

chapter 1

Who *Are* These Ameche Brothers?

“Adam, are you there?” Jennifer banged on the van. “I know you are!” she shouted. She cupped her hands around her eyes and stood on tiptoe to see through the tinted windows. He *was* in there, his legs stretched out on the floor by the backseat, motionless.

Her legs had goose bumps. The wind was blowing off the river, and it seemed more like early March than early May. “Come on, Adam. . . . You can’t do this. You knew I was coming over!” She banged on the van several more times. “We’ve been planning this for a week . . . *Adam!*” She peered in again. Not a twitch.

Jennifer was standing in Adam's driveway, screaming at his locked van. "*Adam Canfield, you birdbrain, you know we have to see the Ameche brothers! Wake up! AAAAAAAAAAA-dam!*"

"Jennifer, sweetie. Stop." It was Adam's mother, standing at the front-porch door. "You're dealing with an Olympic-class sleeper. You've got to pull out the big guns." She stretched her arm toward the van and pressed her key, unlocking the doors. "Go hard," she called.

Jennifer slid the side door open. She grabbed Adam's ankle and shook it. Nothing. She did it again.

"Come on," she said. "I know you're awake."

"I'm not. Go away."

"How come you're talking if you're not awake?" she said.

There was a long pause.

"Only my lips are awake."

Jennifer climbed up onto the middle seat of the van. She was on her knees, facing the back, elbows resting on the seat top, staring down at Adam on the floor. She made a hocking sound.

"Adam Canfield, if you don't wake up right now—and I mean all of you, not just your lips—I will spit this loogie right on your head. One . . ."

She made a hocking sound again. He was sure she was bluffing. Jennifer's manners were way too good for her to spit on her coeditor.

"Two . . ." A double hocking sound. No way she could hold all that loogie in without gagging. She was definitely bluffing. He wished he could take a peek to be sure, but then it would be hard to argue that he was asleep.

"Three."

He felt something wet.

"Gross!" he screamed, sitting bolt upright and using his sleeve to wipe the side of his face.

She held up a water bottle and let a few drops fall. "Faked you out."

"You are a terrible person," Adam said. "I wasn't hurting a fly, taking a little Sunday afternoon nap. . . ."

"A nap?" Jennifer said. "You take naps in your van?"

"Lots of people sleep in the car," said Adam.

"Not when it's parked in the driveway."

Did he have to explain himself every second? On a chilly afternoon with lots of sun, the van was the coziest place he knew. He'd been minding his own business, playing Bubble Struggle on the computer

for maybe two hours at most, when his parents started making a big thing about how he was wasting his life on “stupid” computer games and then staying up past midnight to finish his homework. Somehow that calm discussion had turned into a yelling match. So he’d stomped out of the family room to prove his point, ducked out the back door by the boiler room, and circled toward the front of the house, trying to think of a plan. There was the van, looking warm and friendly. He’d climbed in for a minute.

“Close the door,” he said to Jennifer. “It’s freezing out.”

“Your mom says you’ve been conked out for more than two hours.”

His mom knew he was in the van? What was she, the FBI? Just for one second, couldn’t she be like other moms and feel terrible because he’d run away?

“I had the strangest dream,” Adam said. “I dreamed that we had no school tomorrow because they came out with a new flavor of Brown-Sugar Wallops.”

Jennifer just stared at him.

“Your hair’s different,” he said.

She smiled. She’d put it in braids, and she wiggled her head back and forth to bounce them.

“They look like the flying swings at Tri-River Adventure Park,” he said. “I love that ride.”

“I guess that’s a compliment,” she said. “We’ve got to go. I told the Ameche brothers we’d be there by now. I need you to take this seriously, Adam. I really think they’re our best chance to save the *Slash*.”

“Right,” said Adam. He was thinking of the long list of people who had tried to save the *Slash*—their school newspaper at Harris Elementary/Middle School—and how all of them had failed.

Mrs. Quigley, the acting principal, hadn’t been able to save the *Slash*, and she loved Adam and Jennifer.

Mr. Brooks, his favorite teacher, hadn’t been able to save the *Slash*.

