

THE
CLIFFSIDE
CHRONICLES

by

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FREE SAMPLE CHAPTER

Chapter 1

“RANDY BADOOK”

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From *The Island*, Book 1 of THE CLIFFSIDE CHRONICLES.

*Oh, baby, baby, it's a wild world
It's hard to get by just upon a smile
- Old Pop Song*

“Randy Badoo?”

I perked up in my seat and looked over the top of a half a spiral notebook page of dozens of hearts circling the letters J-A-N-E-T in huge, perfect Catholic school cursive, startled.

Did I hear that right?

(Yep. You sure did.)

I had known a Randy Badoo from Walden Falls, but he was two years younger. He would be in 5th Grade now, not 7th.

What were the odds there was another Randy Badoo on the planet, let alone in the Landing? And what was that Randy Badoo, if it was the Walden Falls one I knew, doing in my 7th Grade homeroom?

“Present,” replied a weak, nervous, high-pitched voice from the right side of the room, somewhere down front. A few kids giggled.

No one had ever said “present” in any school I’d ever been in. But it was exactly the kind of thing that the Randy Badoo I remembered would say. I strained to get a better look, but from where I was in the back row, and considering that Diane Brown’s afro was in the way, I couldn’t see him.

The teacher, Mr. James Fortenbras, paused, scanning the room through his yellow-tinted Aviators. A weird grin crept across his high, narrow face and he tossed the attendance book onto his desk. He stood up, rising to his full height of six feet and close to six inches, revealing his full width. The man was a room divider in a suit.

“Randy, would you stand up, please?”

Uh-oh. Here it comes. The Kiss of Death.

The kid stood up. He was barely taller on his feet than he was sitting down.

Holy shit! It was him! My Randy Badoo! And he still had the same Moe of the Three Stooges bowl cut that he had when he was 10. That was a year ago.

(Poor bastard.)

And glasses. Those were new. Well, they were more like shop goggles. And he was stuffed into a bright lime-green turtleneck that looked three sizes too small. And corduroys that were a shade of yellow not found in a crayon box, let alone nature. I didn't even have to see to know those pants were too short. It was my Randy Badoo all right.

All that was missing was a sheet of paper saying "KICK ME" Scotch-taped to his back.

"Class," said Mr. Fortenbras, "Mr. Badoo just arrived today. He's a transfer from the Montgomery Park School. Has anyone ever heard of that school?"

Most shook their heads. I had. From my days at Montgomery Valley Middle School. We called it the Stuck-up Little Asshole Factory. It was on the other side of High Bridge, on a hill overlooking the town. And the kids whose parents could afford to send them there liked that because, like them, the place looked down on the rest of Walden Falls.

"It's a private school. For gifted children."

Fortenbras walked over and put his arm around Randy, and turned him around to face his classmates, his hands on Randy's bony shoulders, kneading them rhythmically. He looked like Herman Munster massaging a garden gnome.

(That might be the creepiest thing I've ever seen a teacher do.)

Yeah. It's pretty weird.

Ricky Carnicki piped up from his perch in the back corner. "You mean like the school in the X-Men comics? The one for ... mutants?"

A few pockets of laughter erupted in the room. It wasn't that everyone knew the word "mutant," it was just a word that had become a name that certain kids got called. I gave Carnicki a sideways glance, without making eye contact. Looking directly into those beady rat eyes automatically earned you a spot on his shitlist. He took a stare as defiance, a challenge to his playground supremacy. It meant you had to fight him after school.

He was, as usual, smirking, proud of his little joke.

(That's a pretty advanced insult for that cement-head.)

Be quiet.

I'd lost count of how many times I'd heard that Ricky had been left back. At least twice. It certainly could've been more.

Randy continued to stand there with Fortenbras' hands kneading his narrow shoulders. I imagined the kid was wishing he actually were a mutant X-kid and had the power to make himself invisible. Or that he could pull the fire alarm like Magneto could, with his mind, and send everyone out to the parking lot. Or, better yet, maybe just set Ricky on fire.

