

THE H.O.G. SYNDROME
BY
POPPY Z. BRITE (AGE 12)

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CHAPTER ONE

"GRUNCH"

Joey Casta was sitting in the cafeteria of Garfield High School with one of the notorious "hot" lunches -- commonly known around the school as "grunches" -- on the table in front of him. He poked rather tentatively at the hamburger and a drop of watery ketchup oozed out from under the soggy sesame seed bun.

"Great green globs of greasy grimy gopher guts," Joey hummed under his breath, "little birdies' dirty feet, marinated monkey meat -- "

"French-fried eyeballs sitting in a pan of blood," Lizzie Borden joined in, sitting down beside him, "and I forgot my spoon!" She giggled. Joey grinned at her.

"Lizzie Borden took an ax ... " someone across the cafeteria said very loudly and nastily.

"Shut up, Carlo," Lizzie shouted back good-naturedly. "Hey, Joey, did you hear about little Steffi Hart?"

"No, what about him?"

"He's in the sickroom -- he got sick on the grunch. Such things shouldn't happen to a freshman."

"Yeah. Poor Steffi. Shall we go offer our sympathies?"

"Don't be silly, Joey. We hardly know the -- hey!" Lizzie's eyes were just beginning to sparkle. "Yeah -- let's go see him. And let's bring Carlo!"

"Carlo Rossi? Let's not!"

"C'mon, Joey. He may not win the Mr. Congeniality award -- "

" -- That's the understatement of the year -- "

" -- but you've got to admit he's the Garfield Tribune's best reporter. And I think it's about time the Trib ran another story about the grunches."

"Well, if anyone knows how to complain, it's Carlo," Joey sighed. "Let's go."

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When Carlo Rossi heard about Steffi Hart, he grinned somewhat maliciously, grabbed a small spiral notebook, and headed for the door. He knew a good story when he heard one. "Where is this kid?"

"In the nurse's room," Lizzie answered.

Carlo was already in the nurse's office when Lizzie and Joey arrived. "Exactly what happened, Steffi?"

"Well, I ate the hamburger and it was really awful. Then my lunch period was over, so I went to math. In the middle of math, I started having pains in my stomach. They got real bad, so bad I thought I was going to -- well, you know."

"Yes, and? Go on, go on."

"Well, I raised my hand and asked to be excused to Mrs. O'Grady's office. So here I am." The freshman lay back and closed his eyes, looking pale behind his wire-rimmed glasses.

Lizzie patted Steffi's curly hair. "Poor baby. Will you write the story, Carlo?"

"You bet I will. This may be front-page material."

"But that's not enough!" Lizzie said, almost to herself. Carlo and Joey turned to look at her.

"What's not enough?" asked Carlo, his voice dripping with contempt.

"Hey," said Joey, "don't talk to her like that."

"It's all right, Joey. I just meant that lots of stories about the grunches have been printed, and nobody seems to pay any attention to them anymore. I was thinking maybe a committee -- "

"A committee," said Carlo scornfully.

"Not like Ramsey Meade's committees," said Joey, catching on, "not the kind that passes out buttons and gets people to sign petitions. Maybe a -- a secret committee that strikes in the dead of night, leaving signs of our awful presence!"

Even Carlo liked that idea.

"Steffi," whispered Lizzie. "Wake up ... you wanna be on a committee?"

Carlo's story was given an inch of space on the fifth page of the school newspaper.

GRUNCH TROUBLE

By Carlo Rossi

Stefan Hart, an unsuspecting freshman, fell ill yesterday after eating the grunch. This is a warning

to all new kids. Brown-bag it.

That Friday, Joey, Lizzie, Steffi, and Carlo held an unofficial meeting at Lizzie's house to decide who else deserved the honor of being on their committee. They decided to ask Ramsey Meade, the head of the student body (because he had influence in high places) and his girlfriend Junie Churchill (because she was the only person who could talk Ramsey into joining).

Junie accepted. After a great deal of persuasion, so did Ramsey.

Thusly, H.O.G. was born.

CHAPTER TWO

"H.O.G."

H.O.G. stood for "Horrible Organization for Grunch." Joey had thought of it -- their slogan was "You couldn't feed this slop to the H.O.G.s." Everyone was sworn to secrecy for obvious reasons.

The first official meeting of H.O.G. was held at Headquarters (Lizzie's house). To anyone looking on, it wouldn't have appeared very official -- Lizzie was sprawled on the floor painting a big sign which was to have the H.O.G. slogan on it; Joey and Steffi were watching her ("supervising," Joey called it); Carlo was slumped against Lizzie's bed eating all the potato chips, and Ramsey was

sitting in a yellow and white director's chair with Junie at his knee. The radio was playing a popular song. Lizzie put the finishing touches on her sign, clicked off the radio, and clapped her hands for attention. No one noticed her.

"Atten -- shun!" Lizzie said. That time everybody looked up.

"The first meeting of H.O.G. will now come to order," she said importantly. It was her turn to act as president and she was going to make the most of it.

"Come to order -- ha!" said Ramsey.

"The meeting will come to order," Lizzie repeated firmly. "Since this is our first meeting, there is no old business to be discussed and no minutes to be read. Minutes are a waste of time anyway. Ramsey, what is today's business, please?"

"On today's agenda is the discussion of the hot lunch" (Ramsey was the only person in the school who never said "grunch," but he did say the word "hot" with a hint of sarcasm in his voice) "program at Garfield High School. Today's acting officers are Elizabeth Borden, president; Ramsey Meade, myself, advisor; June Churchill, secretary; Joseph Casta and Carlo Rossi, sergeants at arms; and Stefan Hart, stand-in treasurer for Miss Borden."

"Somebody turn him off," said Carlo.

Joey raised his hand. "Joey has the floor," said Lizzie.

"I think," he said, "that you should tell everyone what we're going to do."

"Good idea. Junie, go ahead and add that to today's agenda. OK, does anyone have any suggestions? Ramsey has the floor."