A letter from the National Scholastic Press Association on official stationery defending freedom of the press hadn’t been able to save the *Slash*.

A story in the *New York Times* that praised the *Slash* hadn’t saved the *Slash*.

How were the Ameche brothers going to save the *Slash*? They were just kids. Adam had said all of this to Jennifer more than once, but the girl would not quit.

“You’re the one who’s dreaming,” he said.

“Got to live your dreams,” said Jennifer, jumping out of the van. Adam did not move; he seemed

to be struggling with a large lump in his pocket. He finally pulled out a plastic grocery bag with a smooth, rock-hard white sphere inside, almost as big as a tennis ball.

“My God, what is that?” asked Jennifer. “It looks like a giant eyeball.”

Adam took it from the bag and stuffed it into his mouth. His eyes bulged from opening his jaw so wide. After a lot of loud slurping, he popped the ball back into the bag with his tongue.

“Want a suck of my jawbreaker?” he said. “It’s delicious.”

Adam and Jennifer biked together, racing much of the way.

“Passing on the left!” he yelled, streaking by her.

“*Au revoir, mon chéri,*” she called when she overtook him.

The e-mail from the Ameche brothers had said they lived in the West End, which was on the other side of the downtown area. It was a pretty long ride, twenty minutes even biking hard, but Adam loved this time of year, when he could bike everywhere. His bike was his freedom. He loved riding to the West

End and often wished he lived there. It was a beachy neighborhood by the river that had once been a summer community of little cottages. Over the years, city people had moved out to live there full-time, winterizing the cottages, adding porches and decks and second and third floors.

Houses in the West End were crowded in so close that backyards were just narrow strips. Most houses did not have garages or driveways, so the streets and alleys were crammed with parked cars.

That's what Adam loved: everything was more squeezed together than in River Path or River Bluffs, where he and Jennifer lived. Every block had restaurants and bars and delis and pizzerias. And real shops: a butcher, a florist, a tailor, along with ice-cream and hardware stores and even a baseball-card store. And people were always walking around, even late at night. Kids in the West End had no trouble getting up wiffle ball or touch-football games or finding other kids to kick around a Hacky Sack. To Adam, the West End seemed like one big sleepover.

All the West End streets and alleys were named for months or states. February Path. Minnesota Walk. The Ameche brothers' e-mail said they lived on May Way West, in the middle of the block.

“That must be it,” Jennifer said. “The e-mail said to look for a basketball hoop painted in zebra stripes with a neon-orange backboard.”

Adam perked up. Zebra stripes? Neon-orange backboard?

Who were these Ameche brothers?

The house had stairs leading down to a basement and up to a front porch. “To the cave or the mountains?” asked Adam.

“Neither,” said Jennifer. “They said to follow the yellow wire along the side of the house to the back. They said their headquarters is out back.”

“Headquarters?” repeated Adam.

Who *were* these Ameche brothers?

The coeditors walked around the side, along a concrete path, to a high fence in back. Adam reached over the gate and undid the latch.

It was stunning to take in so much clutter at once: old motors, engine parts, used tires, gardening tools, a ripped hockey net, half a kayak paddle, several buckets of muddy golf balls, three broken fishing poles, a power mower with no wheels, a deflated blow-up raft, divers’ wet suits, assorted boots. The yard was mostly cement, and along the back fence were stacks of orange plastic storage containers that reached past the top.

Adam noticed that it smelled a little bad. The odor seemed to come from the garden, which was against the house, but it wasn't like most gardens Adam had seen. There were three tiers of soil climbing upward like stairs, each bordered by long wooden beams. If Adam wasn't mistaken, they were filled with tomato plants. Adam could see little bones sticking out of the soil. And there seemed to be — could it be? — lots of bird doo?

"Maybe this is a mistake," said Jennifer. "I think we should go."

"No," said Adam. "This is great. How did you find these guys again?"

