

RILEY MACK STIRS UP MORE TROUBLE

by Chris Grabenstein

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Prologue

Savannah Munholland sat staring at the extremely strange message her fellow fifth-grader Jamal Wilson had handed her right before she stepped into the room to serve her first-ever detention:

“If anyone asks, you wrote the letter.”

She had no idea what it meant.

“Ms. Munholland?” snapped Mr. Ball, the assistant principal.

“What are you reading?”

“Nothing, sir.”

“Do you have homework?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Then do it!

“But, sir, I have to go home. I can’t be here.”

The assistant principal rubbed his thumb in tiny circles over his index finger. “Do you know what this is, Ms. Munholland?”

“No, sir.”

“The smallest record player in the world playing ‘My Heart Bleeds for You.’”

“But, my mom’s at work, sir. I need to be at the house when my little sister comes home from school...”

“Maybe you should’ve thought about your family responsibilities before you wore that shirt to school.”

Savannah looked down at her olive drab T-shirt. It had “Well Behaved Women Rarely Make History” silk-screened across the front.

“My mom gave me this. She loves history. She’s a librarian.”

“Really? Then tell her to head over to the reference section and look up ‘school dress code.’ Fairview Middle will not tolerate rabble-rousing slogans plastered across T-shirts. No, sir. Not on my watch!”

Savannah slumped down in her seat. Her poor sister. Hailey was only in the third grade and if nobody was home when she got off the bus...

Suddenly, the overhead intercom speaker buzzed to life.

“Mr. Ball?”

“Yes, Mrs. James? What is it?”

“Sorry to bother you sir, but, well, Principal Fowler just received a very interesting telephone call.”

“What?”

“It was from that TV Show!” The school secretary sounded super thrilled. “America’s Most Talented Teachers.”

Suddenly, the classroom door swung open to reveal Hubert Montgomery (a seventh grader so huge, he looked like he had seven other seventh graders stuffed inside him).

“Wow. Did somebody just mention ‘America’s Most Talented Teachers?’ That’s my favorite. TV show!”

“Mr. Montgomery?”

“Yes, Mr. Ball?”

“Are you serving detention this afternoon?”

“No, sir,” the big bear said sheepishly. “I was just out here. At my locker. And I heard Mrs. James mention my all-time favorite. TV talent show.”

Assistant Principal Ball ripped an orange detention slip off a thick pad on his desk. “Would you like to join us today?”

“No, thank you, sir. Sorry, sir.”

Montgomery backed out of the room and shut the door.

“Mr. Ball?” said the voice through the intercom speaker. “‘America’s Most Talented Teachers’ is *the* top-rated show on Disney’s Education Channel!”

“Really? Then why haven’t I ever heard of it?”

“Well, they’ve certainly heard of you!”

“What?”

“They want to put you on the show as a contestant. You could win fifty thousand dollars plus new uniforms for the band!”

Mr. Ball tugged at his tie and sort of smiled. “Really?” All of a sudden, he didn’t sound so grouchy. “Free band uniforms?”

“Yes, sir. I hope you don’t mind, but I gave the producer -- a young lady with a British accent named Abigail Rose Painter -- your cell phone number.”

Just then, a cell phone blared the theme song from “Dancing With The Stars.”

“Oh, I’ll bet that’s her!” said Mrs. James excitedly.

Mr. Ball unclipped his BlackBerry from its belt holster. He quickly studied the caller ID screen and cleared his throat.

“Hello, Ms. Painter, this is assistant principal Albert Ball at Fairview Middle School. How may I be of assistance?”

Savannah and the other kids in detention hall sat in stunned silence while Mr. Ball chatted with the television producer.

“Uhm-hmm. I see. Fifty thousand dollars, eh? *And* band uniforms? Well, I’m honored. If you don’t mind me asking, how did you folks hear about me? Really? Is that so?”

Suddenly, Mr. Ball was staring at Savannah.

And, he was smiling!

“Perhaps she heard me sing at last winter’s Barbershop Quartet event out at the mall. Hmm? The finals are in Hollywood? Really?”

Now Mr. Ball was actually chuckling. “Well, no, Ms. Painter -- I’ve never flown *anywhere* first class. Uhm-hmm. Thank you. You, too.”

Mr. Ball slid his BlackBerry back into its belt clip and motioned for Savannah to come join him up at his desk.

“Yes, Mr. Ball?” she said in a nervous whisper.

“Did you really write a letter to the folks at ‘America’s Most Talented Teachers?’”

Savannah remembered the strange note Jamal Wilson had handed her.

“Yes, sir. I wrote the letter.”

“They might want you to be on the show, too.”

“Really?”

“To answer a few questions. About me and my singing, of course.”

