



QUICKREADS

JANICE GREENE



I start walking toward the bus stop, tagging along behind some other kids, trying to blend in. They're laughing and talking—nobody notices me. If I'm lucky I'll stay invisible.

Then I hear footsteps behind me. “*Sánte! Sánnn-te!*” The voice calling my name is sing-song, taunting. It's Rubio! My stomach twists with an awful combination of fear and helpless anger.

More footsteps. “*Sánte! Sánte!*” Now I can hear that Rubio's whole gang is with him. I know I'm doomed.

I start running as fast as I can, which isn't very fast. I head toward the woods

next to school. In 10 seconds, they've got me, Rubio grabbing one arm and Quinto the other. I squirm and thrash around, trying to get loose. But I know it's hopeless. There are just too many of them.

They push me to the ground. Dirt smears my face and goes up my nose. "Get his shoe off!" someone yells.

I go crazy, kicking and punching wildly, desperately. "No!" I yell. "*Don't!*"

Their hands are all over me, rough and hard. But their punches don't hurt much. What really hurts is my soul.

Then all seven of them grab me and I can't move. I feel my shoe being pulled off. I squeeze my eyes shut.

"Freak show!" hollers Rubio.

"Grrrrross!" Quinto yells.

From all sides, their voices hit me like bombs. "*Yuck!*" "*Disgust-o!*"

One boy makes retching noises. Another screams in mock terror. "Auuugh! It's gonna get me! The curse of the clubfoot!"

Then one boy yells, "Bus!" and they all run

off, laughing and yelling.

I sit up, wiping the dirt off my face with my shirt. And since no one can see me, I cry for a minute.



The next day, I'd do anything to stay home from school, but Mom insists. "You have to get an education," she always says. I don't tell her what I'm really learning, which is to hate.

We're in the middle of math class when the principal, Mr. McNulty, comes in. He brings in a new boy. The kid is kind of tall, but he's fat, too. A new victim for Rubio and his gang.

"This is Tino Morales," says Mr. McNulty. "I want all of you to please make Tino feel welcome here."

Somebody makes a fart sound, which Mr. McNulty ignores.

Tino looks around the room at everyone, checking them out. It doesn't seem to bother him that all the kids are staring at him.

He's staring right back at them. In fact, he looks bored.

At lunch, I see Tino again. Now he's carrying a lunch bag and heading for the stairs.

Usually, I don't talk to anybody unless I have to. But today I surprise myself. "Wait!" I say, hurrying after him. "Don't go on the stairs."

He looks at me for a few seconds, one eyebrow raised high.

"This guy, Rubio, and his gang—that's their territory," I explain.

"They don't let anybody else use the stairs?" Tino asks.

"Sometimes if you're cool with them, it's okay—" I say.

"You think it's possible I could ever be cool with those guys?" he says. That eyebrow comes up again.

Suddenly, I feel like I could tell this guy anything. "Not in a million years," I say with a grin.

He laughs, and keeps on walking toward

the stairs. Following him, I wonder if he's brave or crazy. Quinto and another guy, Bobby, see where Tino is headed. Of course they go right after him. I peek over the stairs just as Quinto and Bobby catch up to Tino.

"Hey, Fat Boy," Quinto snarls like the rat he is. "What are you doing here?"

"Going down the stairs, one step at a time," says Tino. "Is that a problem?"

Bobby says, "Yeah, the stairs are *our* territory—the Blades!"

"So I'm supposed to bow down and promise to never use the stairs again, is that it?" Tino says. His voice is sarcastic. He looks them up and down, and I know they're getting steamed.

Bobby turns to Quinto. "Guess the fat boy needs to be taught a lesson," he says. "Right?"

Quinto never gets a chance to answer. Tino lunges forward, slamming his big foot down on Quinto's instep. At the same time, he rams his fist into Bobby's stomach. Quinto yelps with pain and Bobby doubles up, groaning. He looks like he's going to puke.

I hurry away before someone sees me.

I'm walking to my last class when Tino catches up to me.

"Hey," he says. "Thanks for the warning."

"Uh—that's okay," I say lamely. I'm not used to talking to people.

"I needed to look out for those guys," Tino says.

"They'll get back at you," I say.

"Yeah, I can imagine," he says.

"Aren't you scared?" I say.

"I've been beat up a lot," he says with a shrug. "Hey, which bus do you take to get home?"

"The 31," I say.

"Me, too," he says. "I'll meet you at the bus stop after school."

"Okay," I say.

"I know where your locker is," he says. "See you later."