"I told you ten times — online," Jennifer whispered. She'd been trying to think of some way they could raise money to put out the *Slash* all by themselves, now that the paper had been closed down by the school board for causing too much trouble. She'd found the Ameches' ad on TremblesList, under "Business Start-Ups/Kids." The listing said that they were kids themselves, experts at starting up businesses for fellow kids. They said that they'd started a bunch of businesses, including a computer-repair business, a motorbike-repair business, a motor-scooter repair business, a model-airplane repair business,

a cookie sales business, a golf-ball sales business, a lemonade-stand franchise business, an iPod music-download business, a toy-repair business, a spaghetti-sauce business, a tomato-paste business, a ketchup business, a pickled-tomato business, a tomato-soup business, a diced-tomato business, a stewed-tomato business, and a fresh-tomato business.

When Jennifer wrote, they'd messaged back saying that they'd never started a newspaper but would be happy to try one.

"I thought it would be nicer," Jennifer said. "More official-looking. We should go."

"What do you mean?" said Adam. "This *is* nice. That has to be their headquarters over there." He nodded toward a wooden storage shed that took up the entire width of the yard, maybe ten feet across. The yellow wire they'd been following went right inside it.

"What if they're Internet predators like they tell us about in Health and Careers class?" Jennifer whispered. "Maybe they're not even kids. Maybe they're two fat old guys with bad teeth who lure kids into their junky backyard and then . . . Oh, my God, we should go."

"Junky?" said Adam "What do you mean? No way. Two fat old guys with bad teeth wouldn't paint

their rim with zebra stripes. They'd never have a neon-orange backboard. My reporter's instinct tells me we're onto something big here."

"I'm getting out," said Jennifer.

"No you're not," said Adam. "You're way too good a person to leave me at the mercy of two fat old guys with bad teeth. You could never live with yourself if something terrible happened to me while I was here *alone*."

"But you can live with yourself if it turns out that you are leading *me* straight into a fat old perv trap?"

"I'm not as good a person as you," said Adam.

"Deep down inside you are."

"That's a long way to go," he said, and before she could say more, he knocked on the shed door.

There was no response, so he knocked twice more. Adam and Jennifer could hear talking inside, then saw a curtain over the shed window move slightly, and heard someone say, "It's not Ma."

"Then open it."

"Fans, our next two guests have arrived. Please say hello to . . ."

Two boys who were talking into their computer with microphone headsets were now staring at Adam

and Jennifer. One of them was pointing a webcam on the top of his screen at them.

“Welcome to the *Ameche Brothers’ Talk Till You Drop, All-Live Except the Recorded Parts* webcast, with Don and Alan Ameche serving your needs 24/7. Would you like to tell us your names, or are you fugitives from the law?”

Adam and Jennifer looked at each other. “Are you really broadcasting?” asked Jennifer. “Are people watching?”

“Globally speaking, two billion people have Internet hookups,” said the bigger Ameche. “So don’t get nervous.” He motioned for them to sit on a couple of plastic crates that were squeezed in beside the Ameches. Adam glanced around. The shed was as jam-packed as the backyard, but mostly with gardening stuff: bags of potting soil, peat moss and fertilizer, gloves, spades, a pitchfork, a rake, a couple of saws. And there were stacks and stacks of used paint cans.

The bigger Ameche picked up an empty seed packet from the floor, crumpled it in his hand, then held his closed fist in front of the webcam and squeezed it all around, making crinkling noises. “I have a hundred-dollar bill in my hand at this very

moment that I'm ready to give away to the e-mailer with the best question for our guests this afternoon."

"Oops," said the smaller Ameche. "It's 4:17. Time for the weather report." He looked at Adam. "Would you mind doing the weather report for us?"

"He doesn't know anything about the weather," said Jennifer.

"Sure he does," said the bigger Ameche brother. "Just step outside. That's right. What do you see?"

"Well," said Adam, "not much. The sky's blue, the sun's out, and it feels kind of cold."

