



# THE GOOB FACTOR

by

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## Chapter One

Let's face it, if you come into this world with a name like Gooby, you're pretty much done for.

I can't believe that after decades (centuries, maybe!) of kids getting pummelled in playgrounds, the world hasn't figured this one out by now. Hey, attention parents — newflash! This just in! Don't land your kid with a stupid name!

Jeez, you'd think they'd have done studies on it or something, proven what a nightmare effect it has on a kid's formative years. Not that anyone really *needs* to do a study. I mean, take a look around you at school, and you have your answer. How easy a time is a kid going to have if his name is, I don't know, Dilbert or something? Not exactly a name that screams "leadership!" But maybe if some brainiac were to write it up in a scientific journal, parents would actually take notice. I could write the whole thing myself, but even if I wrote in letters ten feet high, my parents still probably wouldn't get it.

I guess not all kids have parents who are as clued-out as mine. The Mike Thornleigh's of the world, for instance. Their parents get it.

Don't get me wrong, I don't mean to totally diss my folks. I mean, they're nice and all. But they're kind of living in this stuck-in-the-seventies la-la land. (And another thing: am I really supposed to believe that kids didn't make fun of the name Gooby in the seventies? I have a hard time buying that my dad didn't go through the same welcome-to-life, by-the-way-you're-screwed boot camp.)

Gooby's not my first name. Thank. Freaking. God. Can you imagine? I'll give my parents credit for at least giving me a halfway normal first name. Oh no, wait — I won't. Jay might sound normal at first, but then you realize it could be a girl's name. Couple that with the whole Gooby thing, and life is pretty much over before it's begun.

It's okay for a girl to have a guys' name. Like Charlie or Jamie — it's kinda cute. Sexy, even. But on no account should a guy ever, EVER be called Stacy, Leslie or (thank God for small mercies) Vivian. But Jay is almost as bad. Trust me on this one.

"Hey Goober!" a voice calls.

Nickname number one.

Takes a real genius to come up with that one. I don't even turn around; I already know the genius in question is Mike Thornleigh. It's the hey-world-look-at-me, I'm MIKE THORNLEIGH in his voice that gives it away. Oh, that and the fact he's been calling me names for nine straight years now. I could probably pick his voice out of a screaming crowd of a thousand people. While wearing headphones.

"Goobs!"

Nickname number two.

There's Gooby, Goobs, Goober, Goobster, and then my personal favourite: Booger. That one doesn't even make *sense*. But try explaining that to someone like Thornleigh. It's not that the guy's dumb, just that there isn't much call for him to be smart. In school, smart is a niche, and it's reserved for the kids who aren't athletes, good looking, overflowing with confidence, blah, blah, blah. Thornleigh is all of those things, so smart doesn't really get a look-in.

"Thornleigh," I say, which makes me wonder if I really am so smart, after all. I mean, NINE YEARS of name-calling — you'd think I could come up with something better. But go on, you try — come up with a nickname out of Thornleigh.

I once thought about the 'Booger' nickname and how it wasn't really close to my name at all, so I took the Leigh from Thornleigh and figured at least I could do something with that, but all I came up with was Leafy. So then I thought, hey, that's neat, 'cause leafy is like a bush and so are *thorns*, so I called him Leafy and he just gave me this strange look and then I realized how stupid it sounded.

Thornleigh. Damn. Sounds good no matter what. Kinda tough. Even a bit, I don't know, classy. Like a make of hockey stick or something.

Whack.

Ow. Textbook. Head.

I swing around, ready to nail Thornleigh with my backpack, but he's already jumped out of the way. He's always hitting me with books or tripping me up or slamming me against lockers

Nine years is a long time. I should know; I'm fourteen.

"So Goob-Goob!" (Oh, did I forget to mention that one?) "You going to practice tomorrow?"

I turn to look at him. He's smiling. He'd actually look friendly if it weren't for all the years of nicknames, jokes, punches, wedgies, and general roughhousing on his slate.

"Yeah, I'm goin'."

"Great! 'Cause my team really needs you, man."

This would sound nice if I weren't on a different team.

"The way you let those pucks fly in..." He grins.

I grit my teeth. "I'm not playing goal any more."

His jaw drops and he actually stops in his tracks. Is it because he might have to learn how to aim, now? Because our team might get a halfway decent goalie?

"Coach moved me up, I'm playing forward."

"GOOB!" He actually sounds happy. Goes to high-five me. I put my hand up but crouch a bit, waiting for him to slug me in the stomach when my arm's up. He high-fives me anyway, but because I'm not ready for it, he whacks my hand down. It's a kind of screwed-up high five. As usual, I feel stupid.

"So it'll be you and me out on the ice, man! Finally!" Then he lowers his voice like he's the narrator of Star Wars or something: "THE FACE OFF."

Oh, yeah, great. Just what I've been waiting for, all these years. Now it won't only be legal for him to kill me, but encouraged. It's times like these I gotta wonder about hockey being our national sport. Full body combat, with blades, and sticks, on ice. Great combination. Oh, and throw some testosterone into the mix, for that extra little somethin'.

"I've played forward before," I say.

D'oh! Why did I tell him that? Now I've gone and lost *any* element of surprise — my one possible advantage. Now that 'extra little somethin' will probably be a couple pints of my own blood. (Can you sign up for transfusions in advance? Is there a waiting list?)

"Can't wait, buddy! See you Saturday."

"Yeah. See you." Can't wait.

And to think I had been looking forward to playing out on the ice again. Welcome to my life. The Curse of the Goob.



## Chapter Two

The screen door bangs shut behind me. I drop my backpack on the floor and yell “I’m home!”

“Hi, Jay!” my dad calls back, his voice muffled from the basement.

To make matters worse, my dad’s a stay-at-home parent.

I know what you’re probably thinking, that I should lay off my folks around about now. And that I’m way overblowing this whole name thing, right? Like my dad couldn’t help giving me the last name Gooby. Well, get this: my mom kept her last name when she married him. That’s right, she *chose* to take this guy, and even she didn’t want to be a Gooby. Why didn’t I get a choice? I could’ve taken Mom’s name. Or Dad could’ve taken hers — I mean, it was the nineties, for Pete’s sake! (Pete is a nice ordinary name, too.) This one guy in my class, his parents combined both their last names to make a brand new name. Of course, they ended up with DeLaSpitzburg so maybe that’s not

such a good example, but the point is, Dad could have invented a whole new name. He is an inventor, after all.

That's right, my dad's an inventor. When I was little, it was really cool. How many kids can say that about their dad? He was selling a lot more back then, too, or maybe it just seemed that way. I remember one year, he made a whole bunch of sales and we went out for pizza and ice cream all the time. He sold a couple of hardware tool designs — those are his mainstay — and some electrical circuit thing to do with engineering. So you can imagine, Show and Tell was great. Hey everyone, my dad invented this!

But the Goob Factor was already kicking in. (It's not a name that escapes attention. You've got a grace period of right up 'til, oh, the first time someone hears it.) Would you buy something with the word 'Gooby' on it? Exactly. My dad's last great invention? Something to do with a toilet. That's right, A TOILET. Try living that one down at school.

Anyway, after that, things kind of went down the tubes. I guess Dad was sticking to tools (although thankfully, no more toilets) when the world wanted computers, software, and cell phones. He had an office for a while, but he packed it up and settled into the basement. He gets enough money from his older inventions to keep us going (yes, my life is financed by a toilet), but he hasn't made much of anything for a long time. I looked at his income tax form once and he'd changed his job title to "unemployed", which made me feel really embarrassed and awful.

So now the inventor thing seems kinda, well, cringe-worthy. I feel bad saying so, but that's the truth.

And just in case I don't have an unusual enough role model? He really loves the stay-at-home-dad thing. *Loves it!*

As I grab a soda out of the fridge, he comes bounding up the stairs — I can hear him on the old, wooden steps — and the door booms open and he says, "Hi, Son!" like this is some after-school TV show. He's wearing brown corduroys and a green sweater, and his beard is looking straggly. That was the dad uniform of the seventies, apparently. He doesn't get out much, so he doesn't understand that time has moved on.

"Hey, Dad."

"How was school?"

When will parents learn not to ask that question?

"Fine."

"Learn anything new today?"

"No, I think they sucked some knowledge back out. They need to recycle it for the younger kids."

He laughs, but it's that nervous, *my-son-is-a-teenager-please-tell-me-how-to-react* kind of laugh. "How are your friends?"

I sip my soda.

I do have friends. I'm not a total loser. I can joke around with the guys, I do get picked for teams, it's not like I eat lunch on my own or anything. But things sorta shuffled around when we started high school, and now I feel like I don't really have a best bud. I don't know what happened, exactly. It's like in P.E., when the teacher yells

for everyone to grab a basketball for drills and we all make a dive for the box, 'cause everyone knows that at the bottom is this one ball that's partially deflated, and I'm late in the scramble and get left holding the doofy ball. It's not like anyone *meant* to do it or hated me (except maybe Mike Thornleigh, who also manages to get the super-inflated, cement-hard basketball), it's just that it was every man for himself, and that's way the way the cookie crumbles. Or basketball bounces. Or doesn't bounce, but sorta goes *'thiff'* instead, and sits there like it's suffering a bout of manic-ball-depression.

"They're..." I don't have an answer. "...they're okay, Dad." It's amazing how much people can lie to each other.

"That's great, son! Well, it's a nice day out. You want to go throw a baseball around or something?"

"Sure."

He's a pretty good guy. Sucks at sports, but he's always cheerful, and he really does try. I have to give him credit for that.

We grab the baseball mitts and head out to the back yard. I live in a small town, and everyone has big lots. Ours is even bigger. Our house is old, but the yard is pretty cool; there's this huge, hundred-foot cedar, a couple smaller trees, some bushy plants and stuff that Mom looks after, and lots of lawn.

Dad throws the ball. Underhand. *Groan*.

I'm nice and don't throw back too hard, 'cause it practically knocks him over when I do. Once, when I was in a bad mood, I started just *pelting* the ball at him. I could tell he could barely catch it, that I was almost knocking his hand off, but he kept on playing and playing, anyway.

I feel kind of guilty for complaining about my parents when I think about stuff like that.

I hear the familiar growl of the car, and Mom pulls into the driveway. Dad and I wave. My mom works from home, too. She's a therapist. She works with a lot of... oh, what's the politically correct term this week? 'Challenged' kids. I guess my mom is good at what she does, because the kids' parents bring them all the way from other towns to see her. Anyway, these kids are nice and all, but sometimes I just want to have normal people over at our house.

Jermine climbs out the car. He's about six or seven years old, one of Mom's 'challenged' kids. He sort of slaps over towards me, his legs slightly knock-kneed, his feet doing this windmill thing.

"Ball!" he calls out. "Ball, ball, ball!"

"Hi, Jermine," I say, and throw the ball to my dad.

I know I should be extra nice to these kids. Believe me, I am never, *ever* mean to them, no way. But sometimes it feels like I have to try so hard, and I don't always *want* to. I'm not good with them the way Mom and Dad are. Plus, Jermine's kinda drooly, so I really don't want to give him the ball.

"That's right!" Mom calls out. "It's a ball. Hi, Jay!"

"Hi, Mom."

Jermine's running and jumping up to get the ball. Of course, Dad gives it to him, and Jermine immediately goes *thwock* with his mouth, over top of the ball.

"Gasbplat," Jermine seemed to be saying through the ball and the drool.

Poor Jermine. I mean, living proof of my name theory. What chance does a kid have with a name like that? No wonder the kid doesn't want to talk to anyone. (I know, I know. I'm going on about it again. But remember: NINE YEARS. And it ain't showing any sign of letting up.)

"We're going inside to do a lesson," Mom says. "You two need a snack?"

"I can get us something," Dad says. He pries the drooly ball out of Jermine's mouth and throws it back to me.

Oh, gross.

I catch the ball with my mitt but there is NO way I'm touching it with my hand. "Maybe we should quit now, Dad. Go have that snack."

"Great!" He looks relieved.

