



The **TIP-OFF**



THE CHRONICLES OF
**JONATHAN
SPENCER**
Book 1

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 **PragerU**



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CHAPTER



Mom's van screeches to a stop at the front of the drop-off line like a dying barn owl.

"Mom, we could've taken the bus," I mutter, gripping the door handle with sweaty fingers.

"Nonsense! I wanted to see my babies off on their first day." She reaches across the console and squeezes me in a tight hug. "So proud of you!"

I squirm. The car behind us blasts its horn, but Mom ignores it.

I finally break free and open the door. "Thanks, Mom. See ya." I unfold my long legs from their cramped quarters as quickly as humanly possible.

Two steps onto the pavement.

I take the third step toward my new middle school.

And then the humiliation begins.

My twin seven-year-old brothers pound their tiny fists on the windows of Mom's beat-up minivan, screaming at the top of their lungs.

“Bye, Jonathan! Have a great first day!” Alec blows kisses and gives me two overenthusiastic thumbs up.

Ian sobs theatrically, his face smooshed against the glass. “I miss you already! Don’t goooo!”

I whip around, desperate to shut them up before someone notices, and smack full-speed into two girls. And not just any girls. *Cheerleaders*. I can tell by the blue and white Collins Cougars uniforms they’re wearing. The impact sends one cheerleader’s open water bottle sailing out of her hand and onto the pavement, dousing her white sneakers. The other one drops her chocolate chip muffin. Someone yelps like an injured seal. (Fine. That was me.)

A burning sensation crawls up my neck and face. Did everyone in the parking lot just witness that? I don’t dare look around.

“I—I’m sorry.” I scramble to pick up the now-empty bottle.

The taller of the two cheerleaders picks up her breakfast, straightens her enormous white hair bow, and huffs. “Just watch where you’re going next time.”

The shorter one, a red-haired girl, shakes off her damp shoes and looks up at me. She has to tilt her head so far back I half expect her to fall over. “Hey, are you the eighth-grade transfer from Norman? The basketball player? Coach Robinson was looking for you.”

I freeze. *What?*

I don’t even know where Norman is. “No. I’m in sixth.”

The red-haired girl’s mouth drops open. “But—you’re

so tall.”

And there it is.

My face ignites.

“I mean seriously, you’re probably taller than half the teachers.”

The redhead’s friend grabs her by the elbow. “Excuse her. Riley, we have to go.”

“He is, though.” Riley walks away arm in arm with her friend, stealing a bewildered glance back at me.

Great. I’ve been at my new school all of two minutes, and the cheerleaders look at me like I belong in the zoo.

I take a breath to recover. Stop standing around like an idiot and keep moving.

I pull a copy of my class schedule out of my back pocket. A tiny, older woman in a Cougars Have Class T-shirt touches my elbow.

“Do you need help finding anything?”

I do. But admitting that out loud feels like pouring gasoline on my dumpster fire of an entrance. The lady smiles at me kindly, and I cave.

“Uh, Boys’ Athletics?”

“What sport?”

Since my crazy growth spurt this past summer, everyone I know—and even people I don’t know—has said I need to play one sport. “Basketball.”

She chuckles a little. “Well, that makes sense, doesn’t

it? You'll be in the gym, then." She points to the sprawling brick building. "Go in the main entrance here, then take a left all the way down the hallway. Look for the double doors. You can't miss it."

I slouch. "Thanks."

I wade into the stream of people flowing from the buses and car lines into the building. The fact that I'm at least a foot taller than most of them makes me feel even more out of place.

There are more people in this school than live in my entire town. Well, what used to be my entire town.

Prosper Valley, Oklahoma had one school. One of everything, really—stoplight, gas station, post office, grocery store. I bet every resident of Prosper Valley would fit inside Collins Middle School.

I duck under the giant blue WELCOME, COUGARS! banner that stretches across the school entrance and step into pure chaos. Lockers slam. Teachers shout things like, "Keep moving!" and "No running!" Students zigzag through the crowd like we're in a high-speed car chase. Honestly, this hallway needs hazard signs. Traffic cones. Maybe a crossing guard. The risk of flat tires, accidental body slams, and rogue elbows is off the charts—especially if you're tall, uncoordinated, and have sasquatch-size feet like me.

I surge forward, hoping for the best.

A voice from behind me says, "Keep it moving, grandpa." Before I can react, a hard shove launches me straight into the back of a girl carrying a clarinet.

"Watch it." The girl glares at me and marches into the music room.

I apologize to the girl and keep moving. "Excuse me, sorry."

Behind me, two guys burst into laughter. "Whoa! He did it! He did the meme! Let's go!"

What meme? What did I do?

I shuffle forward, pretending not to hear them, but then a hand grabs my elbow. I'm spun around. A beefy, brown-haired kid in a Dallas Cowboys T-shirt says, "Dude. That was awesome. Do it again. You gotta do it again."

I blink. "Do what?"

"You know, the meme. You did it, like, less than a minute ago. Do it again!" Beefy Cowboy turns to his friend in an Oklahoma Sooners jersey. They both make exaggerated, slack-jawed faces. Then, in unison, they belt out: "Excuse me!" More laughter. More high fives.

I follow their lead and chuckle too. "Yeah, okay. So I bumped into her and felt bad, so I said excuse me." I hold my hand up and wait for a high five.

Nothing. Blank stares. The energy around us flat-lines.

"Dude. Is the air, like, extra dorky up there or what?" The corner of Beefy Cowboy's mouth curls into a sneer. "Do you not know what a meme is?"

Sooners jersey kid throws his head back and snort laughs. "Ohhh no waaay! He actually doesn't know."

A sour taste fills my mouth. Of course I know what a meme is. Just. . . not that specific meme. I have never wanted to evaporate into thin air more in my life.

I jam my fists into my pockets, shoulders slouching. “I gotta get to class.” I spin around and head toward the end of the corridor, but I can still hear them hee-hawing behind me.

By the time I reach the gym, my back throbs, and my stomach churns like a rabid raccoon on a hamster wheel.

I shove open the gym door.

BANG!

Suddenly, fifteen pairs of eyes are on me. *Fantastic. Way to be subtle, Jonathan.* I freeze for half a second, debating whether I should just turn around and transfer schools.

But instead, I shuffle forward, trying to ignore the feeling that I’m some kind of giant, gangly, country-bumpkin freak.

Breathe in. Breathe out. Today will be the hardest. It will get easier from here. I keep stepping my size thirteen-and-a-half Chuck Taylors toward the bleachers.

Then—finally—a familiar face. Mason Barnes. I let my shoulders relax.

Mason was the only kid who talked to me before school started. He came by on Saturday afternoon—the day we moved in—when I was shooting hoops in the driveway. Maybe today won’t be a disaster after all.

He’s sitting halfway up the bleachers. He and three other guys are huddled around somebody’s phone, probably watching a video.

At Prosper Valley, phones had to stay in our backpacks. No exceptions. I didn’t even own a phone until

about a month ago—when my parents decided we were moving to Oklahoma City so Dad could be closer to work. And now I have dad's old phone.

Correction: Dad's ancient, prehistoric flip phone.

A Kyocera DuraXE.

I'm ninety-nine percent sure it was built before YouTube. One-hundred percent sure it doesn't have internet. But hey, I can play a pretty wicked snake game on it.

I head toward the bleachers, aiming for Mason, when some random guy stands up right in front of me. No eye contact. Just steps into my path like I don't exist. Then he climbs the bleachers two steps at a time and joins Mason's group. Whoever this guy is, he's a foot shorter than me but looks twice as cool.

I could use some looking cool right about now.

I size up the steps. That guy did it. How hard can it be?

I stretch my right leg, push off with my left, and hop over the first bleacher.

Easy.

I push off the third step with my right foot. Then my giant clown shoe catches on the edge of the bleacher.

Uh-oh.

My insides somersault. Gravity senses my weakness. Everything shifts into slow motion.

Must. Keep. Balance.

A tiny, panicked voice in my brain screams: *USE YOUR*

ARMS.

So I do. I flail around, wildly. Arms windmilling in giant, desperate circles. It works. Until I accidentally smack the kid sitting near the aisle.

Then I nose dive. Hard.

Whammo. I'm face first on the cold steel. Something sharp, probably the corner of the step, scrapes my nose. I hear a giant, collective gasp from everyone in the gym.

Whooosh. I slide down the bleachers.

Whump. I'm face down on the gym floor.

Welp. That happened. Here I was thinking this day couldn't get any worse.

I lie still for a moment and complete a mental checklist of my body parts. Everything's still attached. Nothing hurts except for my nose and a couple minor elbow and knee scrapes. Unless you count my pride, which has taken a possibly fatal blow.

I crack one eye open, hoping I'll wake up and find this is all a bad dream. Mason is standing over me, hand extended. "You all right, dude?"

I grab his arm, pull myself upright, and cover my nose with my hand. What I wouldn't give for a sinkhole to open up beneath my feet right now.

"Yeah, I'm okay. Thanks." I dust off my knees and shrug my backpack higher onto my left shoulder.

Mason squints at my face. “Your nose is bleeding. Not bad, but it looks like it hurts.”

I check my fingertips and, sure enough, a tiny red smear

streaks across them. I really need to go assess the damage to my face, but the bell’s about to ring, and who knows where the bathroom is in this labyrinth of a school. My heart pounds against my ribs, and I don’t know what to do.

“Man.” Mason chuckles. “You couldn’t have planned that stunt better.

It was just. . . wow.” He starts back up the bleachers, then waves me forward. “You better go up ahead of me. Just in case.”

I nod, and carefully, slowly, making no eye contact with anyone, advance up the steps. I take a seat at the end of the row behind Mason and his friends. He probably thinks I’m a dork, like those guys in the hallway said earlier. In the row in front of Mason, a group of guys laugh and flail their arms around, mocking me.

First period hasn’t even started yet.

Middle school is not going to be easy.

CHAPTER



I squint at the fleet of giant yellow school buses winding around the CMS parking lot. Prosper Valley had one sad, yellow minivan.

Panic claws up my throat. *Which one is 527? Where are the numbers? Did I miss it already?*

Then I spot it, chugging to the front of the line, coughing up a cloud of black exhaust. The door squeals open and kids pile on.

I pause on the bottom step. The driver—a mountain of wild, curly brown hair and broad shoulders—waves me forward with one hand while leaning on the horn with his gut. I duck my chin and shuffle aboard.

Almost every seat is jam-packed. I walk past kids wearing dark eyeliner and black leather jackets in the late summer heat. Kids with neon streaks in their hair and layers of bright-colored jewelry. Kids wearing shiny, baggy athletic gear, concert T-shirts of bands I've never heard of, and ripped jeans. Me and my cotton athletic shorts, Thunder T-shirt, and blue-and-white striped socks stand out like a baseball bat at tipoff.

“Jon!” My ten-year-old sister Sarah’s voice rises above the alien conversations.

I spot her long blonde ponytail and bright pink T-shirt near the back of the bus. She waves me toward an empty seat in front of her, next to an angry-looking kid about her age. He’s glued to his phone and has a skateboard crammed into his backpack.

I drop into the seat, and he glares at me.

“What happened to your face?” Angry Kid points at my nose.

“I fell.” I slump into the sticky vinyl seat and brace myself for more laughter.

“Cool.” He turns back to his phone and jabs the screen with his thumbs. I notice we’re wearing the exact same Chuck Taylors. I wonder if his mom got them on sale from Amazon too.

The bus launches forward, and I lean back, hoping for a quiet ride home. My brain is fried, my body aches from the non-stop jostling during passing periods, and my nose throbs.

Sarah taps my shoulder. “You fell?”

So much for peace and quiet. “Yeah.”

She taps again. “What happened?”

I do not have energy for this conversation right now. “Gravity.”

Sarah leans forward. “Jonathan. What. Happened.”

I groan and turn around to face her. “I’m fine. I tried taking the bleacher steps two at a time. Didn’t work.”

“Yikes. I’m sorry.” She wraps an arm around the shoulders of the girl next to her and smiles. “This is Mari, my new best friend. She lives around the corner from us. She’s coming over for a little while, if that’s okay.”

What does she mean *if that’s okay*? “Why would I care? No offense, Mari.”

Sarah shoots me a “duh” expression. “Because you’re in charge until Mom or Dad gets home.”

“Oh, yeah.” It’s not like I forgot Mom took a new job. Or that I forgot I have to babysit my siblings after school. It’s that I didn’t realize Sarah would make friends so fast and ask me for permission to do things with them. “It’s fine. Whatever.”

I spot our twin brothers, Ian and Alec, two rows behind Sarah and Mari. *Did they make new friends already too?*

The bus swerves around a speed bump. Sarah and Mari slide into the bus wall. Ian and Alec shout, “Woo-hoo!” I grip my seat, and the bus zips forward.

“We have homeroom together too.” Mari sits straighter and flips her long, dark hair over one shoulder. “And, we’re both Jasminions.”

I shoot Sarah a *what is that?* look.

Sarah rolls her eyes. “Jasmine Cunningham, the singer? Her fans are Jasminions.”

“Oh. . . right.” We round another corner and a couple of girls in the front scream. Angry Kid and I slide right, barely managing not to tumble into the aisle.

A voice shouts, “I’m going to be sick!”

That doesn't sound good. Our bus driver, Captain Warp Speed, seems to be playing fast and loose with the rules of the road.

I glance around. One little girl, probably second grade if I had to guess, is crying. The kid across the aisle from her is the same color as a lima bean.

Wait.

Mason?

He's hunched over, head between his knees, looking ready to explode. His seatmate, a curly-haired kid in an Oklahoma State T-shirt, is pressed against the window. He looks afraid that Mason will liquefy.

Wham! The bus hits a pothole, and we catch a split second of air. The driver slams on the brakes, and everyone on the bus gasps in unison.

"Oh, look, it's our stop." I couldn't be more relieved.

We stand and move up the aisle. Ahead, still a sickly shade of green, Mason rises from his seat and shuffles his way into line.

I follow the line off the bus and pause on the sidewalk. Mason is doubled over with his hands on his knees. The universal "I'm about to hurl" stance. I hesitate. *Should I say something? He did help me this morning after my botched bleacher climb.*

"You okay, man?" I ask.

"I think so." He inhales deep, exhales loud. "I've never been carsick before." He straightens up, wiping sweat off his forehead.

"It goes away in a minute." It's only happened to me

once, on a family road trip to Colorado, but man. It's awful. "Next time, try opening the window."

My brothers leap from the bus and land on the sidewalk next to us.

"Your friend looks like a ninja turtle." Ian squints, staring at Mason like he's a rare species.

Alec adjusts his glasses. "Just because he's short and green doesn't make him a ninja turtle. Wait. Do you know karate?"

Mason laughs weakly. "Nah, just basketball."

"My brother likes basketball." Alec stands up tall.

"I know, we played in your driveway, right after y'all moved in." Mason steps off the sidewalk into the grass. "How's your nose?"

"The north star?" I touch my sore schnoz. "It's fine. Thanks."