“He sure looks like a Mew-TANT to me,” Carnicki added, doubtless to an imaginary rimshot only audible in that dimly lit brain of his. He tilted his chair back against the wall and crossed his arms over his leather-jacketed chest. His trademark air of deranged smugness came off of him in waves. His feet, clad in worn out white Cons, swung back and forth happily beneath him. I marveled at how his long curly hair, rivaling Robert Plant’s, spread out in a dirty blonde fan against the faded pistachio green every wall in this wing of the school had been painted.

The more amazing thing was that Ricky had apparently read something other than Playboy, even if it was just an X-Men comic. If anything resembling an actual thought about anything ever crossed his mind, it’d be the shortest trip in the Landing.

“Quiet, Mr. Carnicki,” said Mr. Fortenbras. “One more outburst from you and I’ll have you after school for a week.”

Fortenbras then turned Randy to face him and looked glowingly down at him, like a prideful father. Those bear paws were still rubbing the kid’s shoulders, as if Randy was a prizefighter and Fortenbras his devoted corner-man bucking him up for the next round. If Fortenbras ever slapped someone with one of those meathooks here, I thought, that person’s second cousin twice-removed in California would fall down.

“Go ahead and take your seat now, Randy.”

Randy quickly complied, more out of an ingrained respect for authority than the good sense to get out of Carnicki’s crosshairs – or away from Fortenbras’ mitts – as soon as possible.

Fortenbras remained standing, and it almost looked like he wanted to clap - those Rondo Hatton hands of his making the first barely perceptible movements of coming together and applauding - before even he thought better of it. But then he cluelessly charged full speed ahead, and signed the kid’s death warrant anyway.

“Randy is the smartest student in this school. Seniors included. And he’s probably smarter than ninety percent of the faculty.”

Good job, Mr. F. You just sealed that poor bastard’s fate.

“How old are you, Randy?”

Randy looked down before answering, somewhat meekly.

“10, sir.”

A few murmurs broke out in the room. The rest of us were 12 at least. Hell, Marty Coughlin was nearly 14 and had the porkchop sideburns and carpet of back hair to prove it. And Ricky? Hell, he might’ve been 16 for all we knew.

“10,” Mr. Fortenbras repeated wistfully. “Going on 21. With an IQ of 165 and a grade average at Montgomery Park of 100,” speaking to all of us.

“And when will you turn 11?”

“In 11 months, sir. I just turned 10. Last month.”

More giggling. Was this kid in the wrong class? Hell, the wrong school! Was Mr. Fortenbras that stupid? An age difference of two years in school was huge. And Fortenbras' ill-advised introduction had made him instant fodder for jokes, or worse. He had all but tied a noose around Randy's neck and given an apprentice sadist like Ricky Carnicki more than enough rope to hang him with. It might not be today, or even next week, but the wheels inside Ricky's head were turning. Plotting Randy's demise. Ricky was the type that hated "Brains" on principle, and it was his life's work to beat them out of whoever possessed some.

"Randy at his young age is in 7th Grade at Landing," Mr. Fortenbras explained, "because he skipped two grades at Montgomery Park so he wouldn't get too bored. We're dealing with a little Einstein here, and we all have to keep him engaged. Which is why I want to make sure that none of you treat him any differently just because he's smarter than you. Or because he's smaller ... er, younger. That doesn't mean it's okay to pick on him. Maybe he can even teach some of you a thing or two. As gifted as he is, I want you all to think of him more as a gift to this school. His presence will make us all better. Think of him just like you would our star quarterback or fastest runner. But let's be clear. There will be no making fun of Randy in this homeroom, got it? And those of you that are in my 4th period English class, in which we'll have the pleasure of working with him, you've been warned. That means you, Mr. Farmer."

Might as well crawl into the coffin now, kid.

"Got it?"

Several kids muttered that they did, but most were struggling to keep from laughing out loud. Even strait-laced Judy Baxter was biting her lower lip to try to stop from smiling.

Got it, Mr. Carnicki?"

Ricky looked up, his chair still tilted back against the wall, and nodded as he smiled, baring a row of nicotine-stained teeth.

(That kid ain't right in the head.)

Tell me about it.

Ricky then quickly flashed a wicked smile to his go-to toadies, first to Bobby Donovan and then to Mike Farmer, sitting to either side of him in matching leather jackets, elephant bells, T-shirts, and filthy Cons. That vulpine grin of Ricky's told anyone who caught it exactly what Randy Badoo had in store for him. And locker room wedgies or Indian burns for the entire school year would be the least of it.

