

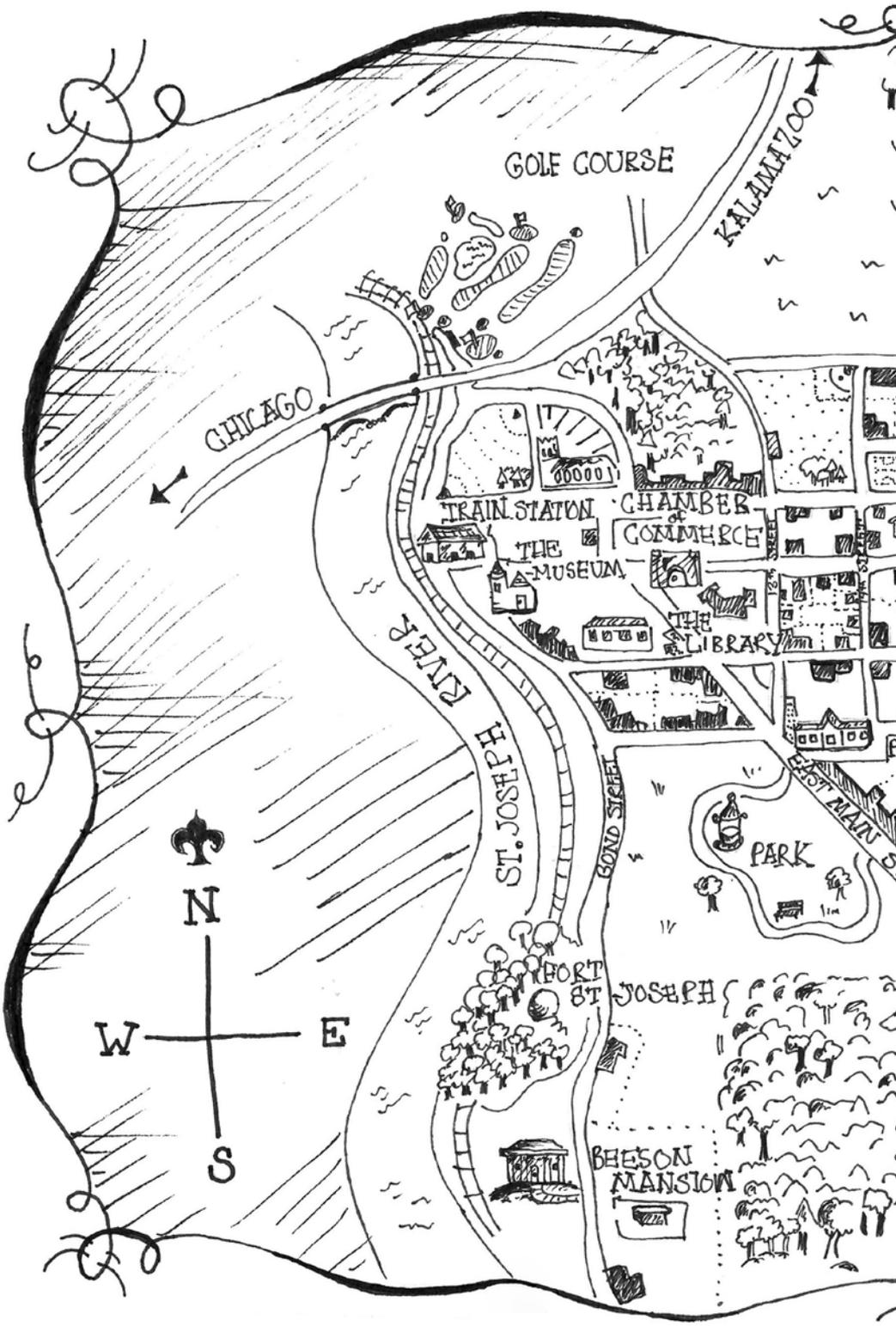
HORACE j. EDWARDS *and the* TIME KEEPERS

the
SECRET of the
SCARAB Beetle

BOOK ONE

william meyer

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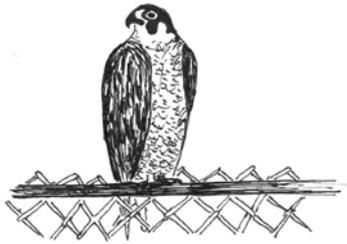
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MAP of NILES



CHAPTER ONE



Lying beneath the swing, the right side of his face smashed firmly against the ground, Horace wondered how he'd gotten himself into this mess. For over a month now, he'd managed to go unnoticed—well, at least as much as any new kid could. And that wasn't easy, considering Niles was the smallest town Horace had ever lived in. But now, with Seth looming over him, and Seth's gang of sixth-grade goons ready to pounce, things didn't look good.

Horace tried to slowly push himself off the ground, spitting out a mixture of dirt and twigs. He barely got to one elbow before a second forceful kick sent him sprawling out across the woodchips.

“What d’you think you’re doing?” mocked Seth.
“Trying to get out of more work?”

Seth was the meanest kid in Niles and also the biggest bully. Horace had routinely watched him trip unsuspecting classmates in gym and even kill innocent squirrels with his slingshot on the playground. And while Horace had done his best to avoid any trouble with him for over a month, this morning, when Horace had refused to let him copy his homework, Seth had lost it.

“Look, look at how Horace is trying to squirm away.”