"I better get home. See ya." Mason crosses the street and heads up the hill.

"See ya."

I usher the twins around the corner. Up ahead, I spot Sarah and Mari, chatting loudly about all the fourth-grade hot topics—Jasmine Cunningham, science club, student council elections, some boy who sits between them, and why all the cafeteria food tastes the same.

My chest tightens. Of course Sarah would make friends faster than me.

"Did Mom and Dad give you a key, or do we have to break in?" Ian punches the air like he's breaking a

window.

I pull my *Zombie Spider Apocalypse* keychain out of my backpack.

We reach the house—a gray two-story place across the street from Dad’s shop, Craig Spencer Auto Works. As of two days ago, our new home sweet home.

The boys race past Sarah and Mari to the enormous oak in our front yard. By the time I step onto the porch and unlock the front door, Alec’s dropped to all fours and Ian is using him as a step stool to try and reach the lowest branch.

Wrangler, our scruffy-faced mutt, greets us with slobbery kisses. He’s part terrier, part labrador retriever, and the best dog ever.

“Awww! He’s so sweet!” Mari squeals, dropping to give him a tummy rub.

“Alec! Ian! Come give Wrangler treats!” Sarah calls.

Stacks of boxes line the entryway and the living room. I dodge the minefield of cardboard to get into the kitchen. I zero in on the fridge. And. . . it’s almost empty. Behind me, I hear the smack-smack-smack of little shoes hopping across the tile floor.

“Do you wanna play with us?” Ian asks. “Sarah’s busy showing off Wrangler to her friend.”

I grab the milk jug and chug half of it down. “Nah, thanks. You guys go ahead.” I have big plans that involve consuming food and shooting hoops in our driveway. Our old house had a gravel driveway, so I always had to bike to the park if I wanted to shoot, but I honestly didn’t play basketball very often.

"You never play with us anymore," Ian grumbles.

"Told you so." Alec taps Ian on the shoulder. "Tag. You're it." They race out of the room, screeching and laughing.

There's a thud, followed by the unmistakable rumble of a cardboard avalanche. I return the milk to the fridge. "Guys?"

At first, silence.

Then, giggles.

"We're okay."

"Whatever you knocked down, pick it up."

On the kitchen table, an envelope is propped against a box labeled "Bakeware—fragile." Across the envelope in big, red letters it says, KIDS—READ ME.

I open it.

J, S, A & I,

Hope you had a GREAT first day at school! Dad and I can't wait to hear all about it tonight.

Before we get home, please:

- 1) Let Wrangler outside to do his business (he's been inside all day)*
- 2) Unpack and put away at least 1 box in your room*
- 3) Think of 1 thing to tell Dad and me about your new school*
- 4) Jonathan—please take the package of hamburger meat out of the freezer to thaw for dinner*

xoxoxox

Mom

I weave through boxes on the way upstairs and open Sarah's door. "Did you let Wrangler out?"

"Hey! Knock!" Sarah tries to push the door closed.

I stop it with my massive foot. "Did you?"

"No. I haven't seen him since we came up here."

I check the twins' room. They're draping towels and sheets over a pile of boxes. Box fort. At least that'll keep them busy for a while and out of my hair.

"Have you seen Wrangler?"

"He was with Sarah." Ian stumbles over a box and loses the corner of a sheet. "Aw, Jonathan. You made me mess up."

One last place to check. I step into my room and immediately regret it. The smell hits me like a brick wall. I yank my shirt over my nose. Something foul—like crawled into the walls and died foul—fills my room. I scan the floor. Then, I see it.

A stinky, steaming landmine of epic proportions. Dead center in my room.

"Aw! Wrangler!"

A thump-thump-thumping tail emerges from beneath my bed.

I know Mom and Dad want me to have a positive attitude and all, but after crashing into cheerleaders, falling down bleachers, and finding this little gift in my room, I think it's okay to go ahead and admit it.

Today really and truly stinks.

CHAPTER



The kitchen is already alive with slurping, crunching, and the occasional thump of a spoon against a plastic tub. Ian and Alec sit at the table, eating cereal out of recycled Kool-Wip containers. I pluck the Marshmallow Chocolate Snappy Puffs box off the table and shake the box. Mostly dust. Fantastic. From under the table, Wrangler's tail thumps excitedly, waiting for any scraps to fall.

"Jonathan, who's faster—an owl or an antelope?" Ian slurps milk from his Extra Creamy tub.

"Duh, everybody knows an antelope is faster." Sarah rinses her tub and sets it in the sink.

"He asked Jonathan." Alec picks mini marshmallows out of his cereal and hands them to Ian. "So? For a million dollars, who wins? Owl or antelope?"

"They're both pretty fast." I pour what's left of the Snappy Puffs directly into my mouth.

Ian dumps his tub in the sink, disappointed. "That's not an answer. You lose a million dollars."

Too bad a million dollars can't erase my first day at Collins Middle School.

The front door squeals open. "Melissa! You still here? Mel?" Dad barges through the living room like a short, stocky, freight train in coveralls.

Wrangler charges from the kitchen, knocking over Ian's empty chair in the process.

"Daddy!" Ian and Alec launch themselves at his legs.

"Hang on, guys. I need to talk to your mom. Is she still here?" He picks the boys up, one by one, and sets them on the couch.

Alec points to Mom and Dad's bedroom door.

"I'm here, hang on." Mom blazes out, through the living room and into the kitchen, fiddling with a bracelet clasp on her wrist. "What's wrong?"

"Why didn't you answer your phone?" I know that Dad voice. It's the one he uses when I don't do something he expects me to do.

Mom pats her skirt pocket. "I don't have it on me, honey, I'm sorry. Is everything okay?"

"The bank needs us to come by today before five. We've got to sign one more document. Can you pick me up at your lunch break so we can take care of it?"

"I'll try, yeah." She secures her hair with a clip and squeezes between Dad and a stack of moving boxes into the kitchen.

I notice the department store tag on the back of her neck. Her jacket's inside out.

"Maybe I should rephrase that." Dad follows her into the kitchen. "This is about our home. We can't tell the bank we'll try. This is a 'get it done today' situation. So, what time will you pick me up? Eleven or twelve?"

Mom guzzles her coffee. "I hear you. But I can't tell you until I look at my calendar." She pats Dad's shoulder. "I'm running late. I'll call you when I get to work." Her shiny black shoes clack across the kitchen floor as she heads to the garage.

"Mom?" I point at the back of my own collar. "Tag."

"Sit up straight, Jon. Gotta go." She blows kisses to the entire room and bustles out the door.

Sarah looks at me and shrugs. "You tried."

Dad rests one hand on the kitchen counter, hangs his head, and sighs. He empties the coffee pot into his Craig Spencer Autoworks mug and takes a long swig. When he turns around, he forces a smile.

"Jonathan. Please text me when you get home after school, so I know y'all are here."

"I will, Dad."

"And don't forget to let Wrangler out first thing."

"I *know*, Dad." Like he needs to remind me. I learned that one the hard way.

"Sarah, make sure he remembers. And no more friends over until Mom and I meet their parents. Okay?"

Sarah groans. "Fine."

Dad checks his watch. "Back to it. Those alternators aren't going to change themselves." He drops a kiss onto each of our foreheads. "Love you. See you tonight. Keep your positive attitude. And keep unpacking." He winks and heads out the front door.

Easy for him to say. Keep a positive attitude? He fixes machines all day. Machines can't laugh at you. I've got to deal with the jungle of Collins Middle School, where one wrong move could cement my reputation for eternity. Or at least the next few years. I'm positive about one thing though: if I want to survive sixth grade, I need to lay low.

CHAPTER

04



It's day two at CMS, and I think I've cracked the hallway survival code. All the rules you think you know? Throw 'em out the window. At Collins, it's every man for himself.

I've already counted six glares, three "watch outs," five versions of the "Excuse me" meme, and I've been shoved seven times—and I'm not even halfway down the hall. Is it like this for everyone, or just me?

It's like there's a giant neon sign blinking above my head. And a brass band behind me. On unicycles. I can almost hear it: Ooom-pah-pah DORK. It's my own personal Theme Song of Awkwardness.

At least my nose is healing. Now, instead of having a bloody, swollen scrape down the middle of my nose, I just look like I have a cluster of angry pimples. I guess that's progress.

The one good thing about people shoving past is that I hear snippets of their conversations. And the one

thing kids here are obsessed with? TikTok. Like, weirdly, enthusiastically obsessed. I don't even have social media, but I know what TikTok is. Obviously. I've seen clips on YouTube, and I've heard kids at my old school talk about it.

But here? It's next level. People aren't just into TikTok. It's their entire personality. And suddenly, I feel like the only one who's not in on the joke.

Did you see Slammo's latest TikTok?"

"Slammo's trending again."

"I heard Slammo's going to slam another one this morning."

It's all I've heard this morning. By the time I walk into the gym, my head is spinning with questions. *Who is Slammo? What's he slamming? Is this just a Collins thing or have I been living under a rock?*

Now, I don't just feel new—I feel behind.

I hustle quietly toward the bleachers, opting for the front row this time. I'm not about to try double-stepping it or even single-stepping it up to a higher row. There's no way I'm risking a repeat performance of yesterday's humiliation.

Kids trickle into the gym. The handful of guys who aren't on their phones talk to each other as they climb the bleachers.

Mason sees me and pauses. "Hey. I like your socks." He steps up to the second row and sits behind me.

“Thanks.” At my school in Prosper Valley, everybody loved my funky socks. Mason’s the first person here to notice them. I lean forward and tug today’s pair higher on my shins. They’re grey with bright orange and red pepperoni pizza slices all over them. “Hey, can I ask you something?”

“Sure.” Mason sets his backpack between his feet.

“Does somebody named Slammo go to school here? I’ve heard people talking about him—or her?”

“Slammo’s definitely a him.” Mason pulls a water bottle from his pack. “Trey Matthews. He’s a sixth grader. He pranks people and films it. At the end, he says, ‘You’ve Been Slammo Slammed.’”

“And people actually like this?” I ask.

“Yeah. He’s pretty popular. He said if he reaches five hundred followers, he’ll stuff somebody in a locker every day for a month. He’s at 498 now. That’s why people are talking about him.”

“Do you know him?”

“Yeah,” Mason says. “Uh, you know him too. Trey? He’s in this class.”

I rack my brain, trying to remember my classmates from yesterday, but the whole bleacher debacle has left me fuzzy. I’m totally blanking. “He is?”

“He’s not here yet. I’ll point him out to you.” Mason leans forward.

My backpack pings. Well, my flip phone in my backpack rings, anyway. I bust it out and see a text from Dad.

Have a great day, buddy. Love you.

PS don't forget to text me when you get home. When you get your room unpacked, maybe we can work on the Charger.

We've been in our new house for three days, and Dad's already after me about working on the Charger. I switch my phone to silent and shove the image of that ancient piece of junk car out of my mind.

The tardy bell rings, and Coach Robinson half jogs, half walks to the bottom of the bleachers. He's tall. Like, probably at least four or five inches taller than me. He's wearing a blue Collins Cougars track suit with a white T-shirt that says Cougars in big blocky letters across the front. He holds his shoulders back and his head high, like athletes do.

I sit up straighter.

Mason leans forward. "Coach Robinson is the seventh-grade basketball coach. He played at Arizona State with James Harden."

The kid next to me with curly hair and square-rimmed glasses turns back to Mason. "No way. I heard he would have played in the NBA if he hadn't hurt his knee."

Mason nods. "I heard that too."

I take a second look at Coach Robinson's knee. Sure

enough, the outline of a bulky knee brace beneath his blue track pants is unmistakable.

Coach Robinson taps his clipboard and clears his throat. “Good morning, gentlemen. This will be your last easy day in Athletics for a while, so enjoy it. Tomorrow, we get to work.

“I have a few more housekeeping things to go over.” He takes a stack of papers from his clipboard and hands them to me. “Take one and pass it down, please. For those of you who lose papers, these are also posted to our class page in Schooly.”

I take a copy of Coach’s handout and pass the stack to my neighbor. At the top of the page, the first words I see are “HOW TO TRY OUT FOR COUGAR BASKETBALL.”

I swallow hard. I’ve never had to try out for anything before.

The metal gym doors clang, and three guys swagger in, dressed head to toe in slick athletic gear. Mason smacks my shoulder.

“That guy—the one in the green shorts with the wristbands? That’s Trey. Those are his best friends, Jaron Oakes and Wes Hawkins.”

Trey walks like he owns the place. The three of them shush each other as they race up the bleachers to the top row.

Maybe if you’re semi-famous like Slammo, class starts

when you get there.

Coach looks at his watch, then back at the late arrivals. "Thank you for joining us, gentlemen. I need you to come down and sit with the rest of the class. And plan on sticking around afterward."

The bleachers clatter as the three guys bound down the steps and flop onto the row across the aisle from me.

I can't help but notice that the three of them wear wristbands. Trey's are green, and the other two guys' are blue. All of them have the word SLAMMO written across them in black marker.

Coach taps his clipboard and stands directly in front of Trey/Slammo, Jaron, and Wes. "Yesterday, I said I expect two things from you this year. What were those two things?"

Trey, Jaron, and Wes squirm.

I rack my brain, trying to remember something from yesterday's class other than the sound of my nose cracking against the bleacher.

Coach waits. "Anybody?" He crosses his arms. "Excellence and accountability. I hold you to high standards because you are capable young men. What does excellence mean?"

From somewhere behind me, a guy answers. "Trying your best?"

"Very close," Coach says. "Trying your best to do

what? Is excellence trying to be like everyone else?"

"Excellence is trying to be the very best you are capable of being, to like, set the bar high for everyone else to follow," the same voice answers.

"Yes!" Coach grins, bouncing a little. "I like that. 'Set the bar high.' We have to keep pushing ourselves to improve. What about accountability? Who remembers what it means to be accountable?"

A kid named Jeff from my science class raises his hand. "Accountability means you take responsibility for what you do."

"That's right. Men, I don't want to hear you blaming anyone else or anything else for how you perform in this class. Win or lose? Own it. You mess up? Own it. We always take responsibility for ourselves because our classmates and teammates count on us. Am I clear?"

We all say, "Yes, Coach."

"Good. Like I said, we start working toward excellence tomorrow. We'll either work in the weight room or on the court. From here on out, unless I tell you differently, make sure you dress out for class. That means you wear athletic shorts, athletic shoes, and a T-shirt you don't mind getting sweaty. No street shoes. Does everyone know what I mean by that?"

I fight the urge to look at my neighbor. Am I the only doofus who's never heard of street shoes? What the heck are street shoes? Shoes that are only supposed to go in the street?

“I’ll take your silence as a no.” Coach points to his shoes—sleek, black, thick-soled pieces of gear with bright blue stripes. “You want to wear shoes that are made for indoor sports or running. You don’t have to spend a fortune on a name brand. Don’t go telling your parents you have to have an \$800 pair of shoes. But you do want an athletic shoe. What you don’t want are flat, thin soles. Make sense?”

