

LIGHTS! CAMERA! ACTION!

NUTTY, the Movie Star

Dean Hughes



LINDBERG

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Chapter 1

Nutty was the last one to poke his head into the darkness. He couldn't see a thing. But up he went. He moved slowly, being careful not to make a sound, and once he had pulled himself all the way up into the crawl space and onto the ramp, he felt his way forward, inching along on all fours. When his hand touched Orlando's shoe, he knew he had caught up with the others. "Okay, go ahead," he whispered.

Slowly, silently, the boys edged ahead. They had done this three times in the last couple of weeks, so they knew the procedure. The idea was to crawl about thirty feet until they were above the classroom next to the custodian's closet, where they had entered the crawl space. From above the false ceiling, they would be able to hear what the girls down below were saying.

Bilbo, who was first in line, stopped a little too soon. Nutty couldn't hear very clearly. He reached out and tapped Orlando on the behind. But Orlando apparently

didn't understand the message. He threw out a little mule kick that barely missed Nutty's nose. "Watch it," Nutty whispered. "Move up a little."

But Nutty heard a voice below say, "What was that?" All the boys froze.

The girls didn't seem too concerned, however. They were quiet only for a few seconds, and then they returned to their conversation. Finally, Nutty reached up and flipped Orlando on the backside again, and this time Orlando apparently sent the message forward—through Richie to Bilbo. The boys moved ahead.

Nutty could now hear one of the fifth-grade girls—it sounded like Carrie—complaining that her father had packed a tuna sandwich for her again. The girls were the pickiest eaters Nutty had ever seen. They hated the cafeteria food, so they all brought their own lunches, but they didn't like those either. Of course, Nutty was a little sensitive on this issue. Everyone kept reminding him that he had promised, way back when he was elected student council president, that he would do something to improve school lunches. And they weren't seeing any change. In fact, something of a protest was going on these days. About half the kids in the school were bringing their own lunches—a way of telling Dr. Dunlop, principal of the university laboratory school, what they thought of the meals in the cafeteria.

The fifth-grade girls all ate in Mrs. Smiley's classroom. They claimed they were protesting, the same as the rest, but Nutty thought they especially liked to eat in private, so they could talk. It was that theory, in fact,

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that had inspired the boys to climb into the crawl space and listen. And they hadn't been wrong; they had already heard some juicy stuff.

"But he's not just cute," Nutty heard a girl say. "He's really nice, too, and he's smart."

Nutty recognized April's voice, and he smiled. He was sure she was talking about him. She had had a crush on Nutty since about third grade. All the same, it was kind of embarrassing for the other boys to hear her saying things like that.

"He's so tall and so strong, but his voice is really soft. I think he's kind of shy."

That was Carrie. Nutty had no idea she liked him, too. But then, he wasn't exactly surprised. He was pretty tall and a good athlete. He'd never thought of himself as all that strong, but maybe girls thought so.

"What I can't believe is the way he looks at me. He's got those dark eyes and those long eyelashes. When he smiles, I get goose bumps all over."

Abbie, too? Nutty was amazed. But what was this about dark eyes? He didn't have dark eyes. She must mean dark blue.

"Oh, I know. And don't you love his name? It sounds like a movie star's."

Mindy must be losing her mind. Nutty Nutsell was not a movie star's name. Freddie Nutsell wasn't any better. When girls fell for a guy, they were really sort of ridiculous. Nutty knew he was probably pretty good looking, but he really wasn't all that incredible. And the amazing thing was, Mindy had always pretended she couldn't stand him.

"I know. Lance Knight. It sounds like the hero's name in one of those old-fashioned movies."

What? Wait a minute. All this stuff was about this Lance guy?

Nutty couldn't believe it. Lance was a new guy who had just moved in that week. Sure he was tall, and maybe he was good looking—Nutty hadn't thought about that—but he was nothing to get excited about. Lance Knight. What a stupid name.

