



SOMETHING STINKS!



Gail Hedrick

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SOMETHING STINKS!

By Gail E. Hedrick

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*For Ben, Josh, Meghan, and Mont,
with all my love.*

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CHAPTER 1

SUMMER NO MORE

The moment I stepped out of Mom's car I knew something was terribly wrong. I gasped as a horrible smell streamed up my nose. It was like that awful mix of odors that drift out of a dumpster behind a bad restaurant. The only problem was I was not behind a bad restaurant. I was at my aunt and uncle's apple orchard. "This is nasty!" I blurted out, and I pinched my nostrils shut.

Aunt Sylvie came bustling out the back door of their little wood-sided cottage, with a handkerchief over her mouth and nose. "Hello, Emily. Best keep holding your breath!"

Mom hauled my little brother Ben out of his seat. She blinked her eyes several times. "Sylvie, what is it?"

“You’ll see, it’s the worst one yet.” Aunt Sylvie beckoned. “Come on.”

We followed her around the house, past tidy flower beds filled with late-summer daylilies and mums, and down the grass-covered hill toward the Higdon River. Dead fish, with their bodies bloated and eyes bulging, lay scattered everywhere. Catfish, perch, bluegills, and bass were strewn along the bank and in the water. Some bobbed silently under the wooden dock. “Gosh, Aunt Sylvie,” I said, choking. “How many are there?”

“Hundreds,” said Uncle Joe, coming up the riverbank carrying a shovel. He wiped his forehead with a red bandanna. “I’m trying to bury ‘em to keep the smell down.”

“Mommy, stinky fish,” said Ben, wrinkling his nose.

“I know,” said Mom, nodding. “What’s going on here?”

Aunt Sylvie bit her lip. “We don’t know, but it’s happened before. I think the last time was early in the summer, right after y’all left.”

We’d just returned home to Southwest Virginia from spending the entire summer over in Tennessee. It wasn’t the way I would have picked to spend my time before starting seventh grade but no one asked me. My dad’s a project manager for a regional utility company, and since *he’d* had to go, he was sure my mom, little brother, and I would love to tag along. I didn’t get to sleep in my own bed for months,

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had to spend endless hours of “quality time” with a three-year-old, and constantly wondered what my friends were doing back home. Now, this. What would kill so many fish in this perfect little river?

Aunt Sylvie patted Ben on the head and went on. “We reported that first one to the county back then, but nobody seemed too concerned. Later we heard someone in the office had accidentally deleted the call log for that day.”

Uncle Joe grumbled, “We called again yesterday when we started seeing a few dead ones here and there. This time some inspector came out and tromped all around. He glanced at the water but didn’t test it. He said everyone always wants to blame the big companies upstream for these sorts of things, but the factories have ‘state regulations’ they have to follow. Unlike the farmers.”

He jammed the shovel into the squishy red clay. “That was when the guy seemed to turn on me asking what kind of pesticides I used. I told him we’re organic growers. I use soap and water and nothing else. He laughed and said it must be some kind of potent suds to get this result. That’s when I showed him the door.”

“He sounds like a jerk,” I said. “What are they going to do about it?”

Uncle Joe shook his head. “They just sent us a status report stamped *Incident submitted - necessity for further action inconclusive.*”

“What does that mean?” I asked.

“It means he’s not going to do anything. Case closed.”

Mom said, “That’s ridiculous.”

“It is,” Uncle Joe agreed. “But it appears we’re on our own, so we’ll deal with it.”

Mom surveyed the scene. “Listen, I have to get to the pharmacy before it closes. How about I have John come out to help you clean up?”

Uncle Joe chuckled. “Your husband doesn’t need to lose a day’s pay to bury fish.”

“We’ll be fine,” said Aunt Sylvie, pulling her apron strings tight around her waist. “I’ll be out here in a few minutes with my barn boots on and my own shovel.”

I looked at the bodies clumping against my uncle’s little fishing boat and bobbing ashore, pushed by the river currents. The creepy combination of the smell and sight of these fish made me want to run away and never come back. I glanced at my sweet aunt and uncle. Their shoulders sagged with either defeat or exhaustion; I didn’t know which. It was awful to see them like this. I sighed. “Mom, you take Ben and leave me here to help.”