The other boys around Seth were now laughing. Then one of them pressed his foot on Horace’s wrist.

“Do you need to use the little girls’ potty?”

Horace dared a quick glance to the side, wondering if either Anna or Milton, his two best friends—well, really his only friends since he’d moved—were nearby. But there was no sign of either one. Not even Ms. Shackles, the lunch lady, was in sight, and she constantly patrolled the yard, looking for kids to drag to the principal’s office.

“What do you think we should do with him?” one of the other kids asked Seth.

Horace grimaced at the thought of what Seth might have in mind. A sharp pain soon followed as a second shoe—from another boy—pressed down on his wrist.

Seth smirked. “Don’t worry. I’ve got an idea.” He reached down and picked up Horace’s sketch pad from the ground. It was the one Horace always carried with him to class, and the one he’d been drawing in before getting ambushed on the swings. “Look at all these pretty drawings,” Seth said sarcastically.

“Don’t . . . don’t touch those.” For the first time Horace found his voice.

Seth’s eyes lit up. “Oh really? Are these *special*?” Seth flipped to another page. “What’s this?” It was a drawing of a farm. “Maybe you should have spent more time working on our project instead of these stupid drawings.”

Horace was growing desperate, and he began to plead. “I’m sorry, Seth. I’ll tell Mr. Petrie after lunch it was my fault. Just leave my stuff alone.”

“Too late for that.” And with a sharp splitting sound that seemed to tear Horace’s insides in half, Seth ripped the drawing in two.

Horace watched the pieces fall to the ground.

“Please, please stop. What do you want from me?”

Seth smiled and tore a second page in half. “I don’t want anything, Horace. I asked nicely for your homework this morning, but I guess you were too busy drawing.” More pages fell to the ground.

Horace tried to get up again, but Seth’s two friends continued to pin him to the ground with their feet. His fingers were starting to turn purple from the pressure.

One of the kids shouted to Seth, “I think Horace is crying!” The other snickered.

Seth threw the remains of the sketch pad onto the ground. “Pick him up.”

The two boys stepped off Horace’s wrists and yanked him into the air. They pulled his arms behind his back.

“Now, Horace”—Seth was rolling up his sleeves—“I’m going to teach you a little lesson. The next time I want to copy your homework, you better let me. Or else—”

“Or else what? You’re going to beat me up, just like you do to everyone else? I’m sure that’s going to be really tough with both my arms pinned behind my back. If you’re

so strong, Seth, why don't you fight me on your own?" Horace didn't know why he said it; in fact, he probably never should have said anything, but it just came out.

Seth started to grind his teeth. Horace had him. It was an unspoken rule of the playground. If Seth didn't accept the challenge, he'd look like a coward, especially since Horace was half his size.

Seth glanced over his shoulder to make sure there still were no adults around. Then he snorted under his breath. "Fine. Let him go. This shouldn't take long." His usually confident voice hinted at the smallest morsel of doubt.

Finally free of Seth's goons, Horace wiped his face clean and pulled a woodchip from his hair. There was no chance he could ever beat Seth in a fight. He knew that. But maybe, just maybe, if he could drag it out long enough, the lunch bell would ring and delay the inevitable for another day.

A forceful shove by one of the kids behind Horace marked the start of the fight. Just inches from Seth's face, he could smell the stench of potato chips and tuna fish from his lunch. Horace stepped back, and within seconds

Seth sent his first punch flying toward his head. By luck Horace dropped his shoulder and felt it graze his right ear. Seth, who never missed and had thrown his full weight into the punch, was surprised by the sudden movement and stumbled forward.

Horace used the extra second to spin around and prepare for the next attack.

This one came higher, and Horace easily ducked again.

Out of the corner of his eye, he could see kids starting to gather in lines by the far doors. He wondered if he just might get out of this mess alive. Probably another minute or two before the lunch bell rang.

Unfortunately, his momentary distraction left him open to Seth's next punch, a powerful uppercut to his stomach. A sucking sound followed as Horace gasped for breath, and the remains of his peanut butter sandwich came rushing into his mouth. He swallowed the acidic mixture and hunched over his knees in pain.

Seth seized the opportunity and wasted no time sending another punch into Horace's temple.

Now Horace's stomach was no longer the only aching

part of his body; the side of his head was throbbing. Through blurred vision he could see Seth readying for the knockout.

But just as Seth cocked his arm backward, one of the other boys called out, “What is *that*?”

“What?” Seth stopped mid-punch, fearful it was Ms. Shackles.

“Look! Up there.”

An object was circling above them.

“That’s just a bird, you idiot,” Seth replied. It let out a sharp cry, a perfectly timed response, but Seth turned back to his wounded victim, angered by the interruption.

“That’s not *just* a bird,” someone else added. “I think that’s a hawk or a falcon.”

“What are you talking about? We don’t have time for this. The bell is going to ring any second,” snapped Seth. “Grab him.”

But no one did.

“Watch out!” yelled the boy behind Horace.

“Run!” shouted another.

“What the—” Seth answered in confusion.

The mixture of feathers, screams, and blood that filled the air made it hard to say what happened next. But by most accounts, the final outcome was the same. Seth Davis, the meanest bully in Niles, Michigan, was the one rolling on the ground, while Horace Edwards, the undersized new kid from across the street, stood in a cloud of feathers.