### **Chapter Three**

When Saturday arrives, I'm feeling kind of queasy. I've played most positions at some point, so it's not like playing forward should make me nervous or anything. The same group of guys has been practicing hockey together since first grade. Like I said, this is a small town. We have a few hockey teams but only one rink, and it's real old and falling-down.

I push open the doors and the cold, metallic smell of the ice rink hits me. It feels like there's a change in air pressure as I walk through the doors, and the sounds are different, too. Muted and echoey, like they're frozen and take longer to reach my ears. I don't really know how to describe it — you've either spent your childhood in an ice rink or you haven't.

Anyway, I've been itching to get into the action again. I didn't really like goal, I was only doing it as a favour to the coach. There's just the one coach for all the teams in our town, and there are only two teams for my age group, which means we're so used to playing each other, we could probably do it blindfolded. But this year

Coach seems determined to make us into real hockey players — I guess so that when we go to other towns, we might actually win for once.



So I'm standing out on the ice like some marooned seal, while everyone's down the other end in a big scramble for the puck. I'd like to make it clear that I am not, repeat NOT, standing out here on my own 'cause I'm a loser. I'm here 'cause I'm the only one who follows Coach Franey's instructions. For six years (six!) he's been blabbing on about different plays, spreading ourselves out on the ice, passing to each other. You know what? Ninety percent of kids, you can't convince them to do that. No matter what. They see the puck, they go for the puck. Like Labrador retrievers, except a Lab would learn a lot more in six years.

I don't call "pass it to me!" or "over here!" or anything like that, 'cause that's the sports equivalent of wearing a shirt that says 'DON'T ever pass it to me.' Plus, they wouldn't hear me; they've descended on the puck like a mass of rabid seagulls picking apart a clam. With about as much playing skill, I might add.

Except for Thornleigh, of course. He manages to steal the puck and now he's heading my way, fast.

I skate out to intercept. He weaves right, then left, skilled but with no surprises. I fake one way, then launch myself the other, trying to get at the puck. Mike's surprised by my fake-out and he barrels right into me.

*Oooooof!* The air is knocked out of my lungs and we slide down towards the goal, almost gracefully, like we're in a water ballet. Except for the nasty "crunch!" at the end



when we pitch up against the boards. It takes us a few seconds to get untangled. Then Coach blows his whistle, and as soon as he looks away there's a *whack* on the back of my helmet, from Thornleigh. I turn to get him, my arm swinging out ahead of me, but he's waiting for it and catches my hand. He grins as he holds my arm, and after a moment or two of silent struggling, I can't help it, I launch myself at him. But Thornleigh's still grinning through the scuffle, and Coach's whistle shrieks beside my ear.

"All right, guys!" Coach shouts. "Break it up. Let's take five."

We skate off the ice, Thornleigh laughing and joshing with everyone, me behind him, still scowling, plotting how to get him back.

When we're on our break, we get the biggest shocker ever. We're all in the changing room, swilling down Gatorade, when Coach Franey strolls in saying, "I've made a decision, guys." Collectively, we look up. He's carrying a clipboard. That's never good news.

"I'm going to switch up the teams."

Everyone groans.

Aw, man, I'd better not be back in goal. No way, I won't do it. I'll quit instead. I wonder suddenly if this is all because of me. One day playing forward, and he's come up with some elaborate plan to demote me already? That's gotta be a record. I slump in my seat.

"You guys are just not working these plays. I can only go over them so many times on the chalkboard. I figure I have to do something to bust you out of your usual habits. You've been playing together the same way for too long, so I'm going to completely rehash the teams. We're

going to start from scratch and make two brand-new teams. Out with the old, in with the new.”

We look at each other blankly. One second we’re two teams — enemies — and now we’re united against a common threat. Change.

“I’ll read out the new teams,” he says.

After the initial shock, there’s an outcry, but he waves us down.

“It’s not forever guys, so pipe down. okay, here’s the new line-up. Team A — and you can pick your name later — Gooby. Boulet. Cheng. DiRossio. Lam. Michaelson. Kramer. Vandhoffen.”

No Thornleigh! Whew. I look over at him, and he’s looking straight at Coach, his expression serious.

“Team B: Kazlov. Singh. Farquarson. McBride. Stalanzo. Dufresne. Patel. Willis.” He stops.

What about Thornleigh?

“Thornleigh and Hmari, I haven’t decided where to place you yet.”

“I’ll play on Gooby’s team,” Thornleigh chimes in, real fast. I turn to look at him in surprise.

“Done. Okay, Hmari, that puts you on Kazlov’s team. Now, these teams aren’t forever, but we’re going to try this out for long enough to see if we can do something good. I don’t want to hear any complaining. Remember, we’re doing this to try to turn you guys into real players. You’re still jumping on top of that puck like a bunch of...”

“Seagulls,” I say automatically, then realize I said it out loud.

Thornleigh gives this kind of snort-guffaw. Coach is silent for a minute. When I add “starving ones,” he laughs. Soon a few more people laugh, and it kind of breaks up the tension.

“Okay, guys, here are your new positions.”

I’m sort of spacing off, embarrassed about the seagull thing, when I realize that Coach is reading out our new line-up. Thornleigh, Jim Lam and I are forwards. Thornleigh is centre, of course, and I’m going to be right wing. Jim’s left wing — he’s a good player, not great. Kind of like me, I guess. I glance over at Thornleigh, wondering how he’ll sabotage me now that we’re on the same team. Creativity is not Mike’s strong point. What the heck is he up to, asking to be on my team? Something’s coming, I just don’t know what.



Everyone’s nervous at first.

I’m out there on my own, the usual stranded seal thing, except that it’s not quite the same. There’s this energy buzzing on the rink and that’s great in itself, but then something even wilder happens. Thornleigh gets the puck (nothing unusual in that, but just wait), skates down the ice, and when two players (the seagull type) head for him, he takes a look around, sees me, and get this — passes the puck.

I’m so stunned I almost miss it.

I catch it, turn, hightail it down the rink, and Thornleigh just *flies* down — man, can he skate fast — and I'd love to try for the goal myself, 'cause no one's on me. They're all thrown into confusion by the sight of someone actually passing, but I figure Thornleigh is faster and better positioned, so I pass it back and he SLAMS it into the goal. Yeah!

Our new team cheers. Coach blows his whistle and gives us a short lecture/praise session on passing. I swear there are tears in his eyes. Then we're off again.

And same thing happens again. I don't dive into the gull-melee, I position myself just right and then BAM, the puck comes my way, flying off Thornleigh's stick! I catch it and head down the ice, and it's like the two of us are controlled by one giant brain or something. We're passing, weaving, looking up, easy as if we've been practicing this for years, and he wants to shoot but someone's in the way, he passes back to me, I stop, pivot, aim, let fly and *crack!* — it bounces off the post.

This huge "OH!" goes up from everyone on the ice, and I mean everyone, even the guys who are now on the other team. But it's a sympathetic, "Oh, that bites!" kind of "Oh", not like they're mad at me or anything. I even hear Thornleigh give an "Oh" and I thought — *thought* — it was a sympathetic one, too, but when I look over he's grinning, so I guess he enjoyed my miss. But I'm still too buzzed to give it much thought. The whistle blows, and we're off again. Even though I flubbed that shot, Thornleigh's still passing to me. In fact, it's pretty much him and me running the show. No-one else knows how to position themselves right, so we're flying by like we're in race cars and the rest of them are just traffic cones. Sad little traffic cones with sticks.

I love it!

Mike sails down the rink again. When he passes to me, I really want to try for a goal again but I'm too far, and Mike's so fast he's almost there, so I pass and BAM! He pulls off another one.

There's a cheer. People are really paying attention now. A few of the moms in the stands look up from their magazines. Mine's not here to see me, but oh well.

When practice is over, Coach can't stop talking about how great we did. Well, about how great Thornleigh did. He seems to forget that I did lots of passing, too, and that I'm always positioned just right. But what the heck, our new team won and that's all that counts with the guys. Guys don't actually care about cool plays or neat strategies, even if we're supposed to; we're way simpler than that. In/out, goal/no goal, win/lose.

Loser/champ.

As I'm drying my blades and tossing my gear into my hockey bag, Mike walks over and says, "Nice try today, man!" I look up, waiting for the sarcasm to smack me, but my radar must be broken, 'cause I don't detect any.

"We make a good team," he says, and goes to high-five me. I'm still not detecting sarcasm, so I think what the heck, raise my arm. When we high-five, I hit Mike pretty hard, and it feels good.

"See you Monday," he calls out as he leaves, and I'm so surprised by all this, I don't have an answer.

It isn't 'til after he leaves that I realize he didn't call me Goob.

What's going on?

## Chapter Four

I slide into my seat just as the bell rings. Mr. Tomlin, our homeroom teacher, is handing out sheets of paper.

“This is your schedule for Guidance class,” he says.

Guidance! Sweet. One big slack-off.

The schools have to give us Guidance classes by law or something. They started with sex ed classes when we were younger, but now Guidance includes all kinds of other lame stuff, like ‘Life skills.’ Spare me. The good news is, it’s a great way to catch up on some napping. As Guidance is only once a week, the way they squeeze it into our schedule is by taking time out from another class. I grab my timetable to see that the class in question is Social Studies. Oh, yeah! Socials is the most boring class on the planet. This couldn’t be better.

When I get to Guidance that afternoon, I see they’ve split it up into girls-only and guys-only. Fine by me, I plan on sleeping through it. The class is in one of the science-lab rooms, so everyone sits in pairs, immediately fiddling with

the gas taps to see if they're on. I catch sight of Andy Hmari and go sit by him. Thornleigh and Jason Sparke swing into the table behind ours.

A room full of guys is always noisier, so it takes ages for everyone to settle down. "Okay, class!" the teacher calls out. "Some of you know me already from last year, I'm Mr. Karsan..."

Time to tune out.

But it's hard to tune out, 'cause Mr. K. is all energetic and one of those teachers who knows how to command attention. He hands out a course outline, and I see that we're not getting to the good stuff (sex ed) 'til later in the year. Yawn. The first couple classes are all about Positive Mental Attitude, How to Be a Better Person, blah, blah, blah. How to get brainwashed into being some geeky, boy-scout android, more like.

Something pelts me in the back of the neck and I turn around. It's Thornleigh, holding a straw. Oh, great. Spit balls. At our age. For Pete's sake, can't the guy grow up? We're fourteen!

I decide to do the ignoring routine — not 'cause it ever works, but because I don't have any available ammo. I slide open my pencil case, looking to see if I have an eraser or something. Thornleigh nails the back of my head this time, but I'm ready for it. I turn around and huck a mechanical pencil straight at him. I wish I could throw it like a circus knife-thrower, 'cause it has a metal tip that would pierce nicely into his heart. But it bounces off his cool, aviator-style leather jacket and hits the floor.

"Guys!"

Aw, damn. Teacher. Spotted us.

"So we're talking today about attitude, and already we've got troublemakers in the room? Kind of ironic, don't you think?"

No, because fourteen-year-olds don't know and don't give a damn what irony is.

"Making trouble with your Guidance counsellor is not the smartest idea. Let's move some of you guys — Thornleigh, up one table; Hmari, back. Seeing as you two want to spend so much time together, you can sit nice and close."

"Now you can sit with your girlfriend, Thornleigh," Andy says.

*Oooh!* Good one. The class hoots. Both Thornleigh and I go red, but the joke's more on him than me, for once.

Moving us was a pretty low blow, but you gotta admire Karsan for it. He knows what he's doing, so he might turn out to be okay. The only problem: he's now pretty much directing his lesson straight at me and Thornleigh. I guess he knows that the second he looks away, one of us is going to go for the other, and it won't be pretty.

"So, today we're going to talk about attitude."

*Okay*, Mister Karsan, you just lost your cool rating. It's time for me to space off again, but I can't, 'cause Mr. Karsan is staring straight at me and Thornleigh.

"And about the way we treat each other."

My skin bristles. Sure, why don't you talk to THORNLEIGH about it? And let the rest of us go eat fries or something.



"I want us to take a look at how we treat everyone around us. School, friends, family. Are we proud of our behaviour, is it something we think is good? And if not, then why do we do it? What motivates us to treat people differently? Think about it. Do you treat everyone the same way?"

