

Chapter 1

Something in the air felt strange when we got to the park where we played baseball after school during the spring. I thought I heard a snatch of odd high-pitched music that sounded vaguely familiar. The trees seemed thicker and more colorful in the outfield. Both the music and the trees made me think of the strange computer game we'd all seen on Kerry's computer that had thrown all six of us into a panic. Since we all lived in the high-rise across Clark Street from the park and we were all in the same sixth-grade class, it made sense for us to hang out together even though we were pretty different from each other and Kerry Blake was off the scale for weirdness.

"We're first up this time," said Ron Thompson, a hefty African-American and the best power hitter among us.

"We'll bury you so deep you'll never catch up," his teammate John Wernicke boasted.

"We'll score twice as many runs as you do," Margot Rainer retorted.

I appreciated her confidence since she was on my team.

"With Margot pitching and Kerry in the outfield and our great hitting, we're sure to get revenge today for yesterday," I said.

"We'll have to take your confidence down a few pegs, Gwe-e-e-e-on," said John.

Hearing my name with that exaggerated pronunciation made me wince. Hearing my name at all made me wince. My yuppie parents named me after a boy in Welsh myth who stirred a pot filled with wisdom for a bunch of witches. He tasted the brew by mistake and became wise. My idea of wisdom is to goof off as much as possible. At least my last name is Williams, something more sensible.

"No, *you* 'll be wanting revenge tomorrow," I insisted.

"Revenge is sweet," said Ron, "but making *you* want revenge is sweeter."

"No matter who wins today, somebody will want revenge tomorrow," said Karen Lang.

"What do you think, Kerry?" I asked my other teammate. "Do you want revenge for yesterday?"

With his long, fair hair and gangly build, Kerry looked like a scarecrow. He was several steps behind the rest of us and he didn't seem to have heard me. He was always spaced out—as any boy who plays the flute and sings would be—but he'd been tuning out the human world a lot more since that unnerving video game a few days ago. I was starting to worry about him, and I'm usually not good at worrying about anybody except me. I didn't bother repeating my question. I knew Kerry would spoil the fun by saying something nerdy and moralistic about why revenge was a bad thing.

Margot, Kerry and I had been playing Ron, John and Karen since at least last year, and those teams had been about as evenly matched as the strengths and weaknesses of the six of us allowed. As secretary of our two-team league, I knew we were only three games behind Ron's team in the race for the year's championship. Margot dropped the rag we used for the pitcher's mound. I went back to my general infield position and Kerry ran back among the trees at the edge of the outfield. I should have wondered why they were

so thick and a few leaves were turning yellow in the springtime, but I'm not good at wondering about things. Ron dropped the pie tin that was home plate and took some practice cuts. He always batted first for his team since he was the best hitter of all of us. Once the game started, the park became its own little world and I forgot the heavy traffic on Clark Street coming up out of the Loop and angling across Chicago.

"Gwion! Kerry! Play deeper!" Margot yelled at us. Her frizzy hair flying in all directions and tense look made her appear to be the mad scientist she was.

I felt like yelling back that I was deep enough already, but then remembered that arguing with Margot was never a good idea. Besides, if her strategy backfired, I could give her grief over it and not have to take the blame myself. Kerry practically disappeared in the clump of trees. I felt like I was in the middle of nowhere with grass all around me. Once satisfied with our positions, Margot scrunched up her face as she thought really hard about her first pitch while Ron made himself look as ferocious as possible. When Margot started her windup, I thought I heard that strange high-pitched music again with drums tapping away. I looked at Kerry who was standing way back, close to the trees, wondering if he was playing his flute out there. He wasn't, but he was drifting farther back toward the trees with autumn leaves that seemed thicker than they were a minute ago.

Margot threw a dipping curve ball but Ron smoked it and sent a soaring drive deep into the outfield. Kerry sprinted after it, faster than a rocket. He was the fastest runner in our school and if anyone was going to catch a ball like that, it was Kerry. For a couple of seconds I thought he was going to catch up with it and snare it on the fly, but the ball sailed into the clump of yellow trees. Ron had to get around all the bases to home or he was out, so if Kerry played the ball cleanly off a tree and got off a good throw to me, we'd have a chance to get Ron out at home. I checked to make sure Margot was covering the plate. She was. Then I positioned myself behind second base to take the throw from Kerry, but the throw never came.

