

# BITOPIA

## Chapter 1

Stewart stood under the maple tree, watching the other students stream out the school doors into the sunny afternoon: Emily, Hannah, Nick, Brandon, a few third graders, Ryan, Tyler, the dorky kid with the thick glasses, a group of fifth graders, a string of first or second graders. At the other end of the building, the junior high wing, the older students were leaving through a different set of doors.

The longer Stewart waited, the more anxious he felt. Had Josh already come out? That would have been nearly impossible. At the bell, Stewart had raced through the hallway like a madman in order to be one of the first outside. Could Josh have gone out the back doors? Not likely as he always came out the front. Had he been kept after school to talk to a teacher? Maybe. The only thing certain, though, was that if Josh didn't appear soon, Stewart's whole plan would be wrecked.

Three eighth graders—Dirk, Frankie, and Judd—emerged from the junior high doors and Stewart's heart began to race. They were muscular, with broad chests and sinewy arms. Judd, whose black hair stood up in spiked clumps on his head, wore a chain around his neck with a gold skull emblem on it. Frankie had a small loop earring in one ear. Dirk had a pointed face that made him look like a weasel. All of them smoked. They stopped in the grass just outside the doors, talking among themselves, then looked in Stewart's direction. He quickly slid around the trunk of the tree.

To say that Stewart hated Dirk, Frankie, and Judd would be an understatement of gigantic humongistic proportions. Every day (just about), Dirk, Frankie, and Judd, who prowled the neighborhood on their bikes, intercepted him on his way home from school and applied some new devious torment. It was hard enough having just moved with his mom to Harrison City and being the new kid at Oak Hill School. But soon after starting school, those three bullies zeroed in on him and made his life miserable.

And no matter what evasive actions Stewart executed—sneaking like a thief through yards, ducking behind bushes like a crafty fox, or running like a cheetah with his tail on fire—they always got him. Yesterday, they pinned him to the ground and threatened to make him eat dried dog doodoo unless he admitted that he was a “little mama’s boy.” And his mom was not happy that he came home with another hole in the knee of his pants, thanks to Frankie’s parting shove. Stewart wanted to tell her what happened, but if he did, his mom would be sure to call the school, the bullies would know he told, and that would only make things worse.

After waiting as long he dared, Stewart peered out from behind the maple tree. The bullies were gone. He slid his hand into his book bag and gripped his pencil box, which he had been guarding all day. Inside the box were his most valuable possessions. He had taken a great risk in bringing them to school and had even disobeyed his mom’s direct order not to. But they were the key to his plan. Starting today, the bullies would never bother him again.

Josh finally appeared, walking with Zach and Tony. Stewart breathed a sigh of relief.

“Josh,” Stewart called out.

“Hey Stewart,” Josh said.

“Come over here,” Stewart said. “I want to show you those things I was telling you about the other day.”

Josh approached with Zach and Tony in tow. Like Stewart, Josh was shorter than practically everyone else in the fourth grade. However, at recess a few days ago, Stewart had witnessed something unbelievable. From where he sat in his usual safe spot against the wall near the playground monitor, Stewart saw Dirk, Frankie, and Judd approach Josh, who was playing centerfield in a kickball game. Dirk said something and then gave Josh a one-handed shove. Instead of running away, Josh remained standing where he was. Dirk tried to push him again, but Josh knocked his hand away and then said something to Dirk. Stewart couldn't hear what Josh said from where he sat, but most unbelievably, the bullies turned and walked away. And Josh simply turned his attention back to the game as though nothing had happened. Stewart had never seen anyone stand up to those three. At that moment, Stewart knew he had to make Josh his friend.

“What did you want to show me?” Josh asked.

“Check this out,” Stewart said, pulling the pencil box out of his book bag. He drew back the lid of the box, revealing seven old coins: a silver Standing Liberty quarter, a silver Washington quarter, two Indian head pennies, a buffalo nickel, a wheat penny, and a silver Roosevelt dime.

“Whoa,” Josh said. He reached in and picked up the Standing Liberty quarter.

“How old is this?”

Stewart smiled. “It's so old that the date has worn off. But it was minted between 1916 and 1930, so it's pretty old. And it's solid silver.”

“Let me see one of those,” Tony said.

Stewart wanted to pull the box out of Tony’s reach. Tony was one of those annoying people who was always telling everyone else what to do. And as one of the biggest kids in class, he could get away with it. But Tony was friends with Josh, so Stewart didn’t have much choice.

“Sure, go ahead,” Stewart said to Tony.

Tony reached in and grabbed the buffalo nickel.

“Check out this one,” Stewart said, picking up an Indian head penny. He exchanged it with Josh for the quarter.

“It says ‘1893,’ ” Josh said. “Is that when it was made?”

“Yup,” Stewart said. “That’s from the eighteen hundreds. Think about it—they didn’t have computers, PlayStations, iPods, cell phones, or even cars back then. Whoever had that coin probably rode around on a horse. And because it’s in such good condition, it’s worth almost ten dollars.”

“Ten bucks?” Zach asked, leaning in to have a look over Josh’s shoulder. “Ten bucks for a penny?”

“I have a silver fifty-cent piece at home that’s worth over a hundred dollars,” Stewart said.