"I could," Ramsey offered, "bring up the subject at the next student council meeting. I'm aware of the fact that it's been discussed before, but I believe it's worth a try."

"I'm sure it is. It would be great if you could do that. Steffi has the floor."

"I was sort of thinking ... " Steffi began shyly.

"Did it hurt?" interrupted Carlo. Lizzie glared at him, then said gently, "Go on, Steffi."

Steffi glanced timidly at Carlo, who looked away. "I thought we could raid the cafeteria at night and put up signs."

Everyone stared at Steffi, who looked terrified. They had thought he was such a scared rabbit, and he'd come up with a suggestion they weren't even sure they'd dare to try!

"My mother might not like that," Junie ventured.

Carlo looked at her with totally unconcealed disgust. "What in the world did I do?" she asked.

"Nothing, Junie, it's just that warriors and soldiers don't usually go running to ask their mommies -- "

"All right, big mouth, that's about enough," warned Ramsey.

"I suppose you're going to stop me, Mr. Student Body President?"

"I happen to be the boxing champion of the Young Republicans -- "

"Oh, you would -- that's such a snob organization -- "

"ORDER!" yelled Lizzie. "Carlo, you're the sergeant at arms. You're supposed to keep the peace, not break it. Steffi, that's the best suggestion I've heard all day. Junie, I hate to agree with Carlo, but we're not really supposed to tell our mothers." Carlo smirked.

Inspired, Steffi added to his suggestion, and by the end of the meeting it was all planned. Instead of leaving school that day, Carlo would hide in the supply closet. (They chose Carlo because he came from a very large family and his parents probably wouldn't even notice they were missing a kid.) At 11:00 that night, the others would sneak back to school and Carlo would let them in the back entrance.

It was going to be known as the Big Mac raid.

CHAPTER THREE

"THE BIG MAC RAID"

"Have you got them?" Carlo asked.

"They're in my Porsche," answered Ramsey. "Come along and help us bring them in."

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"What in the world ... ?" the boy at the next table said to himself, staring at his plate. "This is actually a decent burger."

"Don't you know?" asked Joey, tilting his chair back and gazing earnestly into the boy's face. "Somebody broke into the cafeteria last night and left Big Macs in the place of the grunches. They also stuck their posters all over the place."

"A gang that calls themselves H.O.G., wasn't it? I've been hearing about them all day."

"H.O.G.," Joey said thoughtfully. "Yeah, I think it was H.O.G."

CHAPTER FOUR**"DARY JUSTICE AND THE SANDY FOOTPRINTS MYSTERY"**

Spring break snuck up on Garfield High School like the Gauls on the Romans, and after careful consideration the members of H.O.G. decided to spend the week at Lizzie's family's beach house.

Their first day there was fairly uneventful. But the second day everyone was sitting on the beach when something happened. Lizzie had just returned from a two-mile walk up and down the beach looking for clams, and as they sat there, they noticed someone coming up the beach toward them. He walked as if he were looking at something on the sand.

"Hey, whatcha doin'?" Joey asked, jogging up to him. The stranger didn't answer, just kept following a trail of footprints on the wet sand. Joey walked behind him kicking at the prints.

When the stranger reached the group he stopped, glanced at their feet, and looked back at the footprints. "Aha!" He pointed at Lizzie. "These footprints -- they're yours, aren't they?"

"That's amazing! How'd you know?"

"Elementary, my dear Lizzie. The prints, judging from the depth of them, were made by thongs. You're the only one here wearing thongs!"

"And how did you know my name?"

"Well, here where you wrote your name in the sand -- it has chips of red nail polish in it. You are wearing red nail polish."

Lizzie pointed at Junie. "She has on red nail polish too. How do you know she's not Lizzie?"

"That's June and she's wearing an entirely different shade of red. Wait -- before you ask how I know her name, I'll tell you. I can see it on the personalized ankle bracelet Ramsey gave her!"

"You're a regular Barnaby Jones!" Joey said, looking at the stranger admiringly. "What's your name?"

"My name is -- brace yourself -- Dary Justice!"

"What's Dary short for?"

"Irrelevant."

"Does that mean you don't want to tell me?"

"Got it first crack out of the box."

"Well, look, Dary, why don't you ride to town with us and we can talk over a pizza."

Dary smiled. "Sure thing, Joey."

Joey grinned. "I won't ask. I just won't ask."

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"OK, kids, what'll it be?"

"A large pizza with everything -- only hold the anchovies."

"And the black olives."

"And the onions."

"And the peppers."

"And the sausage."

"And the pepperoni."

"You don't like pepperoni? Boy, you're weird."

"You heard me, didn't you?"

"And the bacon."

"Bacon?"

"My mother always puts bacon on our pizzas. I hate it."

"You must have a weird mother."

"She's crazy, really crazy. Every day when I come home from school she says 'You et all your lunch today, Carlo?' and I say 'No, Ma' and then she wants to know why not and I tell her and she shakes her head and goes, 'What's the world coming to, when my little boy has to eat garbage.' You know, maybe she's not so crazy."

"Hold the anchovies."

"We said anchovies!"

"We did not!"

"We did too!"

"Did not!"

"Did too!"

"Did not!"

"HEY!" yelled the waitress. Ramsey and Carlo stopped arguing.

"You have just ordered a large pizza with everything, minus the anchovies, minus the black olives, minus the onions, minus the peppers, minus the sausage, minus the pepperoni, and minus the bacon which we don't have anyway.

Now, am I correct in assuming that what you want is a large cheese pizza?"

"Why no. We want a large pizza with everything, minus the anchovies, minus the -- hey, why'd she walk away?"

"Ever been to this place before, Dary?" Lizzie asked.

"No -- but it's gotta be better than the school cafeteria. You know, I really wish somebody would do something about that food."

Lizzie glanced at Carlo. Carlo glanced at Steffi. Steffi glanced at Junie. Junie glanced at Ramsey. Ramsey glanced at Joey. Joey nodded ever so slightly. And suddenly everyone was leaning toward Dary, all talking at once, telling him about a thing called H.O.G.

