

Chapter One

The Boy Screws Up

He saw movement behind the bushes ahead. There, through the thick underbrush he could just make out the green scaly outline of the dragon. Barbed spikes protruded from its ugly head. He must close in slowly, so as not to be noticed. It was noisily shredding its most recent kill. Andy crept forward. He swallowed hard. This was his chance. Slowly he raised his bow.

“Andrew Farrin Smithson! Come here this minute!”

Startled, Andy argued, “But Mom, I can’t. I’m right in the middle of this level.”

“I don’t care. Turn off that game and come down here. Now!”

“But Mom, I’ll lose everything if I have to stop now.”

“You’ll lose more than that if you don’t stop arguing!”

The tone in her voice told him not to say anything more. She was home late tonight and clearly not in a good mood.

Andy came downstairs into the kitchen where his Mom was sitting at the granite counter of the breakfast bar.

“That was Mrs. Crabtree on the phone.” His Mom let the words linger for a minute.

Oh Crap! thought Andy. He knew what this was about and it meant he would not be finishing off that dragon any time soon.

“What would you like to tell me Andy?”

He hated this question. If he said anything, he usually ended up incriminating himself, at least that’s how it seemed.

“Nothing.”

“That’s not what Mrs. Crabtree says. She said you were very disrespectful to her in class today. She said you raised your hand to answer a question and when she called on you, you refused to answer. She said you stared at her for a minute and then yelled out about her being a king or wizard or some such thing and also something about a Laboratory. Andy, you’re in fifth grade. This is not acceptable behavior and you know it. She said next time she will get the principal involved. Now go to your bedroom and do your homework. We’ll discuss this further when your father gets home. And I don’t want to hear you playing any video games, do you understand me?”

Great... Just what I wanted... another long, drawn out “conversation” with my parents lecturing me about being respectful and responsible. I’ve heard it all a thousand times, but Dad seems to enjoy droning on for hours about how my behavior will not get me far.

Andy trudged upstairs again. He sat down on his bed. He didn’t feel like doing homework. In trouble again, it felt like the story of his life. Andy never meant to get in trouble, or put a different way, he never meant to get caught. Why did it feel like he was always getting in trouble when his older sister, Madison (aka Miss Perfect), always got away with whatever crime she committed? It seemed his parents overlooked anything their precious angel did, but he could do no right.

A clap of thunder sounded right outside his window. He jumped. He opened the blind and watched the branches of the oak tree outside his window beat against the house, driven by the wind. As he glanced up, he saw the light in the attic window turn off.

That's weird, he thought, *Mom's downstairs, Madison's in her bedroom probably doing her homework over for the fifteenth time to make sure it's perfect, and Dad's not home yet.*

Andy grabbed the flashlight that he used to read in bed at night after he was supposed to be sleeping, snuck out of his room and down the hall toward the door at the end. Thankfully the hall had plush carpeting that muffled the sound of his footsteps. He carefully opened the door, stopping each time it started to creek, listening to make sure he did not hear his mom or loudmouth sister coming. He finally pushed it open far enough to squeeze through. A burst of cold air hit him. He hesitated, considering whether to go back for his jacket. He decided against it. He turned the flashlight on and started up the unfinished wood stairs. Halfway up, another clap of thunder startled him, as if reminding him of his Dad's warning that "in no uncertain terms" was he to be up in the attic, why, he had never known. He persevered and made it to the top step.

Looking around, nothing seemed amiss. He shone his flashlight where his old Nintendo 64 and Game Cube had been sitting. Both electronic alters (he never understood why his parents called them that) as well as the multitude of games belonging to each, remained dust-covered and undisturbed. He shone the beam at the light switch. As if daring fate, he flipped it on and ducked, just in case something was about to jump him. Nothing did. Another clap of thunder. He jumped and stumbled over a trunk behind him, landing hard on the floor. He waited, listening for his mom or sister. Silence, except for the constant howling of the wind and the continued thumping of the oak tree.

That's new, he thought.