“Really?” Josh asked. “That’s awesome.”

This was the moment Stewart had been waiting for. “If you want,” he said slowly, “you can come over to my house and have a look.” Stewart held his breath, waiting for a reply. He had to come with him, he just had to.

“Yeah, I guess,” Josh said. “I don’t have to be home for an hour.”

“Sure,” Zach said. “I’d love to see that coin.”

Tony’s eyes narrowed, but Stewart ignored him. He wanted to shout with joy. He had done it—his plan had worked. He had made a friend, maybe even two, and would never have to walk home alone again.

“Cool,” Stewart said. “And you’re not going to believe it until you see it, but I have a coin that’s actually a two-cent piece. One coin was worth two cents!”

“No way,” Zach said. “That’s freaky money.”

Josh and Stewart laughed.

“What’s that coin worth?” Josh asked.

“About twenty-five dollars,” Stewart said.

Josh and Zach both gasped.

Stewart grinned.

“Or how about nothing,” Tony said.

The smile faded from Stewart’s face. The three of them looked at Tony.

“What are you talking about?” Josh asked.

“These coins are bogus,” Tony said. “This so-called nickel,” he said, holding up the coin. “It’s not real money.”

“Yes it is,” Stewart said. “That nickel was made in 1936. That’s the money they used back in those days.”

“It’s bogus,” Tony said. “You can get these things in a Crackerjack box.”

“It’s real,” Stewart insisted.

“Nice try,” Tony said. He handed Stewart back the nickel. “Ten bucks for a penny, no way. Those coins ain’t worth squat. Come on guys.”

Tony and Zach started walking away, but Josh remained standing next to Stewart. He took another look at the Indian head penny.

“I’m telling you, it’s real,” Stewart said to Josh. “That’s a real old penny.”

“You coming, Josh?” Tony asked. “Let’s go!”

Josh handed Stewart back the penny. He gave Stewart a look of disappointment, then turned away. Stewart watched them walk across the parking lot and down the street until they turned a corner and disappeared from sight.

Stewart’s heart sank. The plan had failed.

The feeling of dread that came over Stewart every day at this time, when faced with the trip through the neighborhood to home alone, was far stronger than usual. Not only did he have to try to make it home, but now he had his coins with him. If the bullies caught him and found the coins, they were as good as gone.

Stewart spotted a bunch of sixth graders heading into the neighborhood. He quickly cut across the lawn toward them. Camouflage, a standard tactic—if Stewart followed them at a close enough distance, he could appear to be part of the group, increasing his chances that the bullies would leave him alone.

The broad canopies of oak, maple, and chestnut trees bathed the quiet neighborhood of older homes, broad lawns, and wide sidewalks in shadow. Stewart followed the sixth graders all the way to the corner of Hickory and Birch Streets. Dirk, Frankie, and Judd were nowhere to be seen. Most likely they were occupied with smashing a mailbox, soaping windows, or whatever other acts of vandalism they thought up with their rock-filled heads.

The sixth graders made a left where Stewart usually went straight, but he followed them for two more blocks until it appeared certain that they were going to Crestwood Heights, the development on the other side of the highway. At that point, Stewart cut over toward the direction of his home, sneaking through the thick bushes that grew on the lawns of the houses on Maple Street until he came to the bottom of the hill at High Street. Still no sign of the bullies.

Stewart began to feel a spark of hope. He was almost home. Now he had a choice of two routes; he could either take High Street over the hill to Elm Street, where he lived, or he could circle around the base of the hill on Ricrac Road, a busy thoroughfare lined with shops. The bullies loved racing down the hill on their bikes, but they also frequented the shops on Ricrac. So neither way was safer than the other.

Stewart thought about his coins. Although it was still early, there might be some adults shopping on Ricrac. If Stewart did get nabbed by the bullies on High Street, there would likely be no one around who could intervene, and he could not, at any cost, risk having his coins stolen. So it was safer for the coins if he went home via Ricrac.

Making his way from bush to bush, tree to tree, and bolting from yard to yard, Stewart finally arrived at Ricrac Road. The sidewalk was clear of adults, but the street was filled with passing cars, making the sidewalk seem less lonely. Stewart walked slowly but steadily along the sidewalk, rounding the base of the hill, keeping close to the shops and peering ahead for the Elm Street sign. Card shop, flower shop, drugstore, post office. Stewart was getting close. Dress shop, coffee shop, Italian deli. The sign for Elm came into view. A few more shops and he would be on his own street, his house within view.

Stewart spied the bikes leaning against the wall at the corner news and books shop at the same moment that Frankie and Judd stepped out onto the sidewalk. Stewart froze in his tracks and braced for their pounce, but they were huddled over the pages of a graphic novel and didn't notice him.

Keeping his eyes on the bullies, and trying to keep his fear in check, Stewart backed up slowly. He would hide out in the deli and wait until the bullies went away. Mrs. Petricelli, the kind woman from Sicily who ran the deli with her husband, wouldn't mind.

Using his hand as a guide, Stewart felt for the glass of the deli window, then touched the doorframe. He was about to rush in when someone grabbed the back of his shirt.

“Going somewhere, twerp?”

Stewart turned and looked up into the sneering face of Dirk.