I watch him walk off and I notice something amazing—Tino walks proud. Fat kids at Carmichael High don't usually walk like that. I wonder how long he'll last here.



After school, I get my books out of my locker. I wonder if he's going to show up. But Tino is one surprise after another. He comes around the corner.

We walk to the bus, and it's okay today: None of the Blades are around. "What's wrong with your right foot?" Tino asks.

I stare at him. I swear, nobody's asked me that since I was eight years old. They usually ask *someone else* what's wrong with me.

"It's a clubfoot," I say. "My foot's twisted. It's been that way ever since I was born."

"Huh. Anything you can do about it?" Tino says.

"If they'd done something right away, they could have fixed it, but I think it's too late now," I say.

"It's all your fault," Tino says. "You should've been born rich. Then they would have taken care of it right away."

I grin. Another surprise. It actually feels *good* to talk about my foot.

“It’s my fault, too—that I’m fat,” he says.
“I eat too much.”

I start laughing. “Did you ever go on a diet?” I ask.

“Only about 17 times,” he says. Now we’re both laughing.



Tino gets off the bus and waves. I get off at the next stop and head to the day care center. I have to pick up my baby sister, Yoli.

When she sees my face she lights up like a candle. She comes running for a hug, calling “Sánte! Sánte!”

Everybody loves Yoli ’cause she’s sweet and really pretty. People think I’m good-looking, too—until they see me walk. When Yoli’s 16, like I am now, she won’t want to be seen on the street with me. But right now, it’s cool. I’m the sun, the moon, and the stars to her.

We walk home and watch TV for a while. Then I fix something to eat and Mom comes home. As usual, she looks exhausted. She

works in a factory, making men's wallets. Her hands hurt all the time. That's because she does the same movements over and over. Sometimes I hear her crying when she's trying to fold laundry. Or maybe she's crying about something else.

After everyone goes to bed, I sit down at my drums. But I just play on the practice pad so I won't wake anybody up. My drums are the coolest thing I ever had. My uncle left them for me when he died three years ago. Even when there's no school, playing drums is the best part of the day—always.



When I see Tino at lunch the next day, he's got Runt with him. They look odd together. That's because Tino's tall and Runt's about as big as your average fifth-grader. After me, he's Rubio's favorite victim.

"Hey, man, we're starting a club," Tino announces. "*The Outcasts*."

"Sounds good," I say. Everything Tino says



Death
Grip

QUICKREADS

JANET LORIMER



“**W**ill you just *look* at this awful place!” Katie wailed as she slammed on the brakes.

Bernie Polansky shook his head in disgust as he climbed out of the car. What was *with* this girl? Katie O’Neal was far too emotional for his taste.

She had stopped the car just a few inches short of a heavy iron gate. The sign that arched high over the gate read: *Oak Haven Hospital*.

Katie climbed out of the car and glanced around. “This place looks like the end of the world!” She shivered. “It’s hard to believe it used to be a hospital. Seems

more like a prison!”

Bernie didn't say so, but he had to agree. A dense forest bordered each side of the road. A high fence topped with barbed wire extended deep into the woods. Anyone trying to leave the hospital grounds without permission would have had a *very* hard time.

“Do you have the key?” Bernie asked. When Katie looked up, he pointed to the heavy chain and padlock on the gate.

Katie fished a key from her jeans pocket and handed it to Bernie. “Why would anyone want to keep the gate locked?” she wondered aloud. “My supervisor said this old hospital has been empty for more than 50 years.”

Bernie didn't answer. The lock was a little rusty, and the key stuck. He jiggled it gently.

“Need help?” Katie asked as she crowded in next to him and reached out for the key.

Bernie glanced at her impatiently. “You may not believe this,” he said, “but I can actually unlock a padlock! I'm not as helpless as you seem to think.”

Katie's cheeks turned red. "I didn't mean—" she started to say.

Bernie turned away and went back to work. Just a few seconds later, the rusty padlock snapped open.

Katie got in the car and drove through the iron gate. She glanced at her watch as she waited for Bernie to close the gate and join her. When he climbed in, she impatiently gunned the engine and the car jerked forward.

Bernie glanced sideways at his work partner. Her bad mood was written all over her face. He gritted his teeth. This was *not* going to be a fun day!

Katie and Bernie worked for a maintenance company. The company did all kinds of jobs—from cleaning office buildings to making minor repairs. Bernie had only been hired two weeks ago. This was the first time he and Katie had been paired up. Right now, he was hoping it would be the last!



Katie knew that Bernie had epilepsy—a condition that can cause brief disturbances in the brain’s electrical functions. The trouble was, she didn’t know much about the disorder. Bernie could tell she was scared of him.