"Perfect," said the larger Ameche. "That's better than the lady on News 12 Accu-Weather." He turned toward the webcam. "Our *Talk Till You Drop* meteorologist has checked the Doppler radar readings here at the Ameche May Way West studios on the banks of the Tremble River in the heart of beautiful Tremble County and reports blue skies, plenty of sunshine, and temperatures—Wait a minute. . . . What's that? Oh, please, no. . . . Did you say . . . *funnel cloud*? That cloud's getting closer. . . . Oh, my God, I've never seen it get so dark, so fast. . . . *A twister!*"

The bigger Ameche grabbed a blue plastic tarp that was covering a pile of bags of soil under the table and tossed it over the computer, the webcam,

his head, and his brother's head. "I hope you folks at home can see what we're up against here as this monstrous tornado bears down on us. I can't make out my fingers in front of my face. . . . And my brother? Alan, are you there? Alan? Oh, little Alan, I hardly knew you. . . . I have to apologize to all our loyal fans out there in cyberspace, but we're heading for cover. This is Don Ameche, signing off. . . ."

Adam and Jennifer looked at each other. Adam poked his head out of the shed just to be sure. The sky'd never looked bluer. He stepped back in. Both Ameches were still under the tarp. All Adam could see was two bumps in the tarp where their heads were.

"They look ridiculous," Jennifer whispered.

Adam wished he'd thought of it.

"Hey," said Adam. "Excuse me, I just . . ."

"Shhh," said one of the head bumps. "Just one second and the website will go remote. I'm uploading some video of the tornado from *The Wizard of Oz*. It'll make a nice wrap-up. . . ."

They finally tossed the tarp off, then brushed potting soil from their hair and clothes.

"Boy," said Adam, "that's a lot of work. You must be worn out." He went into his pocket and pulled out the plastic bag with his giant jawbreaker. "Want

a suck?” he said. “Great energy pick-me-up. Has one hundred percent of the daily sugar dose recommended by the National Council of Candy Manufacturers.”

“That’s gross,” said Jennifer. “It’s bad enough that *you* do it. Now you’re going to share your germs with them?”

“What are you talking about?” said Adam. “Give me your water bottle.” He took the jawbreaker out of the bag. “OK if the floor gets a little wet?” he asked.

“No problem,” said the bigger Ameche. “We need to wet down the peat moss; the dust’s bad for the computers.”

Adam doused the jawbreaker with water and handed it to the bigger Ameche, who took a long, slurpy suck, then cleaned it off and gave his brother a turn.

“Too bad the webcast’s on remote,” said Don Ameche. “This would have been a terrific guest segment.”

“What’s your viewership?” asked Jennifer.

“Pretty much nobody,” said Alan Ameche.

“That’s not true,” said Don Ameche. “We get a couple of hits a month. An occasional e-mail.”

As if on cue, there was the sound of an e-mail arriving.

Alan glanced at the screen. "That doesn't really count," he said. "I can tell without reading it. It's that annoying third grader who tries to win the hundred-dollar prize every time."

"We think she's a wack job," said Don. "Very grandiose. She claims to be the world's greatest third-grade reporter."

Adam and Jennifer looked at each other but didn't say a word.

"Anyone ever win the hundred-dollar prize?" asked Adam.

"You kidding?" said Don. "Does it look like we have a hundred dollars?"

"OK," said Jennifer. "We should go. It was nice visiting with you."

"Wait," said Don. "We've had other e-mails. Not that long ago, either. From this girl who wants us to help her start a newspaper."

"She seemed pretty smart," said Alan. "Her spelling was good."

"Yeah," said Don. "I'm pretty sure she's no wack job."

"That's me," said Jennifer. "But we don't need to bother you. I can see it would be a waste of time. We need a business manager and webmaster to raise

money so we can put out our newspaper — which, by the way, is based on this old-fashioned idea that it's important to stick to facts, something I can see you're not familiar with. We need money, not empty seed packets."

"Hey, wait," said Don. "We make lots —"

"And I'll tell you one more thing," said Jennifer. "That third-grade wack job? Phoebe is no wack job. A little difficult maybe, a bit high-strung. But she really may be the world's greatest third-grade reporter. And I think it's cruel that you'd lie to people that way — especially a third grader, sitting at home in front of her little computer trying so hard to win a prize that's just a big joke to you."

"Jennifer," said Adam, "please. I think the Ameches can help us. It's just a goof."