CHAPTER FIVE
"COMMUNIQUES"

Dear Dary,

I am sitting in math class writing this. I'm lucky to have math before grunch (that's what we call the "hot" lunch) since it's my worst subject. It's Steffi's worst subject too and he has it right after grunch! Freshmen are unlucky people, I guess.

In case you are worried, let me tell you that H.O.G. is not all work. For instance, the party we had last Saturday night -- but Joey is trying to steal the paper so I guess I'll let him tell you about that.

Hi, Barnaby! (Jones, that is!) Yeah, the party was a real blast. We played Two Minutes in the Closet with numbers, but it didn't work out too well because me and Steffi and Carlo kept picking eight which we knew was Lizzie's number. You know I'm going with Lizzie, and I

think Carlo has a crush on her, but Steffi is just plain scared of Ramsey! He (Ramsey) is not as great as he thinks he is, but he sure talks big.

Well, guess I'll give him the paper now. Been nice talking t

This is Ramsey and I want you to know that what Joseph said about me is in no way true. "Not as great as he thinks he is," ha! I happen to be the Young Republicans boxing champion as I told Carlo a few weeks ago when he was being particularly nasty to June. Everyone says he's practically reformed but I think it's a cover-up.

He is reading over my shoulder and he says I should know about cover-ups because I'm going to be a second R. Nixon. Well, it takes one to know one.

In closing I would like to ask for your real name since I never call anyone by their nickname. It doesn't fit my image.

Dary -- Saturday night at the party given by H.O.G. for H.O.G., Ramsey Meade and Junie Churchill stayed in the closet for eight minutes. You will please note that we were playing Two Minutes in the Closet, not Eight Minutes in the Closet. And when they finally came out, he had lipstick all over his dumb face. Let's see, that covers WHO WHAT WHEN WHERE. I'd tell you WHY but for the life of me I can't

figure it out and anyway Mrs. Nixon wants the paper. Maybe she will tell you WHY.

Isn't he awful, Dary? We only stayed in the closet for seven minutes and I wasn't even wearing lipstick. I think he should write fiction. Ramsey is very romantic though. We're the only sophomore couple that is officially engaged and you should see the nice restaurants and clubs and dances he takes me to. I don't love him for his money, though. If he didn't have a penny in the world I would feel the same way about him.

Do you think that sounds nice? Maybe I should write fiction.

Hi Dary. I see they didn't leave me much space but that doesn't matter since everything has already been said. I wish I wasn't the youngest one in H.O.G. Mostly everybody is nice to me but I can tell they just think of me as a kid.

Your Friends,
Lizzie Borden
Joey Casta
Ramsey Meade
Carlo Rossi
Junie Churchill
Steffi Hart

Dear Fellow H.O.G.s,

I hope you don't see my greeting as arrogant. I realize I'm only an honorary member but I like to call myself a real member.

Steffi -- at the risk of offending you, if you don't want to be treated like a kid, don't act like a kid! You've got to stand up for yourself once in a while!

Ramsey -- get used to calling me Dary because you're not even getting a HINT!!!

Carlo -- if what Junie says is true, and I suspect it is, you should stick to the facts! Otherwise you are a terrific reporter and I hope you stay with it!

Junie -- yes, what you said about Ramsey was very beautiful. I suggest you try your hand at poetry -- one hotshot writer on the committee is plenty!

Joey -- I may be a good detective, but not as good as Barnaby Jones. He has one thing in his favor -- ratings.

Lizzie -- if you keep writing letters in class, your grades are going to be underwater -- that is, below C level. Forgive me ... I know a pun is the lowest form of humor.

Your Friend,

Dary Justice

CHAPTER SIX

"MINUTES, H.O.G., TAKEN BY JUNE CHURCHILL"

Minutes -- H.O.G. -- taken by June Churchill

PRESIDENT: JOSEPH CASTA

ADVISOR: RAMSEY MEADE

TREASURER: ELIZABETH BORDEN

SEARGEANTS AT ARMS: CARLO ROSSI, STEFAN HART (stand-in for Joseph Casta)

CASTA: Your attention, please, ladies and gentlemen. Our treasurer is collecting dues.

BORDEN: Carlo, do I have to have a seeing-eye dog to get more than fifty cents out of you?

ROSSI: OK, OK ... here's a dollar.

CASTA: Finish up, please, treasurer.

BORDEN: I already was.

CASTA: OK. Advisor Meade, what is today's business, please?

MEADE: On today's agenda is the discussion of the "hot" lunch program at Garfield High School. Today's acting officers are --

CASTA: I'm getting a feeling of déjà vu; isn't that the same business as at the last four meetings?

MEADE: Sweetie pie?

MYSELF: Yes, sir?

MEADE: Is that the same agenda we had at our last four meetings?

MYSELF: Yes, sir.

CASTA: Gotta have variety. Let's talk about ... uh ...

MEADE: Sir?

CASTA: Me?

MEADE: Yes, sir.

CASTA: Yes, sir?

MEADE: I admit it would be rather interesting to discuss a topic other than our usual, sir, but other topics aren't our problem. Our problem is the ... the GRUNCH, and I for one would like to see something done about it!

(Applause. Meade looks very pleased.)

(At this point a large turkey walks into the room.)

MEADE: JUNE! WATCH OUT! IT'LL TEAR YOU TO SHREDS!!!

BORDEN: MOM! Who let the turkey in?

MRS. BORDEN: We're having roast turkey tonight, dear. It's much cheaper this way.

BORDEN: GET IT OUT!

ROSSI (to turkey): You're cute, fella. You wanna come live with Carlo? (He exits with turkey.)

HART: I guess you're not having roast turkey tonight, Lizzie.

BORDEN: Kind of looks that way, doesn't it?

CASTA: Order please! This meeting is not over!

(Rossi returns shortly.)

BORDEN: Where's our turkey, Carlo?

ROSSI: I took him home with me. When he looked at me with those big sad eyes, I knew I couldn't let him die.