Their supervisor had explained to Katie that Bernie would be fine. He controlled his condition with medication. But Katie was nervous. She was afraid that Bernie would have a seizure while they were working together.

Bernie had run into people like Katie all his life. Once they found out he had epilepsy, they treated him differently. He was tired of having to prove himself.

“Oh, wow! Look at that!” Katie said as she drove out of the woods. Just ahead lay acres of rolling green lawns studded with large oaks and pines.

The road wound in front of a huge, three-story white building. “Oak Haven

Hospital,” Katie said. “You know, until yesterday, I’d never heard of this place.”

“You’re kidding!” Bernie gazed at her in amazement. “Oak Haven played a big part in the history of the city. This hospital is over 100 years old.”

Katie glanced at Bernie in surprise. “How do you know?”

Bernie grinned. “I love history,” he told her. He studied the stately white building. “There are a lot of interesting stories about this place,” he went on. “This hospital was one of the few that took in patients with highly contagious diseases like cholera and typhoid. That was long before modern medicine.”

“Maybe that’s why the fence is so high,” Katie said, shifting the car to a lower gear. “They wanted to make sure the patients stayed inside.”

She drove slowly by the hospital. “The city plans to turn this place into a park and museum,” Katie went on. “City workers have already cleaned out the hospital. They’re going to start restoring it soon. We’re here

to clean out a little cottage. It's supposed to be somewhere on the grounds behind the hospital."

Bernie frowned. "Why didn't the city people clean out the cottage, too?"

Katie shrugged. "Who knows? But the pay is good, so don't complain."

Without knowing why, Bernie got the feeling that there was something *wrong* with the cottage.



They pulled up in front of the cottage. "This little place looks like something out of a Disney movie," Bernie said. Then Katie parked the car, and they began to unload their cleaning equipment.

"Why do you say that?" she asked, handing Bernie a broom.

"Look at it," Bernie said. "What a great setting."

Katie stopped what she was doing and studied the cottage. It needed fresh paint, but there was something very charming about

the place. A neat stone path wound its way to the front door. The yard was shaded by a big oak tree, and the front windows were decorated with flower boxes.

“It’s picture perfect. There’s even a white picket fence,” Bernie said.

But inside the cottage, the feeling was very different. Perhaps it was because the oak tree cut off sunlight. Or it could have been the dismal shade of gray paint on the walls. Maybe it was just the dead air inside.

Almost at once Katie felt a chill. “It must be 20 degrees colder in here than it is outside,” she said.

Bernie raised a questioning eyebrow. “Huh? I’m not a bit cold. Are you sure you’re feeling okay?”

Katie glared at him. “Do you suppose we could get some heat in here?” She pointed to the small fireplace.

Bernie put down his load of cleaning supplies and lit the log that was there. Katie shivered as she moved closer to it.

“I’m going to take a look at the rest of

the cottage,” Bernie said, starting down the tiny hall.

“I’m right behind you,” Katie said. Bernie glanced over his shoulder at her. Was it his imagination, or did her voice sound anxious?

“I wonder who lived here,” Bernie said as they peered into the small bedroom at the back.

“Maybe a gardener,” Katie said.

Bernie pointed at the frilly lace curtains and the single cot.

“Maybe a nurse.” Katie shrugged and blew on her hands.

Bernie opened the closet and let out a low whistle. “Look at this, O’Neal!” He pulled out a dust-covered dress. It looked like a costume from a very old black-and-white movie. “Wow! This little number must be over 70 years old!”

He shook his head in amazement. “And get a load of the furniture! Have you noticed how *old* it is? These pieces may not look like much, but I’d swear that half of them are genuine antiques.”

He turned around to see if Katie was

listening. She had a funny look on her face. “What’s wrong?” he asked.

“Haven’t you noticed the odor?” Katie asked. “It smells *awful* in here.”

Bernie sniffed, then shook his head. “The air is stuffy, that’s all,” he said. “I’ll open a window.”

“No!” Katie snapped. “I’m already too cold.” She rubbed her arms. “Aren’t there any other fireplaces in here?”

“You’ll warm up soon enough when you get down to work,” Bernie told her. “Where do we start?”

“The parlor. Where else?” Katie said.

Bernie stared at her in surprise. “You’re joking. The *what?*”

“I said let’s start in the front room.” Irritated, Katie had raised her voice as if she were talking to a deaf person.

“No, you didn’t,” Bernie said. “You called it the *parlor*.”

Katie frowned at him. “I did not! You’re nuts. Or maybe you’re hearing things. Is that because you have—”