We all kind of shuffle around, not because we're actually thinking about the question, but because fourteen-year-old guys just plain hate being asked questions.

"Gooby!"

Ah, hell.

"How about you? Do you treat everyone the same?"

"Uh, no."

"So who do you treat differently? Give us an example."

Mister Karsan, I think I've changed my mind about liking you.

"Uh, okay, well..." Who can I talk about? I am *not* getting into the whole school thing, so that leaves family. I have no brothers or sisters. "Well, um, my parents." I'm hoping that if I stall enough, he'll walk me through this. Usually if you look lost or dumb enough, teachers will take pity on you. Not this guy. He's a pro. "I mean, I treat them like I have to. Like parents."

"And could you describe that for us?"

"Uh, I don't know. Good, I guess. I do what they say, most of the time."

"And why is that?"

"Cause they'll kick my butt if I don't."

Everyone laughs. It's untrue, though; my dad's probably the least capable person in the world of kicking someone's butt. He wears corduroys with sandals, for Pete's sake. My mom could totally kick someone's butt, but she's too busy.

"Okay, so you treat them with respect?"

"Yeah, I guess so."

"Okay, good."

Whew.

"Now, think of someone else."

No, thank you.

"Tell us about someone else — an entire group even, not just an individual — and how you treat them."

Like I said, I don't want to think about school, so instead what pops into my mind are the drooly kids who come over to our house. "Uh... my mom works with kids with learning difficulties."

He nods, saying nothing. He still wants to make me do all the work.

"Well, you can't really treat them the same," I say. "I mean... they're, you know, learning-challenged." He's nodding vigorously now, like I'm onto something great. Teachers love this stuff. They go crazy when they hear

what my mom does for a living. "So you have to, I don't know, talk slower. Be nice to them."

"That's true. But would you say you treat them with the same respect as everyone else?"

I have to think about it for a second. Then, "Well, sure." And it's true. I'm as nice as I can be to those kids.

"And what is it that makes you treat them with respect?"

Is my turn not over yet? Jeez. I'd better get some kind of extra credit for this.

"Uh, 'cause my parents'll kick my butt if I don't."

Everyone laughs, and a few people clap. Thornleigh laughs real loud. Damn, now I've made myself look like someone who can get his butt kicked by his parents.

Mr. Karsan is laughing too. "Okay, I'll take your word for that, but I somehow don't think that's the whole truth. Jay, if your parents weren't around, if they'd never taught you to be nice to those kids, would you still treat them the same?"

At first I think: yes, of course. But then I remember that when I was way younger, my first instinct was — okay, this sounds really bad, but it's true — to pick on them. I don't know why, but for real, that was my first reaction. Mom and Dad *did* have to teach me to be nice to those kids, how to act around them.

"You strike me as someone who'd still treat those kids well," Mr. Karsan says. I don't want to talk any more, so I'm sure as heck not telling him my thoughts.

“Thornleigh!” Karsan says. *Phew*, he’s moved on. “Tell us about two different peer groups in your life and how you treat them.”

I’m bursting with curiosity to hear what Thornleigh has to say. He doesn’t look embarrassed at all. I can feel the confidence radiating off him, and I hate it, it’s like sunburn on my skin.

“Okay, well first up, there’s my hockey buds,” he says.

Drattit! Why didn’t I think of that? Of course he’d think of something cool. I could’ve picked hockey, but no, I had to go with the drooly kids.

“They’re, you know, the hockey guys. We’re a team. We play together.”

I can feel the class’ collective radar scan for things to make fun of in this, but no-one comes up with anything. Thornleigh’s bullet-proof.

“Yes, but how do you treat them?” Karsan asks.

“Like my buds!”

I turn to look at him, to see the bravado, the lies. But there’s nothing there; he seems to really believe what he’s saying. I guess he forgot about me, about the years of torment. Or he naturally doesn’t count me as one of his ‘buds’.

“Okay, so who’s your second peer group?”

“Ah,” Thornleigh says, and *there’s* the I’m-so-cool grin. Smug bastard. “That would be the girls,” he says.

The class has been tense for too long, so it erupts into cheers and whistles and hands hammering on desks.

Mr. Karsan's smiling, too. I now thoroughly hate him.

"All right, Thornleigh, tell us how you treat them." More yelling and whistling. Thornleigh has them all in the palm of his hand. Karsan has lost his hold.

Tell them instead about how you treat me, Thornleigh, I'm thinking. Tell them why you do it, explain what makes me so different. And while you're at it, tell me why.

But he's entertaining everyone, sitting back in his chair, crossing his arms behind his head, clearing his throat and beginning, "Well!"

*Well.* Chalk up another round to Thornleigh.

## Chapter Five

A couple days later, I come home from school to find Mom and Dad sitting at the kitchen table, looking serious. Uh-oh. What did I do?

“Jay, we’d like to have a talk with you,” Mom says.

Well, duh — I’d already worked that one out. I let my backpack fall to the floor and sit down, frantically trying to think of what I could have done. It’s not good going into these things unprepared. But I can’t remember screwing anything up recently, and my grades are always good. Besides, it’s too early in the school year to have grades.

“You know Jermine, right?” Mom begins, and my stomach clenches. Does she think I was being mean to him or something? I swear I wasn’t.

“Well,” she says, her voice low and her eyes all teary, “his mom has cancer.”

Wow... heavy. I know she and Jermine's mom are friends. I'm confused about where this is going, so I keep quiet.

"I've known his mother for a long time, and I've known about the cancer for about a year now. It's really not looking good, Jay. She's had a relapse and they're going to have to take her to a hospital in Vancouver."

She pauses for a second to dab at her eyes with a tissue, so I wait.

"So we'll be looking after Jermine while she's away," she says.

That's it? Whew. I breathe out. That's not such a big deal. "How long for?" I ask, not 'cause it really matters, just 'cause they seem to be expecting me to say something.

Mom sighs and looks sad. "Well, that's part of it, Jay. We don't know how likely it is that she's going to make it back here."

Does she mean...? *Yikes*. Way heavy. I don't know what to say.

"Even if she does pull through, she wouldn't be fit to look after Jermine for quite some time." Tears are leaking out of her eyes, now. Oh, man! Parents crying is the worst of the worst. Well, I guess that's not quite true — look at Jermine's mom. That would be the *absolute* worst.

Mom sniffs and Dad hands her a Kleenex. As she blows her nose Dad says, "Jay, I think we have to be prepared for the worst."

I barely even know Jermine's mom, but suddenly I feel sad, too.

"So he'll stay with his dad if she..." I don't say the word.

Mom answers. "He doesn't have a dad, honey. Freya is a single mother."

Uh-oh. Warning... warning...

"Jay, honey, your father and I would like to offer to become his legal guardians."

"Jermine? Drooly Jermine?"

She gives me *that* look so I clam up.

"Your father and I have discussed it before, but we didn't want to bring it up with you unless we had to. We kept hoping that Freya would get better. But now that it's not looking likely, we want to let her know that if the worst should happen, at least Jermine will be looked after. Jay, we know this would affect all our lives. So we want you to have some say in the decision."

Lie. Complete lie. Parental-BS radar is up. My parents are staring at me like they expect me to say something, and I can't think of anything. After a tense minute the only thing I come up with is, "Hey Mom, what's Jermine's last name anyway?"

"La Rue."

La Rue! Jermine La Rue! I don't believe it. The poor kid, what chance does he have with a name like that? But I'm not laughing; if anything, I'm overflowing with sympathy for the kid.

"Well, Jay, what do you think about him joining the family?"



Okay, not *that* much sympathy.

"Uh... I don't know." I kick my feet against the chair legs and look around.

"We know it's a big deal, so we want to give you some time to think about it. We won't go through with this if you don't think you can handle it."

Ouch. Nice one, Mom. So now the whole thing is hanging on me? That somehow makes it all worse. I expel a long breath of air. Man, is my mom ever good at playing the guilt-trip card.

"You can think about it tonight, Jay."

Oh great, a whole night. I'm sure I'll sleep well.

"Just so you know, hon, if we don't take him, his chances of going to a family... well, they're not good. A lot of kids with learning difficulties, especially once they're through early childhood, they end up in a home."

*A home.* Sounds nice in every context but that one. Well done, O Master of Guilt Trips.

"Uh, he has more than just learning difficulties, Mom," I point out. "He has about every kind of difficulty."

She gives me this triumphant look, and I want to slap my forehead like I'm in a cartoon. D'oh! She did it again. I just walked into her trap.

"I'll think about it," I mumble, and slink away.



Later that night, Jermine is over at the house, and Mom and Dad are in the kitchen cleaning up. I think they planned this so I can get to know Jermine, but it's not such a great idea. It's hard to get to know a kid who has a vocabulary of maybe twenty words. And tonight he has forgotten nineteen of them, so it's not really winning him any points. I'm sitting on the sofa drinking a soda while he runs around the room. It's making me kind of dizzy.

"Jay! Jay! Jay!" he shouts as he runs.

Kind of cute that someone's using my real name, but this could get tiring after a while. Like say thirty seconds.

"Jay! J--"

Yup, tired.

"Hey, Jermine," I say. "You wanna give that a rest?" He runs over with this big, goofy, drooly grin on his face and immediately plunks his mouth over top of my knee. I can feel the drool seep in. *Ewwwww*.

"Hey, Mom!" I call, but she doesn't emerge from the kitchen. So I put my hand to his forehead and give a gentle push, but it's like detaching a limpet shell. Finally I un-suction him and he laughs like it's a big game.

"Jay! Jay! Jay! J--"

So if he moves in now and I live at home 'til I'm, say, eighteen, that would be four years...

"-ay! Jay! Jay!"

...but I think you can legally leave home at sixteen.

Aw, man. What am I supposed to do? I know mom *said* I could say no, but somehow it doesn't *feel* like it. I mean, the poor kid's mom is *dying*. Holy cow. I can't possibly say no. A little kid like this... he'd have nothing. Where would he go?

"Jay! Jay!"

"Hey, Jermine!" I interrupt. "Can you say Gooby?"

"Guhhhhhh!" he says.

Hard to say whether it's an improvement or not.

But he's got this huge smile on his face like I've just told him he can have his own ice cream van or something, and he's looking really proud, too, so I feel kinda forced to say, "That's right, Jermine. Goo-by."

"Gooley!" he calls out, and I burst out laughing so hard that soda explodes out of my nose. I can't believe it! Nine years of no-one coming up with a new nickname, then learning-challenged Jermine goes and nails one in a second. Oh, man! This is too much.

Mom comes in and I stop laughing right away. I don't want her to think we're all one big happy family or something. Not yet. I know my hand is pretty much forced on this, but I'm at least going to hold out for my "you can think about it" time. If she thinks I'm going to give this one up gracefully, she's wrong. I'm fourteen and I have a God-given right to be surly. In fact, I think it's my duty.

"Having fun, you two?" she asks.

"No." I scowl.

Jermine catches sight of my expression and starts pivoting back and forth from the waist, gazing from Mom to me with this lost puppy look, and then his face screws up like tears are about to explode out of his head.

Which they do.

“Guuhhhhhhhh!” His face grows bright red, the tears fly, my mom runs up and puts her arms around him. I’m sorry at first, ‘til the wails get really loud, and then I flee to the safety of my room.



I put a pillow over my head, trying to sleep. Every time I’m about to drift off, Jermine shrieks or cries or bangs something (who gave him a sledgehammer for a bedtime toy?) and I’m awake again. Okay, this little plan of my parents’ is *not* going well.

By the time I get up in the morning, I hate to say it, but I’m ready to strangle him. Or at least toss him on a train bound for Halifax.

I stumble downstairs, bleary-eyed, bleary-headed, bleary everything.

Jermine’s sitting in a chair, splashing at a bowl of Fruit Loops. There are loops and milk everywhere. Mom looks up and I can see she slept even worse than me. I haven’t seen her looking like this since... well, ever. There are dark circles under her eyes, her hair is messy, she has milk on her housecoat, and a couple of Fruit Loops on her shoulder.