BORDEN: That's very nice of you, but I think you'd better pay my mother for him.

ROSSI: Uh ... Ramsey?

MEADE: Of course, Carlo. Here's twenty dollars on account of I can't abide live animals.

ROSSI: Thanks, pal.

CASTA: ORDER! Look, the Big Mac raid was a great idea and everybody talked about it for days, but now the talk is dying down. We need another gimmick.

MEADE: Sir?

CASTA: Me?

MEADE: Yes, sir.

CASTA: Yes, sir?

MEADE: I have an idea. We could invite the cafeteria workers to a big banquet at Meade Country Club -- my father owns it -- and then literally give them a taste of their own medicine!

CASTA: You mean serve grunch?

MEADE: Yes, sir.

CASTA: But how?

ROSSI: I know. See, they don't cook the food themselves -- they order it from a big company.

BORDEN: But doesn't that mean we should be sabotaging that company?

ROSSI: No, it's still the cafeteria we're against. They could afford to buy from a better company, but they won't.

CASTA: Thank you, Ramsey, for a great -- and I do mean great -- idea.

MEADE: Thank you, sir.

CASTA: Me?

MEADE: Yes, sir.

CASTA: You're welcome. Meeting adjourned.

CHAPTER SEVEN

"YOU ARE CORDIALLY INVITED"

Ramsey smiled as he slid the last envelope into the slot marked LOCAL. This was one of his better ideas if he did say so himself.

"Ramsey Meade," he said aloud, "you're a genius!" Several people passing by looked at Ramsey strangely, but he was too wrapped up in himself to notice.

He smiled again as he silently translated the menu. Chopped sirloin, green salad, and sautéed vegetables were easy enough -- that was just the soybean hamburger, the two limp lettuce leaves, and the half-boiled peas and carrots in a watery yellow-green sauce. And of course everyone knew the ever-famous fruit cup, or "barf time special" -- the orange gelatin with carrot chips on top that only freshmen dared to try.

After mailing the invitations, Ramsey reported back to Lizzie's house where a H.O.G. meeting was in progress. It appeared that Lizzie was assigning jobs, so Ramsey sat down next to Junie and waited.

"Junie, you're in charge of finding out how many can come. Steffi, I want you to order the food from that company. Ramsey, you've got to get the workers at the country club not to mention this to anybody. Bribe them if you have to. Joey, I want you there when the food's delivered to the club.

"Carlo, I need for you to find out as much as you can about the cafeteria workers. Interview them ... tell them it's for the Trib or something. And if anyone needs help with their job, just come to me.

"Everyone is to be at the Meade Country Club at ten till eight on Wednesday night -- the banquet starts at eight. You'd better eat beforehand."

"Lizzie?"

"What is it, Steffi?"

"What should we wear?"

"Better dress up. I hear the Club is a very snobbish place."

"It is," said Ramsey happily.

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"Lizzie? I've got the goods on the workers."

"Go ahead, Carlo."

"OK, there are five of them -- Lisa, Belle, Erin, Dru, and Mara Lynn. They're college dropouts and members of an exclusive sorority called Delta Omicron Gamma -- guess what that spells in English."

"What?"

"D.O.G.!"

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"D.O.G.?" said Joey incredulously when Carlo told him the next night. "Well, what do you know ... H.O.G. versus D.O.G.!"

"Yeah!" Carlo was almost ecstatic. "And you should see them ... the name really fits! There's the twins, Lisa and Belle, and they dress identical! They're Siamese twins if you ask me ... the whole time I was talking to them, they had their arms around each other's shoulders ... and you know what else?"

"What?"

"They talk in chorus!"

"Oh, no!"

"Oh, yes! Like when I asked them their names, they said 'Lisa and Belle' at the same time -- I don't even know which is which!"

"Here they come!" squealed Lizzie suddenly. "And look at them!"

CHAPTER EIGHT

"IN WHICH MEADE COUNTRY CLUB BECOMES A COMBAT ZONE"

Dear Dary,

Wait'll you hear about the H.O.G. banquet! It was nothing like we expected and I think I started a cold war.

They walked in wearing identical dresses -- all white except for big Greek letters down the front. The Lisa-Belles (we can't tell them apart so that's what we call them) had their arms draped around each other's shoulders. They were in front, but Mara Lynn is the leader. She is Southern and very bossy.

You probably won't believe this, but Mara Lynn was actually marching them. "Left-right-left-right-left-right-HALT!"

"Is this the army or what?" Dru complained.

"QUIET! All right, it looks like we're sitting three to a table." (Steffi, Ramsey, and Junie were sitting at one table and Joey, Carlo, and I were at the next.) "I'll sit with Lisa and Belle." (The Lisa-Belles looked faintly chagrined.) "Dru and Erin may sit at the next one. MARCH!"

Us H.O.G.s were exchanging eye signals like crazy. "Do you believe this?" I whispered.

Ramsey leaned over to our table. "They look vicious. I hope they don't discover we're in charge of this."

"Yeah," agreed Joey, "but we're the only other ones here and I think they may suspect something when we hold our noses as the waiter passes by."

Junie and I went to the ladies' room. Even after we had fixed our hair and refreshed our Peppermint Passion lip gloss, we remained at the mirror talking about THEM.

"Aren't they awful?" Junie said.

"Terrible," I agreed. "That Mara Lynn looks like a blond-haired witch. Did you see what she was doing? She was making the others march! I'm glad I'm not in that stupid sorority."

Junie glanced into the mirror and went suddenly pale. "Oh," she said weakly, "hi, Mara Lynn." I spun around and saw Mara Lynn standing in the doorway -- and boy, did she look mad!

Dary, if you live to be two hundred years old you will still never guess what happened next. And I mean never.

Mara Lynn marched over to me and shook my hand. "Girl, you're sure brave. I never met anyone with the courage to insult the Delta queen."

(Some queen, huh, Dary?)

"Unfortunately," she continued, "we have sworn to declare war against anyone who insults one of our girls."