I’ve never paid attention to shoes in my life, but suddenly I stare at the end of my legs and discover that my brand-new Chuck Taylors are street shoes. Do I even have the kind of shoes Coach is talking about? Am I the only one who doesn’t?

Coach keeps going. “And please, gentlemen, I’ll give you time at the end of class to change into clean clothes, so at least bring a clean shirt and deodorant to put on after class. Your classmates in second period will thank you.” Coach clears his throat.

“I recognize many of you from Junior Cougars, and for you, a lot of what we’re going to do this first semester will be review. But trust me, constantly refining and revisiting the basics is what made me a Division I player. We’ll start with basic skill work and work up to some scrimmages.”

Junior Cougars? What’s Junior Cougars? And what the heck’s a scrimmage?

Coach wraps up. “Remember. In this class, our goal is to prepare you to try out for the seventh-grade basketball team. But since it’s only the second day of class,

I'm going to cut you some slack. Matthews, Oakes, Hawkins—my office. The rest of you, no phones, but you can talk until the bell rings. Dress out tomorrow for the weight room.”

My stomach drops to my toes. The weight room. I've never lifted weights in my entire life. If I can't walk up bleachers without falling, or down a crowded hallway without bumping into everyone and their brother, what kind of apocalyptic damage am I going to do in a room full of heavy weights and complicated equipment?

Another horrific thought pops into my skull. If Slammo himself is in my gym class, what's keeping him from making any of us his next victim? And by “any of us,” I mean me.

This week just went from bad to terrifying, and it's only Tuesday.

CHAPTER



I stand in the doorway of my room, still struggling to believe it's mine. The pale blue walls feel too clean. Too blank. My old room in Prosper Valley had history. Dents in the wall from epic keep-away games. Grape jelly stains from late-night pretzel and jelly sandwiches while watching old Godzilla movies with my buddies Max and Ben.

I munch a handful of tortilla chips I brought up from the kitchen and lick the salt off my fingers. Time to get to work. I slide my hand between my dresser and the wall until I touch something thin. It's still there. My new OKC Thunder poster.

I carefully fish the poster out of its hiding place. Once I get this poster hung, I can officially move in. The wall next to my desk is perfect.

I line up the edges.

Check the corners are square.

Height is just out of reach for sticky-fingered little brothers.

I place the push pins, step back, and admire my work. There. Now I can unpack.

All my stuff—everything I own in the world—is jammed into six boxes and two suitcases. I haul one suitcase onto my bed, unzip, and dump. A tidal wave of socks and shoes spills out. A funky, slightly corny smell fills the room, and I don't know if it's coming from my tortilla chips or my footwear.

Coach Robinson said we need shoes with thick soles and good ankle support. That takes the brand-new Chucks Mom and Dad got me out of the running, so I stack them in the bottom of the closet first. I can't wear these Vans because they're size nine, and I'm size thirteen-and-a-half. Happy belated birthday, Alec or Ian.

By the time I get my last pair of socks stuffed into my dresser, every pair of shoes except the Chucks in the closet is in the donate pile.

My stomach hurts, and it's not from the chips. *What am I going to wear to class tomorrow? Will I be the only guy in the weight room with street shoes?*

Ian blazes into my room, his cheeks smeared with blue and orange chalk. "Wrangler wanted to come in."

"Okay." I close my empty suitcase and shove it into my closet. "Where is he?"

Ian leaps onto my bed. "Downstairs. Also, I'm hungry."

Typical. "Are your legs broken?"

He touches his toes. "Nope."

"Then go make yourself a snack. I'm unpacking."

Ian pouts. "I don't know how."

"You will if you go figure it out."

He grabs my covers and rolls himself into a human burrito. "No."

"I don't have time for this." I pick him up, blankets and all, and carry him out of my room.

Ian shrieks. "Nooooo! Jonathan! You're crushing my spine! My delicate lungs! Whyyy, Jon?"

"Pipe down. You're fine." I drop him onto his bed. "I've got stuff to do."

Alec slams down the book he's holding. "Shhh. I'm reading."

I'm bolting back to my room when the front door squeaks open downstairs.

"Anybody home?" Dad calls.

"Daddy!" The twins squeal. They storm past my room and down the stairs.

"What are you doing?" Sarah peeks through my doorway.

“Trying to unpack,” I snap.

“Jeez. Sor-ree. Be ruder next time, why don’t you?”

I’m not trying to be rude. I just need five minutes alone. Is that too much to ask for? I carry my other suitcase from the dresser to my bed, crossing my fingers. Please, please, please let me have forgotten about a perfect pair of size thirteen-and-a-half shoes and let them be somewhere in this suitcase.

I dig into the case like a pirate searching for treasure. I fling pants, T-shirts, shorts, and sweatshirts into scattered piles on my bed. Before long, my suitcase is empty, my bed is a mountain of clothes, and athletic shoes are nowhere to be found.

What am I going to do? I have to wear the right shoes tomorrow.

“Knock knock.” Dad steps into my room and surveys the landscape. “How’s it going?”

“What time do shoe stores close?” I shove a pile of shorts into a dresser drawer.

“Looks like you have your own shoe store right here.” Dad removes his Craig Spencer Autoworks cap and scratches his head. “What’s wrong with these?”

“First of all, none of them fit anymore. Second, Coach says I have to wear athletic shoes to the weight room tomorrow. All I have are street shoes. Can you take me to get shoes, please?” I’m out of breath by the time I finish.

“Settle down, bud. It’s going to be okay.” Dad studies my feet. “What size do you wear? I’ve got some shoes you could borrow.”

“I can’t borrow yours. I need my own.” First his old flip phone. Now his old shoes. I think I’ll pass.

“Just for a few days.” Dad stands next to me and lines his right foot up with my left. My foot’s probably four inches longer than his. “Oh. Yeah, that’s not going to work, is it?” He looks up at me. “You sure have grown this summer.”

Why does everybody say that? Like I had anything to do with it.

“I know. So, are we going?”

Dad looks at his shoes and sighs. “I don’t get paid until Friday, bud.” He rests his hand on my shoulder. “I’ll take you this weekend, I promise.”

“This weekend?” That’s so far from now. And Dad’s the boss. He owns his business. Can’t he decide when he gets paid?

What if Coach calls me out in front of the entire class?

“Don’t worry, J.” Dad heads for the door. “It’s so early in the school year, your gym teacher will understand if you don’t have all the gear yet. But we’ll get them. We all have a lot going on right now.” His face brightens. “Hey, maybe when Mom gets home, we can walk across the street and work on the Charger? Clear your

head.”

Right. Because tinkering with an old car is the perfect solution to my shoe crisis. Dad’s always looking to put a wrench in my hand and turn me into a car guy just like him. It’s just not my thing. “I’ve got a lot to do. I’m not really feeling the Charger today.”

“Suit yourself. Let me know if you change your mind.”

I flop onto my bed and stare at the ceiling. I have to get through three whole weight room sessions without being called out in class. How am I going to do that?

Wrangler noses the door open. He plods over, hops up onto my bed, and molds himself into my side like a fuzzy pillow.

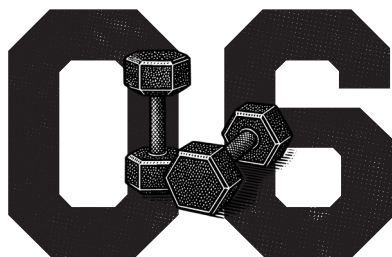
“You don’t have to worry about stupid shoes, do you, buddy?” His tail thwacks against my leg. “No, you don’t. Or falling down bleachers.”

Thwack. Thwack.

“What do you think I should do? I know. Stay here with you and feed you treats all day. How’s that for a plan?” I scratch behind his ears.

“I wish.”

CHAPTER



Wednesday morning's bus ride is super short, thanks to our bus driver's Speed-Limits-Are-Only-Suggestions philosophy.

My hands are slick with sweat. If I can get through first period without Coach calling me out for my street shoes, that will be awesome. Will I be the only guy there who doesn't know how all the stuff in the weight room works? Coach will show us how to use the equipment, right? He won't turn us loose without some kind of instructions, will he?

When I walk in, Mason's finishing homework, a kid named Lane's running up and down the bleachers, and Coach is at the bottle station filling up his giant water jug. He locks eyes with me. "Stand up straight, Spencer."

He sounds just like my mom. I push my shoulders back and lift my chin. "Yes, sir."

He looks me up and down and grunts with disapprov-

al. This is it. He's spotted my street shoes and DOES NOT approve. I look around nervously. The gym is still mostly empty. At least if I'm going to get chewed out, it won't be in front of everyone.

He caps his water jug and says, "Walk with me."

"Yes, sir." The toaster waffle I had for breakfast threatens to come back up, but I swallow hard and follow Coach.

He walks in long strides down the narrow hallway by his office. On the left is a red door labeled "Boys' Lockers." On the right, a red door labeled "Weight Room." Coach unlocks the weight room door, steps inside, and switches on the fluorescent overhead lights.

"Did you remember that today's a dress-out day?" Coach pulls a handful of paper towels from a wall dispenser and hands a couple to me.

"Yes, sir."

"Did you forget your shoes?" He hands me a spray bottle next.

"No, sir."

Coach blasts cleaner across a vinyl bench and a cloud of rotten lemon aroma fills the room. He swipes the bench with the paper towel and moves on to the next piece of equipment. "If you didn't forget, why aren't you wearing proper footwear?" He points to the equipment like *go on, get cleaning*.

What do I say? I pick up the smallest dumbbell and spray it. "We just moved in a couple of days ago and I'm still unpacking, but I don't think—" I press the paper towel hard into the rubber handle and pause. I haven't lied to Coach, exactly. Just. . . left out the part where my shoe options are non-existent.

Coach spritzes the mirrored wall. "Your Converse will be fine this week."

I exhale quietly and feel my neck and shoulders relax.

He tosses a wad of paper towels in a garbage can and wipes his hands on his blue track pants. "I happen to know that OKC Shoes is having a back-to-school sale this weekend. Guys your age tend to grow so fast that it's hard for their parents to keep them in gear that fits. Let me know on Monday if you need more time to unpack. I'll see what I can do."

"Thanks, Coach." *How did he know?*

Back in the gym, I sit next to Mason and Lane in the second row as the tardy bell rings.

"What was all that about?" Lane whispers.

I just shrug. "Beats me."

Lane opens his mouth to ask something else, and I'm saved by the shrill *REEEEET* of Coach's whistle. Everybody jumps.

"Good morning, gentlemen!" Coach speaks into a bullhorn from the other side of the gym. "Your warm-up starts now. Five laps around the gym, then wait at

center court for more instructions. Let's go, go, go!"

Mason, Lane, and I exchange looks, then take off at a jog around the perimeter of the gym.

Trey, Jaron, and Wes are the first on the court, and they take turns running backward and making faces at everyone behind them. I try to ignore them.

Mason's legs are a lot shorter than mine or Lane's. He has to run twice as fast to keep up with us. It's nice to have someone to run with, though, so I slow my pace a little.

We line up at center court like Coach said, do some goofy-looking stretches, then take a knee.

"In the weight room, you will only do the exercises you are assigned the way you are assigned them." He paces across center court. "You will not proceed to the next station until every man at the station ahead of you has completed the exercise. If you don't remember the correct way to use a piece of equipment, ask for help before you use it. No horseplay. And you will not—I repeat, not—change the playlist or the volume of the music in the weight room. Are we clear, gentlemen?"

"Yes, Coach."

He divides us into five groups of five, and we walk down the hall to the weight room. My stomach is in knots.

The red door is propped open, and a whiteboard sits

along the back wall. On it, Coach has written:

EXCELLENCE AND ACCOUNTABILITY

Station 1: Planks [3 x :60] + [3 x :60 w/shoulder taps]

Station 2: Squats [3 sets x12] + [2 sets x 12 w/ 5#]

Station 3: 3 sets each x 12 — bicep curls, hammer curls, tricep kickbacks

Station 4: pull-ups — 10 X 3

Station 5: push-ups — 20 X 3

Each station in the weight room is labeled with a blue and white number sign. We crowd into the first station, and Coach demonstrates the correct way to do the exercises. Then, we move in an awkward cluster into the next four areas. By the time we've gone through all five stations, I figure I have a 50/50 shot at not hurting myself or anyone else today.

I have a decent group. It's me; Mason; Lane; a quiet, artsy kid named Vince; and a big, no-nonsense guy named Abe. We begin at station two—squats. That means my humiliation will proceed in the following order: Squats, Weights, Pull-ups, Push-ups, and Planks. I've done planks before, so maybe I'll finish strong.

Five weighted plates are already lined up on the mat for us, so we take our places and begin our first set.

I plant my Chuck Taylors shoulder-width apart, take a deep breath, and pretend to sit in an imaginary chair.

“Keep that chest up, Spencer!” Coach walks past.

I suck in my belly and pull my shoulders back, lowering my rear until the tops of my thighs are parallel to the ground. Then, I push my heels into the ground and press myself back up.

“One!” Abe counts as we all straighten to the starting position.

“One!” The four of us respond.

We do it again and again until we finish our first set.

“Thirty seconds rest, guys.” Abe’s boxy forehead is coated with a shiny sheen of sweat. I check my reflection in the mirror. So is mine. Cool.

I forgot my water bottle, so I dash across the room to the water fountain. I can’t shake these butterflies.

I catch a glimpse of Trey and his friends at the push-up station. They’re showing off, blazing through the push-ups with one hand behind their backs until they collapse on the floor.

How do they do that? They make it look so easy.

I gulp down the cold water and splash my face. I spin around to head back to my station and barely catch myself from bumping the person behind me. I freeze. It’s the cheerleader from yesterday. Riley. *Where did she come from?*

“Woah!” she exclaims. “Good thing my water is empty this time.” She shakes her empty water bottle.

I can feel my cheeks heating up. “Uh, what are you doing here?”

“Girls’ Athletics meets during this period too. This was the closest drinking fountain. By the way, I’m Riley.”

“Hi.” Does she want something from me or what?

“I didn’t catch your name, Transfer Guy,” she says.

“It’s Jon—Jonathan. Um. I mean, either is good.” My words sound pathetic to my own ears. I bet Slammo can introduce himself to a girl without mumbling like an idiot. “Anyway, I better get back. Lots of squats to do and all.”

She nods. “Same. Good luck.”

I blink. “You have to do this stuff too?”

She rolls her eyes. “We don’t just wave pom-poms, you know.”

“Spencer!” Abe calls. “Come on, we’re adding weights now.”

“Bye.” I make a beeline back to my group, trying to forget the whole interaction.

Abe holds a five-pound plate. “Who’s the cheerleader?”

“Dunno. Some girl named Riley.” I bend over and grab my weight off the ground. *Okay, here we go. Focus. Stomach tight. Head up, chest out. Hips back. Knees parallel. Hold it.*

Push up through your legs and feet.

“That’s one,” Abe calls.

We finish our set of twelve and set our plates back on the mat. Coach calls out, “Gentlemen! You should be at least halfway done with your first station. If you are not, now’s a good time to safely increase your speed.”