Mom and I look at each other and neither of us say anything. I think we’re both kind of shell-shocked. Then

Jermine spooshes his spoon in the bowl again and says "Gooley!" as he swings his arms up like a cheerleader. Mom and I both laugh, and for some reason — sleep deprivation, maybe — we can't stop. Jermine looks delighted. It feels good, laughing with my mom like this, and Jermine joins in with his 'huh-uh-uh!' laugh, looking proud, like he knows he's the one who made the joke.

"Are you sure you want to do this, Mom?" I ask. I feel really mature all of a sudden. "You're not just doing this out of guilt or 'cause you think you have to?" Wow, I'm Dr. Phil!

It's a weary, sleep-deprived smile she gives me, but it's genuine. "Yes," she says, and I realize what a good person my mom is. She really does care about this kid.

I walk up to Jermine. "Hi Jer-Jer," I say, figuring the least I can do is help come up with a better name for him. Jerry? Jer? Jerm? No! Not Jerm. Not for a drooly kid.

"Can you say my name?" I ask him. "Can you say Jay?"

"Jay Jay!" he says.

*Hmm.* J.J. This kid can actually come up with ideas. I wonder if I could live with the name 'J.J.' It has a certain Jay-Z kind of cool to it. Maybe Drooly Jermine isn't so bad after all.

## Chapter Six

Hockey practices are going well. Amazingly well. Me, Thornleigh and Jim are working out great as forwards. Jim's slowly getting in on the whole passing thing, but as he doesn't have the same instinct for where to position himself, Thornleigh passes to me more often. I'm still waiting for some big practical joke to hit, but so far it hasn't.

We have an out-of-town game in a few weeks, which means a *real* game, not the same two teams constantly scrapping against each other. Coach is getting kinda jumpy. I guess he figures this is his big chance at winning an out-of-towner. He's trying to teach us all these different plays, but it's getting too complicated. At one point, I think he realizes it's all a bit much for us, so he kind of backs off with the chalkboard stuff and lets us work it out on the ice.

His plan seems to be working. I never knew a different combination of players could change our game so much. I mean, I kind of knew, from watching hockey on TV, but I'd never experienced it firsthand. It's the same bunch of guys it's been since first grade, and our playing

skills can't have suddenly shot up in a couple weeks, so it must be something else. Something about me, Thornleigh and Jim just gels.

That's on the ice.

Off is a different matter.

At school, Thornleigh treats me the same as always. He dishes out his whole I'm-the-big-jock routine on a fairly equal basis, which means he doesn't single me out or anything; he at least rotates his schedule. In P.E. class, he always hits someone too hard or throws someone's clothes on the floor. He doesn't look mean when he does it, he just has this stupid, I'm-so-funny look on his face, and sometimes I want to walk up to him, cool as you like, and smash my fist into his face.

It would probably be the last thing I ever do. He's bigger than me.

The really weird thing is, most of the other guys don't seem to mind. Or maybe they do and they're just pretending when they grin and hit back. I wonder why I can't just joke along with it like the others do. Pretend I like it, that I think it's funny, too. Maybe the rest of them manage 'cause they haven't been enduring it non-stop for so many years.

Thornleigh trips me up as I walk into guidance class. He gives me an extra nudge as I stumble, and I go flying into a desk. By the time I swing around, I'm already aiming my backpack, but he's prepared for it, as usual, and is halfway across the room by the time my pack hits the empty space where his stupid, grinning head used to be.

Laughing, he slides into his seat at the desk behind mine. The two of us sharing a desk didn't last long, but now

I wonder whether it was better to at least have him in my line of sight. The way it is now, as soon as I sit down, I'm tensed up, waiting for something to hit me. At least when he was beside me, I knew nothing was about to ricochet off the back of my head.

I sit there tense, my neck burning with anticipation, thinking again about how much I'd love to, just once, deck the guy. I'm wondering if it would be worth it for that one moment of pure pleasure when I feel his teeth cave in under my knuckles.

"Okay!" Mr. Karsan says, trying to settle down the class. He gets us after P.E., so he has all this adolescent adrenaline to fight. He does a pretty good job, I'll give him that, but it's one of those perfect, sunny, autumn days when every teenage Canadian male wants to be out playing a sport of some kind: street hockey or rugby or, I don't know, pushing over mailboxes, or beating each other up. As long as it's outdoors and involves knocking the stuffing out of something or someone.

"So today we're going to talk about our outlook on life — the way we perceive things and the way it affects everything we do."

*Groan.* Can't we just talk about different kinds of pizza toppings or something? This touchy-feely stuff is *not* going over well.

"Okay, so let's think about how our attitude affects our day-to-day life. Suppose you go through life thinking the world is a good place and everyone likes you. How is that going to make you feel?"

He looks straight at Sean Boulet when he asks the question. Sean is not the brightest crayon in the box, so



when he finally answers he says, "Uh... like... the world is good. And everyone likes you."

"You tell 'em, Einstein!" someone calls out. Everyone laughs. We're all bored, looking around, mostly for an escape, so that Karsan won't make us talk. If you can't see the teacher, they can't see you. That's the rule.

"Sparke!" Karsan yells. Damn. He knows the one deal-breaker to the eye contact rule: calling out your name. Like I said, this guy's good.

Sparke sort of snort-gasps as he sits up, one side of his hair standing up, a jacket-sleeve wrinkle imprinted on his cheek.

"Wakey, wakey!" Mr. Karsan says.

Everyone laughs.

"Okay, Sparke, imagine this. You walk into a room with a bunch of strangers. Everyone's looking angry. How do you feel?"

"Uh, like I just walked into my house?"

We howl.

Karsan laughs too, but keeps pushing. "Strangers, Sparke. Imagine you just got called into the principal's office. There's a bunch of people there, and they're all looking mad. What do you think?"

"That I did something wrong."

"Right. And what makes you think that?"

"The fact... they're... mad."

Karsan seems to be getting the answers he wants but it's a long, drawn-out way of getting there. I hate it when teachers do this, and they *all* seem to. They'll have this particular answer in mind and so they keep asking questions 'til they get it instead of just coming out and saying it themselves. Why is that? They could sure save a lot of time.

He continues: "Okay, so how come you don't think that maybe they had a bad day? That they are mad, but that it's nothing to do with you?"

"Uh, 'cause odds are, I probably did something," Sparke says.

We laugh again — this is great. Like watching tennis.

"Okay, let's extrapolate," Karsan says. *Whatever that means.* "Suppose you go to school convinced that everyone thinks you're great, that the world is full of sunshine and Mars bars and..."

"Strippers," Sparke mutters behind me, and the guys in our area smirk.

"... no one says much to you all day, so they're not contradicting your idea. You go home, you've had a good day. Got that one? Okay, next picture. Same day, but you're in a foul mood. You're convinced that everyone hates you, and is out to get you."

My skin starts to prickle in a weird way, especially at the back of my neck. I slide open my pencil case, wishing I'd remembered to buy a small throwing knife.

"No one talks to you that day, either. But you're already convinced they hate you, so you assume they're ignoring you, and that they're deliberately being mean to

you. What does that do? It just reinforces what you already thought, right?"

Yeah, but his example of people not talking isn't very real. How 'bout one where they bodycheck you in the hallway and knock your books out of your hand?

"Okay, now I want an example from one of you."

Can he read my mind or something? Don't pick me don't pick me don't pick me.

"Mike Thornleigh."

I twist around in my chair. Everyone does; people listen to Thornleigh.

Thornleigh shuffles around, but doesn't look perturbed. Same, stupid, smug expression he always has. "Well, I guess if you go to school and think everyone's your buddy, then... I don't know, mostly they are."

*Maybe it's like that for you, Thornleigh. No-one gives you a hard time.* My skin's prickling again. I think maybe I'm getting a rash. But you don't treat everyone like your buddy, Thornleigh. Why pretend you do?

"Okay, so how do they treat you back?" Karsan asks him.

"Like... a bud."

"And why is that?"

"Um, 'cause they are?"

"All right, but supposing it's someone you don't know very well. You go through the day thinking everyone's your friend. How will this other person react?"

"I guess... good."

"And why's that?"

Oh, it's *painful* the way teachers try to drag the answers they want out of us. Why go through all this? Just say what you want, Karsan! C'mon, bell, ring!

"Cause... I guess 'cause I act friendly to them."

"Right!" Karsan bangs his hand on his desk. We jump. It seems like he got whatever answer he wanted, but the class still doesn't get where he's going with this.

"So let's take this one step further. I want you to think about how your attitude actually shapes how people act towards you. Like Thornleigh just mentioned. How else would that happen?"

Silence. This is way too complicated. If he wants something, he can do the work for it. There's no way we're going to try.

"Let's pull apart this theory: if you expect you'll be treated a certain way, you will. How does that work?"

"It doesn't," Mark Johansen mutters, and we all laugh.

"Come on, one of you came up with the idea. Someone else must have some thoughts on this."

That logic doesn't make sense to me either, but I'm not saying a word in today's class, not A WORD.

Karsan persists. "Why might people keep away from you? Ignore you, shun you?"

I stare at the side wall.

"Uh, 'cause you're sending out some kinda death-ray aura vibe," Johanson says. We all swing around and he looks sheepish. "My parents are ex-hippies so they believe in all this kind of crap. I mean, stuff."

We laugh again. But Karsan's not letting up. He still has five minutes left to torture us, and he's determined to use it.

"Come on, guys. I teach at three schools in this region, and all the other classes came up with something good. You're not going to let them outdo you, are you?"

We all groan. Oh, *man*. Karsan's normally pretty cool but that was *so* not cool. Why do teachers always try to get us motivated with that kind of thing? We hate it.

"Think about the way you go through your day. The way you talk to people, the way you treat them."

I think about Thornleigh. Swaggering along, joshing, ribbing, mock-fighting.

"Think about what people do in return."

I think about the other guys: they josh, rib, mock-fight back. Except me. But Thornleigh's got this mean streak when he does all that stuff to me; it's different. So I'm not the happy-josher back. I hate him like he hates me.

*Okay, so you treat someone bad, they hate you back.* Duh. Is that it, Karsan, are you done? Can we go now?

Thinking of Thornleigh, I start to feel that burn on the back of my neck again. I can even feel my face grow hot.

“What I want to look at next,” Karsan says, “is, can you change how you see things? How would you go about that?”

Karsan blabs on some more, but I’m too mad to listen. Sure, you make Thornleigh stop being such a hosebag. Stop him thinking he’s the king of the freaking castle — see if you can do it. Earn your pay cheque, mister guidance counsellor. I keep glancing at the clock. The minute hand is moving nearer and nearer the end of the hour. Finally the bell rings. The class erupts – torture time is over.

“You can choose how you view the world around you, and how you react!” Karsan is yelling over the noise of everyone leaving. Yeah, whatever. How many more weeks of this touchy-feely crap `til we get to sex ed?

## Chapter Seven

Jermine's at it again.

"Jay! Jay! Jay!"

I grab him by the arm and he's still kinda wheeling around in a circle. I don't want to hold him too hard in case I hurt him, so he easily twists away and keeps going.

He's been living with us for two weeks now, and I'm starting to get used to it, but at the same time starting to get tired of it. I mean, this could be *forever*. Mom's looking tired, too.

As he runs towards me, I kneel down, grab him by the arms, and stare straight into his eyes, like Mom does. "How 'bout just twice?" I ask. I say the words slowly but close together: "J.J."

"Guhhhhh," he says, looking away, not meeting my gaze.

I hold him firmly and keep looking into his eyes, the way Mom does with him.

“Hey Jermine, what’s my name?”

He looks at me with this little smile, but suddenly he’s all shy.

“J.J.” I say again, but he pulls away and runs out of the room.

When he comes back he’s carrying a toy truck. Then all of a sudden, he drops it on the floor like his hand has gone limp, and at the exact same moment he seems to forget all about the truck. Mom’s in the next room, and I know she’ll give me a big lecture if I don’t spend some time with him, so I move towards Jermine, kneel down, and pick up his truck.

“Hey, little dude,” I say. “You want your truck back?”

He looks at me, but he’s still lost, confused.