"Great," said Jennifer. "Then you and the brothers work it out. You don't need me. A little responsibility would be good for you, Adam Canfield. I'm going. I've got real stuff to do." And she stomped out, knocking over paint cans and stirring up a cloud of peat-moss dust as she went.

chapter 2

A Business Concern

Adam apologized to the Ameche brothers for Jennifer. He told them what a great person she was. He said that once they got to know her, they'd think she was terrific, too, and then he started explaining why they'd come. He hadn't gotten very far when there was a bunch of noise outside, in the yard. They could hear things being knocked around.

"*Shhh,*" said Don. He pulled the curtain away from the shed window a tiny bit and peeked out. "Oh, geez, it's Ma," he said. "She's back from Busy Bee already. Quick, grab a bag of soil and pretend you're helping us with the tomatoes."

They were too late. Mrs. Ameche was at the door. “Ameche brothers,” she said. “I see the same weeds in my tomatoes that were there at nine this morning when I left. I don’t see any evidence of fresh topsoil. I don’t see any fresh bird poop.

“I will not stand for this,” she continued. “You love it when I win the Big Tomato. You love the prestige of being state champ. You stick it on every jar of tomato product you move out of here, but I don’t see you working for it.”

“Aw, Ma,” said Don. “We were just getting to the soil.”

“Eight hours to lift a bag of topsoil?” said Mrs. Ameche, shaking her head.

“If you must know, Ma, we were setting up an important business deal here,” said Don.

“We’re negotiating to join a big media company,” said Alan.

“Really?” said their mom. Then she turned to Adam, “You’re a big media company? You don’t look it, unless . . . You’re not one of the Murdoch kids, are you? And if that’s a yes, why would you waste your time with the Ameche brothers?”

“I don’t think I am wasting my time,” said Adam. “I’m coeditor of the *Slash*. We’re the student

newspaper of Harris Elementary/Middle School. Well, I *was* coeditor of the *Slash*.”

“You lost your job?” said Mrs. Ameche. “The Ameche brothers are negotiating with an unemployed coeditor? Typical.”

“Actually, I lost my newspaper,” said Adam. “I’m still coeditor, but our newspaper got shut down.”

Mrs. Ameche nodded. “Bad time for newspapers,” she said. “Who was that black girl running out of here? She a media company, too? She looked upset. Ameche brothers, you didn’t say anything prejudiced, did you?”

“Aw, come on, Ma,” said Don.

“You think we’re like Uncle Louie?” said Alan.

“Thank God, no,” said Mrs. Ameche. “I raised you better than that. So what is going on here? Certainly nothing to do with taking care of my tomatoes.”

“Well, if you must know, Ma,” said Don, “not much is going on.”

“Because someone interrupted the negotiations,” said Alan. “You wouldn’t have any idea who, Ma?”

“Sorry,” said Mrs. Ameche. “My apologies, Ameche brothers. You two have been so busy, you probably haven’t had a moment to listen to the weather report

this afternoon. I heard they're predicting some pretty violent storms. Anybody heard the weather report?"

All three boys looked at her, but Mrs. Ameche turned her attention to Adam. "Well, let's hear it, young man. So you're no Murdoch. That's all right. Neither are the Ameche brothers. You got a name?"

It took quite a while for Adam to tell. He gave them some of the history of the *Slash*, including the name ("Harris Elementary *slash* Middle School, get it?"). He also described several of the best stories they'd done in the past year. And even though the Ameche brothers went to a different middle school, they'd actually heard about one of the stories, the one that saved the basketball hoops.

"Jennifer and I discovered that the zoning board had a secret plan to get rid of all the hoops, and we did a big front-page story," said Adam. "That's what got everybody working so hard to save the hoops."

"We signed a petition for the hoops," said Mrs. Ameche. "That was your story?"

Adam nodded. "I really like your hoop," he said. "I wish I had zebra stripes."

"Ma's an artist," said Don. "She does portraits at the Busy Bee flea market. Her record is four in an hour."

“Please, that’s pushing it,” said Mrs. Ameche. “Nearly killed me. Drained all my artistic juices. I like having at least a half hour for each painting. You need time to get the eyes right.” She gave Adam a business card. It said DONATELLA AMECHE/PORTRAITS-WHILE-YOU-SHOP/SATISFACTION GUARANTEED.