“What about getting your school supplies?”

“We can go after you get Ben’s medicine. My list isn’t that huge, so we can go after you come back.”

“Okay, plan the rest of my day,” said Mom, grinning. “What about Leanne?”

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My best friend and I had shopped together for school supplies forever. “Oh, shoot. I’ll need to let her know, but I bet she won’t mind going later. When I tell her what the problem is, she’ll understand. She loves it out here, too.”

“Oh, you dear child,” said Aunt Sylvie, giving me a hug. Then she peered up at me. “When did you get so tall?”

“Everyone looks gigantic to you, Aunt Sylvie. I’m still right at 5’5”.”

“Well, maybe it’s that new short hairdo. It shows off your natural curl. Now, I need to find you some gloves and a rake. Jenny, bring little Ben and on your way to the car I’ll get you some cider to take along for later.”

I wished it was later and all this mess was already bagged up. As the others walked away, I turned toward the river and Uncle Joe, but all I could see were the fish. Their eyes were getting to me and the usually crisp air out here seemed as rotten as the inside of a sewer. “This is so sad. My favorite place in the whole world is a graveyard. How could something like this happen? Why can’t something great ever stay that way?”

“Well, it’s looking like we might never know,” said Uncle Joe. “Hopefully, it won’t be like this the next time you’re here. By the way, what did you say about your side-kick, Leanne?”

“Oh, I’ve gotta call her. I guess I should’ve gone up to the house to use the phone.”

“Shoot, no,” said Uncle Joe, “use my cell phone. I’m surprised you don’t have one of these gizmos.”

“Tell that to my parents, please,” I said, entering the phone number of my best friend since kindergarten.

“Leanne? Hi, we’re going to be kind of late. We’re out at my aunt and uncle’s place. You won’t believe what a mess...” I listened for a moment, not believing my ears. I said, “I thought you wanted to go.”

I listened a moment, wishing I had the power to change what Leanne was saying. “Well, okay, if that’s what you want to do.” I clicked the button on the phone to ‘end’ and stood facing away from Uncle Joe, hoping I wouldn’t cry. How dumb for a stupid phone call to matter this much.

I sighed and turned around. “I haven’t seen Leanne all summer. We were supposed to go school shopping together today just like every year. Mom always takes us and we stop for milkshakes at the Dairy Barn on the way home. Sounds corny, I know.”

Uncle Joe took off his hat and scratched his head. “Nope, it sounds like a nice plan. So, what happened?”

“She bailed on me to go shopping with this fancy, rich girl, Cynthia Craver. And instead of milkshakes, she’s going to Cyn’s country club for dinner.”

“Hard to compete with that,” said Uncle Joe.

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“Tell me about it,” I agreed. “I left here having an amazing best friend. And now, who knows?”

Uncle Joe replaced his hat. “Well, I’m sorry that happened. And I’m sorry we won’t see Leanne. I’ve missed her.”

“Me too.” Yup, my besty ditched me, so for the second time today I wondered, why can’t something great ever stay that way?

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CHAPTER 2

TOO MUCH RACQUET

Early Sunday afternoon, I sat at the kitchen table organizing my backpack, stashing new pens, colored pencils and notebooks in the various pockets, and eyeing the clock. When the phone rang, Mom grabbed it as she was expecting a call from a member of her garden club. She listened a moment, then waved the phone at me. “It’s Leanne, something about this afternoon.”

I held my breath, not wanting to be dumped again. Then I took the phone. “Let me guess, no tennis.”

“You are so wrong, Miss Jump-to-Conclusions. I had some chores to finish.”

“You still do chores? I thought maybe Cyn’s family loaned you their maid.”

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“Oh, please. I’m the only maid this house will ever see,” said Leanne. “So, I can do tennis, but I have to bring Beth.”

“No,” I complained. “No little sisters.”

Leanne sighed. “It’s that or not play. My mom’s going to visit someone in the hospital, so I’ve got to babysit. If you bring Ben, we can park them in the sandbox.”

