topped the line with a small circle, which she filled in with yellow. Then she absently drew another line that curled outward from the circle and swept back. This curved line formed an ellipse, which she then filled in with white. She drew another, similar ellipse, and another, until her drawing took on the appearance of something familiar. Byte smiled to herself. *It's a daisy.*

Even if Jake *were* interested in her, Byte thought—and so far he had given her no reason to think he was—he likely wouldn't say anything.

She clicked on one of the daisy's petals with her mouse and dragged it away so that it lay by itself in the green field.

Byte realized, too, that her problem with Jake might have a deeper complication. That complication was Peter Braddock. Just as Byte had been sending messages to Jake about her feelings, Peter had been sending some messages of his own. To her. Byte frowned at this thought. She dragged another petal away and left it near the other one.

She liked Peter. She really did. He was a friend. A *close* friend. She wouldn't dream of hurting him. What if...what if he told her straight out how he felt? Byte felt a slight twinge of panic, then dismissed the thought. She had to be wrong. She wasn't reading Peter correctly; that had to be it. And when he smiled at her goofily, or when his hand accidentally brushed hers then shot away—well, there just had to be another explanation. With that thought, Byte glanced once again at her computerized doodle. She banished three more of the petals.

She looked at the last remaining petal, finally bored with her game, and dragged it away too. The yellow center of the now-shorn daisy stared back at her—a jaundiced eye, watching.

Byte heard snickering behind her. She spun around and saw Aimee Louvier—a girl with black lipstick, black nail polish, heavy black eyeliner, and ghostly pale skin—

24 staring at her. Aimee's shaggy black hair tumbled to her waist.

"He loves you," said Aimee.

"Huh?" said Byte. Her cheeks tingled. She would have put on a mask of indignation—*What do you mean? I don't know what you're talking about!*—but apparently the cat was not going back into that particular bag. How had Aimee known?

The Goth-queen shrugged. She pointed at the digital daisy petals lying in the digital grass. "I don't know who it is, but he loves you. I counted, and Mother Nature never lies."

Byte spun back around and stared at her computer screen. She thought of slamming down the monitor, deleting the evidence, but she was too late to hide anything from Aimee Louvier. To the witch-girl, the daisy petals had spoken.



When the final bell of the day rang, Byte hauled herself from her seat, nearly staggering under the combined weight of her backpack and computer bag. She forced herself through the crowded hallway, wincing at the metallic slam of a locker door. Her head ached. Her wire-framed granny glasses were dirty and blurred her vision. When a passing student—who did not so much as utter an "excuse me"—bumped into her, the glasses slipped to the end of her nose. Byte muttered under her breath and crinkled her nose to set them straight.

That's when a radio-controlled car pulled up and

parked at her ankles. Its front end spat out a note bearing a Misfits, Inc. emblem. A little plastic driver raised his arm in a little plastic wave. A sound chip said “Hel-lo, Byte,” in Mattie Ramiro’s voice. Then the car, humming as it shifted into reverse, shot back in the direction from which it had come.

Byte snatched the note from her shoe top, jammed the trig book in her locker, and slammed shut the locker door.

She read the note and, five minutes later, found the others waiting for her in the parking lot. Peter, Jake, and Mattie stood next to a pinkish-purplish Geo Tracker. Standing beside the Tracker was a woman with coarse, dark hair and striking blue eyes. *Rebecca!* Byte waved at the group and began to walk faster, pressing her hand against her computer bag to keep it from slapping against her hip.

“Hello, Byte,” said the reporter.

Byte grinned at the way the woman clicked off the hard *T* in her name. Rebecca had come to the United States as a child from her home in the old Soviet Union, and traces of her Russian accent lingered in her speech.

“What have I missed?” asked Byte.

“We’ve been *waiting* for you,” said Peter. “Putting off the good part because you were late.” He smiled broadly at Rebecca. “Now we can stop talking about the weather, right?”

“Hey,” said Byte, “I’d have gotten here sooner if a certain little *bug*—” Here she glared at Mattie. “had sent a note to me earlier. What happened, Mattie?”

Mattie shrugged. “I was busy, okay? I promise same-day service. You want something better, call FedEx.”

Byte smacked him on the shoulder. “Anyway. What brings you out here, Rebecca?” she asked.

“Business for Misfits, Inc.,” Rebecca replied. The reporter smiled at all of them, but the smile flattened a bit, Byte thought, when it turned to Mattie. “Someone needs your help.”

“Who?” asked Jake.

“Well, this is really awkward.” Staring off in the distance—and clearly refusing to meet their eyes—Rebecca took a deep breath. “She made me promise not to tell.”

Peter, Byte could see, was intrigued. He was smiling at the reporter, his eyes narrowing, searching for clues in her expression. “Is it someone we know?” he asked.

No answer.

“Rebecca,” said Jake. “Come on, tell us *something*.”

Peter was nodding, gathering his thoughts. “Whatever this is about,” he announced, “my guess is that it affects one of us personally. A stranger might have asked to remain ‘anonymous,’ but Rebecca used the word ‘promise.’ A promise is intimate, it’s personal.” He took a moment, apparently assessing his logic and finding it satisfactory. “Okay, I’m in,” he said. “If the others are.”

“I’m in,” said Mattie.

Jake and Byte nodded as well.

“Then let’s go,” said Rebecca. “This person needs help as soon as possible. I can take you right now.”

Byte's hand flew to her computer bag. "Oh, but I'll have to go back inside and send an Instant Message to my mom," she said, "to let her know I'll be late."

"Yeah," said Peter, "and the rest of us Neanderthals will have to use the pay phone. We'll be back in a few minutes." As they headed toward the school building, Mattie nudged Peter's elbow. Byte could hear the two whisper. "Hey, it's Thursday," Mattie said. "Is your mom making pork chops for dinner?"

"I don't know, Mattie," said Peter.

"What do you mean?" Mattie cried, the whispering forgotten. "She always makes pork chops on Thursday. The ones with the spicy-crumby stuff on them. It's tradition. She makes chops, I mooch."

They returned several minutes later. Rebecca opened the door to her Tracker and threw the seatback forward. "I think we can all fit, if we squeeze in," she said. Peter, Byte, and Mattie clambered into the back seat. Jake, because of his size, rode shotgun in the front.

"So where are we going?" Peter asked.

The car's engine roared to life. Byte heard the parking brake *cha-chunk* as the reporter released it.

"The county jail," Rebecca said.