"Kerry! Throw it!" I yelled.

Ron rounded second. There was no sign of Kerry. Had he lost the ball among the trees?

"Kerry, throw it!" Margot yelled.

I glanced back at Ron. He was rounding third with John and Karen cheering him on. There was no chance of getting him out. We were down by a run. Still not seeing Kerry, I trotted out deep into center field but he was nowhere to be seen. Did he get lost in that clump of trees? The question brought me up short. *What clump of trees?* The nearest trees I saw out there were awfully far from where Kerry had been playing and they didn't make up a clump and all their leaves were green. Surely I wasn't hallucinating a moment ago when I saw—or thought I saw the trees with colored leaves. Hallucinations were Kerry's specialty, not mine. My head started to spin.

"Kerry!" I called.

No answer.

"What's the matter?" asked Margot as she came up to me.

Ron, Karen and John were milling around the infield impatiently.

“I can’t find Kerry,” I answered Margot.

“What?!”

“You heard me. I can’t find Kerry. He’s gone.”

“He can’t be!”

“I know he can’t be gone, but he *is*.”

“What are you waiting for?” John called out.

“We can’t find Kerry!” I yelled back.

“Why not?”

“I don’t know.”

“Kerry! Stop sulking about Ron’s home run and come back and play!” John yelled.

No reply. Margot and I shuffled through the outfield, looking for hiding places, but there weren’t any places where he could possibly be, except for the clump of trees I saw before but didn’t now. With that strange computer game from a couple days ago haunting me, I was getting a bad feeling about this.

“I don’t understand it,” said Margot.

“Me, neither,” I said.

“Are you going to find Kerry or aren’t you?” yelled Ron.

“I don’t know!” I yelled back.

“We aren’t going to wait for him all day,” said Karen. “If he’s gonna to play hide-and-seek, we’re going home.”

“If Kerry doesn’t come back in ten seconds, we win by forfeit,” said Ron.

“We don’t have to win a forfeit,” said Karen. “We’ll just go home and play tomorrow if Kerry comes back from la-la land.”

“You can go anywhere you want to if you don’t want to help us look for Kerry,” said Margot.

“Who cares where Kerry is if he’s going to run out on us like this?” asked Ron as he wandered away with his teammates following him.

Not me, but I didn’t say that out loud. Kerry was weird and flaky in lots of ways, but suddenly ducking out of a baseball game wasn’t the sort of thing he did. Unless he was doing it now for the first time . . . but I just didn’t see any place where he could have been hiding. As we looked behind every tree and bush and bench in the park, Margot’s mad scientist look got madder by the second. When we’d made the rounds of the park a second time, Margot stabbed the ground with her shoe. She looked like she wanted to say something but was afraid to say it. The look she gave me made me afraid I looked like I, too, wanted to say something to her but was afraid to say it. Which was true.

“Gwion, there’s something weird about this,” said Margot.

“No kidding.”

“When I looked back to see how far the ball was going,” said Margot, struggling to keep her voice steady, “I thought the ball was flying right into a bunch of trees in deep centerfield. I knew our only chance to get Ron was for you to take a relay and throw to the plate. So I ran to the plate. When I turned around to take your throw, I didn’t see those trees any more. Do you think I was just seeing things?”

“Uh—if you’re seeing things, then I’m seeing things, too,” I admitted. “I thought I saw Kerry running at a clump of trees but then I turned my back on him to make sure you were covering the plate . . .”

“You should have known without looking that I’d be covering the plate,” said Margot. “I’m not dumb, you know.”

“I know you’re not dumb,” I said. “I’m just telling you what I did. When I turned around to wait for Kerry’s throw, I didn’t see the trees anymore and—I didn’t see Kerry, either. Do you think we *both* imagined those trees?”

“It’s very possible for someone to hallucinate and see strange trees that aren’t really there,” said Margot. “The brain has the capability of conjuring up these images and fooling us into thinking we are really seeing them.”