"And Randy, do let me know after perusing it if my English syllabus this marking period seems like it will be too easy for you, and I'll see if I can give you extra homework," Mr. Fortenbras said, picking up his attendance sheet. "For extra credit, of course. For an extra-special student. A 100-plus average in my class would look good on your permanent record."

That coffin ain't gonna nail itself shut and throw itself in the grave, is it?

(Nope, Sam. It soitenly ain't.)

Fortenbras finally stopped praising Randy – unaware that he'd actually ended up burying him – and resumed calling the roll.

“Judy Baxter?”

“Here.”

Judy was one of a bunch of kids that had finished up at St. Thomas’ Catholic School in town, but had plenty of friends, so their first year in Landing High wasn’t gonna be as big an adjustment as mine. Landing was my sixth new school in six years. Being able to get used to a new school every year didn’t mean I liked it.

“Verna Beaman?”

“Here.”

Verna, Verna, Bo-berna. Banana-fanna fo-ferna. Fee fi mo-merna. Verna!

I’d noticed Verna the first day. She looked like a younger version of Leigh Taylor-Young, who I’d seen the year before, in “I Love You, Alice B. Toklas.” She played “Buttercup,” a hippie chick that a very square and uptight dude played by Peters Sellers becomes infatuated with. I saw the movie twice with my friends in Walden Falls, once at the Saturday matinee and again on Sunday. We considered movies like that sex education. As short as Verna’s battery of first-week-of-school skirts were, I still wondered if she had a butterfly tattooed on her thigh like Buttercup did in the movie. I doubted it, but imagined it anyway. I was still waiting for Janet Weiss to show up to the classes we had together in a mini-skirt. I could barely see her knees. Up top, she wore sweaters and collared shirts. Very prim and proper. Verna was easy on the eyes, but she never looked at me. There was something about the way Janet did in Miss Weider’s English class on the first day. She somehow made me forget I was on crutches and had a cast from my hip to my toe on my left leg. I felt like I was floating. How she managed that, I had no idea.

(You’re an idiot.)

Interrupting himself, Mr. Fortenbras added, “One more thing, Randy. Don’t be afraid to report anyone who bullies you outside of this class directly to me. I’ll see that they’ll have to answer to Mr. Shand.”

Randy unhesitatingly gave Fortenbras a big thumbs up.

Jesus Christmas. Did these two think this was Sunshine & Rainbows High?

“David Bell?”

“Here.”

It was A Whole Tube of Ben-Gay in Your Cup and A Bag of Beagle Crap in Your Locker High!

“Sam Bennett?”

He waited and looked around, and then said slightly more loudly, “Samuel Lancelot Bennett?”

“Earth to Mr. Bennett.”

(Whatever you do, don’t say “present”! Or ...)

“Janet.”

(Too late.)

The entire room exploded in laughter.

“He-ha-huh-here,” I finally responded, fumphering. “Here!”

“Are you sure, Mr. Bennett? It sounds like you’re on another planet.”

“HERE! I’m here.”

Staring straight ahead as the laughter died down, I caught Randy, no longer slouched down in his seat, visible now that Diane Brown had lowered her head to her desk, turned completely around facing me. His eyes caught mine and lit up. Then he smiled.

Braces too? This is too much now!

(Train tracks. Jesus. It never rains, but it pours. You better hope no one saw him smile at you like that. That was ... love.)

Shaddup.

Then he waved.

Great.

Just great.

Randy had lived a few blocks away from me, on the other side of Ulster Avenue in Walden Falls, about 20 miles from the Landing. At the time, a year ago, I was in 6th Grade at Montgomery Valley Middle School, and he was in 4th, at Walden Falls Elementary. Like I said, he was from Bradley Park, where all the rich kids lived. But, for some reason, he always crossed over what we called the DMZ on his bike. The DMZ was what we called Ulster, the “demilitarized zone” between the Haves and Have Nots. And then he’d come down that wicked Richardson Street hill to our neighborhood’s main drag, Valley Avenue. He’d follow me and my friends around like a lost puppy every weekend, trailing us on a brand spankin’ new Lemon Peeler. All of us would’ve killed for a Peeler, or an Orange Crate, because all of us rode something put together from four or five other bikes, with parts filched from the junkyard. He kept well behind us wherever we rode, and when we were just hanging out at our fort, he’d hang back, just waiting or wishing to be invited in.

