

# **Cloud Riders**

Don Hurst

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## Dedication

To Donna Sundblad, best writer's friend anyone ever had.

To Bob and Dennis Hurst, brothers extraordinary, who bought me my computer. To their families, including me.

To Writer's Village University (WVU) and Critique Circle (CC), my on-line writers groups. Thanks so much.

To YOU of Imagination and Humor and Hope and with enough money to buy this book.

## Chapter One

### Fight or Flight

On one side of the windowless gym room, skinny, lightweight Paul Winsome stood staring at his opponent. Across from him loomed the largest student at Morris Junior High, heavyweight football lineman, Buster Lanson. The contest, rope climbing. Coach Rayman, stopwatch in hand, clicked its button. "Go."

Paul shinned up the plastic covered rope, imagining it to be a polyester-skinned snake. His arms and legs acted as if on a mission of their own, his body along for the ride. Legs pushed, arms pulled toward the ceiling, tagged it and roped down to the floor mat. "How'd I do, coach?" Paul asked, knowing the answer.

"Fine, fine," Coach Rayman said in a dismissive tone. "Okay, Buster. Let's play a game. The ceiling has the football and you're going for it." The coach glanced at his stopwatch. "Do one for the team."

Buster's heavy body made him vertically challenged despite his thick legs and immense arms, which strained to heave his massive bulk upward. To Paul, he looked like a gorilla trying to climb a wet noodle.

Reaching the top, Buster slapped the ceiling tile with denting ferocity. He glared down at Paul, red-faced with teeth clenched.

Paul didn't realize it, but he smiled back. Winning the reptile scramble against the largest boy in school pleased him no end; a big boy who probably didn't have the game-playing ability to see his rope as a snake. He picked up on Buster's glare and his stomach did a whoops-somersault.

"Knew you could do one for the team," Coach Raymond said. "You let yourself down now." The coach grinned, shoved the stopwatch into a pocket, nodded at Paul and strolled out of the room.

Paul followed the coach before Buster could catch up to him. It only delayed his probable punishment for his unintentional reaction.

Noon came and Paul walked out onto the asphalt of the schoolyard toward the lunchroom at the opposite end of the L-

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shaped building. Buster stood in front of the lunchroom, a head taller than his clique of popular girls and guys. Paul's heart beat an unwanted drum solo inside his chest, his thoughts automatically returning to the snake climb and his ill-advised, stupid, accidental smile.

Under serious consideration, the thought of fleeing the scene. Paul could outrun any of those now starting to form a circle around him. Trapped between thoughts of flight and legs refusing to move, Paul thought himself foolish for walking right into this situation knowing full well he had dented Buster's pride as easily as Buster had dented the ceiling tile when he reached it. Once again his legs seemed to be on a program of their own. No one in their right mind walks toward danger on purpose unless their legs were on automatic. Yet, nothing could be worse than being labeled a coward. Playground rule one, no one is ever afraid about anything. Rule two, when scared, refer to rule one.

The circle grew in numbers as almost everyone outside the building gravitated toward the beckoning call of 'fight!' The group surrounded Paul like tigers circling their still-alive dinner. The guys smirked and the girls sniggered nervously.

Buster snarled, "Hey, Runt. Like trying to smile at me some more out here?" He stood and glared, his cannonball fists hung at his sides. "I'm not up any stupid rope now, and I'm in the mood to kick some wiseass butt. What'd you think about that, runt?" The word 'runt' came out of his mouth like escaping garbage.

"Come on Buster, if I wanted to make fun of you I'd climbed the rope three times while you were still trying to do it once." Paul wished he didn't have the unfortunate habit of wisecracking when scared. Stupid words, now out of his mouth and irretrievable. He backed from Buster. "Come on, you can take a joke can't you? It was just a fumble."

"Runt, you can have a freebie smack at me." He jutted out his thick chin. "Maybe you could get lucky. Deck me right off so you could make some more fun of me with that smile of yours. Take your best shot, runt." He closed his eyes and pushed his jaw out even further. "Well, go ahead. Do it, smart ass!"

More nervous giggles came from those mysterious creatures known as girls. Paul's mind frequently skipped around when it

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would be to his advantage to concentrate on the situation at hand, as if he stood admiring the speed of a rattlesnake strike rather than jumping out of the way of its bite.

His dad, Harry, had taught him lessons for as long as he could remember, repeating a few over and over. One such teaching: 'Action cures fear.' Maybe if Vicki, his eleven-year-old sister, could be at his side she could advise him how fleeing the scene could be considered taking action. He had to admit she knew stuff about life which now played a game of hide and seek inside his own brain. She'd probably have a suggestion about how he might avoid Buster's fists.

"If my sister were here, could she have a freebie too?" At once Paul realized his words weren't well thought out. He had no idea why a smart guy like himself could say something so stupid. Sometimes he amazed himself.

Buster's eyes opened, he pulled back his jaw and his mouth hardened into a dreadful sneer. "Tell your oh-so-smart sister about this, wiseass!"

Almost in slow motion, Paul watched the cannonball fist slam into the side of his face. His head barely stayed on his shoulders as his knees buckled and dropped his body to the schoolyard asphalt. Uninvited fireworks burst in his head, bright stars and flares exploding behind his eyeballs.

The laughter faded as the group walked away. In his peripheral vision Paul caught a glimpse of someone watching him on the outskirts of the schoolyard. He turned to see which kid had remained behind. Paul thought he saw a boy, strangely familiar, yet almost transparent except for two very visible green eyes. It had to be a lingering effect of Buster's blow, the fleeting glance more of an impression than anything real. The hallucination disappeared by the time he fully turned his head toward it. Surely his overactive imagination played a trick on him.