He’s wearing a baseball cap so I reach out and tweak the visor, pulling it down over his eyes. I say to him: “You won’t make a very good truck driver if you keep losing your truck like that. Man, you gotta pay more attention to the road — you just crashed this baby!” I’m smiling, joking, and I tweak his cap again.

He fumbles with his hat and seems to see the truck again, but then turns towards the kitchen door, silent. I have *no* clue what he’s looking for, or what he’s thinking. It’s like he’s suddenly forgotten I’m there.

Then out of nowhere, he starts bawling. And I mean bawling! Whew, that kid can switch fast. Mom comes running.



She gathers him up in her arms and says, "Oh Jermine, honey, it's okay." I feel lousy, even though it's not my fault.

"Jay, you can't tease him like that," she says.

What? So it *is* my fault? "What are you talking about? I was being nice to him! I was just joking around, trying to get him to play with the truck."

She strokes Jermine's hair and his sobs are muffled by her shoulder. "I know, sweetheart, but he doesn't really understand teasing. He takes things literally. If you tell him he did something wrong, even if you're joking, he doesn't hear the joke, he just hears that he did something wrong."

"Oh." *Sheeeesh*. Do I ever feel like a louse.

"Don't you remember when you were really little, the first time people kidded around with you like that? That it was kind of confusing and hurtful? That you had to learn it wasn't hurtful, teach yourself to think of it as a joke?"

"Uh..." Without having to think about it much, I realize she's right. I do vaguely remember, even though I can't think of any particular time or place.

I reach out and pat Jermine on the back. "I'm sorry, little dude," I say. "We can play truck sometime, whenever you want."

But Mom's keeping a hold of Jermine, and although he's shifted so that his face isn't buried in her shoulder any more, she's covering his eyes with her hand. Maybe so he won't see me, or maybe he just likes hiding from the world. Mom smiles at me. But I still feel cruddy.



Later that night, I'm lying in bed reading, my door open. I hear the sound of feet padding along and Jermine appears in the doorway. He's in his pyjamas and is carrying an old teddy bear of mine. I guess Mom dug it out for him. The teddy is looking somewhat drool-covered. Gross. Not that I use the bear anymore, but I mean, she could have at least asked me. I don't want a favourite childhood toy have to drown in a pool of drool.

"That's my bear you've got," I say without thinking. Jermine looks down. I'm not sure if he even understood me, but right away I feel bad. He's doing that pivoting thing with his upper body again — swinging left-right-left-right.

"Hey," I say, softer, but he won't look up. "It's okay. You can play with the bear. His name is Mister Furry."

He pivots some more, and I'm worried he's going to start bawling again, so I say, "He's a really nice bear, Jermine. He was my favourite. I'm sure he wants to be friends with you."

After a minute or two, he looks up and in a small voice says, "J.J." Then he turns and pads away.

Well, whaddya know.

## Chapter Eight

It's the first out-of-town hockey game of the season, and everyone's acting weird. My parents keep asking if I want them to come along. Even the guys on the team seem high-strung. Mike and I ride with Jim in his parents' car. It's an SUV, nothing like my folks' old piece of junk. We talk and josh in the car, but our mood is still tense.

When we finally get to Kamloops, I'm stiff from sitting for so long. We get to the rink, change, and head out onto the ice for our warm-up. It seems like everyone's wound up tight. Coach Franey's fidgeting like he's downed about six cups of coffee. When he gives us the pep talk, there are beads of sweat on his forehead. I think he's more nervous than we are.

During the skate-around, we eye up the guys on the other team. They look big. I guess maybe we do, too, because of the pads and helmets and stuff, but I'm pretty sure they're bigger.

We troop off the ice and hunch down on the player's bench. I notice that even Thornleigh is kind of white-faced,

which is surprising; I never thought Thornleigh was the nervous type. Suddenly, it feels like we haven't been practicing enough, and maybe we should have been paying more attention to that chalkboard of Coach's.

The referee skates out onto the ice, and we all climb over the boards from the player's box. Now my heart is whumping away. Me, Thornleigh, and Jim line up against the other forwards. My counterpart looks tough. He's got two inches on me, twenty pounds extra and a couple of scars. I think he even shaves.

I don't really hear what the ref says. He drops the puck and Thornleigh gets it, right away. He whacks it straight to Jim. I skate down the rink fast, but there's a defenseman on me, so Jim has to pass it back to Thornleigh. But the defenseman whips it away, and the home team is off to the other end. I clock Thornleigh's expression and he's surprised too; these guys really know what they're doing.

Throughout the first period, we're getting wailed on. I think our playing is off just 'cause we're nervous and still not used to the new team line-up. Back home, we all thought we were getting good. Now, I'm not so sure.

When the buzzer sounds and the period ends, they're three goals up and everyone on our team is looking miserable. Although not as miserable as Coach Franey. I think he has tears in his eyes again, and this time not the happy kind. Second giveaway: he's running his fingers through what little hair he has left. I know his hair is precious to him, so he wouldn't do that unless he was really stressed.

We skate out for the second period. Thornleigh's looking grim; I guess he's feeling determined, or something. And it works — he pulls a sneaky one, steals

the puck, chips it over the defender stick towards me. Everyone's clustered up mid-ice so I hoof it down towards the goal and I get the shot away — *Oh!* The goalie snares it.

I didn't think it would go in, but just getting a shot off makes me feel better. I get the sense Thornleigh's feeling the same way, too. He's playing hard, and it seems to be having an effect on the rest of our team. The other team takes a slap shot at our goal, but our defence is doing better now and what do you know, they've even learned to pass! Tony DiRossio bounces it off the boards to Thornleigh.

Then Mike and I seem to fall into our groove again. It's like everything comes together, and it's working just like it did in our practices. We're *smoking* down the ice, passing back and forth, weaving through their defence. We line it up perfect, Mike shoots, and GOAL! It's in!

There aren't many people watching the game — a few of the home team's parents and only three sets of ours, but that's okay. There's some clapping and a lone "Yeah!"

Before long, Mike gets another goal, a really cool slap shot. We're now only one goal down, and at this rate, we can catch up. One of their defensemen seems to figure out how Mike and I are working, so he puts himself between us while the other one skates straight up to Mike. Mike flicks the puck over to Jim, who shoots, but it's way off. Then as the puck bounces off the back board I realize he meant to do that — it's coming my way. I want to pass it to Mike but his guy's still on him, so I skate out, fake a pass, flick it towards the corner of the goal. Both the goalie and the defenseman have fallen for my fake, and it goes in. GOAL! Oh, yeah! My first goal of the game, *and* the season. Not only that, but the score's even now! Three-three.

I'm so stoked I could burst. Both Mike and Jim skate up and slap my back. It was such a cool shot, I almost don't care if we win the game or not.

"That was a *wicked* shot, man!" Mike says to me.

What can I say? Sometimes the guy is right.

Just before the buzzer, the other team scores to take a one goal lead, making the score four-three. Even so, at the end of the second period, Coach is blabbing on about our great teamwork, how neat it is that there are no egos out there, that we're passing instead of always trying to get the goals ourselves. I realize he's right, it's a pretty ego-free team. I used to have Mike pegged as an ego kind of guy. Then again, it's usually me handing the puck off to him for the shot. He usually just passes to me on the way down the ice. I wonder if he would ever pass it to me for a shot, rather than take the shot himself.

Thinking about this makes my good mood evaporate. I look over at Mike; he's staring down at the floor. He looks kind of grim again. I wonder what's up with him.

As we skate back out, I'm watching Mike closely. I guess I'm lost in my thoughts a bit, 'cause I flub a few passes and the other team racks up another goal. That makes it five-three — we're back to two goals down.

I snap back to attention as the puck comes my way. I take it, fly down the ice, and pass it to Jim. He snaps it back real quick so I get in one of those *fast* shots at the goal, no-one's ready for it, and it's IN! Goal! My second. Now the score's five-four.

The guys skate up to me and slap my back. Mike doesn't look as happy, this time. Is he sore that I got in another goal instead of him?

I guess he is, 'cause he starts playing real hard, real aggressive. But it makes me and Jim pick up the pace too, and soon we're like a machine. Bam! — goal. Bam! — another. Both Thornleigh's. He's looking way happier. But when he skates back out to centre ice, I can see he looks kind of pissed off or something — what's up with the guy? I can't figure him out. It's making me nervous. As well as keeping an eye on the game, I'm trying to keep an eye on Thornleigh.

Seven minutes to go and the score is six-five — we're up by one goal! The teams are pretty equally matched.

I catch Thornleigh's expression again and suddenly think, hey, he's not pissed off, maybe he's hurt or something. But there's been no roughing or cross-checking, so I wonder how that could be.

"Hey, you okay man?" I ask between shifts.

"Yeah, of course."

We line up for the face-off, and we're off. The other team grabs the puck, cuts through our defence like they're just there for decoration, and fires off a slap shot. It's a goal.

Thornleigh gives me and Jim a nod, a we're-gonna-do-it kind of look. Jim and I nod back. Six-all; there's still a chance we can win this.

The other team manages to get the puck, but DiRossio makes a fabulous intercept, knocks it down the ice

to me, and I fire it off to Jim. Jim gets off a shot, but oh!— their goalie saves it. We're still tied. And we only have one minute left, unless we go into sudden death.

Thornleigh and the other guy face off again, and when the ref drops the puck, Thornleigh gets it. I can see the concentration in his eyes. Then the puck comes my way. I'm about to pass it across the ice to Jim, 'cause there's a guy on me and I'm not so hot at shaking off opponents. But Jim's not open, neither's Thornleigh, so I give it my best and manage to get past the guy. Then I'm skating straight towards the goal, no one's near me, but the goalie is ready for me. I can still try. Thornleigh's flying straight down the ice, and he could probably get off the better shot.

Got to think fast.

I know I should pass, that Thornleigh will have the better shot, but I really want to be the one to shoot the winning goal. Damn! I go to pass, but I've hesitated too long, their guy is on Thornleigh. I have to keep moving, so I skate round behind the goal, send the puck to Jim, he fires it at the goal. The goalie knocks it away with his stick, but it kinda ricochets weird and comes straight towards me. Without thinking, I smack it straight back at the goal. It hits the frame and it skitters *just* out, but Thornleigh's flying straight down towards the goal and I'm going for the puck again, too, and he's going to crash straight into me—

**BAM!** The puck skips into the back of the net, and at the same time I'm crunched against the post so hard, it almost comes off its moorings. My helmet smacks against the crossbar and I spin around, ready to take a swing at someone. It was Thornleigh! He bodychecked me straight into the goal, but I don't have time to think 'cause the buzzer sounds.



Oh, YES! We won! It's like a movie. The crowd — well, our team really, there is no crowd — goes wild. Coach is jumping up and down. Everyone skates up to high-five... *Thornleigh*. Not me. I don't believe it! I was on the puck, it should have been my goal! Didn't we both hit it in?

For a second I feel a burn. A deep one, like I just swallowed molten metal. My muscles twitch; that's how much I want to take my hockey stick and swing at Thornleigh's head. But everyone's cheering and clapping each other on the back. They're so keyed up, they're doing the overly-hard backslapping thing, so when Thornleigh turns to face me, this huge grin on his face, I skate around and whack him on the back. *Hard*. He almost staggers.

I grin as he looks back at me but mine is a fake grin, like it's wired into my face, and I kind of *get* it now. I finally do! This looking at someone and smiling and grinning but wanting to do them some damage. Is this how Thornleigh feels, how he goes through life? This *I'm-smiling-but-I'll-GET-you, I swear I will*. It's a revelation for me. I'm sweating, my heart is beating, my throat is raw with the heat of the game and the cold of the ice rink, and I *get it, I get it*. We won, so I should be happy and excited, but instead I'm raging inside. Suddenly *I get what it is to be Thornleigh!*

I'm still looking at him and already he's faking that smile of his before turning away to do the other-team handshake thing.

I follow. We all skate by the other team and hit hands, then turn to leave the ice. Thornleigh holds back to skate beside me and says, "Good game, man!"

"Yeah," I say. Everyone in front of us is joshing and roughhousing as they leave the ice, so I do the same, I give Mike a hard shoulder nudge and send him sprawling.