“Next set, fellas?” Abe asks. We start cranking out the next set.

“My legs are on fire.” Mason massages his thighs.

“Same.” I slowly drop into the squat, and then I hear a sound. The second worst sound you can hear in a group of guys in a weight room. And it’s coming from my pants.

RRRRRIIIIIIPPPPP

Mason, Lane, Vince, and Abe stop mid-rep.

“Dude. Did you—?” Mason’s eyes go wide.

“No!” I say too quickly. “No way.” My legs are cement blocks, and I’m sweating from every pore in my skin. Suddenly, I feel a light breeze on my backside. “I ripped my pants.” Oh no, did I just say that out loud?

Vince and Abe double over in laughter, tears flowing down their faces. The guys at stations one and three are pointing and laughing.

“You sure you didn’t let one rip?” Mason’s grinning from ear to ear.

“No!” I casually brush the back of my hand against my pants and feel a jagged seam.

“Oh, classic!” Mason laughs. “Did you bring another set of shorts?”

Horror washes over me, and I imagine waddling around the rest of the day with my hands covering my butt. “No.”

“It’s okay. I have some you can borrow.” Mason wipes a tear from his eye as Coach marches up to us.

“What’s the issue, fellas?”

“I ripped my pants.”

Coach doesn’t bother asking for proof. “Hit the locker room quick, son.”

Before I can say anything, Mason jumps in. “I’m loaning him an extra pair of shorts.”

“Go on, then. Hurry up.”

I jog out of the weight room and sprint across the hall to the lockers. Mason’s right behind me, giggling like a fourth-grade girl the entire way.

I stand with my backside against the lockers while Mason fumbles with his combination lock. He stops, wipes his eyes, and tries the combination for what feels like the thousandth time. “I’m sorry. That was the funniest thing I’ve ever seen.”

“For you, maybe.”

Mason finally opens his locker and tosses me the shorts. When I pull them on, I remember—Mason's a lot shorter than me. I spy a whole lot of leg above my kneecap.

Oh, man. I have to wear this all day.

Mason closes his locker, turns around, and his face drops. "Hope you don't get dress-coded for showing all that thigh. Still, short shorts are better than no shorts."

"Yeah. Thanks."

How hard would it be to change schools at this point?

I brace myself and step out into the hallway. And that's when I hear it. A soft, surprised laugh. I look up. There she is again. Riley.

She's leaning against the wall, holding some ridiculously bright cheer poster, and looking at my shorts.

"Nice legs, Jon." She waves and bounces off down the hallway. Like nothing just happened. I'm pretty sure my brain short-circuited.

Three times. Three times I've run into her and two of those times were to witness my most epic fails. Is she following me? Obsessed with me? I don't know.

But I do know one thing—on top of new shoes, I now need new gym shorts too. And a new school.

And while we're at it, a new name and identity would be great.

CHAPTER

07



As I pinball across the hallway Thursday morning, all I hear about—other than “Excuse me!”—is Slammo.

Slammo is at 500 followers!

He’s going to start slamming people in lockers!

And everybody thinks they’ll be the Slam-ee. Theater kids are all kinds of drama about it. Track kids know they’re in the running. The chess club is doing their best to stay two moves ahead of him.

I guess that’s the good thing about being new at school. Until you make friends and have somebody to talk to, all you can do is listen to what’s going on around you.

By the time I get to the gym, I’m pretty sure Trey’s just pranking us all for clicks.

He wanted to get everybody talking about him, and it worked.

It's oddly a relief. Because instead of talking about my pants catastrophe yesterday, everyone's talking about who will be Slammo's first victim in his month-long quest.

When I get to the bleachers, Wes, Trey, and Jaron are front and center, with their matching shoes, Slammo wristbands, and black socks. I slide into the row behind them and drop down next to Lane and Mason.

"Hey. Did you hear?" Lane whispers.

"About—?" I jab a thumb in Trey's direction, then hike up my cactus socks.

"Yeah. The Slammings start next week." Mason nods.

REEEEEEET!

Coach Robinson's whistle grabs my attention.

"Good morning, gentlemen! Warm up! Give me five laps around the court! Let's go, let's go!" Coach swings his arm in a circle, and we jog toward the edge of the gym.

I fall in line behind Mason. For a small guy, he really hustles. I admire that. I also appreciate that he's kept quiet about the unfortunate weight room incident. That's the kind of thing a guy does when he's being a decent friend, right?

We form a semicircle around Coach, who paces back and forth in the center.

"Seventh grade probably feels like a long time from

now, but gentlemen, here at Collins, we take our sports seriously, and we're serious about being prepared to compete. You chose to take Athletics instead of PE. That tells me something. You're ready to be serious about sports too." Coach faces us, pointing at the group. "Our goal in sixth-grade Athletics is to equip you gentlemen to play for our school as seventh graders. Football tryouts will be over the summer. Basketball tryouts will be in the fall."

That means tryouts are only a year away. If I don't make the team, I get shipped to regular PE.

Coach paces with purpose. "Now, boys, whenever I set a goal, I always make a game plan. You can find my game plan for this class in your syllabus. It's online, and your parents received a physical copy on back-to-school night. If you've read the syllabus—and you need to—you know that for the first half of this semester, our work will focus a hundred percent on the basics of basketball. The fundamentals."

Trey, Wes, and Jaron groan just loud enough for us to hear. Coach stops in his tracks and shoots a "do not try me" look directly at the Slammos.

"I don't care who you are, whether you're a high school varsity starter or a third grader in Junior Cougars—in the Collins basketball community, we're all about fundamental basketball, keeping the game simple, and working toward mastery of the basics. That's the Cougar Way." Coach juts his chin at the Slammos. "You can play how you wanna play down at the park. In this gym, you will play the Cougar Way."

Wes raises his hand. "Coach, are we going to at least play three-on-three this year?"

"Yes, Mr. Hawkins. Three-on-three, one-on-one, eleven-man, and lots of five-on-five scrimmages."

Coach speaks faster. "You'll have plenty of opportunities to compete against each other. But, guys, in these first few months, we are going to break the game down to the basics. Then—when it's time for y'all to get after it—you'll be ready to do it the Cougar Way."

Coach plants his hands on his hips. "Let's start at the beginning. How and where a basketball game begins." He scans the room.

Is he about to ask a question? *Please, please, don't call on me.*

Everyone's holding their breath.

"Hawkins, where am I standing?"

I exhale.

"You're at center court, Coach," Wes says.

Jaron and Trey snicker.

"What happens at center court at the start of every game?" Coach points at Jaron. "Oakes?"

"Tipoff."

"Correct. The tipoff. The beginning of the game. When excitement rushes, and everyone's filled with hope. A lot like the beginning of sixth grade, gentlemen. You don't suit-up and play for us until seventh

grade, but today? Right now? This is the tipoff of your Collins athletic career.”

Coach’s voice booms with a little more bass. I think this is my first pep talk.

“Even though tryouts aren’t officially until next year, you need to know that, unofficially, they’ve already begun.”

The gym is spooky silent. Coach drills holes in our faces as he locks eyes with each of us, one by one.

I swallow.

Then he points in my direction. “What do I mean by that, uh, Bing?”

My heart jumps into my throat for a split second until I realize he’s not talking to me. He’s calling on Mason.

“Barnes, Coach. You mean you’re watching and listening already. You want players who are not just good at basketball but also coachable.”

“Yes, Barnes. Incredible answer.”

I don’t have to look at Mason to know he’s beaming at Coach’s praise.

Coach walks over to a ball rack, grabs a basketball, and returns to our semi-circle.

“Barnes, if I’m playing, can I walk around with the ball like this?”

Mason stands up straighter. “No, sir. You’d be travel-

ing. You need to dribble.”

“Good man,” Coach says. He pounds the ball between the gym’s hardwood floor and his fingertips like a big, orange yo-yo. I’ve seen players dribble before, but somehow Coach makes it look perfectly smooth, like it’s an extension of his body.

“If I’ve got the ball, and I want to move across the court—unless I’m Michael Jordan flying through the air—I need to dribble.” Coach paces as he speaks, the ball and his hand in constant motion.

I feel like I’m courtside at an NBA game.

The smack-smack-smack of the ball against the floor continues as Coach fires off another question. “But if I stop dribbling, what are my options? Hawkins?”

Wes’s ears turn red. He clears his throat. “You need to pass or shoot, sir.”

“Yes.” Coach continues dribbling. “And when I pick up the ball, I get up to two steps to figure out what to do. That moment is called a transition. To help with the transitions, we’re going to learn about triple-threat position.”

Coach jumps a few inches off the ground with his left foot and snatches the ball with both hands. His sneakers squeak as both feet land in unison. Coach whips the ball around, centering it in front of his chest. Both knees are bent slightly, his body crouched like a cougar about to pounce.

“Gentlemen, this is triple-threat position. From here, I can shoot, pass, or drive. Those are your three basic options when the ball is in your hands. The move I did to get here—the little hop off one foot to land balanced onto two—that’s called a jump-stop.” Coach looks around the semi-circle. “Are there any questions so far?”

Coach makes it look so easy yet so impossible at the same time. My head is spinning, but I shake it like everybody else. No questions.

“Today, we’re going to dribble and jump-stop into triple-threat position.”

Coach returns to center court and holds one arm straight up, like a gate. “This is the dividing line. Everybody on my left, go stand at that baseline”—he points at the line near the basket on the left side—“and everyone on my right, same thing on the opposite side. I want two groups at the baselines, opposite ends of the court. Got it? Hustle!”

As we jog over to our group’s baseline, my stomach jitters, but not in a bad way. It’s the kind of jitter you get when you’re at the top of a rollercoaster right before the big drop—it’s more excitement than nerves.

I don’t even care that Wes, Jaron, and Trey are in our group. Okay, maybe I care a little. Looks like Mason cares a little, too, though. But in a different way.

He heads straight for them. I gotta give him credit. That might be a smart move if the Slamming has be-

gun. Maybe I should try to blend in too.

Coach wheels out a giant bin full of basketballs and tosses one to every other boy. “Drill number one. You’ll jog from your baseline while dribbling with your right hand. When you get to mid-court, jump-stop into triple-threat. Once you’ve come under control, pivot with your left foot glued to the ground until you’re facing your partner back at your baseline. Then dribble back, jump-stop into triple-threat at the baseline, and hand the ball to your partner. Your partner is the guy standing on your left.”

Oh great. Trey Matthews is my partner.

“Matthews, why don’t you demonstrate?” *REEEEET!*

Trey shoots from the baseline like a cannon. He dribbles close and tight to his body, almost as smooth as Coach. At the midcourt line, he hops perfectly into triple-threat position and pivots back to face the baseline.

Jaron and Wes whoop and clap for him.

“Nice,” Coach hollers. “Now head back.”

Trey dribbles in my direction, an odd grin on his face. He reaches the baseline, hops off his left foot, and lands square in the triple-threat position. Then out of nowhere, he pumps his arms forward in a quick, jerky motion.

I think the ball’s coming right for my head. Before I realize what I’m doing, I leap. Straight into the air.

Everyone on the baseline laughs. Except me.

“Matthews, that’s enough. Everybody understand the drill?” He waits for a response, and everyone nods.

“Wait for my whistle.”

Coach runs across the gym to give instructions to the other group, and Trey walks up to me. The top of his head is at my earlobes, but he’s got his shoulders thrown back and his jaw jutting out, and he’s looking me straight in the eyes.

“Aw, did I scare you, Spencer?” Trey’s smiling, but his voice doesn’t match his face. Jaron and Wes walk over and stand behind him, laughing like a pair of bullfrogs—croak, croak.

I’m not sure if he’s expecting a response, or if he’s finished talking, or what. And I’m supposed to be partners with this guy? I look over at Mason for help, but he avoids eye contact.

Trey drops his eyes to my feet, then back to my face. “Your turn. Nice socks, by the way.” He hands me the ball and turns back to his buddies.

Again, his voice doesn’t match his face. I’m confused. He’s probably messing with me, but I don’t want to become his next target for a slamming. “Uh, thanks.”

“Uh, thanks.” Wes crosses his eyes, and the three of them crack up again. A few of the guys standing along the baseline smile, but nobody else joins in.

My ears burn. I don’t know why these guys are doing

this. I look over at Mason, like *do you know what's going on?*

"So we're supposed to dribble to the center line, jump stop into triple-threat, pivot, and come back and jump stop into triple-threat again. Easy stuff." Mason finishes double-knotting his gym shoes and stands next to me. "Hey, look. I'm the guy to your left."

"Yep," I nod. A serious upgrade from Trey. "Look at that."

At the other end of the row, Trey, Wes, and Jaron have a ball and are attempting figure-eight dribbles between their legs.

Easy stuff. All I have to do is dribble to the center line and back.

I've dribbled a basketball plenty of times. This will be easy, as long as Trey and those guys don't pay any attention to me.

Coach blows the whistle. *REEEEEEET!* "Let's go, let's go!"

I'm off.

Suddenly, the air explodes with the smacks and squeaks of basketballs and sneakers against the gym floor. The noise bounces from floor to ceiling and everywhere in between. It's loud. It's busy.

It's glorious.

I come off the line a couple of seconds later than everyone else, but my long limbs take over, and I gain ground quickly. I push the ball toward the ground, push my legs forward, and I have no idea how, but

everything works. I don't run so much as sail across the court.

This is so much cooler than dribbling in the driveway.

My heart thumps along with the rhythm of the drill. The noise bounces from floor to ceiling to wall to wall, drowning out Trey's voice, Wes and Jaron's bullfrog laughter, and every other thought in my head.

Basketball is all there is.

At center court, I dribble one last time. The ball ricochets from the floor, and I shove off with my left foot at the same time, just like Coach showed us. I'm in the air, almost in slow motion, floating a few inches above the court, right next to the ball. I snatch the ball with both hands, the orange leather smacking against my palm with a satisfying thwack as I land, secure in the triple-threat position.

"Looking good, Spencer!" Coach shouts across the gym for everyone to hear.

My face burns again, but I don't hate it this time.

I swivel back around toward the baseline, slightly awkward and a little off balance. But I take off dribbling anyway.

We go again and again, and each time it's my turn, something inside me just clicks. I'm like a living energy drink commercial without caffeine. My calves burn, and my shirt is soaked, but I don't even care. Coach said I look good on the court.

By the time we're dismissed to the locker room, half of the class is grumbling. I notice several stares, even a few glares pointed in my direction. Are they upset Coach complimented me? I don't really care. I practically soar out into the hallway.

"Spencer!" Coach Robinson's voice sends me crashing back to earth.

I turn back. "Coach?"

"A word, please. Quickly." He waves me back toward his office.

A few guys on their way to the lockers make the "ooooh" sound, like "he's in trouble." I ignore them and hustle down the hallway.

Coach meets me in the doorway of his office, a piece of paper in his hand. "What elementary did you go to?"

"Prosper Valley. It's a small town."

