

ΒΙΤΟΡΙΑ

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OLIVANDER PRESS

BOSTON

For my brilliant, shining suns, Oliver and Anders,
and my perpetually bright blue sky, Royce

CHAPTER 1

Stewart ran through the neighborhood, clutching his backpack to his chest. He cut across the lawns of houses, pumping his legs furiously, using the bushes and trees dotting the yards for cover. They were somewhere behind him, and they were coming. For him.

The old trees lining the streets, with their gnarled trunks and creaking canopies of spindly, twisting branches, towered over him as he sped past. Adults weren't home from work yet, and Stewart had raced out of his sixth-grade classroom and through the doors of the Oak Hill School the moment the bell had rung, so he was well ahead of the other students. The neighborhood was deserted.

As he ran, Stewart tried his best to ignore the darkened windows of the empty houses. He had dreams where he was running through the neighborhood, and the faces of his pursuers would appear like ghostly apparitions behind the glass, their mouths twisted in evil sneers, letting him know that his attempts to escape were futile. Stewart squeezed his backpack tighter as he ran. No matter what happened, he couldn't let them catch him. If they did, they would certainly find what he was carrying in his pack. And if *that* happened...

Stewart forced the thought from his head and pushed on. At the corner of Maple Street and Birch Street, he slid under a big green hemlock bush, disappearing completely beneath the bottom branches. He lay panting on the dirt, listening. At first he could only hear the pounding of his heart and his own

gasping, but as his breathing slowed, the sounds of the neighborhood became audible. A faint breeze whispered through the trees, rustling leaves and swaying small branches. From a few blocks away, the sound of a passing car emerged from the stillness, then faded back to silence. Far away, he heard the rumble and rattle of a construction site.

Stewart closed his eyes, trying to shut down all senses except for his hearing. He took in every vibration, every whisper of noise, sorting through them, trying to discern the telltale sound of his pursuers. And then he heard it. Almost as quiet as the flapping of a butterfly's wings, he detected the sound he dreaded most: the faint hum of knobby tires on pavement. It was barely perceptible, but over the months since he started at his new school, his ears had become attuned to the noise.

As he listened, he heard a *zip-zop, zip-zop, zip-zop*, the sound of the hum stopping and then starting again. They were jumping the curbs at the driveways. But more importantly, what the sound told him was that Dirk, Frankie, and Judd, the bullies of the Oak Hill School who called themselves "the Rage"—a dumb name to be sure, but not something that Stewart or anyone else for that matter would dare tell them—were all riding together. And as long as they were all behind him, his way forward would be clear.

He scrambled out from under the hemlock and sprinted toward Ricrac Road, a busy thoroughfare lined with shops that curved around the base of a hill. Just one block down Ricrac was Elm Street, where Stewart lived. Ricrac was usually the safest way home, thanks to the occasional adult walking past on the sidewalk,

which was enough to keep the Rage at bay. All he would have to do is make it down the block and up the hill to his house, and he and his backpack would be safe.

As Stewart approached the corner of Maple and Ricrac, the sounds of the construction site that he had heard from under the hemlock grew louder. When he reached the corner, he skidded to a stop behind a large maple tree and stared. Trucks, backhoes, and men wearing orange vests and hardhats were crawling across the entire width of the road. Every few moments, the rapid thumping of a jackhammer would fill the air, masking all sounds except for the clomping of rocks and pieces of asphalt dropped by a backhoe digger into a dump truck. The blacktop was pockmarked with holes and trenches. The grate of a storm drain had been pulled off and was lying next to the curb. The whole area had been cordoned off with a long yellow caution tape strung between white plastic sawhorses.

Stewart's heart leapt with relief. With all the construction workers around, the Rage would leave him alone. He could stroll down the sidewalk as carefree as the mayor. But then the backhoe engine shut off and the jackhammer went quiet. Stewart realized that the workers moving about were actually putting away shovels and tools. One by one they climbed into cars and trucks parked at the edge of the site and drove off. Before long, the place was deserted.

Stewart's hopes sank almost as fast as his fears rose. He was once again alone. No one was there to drive the bullies away.

Knowing that the Rage was getting closer with each passing second, he gritted his teeth and dashed out into the open street to cross. He braced himself for the

inevitable whoops and howls that the Rage would make when they saw him. But the shouts didn't come.

Stewart leapt to the far curb, took cover behind an old oak tree, and slowly peered around the gnarled trunk. The bullies were nowhere in sight. He listened, but couldn't hear the sound of the tires. Where had they gone? He sank back against the trunk, fighting a feeling of panic. Not knowing where they were meant that he was vulnerable. For all he knew, they were circling the block, heading up the hill and coming down the other side, which would cut him off.

Stewart checked the zippers of his backpack to make sure the cargo was safe. Tucked deep inside were five old coins: two silver quarters, a silver dime, a Buffalo nickel, and an Indian Head penny from the 1800s. They had been his grandfather's, and together they were worth over one hundred dollars. If the Rage found them, they were as good as gone.

Stewart peered around the oak tree again. He thought about backtracking, circling around behind the Rage and going up the hill to Elm; however, that route was much longer and there was no chance of an adult being around to help him. At least Ricrac offered the chance of a grown-up out shopping. He would take his chances on Ricrac.

Like a prowling cat, Stewart crept slowly along the sidewalk, keeping as close as he could to the storefronts, studying the way forward and looking back over his shoulder in case the Rage appeared. He passed the card shop, the flower shop, the drug store, the post office. He was halfway there. Dress shop, coffee shop, Italian deli. The sign for Elm Street was almost in view.

Finally he saw the corner bookstore and Elm Street. He was about to charge forward when he heard the dreaded hum. It quickly grew louder and was much higher in pitch, meaning the bullies were speeding down the Elm Street hill. In only a few seconds, they would round the corner onto Ricrac. Stewart turned to flee back to Maple Street but stopped cold. Sitting nonchalantly on his bike at the end of the block was Frankie. Behind him, Stewart heard two bikes skid to a stop.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ari Magnusson spent his first year of high school getting picked on by a huge bully until the day he figured out the secret to stopping him. They eventually became friends. Ari lives in eastern Massachusetts. *Bitopia* is his first novel.

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OLIVANDER PRESS
Boston, Massachusetts

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Library of Congress Control Number: 2011961142

ISBN-13: 978-0-9848610-5-7

First edition - February 2012

Printed in the United States of America

Cover illustration by Greg Marathas
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Printed on 100% post-consumer recycled paper.