"In that case," I said, "you've got a whole lot of wars to declare. Let's see. Carlo called you dogs. Joey agreed with him. Steffi -- well, Steffi never insults anybody. Ramsey said -- "

"Lizzie! Shut UP!" Junie was pawing at my shoulder desperately. I brushed her off.

"Calm yourself, Junie. I have a score to settle with this Southern-fried chicken here." I glared at Mara Lynn.

"All right, that does it. Now GET OUT OF MY WAY!" She put her hands against my shoulders and gave me a shove.

Now Dary, I don't have to tell you that I was mad. But I swear to the Lord on high that I didn't mean to do what I did next. I stomped up to Mara Lynn, looked her straight in the eye, and slapped her -- hard -- across the face.

Mara Lynn looked stunned, then furious. "You little brat," she said, separating each syllable. "All you little brats."

I was as shocked as she was, but somehow I managed to smirk at her. Then Junie and I walked out.

We returned to our tables somewhat shaken but completely composed. Mara Lynn came back in and whispered to the Lisa-Belles, who looked at me unbelievably and rushed over to tell Dru and Erin. They looked for all the world like a gang of prissy schoolgirls gossiping.

We all watched as Mara Lynn started to cut the "chopped sirloin." Her knife and fork sprang back out. She tried again. No luck. Finally, exasperated, she started on the "fruit cup."

"Will you look at her!" I giggled as Mara Lynn headed for the ladies' room, turning a lovely shade of green -- about the color of the "green salad," actually.

But I don't think we've seen the last of the D.O.G.s.

Your friend,

Lizzie

Dear Lizzie,

Sounds like a real picnic -- if you'll excuse a slight pun.

Your friend,

Dary Justice

CHAPTER NINE

"SO WHERE'S CARLO?"

"So where's Carlo?" Lizzie complained, flopping onto her bed. "We're supposed to have a meeting this afternoon and he's an hour late."

"Typical of Carlo," Ramsey muttered.

"There's where you're wrong, Ramsey. A reporter may be pushy like Carlo, or downright mean, but one good thing about the reporter is that he will not be late if he can help it. See, if he has an appointment at 3:00 with someone who might give him a lead, he knows he'll miss out on his lead if he arrives at 3:30, unless his appointment happens

to be with a very patient person -- and he can't rely on that."

"Well, we're not a lead, we're a committee, and we distinctly told him to be here at 4:00."

"The principle is the same, dumbhead!"

"Who's a dumbhead?"

"No one. I'm sorry, Ramsey. I guess I'm just a little worried about Carlo. It won't happen again."

"Well, see that it doesn't!"

"Ramsey?" said Joey.

"Yes?"

"Why don't you call his house?" Joey pushed the telephone toward Ramsey.

"Why me?"

"Well, you are a lot more sophisticated than any of us ... "

"That's true, Joseph. All right, I'll do it. What's his number?"

"I'll dial," said Lizzie, and did.

"Uh?" said a voice on the other end of the line.

"Is this the Rossi residence, please?"

"Yeah."

"May I speak to Carlo?"

"Nuh."

"Pardon me?"

"Carlo ain't here."

"Carlo isn't here."

"Well, if he ain't here and he ain't there, where is he?"

"Actually, that's what I'm calling about. Would you happen to know where Carlo is?"

"Think he's walkin' his turkey."

"Thank you," said Ramsey politely, hanging up. "He isn't home. His brother ... I think that's who it was ... said he was out walking his turkey."

"He did mention something about bringing Lou over here," Lizzie reflected.

"Lou?"

"His turkey," Joey reminded Junie. "Listen, do you guys think we should go look for Carlo? I mean, he might have gotten so busy thinking about a story or something that he forgot to keep walking."

"Good idea," said Lizzie. "All in favor ... ?" Everyone nodded.

"OK, we'll leave him a note in case he comes here. Would someone hand me a pencil and paper?" Someone did. Lizzie scrawled a few lines, stuck it on the front door, and they left.

They drove to Carlo's house, stopping to ask everybody they saw if he or she had seen a boy walking a turkey. They got some very weird looks. Nobody had seen Carlo.

Meanwhile, back at Lizzie's house, there were some mysterious goings-on. A white van with "Delta Omicron Gamma" lettered on the side was pulling into the driveway.

"Coast clear?" said Erin.

Mara Lynn, who was driving the van, nodded. "No cars here. Her momma and daddy must be gone somewhere." She parked the van. "Go on, Erin, do it. And if he moves, Dru, you wring the bird's neck."

After an unsuccessful search for Carlo and Lou, the five returned to Lizzie's house and found another note on the front door.

Dear P.I.G.s,

Yes, we know about your stupid little committee. And we know you set up that "banquet." And guess what else? We have Carlo. Also his bird.

If you want the two turkeys back, we'll have to see H.O.G disbanded within thirty days. Otherwise your reporter friend gets on a nonstop flight to Siberia ... and his bird goes into the cooking pot.

WE ARE NOT BLUFFING!

Signed,

Delta Omicron Gamma

CHAPTER TEN

"JUST A WORD FROM YOUR ABDUCTEE"

Dear Lizzie, Steffi, Joey, Junie, & Ramsey,

Just a note from your abductee. I thought I'd let you know that you shouldn't worry about me -- I'm OK. So's Lou.

I'm sure the D.O.G.s will read all the mail I send and get, so don't bother sending me any escape plans. I guess it's OK for me to tell you that I'm being kept in the basement of the D.O.G. sorority house. There's a bed, a john, a pen for Lou, and even a mini-kitchen, so I guess they're not planning to torture me.

Don't worry about notifying my family about this. Unless somebody tells them, they probably won't even know I'm missing. And the D.O.G.s bring me my homework every day. (Enemies till the last.)

I realize this isn't exactly the writing of a gifted journalist such as myself, but that could be because it's 3:00 in the morning.

And I think I'm falling asleep. Write to me, please, and tell Dary to too.

Goodnight,

Carlo

P.S. Would someone tell the editor of the Tribune that I'm on vacation? I don't think the D.O.G.s have thought of that.