She should know. Her father was a doctor, after all.

“But both of us?” I asked.

Margot shook her head.

“The probability that we *both* imagined the same thing at the same time when it wasn’t there is slightly better than nil.”

We let those words hang in the air for a moment or two.

“Do you think somebody could have kidnaped him when we had our backs turned?” asked Margot.

“I don’t think my back was turned on Kerry long enough for someone run up to him and kidnap him without my seeing anything,” I replied.

We shuffled along on the grass for a few more minutes. I kept thinking about the computer game where the strange forest was, with colored leaves just like the ones I saw on the trees where Kerry was positioned, the trees that were no longer anywhere to be seen. In the game, the branches of the trees reached out to try and grab Kerry while strange music came out of the speakers. I know that couldn’t have happened but that’s what it looked like at the time while we were all in panic mode. It was impossible that the same computer game could attack us in the park, but my sense of possible and impossible was stretching to the breaking point. Finally Margot and I looked at each other and shook our heads. The glazed look in her eyes made me wonder if she thinking of that game too.

“Those trees we saw before but don’t see now didn’t look like the trees in that computer game that almost sucked Kerry in, did they?” I asked.

I started to hold my breath, hoping I hadn’t made a fool of myself, but I could see right away that Margot did not think I had asked a stupid question.

“Those trees *so* looked like the trees in that computer game that sprang up on Kerry that I think that horrid computer game came to life right where Kerry was.”

“How could that happen?”

“I wish I knew.”

“Did you hear any funny music right when you were pitching to Ron?” I asked. Margot’s face froze for a moment and then she nodded.

“It sounded like the music in that game,” she said.

“I was afraid you’d say that,” I replied.

“Maybe a magician cast a spell on us,” Margot suggested.

“I thought you were more scientific than that.”

“I’m just making a scientific hypothesis. Got a better hypothesis to go on?”

“No.”

“Let’s look for the baseball,” Margot suggested. “Maybe that’ll give us a clue about where Kerry is if we can find it.”

“*If* we can find it,” I muttered.

Margot and I combed the outfield area one more time, looking for the ball, but we never found it.

“That’s funny,” said Margot. “You’d think the ball would be here somewhere.”

“Yeah,” I said. “Why would kidnapers want a beat-up grass-stained baseball?”

I looked especially carefully around the area where I thought I saw the clump of trees but I found neither the baseball nor the least sign that a clump of trees had appeared there.

“I give up,” I said.

“Don’t do that,” Margot admonished me.

“What else can we do? We can’t stay out here all night.”

“Don’t you care about Kerry?”

I started to shoot back a smart-alecky answer but her question had hit too close to home for me to insist that I cared about Kerry. The truth was that I was grateful when he helped me with my homework, especially math, and fixed my computer problems, but Kerry constantly tested my patience by telling me all about the books he’d read and trying to get me to listen to classical music. Kids my age shouldn’t be saddled with classmates like that. It was bad enough if I had to hear him practice his flute when I went over to his condo. It was even worse when he came over to my condo to give my sister flute lessons because then I had to listen to both of them whether I liked it or not. Which I didn’t.

“Yeah, though he’s always trying to be an oddball.”

“Is that a crime?”

I thought it was but I knew Margot wouldn’t agree, so I just shrugged. Sometimes she was just as bad as Kerry.

“It’s time for us to get home,” I said. “Maybe Kerry will turn up somewhere else.”

“Do you believe that?”

“Do you?”

Margot didn’t bother to answer but she knew we were defeated, at least for the time being. This whole thing was making my insides twist about and the only way I could think of to get that to stop was to get away. I shuffled over to the traffic light across from our high-rise and Margot reluctantly followed me. The light was against us, and we had to wait for it to change. A boy I’d never seen before walked out from between some bushes near the edge of the park and stepped up to the curb next to us. He was very pale and his blond hair was almost white. He was dressed in a way that would get him laughed out of school in ten seconds. I would have thought his clothes were made out of leaves and paper—if I thought that was possible. His outfit was kind of green and kind of gray with a hint of yellow. I also noticed that his ears, mostly covered by his light blond hair,

were oddly shaped. His blank stare was getting on my nerves. He looked like he was about the same age as me and Margot, so there was a good chance he'd end up in our class if he had just moved into our neighborhood. I didn't like the thought of that.

