HYPERGIFTED

GORDON KORMAN

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HYPERGRADUATE
DONOVAN CURTIS

Heavy Metal, robot extraordinaire, moved slowly forward, its Mecanum wheels propelling it along the gym floor. With a whirring sound, its lifting forks rose, bearing a rolled white parchment sealed with a shiny red ribbon.

Chloe Garfinkle, IQ 159, accepted her diploma as the students on the bleachers applauded politely. They were basketball bleachers, even though the Academy for Scholastic Distinction had no basketball team—or

any sports team, actually. The most rah-rah team here was robotics. That's why I was part of the Academy's graduation ceremony even though I was far too dumb to breathe the air at this school. These geniuses could build the ultimate robot, but none of them could drive one. I was the only person with the skills to work the controller, thanks to my long career as a video-game-obsessed couch potato.

Dr. Schultz, the superintendent, finished talking about Chloe's many accomplishments and called the name of the next graduate. "Abigail Lee."

Abigail was even brainier than Chloe—IQ 171—not that a few extra points mattered much at this level. Everybody here was at least half an Einstein smarter than me, I reflected, as Heavy Metal handed over her diploma.

"Last but not least, we have Noah Youkilis," the superintendent announced.

In the front row of bleachers, Noah stood up. They seated him in row one because if he'd been any higher, there was a really good chance he might have come down on his head. He wasn't exactly the most coordinated kid in the world. As it was, he managed to have his left foot hooked around the front rail, so he stumbled onto the floor before righting himself to

his usual praying-mantis posture.

Even in a school full of geniuses, somebody had to be the smartest, and that was Noah—IQ 206. Head and shoulders above everyone else, even if he was head and shoulders below them, height-wise. He was my friend too—although you might ask yourself what a guy that brilliant would want with someone like me.

I sent Heavy Metal in his direction, raising the forks a little less for this shorter graduate.

"I have some special news for Noah," Dr. Schultz continued. "You may have noticed that his diploma is a little thicker than the others. That's because it contains a high school certificate as well as a middle school one. Our Noah is being graduated from the Academy straight into college."

Noah's hand froze in midair, inches from Heavy Metal's lifting forks. *"No-o!"*

"Wilderton University, the most prestigious institution in our state, is offering you a full scholarship to be part of their freshman class," the superintendent went on.

"I won't do it!" Noah exclaimed. "You can't make me go to college! What about all that stuff in between? Ninth grade! Driver's ed! Prom night!"

Dr. Schultz regarded him in dismay. "This is an

incredible honour, Noah! Wilderton has never offered this to anyone before. It shows they truly believe how brilliant you are!"

Noah scowled at him. "I'm not brilliant; I'm average!" He added, "Indubitably!"

I tapped the controller in my hands, edging Heavy Metal forward in the hope that Noah would notice the diploma and take it. When the left fork tapped his stomach, he let out a whoop and jumped back.

"Don't even think about it, Donovan!" he barked at me. "Whose side are you on, anyway? If I touch that thing, I'll have to go to college!" He turned and stormed away.

What could I do? I followed him with the robot. Dr. Schultz was glaring at me like this was my fault. My one job was handing out diplomas, and I couldn't even get that right.

The other Academy kids were fidgeting and murmuring uncomfortably. Noah had been given an opportunity any one of them would have jumped at. They were all gifted; some were supergifted. But only Noah was *hyper*gifted, which meant that even a scholarship from a fancy university was no big deal to him.

The one thing Noah wanted more than prizes and honours and scholarships and awards was the privilege

of being ordinary. And no hypergifted kid could ever have that.

I think Noah was trying to make a dramatic exit, but he walked into the equipment room by mistake, sending a fusillade of volleyballs bouncing out toward the bleachers. One of them struck Dr. Schultz's podium, making the sound system shriek with feedback.

"You should have seen him," I told my parents after school that day. "They had to cut him out of the netting of a field hockey goal. He tied himself up so he wouldn't have to go to college."

"Poor Noah," Mom clucked from the kitchen, where she and Dad were getting dinner ready. "They expect so much from him and it's just not fair. He may be a genius, but he's only thirteen."

"And his mental age is three and a half," I finished. "That's pretty young to be living in a dormitory on a college campus, where everybody else is eighteen and older. And who's going to want to be his roommate? You'd feel like a nanny."

"I guess a two hundred IQ is both a blessing and a curse," Dad put in.

"That's not the worst part," I went on. "Wilderton wants him to start in the summer semester so he'll be

used to college life by the time things get really busy in the fall."