I made a face. “Okay, but we won’t get to play much tennis.”

“Stop whining, girl,” said Leanne giggling. “It won’t be so bad.”

Later, as I pedaled along, I thought, it won’t be so good either. I was riding Mom’s bike, complete with baby seat. With Ben’s added weight, plus the tennis bag, I wobbled all over the road. Still, I had it easy compared to Leanne. As we met near the park entrance, I said, “Whoa, what a load.”

Leanne grinned. “Toys, snacks, and extra diapers!”

There was something else different about her. I stared at Leanne. “Um, are you wearing a *tennis outfit*? Where did that come from?”

“You love it, right?” Leanne asked, as she put down the kickstand and stepped gracefully off the bike. She twirled so the pale-pink skirt flared out almost as far as her long blond hair. “Cynthia’s dad, you know, Mr. Craver? Anyway, he runs the Cayenne sportswear factory. It’s been

around forever, but they've just started an athletic line. You know which factory I'm talking about?"

I nodded. Our town is known as the sweatshirt capital of the world. People come from all over to buy jogging suits and T-shirts at our factory outlets. I guess every town has to be famous for something. Why not sweatshirts?

Leanne gushed on. "The factory's been around forever, but they just started a new tennis line. And *I'm* the same size as the samples. He gave me this whole outfit! Do you believe that?"

I looked down at my cutoffs, then tapped my faded orange UVA visor, which I had slid on at the last second. Wearing this, I probably looked like a curly redheaded boy. "Guess I'm underdressed."

"Nah," said Leanne, unpacking the stuff for the little kids, "you look normal. Love your tennis shoes. Besides, we're at the park, not the club."

"Oh, yeah, Miss Country Club."

Leanne giggled. "That place is so neat. Mr. Craver is letting me take golf lessons with Cynthia. She has her own clubs and has taken lessons for years. Funny, she's still not very good, but the golf pro says I have 'potential'."

"I didn't know you liked golf," I said, as we settled the kids in the sandbox.

"I didn't know I liked golf either till I tried it." Leanne swung her racquet. "It's something different. You're doing new stuff, too. Aren't you learning guitar?"

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“I took a class this summer. I can play, like, three songs. But basically, I’m just the same old Emily. I like things just the way they’ve always been.”

“I was like that, too,” agreed Leanne, “but since my parents split up, nothing is like it used to be.”

“Oh, I’m such an idiot,” I said, tapping my head. “I keep forgetting your dad left. It’s like he should still be here with his car in your driveway.” I realized I had no idea what Leanne’s life was like now. My dad was home every night, and though my parents sometimes argued over things like where they should have dinner or what color to paint the house, they were basically a ridiculously happy couple. “Is it awful?”

“It was for a while. You left town, then he left us. My mom and I walked around like zombies. She’d forget to feed us and I’d just sit on my bed.”

“Wow, why didn’t you tell me all this when I called you?”

“I actually wrote you a couple of e-mails, then deleted them. I couldn’t talk about it for the first couple of months. It was just so icky. I kept hoping they’d made a horrible mistake and things would go back to like they used to be.” Leanne shrugged. “That never happened, but it’s a little better now. I finally got busy doing stuff. And Mom’s stopped crying every five seconds.”

It’s no fun seeing one of your parents cry. You don’t know whether to hug them, do something silly to make

them laugh, or just leave them alone. I hadn't had the most exciting summer on record, but at least my parents didn't get divorced. "So, I'm sorry about everything, but I'm glad it's better. Um, should we play?"

"Yup," said Leanne, spinning her racquet. "And, if you liked things the way they used to be, then I'm going to win, like always. Serve it up!"

We went at each other, playing as hard as if we were in a tournament. We had each won a set when I called for time out. "I need a drink."

"So, you're not just throwing in the towel?" said Leanne, trotting to the net. "Did you lose weight this summer?"

"Maybe a little. I swam a lot of laps and lifted weights some."

"I knew something was different." She pointed to the kids. "They're doing pretty good. Let's keep that going and pass out the snacks."