Mr. Ball started humming happily and opened his detention ledger. “Now then, seeing how this is your first offense and weighing the extra credit you should have earned by engaging in this commendable extracurricular activity with the television people, I hereby commute your sentence to time served.”

Savannah glanced up at the clock. She’d only been in detention hall for five minutes.

“You are free to go,” said Mr. Ball, grandly gesturing toward the door. “I hope, when talking to the folks at ‘America’s Most Talented Teachers,’ you will remember how I always strive to find the perfect harmony between justice and mercy.”

“Yes, sir.”

Savannah hurried out the door and into the hall.

That’s when she saw Briana Bloomfield, the star of just about every play or musical at the middle school, tucking the same kind of push-button microphone the principal used in the office to make announcements into her backpack. Meanwhile Jake Lowenstein, another seventh grader and total techno geek, sat on Hubert Montgomery’s

gigantic shoulders so he could fiddle with some brightly colored wires connected to a black box under a popped-up ceiling panel.

“Assistant Principal Ball?” Briana said with a very thick, very warbly British Accent into her cell phone. “Abigail Rose Painter. Sorry to bother you again, sir, but Chip Dale, he’s the star of our show, Chip would *love* to chat with you, one-on-one. Perhaps sample a bit of your singing?”

Jamal Wilson came bopping up the hall.

“Okay, Savannah,” he whispered. “Briana will keep Mr. Ball tied up for a few more minutes. You need grab your bike and hurry home.” He took her by the elbow and led her toward the front of the school. “Your little sister Hailey will be the last one dropped off today.”

“H-h-how...”

“Seems the bus driver owes Riley Mack a favor. Something to do with stopping kids from spitballing her in the back of her head.”

“Did Riley...?”

“Yep. He orchestrated this whole operation. I, of course, provided valuable assistance. Even came up with the idea for the TV show. Mr. Ball loves to sing in the faculty bathroom when he thinks no one is listening.”

Savannah looked over her shoulder and saw Jake Lowenstein and Hubert Montgomery packing up the last of their gear. Briana was still on her cell.

“Al?” she said into her phone, sounding a lot like Ryan Seacrest. “This is Chip Dale. I’d *love* to hear you sing something, buddy.”

Savannah realized that even the voice of Mrs. James, the school secretary on the intercom, had really been Briana Bloomfield!

Inside the classroom, Mr. Ball started bellowing something about “Sweet Adeline, My Adeline” and how at night “For you I pine.” He was singing so loudly, Savannah could hear him all the way up the corridor to the front door.

When she and Jamal stepped outside, Riley Mack -- his red hair blazing in the sunshine, his arms folded casually across his chest -- was leaning up against the bicycle rack waiting for them.

“You better head home,” he said. “Hailey will be there soon.”

“Thank you guys so much!” gushed Savannah.

Riley shrugged nonchalantly. “We saw a wrong and tried to right it. It’s what we do.”

“And, in my humble opinion,” added Jamal, “we do it better than anyone in the world. Except maybe those guys from Mission Impossible. They’re pretty good, too.”

Riley Mack's extraordinarily awesome talents weren't the kind he could showcase on TV or at a school talent show.

If he did, he might end up in detention hall.

For life.

But a talent show was why Riley and his mom were eating Sunday brunch at Fairview's hoity toity Brookhaven Country Club.

Brunch, Riley had discovered, was a meal halfway between breakfast and lunch. If you ate between lunch and dinner, he figured they called it Dunch. Or Linner.

"How are your Eggs Benedict?" asked Mr. Paxton, the country club president and the guy who had invited Riley and his mom to the stuffy old mansion where men wore ties and blazers to breakfast.

"Delicious," said Riley's mother.

Riley had ordered chicken fingers and French fries off the "Little Putters" kids menu, even though he was twelve. He just couldn't stand the sight of Eggs Benedict: wobbly poached eggs plopped on top of an English muffin, then smothered in yellow gunk that made it look like the cook had blown a nose full of boogers all over your breakfast.

"Is this your first visit to Brookhaven, Mrs. Mack?" asked Mr. Paxton, who sounded even snottier than the eggs looked.

"Yes," his mother answered. "We've driven past, of course, but we've never actually been inside before. Everything is so beautiful!"

The country club dining room looked like the kind of place a mom would want to be taken on Mother's Day. Real wooden chairs, not scooped-out plastic seats like at Burger King. Tablecloths. Oil paintings of fox hunts on the walls. With his shaggy red hair the color of fox fur, Riley always rooted for the hunted to outfox the hunters, horses, and hounds.

"Well, as I've said, I hope you'll come back in two weeks to help us judge the talent competition," said Mr. Paxton. "It'll be part of our Grand Re-Opening Gala when we finish renovating all the greens and fairways."