"So you haven't heard of the Junior Cougars program, have you? It's our version of a basketball farm system. Do you know what that is?"

I shake my head.

"We meet for six Saturdays starting in January. The varsity squad from our high school will work with small groups of elementary and middle school players to help prepare them for high school ball. You'll work on drills for a half hour, then scrimmage for a half hour. Registration opens in a few weeks. Give your

parents this flyer. My contact information's there. Tell them I'm glad to answer any questions. I'd like to see you there."

Before I realize what's happening, I'm bouncing on my toes. Working with actual varsity players? "Yeah, cool. Thanks, Coach."

I jog toward the locker room as Mason walks out into the hallway.

"That was awesome!" I move to high-five him, but he takes a step back.

"Yeah, it was." He tucks his chin and hurries past me like he's going to be late for class or something.

I don't even care that he left me hanging, and I look like a huge dork. That class was so much more fun than watching a game on TV.

I change clothes and hustle to math class, my brain buzzing.

We played "Horse" with basketballs in P.E. in elementary school. And it's not like I haven't dribbled a basketball before. But today, something was different.

Today was all about running basic drills in the gym, just pounding the court, sweating. Why was it so awesome?

Because running the ball, running drills felt amazing.

The sounds, the sweat, even the smell of the gym.

Also amazing.

Because Coach thought I did well enough that he made sure I knew about the Junior Cougar program. And maybe, if I work hard, I could actually make the seventh-grade team next year.

I could be part of a real team and have a place to belong.

Finally, after countless fails this week, I managed to do something *right*.

WHAT DO YOU THINK?

1. How is Jonathan's new school different from his old one?
2. Jonathan often feels out of place because of his height and background. Can you think of a time you felt different in a new situation? How did you handle it?
3. How does Jonathan's homelife add pressure on top of starting a new school?
4. Describe Jonathan's character so far in the novel. What are his strengths and weaknesses?

CHAPTER



Wrangler barks as I open the front door to let the sibling train inside. I've been thinking about nothing but today's drills, and I'm just itching to get back on the court. Maybe if I get Sarah to watch the twins, I can get some practice in on the driveway.

Sarah is going on about her new friend Mari—Mari this and Mari that. It's like a playlist on repeat, but there's no pause button. Even Ian and Alec seem a little annoyed. But it's not going to win me any driveway time if I snap, *We get it. You've got a new best friend.*

It hasn't even been a week, and my siblings are already rubbing in that they have friends. *Must be nice to be in elementary school.* But I push down my annoyance and activate Big Brother Charm.

"Hey Sarah, can you watch the boys for a little while?" I ask, giving her a wide smile.

"Why? What do you have planned?" she asks suspiciously.

"I just want to practice some drills in the driveway."

"Fine, but you have to make the boys a snack first."

She plants her hands on her hips, as if that's supposed to make her look intimidating. But I accept her terms.

I hustle to the kitchen and open the fridge, only to realize I've been played. It's empty. Not even a lone stick of butter or milk of a questionable consistency.

"Oops, guess you'll have to wait until Mom or Dad comes home with the groceries." Sarah smiles and flips her ponytail.

"No way. That wasn't the deal." I will not admit defeat to a fourth grader. Not when basketball is at stake.

Alec and Ian are sitting at the table, waiting. "Where's our snack, Jon?"

There's got to be a way to turn this around. I rifle through the cupboards. Surely, I can hodge-podge something together. Let's see. . . stale crackers and a can of beans. I'm just pulling out the crackers when I hear the squeak of the front door.

"I come bearing groceries!" Dad steps inside, carrying two paper bags.

I'm saved. Dad for the win.

"Score." I relieve Dad of his burdens and drop the bags in front of Alec and Ian. "Snacks are served."

Dad chuckles. "Glad someone's excited. I gotta run back to the shop, but maybe you could walk over in an

hour so we can work on the Charger.”

Not again.

“Or. . . we could shoot hoops.”

Dad pauses, thinking. “Yeah, let’s do it. I’ll see you in about an hour. And make sure you and your siblings don’t snack too much. Wouldn’t want to spoil your dinner.”

“Deal.” I pull out the groceries and set to work on making my famous PBBBs, peanut-butter-bologna-burritos. The perfect fuel for drills with Dad. I give one to Ian and Alec too, just cause I’m in a good mood. Dad and I are going to shoot hoops. Epic.

“They’re all yours, Sarah,” I call as I head out the door.

I dribble in the driveway, replaying the drills from this morning. I can’t wait to show Dad my new moves. As I rebound one of my shots, I notice Mason walking down the block.

I wave him over. “Hey! Wanna play?”

Mason picks up his pace, walking away from me.

Did he not hear me?

“Mason!” I shout.

He casts a quick glance over his shoulder. Then, he disappears around a corner.

That was weird. Is he avoiding me?

He totally left me hanging. I thought after the whole bleachers thing and saving my skin after the weight room incident, we were kinda sorta friends.

Maybe he's in a rush to get somewhere. Total fluke.

Or maybe he can't associate with a loser like me.

I try to shake this second thought off by pouring back into the drills.

Thwack. Thwack. Thwack.

I stare at the rim. Shoot.

Miss.

At least Dad's coming soon.

Across the street at Dad's shop, a customer pulls into the driveway.

I hope, anyway.

CHAPTER



“Hey.” I slide next to Mason and Lane on the bleachers. Neither of them takes their eyes off of Lane’s phone. I notice Lane’s wearing the exact same striped basketball shoes as Trey and his friends. Plus, matching striped sweatbands. I don’t see the word SLAMMO written anywhere on them—yet.

I have to admit, it’s a baller look. Maybe when Dad takes me to the shoe store this weekend, I can find a striped pair and some matching sweatbands, too.

“Did you see?” Lane finally lets me in on whatever he and Mason are watching. “Slammo’s Slam-fest has started.”

“It’s Friday. I thought he wasn’t starting until next week.” Mason looks over Lane’s shoulder.

Lane shrugs. “Guess he wanted a head start.”

I watch as Lane hits the replay on the video. A skinny guy with curly hair stands at his locker, working the

combination.

The camera lurks closer. A low, creepy AI-altered voice kicks in. “Hey.”

The victim spins around, but his face is covered by a cartoony chipmunk sticker. He realizes what’s happening, and lets out a horrible shriek.

Then—WHAM!

He’s shoved headfirst into his own locker. The door slams shut, with the words “SLAMMO SLAMMED” flashing across the screen.

I feel like I might throw up.

Mason snorts. “Classic.”

More like twisted. I rub the back of my neck and glance at Mason and Lane. *How is this funny? Is anybody else embarrassed for this guy? What if it happened to one of us?*

The video already has 73 likes. Lane clicks the thumbs-up button. That’s 74.

“Yikes, poor kid,” I say. A shiver runs up my back, and I feel like I’m being watched. It’s as if there’s a giant target on my back screaming, *next unsuspecting locker stuff-ee*. I’ve already embarrassed myself enough for one week, but to have my humiliation posted on the internet? I’d never be able to show my face again.

WHAM! The double-doors fly open, announcing the entrance of Trey, Jaron, and Wes. The Slammo crew whoops with laughter.

Mason shakes his head. "Wow."

Trey scans the bleachers, zeroing in on us. "Shane!"

Who is he yelling at? Lane, Mason, and I check the bleachers behind us. They're empty.

"Shane! Hey!" Trey's voice bounces off the gym floor.

"You mean Lane?" I jab my thumb toward Lane next to me.

"I'm not talking to you, Baby Socks." Trey points to Lane. "I'm talking to him. Come sit with us."

All the color drains from Lane's face.

Mason nudges him. "Go on."

"Uh, I'm good. Maybe next time," Lane answers.

"Your loss, Shane." Trey sits between Wes and Jaron.

Lane exhales. "Like I'm volunteering to get stuffed in a locker. No thanks."

Mason and I trade looks. I think we're both glad we just dodged that bullet.

The bell rings and Coach Robinson jogs out to center court. He's wearing his bright blue track suit with the Collins Cougars logo, but it's his shoes that catch my eye. They're white high tops with thick, traffic-cone-orange and blue soles.

"Nice kicks," Mason whispers.

I nod. "What are kicks?"

Mason laughs and shakes his head. Then, he realizes I'm not laughing and his mouth drops open. "You're serious? I know you're not from around here, but are you like from another planet?"

I shrug. "If you consider Prosper Valley another planet."

Mason smacks his forehead. "Sneakers. Kicks are sneakers. Jeez."

He's right. Those are, in fact, nice kicks. I'd ask Mom and Dad for a pair of those, but they look even more expensive than the striped ones.

"Good morning, gentlemen," Coach bellows. "Give me five laps around the gym. Let's move!"

Mason, Lane, and I break into a steady jog. Technically, it's more of a steady jog for me and a run for Mason and Lane.

I spot Trey, Wes, and Jaron up ahead, leading the pack. They run exactly like they walk. Like they own the court.

Is it better to ignore Trey and his buddies or try to be in with them? Lane took his stand, but what about Mason? Is that why he blew me off the other day? Because he's worried the Slammos might target him if he hangs out with me?

Coach *reeeets* his whistle. He sets the giant ball bin beneath one of the hoops and dribbles to center court. "Today we're working on ball control. Our first drill

is going to be with our right hand; we're going to go low-high. We're going to tap the ball low as fast as we can for thirty seconds."

He widens his stance and tap-tap-taps the ball about eight inches above the ground. "Then, we go high and pound it for thirty seconds." He straightens up and slams the ball hard into the court. Wham. Pause. Wham. Pause.

"We'll do this ten times with each hand. Your arms are going to burn, and that's okay. That pain is your muscles growing. Take a short break after each set if you need. Excellence in your efforts, Cougars. Ready?"

REEEEET!

I get to the ball bin before Mason, so I grab one and toss it in his direction.

Trey snatches it first. "Oh, hey, thanks, Baby Socks!" He and Wes walk away, laughing. I can tell Mason is holding back a smile, and that bothers me more than what Trey said.

"No problem, tool bag," I mutter to Trey's back. I grab another ball and fire it over to Mason. This time, Mason catches it.

When I turn back to get a ball for myself, there's Jaron. "What did you just say?"

"Nothing." I sidestep, trying to walk around him.

He blocks my path. "It sounded like you called Trey a

tool bag.”

My pulse spikes as I look Jaron in the eyes. “Nope,” I lie.

I walk over to Mason, trying my best to keep my knees from shaking. I have a sinking feeling Jaron wasn’t convinced. *Why did I say that?*

“Dude. Why did you call Trey a tool bag?” Mason hisses.

“I don’t know. It just slipped out.” *Why is Mason taking his side?*

“Whatever, man. It’s your funeral.”

“I didn’t say it *that* loud, did I?” My brain is suddenly replaying the moment over and over again in my head.

“Uh, yeah, you kinda did.”

REEEEEET! “Less chatter! More work!” Coach bellows.

I shake off my thoughts and get into position like Coach showed us. Wide stance. Bend the knees. Tap the ball low. I’m half expecting the ball to bounce back and smack me square in the face, but it doesn’t. It stays put, almost like it’s part of my hand.

I count to thirty, then straighten up and pound the ball, slow and steady. Again, the ball goes where I want. It’s just dribbling, but it’s awesome.

Man, if I’d known about this drill yesterday, I would’ve practiced it on my own. Dad bailed on shoot-

ing in the driveway—something came up at work, of course. Guess there's always next time.

I scan the gym and see Coach helping one kid adjust his stance so he's lower to the ground. Another guy struggles to control the ball. Even Lane has to slow his dribble a bit to keep the ball in check.

When Coach walks by me, he gives an approving nod. Trey notices, his eyes shooting daggers in my direction.

By the time we hit the locker room, my muscles burn just like Coach said. I don't hate it, though. I grab a fresh T-shirt from my bag, about to pull it on when—a pair of striped shoes step into view.

I look up.

It's Trey. "Hey. What's this I hear about you calling me a tool?"

The locker room goes silent. Almost every guy hustles out the door at the same time, like they know a hard foul is about to go down and they want nothing to do with it. It's just me, Mason, and Trey.

Am I about to get Slammo Slammed? I finish tugging my shirt over my chest and slowly face Trey.

What do I say? I'll stop calling you a tool when you stop calling me Baby Socks? I'm already one wrong move away from being the victim of his next prank.

I could pretend I have no idea what's he talking about.

“Well?” Trey steps forward, fists balled at his sides.

I straighten to my full height and square my shoulders. The top of Trey’s head comes up to my ears, but he doesn’t seem the least bit fazed.

I panic. And once again, something slips out of my mouth, completely unfiltered. “I like potatoes.”

Trey’s right eye twitches. I’m not sure if he’s going to laugh or throat-punch me. “You. . . you *what*?”

Mason snorts.

“Potatoes,” Trey says.

Before I can dig myself a deeper grave, the locker room door swings open. Coach barrels in, and Trey quickly steps away from me.

Coach plants himself between us. “Do we have an issue here, gentlemen?”

“No sir, Coach,” Mason volunteers.

“Thank you, Mr. Barnes, but I’d like to hear from Mr. Matthews and Mr. Spencer.”

I shake my head no, hoping that will satisfy Coach. I’m not sure I trust anything else that could come from my mouth.

“No, Coach.” Trey stares at the fluorescent lights above our heads.

“Get to class. Cool off. Monday morning, I want to see you two in my office at 7:45 sharp. You hear me?”

All three of us answer. “Yes, Coach.”

“Not you, Barnes.” Coach picks up my backpack and shoves it into my arms. I stumble backward.

“Go on.” Coach shoos us out into the corridor.

Mason half-jogs next to me. “You like potatoes?” He shakes his head. “That was so random.”

I pause in Mrs. Orloff’s doorway. “Hey, it worked.”

Mason just shakes his head.

Trey passes us in the hallway and glares at me. “This isn’t over, Baby Socks. Watch your back.”

The threat sends a chill down my spine. Okay, maybe all I did was make things worse. I think I’d rather he just punched me or shoved me in a locker now—just to get it over with. Sixth grade is going to be a long year if I have to constantly look over my shoulder, waiting for Trey and the Slammos to strike back.

CHAPTER

10



I should be studying for history, but my brain refuses to cooperate. Coach wouldn't suspend me for calling somebody a name behind his back—would he? If we had thrown punches, sure. But for saying something Trey totally deserved? Is that suspend-able?

Monday is either going to be:

- A.) A suspension.
- B.) A Slammo revenge special.
- C.) Both.

None of those sound great. Maybe I can convince Mom and Dad I'm sick or something and stay home. But that won't work long-term. I need someone to talk to.

Dad.

He may have missed shooting hoops yesterday, but today he promised. If I tell him what happened, he'll

know what to do.

In the meantime, I'm unpacking to keep myself busy. I'm almost done with the kitchen items. I hold up an empty box, considering if I should just crawl inside and ship myself back to Prosper Valley. Yeah, too late for that.

If I'm getting suspended or Slammo Slammed or *both* on Monday, I need some first-rate positive household vibes this weekend.