"Good idea, and we can drink some... Uh oh," I said, smacking my forehead. "I meant to bring some of Aunt Sylvie's cider."

"Oh, Em, you had cider and didn't bring any?" Leanne gave the kids some crackers.

"I just forgot, with having to bring Ben and all." I gulped some water from the water fountain. "It was a weird trip out to the orchard. The whole place smelled awful."

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“That cute little cabin? To me, it always has the aroma of chocolate chip cookies.”

“Not on Tuesday. Bunches of dead fish had washed up as far as you could see along both sides of the riverbank. Guts were showing, eyes bulging. It was so gross.”

Leanne wrinkled her sun-pinked nose. “Frankly, I think fish are kind of stinky even when they’re alive.”

I shook my head, remembering the sight. “You really had to be there to appreciate how bad it was.”

“Sounds disgusting.”

“Apparently the county guy, who never even tested the water, tried to blame those hundreds of dead fish on my uncle’s apple orchard.”

“He thought your uncle killed the fish?”

“Yeah, like maybe he’d dumped pesticides into the river. The thing is, Uncle Joe doesn’t use pesticides—never has.”

“I wonder how it happened,” said Leanne.

“I don’t know but I’m gonna find out. Do you want to help me?”

Leanne shrugged. “I guess, if I have time. I’m really busy with...”

The sound of a car horn filled the air. Not the usual honking sound, but the musical kind. This car horn blared “You Are My Sunshine” and came from the white Cadillac

pulling into the parking lot. The convertible top was down and the man at the wheel wore a big, white cowboy hat. Standing in the back, waving like someone in the Pumpkin Parade, stood Cynthia Craver.

“What’s she doing here?”

“I don’t know,” said Leanne, waving back. “I *did* tell her we were playing tennis, but I didn’t tell her where.”

“Where else would we be? Neither of us belongs to any private tennis clubs.” I picked up my racquet. “Come on, let’s finish our match.”

Leanne glanced at Cynthia, as she stepped out of the car. “Um, in a minute. I’d better see what she wants. It’ll take just a sec.”

Before Leanne could move, the Cadillac pulled away and Cynthia ran across the parking lot to our court. First, she patted Beth on the head, poked Ben in his chubby tummy, nodded at me, and then gushed to Leanne, “Look what Daddy just got! These are the latest racquets from Pro Strokes. They send him stuff all the time because they like to have their equipment in the ads with our clothes. They just finished using these in a new commercial and Daddy said we could have them to play with. Come on, Leanne, let’s go.”

Leanne fingered the racquet. The frame glistened with a sky-blue metallic finish. “Wow, it’s light as a feather.”

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Cynthia bragged, “It’s a J11X. My daddy says they’ll sell for hundreds of dollars when they go on the market It’s a ‘winner’s’ racquet.”

I sniffed and said, “It looks nice, but sometimes these old trusty models do just as well.”

Leanne glanced at our scuffed wood racquets, and then back at the J11X. “Em, do you mind?”

I did mind and should have told her, but expecting Leanne to remember that best friends always stick together, I shrugged.

Leanne shrugged right back and pointed the racquet toward the court. “Yeah, I should test it out. We won’t be long.”

Stunned by her remark, I knelt down and pretended to fuss with my shoelace. I didn’t want either one of them to see my watery eyes.

“Thanks, and Em, since you’re going to be here anyway,” said Leanne, nudging the diaper bag in my direction, “Beth is probably due for a change.”

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CHAPTER 3

DOORS, DOORS, AND MORE DOORS

Monday after school, I peered into the refrigerator. “May I have the last soft drink?”

“Sure,” said Mom, coming up from the basement carrying the laundry basket. “Did school improve your mood?”

“School was just school.” I took a long swig from the soda can and sighed. “Honestly, I didn’t think anyone noticed I was a little grumpy.”

“Well, you were hard to ignore,” said Mom. “After tennis, you slammed every door in the house you came in contact with. The cabinets, your bedroom, the closets. Do you want to talk about it?”

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“There’s nothing to talk about. Leanne is way different. Plus, she has a new best friend with lots of money and breasts!”