"Lance Knight. It gives me chills to say it. If he would like me, I wouldn't care if one other good thing ever happened to me in my whole life."

Nutty couldn't believe this stuff. Zoie had said the same thing about one of the sixth-grade guys just last week. What was it with girls? Some guy moves in, and suddenly the whole fifth grade has to fall in love with him. That was the worst thing about being in a lab school—the school was so small that a new kid always seemed like a big deal. But it wouldn't last. The guy was not that...

"He'll be elected student council president next year for sure," Mindy said.

"I know. He'll be twice as good as Nutty."

This time Orlando's kick was only playful, not hard, but it clipped Nutty's forehead, and someone up front in the crawl space let out a little giggle. Nutty was pretty sure it was Richie, not Bilbo. The guy was going to get it when they got down.

"Nutty never has kept his promises. He said we'd start getting hamburgers for lunch and pizza and stuff like that."

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Nutty knew that voice. Ami. She always had been a negative person. She could criticize, but she didn't know. . . .

"I know. He talks big, but he's scared of Dr. Dunlop. If William Bilks didn't help him, he'd never do anything."

"I don't think he's been that bad."

Nutty knew that voice for sure. And he liked it. It was Sarah Montag, his . . . well, anyway, it was Sarah Montag.

"Sure, Sarah, you just say that because you like Nutty, and he likes you." Nutty knew the voice; it was Abbie.

"Yeah, Sarah, if Lance asked you to go with him, you'd forget about Nutty in five seconds. And you'd admit he hasn't been a good president."

"He's done okay. No one else would've done any better."

"Lance would," Abbie said.

Well, Abbie, Nutty said to himself, you be his campaign manager then. And get married to him while you're at it. What do I care?

Nutty stared ahead in the darkness. He was almost sure he had heard one of the guys snickering again.

"Nutty tries to act like he's serious about things, but he's really not. He's just the same old Nutty that he's always been."

If only Nutty were down there. He could tell April a thing or two. . . .

"They speak the truth," Orlando whispered. He had apparently sat up and twisted around, and then, for

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emphasis, he reached back and gave Nutty a little cuff with his hand.

"Orlando, you're going to get it. When we get down, I'm going to—"

"Ssshhhhhhhhh."

Nutty knew he did have to be quiet. He could hear the other two guys laughing, too. He decided they all better leave before they got caught. He gave Orlando's foot a little yank and then started backing up. What he really wanted to do was dive right through that false ceiling and then tell a few girls what he thought of them.

"Nutty was better than any of the other guys in our class would have been."

Nutty stopped.

"That's not saying much. We should have elected Angela. She would have been better than any of the stupid boys."

"Yeah, Bilbo just reads all the time. He would have forgotten to go to the student council meetings."

"And Richie wouldn't have cared what happened. He never has an opinion about anything."

"Then there's Orlando. He always has an opinion—whether he knows anything about the subject or not."

"Yeah, Orlando would have spent the whole time telling how great he was. He's cocky enough without being president."

Nutty reached out and rapped Orlando a pretty good one and then put his head down to muffle his laughter. He just couldn't help it.

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Orlando was backing up now, his shoes pushing into Nutty's arms. Nutty started moving back, maybe a little too quickly.

"What's that?" one of the girls said. "I heard something."

The four boys turned into statues again.

"It sounds like rats in the ceiling."

"Oh, don't say that."

The girls were quiet for a time, apparently listening. The boys didn't move. But before long one of the girls said, "I didn't hear anything," and they started talking again. Nutty took the chance to move back, very slowly, until he got to the access opening. He reached down with his foot, found a step on the ladder, and then climbed down to the floor.

He waited, and soon Orlando's feet appeared. When all three boys had climbed down, they quickly set the ladder against the wall, where they had gotten it. They weren't safe quite yet, however. They were in the custodian's little supply room, and they had to get out without being seen.

"Who do those girls think they are?" Nutty said, as much to himself as anyone else.

"They sure got you." Orlando laughed right out loud.