I toss the box aside and notice Mom's calendar. It says we're having turkey burgers for dinner. What if I made them? She'd be impressed. Dad would be impressed. The house would be calm, and everything would be fine. Dad and I can focus on hoops—maybe make a game plan for tackling Monday.

I grab the ground turkey, eggs, and seasoning. Then I crack an egg over the meat and miss the bowl completely. Not a great start.

"Need some help?" Sarah asks.

"Sure." I wave her over with sticky meat hands. "You want to make the burger patties or the salad?"

"I'm not putting my hands in that goop. Salad, please." Sarah pulls another bowl from the cabinet.

Slurp, slurp.

"No, Wrangler. Shoo." I push him with my foot, trying to stop him from eating the egg guts on the floor. Wrangler ignores me, so I reach for the paper towel

roll.

BOOM. Alec and Ian drop a bucket of toys on the kitchen table. No way. I am not letting my dinner operation go off the rails.

“Nope. Out.” I point toward the stairs. “Stay in your room until I’m done making dinner.”

“We’re making dinner,” Sarah corrects me.

“Your dinner smells weird.” Alec wrinkles his nose.

“Well, it’s not done yet.” I slap a pan on the stove and crank the burner up. Time to speed things up.

The twins dump their toys out all over the table. Sarah jumps in and sweeps their crayons, cars, and playdoh onto the floor.

“Hey!” Ian slaps at Sarah’s arm.

“Ow! Jonathan, are you seeing this??” Sarah’s voice is dangerously high.

“Just a sec.” I press a lopsided meat patty onto the pan. Where’d the seasoning go? I feel something sticky on my foot and remember I didn’t clean up the egg. Chairs clatter behind me.

My siblings are insane. Something snaps inside me.

“GUYS!” I whirl around. “STOP. IT. NOW.”

All three of them jolt to a halt. I point my spatula at the floor. “Clean up this mess.”

To my relief, they listen. Okay. Maybe I've got this under control. Coach yells at us in class to keep us focused. I'm tempted to tell them to go do some laps in the yard while they're at it.

Ian plucks a metal car off the floor. "Something smells bad."

He's right. I spin around and spot a burger-sized pillar of smoke rising from the pan.

Oh no.

BLEEEP! BLEEEEP! BLEEEEEEP!

The smoke alarm.

"Aarrrooooooooooooo!" Wrangler howls. "Aaahhh-haarrroooooo!"

My siblings fall into chaos once more, screaming and covering their ears.

"AAAAHHHHH!"

I move on autopilot. Race to the garage. Grab the broom. Dash back. I jab the smoke alarm release button like I've seen Dad do before. Nothing.

BLEEEEP!

"TURN IT OFF!" Sarah shouts.

"I'M TRYING!" I yell back.

I spin the stove dial off, drag a kitchen chair over, and hop up.

"Go Jon go! Go Jon go!" the twins cheer.

“So you wanna do this the hard way,” I say to the smoke alarm. With a swift crank, I open the casing. It falls to the floor, but I find what I’m looking for. The batteries. I wedge my fingers into the case and flick the first battery free, then the second.

Silence.

I stare at the smoke alarm innards, then lower my gaze to the charred turkey patty and the toy-littered floor. This place looks like a war zone. Grease is splattered all over the countertops. Alec is covered in playdoh. Ian’s pants are on his head. And Sarah, she’s face-down on the table like a fallen soldier.

“Jonathan.” Mom’s voice pierces the silence, almost making me jump.

I hang my head, thinking about what this dinner might have been.

To top it all off, Wrangler slinks into the kitchen making a horrible choking sound. *HUHH-YYEEEE-AAAACCKK*. He retches up a wet pile of yellow-tinged kibble.

“What in the world is going on?” Mom rubs her temples like the very sight of the kitchen is giving her a headache. She has me in her crosshairs. “Please explain all this.”

In my head, it’s all pretty self-explanatory. “I just turned around for a second.”

Wrong answer. Mom inhales like she’s trying not to

explode.

She peels playdoh out of Alec's hair. "You know better." To Ian, she says, "Keep your pants on."

"And you." Her words hit me like a pound of bricks. "You know better than to turn your back on them in the kitchen. I expect more from you, Jonathan."

Me? She expects more from me? I saved the house from catching fire, and she's treating me like the bad guy?

I'd like to see her wrangle all three of them while cooking dinner. It's impossible.

She's being impossible.

I watch in disbelief as she babies the other three—wiping away Sarah's tears and cleaning up the boys.

She continues, clearly not finished with her lecture. "You're the oldest, so I really need you to be a leader. Set a good example."

To the other three, she softens her voice and says, "I need the three of you to cooperate with Jonathan and do what he says. He shouldn't have to remind you of the rules, but if he does, you need to listen."

Her phone buzzes. "All of you, go upstairs and get cleaned up."

She looks at her phone and sighs. "Your Dad will be late. Jimmy's wife is sick, so he had to leave early. Dad's got to finish the McCulloughs' van."

What? No.

All the things I want to say to Mom fade into the background as it hits me that Dad is going to miss shooting hoops. Again. He promised.

I follow Sarah and the boys upstairs, fuming the entire way.

When I reach my room, I slam the door closed. Mom's mad at me. Dad's ditching me. My siblings are a living, breathing circus I didn't sign up for.

I still have no friends. No one to talk to.

Whatever happens on Monday, I'm on my own.

CHAPTER



The house still smells like burnt regret on Saturday morning. Even Wrangler won't go near the kitchen. He's parked by the couch, snout shoved between the cushions like he's hoping to find a portal to another dimension.

Honestly? Same, buddy.

I lace up my Chucks, pulling my yellow and orange striped socks higher. Time to go. I grab a handful of freezer waffles and shout, "Dad! You ready?"

Silence.

I cannot, will not, show up in the wrong shoes on Monday. No way. Coach already gave me a pass, and if I screw this up, I'll be on his bad side. And I really don't need that right now. Not with Trey watching me. Not with Mason acting weird.

"You going somewhere?" Mom comes out of her bedroom and opens the patio door to let Wrangler out.

“Dad said he’d take me to get new shoes today.” I nuke my icy cold waffles.

“He went across the street about an hour ago,” Mom says.

My stomach drops. *But it’s Saturday. Why does he have to be at work?*

“Here, text him.” She hands me my phone from the charging station.

First, I check to see if I have any messages from my old friends Max and Ben. I haven’t heard from them since before the start of the school year. Welp, still nothing.

I plop down at the kitchen table and tap out a quick message to Dad: *u ready to go?* While I wait, I smear peanut butter and maple syrup on my waffles.

Mom sits down with a fresh cup of coffee. “Your dad and I were thinking, since we live so much closer now, maybe we could invite Grandad and Cassie over for lunch soon?” She fiddles with the frayed edge of a checkered placemat.

I don’t even remember the last time we saw Grandad and our step-grandma Cassie. Maybe third or fourth grade? “How close are we now?”

Mom is already typing Moore, Oklahoma into her phone. “About thirty minutes apart when there’s no traffic. That’s nothing. We can spend a lot more time together now if you want.”

I shrug. “Sure.”

The front door squeals open.

“J-man. Hear me out.” Dad barrels in the kitchen, his cap on backward. “What if you come over to the shop for an hour, hour-and-a-half tops, and help me finish this Chevy, and then we hit the shops?”

“Dad, you promised.” My fists clamp on the table. “I have to get new shoes for Monday.”

“I haven’t forgotten. It’s just that I’m by myself at the shop this morning, and I had four people drop off their cars in the last hour.”

Mom’s mug clatters in the sink. “That’s a lot for you to handle. Have you asked the other guys to come in?”

I’m with Mom on this one.

“I’ve made some calls. Serge will be in after noon. Come on, bud. What do you say?”

I would say I needed you to show up for me today.

I would say I’m sick of being last on your list.

I would say we moved so you could be closer to work and spend more time with *us*. But I don’t say any of that.

Instead, I push my chair back. “I’ll go with Mom.”

Mom exchanges a look with Dad. “Of course I can take you, sweetheart.”

Dad rubs the back of his neck. “Thank you, honey.” He ruffles my hair as he retreats back toward the door.

"I'm sorry, J-man. I'll make it up to you, I promise."

There's that word again. Promise. I'm starting to think Dad has no clue what it means.

Don't say it's fine. Don't say it's fine.

"It's fine," I say. There's a twinge of betrayal in my gut. But what else am I supposed to say?

If we were still in Prosper Valley, I could go get shoes with Max and Ben. I wouldn't need to bother Mom and Dad to do this for me. Yet, here we are. Moving turned everything upside down.

Dad jogs back across the street, and I watch him through the kitchen window.

"Why such a sad face?" Mom asks.

I shake it off. "I'm fine. I'd just looked forward to shopping with Dad."

"I know, sweetie. I'm sorry. I know he'd rather hang out with you than be working. Things will smooth out, you'll see."

Will they? Definitely not in time for Monday's probable suspension.

"Tell you what." Mom runs her hands through her hair. "I'll hop in the shower real quick. If you'll feed Wrangler, that will speed up our process."

I nod. "Yeah, sounds good."

From upstairs, the squawking, thumping, and giggles tell me that the boys are awake.

I let Wrangler inside. "Here you go, boy." I pour him a bowl of kibble. I pop another handful of frozen waffles into the microwave, too, for me.

I'm grateful Mom's taking me. Really. But shopping with Mom is always an ordeal. She'll make me try everything on. Twice.

The last time I shopped with Dad? Fifteen minutes in the store. An hour at the ice cream shop. We shared a banana split and talked about superhero movies. It was our thing. Something I could always look forward to. Not anymore.

Mom says he'd rather hang out with me than work. But if that's true, why isn't he here? Coach has been hounding us in class about excellence and accountability. Are parents excluded from that?

Sure seems that way.

CHAPTER

12



When my alarm blasts to life, I'm already awake.

It's here. Monday.

The day I face Coach. And Trey.

I swap my sleeping socks for a green and orange pair with fighter jets.

I'd put on my new shoes, but I can't. None of the stores had my size. Apparently, size thirteen and a half is tough to find in the city too. I spent half the night imagining how I'll explain that to Coach.

I get dressed and grab my trash bin, just in case I puke.

Come on, man. Lock it in. Focus. Positive attitude.

I'm positive.

I'm positive Dad's more interested in cars than me.

I'm positive OKC Shoes is run by hobbits.

I'm positive I'm getting suspended for mouthing off in gym.

Okay, not helpful. I squeeze my eyes shut.

I'm positive it can't get worse.

Well, that's a start.

It's not like I'm dying to say to my parents, *"Hey Mom, hey Dad, I called a guy a tool bag Friday in gym and his friend heard me, and long story short I've got to talk to Coach before class. Also, I said something else really stupid, and the tool bag guy and his friends might want to beat me up and/or shove me in my locker."*

Yeah. Pass.

But it would be nice if I could trust them to be there for me. To know that they care that I just started at a new school and it's not all sunshine and rainbows for me like it is for the other three.

I take a deep breath, grab my backpack, and lumber downstairs. Ian's stretched out on the couch, half-asleep. Alec's on the floor, spoon in one hand, half-eaten bowl of cereal on the coffee table in front of him.

I grab my phone from the charging station in the kitchen. No messages. Big surprise.

The back door rattles and slams as Dad bursts into the kitchen. "Coffeemaker in the shop's busted." But instead of racing to the coffeepot, he makes a beeline for me.

Dad hasn't shown up for me in days. Seeing him bright and chipper this morning? That makes my stomach churn. For a split second, though, I want to tell him everything. How stoked I was to run drills. What happened with Trey and Jaron. How embarrassed I was about blurting the potatoes thing. Because Dad would know what to do.

But he didn't show up when he said he would, so maybe he doesn't get to know.

"I'm really sorry, J-man. It's been a tough week at the shop," he explains.

"It's fine." I head to the living room as Sarah barrels into the kitchen.

Dad pours coffee into his thermos. "It doesn't seem fine."

I lean over Ian. "Time to go, guys."

"Give me another shot? How's tonight after dinner? Want to talk it out over some hoops?"

I stop. I should say no. He doesn't deserve another chance. But Mom's words nag at me. *He'd rather be hanging out with you than working.*

I exhale. "Hoops tonight after dinner." I open the front door and hold it for the sibling parade. "I gotta go. We don't want to be late for the bus."

Talking it out with Dad would have been great a few days ago, but I guess it's better late than never. I won't get my hopes up, though.

Dad waves as we go. "Bye! Work hard! Love you!"

Each step toward the bus stop brings me closer to the edge of Vomit Cliff. I distract myself by tuning in to Alec and Ian's debate about whether worms could have superpowers.

"What did Dad mean, 'give me another shot?'" Sarah twirls the fluffy pom-pom dangling from her backpack.

I glance at her.

"Don't lie to me," she says. "I heard him say it."

I don't have the energy to argue. Plus, she'll just badger me about it all day until I tell her.

"He was supposed to take me shoe shopping Saturday. And we were supposed to shoot hoops too. A bunch of times. He missed it all."

Sarah frowns. "Oh. Sorry. That's happened to me before with Mom. It stinks."

We walk in silence.

The bus rumbles up. When we climb aboard, I see Mason's already in a seat near the front. His window is open, and he's staring down at his phone. I nod as I pass. He doesn't look up. Did he see me? Is he ignoring me again? I slide into the seat behind him.

My siblings are all sitting with their new friends, having the time of their lives. Meanwhile, I'm sitting here alone debating whether or not to say something

to Mason.

Is Mason watching another Slammo video? Does he remember I'm headed straight for Coach's office when we get to school?

I grip the bottom of the seat as Captain Warp Speed launches us forward.

My stomach lurches. I may need to open my own window.

My brothers whoop as the bus zips around a corner. I skid the length of my seat. For once, I'm glad I didn't eat breakfast.

My thoughts zoom through my brain like the Captain zipping through this neighborhood. Maybe Coach'll have me run extra laps. Or maybe he'll suspend me. What if that happens? My parents will lose it if I get suspended. And why do I always say the wrong thing at the worst time? Maybe Mason's right. I shouldn't say everything I think out loud. It only seems to further solidify my dorkiness.

Captain Warp Speed whips into the CMS parking lot and squeals to a stop.

In the seat in front of me, Mason groans and buries his face in his hands.

I do the same.

For different reasons.

CHAPTER

13



It's 7:42. I've got three minutes to get to Coach's office. I feel like I'm glued to the sticky bus seat, but I force myself into the aisle. Ahead of me, Mason is still glued to his phone, in his own world.

The Captain yanks the door open, and I realize there's no turning back. I leap down the steps and take off for the main doors.

"Scuse me! Coming through!" I slow briefly and jostle past four girls who've stopped cold in the middle of the hall. One of them does a double take as I go by, and I hear her say, "Is that guy an eighth grader or a teacher? He's a giant!"

"His name is Jon," says a clear, familiar voice.

Riley? *Did I just bump into a group of cheerleaders again?*

"And I think he's cute."