Valley was the proverbial other side of the tracks in the eyes of Bradley Park residents. At one end, a dirt road led through the woods to the town dump, and on the other, over a rusting bridge over Tin Brook, sat Pierce Industries, a sprawling factory. We never knew what Pierce made, but a whiff of the brook told you it wasn’t lemonade. Whatever it was had killed Andrew Verderame’s pet snapping turtle Gamera. Dickie Munger, the most science-minded of us, had looked into figuring out how to test the water, but after what happened later, everyone forgot.

I'd totally forgotten that Randy existed, which I realized, with the scintilla of insight and a few drops of empathy I'd gained since those days, was just how we treated him back then. Like he didn't exist. Still, as bad as I felt about that in retrospect, that was then, this was now, and this was junior high. At some point, most of us had been treated that way by an older kid. It was, unfortunately, the natural order of the Universe, relatively speaking. Just another rite, or wrong, of passage. Ignoring him seemed more humane than threatening to throw him down the metal shop stairs, which was as subtle as the Ricky Carnickis of the world got. But, I mused, perhaps no less hurtful.

(Listen to you! You sound almost like an adult. Do I know you?)

Just then, the bell for first period rang.

I got up quickly, grabbed my crutches and stood up. I got through the back door before Randy could see me, but he caught me in the hallway just as I reached my locker.

Damn.

(Slow-poke.)

"Oh, hey," I said flatly as he sidled up next to me.

"Do you remember me?" His voice was so high I made a note to check the glass on my watch for cracks. "You didn't wave back."

"Yeah, sure," I shrugged. "You used to live in Bradley Park back at the Falls."

Randy smiled. "You remembered!"

"Uh-huh."

"Sorry to see you're hurt. What happened?"

"Skydiving accident."

"You're pulling my leg."

"Yeah. I'm pulling it. I had an operation on mine. Remember? I had a limp."

"That's right. I remember now. And I did hear you moved away. Did you know that your old gang broke up not long after you left."

By "old gang," he meant the Valley Avenue Believers.

They broke up, all right. Those that made it out of the dynamo alive, that is.

(Everyone but me.)

"Yeah, I heard."

After what happened to Patty Hampton that night, I thought what was the point of ... believing? It could get a kid killed, and did. The papers said Patty drowned. But we knew different. She'd BEEN drowned. Funny that no matter how much we believed what was happening in Walden Falls was not the work of anything human, not a single adult believed it until it was too late. And in the end they covered it up anyway, like they had for a hundred

years. But the important thing was that it wouldn't happen again. Not in Walden Falls anyway. But it cost Patty her life.

Gordon Spencer did tell me the Believers were history when he visited me in July. I'd finished at Montgomery Valley early to go under the knife while my parents moved us from our rental in Walden Falls to Cornwall Landing. I'd lost that entire summer and most of my friends, and every Believer except Gordo. I'd stayed in my room for most of July and August listening to The Beatles, reading Alistair MacLean novels, and building a backlog of models. The Seaview and the Flying Sub joined the Bismarck and carrier Enterprise on my new bookcase, vying for space with Dracula and The Wolf Man. Outside my bedroom window throughout August, I could see the lights from kids playing flashlight tag in the dark and hear their yells of "You're it!" and "Missed me!"

Barely one week into the new school year, and I still had a another month and a half to go before the cast would come off. Maybe, just maybe I thought, things would be back to normal in time for Halloween.

"So much for 'Once a Believer, Always a Believer,'" Randy said sarcastically.

Who does this little twerp think he is to say that? He wasn't one of us.

(You know he always resented not being asked to join the Believers. He thought he'd be a better Spock to your Kirk than Dickie Munger.)