That night, his dad, Harry, asked about his swollen cheek and Paul made the mistake of telling him the truth. To tell his dad a falsehood would be like trying to swim in a bubbling pool of lava. He'd know. He always knew.

The next morning at school, a call came over the speaker system. "Paul Winsome to Principal Panion's office.

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Immediately." Paul's lips tightened. Yep. His dad had phoned sure as Buster's fist easily found its mark the day before.

Paul trudged hesitantly into the outer office. The short, heavysset secretary looked up from her desk and without any conversation, pointed Paul into the principal's inner office. He walked in and looked up into the face of an unsmiling Principal Panion standing tall as he could stretch. Ex-basketball star Principal Panion stood an intimidating six foot eleven and a half inches. Paul felt like a mouse standing next to a human skyscraper.

"Your father phoned me about your noontime fight yesterday." Principal Panion scowled like a preacher describing hell.

"What did Dad say?"

"Why don't you tell me about it," Principal Panion said, his voice dripping with authority. He leaned forward and drummed his fingers against the desktop. "Speak up." The fingers sounded like machineguns firing to Paul.

"It's nothing," Paul lied. "Kind of a misunderstanding." As an afterthought, he added, "Sir."

"Paul Winsome. Get it straightened out before your father climbs on his high horse and comes charging in here."

"What do you mean, sir?" Paul knew exactly what he meant; his dad could be daunting—not in a loud threatening manner, more in a knowing-where-to-place-each-word way.

"Take care of it. If you must fight, take it off the school grounds. My advice is to settle your differences in a more constructive way." The tall man folded his arms across his chest. "You are kind of small to be picking a fight, don't you think?"

"That isn't fair! Pick a fight? But he's a bully!" Paul cried in an exasperated voice. "Sir! He hit me! I didn't hit him. He's a bully! Everyone knows that."

"A bully? What is this bully's name, Paul Winsome? We don't allow bullies at Morris Junior High School! Tell me his name."

Paul felt small as a particle of dust being sucked up into a vacuum cleaner. Better being busted by Buster than squealing on him. Didn't this tall man ever walk out onto the school grounds? Didn't he know the rules? To turn in a student would get around

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school faster than the flu. He would be disgraced and despised, and worse yet, avoided. Surely Principal Panion must know this. Maybe the blood couldn't get high enough to get up into his head. "I don't know his name," Paul said in a voice almost too weak to make the long climb up to the principal's ears.

"I suggest you find out the name of the person you call a bully. I assure you, I will investigate this person. Oh, yes." He shook his head. "There are more productive ways to settle your differences even when away from school. I played one year in pro basketball. Start a fight and out of the game you go. Same here at Morris Junior High School." From up high came a change of expression; a strange pleading look of frustration behind his mask of authority. "Please inform Harry Winsome we had this talk." His hands motioned a gesture of helplessness. "And get me that name."

Paul would rather take another blow from Buster than give his name to the skyscraper principal.

Between school periods, Paul walked reluctantly out onto the schoolyard, Principal Panion's 'Get me that name' playing tag with his dad's 'Action cures fear'. Take what action? Turn in Buster? Make up a name? Just forget about the whole thing?

Paul had to smile, knowing once a pain decided to visit it would continue to nag like a sore tooth he didn't want to touch. Such a pain existed only to be a magnet to his tongue tip. This is why Paul found no surprise in seeing Buster, surrounded by his admirers, striding toward him. Paul stood his ground as he searched his mind for a way to evade the bully. Why couldn't he just run away? A realization came to him like a wasp sting. It isn't Buster or the guys. It's the girls. Why did they hang around Buster? Why not him? Yet, the thought of all the girls being around him perhaps took on more fright than Buster's fists. Life, a strange thing happening as one lives.

"Ready to turn the other cheek, runt?" His entourage giggled a nervous chorus of waiting-for-the-fight sniggers. "I thought you were going to bring your sister."

"Leave Vicki out of this," Paul shouted. Brave words, as he prayed for the inner strength to stand his ground. "She's only eleven."

"And, oh-so-smart, huh, runt? Find it hard to keep up with

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her, do you?" Buster smirked as he pressed his ham-like fists into his side and pushed his jaw forward in another invitation to trade punches. He loved having the upper hand and played the game as if no other outcome existed. "Feel free to take a freebie." He laughed in a fake menacing chortle meant to mock.

A girl said, "Leave him alone, Buster. He won't fight."

Paul thought about what his dad might do in such a predicament. Couldn't anyone see the illogic of a skinny kid trading punches with the largest guy in junior high? A football player. Paul could be on the team if the coach would let him. He could outrun any of them.

Buster taunted, "You a coward?"

The group around Buster became silent. The question deserved an answer, but what did it matter? He'd never impress anyone in Buster's congregation. Paul looked into Buster's face wanting to be silent, yet unable to trap his defensive wisecrack. "Why, yes. Yes I am." Paul turned and walked away, like a toreador turning his back on the bull. He waited for another wallop and the light show in his head which would follow. This time he would stay on his feet.

He heard laughter and turned. Buster and his group of disciples didn't follow. Paul forced a smile. Buster stood with his cannonballs still unfired, looking stupid and hateful.

A woman's voice assumed a leadership role in his mind, mean as a teacher demanding homework she knew he didn't have. *If you sky journey, death awaits. You saw my boy, next time he will kill you.*