Totally bored, Riley glanced out the big bay window and watched a mustard-yellow backhoe -- half trench-digger and half bulldozer -- rumble across a rolling lawn he wouldn't want to mow. It would take, like, a week. Maybe a month.

“In thirteen days, the golf course will re-open,” Mr. Paxton droned on, “and that Saturday night, we’ll be hosting the year’s biggest banquet followed by the annual All School All Star Talent finals.”

“Busy Saturday.”

“*Nyes*. We hope to raise a good deal of money so we can send golf balls to our brave men and women serving overseas.”

“Excuse me?” said Riley’s mom.

“We’re calling our gala celebration ‘Greens for The Army Green.’ Tickets to the banquet and show will cost five hundred dollars a piece.”

Riley nearly whistled but he didn’t want to earn an under-the-table shin-kick from his mom.

“All proceeds will go toward sending golf equipment overseas to Afghanistan, which, if you ask me, is just one giant sand trap.”

That was Mr. Paxton trying to make a joke.

“Um, my husband is serving over in Afghanistan.”

“*Nyes*. So I heard. Chick Chambliss, head of country club security, has told me all about Colonel Richard Mack.”

Riley’s mom, who was decked out in her flowery Sunday-best dress, shot Riley a grin and a wink.

Mr. Paxton didn’t realize that Chick Chambliss was Riley’s Godfather #24. When Riley was born, his dad asked every guy in his unit to stand up for his son at the baptism, which took place at the base chapel over in Germany.

“I understand your husband is a decorated war hero?” said Mr. Paxton.

“He’s won a few medals,” said Riley, proudly.

“Well, Mrs. Mack, as I’ve said, I’d love for you and your son to be my guests at the banquet and for you to be one of the celebrity judges for the talent competition.”

“But, Mr. Paxton, I’m not a celebrity.”

“Poppycock. You’re the wife of a war hero.”

“Well, I’m not sure I...”

Mr. Paxton reached into his sport jacket and pulled out a thick envelope.

“To help you say yes, the Brookhaven Women’s Auxiliary has put together a little package. There are coupons in here for hair styling and a ‘mani-pedi,’ plus a one-thousand-dollar gift certificate from the Posh & Panache Dress Boutique on Main Street.”

“Wow,” said Riley. “Awesome swag, mom.”

“But, Mr. Paxton, I’m still not sure I’m qualified to judge talent...”

“Just follow Tony Peroni’s lead.”

“The wedding singer?”

“*Nyes*. He handles the preliminary rounds at the local schools.”

“He’s coming to Fairview Middle tomorrow,” added Riley.

“Are you in the contest?” his mom asked.

“No way. But Briana is.”

“Oh,” said his mom, looking worried. “Is that okay? Briana Bloomfield is a family friend.”

“That’s fine,” said Mr. Paxton, flashing his toothy smile. “Ms. Bloomfield may not make it to the finals.”

“Oh, she will,” said Riley. “She’s wicked talented.”

“Is that so? Well, it won’t really matter if your young friend is one of the contestants, Mrs. Mack. The show’s all done in good fun.”

“Um, I thought the winner got, like, a gianormous college scholarship,” said Riley, because Briana had told him she “really, really” needed to make it to the finals and win because her earthy-crunchy parents weren’t what anybody would call rich. Without the All School All Star Talent Scholarship (and a few others), no way was Briana Bloomfield ever going to college.

“*Nyes*. That’s right. I believe there’s a ten thousand dollar grand prize.”

This time, Riley did whistle.

He also felt his cell phone vibrating in his pocket.

“Well, Mr. Paxton, I’d be honored...”

While his mom and Mr. Paxton went over the details of her judge duties, Riley slipped his smartphone out of his pocket and checked the text that had just come in from Briana Bloomfield.

EMERGENCY! S.P. PLANNING TALENT SHOW SABOTAGE!!!

Riley quickly tapped out a reply.

P.P. 2 P.M. ROUND UP THE GANG.

P.P. was short for the Pizza Palace, the spot on Main Street where Riley and his crew always met to strategize.

S.P. was Briana’s abbreviation for Sara Paxton -- the meanest girl to ever attend Fairview Middle School.

Sara was also the daughter of the Country Club president -- the man sitting across the table from Riley eating booger-covered eggs.

A little before 2 p.m., Riley and his good friend Mongo biked over to Main Street to meet up with Briana, Jake, and Jamal -- Riley's whole crew -- at The Pizza Palace.

Mongo's real name was Hubert Montgomery, but he was so gigantic (bigger and stronger than any seventh grader at any middle school anywhere in the known universe) everybody called him "Humongo" or Mongo for short. In fact, he was so huge, when he pedaled his bike, his knees came up to his chin.