As thoughts of the Falls, the Believers, that terrible night inside the old power plant, and especially Patty Hampton flooded over me, I did everything I could to stop myself from pulling Randy Badoo's face by the top of his Bazooka Joe turtleneck up to within an inch of mine and telling him he didn't know what the fuck he was talking about. That he had no business mocking us or even speaking those words. But he was an immature little shit who would never know what the fuck he was talking about EVER, so what was the use?

(He's not worth it.)

I know, I know.

(You're not the throw-them-up-against-a-locker type, Sam. Plus, you can't be seen threatening a twerp if you're considering running for Freshman Class President next year. Besides, what would J-A-N-E-T think.)

Shaddup.

"I never forget a face," I said, still with my back to Randy, pretending to rummage for a notebook in my locker.

"Or, I bet, a name like Badoo," he said.

"Yeah. That too."

Or a haircut that stupid.

(Cheap shot. But that's the Sam I love. Hey, do you remember that Dickie called him Randy Ba-DOUCHE.)

Dickie did have a way with words.

(Especially dirty ones.)

I could feel that uncomfortable heat on my neck that I felt when I was being stared at, but kept my back to everyone as kids started to pass faster and faster in the hall. I could see peripherally that Ricky Carnicki and his two pals weren't around. And if Randy was going to follow me around now like he did back then, I'd end up at the nerd table eating celery sticks with peanut butter on them, drawing maps of Middle Earth, and discussing the science of Voyage to the Bottom of the Sea reruns. Or with a cast on my other leg.

"Your hair's changed," Randy said. "Longer. Looks groovy."

"Uh, yeah," I said, "Groovy."

"It has been a few years, Randy. Both since I had short hair and heard anyone say 'groovy.'"

I'd had to work on my parents, especially my ex-military Dad, but they finally let me grow my hair out a little now that I was 12. By the looks of it, Randy's parents were hell-bent on keeping him looking like he was 6.

"Yours ... hasn't," I noted, picturing his Mom or Dad literally putting a bowl over his head and cutting off whatever stuck out below it with scissors.

"This school is not at all like Montgomery Park," Randy offered cheerily, either oblivious to or ignoring my dig. "We didn't have desks. Or lockers. Or bells."

"Or BELL BOTTOMS!" he said, a series of sounds somewhere between pig snorts and sheep bleats coming out of him, having made a joke. I felt like crawling inside my locker and pulling the door closed behind me.

(He's a regular Red Skelton.)

No bell bottoms, but you Montgomery Parkers had little purple jackets and plaid bowties though.

After nearly hyper-ventilating, Randy stopped laughing and caught his breath.

"And we sat in circles, like Indians. It was an excellent learning environment, even though I got bored near the end. My parents couldn't afford it after a while, and then we moved here to be closer to my grandparents. As you heard, I jumped ahead a few grades. My counselor says I could even skip a few more. I could even graduate in only three more years. I'll get used to it, Dad says. You'll help with that, Sam, won't you? I'm so glad I know someone here! This is going to be great."

Great.

Just great.

(Hey, Sam. It's gonna be better than great. It's gonna be groovy.)

Shaddup.

"Yeah, well, Randy, speaking of bells ..."

“Oh, that’s right! They toll for thee. I mean US! Four minutes to get to class. Like I said, this place is nothing like Montgomery Park. Sorry. Sorry, sorry, sorry three times three. Sorry nine times. Hey! What class do you have now? I have Life Science. With Mrs. Gilfoyle.”

I honestly couldn’t remember. Maybe the fear that it was Life Science erased any recollection of where I was actually supposed to go next. I fished the crumpled schedule out of my pocket and replied, relieved, “Social Studies, with Ziegler.

“Awww, fudge,” said Randy, disappointed. “Where’s Mrs. Gilfoyle’s room? In this wing or upstairs?”

“Hers is the next to the last room on the right down that way,” I replied, pointing without looking toward the end of the long hall.

Did he actually say “Awww, fudge”?

(Aaaa-firmative. He’s such a little mother-fudger.)

“One piece of advice,” I said half under my breath to Randy now that the halls were beginning to clear. “Watch out for that Carnicki kid. He’s got you marked.”

“Marked? Me? But I’ve barely been here for five minutes. I haven’t done anything to him.”

“Doesn’t matter. It’s not that. Or even who you are. It’s what you are and that you exist.”