“So why’d they shut you down if you did such great stories?” asked Mrs. Ameche. “Sounds like they should have given you some big award.”

“That was the problem,” said Adam. “The stories got a little too great.” He told them about the final edition of the *Slash*, the March/April issue. He described how they’d done a big investigation about the Bolands’ attempt to take over the poor section of town, the Willows, by pressuring people to leave so that the Bolands could build million-dollar mini-estates. “After that,” Adam said, “the Bolands got so teed off, they made the school shut down the *Slash*.”

“You took on the Bolands?” Mrs. Ameche let out a low whistle. “You’re talking about the Bolands who own Bolandvision Cable and Boland News 12 and the *Citizen-Gazette-Herald-Advertiser* and Boland Realtors, Inc.? Those Bolands?”

“Those Bolands,” said Adam.

“Didn’t hear about that story,” said Mrs. Ameche. “But I could understand how that could get you shut down. Powerful people. They like their version of the news. You upset the Bolands, they could squish you good.”

“Like a bug,” said Adam.

Mrs. Ameche wanted to know how a kid paper like the *Slash* got such big stories, and Adam said it was a lot of ways. Sometimes they’d just notice a problem and get suspicious and start nosing around. And sometimes they’d get a call from a top-secret source who gave them an inside tip, and then they’d start nosing around some more. “We just dig, dig, dig until we get to the bottom of things,” he said.

“Oh,” said Mrs. Ameche. “Dig, dig, dig, is it? You hear that, Ameche brothers? Does that remind you of anything you were supposed to do, do, do to the weeds in my garden, garden, garden?”

“Oh, Ma, we were going to do it,” said Don. “Just give us a break.”

“Just one stinking break, Ma,” said Alan. “That’s all we’re asking.”

Adam was getting a bad feeling about Mrs. Ameche. She should be nicer to the Ameche brothers. They

seemed like really neat kids. *She* seemed like a slave driver.

Mrs. Ameche was not done, not by a long shot. “So what on God’s earth brings you to the Ameche brothers?” she asked. “You expect them to help you with the Bolands? You sure you got the right Ameche brothers?”

“Ma,” said Don.

“Come on, Ma,” said Alan.

“To be truthful: money,” said Adam. “We need to raise money so we can afford to put out the paper by ourselves. So we can pay to have it printed without using school money. So we can put together a website for the paper. So we can be free from the school and nobody can shut us down again if they don’t like something we write. We need it to be like a grown-up paper—sell ads to raise money. And we need help because, Jennifer and I, we don’t know anything about business. That’s why Jennifer answered the Ameche brothers’ ad about being experts on starting businesses for kids.”

“That reminds me,” said Mrs. Ameche. “Ameche brothers, my apologies, I owe you money. We sold a ton of your golf balls today, and someone bought a rubber raft and a fishing pole, and that guy finally

came to pick up that rebuilt model-airplane engine. I wrote it all down. Here . . . I owe you eighty-seven dollars each. Plus, I got two more computer jobs for you. I wrote down their cell numbers.”

Adam’s eyes bugged out. The Ameche brothers did know how to make money! His reporter’s instinct was as good as ever. Jennifer would be so sorry she left; he could already hear her begging for forgiveness.

“OK, Ameche brothers, tomatoes. You’ve got work to do. I don’t want to hear any excuses. Weed patrol, march.”

“Please, Ma,” said Don, “just let us talk to Adam about the newspaper stuff, then we’ll do the garden work. We promise.”

“We really promise, Ma,” said Alan. “We honest to God promise. Cross my heart and hope to die, Ma.”

“Cross mine, too, Ma,” said Don. “Hope to die, Ma.”

“Promise, huh? Cross your hearts, huh?” Mrs. Ameche didn’t look impressed. “Well, Ameche brothers, you would definitely be dead if that crossing promise was enforceable. The deal was, you didn’t have to go to the flea market so long as you did the garden work—cross your hearts. Now we have

a new deal: you don't have to do the garden work so you can form this media company—cross your hearts. Adam, would you trust the Ameche brothers for one single second?”