P.P.S. It is now 3:30. I spent half an hour thinking of a postscript because I didn't want to end the letter yet.

P.P.P.S. Write!

P.P.P.P.S. I DON'T WANNA GO TO SIBERIA!!!

Dear Carlo,

Of course you're not going to Siberia. And we're not going to let them cook Lou either. Joey says since I got to write the sentimental part, I don't get as much space as the others. Well, he just wants to write and I'm going to give the paper to Steffi instead.

Hi Carlo. That was nice of Lizzie, don't you think? Lizzie is nice. You are too, and although you used to be mean to me, I know you are my friend. Lizzie told me so. I guess I'll give Joey the paper now.

At last I get the paper! You would think since me and Lizzie are going together, she would at least be civil. His Majesty is taking the paper now. I never get to write anything.

Dearest Carlo,

Top of the morning! I'm in quite a good mood since the dance at the yacht club (not the country club) last night -- and you'll never guess who I took! I'll give you a hint -- her initials are J.C. and she was wearing mint-flavored lip

gloss. Take a wild guess at how I knew! She will kill me for telling you that and I really must go.

He's right. I will kill him ... tomorrow. We've got a dinner date tonight.

Your friends,

Lizzie

Steffi

Joey

Ramsey

Junie

Dear Everyone,

COOK LOU??!! No one told me about that!

Steffi has me all figured out, doesn't he?

Your friend,

Carlo

Dear Carlo,

Sherlock Holmes here! The others have told me all about your being kidnapped and I personally don't think it was very nice. Only kidding -- actually, what they are doing to you is against the law and you could press charges.

Your friend,

Dary Justice

Dear Dary,

I know it's against the law, but this is our war ("our" includes you, of course) and I think we should fight it on our own. We can do it -- I know we can. And I don't care who reads this.

Your friend,

Carlo

Dear Carlo,

Don't let them break your spirit!

Your friends,

Lizzie

Joey

Ramsey

Junie

Steffi

Dear Everyone,

I have no intention of letting them break my spirit.

Your friend,

Carlo

CHAPTER ELEVEN**"HOW DO YOU FIT A BLACK TUXEDO OVER A BODY CAST?"**

Junie awoke that morning with the feeling that she had dreamed about something important. After calling for breakfast in bed (her family was middle-class, but Ramsey had given her a maid for Christmas), it came back to her and she knew she had to see Ramsey about it. Junie reached for the telephone.

"Meade residence, Ramsey speaking."

"It's me."

"Well, good morning, baby doll. What can I do for you?"

"Listen, Ramsey, I've got a really great idea. Can I come over?"

"Any time, any day -- only not Wednesday the eleventh, I have a stockholders' meeting then. How about 10:30 this morning?"

"You got yourself a date, Rammy baby. I'll see you then."

"Dress up and I'll take you to the club for brunch."

"Gotcha. In a good mood today?"

"Very. All my stocks are rising."

"Perfect, because this idea may cost a lot. 'Bye."

Such a sweet man, she thought, then sighed. Even she couldn't think of Ramsey Meade as a man; he was just a little boy who thought he was all grown up.

Lost in her thoughts, she got up, dressed, made her preparations, and walked out the door even though she wasn't due at Ramsey's for twenty minutes. Arriving early, she found him smoking a cigar and immersed in Confessions of a Corporate Headhunter.

"A cigar?" Junie did a double take.

"It's chocolate," he explained, hastily shutting the book. "Now what was it you wanted to see me about?"

"Ah, yes. The idea." Smiling secretively, Junie unzipped her purse and slipped out a thin sheaf of papers. "Got it all written down right here."

"Well, may I see it?"

"On one condition."

"And what, may I ask, would that be?"

"This is our secret. The others mustn't know about it just yet."

"Agreed. Now may I see it?"

Junie handed over her papers. As Ramsey skimmed over them, his eyes grew bright and he looked up at Junie admiringly from his seat behind the desk. "You thought this up all by yourself?"

"I just dreamed it up," Junie said truthfully.

"This is wonderful. I'll be happy to finance it when the time comes. 'Churchill and Meade Secret Weapon' ... doesn't it sound magnificent?"

"Better call it CAMSW for short," she advised. "Now about that brunch at the club ... "

"A Meade never breaks a promise," said Ramsey, and stood up. "Are you ready to go?"

"Ready as I'll ever be."

"Then enter once more, my dear, into the luxurious world of the extremely wealthy. Plush country clubs, white Porsches, fabulous yachts ... "

"Oh, shut up."

Their brunch was uneventful. It was when they were driving home, chatting about what they should do that day, that it happened.

Ramsey was driving about twenty-five miles per hour in a thirty-mile-per-hour zone when Junie said, "Doesn't that look like Lizzie's car?"

Ramsey looked where Junie was pointing. "It does, doesn't it? But then yellow Volkswagen Bugs aren't exactly rare."

"Yeah, but that one has a rainbow sticker on the windshield just like Lizzie's."

"Do you know what?"

"No, what?"

"IT'S HEADING STRAIGHT FOR US!!! WE'RE GOING TO DIE ... OR AT LEAST BE MAIMED AND CRIPPLED FOR LIFE ... HOW DO YOU FIT A BLACK TUXEDO OVER A BODY CAST?" Covering his eyes, Ramsey threw himself across the front seat. Junie grabbed the steering wheel and managed to maneuver the Porsche so that it just scraped the Volkswagen.

"Ramsey?" Gingerly, she tapped him on the back. He uncovered one eye and looked up at her.

"You're OK, aren't you? Look, the driver of the Bug was just a kid. Come on, let's go help her."

The young girl had gotten out of the Volkswagen and was tearfully inspecting the damage, a long scratch on the side of the yellow car. Ramsey went over and patted her shoulder. "What's your name, dear?"

"Lu ... Lucy Borden."

"How old are you?"

"Thirteen."

"Thirteen? What are you doing behind the wheel of a car?"