The bushes! There weren't any bushes near the edge of the park. Margot and I had been looking all over that corner when we were looking for the baseball. I looked back to make sure. I was right, there were no bushes, but I was sure I had seen the bushes when the boy came out from between them. This day was getting too weird for me by far. The light finally changed and Margot and I crossed the street. The strange boy followed right behind us. We entered the lobby of our high-rise and the boy walked in as if he lived there, too.

"Hi, Gwion. Hi, Margot," Mike, our Afro-American porter, greeted us with his broad smile.

He didn't greet the strange boy, which was odd, because Mike greeted everybody who lived in the high-rise, especially kids. I glanced over my shoulder. The strange boy wasn't there. That was a relief. Margot and I walked over to the elevators and I pushed the "up" button. Before an elevator got to the ground floor, the strange boy slipped out from behind a large potted plant next to the porter's desk and joined us at the elevator.

"Are you new here?" Margot asked the strange boy.

That was one of those moments when I wished Margot wasn't so friendly. The boy frowned and seemed to concentrate on the question as if he were having trouble understanding it.

"I am not as new as some others," said the boy in a stiff voice with a foreign accent of some kind.

I was amazed that Margot could keep from giving the boy a funny look. Thanks to her control, I had to work really hard not to crack up myself.

"Did you just move into this place?" Margot asked him.

"Move—just move?" the boy puzzled.

"Did you just come from Europe or something?" Margot asked. "*Parlez-vous français?*"

Then she rattled off a long string of French words, but the boy didn't seem to understand French at all.

"What's your name?" Margot asked him.

"Marakel," he answered.

Most boys would have made a snide remark about a strange name like that, but not me with the name I've got. Finally the door opened and we all got inside.

"What floor?" Margot asked the boy.

"Uh—floor—floor fourteen," the boy answered.

I raised my eyebrows. That was Kerry's floor.

"Want to stop at Kerry's condo and see if he's turned up there?" Margot asked me.

"No," I said with a shudder. "His mom will think *we* kidnaped him if he isn't home by now."

Every time any of us went over to Kerry's condo to play computer games with him, his mother acted as if we were monsters who had come to devour her son.

“I am thinking you are looking for somebody,” Marakel said to us.

This was getting to be too much!

“Not really,” I said with a shrug.

“Then you are looking for somebody—falsely?” Marakel asked.

Margot laughed.

“Actually, we’re looking for a friend who has just disappeared,” Margot replied.

I could have kicked her for saying that to this strange, unnerving boy. The elevator seemed to take forever to get to our floor, the way it always does when I’m in a hurry.

“This isn’t *your* business, anyway,” I said to Marakel, hoping to put an end to this conversation.

“My—business? My way of taking gold and silver?” Marakel asked.

“No, I mean it shouldn’t matter to you if we find our friend or not.”

“Friend?” Marakel asked.

“A friend is somebody you do things with, like play games and hang out,” Margot explained.

If she was as puzzled by the boy as I was, she was doing a good job of hiding it.

“Oh. You are talking about your ally?” Marakel asked.

“Not really,” said Margot. “An ally is somebody who fights with you during a war. A friend is somebody you do things with when you don’t have a war.”

“How can you—not have a war?” asked Marakel.

That convinced me that the boy couldn’t be human.

“I wish we could find a way to accomplish that,” said Margot.

The elevator finally stopped and the door opened, but Marakel didn’t move.

“This is your floor,” I said to Marakel.

“My floor?”

“This is the floor you asked for,” said Margot. “The floor you said you wanted to go to.”

“Then I should go out of this moving room now?” Marakel asked.

“Yes,” said Margot, “if this is the floor you want.”

Marakel stepped out. At last, we were rid of him. I gave Margot a mocking look but she scowled at me.

“Can’t you be nicer to a new kid than that?” she asked me.

“Can’t you see he’s *too* weird?” I asked in return.

“Well, I can’t say you’re *too* nice,” she shot back at me when the elevator stopped at her floor. “Have a nice day.”