“Ouch, that’s a tough combination,” said Mom, giving my shoulder a squeeze. “Don’t worry, you’re starting to develop, too.”

I looked down at the tiny bumps on my chest. “You have a great imagination.”

“Oh, hush,” said Mom. “Listen, Leanne had a heart-breaking summer. Did she talk about it?”

“Yeah, a little,” I agreed. “When her parents split up, her dad moved to Aspen. Then her mom bought the hair salon she worked for, which I guess is nice, but now she works all the time.”

“That’s got to be hard,” agreed Mom. “This thing with Cynthia could just be a carryover from the past few months. You said they met in summer school?”

I nodded. “I guess Cynthia’s always gone to Chatham Hill for their big deal music program. But, apparently she got tired of practicing the flute or whatever and her parents are making her try public school. Lucky for me, huh?”

“Unfortunately, no. However, Leanne needed somebody and she found Cynthia. Now it kind of sounds like she’s been swept along by the whole Craver family.”

“Yup, and I can’t compete with the Cravers. I don’t know what to do about it.”

“Well,” said Mom, “You’ve got a couple of choices. One would be to make some new friends.”

I stared at Mom. “There are no girls at my school this year that seem remotely interesting. They’re all giggly and spend all day talking about boys and makeup.” I shuddered.

Mom nodded. “Okay, then I guess you’ll have to go with your second option and just keep trying with Leanne.”

“I asked her to help me find out what caused the big fish mess out at Aunt Sylvie’s. She said she might and we could figure out a plan.”

Mom smiled. “That sounds promising.”

“Right,” I said, thinking. “Maybe she’d want to sleep over Friday.”

“Good idea,” answered Mom. “See if she wants to come for supper, too.”

Changing clothes after PE the next day, I stopped Leanne in the locker room. “Hey, do you want to eat with us Friday and then spend the night?”

“Sure,” said Leanne. “Mom just gave me a whole bunch of new nail polish samples. We can try them all.”

Was she crazy? The Leanne I knew hardly ever wore lip gloss, let alone nail polish. I was about to burst out laughing thinking how polish would look on my clipped short, stubby fingernails when Cynthia Craver came around

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the lockers. She ran a hand through her mass of chocolate-colored curls and said, "If you two are making plans for Friday night, make sure you allow for us going to the flea market after school. There's no telling how long we'll be."

Leanne snapped her fingers, and said "Oh, my gosh, I forgot about the flea market."

I blinked my eyes. "The flea market? You hate that place!"

"Not since she's into antiques," Cynthia said.

"Into *what*?" I asked, not believing what I had heard.

"Antiques," said Cynthia, nudging Leanne. "According to my mama, Leanne has a good eye for decorating, so she's helping us check out all the antique stalls to get the perfect accessories for our new house."

"And don't forget these," said Leanne, shaking her wrists, loaded with bracelets.

"Ooh, yeah," nodded Cynthia, holding her arm out. "See all these cool old bangles?"

I nodded and kept getting dressed. The bracelets looked like rainbows on their wrists.

Cynthia went on. "We've been collecting these vintage bracelets all summer. They're the hottest thing in all the fashion magazines."

"Really?" I ran a comb through my hair and slipped on my tiny amethyst ring. "I don't read many magazines."

Cynthia watched Leanne head toward the hair dryers. As soon as Leanne turned one on, Cynthia pivoted toward me and jingled her bracelets. “Leanne’s told me stuff about you. She mentioned you’re not into fashion. I can see she’s right.”

My eyes stung. I tried a fast joke. “Yeah, my fashion statement is my PE uniform.” I grabbed my stuff and flounced out of the locker room with as much dignity as I could suck up. It didn’t last long. As soon as I got out to the empty hall, the tears of frustration began to roll.

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CHAPTER 4

NOW WHAT?

Out in the hall, I rummaged through my book bag, keeping my head down as I walked. Where was a tissue when I needed one? As usual, one appeared at the bottom of the bag, wadded up and stuck to a piece of old chewing gum. Yup, that's just how I felt, thanks to Cynthia, like thrown-away gum.