"Be quiet," Nutty said. "They got you worse."

"No way. All they said was that I'm cocky. But I've got a right to be cocky. What's your excuse?"

"I'm not as beautiful as Lance Knight—that's all. If you think I care about that, you're nuts."

"Well, I think you care about it, so I guess I'm nuts."

"I think you care, too," Bilbo whispered.

"So do I," Richie said. "That's my very strong opinion on the subject."

"Oh, lay off. All of you."

"At least Sarah still likes you," Orlando said in a sugar-sweet voice.

"Orlando, I'm going to pop that pimple that's sitting on top of your neck—if it ever comes to a head."

"What pimple? I don't have any pimples."

"Yeah, you just proved that."

"What?"

Nutty decided to ignore him. He flipped the light off and stepped to the door. Mr. Skinner always ate his own lunch during this time—in the cafeteria—so he wasn't likely to come along, but other kids could be in the hallway.

Nutty opened the door just a crack and then a little more when he didn't see anyone. He stepped out and looked both ways and then said quickly, "Okay. Hurry."

The other three boys stepped out, and they shut the door. They were safe. But they didn't have much time now if they wanted to get something to eat. They hurried down the hallway to their lockers and got their sack lunches.

They were heading outside when Zoie and April came out of the classroom where they had been eating. "So, Nutty," Zoie said, "you won't eat the lousy cafeteria food either. Why don't you do something to get it changed?"

"Hey, I've been trying all year. You don't know how hard it is to get Dunlop to do anything. He keeps promising, but he—"

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"You don't have to tell us," April said. "We know about people who make a lot of promises they don't keep."

Were you born a little snot, or did someone train you? Nutty wondered, but he decided not to say it. He was just glad his term in office was almost over. He never wanted to run for anything again. Let someone else try, and let someone else take all the criticism. Maybe April would like to give it a shot.

Now the other girls were coming, all smiling, looking satisfied, as though they were glad they had just said such terrible things about him. Talk about heartless! Sarah stayed back, behind the others. Nutty wondered what she was thinking. His eyes met hers for a moment, but she quickly looked away.

"Nutty, the great president," Abbie said. "Can we have your autograph?"

Nutty turned to leave.

"Hey, what's that on your knees? Where have you guys been?"

Nutty glanced and noticed all the dust on his jeans. He reached down and brushed them off as best he could. So did the other guys. It was something they should have remembered from the times before.

"Have you little boys been playing marbles?" Mindy asked.

But Nutty and the guys were getting out of there.

"Some guys in fifth grade are too old for stuff like that. Some guys are tall and handsome—and even nice. They're not little boys, like some other fifth graders we know."

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Mindy was going to get it someday. That girl never let up. Nutty and his friends just kept walking, but when they reached the doors, Mindy called behind them, "Some fifth-grade boys would make good presidents next year, and some already showed they can't do it."

Nutty kept his mouth shut, but Orlando spun around. "Oh, yeah? What about some fifth-grade girls who sit around and talk about—"

Bilbo grabbed Orlando and clapped a hand over his mouth. Then he pulled him out through the doors. Orlando struggled the whole way. He was furious.

But Nutty wasn't so much mad as he was worried. He didn't want everyone saying he had been a lousy president. He had to think of something he could do that would change some minds before his term was over.

The girls claimed he couldn't do anything without getting help from William. But that was stupid. He did lots of things without running to William.

All the same . . . he hadn't seen his old friend for a while. And if the subject did happen to come up, maybe they could chat a little. And—who knows?—maybe William would have some ideas. I don't need his help, Nutty told himself. I can handle this myself. But what could it hurt—just to get his thoughts on the subject?

Chapter 2

Well, Nutty, I simply don't see the problem." William was leaning his chair backward on its rear legs, and he had his feet up on his bed. Of course, he had taken his shoes off first, and he had put them away in his closet. And he had put on a sweater, now that the evening was getting "just a tad cool."