"It's my big sister's. I just got back from boarding school and they don't let you do anything there. I don't have to go back next year anyhow, and I felt like taking a drive -- I know how -- and Lizzie was at her boyfriend's house so I took her car keys and she doesn't know and she's gonna kill me!"

"Now hold on, dear. What did you say your sister's name was?"

"Lizzie."

Ramsey smiled. "June. Come here." Junie came over to them. "June, this is Elizabeth's younger sister."

Lucy wiped her eyes with the back of her hand. "You guys know Lizzie?"

"Remotely. Now" -- he turned to Junie -- "this girl is in real trouble. She took Elizabeth's car without permission and, as you well know, damaged it. Do you think we can help her?"

"I think it's entirely possible. I didn't know Lizzie had a little sister."

"She just returned from boarding school."

"Reform school?"

"No," Lucy said emphatically. "I've never done anything like this before. What's your names?"

"I'm Junie Churchill and this is my boyfriend Ramsey Meade. And you know what we're going to do?"

"Rat me out to Lizzie?"

"No, we're going to take Lizzie's car to the body shop on 11th Street and get that scratch painted over like new. Ramsey will pay for it, won't you, dear?"

"Of course I will. You ladies just lead the way -- I'll follow."

"You won't tell Lizzie, will you?" asked Lucy.

"Well," Junie pretended to consider, "on one condition."

"What's that?"

"That you promise never to do anything like this again. Even people with licenses shouldn't drive other people's cars without permission. Deal?"

"Deal."

Lucy didn't say much until the car was fixed and they were all leaving the body shop. Then she tugged at Junie's sleeve and said, "Hey, Junie, can I tell you something?"

"Go ahead."

"I found some H.O.G. stuff in Lizzie's room and I wormed it out of her and I'm sure I'll enjoy being the eighth member."

CHAPTER TWELVE

" ... AND OTHER ASSORTED PROBLEMS "

The phone rang at the Meade residence. Ramsey sighed as he picked it up -- five calls from his broker in two hours was a bit much.

"What is it now, Jack?"

"What?"

"Oh, June. I apologize ... I thought it was my broker. He's been calling me as if it was going out of style. Did you want something?"

"Yes, I wanted to talk to you ... but you seem to be in kind of a bad mood."

"A visit from a pretty girl might cheer me up. Busy?"

"I'll be over in ten minutes."

•

"OK," said Junie as she closed the door of Ramsey's room, "I think it's time for CAMSW."

"Why now?"

"Because we only have ten days."

"Ten days?"

"The D.O.G.s said they'd have to see H.O.G. disbanded within thirty days or Carlo goes to Siberia and Lou ... well, you know. That was twenty days ago."

"Oh my. I forgot about that! I suppose you're right."

"I know I am," Junie said grimly. "Someone's gonna get disbanded, but it's not gonna be us. You make the call."

Ramsey found the phone book, looked up a number, and dialed. "Hello, is this Joe's Take-Out T-Shirts? Well, I would like five hundred made to order."

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

"H-O-G, SIS BOOM BEE"

Ramsey and Junie were handing out T-shirts to every Garfield student who walked by. "Yes, it's free, but only if you'll wear it to assembly this morning ... here, take one ... YES, TAKE IT! ... no, it's not charity ... look, do you want this or not? ... good ... here."

"Menial," Ramsey growled, "menial. Can't we get some help? How many to go?"

"Only two hundred or so," Junie soothed, "and here come Joey and Lizzie. Let's get them to help. Joey! Lizzie!" Without waiting for an answer, Junie shoved a cardboard box into Joey's arms. "Here, pass these out. Save two for yourselves."

"But what -- "

"Tell you later -- pass them out now!"

"Junie -- "

"Will you please just do it -- they've all got to be passed out by assembly!"

"But -- "

"DO IT, WILL YOU!!!"

"Lizzie, come on, let's do it. It's important and I bet it has something to do with H.O.G." Joey and Lizzie started passing out T-shirts.

"Wear it to assembly ... wear it to assembly ... "

"Don't ask me what it's about, I don't know ... "

In ten minutes all the T-shirts were handed out and Lizzie, Joey, Steffi, Ramsey, and Junie were in a broom closet changing clothes.

"Will somebody please tell me what this is all about?" said Lizzie.

"Just take a look at your T-shirt," Junie told her.

"I can't read upside down."

"So read someone else's."

"Hold still, Steffi. 'You couldn't feed this slop to

the' -- hey! H.O.G.s! You mean we've been passing these out to everybody in the school?"

Junie glanced at Ramsey, who was putting on his jacket and tie over a yellow T-shirt with red lettering. "Think it's time to tell them?"

"Tell us what?" said Joey.

"I suppose so," said Ramsey.

"Tell us what?" said Steffi.

"You tell, Ramsey," said Junie.

"TELL US WHAT?" said Lizzie.

"All right, I'll tell." Ramsey addressed himself to the others. "About a week ago, June came to me with a brilliant scheme that involved five hundred T-shirts and quite a lot of luck. This scheme will really go into action in about" -- he checked his watch -- "ten minutes. This morning the D.O.G.s are scheduled to speak about 'Our Cafeteria's Mission' at assembly. The students will be in the auditorium when they come onstage ... and from there the five of us are to ad-lib it."

•

"Got the speech, Mara Lynn?" said Dru.

"Will you stop askin' me that? Of course I have the speech. I had the speech five minutes ago and I'll still have the speech in five minutes."

"How many days do they have, Mara Lynn?" the Lisa-Belles giggled.

"Eight. That Siberia flight hasn't been canceled, has it? It's time for us to go on."

As they stepped onto the stage, a hum of voices went through the audience. Then Mara Lynn screamed.

"IT'S A MASS REBELLION! THEY'RE ALL WEARING H.O.G. T-SHIRTS!!!"

•

"Let's take the stage, pass it on," Ramsey hissed to Junie on his left.

"Let's take the stage, pass it on."

"Let's take the stage, pass it -- "

"NO! YOU CAN'T COME UP HERE! HEY, YOU LITTLE BRATS, QUIT THAT SHOVING! NO! GET DOWN!"

