

CHAPTER ONE

Life on the High C's

Education is a journey on the high seas of life.

— *Adrian Culpepper, Assistant Principal*

Okay, this time it was LaShonda Powell who got us into trouble. She had written an article for our group's newspaper, *The Cruiser*, she called "Life on the High C's or, Do We Really Need A's and B's?" I told her when she turned it in that Culpepper was going to blow up, but you know LaShonda. The girl just doesn't care.

The last time that Mr. Culpepper had called us to his office he said that it was going to be the very, *very* last chance we were going to have to shape up.

"He can't suspend all four of us," LaShonda said. "I mean, really, how would that look on the school's record?"

"I knew something bad was going to happen as soon as I saw that Da Vinci Academy came in fourth in the Academic Olympics," Kambui said. "We were supposed to be *numero uno!*"

“At least,” Bobbi added.

I wasn't worried about Da Vinci being fourth, or even about being suspended. I was worried about being dropped from the school altogether. My grades were way down and I knew it. Da Vinci was supposed to be one of the best gifted and talented schools in the city, and I simply wasn't doing that well. It wasn't that the material we were learning was too hard. In fact, it may have been too easy, and I really didn't have to study so I was only paying attention to the stuff that interested me, which was mostly Phys Ed and Language Arts. Somehow I just couldn't wrap my head around the other classes.

When Mr. Culpepper, the assistant principal and chief executioner, came in, he did it with a flourish, breathing through his nose and looking like a cross between a really mad Santa Claus and a swishy dragon.

“Well, what are we to say this morning?” he asked, looking over his rimless glasses. “Or have the grades said enough? Hmmm?”

No response.

“We have noted two trends among this small group of miscreants,” Mr. Culpepper went on. “The first is that none of you are living up to your potential. And yes, we do

know your individual abilities because you have all tested very well on the IQ tests. What I strongly suspect is that you just don't care enough about education or about Da Vinci Academy for the Gifted and Talented. I'm wondering if you are really Da Vinci material."

"We care," I said. It sounded lame coming out.

"If it were left to me," Mr. Culpepper continued, raising his volume slightly, "I would stick with the idea that education is about accomplishment and not potential and suggest that you all find other schools, perhaps ones closer to your homes. But since it is the principal, Mrs. Maxwell, who is the dispenser of last chances and not I, we will continue our little adventure a bit further. And, to tell the truth, I rather like her idea. She sees it as a final opportunity to prove you belong here. I see it as enough rope. If you get my drift."

"What do we have to do?" LaShonda asked. LaShonda was tall, dark, and slightly wild-looking. Fashion design was her thing. She could make an entire outfit for anyone overnight. When we had first met in the sixth grade, she had told me that her parents had abandoned her and her younger brother when they were kids and that she lived with him in a group home in the Bronx.