He comes up laughing but looks a little... I don't know. It feels good to send him staggering like that. Then as we both step off the ice, Thornleigh does a face-plant straight onto the floor. I laugh.

"Thornleigh, you doofus, you can skate, but you can't walk?"

He doesn't answer. I'm waiting for him to come up with a smirk and take a swipe at me with his stick, but he's staying there. I grin — for real this time, 'cause I know he's waiting to get me. As soon as I walk by he's going to swing his leg out and trip me. I'm onto him; he won't win this one.

"C'mon, Thornleigh." I nudge him with my stick. "I'm not falling for this!"

He doesn't move. The other guys have already headed into the locker room. I sigh, waiting for the joke to be over. Not too original, even for Thornleigh.

Then a few more seconds pass, and all of a sudden the joke is over. I toss my stick away, I'm down on the ground, I turn him over, his eyes are closed. My heart's going *wham-wham-wham* 'cause I'm waiting for him to jump up and say, "Gotcha!" but somehow I already know something's way-for-real wrong. I shake him and say, "Thornleigh!"

No response.

"Coach!" I yell, loud. "Coach, come quick! Someone, help! It's Thornleigh!"

## Chapter Nine

The paramedics slide the stretcher into the ambulance and jump inside. Coach jumps in too, and the doors slam shut. Then the ambulance races away, sirens wailing.

The sweat on my body has cooled to an uncomfortable clamminess, and I feel like I can barely breathe. Jim's parents drive us to the hospital. Everyone is silent in the car. When we arrive, we find our way to the emergency room waiting area. Coach is there, and he looks fried. He's pacing back and forth, and running his fingers through his lack-of-hair again.

As soon as he sees us, he comes straight over and starts talking to Mr. and Mrs. Lam, kind of like Jim and I aren't there. I guess we don't count for much in these situations.

"Do they know what's wrong?" Mr. Lam asks.

"No. They took him straight into emergency. He's breathing okay, but that's all I know."

I kind of wish I'd watched more hospital shows on TV, but I never liked them. Jim and I sort of shuffle around, since we don't know what to do. My stomach is churning and I feel sick. I ask Mrs. Lam if we should phone Mike's parents, but she tells me the hospital will have done that already. Coach Franey and Mr. Lam are doing enough of the standing-around-worried thing for all of us, so Mrs. Lam says she'll take me and Jim to the cafeteria. Not that we're really hungry or anything, but I'm glad to go. I can't take the tension in the waiting room any longer.

But when we're seated in the cafeteria, I don't feel much better. My stomach's still churning like a washing machine, and I can't manage more than a bite of my doughnut.

"I know I should probably take you two home, but I'd like to be here when Mike's parents arrive," Mrs. Lam says.

"Sure," we both mumble. Neither of us knows what to say. The waiting is awful, but it somehow seems better to be here, almost as if we *could* help.

"Jay, do you want to go phone your parents?"

"Yeah, I guess I better." I take some quarters from her and go off to find the phones. My parents freak out and want to know all about Mike, but there isn't much I can tell them.

I don't mention the fact that I shoved Mike. My stomach hits the spin cycle when I think of it, and I wonder if I should go and tell the doctors that I hit him. Oh, man. Whatever's wrong with him... what if it's my fault?

But then I think, I didn't hit him *that* hard, so maybe he just had exhaustion or something. That would be more

likely to make him drop that a little tap on the back, right? Anyway, he's the one who smacked me into the goal, so I'm hardly to blame for hitting him back.

Although my logic seems good, my brain keeps running on the same loop.

We walk back to the waiting room. I can tell we all want to be around if the doctors have anything to say. Coach is looking worse by the minute. Finally, this doctor or nurse or whoever comes out, wearing one of those green smocky things, like

on TV.

"Are his parents here yet?" she asks.

"No," Coach says. "They're on their way. How's he doing? Is he going to be okay? Do you know what made him collapse?"

"We've run an ECG to rule out the possibility of a heart attack, and now we're doing some blood tests. But we need some of his medical history."

Heart attack? Coach looks white-faced, and I feel sick again.

Every time the outside doors slide open, we look up. Finally, Mike's parents appear. They rush in, worried expressions on their faces, tears in their eyes. They go aside and talk to the green-smocky doctor person, and we're left floundering.

Eventually, it's decided that Mrs. Lam will stay and wait with the Thornleigh's — I guess she's friends with Mike's mom — and Coach will drive me, Jim, and Mr. Lam home. As we leave, I realize I'm tired, really tired.



Instead of sleeping, I toss and turn all night, wondering what's going on with Thornleigh: if he'll be okay, and if I'm somehow responsible. It's a long night. And a long morning. When I get up, Mom tries to make me eat breakfast, but I can't.

Why did I have to get so mad, why did I have to hit him? *But I didn't hit him hard*, I tell myself again. And again. But it's not helping; I'm climbing the walls with worry.

Mom talks to Mrs. Thornleigh later that day. I'm pacing around behind her, waiting for her to finish, while she's on the kitchen phone. Lots of 'Oh's and 'My goodness!' and 'Mm-hm's. This is taking forever. Can't she see I'm going nuts?

Finally, she hangs up.

"So what is it? Is he okay? Is he going to live?" My stomach clenches up really tight.

"It looks like he's going to be fine."

*Whooooosh* — a whole bunch of air comes rushing out of my lungs.

"So what's wrong with him? What happened?"

Mom sits down at the kitchen table and I do the same.

"He has a condition called Bacterial Endocarditis. It's an infection in the heart. Usually in a damaged part, which

means that Mike must have had a small heart defect that went undetected for a long time.”

I’m glad my mom is a therapist so she can translate some of this stuff. My own heart is going *wham-wham-wham* again, ‘cause I’m still freaking over the thought that I could have done this to him. “So it was like a heart attack? What caused it?”

Did I do it? Is it my fault?

“No, it wasn’t a heart attack. He must have had a heart murmur, probably since birth. It’s possible for these things to go undetected. But it’s the infection that got him so sick, and the reason he collapsed. The doctors will treat him with antibiotics to get rid of the infection, and then they’ll see how his heart is.”

“So... it was something he had all along? Will he have to be in a wheelchair and stuff? Can he play hockey again?”

“It’s too early to say for sure, but chances are he’ll be back to normal in a few weeks. As long as the antibiotics get rid of the infection. Then he’ll probably need some bed rest.”

I don’t know what to say. I’m still panicking and my heart is wham-whamming, so the words burble out. “So what about his heart? Does he have to have a transplant?”

She smiles. “No transplant, I’m sure of that. The doctors will find out more once they’ve treated the infection, but lots of people have heart murmurs and still live normal lives.”

“Does it mean he could have another heart attack?”  
But what I really want to know is, *did I do it?*

She shakes her head. "Jay, you're not listening, it wasn't a heart attack. It's something that could have been really serious, but they identified it and caught it in time."

My chest is still tight. I have to ask. I have to. I take a deep breath. "So... you're sure that it was just this infection thing that caused him to black out? It wouldn't have been 'cause anyone..." I swallow. "...uh, hit him in hockey or anything?"

"The exertion from the hockey game may have contributed to it. But he would have had this infection for a while, and probably thought it was just a virus or something. Normally there would be more symptoms, but in Mike's case there weren't. So it would be easy to write them off as something else, like a cold or a mild 'flu."

*Phewwww.* I can breathe normally again.

Mom sighs, too. She looks worried.

"What's wrong? I thought you said he'll be okay."

She looks out the window, a sad smile on her face.

"We're pretty sure he will be. But I'm worried about Jermine's mom. She's not doing well at all. It's a very aggressive form of cancer she has, and it's spreading fast."

Oh. I had forgotten about her, even though Jermine's here. I had been so preoccupied with Mike. And myself, I guess.

I don't know what to say so I don't say anything. But my stomach gets churny again.



## Chapter Ten

It's a couple weeks later when Mom gets a phone call from the hospital in Vancouver to say that Jermine's mom has died. I have absolutely no idea what to say or do, and so immediately I feel guilty. If I think about it too much I get panicky, imagining: what if it was *my* mom? That freaks me out. So I stop thinking about it. Too much heavy stuff lately. Thornleigh in hospital, and now Jermine losing his mom — I totally don't know how to deal.

Mom is a mess. I walk by her and Dad's bedroom and see through the couple inches of open door that she's lying on the bed, crying, with Dad sitting there comforting her. It's at that moment I remember that Jermine's mom was her friend, too, not just someone she knew through her work.

Seeing a parent not just cry but really *bawl* is way-harsh. Dad catches sight of me and tiptoes up to the door. "Keep an eye on Jermine, will you?" he asks.

"Sure."

I wander downstairs and find Jermine sitting in front of the TV, playing with his toys. He looks up with this closed expression in his eyes, like not much is getting in or out. Somehow he knows, I'm sure of it. I don't know if my parents have explained to him the situation with his mom, but I'm sure as heck not going to be the one to do it.

So I sit down on the floor and just talk to him, but he's not listening. After a while I give up and decide to leave. But as I get up, his face screws up like a geyser of tears is about to explode out of him. I sit back down again, real fast, before he starts howling. His face relaxes. Phew — disaster averted.

"C'mere, Jermine," I say, and pull him onto my lap. I hold him tight like my mom does, and he just sits there. He doesn't seem to want to move or talk or play or anything. Luckily, the remote is within reach, so I switch on the TV to some sci-fi show. Jermine sits there with me through the whole show.

I think about Jermine's mom and then wonder about Mike. Mom said everything will be fine as long as Mike gets over the infection, but I didn't ask what would happen if he *doesn't*. Heavy. Hospitals and sickness and dying and stuff — kids and teenagers shouldn't have to deal with that. I guess it's better for me than Jermine, though. I can't imagine losing my folks. I keep holding him tight and he snuggles into my shoulder.

## Chapter Eleven

Everyone at school is talking about Mike. My mom's been giving me regular updates 'cause she knows Mike's mom and has to go to the Kamloops hospital sometimes, for her work. I think I understand now how Mike's illness works, so it's up to me to set everyone at school straight. I explain to them about the infection thing: that it wasn't a heart attack, and that although Mike has to be on an IV for about a month, the doctors say he's going to be fine.

No one's gone to see him yet, 'cause he's all the way in Kamloops, so I'm the only one with the info. For a brief time, while I deliver the news, I'm the star. It's kind of neat. I wonder if this is how Thornleigh feels.

When I come home from school one day, Mom says, "I thought we could drive to Kamloops on Saturday so you can visit Mike."

"Uh, okay." I knew this would be coming at some point. My mom's that type.

I have no idea what I'll say to him, but if I'm the first, then I'll have lots to tell everyone on Monday. I just hope Mike doesn't remember that I hit him after the game. I don't want him to think that's the reason he went down. He might be on an IV right now, but he could probably still pound me into a little pulp when he gets out of hospital.

We leave Dad to look after Jermine, and drive to Kamloops. I stay pretty quiet, and for once, Mom doesn't try to make me talk.

We park, then walk into the hospital and follow signs to the elevator. When the doors open, Mike's parents are there. They beam when they see us.

"Jay, how nice that you came! Hello, Ellen. We were just going to grab a bite to eat. Would you like to come with us? That way, Mike and Jay can catch up — I think Mike's bored out of his mind."

"Sure," my mom says, turning to me and beaming in that kind of 'oh good, a bonding moment' kind of way. "Jay, you go visit with Mike and I'll be along to see him soon."

They point me in the direction of the room, and I head for it, wondering what on earth I'm going to say to Thornleigh. I mean, I hate the guy. Here's my big moment, right? *This is it!* Mike Thornleigh, my lifelong enemy, has been struck down. I wonder if it's some kind of cosmic payback, for being such a hosebag all these years. And for claiming that winning shot in the hockey game. I should feel vindicated that he's having to go through something like this, that he's not the king of the world any more. But instead, I'm feeling nervous. What do I say? Will he still be the same old Mike, even in a hospital bed? Will he still manage to make me feel stupid?

I walk into the room, praying for my big moment of triumph, but as soon as I see him, my insides wobble. Mike's lying there, but he doesn't look like the Mike I know. I mean, he looks like the same person all right, but he's so pale and weak-looking, and there's a tube going into his arm. His usually tanned skin is a few shades lighter, and there are dark circles under his eyes.