"Fellow students," Lizzie shouted into the microphone, "I see most of you are wearing your T-shirts. But none of you know what H.O.G. really is. (No, Mr. Rodgers, sir, please just let us finish.) Well, I'll tell you. We" -- and she made a sweeping motion with her arm -- "plus Carlo Rossi, my kid sister, and a boy named Dary Justice, are the Horrible Organization for Grunch, and we have tried our darndest to do something about the grunch situation. Now, do we have your support?" There was wild applause. "Then

let's hear it! H-O-G! Sis-boom-bee! H.O.G. power, H.O.G. power, H-O-G! C'mon, everybody! H-O-G -- "

As the audience joined in, standing and clapping frenziedly, the D.O.G.s rushed to the principal and resigned. By the end of the day they were on their way to Hawaii and Carlo and Lou were free.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

"A LOOK BACK AND A LOOK FORWARD"

Joey was sitting in the cafeteria with one of the notorius new lunches in front of him. He poked sadly at the hamburger, and a tiny beetle scuttled across his plate. Joey swallowed hard and pushed the plate away.

"Joey. Hi." Lizzie sat down and rested her chin in her hands.

"Know what?"

"Yeah, the food's worse than before. I heard the new cooks are from the Sundale Rest Home ... Steffi says it's impossible to complain because they can't even hear."

"Thus endeth the war," Joey sighed. "Hey, Carlo. Over here." Carlo elbowed his way through the crowd and sat down beside Lizzie.

"I wouldn't eat that if I were you," Joey advised. "It's got bugs in it."

"So what's a bug here and there? It's the last day of school, sourpuss. Cheer up." Carlo took a big bite of his hamburger, choked, and ran to the water fountain.

"There goes a real optimist," said Junie, setting her tray down next to Carlo's.

"And I never suspected I'd hear anyone say that about Carlo Rossi," Ramsey added.

Carlo came back and sat down rather pale and subdued-looking. "I ate an ant. I really ate an ant."

"How do you know?"

"I felt him wiggling all the way down. Oh, well, so the new grunches have a few bugs to be ironed out."

"Carlo, I never thought I'd be saying this to you, but will you please SHUT UP WITH THE OPTIMISM!"

"OK," said Carlo cautiously, "sure, Lizzie."

"Listen," Lizzie said, "why don't we meet at Headquarters after school? I've got a few signs to give away."

"Such as?"

"Oh ... YOU COULDN'T FEED THIS SLOP TO THE H.O.G.s ... H.O.G. POWER ... H.O.G. PROTEST ... " Lizzie's nose touched her hamburger as she started to cry.

"Hey, Lizzie ... " Gently, Carlo patted her hand.

"Watch it, Carlo. You took Lucy to the school dance, right?"

"Right."

"Well, I don't want her accusing me of trying to steal her boyfriend."

"Lucy would understand, Lizzie. She's my girl; you're my friend and I guess I can hold my friend's hand if she needs it."

•

"Lucy?"

"Here."

"Joey?"

"Here."

"Junie?"

"Here."

"Steffi?"

"Here."

"Ramsey?"

"Present."

"Carlo?"

"Here."

"And Lizzie ... I'm here." Lizzie slammed the record book and tossed it across the room. "There's your precious records, Junie ... absolutely worthless."

"Yes," Ramsey agreed. "I'm sorry, June, but all that work for nothing ... the only thing we have to show for it is a couple of bruises and upset stomachs!" Junie was looking close to tears. Ramsey put his arm around her.

"For once, know-it-all," said Carlo, "I can tell you you're wrong. If you want something to show for your work,

look around you. These people are your friends ... and you say you don't have anything to show." He shook his head. "Yeesh!"

"You're right, Carlo," Ramsey said quietly. "I'm sorry, everyone."

"Hey, guess what," Lizzie cried, opening a letter from Dary, "something to cheer us up. We've been invited to Dary's house for a week. Anyone wanna go?"

•

"Hello?"

"Ahem ... 'Dary'?"

"Hi, Ramsey. Can you guys come?"

"Oh, certainly. We'll see you on the 20th, but that isn't what I'm calling about. I've already asked the others and they said yes."

"Asked them what?"

"Just this: how would you like to go on an all-expense-paid trip to my father's resort island?"

"Are you kidding? I'd love to!"

"Fine. We'll come to your house, stay until the weekend, drive to my father's private airstrip, and leave for Meade Island. Is that all right with you?"

"All right? It's perfect!"

•

"Dary," said Carlo, "are you ever going to tell us your real name?"

"I've told you dozens of times, Carlo. You just didn't realize it."

"So?"

"So let's play Twenty Questions."

"Aw, Dary ... "

"Carlo, do you want to know my real name or not?"

"What do you think?"

"I don't know."

"Oh, for ... is it bigger than a breadbox?"

Eighteen questions later, Dary was sitting and watching the others whispering among themselves. "OK, it's not Darryl or Darren or Darius ... what else could it be?"

"I know," said Lucy.

"Lucy," said Carlo solemnly, "the time has come for you to prove your love for me."

"Don't worry, Carlo, I'm going to tell you." Lucy whispered something in Carlo's ear. "Pass it on." When everyone had heard it, Lucy walked over to Dary. "OK, private eye, we're ready. Come on, troops."

"Ask him, Lucy."

"Yeah, ask me, Lucy."

"OK. Dary Justice, place your right hand over your heart and repeat after me."

"After me."

"Clever. Quite clever. OK -- for the prize of \$100,000, payable in Monopoly money, is your real name ... DARY?"

"YES! Girl, how would you like to play Jedidiah Jones to my Barnaby?"

"It was simple, Dary. What else could it stand for? And by the way, do you have a middle name?"

"Yes -- my name is Dary N. Justice."

"What's the N stand for?"

Dary suppressed a grin. "Sorry -- I never tell anyone my middle name."

"Oh no!" groaned Joey. "We're right back where we started!"