The trunk was weathered and old, made of oak. It looked like a pirate's chest with a rounded top and leather straps riveted to metal reinforcing bands every few inches. Two of them ended in buckles. Andy unbuckled the leather straps and then tried the lock that secured the middle. Amazingly, it easily pulled away from the trunk on its rusted hinge. After glancing around the attic again, he pushed up on the top. It creaked open. He rested the lid at an angle that assured him it would not crash down and smash his fingers. He peered in. There was a note and one other object in the uppermost tray. Andy pulled the note out. It read,

Andy,

I'm sorry you're getting involved in the problem this way, but I felt I had no other option. I was told to find a way to remove the contents of this trunk from the Land lest they be found and stir up all manner of unrest among the people. It is pure speculation on my part, but based upon the position that I believe is yours, I felt you were the only one who could manage this. Please use the utmost secrecy and tell no one what you have.

The note was not signed. Andy read it several times wondering who had sent the trunk and what it meant. Still puzzling, Andy turned his attention to the object. It was some sort of black leather holster. Even though it was very old and worn, it still held a shine. It was neatly folded. At the top of the holster was a purple crest with three intricately-detailed pendants attached; a spider at the top, followed by a

wavy line and then a knight on horseback beneath. Andy picked it up and ran his finger over the metal pendants, admiring them. A chill ran up his back. He told himself it was from the cold, but his gut told him otherwise. He glanced around again. He heard his mom calling everyone to come for dinner. He would have to wait to explore the rest of the trunk. He replaced the holster and carefully closed the lid. "Glad you could join us," his dad said as he reached the kitchen.

The Smithson's were an uncommon family, at least that's what his Dad always told him. Uncommon, was not to be confused with strange, weird or odd, mind you.

"We are in the Top 1%," his Dad would announce matter-of-factly, although he made it clear that this fact was to remain a family secret.

Fred and Emily Smithson were both, "CEOs of multimillion dollar companies," they had founded and grown themselves. He'd heard his Mom had thrown that line at many an Administrative Assistant who gave her grief when she had to schedule doctor or dentist appointments and the person on the other end of the line expected her to be available at some inconvenient time during the middle of the workday.

Dinner table conversations were pretty boring as they tended to center around how the two businesses were doing and challenges his Mom or Dad were currently facing. Hiring, too much cost, not enough revenue, the economy, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah. His parents would tell him how fortunate he was to be exposed to this thinking at his young age; it would put him far ahead of all his friends when it came time to start a career. While they might have had a point, that's hardly what he cared about at the moment.

Dinner time was also when his parents would have "conversations" with him about some irresponsible act he had committed and was about to be punished for - better boring business conversations than these, since he never got to voice his side of the story. One time during the course of a heated "conversation", he had told his parents, "My friends parents don't think the way you guys do." He had meant it to mean they were being unreasonable. They had taken it as a compliment. "You're right!" his Dad had responded, smiling. "I'm glad you're beginning to understand."

Over a quickly thrown together (but healthy! – his Mom always interjected, as if making herself feel better) dinner of baked salmon, one of Andy's least favorite, the lecture began.

"Your mother told me about the call she got from Mrs. Crabtree."

"But Dad! It really did happen! I was transported to a Laboratory in an old stone castle and there was a wizard in blue robes with a floppy hat and..."

"Nonsense Andy!" responded his father. "I've heard all of your excuses before and I don't want to hear any ridiculous stories about you visiting some foreign country and seeing wizards or fighting dragons! You're 10 years old! You must learn to respect authority and take responsibility for your actions. How will you ever hold down a job?"

Amazingly, and thankfully, the lecture had only lasted 58 minutes tonight. Andy always timed his parents with the clock on the wall. A new record! He figured they must have something "important" to take care of and did not want to waste time dealing with him.

With his parents as Judge and Jury, respectively, Andy was found guilty once again. His sentence was washing the dishes by hand for the next two nights even though they had a perfectly good dishwasher. Somehow, he failed to see what washing dishes had to do with being more respectful.

Andy stood on the stepstool at the sink to begin his sentence. He hated having to use it. Like so many other things in his life, the stool made him feel like a little kid. He squirted dishwashing liquid into the rising water, playing with the soap bubbles.

“Scrub every dish thoroughly and don’t make a mess, Andy. I will inspect when you’re done,” his Mom warned as she left the kitchen.

The sink was just about full of water. Andy reached for the faucet to turn it off. Suddenly, he felt strange, very light and airy. Then everything went dark.