"Goobs," he says, and he tries to smile.

I look at him, with these tubes and IV bags and monitors, and his usual evil grin missing, and suddenly my throat's doing something weird; it's kind of tight and sore. I feel panicky, 'cause maybe *I'm* getting sick too, so maybe I should get the hell out of this hospital before I catch something. After all, bad things happen in threes, and there's been Mike, Jermine's mom... yikes! That does it, I'm outta here.

But I can't run away; I have to at least talk to Thornleigh.

"Mike," I say, and it comes out kind of wobbly, like maybe I should pay attention to my throat, which seems to be getting even tighter. I still hate him for always roughhousing me and being better at hockey, still resent him for having a cooler name, but there's no trace of meanness in his eyes, no bravado, no jokes... just this... *weakness*, and that should feel good but somehow it doesn't. It seems wrong. He looks incapable of cracking jokes and joshing around, and it makes it hard to dislike him.

"How you doing?" I ask, but my voice kind of squeaks and it comes out like back when my voice was changing. So I clear my throat and try to say, "How you doin'?" again, like maybe Vin Diesel would.

"I'm okay," he says, giving me another tired smile. "At least, that's what they tell me. Maybe you can check the clipboard hanging on the end of the bed, in case they're lying to me." Even though he's smiling, he looks pretty beat. I glance at the clipboard. Then I reach out, unhook it, and hand it to him, but of course he has tubes in his hand, so he can't reach out to grab it.

I sit down in a chair by his bed, holding the clipboard up. There are numbers in the squares but neither of us know what they mean, so I say, "They were probably placing bets on whether you pulled through or not. Or playing bingo or something."

He grins, but I feel stupid. Maybe that was kind of cruel.

"I didn't think you were going to come," he says. "Your parents make you?"

Whoa, heavy, I don't know what to say. I mean, they *did* make me... instead, I tell him, "Everyone at school's worried about you. Especially the guys on the team. They'll be coming in to see you at some point. We all would have come sooner, but we weren't sure when it would be okay, y'know. We heard you had to rest lots, first."

"Oh, man, you kidding? I'm going outta my mind. I have to lie here for four weeks with nothing but books and crappy daytime TV!"

But I think they were right about the resting part, 'cause he looks tired. "Well, my mom heard from your mom you could have a visitor so..." Oops... now it sounds like she *did* force me... "so I came right away."

"Thanks," he says, and he makes this dry-throat noise.

"Uh, can I get you some water?"

"You bring any beer?"

I smile, but look away and grab his water cup for him. I'm not used to Mike being... well, *nice* like this. Uh-oh, now I have to help him drink the water. How weird is that going to be? But he manages to take it from me with his non-tubed hand.

"I'm glad you came," he says again.

I sit there nodding like an idiot.

"I wasn't sure if you would. I kept expecting you but then after a while I figured you weren't going to."

Uh... where is this going?

He continues: "I always wanted to hang out more, y'know? I used to ask you to come watch the senior hockey games with me, but you never seemed interested. After a while, I stopped asking."

I gape. Am I hearing right?

He smiles weakly. "I figured you didn't like me much."

I almost drop the clipboard. I don't know what to say. What *can* I say? It's true; I didn't like him. But that's 'cause he was always making my life miserable. I remember that he did invite me to a few things, but I thought he just wanted me around so he could have someone to pick on, to make him look good.

“Um,” I say. Great answer.

“And your dad, too,” he says. “I always thought he seemed like such a neat guy. I remember when he came to talk to our class once, way back in elementary school. I really liked him. I was always hoping you’d invite me over so I could see what he does. How he, you know... invents stuff. But you never invited me over to your house. Not even for your birthdays.”

Okay, something is seriously wrong here because I have this bizarre feeling like if I’m about to cry. And there is no way in hell I’m going to do that; not here, not now, not ever, and *not* in front of Mike Freaking Thornleigh.

“Mike,” I say, and I move my hand, but I’m not quite sure if it’s, you know, socially okay for a guy to hold another guy’s hand — heck, NO it isn’t, what was I thinking, so I stop reaching. And I’m strangely moved to say something nice back; I want to tell him that I always thought he hated me, and that I spent so much time wondering why. But my chest gets kind of tight (oh, sweet Jesus, could I be having a heart attack? Or Endo Cardio Whatever?) so instead I say, “You were always picking on me.”

It comes out small and whiny, like a kid. Mike is going to have a field day. But he doesn’t go for it.

“Picking on you? What are you talking about? We joke around lots and stuff, just like all the guys do.”

“Are you kidding me? You’ve been giving me grief since kindergarten.”

He looks confused. “You thought I was giving you a hard time? But I act that way with all my friends. I was just kidding around, you know? You were my Goob-man, my



wingman. My hockey bud. Except we didn't really get to be buddies, and I always wondered why."

Oh, *man*, what is this? Now I have a sore throat and a tight chest all at once; it's a good thing I'm near the intensive care. *Help!* Maybe I should press the button to call the nurse.

"I just wanted to hang out, you know, be friends. You always looked so down, or ticked off at the world, and I was trying to make you laugh. Pull you out of whatever funk you were in. I thought maybe you weren't happy and so you'd want to joke around, get your mind off whatever it was that was dragging you down."

This is too much. Where's the pharmacy? I think I need some tranquilizers. I still can't think of anything else to say, so I make this sort of coughing sound and flap my hand uselessly.

"I thought you didn't like me," he continues. "But I talked to my mom about it and she said to just keep trying. To just keep on being your friend. So I did, but it never seemed to work."

His MOM? Mike Freaking Thornleigh talked to his MOM? About *me*? Holy crap. I could tear him apart with this. But I can't, not if he's telling me this stuff when he's on his deathbed. Well, hospital bed.

I would never in a million years tell my mom stuff like that. I wonder what Thornleigh's mom is like. When we were all younger we used to see each other's parents a lot: picking us up from school, sitting watching hockey games, dropping us off at each other's birthday parties, that kind of thing. But when we got older, we didn't need them as much, apart from giving us rides to the rink. Then I remember this one time, when I was really young, that

Mike invited me to his birthday party. I didn't want to go, so I made Mom say that I was sick and couldn't make it. I think I did that the next year too, and then he stopped inviting me. Holy cow — I'd forgotten about that 'til now!

This is too much. I think I'm having palpitations. NUUUUUURSE! I try to respond to Mike again but all I manage to do is clear my throat.

"So like, we don't have to hang out if you don't want, you know," Mike continues, and I think about how many friends he has — why would he want me around? "But if you do, my mom says when I get out of here, I have to rest up a lot, which means sitting around the house being driven nuts by my brother and sister. Maybe you could come over sometime. If you want. I can use this to guilt-trip my folks into pizzas and movies and stuff. Seriously, this is like an unlimited all-you-can-eat pizza card."

I try to laugh. But I'm speechless.

Mike Thornleigh. Trying to be friends. This has got to be a set-up. I'm waiting for the punch line.

## Chapter Twelve

When I get home, I pace my room non-stop. I can't believe it. Mike Thornleigh... am I really supposed to believe that the guy wanted to be friends with me? *All along?* That he didn't get some twisted pleasure out of tormenting me? I'm half-expecting him to appear at the door, grinning and in full health, telling me what a sucker I am and that this is all some big joke, including the scene in the hospital. And that he's going to tell everyone at school about it, and that they'll all laugh at me.

But I saw him when I was there, I saw him in that bed all pale and sick-looking, and there was no way that guy was lying.

My thoughts are going round in circles:

1. Mike was trying to be friends.
2. It can't be. It's not possible. The guy's an ass.
3. My whole school-age life, being picked on by Mike Thornleigh.

4. But I was wrong about it all, and the tormenting was just Mike trying to be friends.

No!

Then I think about Mr. Karsan's class. About that attitude thing, the class that really pissed me off. All this time, I've been figuring Thornleigh's attitude was the problem. It can't be — it just CAN'T, can it? — that I was just choosing to see things that way. That it was *my* attitude creating all this mess? No way. No way, no way, no way. No. Freaking. Way.

I hear Mike's words again, "You always looked so down, or ticked off, and I was just trying to make you laugh. You know, pull you out of whatever funk you were in. I thought maybe you weren't happy and you'd want to joke around."

And all this time, the thing making me miserable was Mike Thornleigh. I mean, I thought it was...

*Nooooo!* This is all too much for my brain. My head even hurts.

So there was Mike trying to make things better... yet he was making them worse... see, it is Mike's fault. And to think his *mom* told him to "keep trying". Oh, man! When will parents learn not to mess things up?

I kick my bed. *Ow*. Bad move. Cheap, stupid, metal-framed bed.

And then at the hockey game, when I was so mad at Thornleigh for stealing what should have been my winning goal, I thought I finally had him figured out. I thought I finally *got* what it was that made Thornleigh so mean. And I was even more wrong! Oh, man!

This sucks!

I pace the room more. I'm going to wear the carpet out. I think I hear my mom call that dinner's ready but I'm not ready to go down, I just keep pacing, pacing, pacing.

Why the hell did Thornleigh have to be such a jerk about it all? I mean, NINE YEARS we've known each other, and all this time he thought that giving me a hard time was a great way to build a friendship? That's so stupid. Isn't it? It's him, right, it was his fault for being so clueless. And such a jock, and a bully, and... and stupid. Right? *Right?*

It feels much better to blame it all on Thornleigh, but still these stupid thoughts from all those stupid classes keep crowding in on my brain.

"You can choose how you view the world around you, and how you react," Mr. Karsan said.

Aw, jeez. I wish someone would tell me how to react. Everything feels so confusing, I'm in way over my head, and it makes me want to just go hide under a rock somewhere. I sigh. I wonder if this is how Jermine feels sometimes.

I go to kick the bed again but stop myself just in time. The last thing I need right now is to go to hospital with a broken toe.

## Chapter Thirteen

Hockey practice is cancelled for a couple weeks. We try it once, but it doesn't work. We're like a bunch of depressed orphans or something; we're still too much in shock. Actually, I think Coach is in an even worse state, so the break is probably more for him than for us. I guess he feels responsible, or maybe he's worried about being sued for not seeing that Mike was looking sick that day. Poor Coach. I kind of know how he feels. From when I thought it was my fault, that is.

It's a whole five weeks after the hockey game until Mike finally comes back to school. As soon as he appears, everyone crowds around him — he's the superstar again.

"Mike, how's it going?"

"How are ya?"

"You okay, man?"

"So do you get out of P.E. now?"

"Were there, like, tons of cute nurses in the hospital?"

"Did they put an MP3 player in your heart? I heard they can do that now."

The girls close in on him, too. I hang back. He looks good. Happy, maybe a little thinner and not quite as energetic as before, but still smiling and joking. I'm not sure what to say, what to do, how to react to the New Mike. Except he's not new, I guess... it's that everything else has changed.

I just watch him for a bit and try to let my brain adjust.

The teachers are all watching him like a hawk, even in the hallways. I can see them leaning out of their classroom doors. I guess they're terrified he'll drop dead in their class or something.

"I'm fine," Mike tells everyone. "I'll even be back to hockey in a few weeks."

I back away, let everyone else do the crowding around and the greeting. I'm still not sure how to deal with him. We had our little honesty moment but I'm not sure if that will still hold in school. Is it going to be back to the old ways?

We run into each other at lunch.

"Hey, Goobster!" I grit my teeth. So he is doing it again. I still hate the name-calling. But I look at his face and the smile is — *I guess* — genuine. This feels like *The Matrix* or something; like everything that I thought was real has been switched around. Hey, the *Matrix*. That's kind of cool.

“So how’s hockey going?” he asks.

I shrug. “Pretty lame. No-one knows what they’re doing, and I think Coach is so worried that we’re all going to drop dead on him or something, he needs a heart monitor.”

He laughs. For once, it doesn’t feel like he’s laughing *at* me.

“Oh, man, I wish I could get back to it. I’m so freaking bored at home. Hey, I thought maybe, you know, you’d call or come over or something.”

I don’t know what to say. All this time that Mike was at home, I kind of knew I should call, but... well, I was chicken. There.