Did I hear that right? I don't have time to check. No teachers in sight—I'm free to sprint. Past the choir

room. Past the band room. Left turn. I blow through the gym doors and nod at Lane as he walks up the bleachers.

Coach's door is open, and he's sitting at his desk, wearing a CMS Cougar hat. Trey isn't here yet.

I pause to catch my breath. My insides are wadded up tighter than a spitball in a straw. Time to get this over with.

"Spencer." Coach waves me inside. "Have a seat."

I sink into one of the blue plastic chairs across from him. He's busy jotting something on a piece of paper. I squint. Suspension form? Parent note? My knees shake, so I press my hands into them and study the room to distract myself.

Coach's office is surprisingly clean and simple. Smells like oranges too. Basketball trophies sit on his filing cabinets, and above those, I spot Coach's Arizona State diploma, hanging next to a framed photo of the Arizona State team.

A smaller photo underneath catches my eye. It's a much younger Coach Robinson shaking hands with an older dude wearing a tie and glasses. Next to that, there's a framed poster of a triangle with the words, "The Coach Wooden Pyramid of Success™."

"Coach? Who's that?" I point at the photo.

Coach looks up and grins. "That's my hero, Spencer. John Wooden. He was an all-American at Purdue and

coached UCLA to a record ten national championships. See that triangle?”

“That looks like a pyramid.”

“It is a pyramid. Coach Wooden’s Pyramid of Success™. As good of a player and coach as John Wooden was, he was an even better man. Written on that pyramid are his rules for living a good life. They’re what I live by.”

I study the pyramid while Coach chugs a MegaPower Protein drink. He flicks the empty bottle perfectly into the metal trash bin across the room.

Coach is even cool at throwing away garbage.

He takes an orange from his desk drawer and starts peeling it.

“Play for me, and you’re gonna hear all about Coach Wooden’s pyramid.”

I examine the different boxes—*Competitive Greatness, Team Spirit, Self-Control, Loyalty*. Something twists in my stomach. *If I had self-control, would I be sitting here? If I had loyalty, would Mason choose me over the Slammos?*

As if my very thoughts summoned him, Trey knocks on the door frame.

“Coach?”

“Close the door behind you, Matthews. Sit.”

Trey slides into the empty chair next to me. He

stretches, looking totally relaxed. He's smiling. I'm dying inside, and he's smiling. How? Is being called into teachers' offices no big deal for him? Well, it is for me.

Coach clasps his hands together. "Gentlemen. Here's the situation. After class on Friday, another student came to me and voiced a concern about you. This student was under the impression that you were having some kind of conflict that may escalate."

Trey laughs. "Who told you that?"

"That's not important. School policy says that if a student shares that kind of concern with a teacher, that teacher has to get involved. So, here we are.

"I've made it clear that I expect you to behave like young men. I expect excellence *and* accountability. I'll repeat the question I asked you when I found you facing off in the locker room. Do you two have a problem?"

I've been wondering that same thing myself.

Trey's grin widens. "No problem, Coach."

That's it, really? As if nothing in the past week ever happened. Like he never called me names—or, you know, the other way around.

"Spencer?"

What do I say? If I say yes, then we're both in a world of trouble. If I say no, Trey owes me. If he owes me, maybe we can call it even, and I won't get locker

slammed. Coach's mention of accountability hangs over my head. I open my mouth.

"Yeah."

"Yeah, you have a problem? Or yeah, you're good?"

I look at Trey. *What's one more lie for the sake of self-preservation?*

"Yeah. We're good."

Coach leans back, studying us. He presses further.

"Then tell me this. Why did your classmate think there was a problem?"

I hesitate.

Trey beats me to it. "No idea, Coach."

Coach looks to me for confirmation.

"No clue, sir."

"Mhmm. I see. This was simply an unfortunate misunderstanding on your classmate's part. It wasn't a result of anything either of you may have said or done. Is that what you're telling me?"

We nod.

Coach sighs and jots something on his paper. "Fellas, I don't like meetings before school, do you?" He doesn't wait for us to reply. "Moving forward, don't give anyone a reason to bring your behavior to my attention. We're in middle school, not kindergarten. If there's an issue, work things out between you in a

respectful way. Like teammates. Am I clear?”

“Yes, sir,” we both say.

Coach stands. “See you in class.”

Trey books it to the gym, leaving me with Coach.

“Hey, Spencer?” Coach points at my Chucks. “Still unpacking?”

My stomach drops. “Yes, sir. But we ordered new shoes. They have to ship my thirteen-and-a-halves from corporate.”

Coach nods. “Ah. I get it. I have to special order my fourteen narrows, too.” He smiles.

Phew. That wasn’t so bad. I jog out to the gym and immediately notice Mason is sitting right behind Trey, Wes, and Jaron. I put some distance between us and snag a higher row next to Lane.

He unwraps a protein bar. “What did Coach say?” He sniffs the bar and gags. “Peanut butter again.”

“Are you going to eat that?” Now that the meeting with Coach is over, I’m starving. I bite into the soft, peanutty deliciousness. “It was weird. Wait—how did you hear about it?”

“Mason.”

I pause mid-chew. My gaze shifts to the Slammos. They’re huddled up with Mason, talking. The four of them bust out laughing, and a pang of jealousy hits

me.

Lane's voice brings me back. "Devon James said you guys were getting suspended."

"Nope, just more excellence and accountability lectures."

"That's it?" Lane's shocked. "But wasn't there a fight?"

"No fight. Just a lot of, you know, *this*." I stick out my chest like Trey does.

"Weird. Did you see Slammo's TikTok?" Lane asks.

I shake my head.

He passes me his phone. "Two down."

I look toward Mason again. This time, I notice something I didn't before. He's wearing light blue wristbands. Just like Slammo.

Why did I let Trey off the hook? I should have stood up to him.

He wins because everyone's afraid of him and his crew. Everyone goes along with whatever he says or does. Even me.

And now Mason's becoming just like him.

The protein bar tastes like cardboard in my mouth now.

I feel like I'm losing a game I didn't know I was playing.

CHAPTER 14



The bell rings, and Coach's whistle cuts through the chatter. "Five laps, Cougars—let's go, let's go!"

Lane bolts off the bleachers. I linger, looking for anyone else wearing street shoes. Just me. Fantastic. But that's not the only thing bothering me.

It's Mason. With them. I watch him jog alongside Trey, Jaron, and Wes. If basketball were the new rock n' roll, they'd be the album cover.

My Chuck Taylors pound the sidelines. My face feels hot, and not just from the running. Mason can't be one of *them*. He's helped me save face more than once in this class. I thought he was a decent guy, but maybe I was wrong.

Coach rolls out the basketball bins. He stands at center court, and we form our semi-circle to wait for instructions on today's drill.

"How do we move the ball down the court?" Coach

points at Mason.

“Dribbling, Coach,” Mason says.

“Yes. What’s another way?”

“A hail Mary,” Trey says. His comment gets snickers from Wes and Jaron. Mason too.

“Raise your hand, Matthews. The correct answer is passing. That’s what our drills are about today. The first type of pass we’re going to work is the bounce pass. I need two volunteers. Spencer, Oakes.”

Jaron sizes me up, clearly not thrilled about the pairing. I swallow hard, forcing down the remnants of my peanut butter granola bar. I need to quit snacking right before running laps.

“A bounce pass is when you pass the ball to your teammate by bouncing it one time across the court. Oakes. If I pass to you, how many times can the ball bounce?”

“Once.” Jaron blinks.

Coach holds the ball with both hands at his chest and says, “Good. When you pass, start with the ball in both hands, in a comfortable, ready position. Knees soft, weight even. Look at the distance between you and your teammate. You want the ball to bounce about two-thirds of the way between you. Use your fingertips to push the ball—not throw it, push it. Like this.” Coach executes a perfect bounce pass to Jaron. “Spencer, you’re up. Oakes, pass it to Spencer.”

I line up a few feet away from Jaron and hold my

hands up, ready for his pass.

Jaron bounces the ball a couple of times. “Ready, Baby Socks?”

I thought we were done with that.

Jaron exaggerates his movements, flopping his elbows like he’s playing catch with a toddler.

“Lose the dramatics, Oakes. Okay, Spencer, pass it back.”

I send it back to Jaron—hard. He fumbles but catches it.

“Easy, Spencer,” Coach says. “Now, for the chest pass. Start in the same position as the bounce pass. Use the same pushing motion, but no bounce. Like this.” Coach mimics a quick, fluid motion from his chest.

“Oakes, to Spencer. Just like I showed you.”

Jaron smirks. I watch him carefully. What’s he planning?

Then, he fires the ball low. Too low.

It slams into my feet.

TWHACK.

I kick the ball, more out of instinct than anything else. Jaron drops to the ground. The ball sails over his head, ricochets off the gym wall, and torpedoes back to our circle. It makes a perfect arch. . . straight into Trey’s face.

SMACK. Trey stumbles back, clutching his nose. Mason catches him.

The gym erupts into shouts and laughter. Jaron goes white as a sheet, his smirk gone. He knows what he just did. Trey's glare, though, is squarely fixed on me. As if it's all my fault.

"ENOUGH!" Coach's whistle blasts in rapid succession. "Oakes—OUT. My office. Now."

Jaron slinks off, muttering a quick "sorry" to Trey as he goes.

Coach hovers near me and Trey. "Spencer, how's your foot?"

I wiggle my toes. "Fine, sir."

"Matthews, your nose?"

It already looks like it's bruising. "I don't think anything's broken."

"Go to the nurse's office, both of you," Coach orders. "Class is dismissed."

"Here, I got you." Mason helps Trey toward the door.

I go to join them, but Mason's face makes me stop short. "Just stay away. You're an accident waiting to happen."

Ouch.

His words hit me like a punch to the gut. Why is he acting like I did this?

"Jaron started it," I defend myself.

"Who kicks a basketball?" Mason shakes his head.

"Did they teach you that at Prosper Valley?"

Not cool, man.

I don't bother replying. Nothing I say ever seems to make a difference. Mason has *clearly* made his choice. I'm out. The Slammos are in.

I watch them hobble down the hallway together. Someone brushes my shoulder.

"What happened?"

I look down, and there she is. Riley. She's wearing the same white sneakers I spilled water all over on my first day. Does she have a sixth sense for when I screw up?

"Trey took a basketball to the face," I say.

She purses her lips. "Ouch. Did you have something to do with it?"

"Maybe." I shift uncomfortably. "It was an accident."

She laughs. *Why is she laughing?*

"Lighten up, Jon. He'll be fine," Riley says. "Maybe he'll even be a little less cocky now."

Or he'll be more determined than ever to stuff me into a locker.

Riley waves as she bounces off to her next class, completely oblivious to my pending doom. Trey won't

forget about today, and now he has Mason as an ally.

Who's on Team Spencer? No one. Absolutely no one.

WHAT DO YOU THINK?



1. How does Mason's behavior change when he starts spending time with the Slammos?
2. What does Coach Robinson mean when he talks about "accountability"?
3. Why do you think Jonathan lies about getting along with Trey during their meeting with Coach Robinson?
4. In what ways do you think middle school is different from elementary school?

CHAPTER 15



Alec peers into the kitchen. “Do you want to play Mario Kart with us?”

I pop a leftover meatball into my mouth. “Can’t.”

“Why not?”

“Dad’ll be here any minute to shoot hoops with me.”

But even as I say the words, my stomach tightens.

What makes this time any different?

“Fine.” Alec settles next to Sarah on the couch.

“First round is Flower Cup,” she announces.

“No!” Alec and Ian chime in unison.

I don’t blame them. Flower Cup isn’t my favorite level either.

“You can choose next round,” Sarah says.

My eyelid twitches. Not because of Flower Cup. But because here I am again, waiting for Dad.

The garage door rattles and whines, and my pulse spikes. But it's only Mom.

"Hey gang!" she calls, but everyone is engrossed in the game. She turns to me. "Well, how was your day, Jonathan?"

"Fine. You heard from Dad?"

Mom slips her work shoes off. "Stand up straight, hon." Then, she checks her watch. "I haven't heard from him since this morning. Why?"

I clench my fists. "We're supposed to shoot hoops this afternoon. I'm going to the shop to see what's taking so long."

"I'm sure he's on his way," Mom says, but I'm already halfway out the door.

I shake my head to clear my thoughts. I didn't dream our conversation this morning, did I? He said he wanted to come home early and shoot hoops with me today. He said he wanted to make it up to me. It's now or never.

I didn't stand my ground with Trey today, but I'm ready to stand my ground with Dad—whether he wants to hear it or not.

CHAPTER

16



My shoes crunch on the gravel driveway leading to Dad's shop. Tangy diesel stings my nose as I walk inside.

"Dad?"

"Back here!"

A neon Alamo Motor Oil sign flickers and buzzes. My eyes adjust to the dim light, and I wind my way across the maze of Dad's shop—between stacks of tires and tool bins, around hydraulic lifts. In the far corner, bright work lights beam onto Dad's '87 Charger.

It's dead quiet. No customers. No employees.

Dad's alone in his shop. Working on his Charger.

While I've been at home, waiting for him to keep his promise.

A lump forms in my throat. I keep blinking, trying to make this make sense.

Dad leans under the Charger's open hood, his oil-smeared sleeves rolled up to his elbows. "That ought to—oh. Nope. Aw, man." He stands and wipes the sweat off his forehead.

"I thought you wanted to shoot today. What are you doing?" My eyes burn. I'm pretty sure my voice just cracked. And my heart pounds so hard I can hear it.

"Yep. I'm almost finished." Dad cranks something inside the Charger's innards. "Could you hand me my toolbox, please? The orange one."

Is this what he's been doing for the past week?

"J? Pass me my orange toolbox?"

Blowing me off, telling me that somebody's sick so that he can waste time on this piece of junk?

I turn around and wipe my face with my T-shirt. I grip the rubbery toolbox handle with both hands and yank hard.

"Be careful—the handle is broken. Hold it from the bottom or else—"

CRASH!

All the anger leaves my body, replaced by a stabbing pain searing from my left foot. My legs become jello, and I crumple onto the cold concrete floor. Tears sting my eyes, and a high-pitched yelp escapes my mouth.

"Jon!" Dad's on the ground next to me. "Stay still

while I look.”

The toolbox sits on its side, one steel corner buried in the top of my left shoe. Fire shoots from my toes to my thigh.

Dad touches my shoulder. “I need to move the toolbox. This might not feel good.”

I nod. *Just get it over with.*

He squats at my left side and slowly grips the orange box with both hands.

“On the count of three. One. . . two. . .”

He lifts the toolbox off my throbbing foot, sending a fresh wave of pain through my left side.

“It’s swelling up pretty bad.” Dad gently peels my street shoe off, and he’s right—below my ankle where a normal-looking foot used to be, there’s a reddish, puffy thing with a purple, knobbly toe.

Dad pulls his phone from his coveralls. “Hey, hon. A toolbox fell on Jonathan’s foot. I’m taking him to the ER. I need you to drop the car keys in the front seat. Yeah. I’ll call you when we get there. Love you too.”