"Sounds sensible," Mom commented.

"Sensible?" I almost howled. "They're taking his summer! The summer after middle school is your last summer of freedom—nobody expects you to get a job or an internship or to do volunteer work. I've made a lot of plans for this summer. Know what they are? One word: *nothing*!"

Dad emerged from the kitchen, his oven mitts wrapped around a casserole dish. "Not very motivated, Donnie."

"That's where you're wrong," I told him. "See that couch over there—the one opposite the TV? My butt is going to be attached to the middle cushion and it isn't moving till September. And I have to say I'm pretty motivated about it."

You couldn't blame me for having an attitude. Up until three weeks ago, our little house was packed with my sister, her husband, their new baby, and two dogs. It wasn't just crowded; it was a zoo. Now that they'd moved on to my brother-in-law's new posting in Europe, this place felt like a luxury Airbnb. It was really going to enhance my summer plans.

My parents placed the tuna casserole and salad on

the table, but nobody made a move to sit down and start eating. A worried look passed between them. Something was up.

"What?" I asked suspiciously.

The doorbell rang and both of them ran to answer it. That's how relieved they were to have the conversation interrupted.

It was Noah, his praying-mantis posture a little stiffer than usual. Beside him stood Mrs. Youkilis, wearing her perpetual careworn expression. Being Noah's mother was a high-stress job.

"Sorry to disturb you at dinnertime," Mrs. Youkilis said, seeing the table set. "Noah was hoping for a word with Donovan."

And before I had a chance to consider what this might mean, Noah aimed a bony finger at the end of a bony arm at the tip of my nose and announced, "You're coming to college with me!"

I just laughed. "Yeah, I'd be great in college. I barely squeaked through eighth grade."

"I should explain," Noah's mother cut in. "Wilderton University is allowing Noah to bring a friend for the summer semester, so he'll have company as he adjusts to the college experience. They'd have a job for you on campus, Donovan, while Noah starts classes."

Job? I repeated the ugly word in my mind. I had absolutely no idea what kind of job an ungifted guy like me would be qualified to do at a university. Probably not the dean of the engineering school. Whatever it was, no way would it be the *nothing* I'd so carefully mapped out for myself during the next three months.

"Thanks, Noah," I managed with a manufactured grin. "That sounds like—uh—fun. But I've got a lot of big plans this summer and the arrangements are all set. It's way too late to make any changes now."

The chorus of throat-clearing from my parents happened in stereo on either side of me. I looked from face to face. Whatever they *weren't* talking about before, it was about to come out now.

"Actually, Donnie," Dad began, trying to sound casual, "this might not be such a bad idea."

"It *is* a bad idea," I assured him. "A *very* bad idea."

"The thing is," Mom said, taking up the tale, "your father and I are celebrating our twenty-fifth anniversary this year. We were thinking of taking a special trip."

"Really? Where are we going?"

"You're not going anywhere," Noah informed me. "They're going without you."

I fell silent. If the guy with the 206 IQ said it, it was probably true.

"It would be a second honeymoon for us," my mother continued. "Our only problem was what to do with you. We couldn't leave you in the house all alone."

Why not? I wanted to scream. The couch would still be there, its middle cushion crying out for my butt cheeks. But I already knew the answer: I was the last person anyone would trust to be home alone. I couldn't say for sure whether I found trouble or trouble found me, but we always came together somehow. I was a trouble magnet. If you left me in charge of the house, you'd come home to find me sitting in the rubble. It wouldn't be on purpose, but you could count on it.

"When Dean Kendrick asked who I wanted to come with me, my answer was instantaneous," Noah said proudly. "Donovan Curtis," he added, in case the stupider people among us weren't following the conversation.

"It's amazing how things work out!" Mom exclaimed, giving Noah a big hug and leaving me standing there, unhugged.

Amazing was the word for it. I wasn't even part of this decision. It was made by my parents—and between

Noah and some Dean guy I'd never heard of. By the time the news made it to me, it was already a done deal.

"But—" I sputtered. "But—"

Surely there was some way to fight this thing. Yet every argument I came up with collapsed like a house of cards. My parents in Europe. Our house locked up tight. There was only one possible place for me—at some college with Noah and his big fat ginormous IQ.

It was like waking up in the middle of a chess match to discover you'd already been checkmated.

Dad was practically jolly. "I can't believe my son is going to an elite university. Well, Noah is and he's taking you along for the ride!"

Yeah. And the cost turned out to be one summer.

Mine.