“Uh, sure,” I say, although I can’t say I really *want* to — this is too weird, too *hard*. It’s freaking me out. Man, is life always going to be this complicated?



## Chapter Fourteen

I get up on Saturday and stumble downstairs to find Mom and Dad already up, looking all perky. Immediately I'm suspicious. They both have this hyper, *we-have-some-awful-idea, but-if-we-smile-maybe-we-can-fool-you* expression going on.

I'm not taking the bait. I grab a box of cereal and sit down.

"Jay, we thought it might be a nice day for a picnic."

"A picnic? In November?"

"Well, it's been such beautiful weather. And we don't know how much longer it'll last, so we should make use of it while we can. We can bundle up in our jackets."

When people become parents, do phrases like this get programmed into them? Are they taken away by a cult and brainwashed?

"This might be our last chance for a nice family day out before winter hits. What do you say? Do you have any other plans today?"

I had planned on sitting around and doing a whole lotta nothin'. Maybe fantasizing about Angelina Jolie. But that probably won't wash.

"Also, we thought you might like to invite Mike."

Ah... I knew something was coming. Is this 'cause they feel sorry for him (Mom's good at looking after the underdog), or because my mom had some kind of underground-conspiracy-planning talk with Thornleigh's mom?

"Um, okay." Fifty bucks says I know what's coming next...

"So why don't you phone Mike while we get the picnic together."

Bingo.

Okay, so Mike and I seem to be somewhat reconciled and all, but I can't say I love the thought of phoning him. Don't my folks know that in any kind of *you-first* situation, the one who goes first *loses*? Stupid parents.

But I know I have to do it, so I pick up the phone and dial. A mom-voice answers.

"Hello?"

"Hi Mrs. Thornleigh, this is Jay Gooby." My teeth clench as soon as I say my name. I still hate it. The minute I turn eighteen, I'm going to change my name. Why have I never looked into that before? I wonder how I go about it,

what I have to do. Well, whatever it takes, I'll do it. For sure. Sign me up.

"Oh, hello Jay! How are you?" ... five minutes of chitchat follows, don't parents know we hate chitchat? How's your mom, how's your dad, I hear you have a new younger brother, blah, blah, blah. If she knows all this stuff, then why is she asking?

Finally I get through the first round of torture, then Thornleigh comes on the phone.

"Thornleigh."

"Goobster!"

I'm tempted to smack the phone down. No — breathe, breathe.

"My parents are having this picnic today and they wanted me to invite you."

"What?"

I sigh and repeat it.

"A picnic? Sounds great. Where?"

"In between the targets at the rifle range, you doofus. Where do you think? In the park."

"Sweet! I've been cooped up inside for so long, and the weather's awesome. Be good to spend some time outdoors before winter hits."

Holy crud! The good-weather-cult got to him. Maybe they got him while he was in hospital, injected something into his veins. I'm never going to hospital, not ever again.

My family, Jermine included, packs up into our antique station wagon and we trundle on over to the park, picking up Mike on the way. He looks good. You'd never in a million years know he had some weird heart condition. I wonder if he worries about it still. Must be pretty heavy to live with that hanging over you. Like a ticking time bomb or something. Yikes.

This is the first time Mike has met Jermine, who's wedged in between us, chewing on a toy car. Mike says hi, but Jermine is too busy being Human-Drooly-Truck-Crusher to answer.

We pile out of the car and set up at one of the picnic tables. It's a pretty nice park; there's a big playing field, a kids' playground area (mom brought a *helmet* for Jermine, the poor kid) and a bunch of picnic tables with barbecue pits under some leafy trees. The leaves are all crispy and golden-brown, like cinnamon toast.

As we eat our sandwiches and cookies, my parents do the usual how-are-you, how's-school routine with Mike. My mom doesn't ask him about his heart or anything. I guess she already grilled Thornleigh's mom, big-time. There's no way she'd take Mike out to a park if she wasn't sure he'd be okay.

I'm sitting on one side of the picnic table with Jermine, and Mike's on the other. He gets up, walks around, and squats down so that he's level with Jermine.

"Hey there, little dude," he says. "My name's Mike."

"Muhhhh," Jermine says, out of the side of his mouth.

Mom looks over and nicely but firmly says, "Jermine honey, it's 'Mike'. Mi-ke." She says the 'k' really clearly.

"Muh!" Jermine says again.

Mike grins. "Mud? You calling me Mud? Aw man, my name is mud around here!" He's joshing and kinda ruffling Jermine's hair as he's doing it, but he's being too rough — Jermine doesn't know him, and is getting upset. I can see what's coming next, but obviously Mike doesn't, 'cause he looks shocked when Jermine screws up his face and lets out a high-pitched shriek. *Ow*. That one even hurt my ears.

Mike takes a step back.

Mom's moving our way but I grab Jermine, haul him onto my knee and hold him against my chest real tight, my fingers over his eyes so he has his little dark corner. He calms down pretty fast but when I move my fingers away he buries his face further into my chest.

"Uh, gee, I'm sorry," Mike says, looking embarrassed. "I was just kidding around. I didn't expect him to freak out." He sounds genuinely sorry.

"It's okay," I say. "He doesn't understand jokes like that, is all. When people are being mean to be funny, you know? He doesn't get the funny, he just hears the mean."

I'm looking at Mike as I say it, and then I stop, mid-everything, and he looks stunned too. A tense moment goes by. We look away from each other.

"Uh... I didn't think I was being mean," he says. There's another awkward moment when our eyes meet, so we look away again, and Mike moves in closer to Jermine. "Hey buddy, I'm real sorry." He goes to put his hand on Jermine's back but I shake my head.

"It'll take a while for him to trust you again," I say.

Even I can see the irony in all this.

But I just want to enjoy the nice day, I don't want to have to think about irony or friendships or complications or ANY of that heavy stuff any more. Mom's looking over, fit to burst with pride or something, at the way I'm handling Jermine. I stare away from her. No way I'm about to let her ruin a tentative friendship by giving her the chance to come out with something proud-parenty. No eye contact, no talky. That's the deal.

Eventually Jermine emerges from his time-out. He looks up, one-eyed at the world, real shy. My jacket is, of course, all covered in drool. Gross. I don't say anything yet, just go on talking to Mike as if I'm unaware Jermine is there. I expect Mike to still be looking uncomfortable, but he's staring at Jermine like he's fascinated. I pick up one of Jermine's stuffed animals as I'm talking and walk it up and down Jermine's leg. Jermine catches sight of it and it's worked, I've hooked his attention. When he looks at the stuffed bunny I make it hide its face, just like Jermine did. He loves it when I do this. He's fascinated, can't get enough of it. I make the bunny do the peek-a-boo thing and Jermine is rapt. Eventually he goes for it — he grabs the bunny and squishes it tight up under his neck.

"J.J." he says in a small voice.

"Is that your bunny's name?" Mike asks, his voice much softer than before. He looks like he really wants to try, but doesn't know what to do. That must be how I looked, just a couple months ago.

Jermine doesn't answer him, he's not ready to. "That's his name for me," I tell Mike.

Mike's eyebrows go up. "Really? Hey, that's kinda cool! J.J."

I can see his brain wheeling and I'm like, oh man, what's he gonna come up with now?

"Suits you better than Jay," he says.

*How would you know? You never called me Jay.* But I don't like the bitterness that goes along with this thought. It feels wrong, like I've swallowed something toxic. That was the old me. The new me isn't much smarter, though, 'cause I can't think of anything to say. I feel kind of uncomfortable and want to get out of there. Plus, Jermine's getting really heavy.

Just then, my prayers are answered. Someone shouts to us — it's Jim Lam and Graham Michaelson, and they're making their way across the park, tossing a football between them.

"Hey guys," Jim calls. "Whatcha doing? You wanna play some football?"

Me and Mike both jump up and I hand Jermine off to Mom. Mom has her concerned-parent face on, but I guess it's okay for Mike to throw a football, 'cause she lets us go.

The four of us jog out onto the playing field. First we toss the ball around in a square. We're all pretty good at throwing a football, considering that we're hockey players. Graham's not so good at catching, but that's okay, there's no competitiveness here; it's kind of understood that football's just not as important as hockey.

Then we toss it around while running, trying to intercept each other's passes. Any excuse for shoving each other in the face or knocking each other down. But it's really good-natured and I wonder now how I ever thought Mike was being mean when he did stuff like that. It just

seems... I don't know, it's like I never saw the nice behind it all, before.

Or maybe he really was mean before, and when the good-weather cult got him in hospital, they injected him with some kind of nice. I saw this TV show where this guy had a brain tumour and it made his personality do a complete one-eighty — maybe that's what happened to Thornleigh. But then I remember the scene with Mike in the hospital, and I know it's not true. I hate being so wrong, though. It feels weird to know that something I believed for most of my life could turn out to be untrue. It spins my head when I think about it too much.

The perfect solution? Don't think about it.

"Hey Goobman! Over here!" Thornleigh yells.

I almost drop the ball. Goobman! That's a new one. It's a step up, that's for sure. At least it has the word "man" in it.

"Pass it over here! Goooooob!"

Okay, so it's back to Goob. I guess I'm Goob, Gooby, Goobman, all of these things. I throw the ball at Mike, real hard. It smacks him in the stomach. Most people don't know I can throw that hard and straight.

He kind of gives a small "oof" and then I realize I shouldn't have tried to knock out someone who just got out of hospital. Oh, jeez! My own stomach does a flip-flop, and I go running over to see if he's okay.

But he's running and dodging, throwing the ball to Jim. I glance back at the picnic tables and see Mom hanging onto Jermine, who's struggling like he wants to come play ball with us. Mom's glancing over at Mike, and I



realize she's probably worried about him. But like I said, it must be okay 'cause she lets us keep playing. We'll both keep an eye out for him. Dad's doing the Proud Parent look and I am so glad he does not want to try to join us. Today he's wearing brown sandals with black socks. I guess some kind of sock-sandal cult got him. Jeez, these cult members must be everywhere!

"Hey J.J.! J.J. McGoob! Comin' your way, man!"

I'm so shocked, the ball smacks me on the side of the jaw. I catch it off the rebound.

J.J. He actually called me J.J.

"Goooob! Back over here!"

Okay, it was brief.

I draw my arm back and let fly with the ball. Mike is far away, and Jim and Graham are in between us. Like I said, most guys don't know how hard I can throw, 'cause we don't play football in P.E. Jim and Graham stare open-mouthed as the ball soars way over their heads in a perfect arc — Mike even has to run back further to make the catch.

He catches it and calls out, "YES! Oh, beautiful throw, man!" Then he turns towards my family and yells, "Hey Jermine, you see that? Did you see that throw?"

Jermine's gnawing on the corner of the picnic table, so he probably didn't, but my parents applaud. Mike's doing this little dance-of-triumph and he tosses the ball back. It goes wide so I have to run hard to get it, but I do (hey, maybe I have a future in this sport) and even Jim and Graham go "Oh!" when I catch it.

"Yo, Goob-MAN!" That's from Mike.

Jim's running straight at me, so we're off again, I let him get real close then lob the ball and give Jim a shove in the chest at the same time. He grins and runs back, shouting, "I'll get you next time, Goobman!"

Goobman, again! And this time from Jim. *Hmm*. It seems to be catching.

Well, it would be nice to be called J.J. all the time, but I guess I can live with Goobman. For now. Maybe I'll even hold off on the name change thing; at least until I'm eighteen.

But I am changing it then, no question. I'm too young to think yet about whether or not I'll have kids someday, but if I do, there is NO WAY they're getting saddled with a name like Gooby. And that's final.

Parents... school... friends... bullies... fourteen is a tough age to be. Especially if your name is Gooby.

Like most teenagers, Jay Gooby is convinced he has it worse than anyone else. His parents don't fit the normal mold, and he has endured a lifetime of merciless teasing, especially at the hands of his lifelong enemy Mike Thornleigh. But Jay has to take on more than just school and hockey when two major events take place: his parents adopt an autistic child, and a freak accident occurs at the hockey rink. Life sure can get a lot more complicated... and at the same time, a lot simpler.