"What do you mean, William?" Nutty said. "Everyone thinks I've been a lousy president. I didn't get any of the stuff done that we told them I was going to do."

"Yes, yes. I know that. But think about that. Presidents always promise things they don't deliver. And they are always criticized. That's just the nature of politics."

"William, this isn't politics. It's president of the student council, for crying out loud. And kids think that if you say you're going to do something you ought to do it."

"Well, of course. Children are a little more simplistic

about those sorts of things, but they are essentially the same as any human being. They complain a great deal, but they know they didn't really anticipate that you would accomplish anything when they elected you."

Nutty was lying on the floor. He had his hands behind his head, and he was staring up at the ceiling. He could see a little wisp of cobweb clinging to the light fixture. He was surprised that William hadn't spotted it by now. It was the only flaw in the otherwise perfect room. Everything William did was perfect—or very close. But he was finally showing that he didn't really understand kids his own age. But then, he had never been his own age, so maybe he had an excuse.

"William, what I want you to help me do is figure out some way to get Dr. Dunlop to start serving hamburgers and pizza and stuff, so everyone will say I did a good job."

"Fine. We can give that a try, but you have to understand that Dunlop's basic plan is very difficult to beat. Every time you bring the topic up, he says, 'We're looking into that, and we just might do something,' but that only stalls you off. He figures if he stalls long enough, the whole thing will go away. He's just about stalled it out to the end, so he's played things pretty smart."

"It's a dirty trick, if you ask me."

"Surely. But that's how the system works. It's like a president and Congress working together. They each play the game to their own advantage."

"Criminy, William, why do you always have to make things so complicated?"

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"Oh, believe me, I'm not. You're the one who's complicating things. You're assuming that a good president has to keep his promises. I'm the one who's telling you not to worry about it."

Nutty started looking for more cobwebs. He thought maybe some had gotten into William's head. Nutty had never heard him say such stupid things.

"Here's the thing, Nutty. People always complain about their leaders, but either they like them or they don't like them. It has more to do with image than anything else. Some presidents are popular no matter how bad they are, and some are hated even if they do pretty well."

"Are you sure about that, William? Why would that happen?"

"Well, it's just the nature of people. Issues are too complicated, so people go by their emotions."

"Just tell me this. How do I get people to like me then? Or to say that I did a good job?"

William rocked his chair back and forth, like somebody's grandpa on the front porch. He nodded from time to time, as though he were agreeing with himself. Finally he said, "It seems to me that the fickle nature of your constituency has led to a momentary—"

"What?"

"Oh... uh... what I mean is, the voters—the children who put you in office—have become attracted to a new face. This fellow with the silly name... Spear, or whatever it was..."

"Lance. Lance Knight," Nutty said.

"Yes. This boy is apparently tall and attractive. He

may be stupid as a log, but the girls like his appearance—think he looks like a movie star.”

“Actually, he’s quite smart.”

“Well, in any case, in politics a new face is always exciting for a while until everyone figures out that he’s just another human like the rest of us. In the long run being smart usually works against a politician. Thoughtful statements are never as interesting as intense, truly believed, stupid ideas. Smart people have trouble saying that sort of thing.”

Nutty rolled over onto his face, his nose smashed into William’s shag carpet. “William, listen to me,” he mumbled into the rug. “You are the age of a fifth grader, no matter how smart you are and what school you go to, and I am a fifth grader. We are not talking about the president of the United States. We are talking about the lab school and the student council.” He took a deep breath through his mouth, since his nose was rather closed off for the moment. “I want to know what will make the kids think I’m better than Lance.”

“So you want to be reelected. Is that it?” William asked.

“No.”

“Of course you do. That’s how politicians prove themselves. If you got yourself elected again, you would solve this ego problem you seem to be struggling with. You would know that everyone loves you after all. It’s all a game of vanity.”

“William, one last time. Only one. I just want to know what to do.” Nutty rolled off his nose and onto his back