“I don’t understand.”

“You’re not in Kansas anymore, Dorothy.”

“Kansas? Montgomery Park was over by Middletown.”

Had this kid been raised in a box like a veal?

“Never mind.”

“What am I exactly?”

“Just take my advice. It’s not easy to know how to fly under his radar, since anything you might do can set him off. But you’ll have to figure it out. Use that big brain of yours. Rule No. 1: NO EYE CONTACT. But it’s probably too late after what happened in homeroom.”

(Why do you care? A minute ago you wanted to jack him up and put his head through your locker.)

Shaddup.

(I’ll tell you even though deep down you know. You were just like him once upon a time. Admit it. You see yourself in the little creep.)

Jesus Christ! Will you shut up!

(Fudge you!)

“Okay. But I guess for now I can just turn around and go the other way if I see him.”

“That won’t work unless he doesn’t see you. If he sees you turn tail, you’re twice as dead as you’d be otherwise. His kind likes it when you run. He can smell fear. And he likes the smell.”

“Is there a book I can read?”

“Not one that’s actually been written. The closest thing ... listen up. The first chance you get, check a book called “The Art of War” out of the library and read it as soon as you can.

“Who’s it by?”

“Sun Tzu.”

“Chinese, eh?”

“No. Italian. Yes, of course he’s Chinese. Trust me. I’ve been through this.”

“Really? When? When did you go through it?”

“In another life. You know for someone who knows how to add, subtract, multiply, and divide, you can’t put two and two together.”

“Hey, why’d you call me Dorothy before?

(He’s actually more like Toto when you get right down to it.)

“Forget it. Now I have to get to class.”

“See you later,” he said excitedly, turning and practically skipping down the hallway.

“Not if Ricky sees you first.”

“Let’s get together and compare our schedules sometime, okay?” he hollered. “What clubs are you thinking of joining. Do they have A/V or Chess here?”

I didn’t answer.

Let’s not. And, what’s more, let’s not even say we did.

I grabbed my three-ring binder, slammed my locker shut and locked it, and headed in the opposite direction.

(God, Sam, you’re something else! Are you REALLY gonna cut through the locker rooms and go all the way around outside the back to get to Social Studies just to avoid walking with Train Tracks? Ziegler’s room is right across the hall from Gilfoyle’s. How mature, Mr. Future Freshman Class President, Man of the People and Defender of the Student Body – well, one body anyway. The one belonging to a particular female student with the initials JW.)

Shut-the-fuck-up. If you weren’t already dead, I’d kill you.

My mind really wasn't on whatever Mr. Ziegler was writing on the blackboard. I was thinking about Ricky Carnicki and his pals. They were probably in the boy's room right now, planning Randy's inaugural ass-kicking. As much pressure as I felt to avoid being seen with Randy, I felt just as much – if not more – to somehow help him get through at least his first week here despite the more annoying aspects of his personality.

(Personality? Are you for real? The little shit doesn't have one.)

Randy was a fish out of water. And pathetic. But it wasn't totally his fault. Bradley Park and that rotten school were to blame. One thing that schools like Montgomery Park didn't prepare kids for was a bully, and especially a professional like Ricky Carnicki. Dealing with bullies was a class without books but constant pop quizzes that certain kids just had to get through. Pharaoh's son probably had to put up with some asshole like Ricky at King Tut High back in 3000 BC.

If I was going to help Randy Badoo even from the shadows, I'd have to first find out exactly what Ricky Carnicki had planned. Protecting Randy was another matter entirely. He wasn't my little brother, and I'd even have a hard time protecting him from being Carnickied if he was. Randy would never see Ricky coming. And teaching him to protect himself, well, that would require actually spending time with him.

(As if. You could teach that dipshit what exactly? You've got a chartreuse belt in which fighting style again? The closest you've ever gotten to martial arts was wearing half a bottle of your father's Hai Karate cologne at the 6th Grade Snow Ball last Winter. And, now that I mention it, why didn't you ask me to dance that night? I wanted you to. And now it's too late. Not only are you in a cast and on crutches, but I'm dead.)

Why are you still here? Don't you have somewhere else to be? Like harp practice?

(Don't you get it, jerk? I'm your guardian angel.)