I sighed, dried the last tear, and stood outside the door to my English class wondering if I was settled down enough to go in. The tardy bell helped me make up my mind. I slid into my seat just as it finished clanging.

"In the nick of time, Miss Sanders," said Mr. Chiacelli.

"I know." Usually English was my favorite subject. "Are we doing vocab today?"

“No, Emily,” said Mr. Chicelli. “We’re starting the year off with a bang—essays!” He smiled at the class as if he were accepting an award.

Everyone groaned, and I muttered, “The end of a perfect day.”

“Emily, since you seem out of sorts, maybe a little exercise would do you good,” said Mr. Chicelli. “Take this bowl and give each person a slip of paper from it. Everyone will get a different subject. You have forty minutes to write. Begin as soon as you have your topic.”

I got the bowl and wandered around the room in a trance, passing out the slips of paper. Finally, when there was only one left, I sat down and opened it. It said, “In 250 words or less, write an essay on a person, living or dead, who has had an impact on your life.”

With pen and paper ready, I pondered this assignment. I glanced up at Mr. Chicelli who was busy grading papers. His hair was the same color as that witch’s Cynthia Craver. Hah!

Later, Mr. Chicelli broke my concentration. “Emily, you seem to have exceeded the word count.” He stood beside my desk, pointing at the sheets of paper I had filled with speed scribbling.

I looked at what I was doing, and shook myself. Wow, I love to write, but words had never spilled out of me like this. “Oops. Sorry, sir.”

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He peered down at the pages I'd written. "Sounds like something dark."

"Well, I guess I was venting," I agreed. "But it's about a real person."

"All right," he said, tapping my essay. "I'm going to look this over before the bell rings. Please see me after class."

"Okay."

As he walked up the aisle, the boy behind me whispered, "Already in trouble, Em?"

I shook my head, and whispered back. "Very funny."

I didn't want to miss the bus, so as soon as the bell rang, I rushed up to Mr. Chicelli's desk. "You wanted to see me, sir?"

"The essay topics were intended to be fun and inspirational, Miss Sanders. This is bordering on inappropriate."

Rats, that kid behind me was right. First week, I was heading downhill fast. "I'm sorry. It's just that this person has messed up my—"

Mr. Chicelli held up his hand. "That's enough. What I was *also* going to say is you are a good writer. I'd like you to consider writing for the school newspaper."

"I'm not sure. I have swim practice."

“I understand,” said Mr. Chicelli, “but we work around all the sports’ practice schedules. Plus, you get 10 bonus points per semester added to your English grade.”

I stood there thinking there was a distinct possibility I wouldn’t be hanging out with Leanne very much. Plus, the ten points wouldn’t hurt.

“Sounds good.” I grabbed my pen and signed up for the newspaper staff.

Mr. Chicelli nodded, and said “The first meeting is Thursday at 3:30.”

After school, Mom met me at our front door, and asked, “Did you talk to Leanne about Friday night?”

I nodded, and said, “Yup, she’ll be here, after she gets finished at the flea market with you know who.”

“Flea market?” asked Mom, with a surprised tone.

“Go figure.” I sighed and trudged toward the kitchen. No matter how bad things seemed, I was always ready for food.

“Well, at least she’s coming,” said Mom, softly. “Do you have a lot of homework?”

“A little math,” I said, looking through the mail. “Oh, one thing. Since I’m basically friendless, and could become bored out of my mind, I signed up to work on the school newspaper. My English teacher is the advisor.”

“That’s great, Em. You like to write.”

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I nodded. "I do. Anyway, the first meeting is Thursday, and I already know what my first article will be about." I reached for the phone, dialed a familiar number. "Uncle Joe?"

"Hello there Emily. You home from school already?"

"Yes, sir, I am and I have a favor to ask. When we were out there the other day, you said something about a report the county sent you after the fish died."

"Yup. What a waste of taxpayers' money mailing that thing."

I nodded. "I agree. I want to talk with those people and see if they would consent to an interview. I'm on the school newspaper staff this year."

"Wish you luck. I don't know if this is interview-worthy. I called the Trib. When I told them there hadn't been any more fish wash up since the weekend, the reporter said that wasn't much of a story and he'd pass."