Adam did not hesitate. “They seem good,” he said. “They must be doing something right. I mean eighty-seven dollars each—that’s big money.”

Mrs. Ameche smiled. “Oh, Adam,” she said, “you are a traitor to common sense.” She said she’d be willing to go along with it on one condition. Once they finished the media company, Adam had to help with the tomatoes. “If you’re going to be partners with the Ameche brothers, Mr. Slash”—and here Mrs. Ameche made a slashing motion with her finger—“then we need to find out what kind of work ethic you’ve got. Make sure you’re not afraid to get a little bird doo on your hands. Hopefully, you’ll be a positive influence on these heart-crossing, low-life Ameche brothers.”

“Ma,” said Don.

“Come on, Ma,” said Alan.

They waited a few minutes, then Adam peeked out around the curtain. “She’s gone,” he said.

“You sure?” said Don.

“How do you know?” said Alan.

“I can’t see her anywhere,” said Adam. “And I can see the whole yard.”

“You sure she’s not hiding behind the crates?” said Don.

“Sure,” said Adam. “She’s not there. I can see.”

“Doesn’t mean a thing,” said Don.

“Sometimes she climbs up on the shed roof and listens,” said Alan. “You’d better check.”

Adam walked outside and looked on the roof. Mrs. Ameche was not there. He came back in and sat down on a crate. “She’s tough,” Adam said.

“Yeah,” said Don, “she keeps us on our toes.”

“She gets inside your head,” Alan said. “Ma’s pretty wily.”

“You want something to drink?” Don asked. The computers were sitting on a plywood board that was held up on one side by a two-drawer filing cabinet. On the other side, Adam now realized as Don opened the door, was a mini-refrigerator.

“Zap cola?” asked Don.

“Five times the caffeine of regular cola,” said Alan, popping open a frosty. “We keep it on special order at C-Town.”

“I’m good,” said Adam. “I got the jawbreaker in

case I'm running down. Look, I've really got to go. We'd better do the tomatoes. We can talk while we get it done."

The three boys began dragging out bags of soil and peat moss and stacking them by the shed door.

"I've got a question," said Adam. "You said you didn't have money. That's why Jennifer got so mad. But your mom just gave you a ton of money."

"Ooh," said Don. "You really don't get business."

"He doesn't get how it works," said Alan.

"Don't worry," said Don. "We'll teach you."

"You've got to spend money to make money," said Alan.

"Golden rule of business," said Don.

"Invest in your future," said Alan.

"Grow your business," said Don.

"Basic microeconomics," said Alan.

"That money," said Don. "It's spent."

"You see that power mower out there?" asked Alan.

"The one with no wheels?" said Adam.

Don and Alan each held up their eighty-seven dollars. "Wheels," they said.

"We can sell that thing for maybe three hundred dollars once we get wheels," said Don.

Adam grinned. He felt a surge of happiness. These Ameche brothers, they really were the ones for this job. It seemed like they could make money on anything. They definitely might be able to save the *Slash*.

“Let’s do the tomatoes,” said Adam. “I’ve got a ton of homework.” His World History teacher, Mr. Brooks, was making them memorize a speech for the World War II unit. It was ridiculous. Adam loved Mr. Brooks, but memorize a speech? Why memorize when in one second, you could Google? Adam got stuck with something from some guy named Winston Churchpail who was like the king of England during World War II. Adam could not imagine naming a kid Winston, especially with a last name like Churchpail. What were his mother and father thinking? Mr. Brooks said they had to learn at least two whole paragraphs, and Adam knew how he was going to pick them: the two shortest.

The Ameches and Adam hustled around, crawling beneath the table, reaching up on shelves and in the far corners, pulling out a bag of lime, garden gloves, hand rakes, spades, a pitchfork.

“I think that’s it,” said Don.

“Let’s do it,” said Alan.

“What about the bird doo?” said Adam. “Where do we get that?”

“Very funny,” said Don.

“Joking makes time go fast,” said Alan.

“I don’t think I was,” said Adam. “I didn’t see any. Where do you get it?”

“Birds,” said Don.

“Definitely birds,” said Alan.