"So what's the emergency again, Riley?"

Mongo also had trouble remembering stuff.

"Briana has uncovered a plot by Sara Paxton and her gal pals to sabotage their competitors at the school talent show tomorrow."

"Is Sara the one who always calls me Butt Munch?"

"Yeah."

"She's pretty."

"Yeah," said Riley. "Pretty horrible."

Riley and Mongo locked their bikes to the rack outside the Pizza Palace and strode through the front door.

"Hi, guys," said Vinnie behind the counter. "The usual?"

"Sure," said Riley. Vinnie slapped one slice into the oven.

"You want a whole pie again, Mongo?"

"No thanks. I just ate lunch."

"How 'bout three slices of meat-lovers, then?"

"Perfect!"

The guys paid and carried their greasy slices and cold drinks to the rear of the restaurant.

A wrinkled old lady was sitting in their usual booth.

Suddenly, the saggy-faced granny started waving at them, windmilling both her arms over her head. "Psst!" she hissed. "Riley! Mongo! It's me!"

Riley grinned. Briana Bloomfield was a master of all things theatrical, including disguises.

"Hurry up, you guys!" Briana was flapping her arms at her side now. "Sit down! This is sooooo *horrific!*"

An extremely talented actress, Briana Bloomfield made everything she said come out with italics and exclamation points.

Riley scooted into the booth beside Briana. Mongo squeezed into the bench across from them. Tilting his head, he was staring at Briana the way a confused puppy stares at a human who says stuff it can't understand.

"Are you going to be a witch next year for Halloween?" Mongo asked.

"This? Nuh-unh. I was in my bedroom, practicing my old age make-up in case I get cast in a summer stock production of *Arsenic And Old Lace* or something when school's out. Pretty awesome, huh? I did it with latex. You wad up crinkled Kleenex then pour on the liquid plastic to make the wrinkles. And then I added in shadows and lines and junk with grease paint, found the right wig, padded out this potato sack dress, and voila! I am *totally* a little old lady."

Mongo nodded like he understood.

"Dag, is that your grandmother, Riley Mack?"

Jamal Wilson, a wiry African-American fifth grader, strolled up to the table. With extremely nimble fingers (which he used to do magic tricks and to crack open locks for fun), Jamal was the youngest and newest member of Riley's crew.

"It's me, Jamal!" whispered Briana.

"Really?" He scooted into the booth next to Mongo. "You need to stay out of the sun, girl. You've got more wrinkles than a box of raisins."

"It's my new make-up."

"Well, in that case, you need to go back to the store and demand a refund. Because -- I'm just being honest here, Bree -- your new make-up makes you look ancient, antiquated, and antediluvian."

Jamal also liked to memorize new words from the dictionary every day. Riley figured he had circled back to the "A's."

"Do you know what those words mean?" Jamal asked Briana.

"Yep. Old."

"Sorry I'm late, guys." Jake Lowenstein, his hands stuffed inside the front pocket of his dragon-print hoodie, shuffled up to the table. "Mr. Holtz asked me to swing by school and help him wire things up in the auditorium for tomorrow's talent show. He never remembers how the microphones work. Or the light board."

Jake, who was the crew's techno-geek-slash-electronics-and-computer wizard, scooped into the booth next to Riley.

"So what's up with Sara Paxton?" Riley asked, now that his team was fully assembled. "Is she really trying to bump you out of the competition by sabotaging your act?"

“Not *me*,” said Briana. “This is way worse. Sara, Brooke, and Kaylie are out to crush the fifth graders!”

“Which ones?” demanded Jamal, the only fifth grader currently seated at the table.

“Staci Evans and that bunch. Six of them are doing this dynamite roller skating act that’s absolutely *fabtastic!* I saw them rehearsing it on Friday.”

Jamal nodded. “I helped choreograph a few of their smoother moves.”

“So what makes you think Sara wants to sabotage the roller skaters?” asked Riley.

“Okay, this is way weird. I was in my bedroom, working on my make-up like I said, when I got this text. From Sara!”

“Interesting.”

“Yuh-hunh. I figure it was a mistake because I’m still in her phone book or whatever.”

Riley knew that, last year, in the sixth grade, Briana had been Sara Paxton’s “fourth musketeer.” But, the instant seventh grade started, Queen Bee Sara and her two other “best friends forever,” Brooke Newton and Kaylie Holland, had turned on Briana and made *her* their primary target.

“So, what’d the text say?” asked Jake, pushing his glasses up the bridge of his nose.

“Hang on,” said Briana as she pulled her iPhone out of the baggy hip pocket of her granny dress: “MEET ME AT SKATE TOWN. NOW! IT’S TIME FOR OUR COMPETITION TO HAVE AN ACCIDENT.”