"Yeah, it's weird how it comes and goes. To me, *that's* a story. Oh, well. You'll get me that report?"

"I'll do it today," said Uncle Joe. "I'll just fax it to you."

"Wow, you have a fax machine?"

"Yes, missy. I also have an MP3 player."

"You are kidding!"

“Nope, I listen to tunes while I’m riding the tractor. Sylvie wants one for when she’s rolling out pie crusts.”

“You two are quite the techies,” I said, giggling. “I’ll let you know what I dig up about the fish.”

“We’re grateful for whatever you can do. Bye.”

Mom had been listening to me and nodded at the phone. “That’s nice of you.”

I nodded. “We’ll see.”

As I hung up, Mom said, “You know, this newspaper thing might be a new friend opportunity.”

“I doubt it. Remember, I’ve known everyone in my school for years.”

“Maybe so,” said Mom. “Just keep an open mind.”

“Mom, stop,” I said, shaking my head. Didn’t she realize that I’m not the type to just pluck friends out of thin air? I wasn’t expecting friends. I just hoped the newspaper staff wouldn’t all be geeks, or even worse, annoying troublemakers like Cynthia Craver. One in my life was enough.

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CHAPTER 5

NEVER RAISE YOUR HAND

Thursday after school, I headed down the hall toward Mr. Chicelli's room and nearly plowed into Ms. Smith.

"Hi, Emily. How was your summer?"

"Pretty good. We spent some time over in Tennessee."

"That sounds nice. I biked through Maine and then came back to create all new lesson plans. Have you been thinking about your science project?"

I glanced at my watch, trying to think of the best way to answer this question. Ms. Smith's life was all about science projects. I'd learned that last year in her class. "Well, you know I always have trouble deciding what to do. Lucky I've got some time to think about it."

“Well, sure you do. Try to think about something relevant to your life.”

I shrugged. “Sorry, but science doesn’t seem relevant to anything in my life.”

“Hmm, you’re on the swim team, right? How about what you eat and how it affects performance? Or, which swim suit offers the least resistance in the water?”

I nodded politely, hearing her but not really listening. I *needed* to get to the newspaper meeting. Hey, wait, did she say relevant? “Ms. Smith, why would fish die in a perfectly nice river?”

Now, Ms. Smith checked *her* watch. “Wow, Emily, that’s a big question, because simply put, there are a boat-load of possibilities. I need to get to a department meeting. Come by my classroom one day during your study hall, and we’ll make a list.” She snapped her fingers. “Fish dying? Sounds like a science project premise to me.” Ms. Smith whirled around and strode off toward the Faculty Center.

I rushed into Mr. Chicelli’s room for the newspaper meeting. “I’m sorry I’m late. I got caught by Ms. Smith.”

Mary Carnell said, “Did she ask if you’d picked a science project yet?”

“Always,” I replied, and sat beside Mary. “And, big surprise, apparently I might already have picked one.”

“Extra-credit diva,” whispered Drew.

“Yeah, I probably am,” I said, grinning at a fellow seventh-grader I’d known since kindergarten. “It might be

nice for once to pick something early so I don't have it hanging over my head."

"Good philosophy, Miss Sanders, so let us continue," said Mr. Chicelli, from the back of the room. "Since most of last year's newspaper staff graduated, we're starting this year with a less-experienced group. We've been discussing the position of editor. Anyone willing to try it?"

Silence.

"Sam?" asked Mr. Chicelli, moving toward his desk. "Are you interested?"

"I'm thinking, sir," answered a tall, deeply tanned boy.

"Well, you did say you'd had newspaper experience at your old school."

"Yeah," said Sam. "I can probably handle it."

"Who is he?" I whispered.

"Eighth-grader, transfer from Greensboro," answered Mary Carnell.

I studied Mary for a minute wondering what the theme of her outfit was. Mary's dad was a famous sculptor and her mom wrote romance novels, both pretty unusual occupations in our small town. Mary's talent was painting, and she was good enough to have her art hanging at the central library community gallery. Last year, she'd occasionally show up wearing all one-color outfits that usually had a theme. Today, the color was orange. Sometimes, the themes were hard to guess, like the day she wore all silky

white with sparkly beads and a long fringed scarf. That outfit was to honor Elvis's birthday. "I like your 'celebrating autumn' look," I said, pointing to Mary's sweater. Glancing up at Sam, I whispered, "How did the new guy get such a good suntan?"

"I heard he spent part of the summer with relatives on the California coast."

"Are there any objections?" said Mr. Chicelli, getting everyone's attention. "Well, Sam, it's unanimous. As the new editor, what's your first order of business?"

"Get help," said Sam, shoving his shaggy black hair off his forehead. "I need an assistant editor, sports writers, and a graphics pro."

Four guys raised their hands. Each wanted sports. Sam chose two and assigned the sports each of them would cover. I listened for a moment and asked, "Isn't someone going to cover *girls' sports*?"

"Oh, you mean someone might actually want to read about field hockey and volleyball?" Sam asked. "We can give them a few sentences."

Grumbles echoed from the girls in the room. Mr. Chicelli said, "I hate to intervene, but we should have all sports covered, so you might need one more writer."

"Understood," said Sam, pointing to me. "How about 'Red'?"

"Call me Emily, and I'll consider it."

SOMETHING STINKS!

He bowed, and said, “Thank you, oh gracious one. Now, about the graphics person. Anyone draw?”

I looked around and then said, “I think Mary is the one you need. She’s won the county fair art competition for three straight years.”

Sam raised his dark eyebrows, and said, “Impressive. Want the job?”

Mary nodded and grinned her thanks to me.

“All right,” said Sam, looking around. “Who’s gonna be Number Two, the one that does all the hard work and makes me look good?”

Everyone groaned, and Mr. Chicelli said, “Gee, Sam, you’re making the spot for assistant editor sound irresistible!”

Then I made a big mistake. I raised my hand. “What do you actually have to do?”

Mr. Chicelli said, “Some writing, like pieces about the school, helping me proofread and edit the articles into newspaper form.”

I stared at a scuff on my shoe, and thought for a minute.

Mr. Chicelli waited, and then he said, “You’d be a good assistant editor, Emily.”

“Then it’s settled,” said Sam, giving a thumbs-up sign. “Let’s vote.”

Everyone’s hand shot up, and before I could blink, I was assistant editor to a guy with an ego as big as a bus.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Gail E. Hedrick, middle-grade fiction author, freelance writer, editor, proofreader, and former teacher in the physical education field, reads the sports section everyday, loving the stories behind the scores. Spurred to write herself, after her first piece sold, she was hooked. With subjects ranging from how-to's, fitness, and etiquette to mysteries, she is read by kids and teens everywhere. She grew up on a lake in Michigan, spent many years on the lakes and rivers of Virginia and North Carolina, and now lives in Bradenton, Florida, and can be reached at www.gailehedrick.com.

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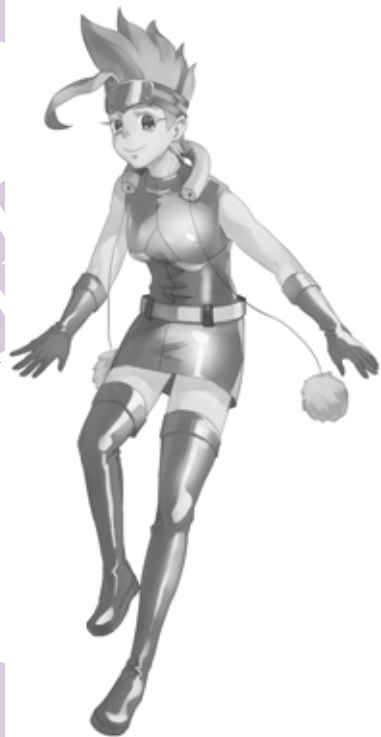


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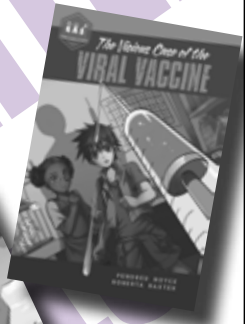
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