Dad grabs an ice pack from his mini-fridge and places it on the top of my foot. “Hold this here. I’ll get the van.” He presses a switch on the wall, and the garage door behind the Charger rises. “Be right back.”

The throbbing in my foot is joined by throbbing in my head.

Stupid Charger.

Stupid toolbox.

Stupid gravity.

I close my eyes and listen to the blood pound in my ears.

Breathe in and out.

The van crunches up the driveway. The next thing I know, Dad's scooping me into his arms and carrying me through the shop like I'm four years old. I close my eyes, hoping that when I open them next, this will just be some terrible nightmare.

CHAPTER



It's not a nightmare—I'm wide awake. My foot, swollen and bloody, looks like a deflated basketball. That's been attacked by a shark. And feels about as good as having shoes made of millions of little push pins. By the time we get to the ER, I'm delirious from the pain.

Even worse, Dad's suddenly playing the Concerned Parent. As if this whole thing isn't his fault. Everybody's buying it. Except me. I know better. He's obsessed with that janky old car. If he'd kept his promise, we'd be shooting hoops in the driveway right now instead of wheeling me to an exam room.

My foot throbs, and my head hurts so badly I can't see straight.

"Jonathan Spencer?" a voice asks.

I re-focus my gaze as a bigger guy with a crew cut wheels in a long-armed machine.

I nod because it's easier than talking.

“I’m Troy, the X-ray technician. Mind if I grab some pictures of your foot?”

Once again, I nod.

He swings the X-ray machine’s arm over my foot and looks at a monitor. “You play sports?”

The question sends a fresh wave of pain through my body. *Is this guy trying to make me more miserable? Why don’t you just drop a toolbox on my other foot while you’re at it?*

Dad answers for me. “Jon’s playing basketball this year.”

Troy fiddles with the robot arm. “Cool. I always wished I was tall enough to play basketball.” He holds up a big black piece of fabric and gives me an apologetic look. “Sorry, I’m going to need to slide this over your lap.”

He lays a heavy blanket over me. It feels weird, but it doesn’t hurt as much as the throbbing in my foot and head.

“I was a baseball player myself. Second base. Okay, be real still.” Troy presses a button and the machine hums. “Ten seconds.”

When the humming stops, Troy repositions the robot arm and repeats the process. “All done. The doc will come in with those results in a few minutes. Do you want some water or anything?”

What I want is to go back in time two hours. And I want two-hours-ago Dad to ditch the Charger instead

of me.

“No, thank you,” I croak out.

I pull the bleach-scented pillow over my face. It’s the crispy kind of cool and dulls the hammer pounding behind my eyes.

“Hey, hon. Just checking in.” Dad’s voice breaks through my pillow barrier. “He’s hurting, but he’s okay. They just took X-rays. I’ll text you after we talk with the doc, okay? I will. Bye.”

Dad speaks a little louder. “If you’re awake under there, Mom says she loves you and hang in there.”

The curtains whoosh next to my bed. “Mister Spencer, I’m Doctor McKay.”

I push the pillow off my face. A tall man with round glasses and a tablet in one hand smiles at me. He shakes my hand, then Dad’s. “Sir, nice to meet you.” Dr. McKay sits on a stool and wheels up next to me. “Tell me what happened.”

I explain in as few words as possible. Dad’s shop. Broken toolbox. Toolbox crush foot. Dr. McKay listens and jots a couple of notes on his tablet.

“How’s your pain, scale of one to ten?” Dr. McKay asks.

“In the shop, it was a ten. Now it’s nine.” The betrayal from Dad though, that’s off the charts.

Dr. McKay peels the bandage off my foot and push-

es his glasses higher on his nose. “You’re lucky. The wound isn’t very deep. We’ll skip the stitches and put some liquid bandage on it. Just make sure you keep the wound area clean and dry.”

Dr. McKay washes his hands and takes a small bottle from a cabinet. He stands at the foot of the hospital bed. “This might sting a little.”

I grit my teeth, preparing for the worst. A cold, wet cloth passes over my foot, followed by a sharp antiseptic sting. Then another thin, wet layer of cold as the liquid bandage covers the broken patch of skin on top of my foot. “There we go.” I let out the breath I didn’t realize I was holding.

“Dad, if you want to come over here, I’ll show both of you the X-rays.” Dr. McKay holds his tablet so Dad and I can both see it.

It’s right there, clear as day. One of my bones is cracked. My heart drops into my stomach. I’m no doctor, but even I know that I can’t play basketball on a cracked foot.

“That’s a fractured fifth metatarsal—a broken foot. The good news is that the break is small and clean. You won’t need surgery. The bad news is that for it to heal, you’ll need to stay off that foot as much as you can. For at least eight weeks. Are you in gym, sports, anything like that?” He looks at me, and I nod.

“Basketball.”

“I’ll write you a note for school.” He jots something on

his tablet. "We'll send you home in a special boot to protect your foot while you heal. Wear it when you're awake. Don't wear it to bed. You're going to hurt for a couple of days, so I'm going to give you something for the pain. It should help you sleep."

I like that Dr. McKay talks to me like I'm an adult, even if I don't like what he has to say.

"What about showering?" Dad asks.

"It sounds strange, but most people wear a trash bag over the boot in the shower. It works. We'll follow up in eight weeks to see how you're healing."

My mind is spinning. *Eight weeks. What about basketball? Will I be ready for Junior Cougars?* Being a transfer student already put me miles behind everyone else. I'll never be able to catch up now.

"I played ball in school." Dr. McKay looks me in the eyes, like he can read my mind or something. "It's tough to sit out, but you know, even the greats deal with injuries. The nurse will be in with pain medicine, your boot, and discharge papers."

"Thank you, Doctor." Dad looks at me like *what do we say, son?*

"Thanks, Doctor."

When the nurse brings the boot, I think she's joking at first. This Boot is not boot-like at all. There's no leather or laces; it's not even shoe or boot-shaped. The thing covers my leg from right below my kneecap to

my toes. It's more like a sci-fi mechanical leg. Which would be cool if it was part of a Halloween costume. But I have to wear this every day. . . in front of all of my classmates.

I know if I want to play ball sooner rather than later, I'm going to have to deal with this monstrosity. I slide my aching foot into the gear, close the Velcro straps, and listen to the nurse's spiel about not running in it, jumping in it, swimming in it, or microwaving it. Basically, if there's anything fun, it cannot be done while wearing The Boot. Which means for the next eight weeks, I can't do anything fun.

"Can I still practice shooting? For basketball. As long as I don't run or jump?" I ask. I cannot imagine a more agonizing eight weeks if I can't at least shoot.

"Sure, as long as someone else gets the rebound for you."

Well, okay. I can shoot. That's a little good news.
Finally.

Now all I have to do is find somebody who will actually show up to rebound.

Because I know it's not Dad.

CHAPTER

18



It's almost 11 p.m. by the time we leave the ER. I'm beyond wiped out, and my foot is already itching inside the Boot.

"You okay?" Dad drums his thumbs on the steering wheel. "You're awfully quiet."

"Just tired."

"The doc's right, you know. You'll be up and playing ball again soon. This isn't a career-ending injury; it's a minor setback." The thumb-drumming stops.

Heat soars to my ears. "*Career-ending injury?* How can I have a career-ending injury? I don't have a career. I haven't even made it to tryouts."

"You're right. But there's still time." Dad speaks slowly and carefully. "I know you're frustrated."

"Yeah, I'm frustrated. If you'd shown up to shoot with me like you promised, I wouldn't have gone looking for you at the shop. I wouldn't have dropped that stupid

toolbox on my foot.” The words spray out like fire from a flamethrower. “Everything hurts. My foot hurts. My head hurts. It hurts to think. I’m at this stupid school without a single friend, and I can’t even count on you to show up.”

Dad pulls the van to an abrupt stop in the garage and shuts off the ignition. He turns and faces me, and his expression makes me swallow anything else I want to spit out.

“Feeling hurt and upset is fine. Talking to me like that is not.”

A twinge of guilt settles in my stomach. I don’t want to fight with Dad, but I feel so helpless.

“You might not feel like it right now, but I’m on your side.” Dad climbs out of the van and comes around to open my door.

“Fine.” I exit the van slowly. Every microscopic movement sends pain daggers flaring through my left side, and I can’t help it, I wince with every step.

Mom’s waiting at the kitchen door. “Oh, honey. I’m so sorry this happened.”

I limp around the corner. “Me too.”

“Do you need help?” Mom follows and stands behind me.

I spit words out. “I’m not a toddler, Mom. I can do it. Thank you.”

Dad's voice slices through the downstairs. "Watch how you speak to your mother."

I grip the handrail and pull myself up to bed.

One agonizing step at a time.

CHAPTER 19

I'm the last person on the bus at our stop. As soon as I climb aboard, Captain Warp Speed slams the door shut—my backpack with it. The force yanks me into the handrail.

“Hey! Watch it!” The Captain grumbles and opens the door to set me free.

The little kids sitting in the front rows applaud and laugh.

Ian storms across the row and shouts at them. “That’s not nice! My brother has a broken foot!”

“It’s fine.” I shoo him away and hobble down the aisle to an empty seat.

Two girls sitting in front of me turn around. The one with braces smiles wide. “It could have been worse. Did you hear what happened to an eighth grader last year?” She points at the Captain. “He shut the door right on the kid’s face. Broke his nose and two teeth.”

“Yikes.” I flinch. “At least I still have my teeth.”

She raises an eyebrow. “Are you sure? Smile—I’ll check.”

A grin spreads across my face like a reflex, and the girl tosses her head back and giggles. I shift uncomfortably in my seat. *Why would my teeth be missing? What is she talking about?*

A hand smacks the top of my head. I whip around. It’s Mason.

“Dude. Why?” I rub my head.

“Are you an idiot?” he whispers. “That girl was flirting with you.”

“Flirting?” Heat floods my face and neck. That was *flirting*? It’s the strangest flirting I’ve ever witnessed.

“If a girl asks you to smile, genius, what do you think she’s doing?” Mason bats his eyelashes.

“It wasn’t like that. What do you care, anyway?”

Mason shrugs. “I don’t.”

I prop my booted leg across my seat.

“What happened to your foot?” Mason points. “That from basketball yesterday?”

I wish. At least then I’d have a better story to tell. “No, I dropped a toolbox on it.”

“Wow. First the bleachers, then the weight room, now

this. You need like full-body bubble wrap. And maybe a hazard sign too.”

I tilt my head back and stare at the bus ceiling. Yep. That’s just what I need.

I think I may have liked him better when he wasn’t talking to me.

CHAPTER



The gym doors loom, and my booted leg feels like it weighs 1,000 pounds. I don't want to be here. Being slammed in a locker never to be seen again might actually be a good thing right now. I yank the crumpled ER note from my backpack and push open the gym doors.

"You walk like my grandpa," Lane mocks. "Oh, my back."

I haven't even made it three steps toward Coach's office, and the humiliation has already started.

The double doors clang again, and I don't need to look to know who just walked in.

"Oh, no! Baby Socks fell down!" Trey's voice fills the room, followed by Wes, Jaron, and Mason's laughter.

I spin around to face the Slammos. Trey's nose is still majorly bruised from yesterday, but it clearly hasn't impacted his pride one bit. He holds himself taller,

and I notice that Mason is flanking Trey where Jaron used to. Jaron stands a little farther back—still part of the group but definitely not Trey’s right hand anymore.

Trey smirks. “Well, do you have something to say to me or what?”

I smack my Boot against the floor. “For your information, I fractured my fifth metatarsal.”

There’s a moment of silence. Then, laughter. They’re laughing so hard, I can still hear them when I finish my limp into Coach’s office.

“Spencer!” Coach’s face is covered with concern. “What the heck happened?”

“I dropped a toolbox on my foot.” I hand him my doctor’s note.

“Yeouch.” Coach scans the note, eyebrows furrowed. “Did you smash a metatarsal?”

“Yeah, was that in the note?”

“No.” Coach steps across his office and shuts the door. “My door was open. I heard what you said. Have a seat.” He points to the blue plastic chairs.

I lower myself into a chair and accidentally clonk my Boot into Coach’s desk. I inhale hard as a steely slice of pain cuts up my left leg.

“Is there a story behind this nickname of yours? Baby Socks?”

I wish I knew. I shrug.

“It’s not a TikTok handle? Like Slammo?”

I shake my head. *Even if I had TikTok, what kind of handle is Baby Socks?* I clear my throat. “You know about Slammo?”

“All the teachers know about Slammo.” Coach sighs.

“I’ve coached a few teams, you know, and sometimes guys who’ve played together for a while will give a new guy a hard time. Especially if he’s got talent. They’ll test him. It can be tough.”

I relax a little. *Does Coach think I have talent?* “But we’re not on a team together or anything.”

Coach leans forward. “You keep working toward excellence and showing accountability, and that could happen sooner than you think.”

I feel a twinge of guilt. I haven’t been totally accountable about the Trey situation. But something tells me Coach knows that already.

“Take my advice,” Coach says. “When I played ball, if a guy mouthed off at me on the court or off, I learned to take that negative energy and turn it into fuel. Focus on playing your best game and stop reacting to them. They’ll back off.”

I have a hard time imagining the Slammos backing off, but I nod. Coach might have a point. “Okay.”

Coach glances at the wall clock. “So. You’ll be out for eight weeks, huh?” Coach takes his ball cap off

and scratches his forehead. "Well, you need to heal properly so you're ready in time for Junior Cougars in January. That will help you prepare for tryouts." He spins around in his desk chair and rummages through some files. "I don't think I have eight weeks' worth of make-up work."

He pauses. "I have an idea. Watch the Thunder game this week. Write me a page about what you like about your favorite player. One page. Due Friday. I'll give you a new assignment next week."

That's it? I can handle this. "Okay. So, what do I do during class?"

"Sit, watch, listen. You'll learn a lot. By the end, you'll be a better teammate. And, I hope, ready to be a leader. You have a hoop at home?"

"Yes, sir."

"When you can, get some shots up. Do you have siblings?"

I nod. *More like my own personal entourage of tiny circus clowns*, I want to say.

"Good. Put 'em to work rebounding for you." Coach gets up and ushers me toward the door.

"Thanks, Coach."

He's looking for me to be a leader? I pull my army green camo sock higher, stand up taller, and head back to the bleachers. Coach charges out behind me.

REEEET! “You know the drill, fellas! Five laps—let’s go, let’s go!” Coach hollers.

“Bye, Baby Socks.” Jaron waves as he jogs past.

“Aw, poor Baby Socks. He fractured a tarsal and can’t play today.” Wes jokes.

Trey laughs, and Mason—I can’t read his expression. *Does he feel sorry for me? Does he want to rub it in like everyone else?*

They’re just testing me. I remind myself of Coach’s words.

I need to convert this negative energy to fuel.

I grab my water bottle and think about practicing my jump shot. I take a long swig and imagine the look on those Slammo guys’ faces when I make the seventh-grade team. I look across the gym at Coach. He tugs the brim of his Cougars cap and nods at me, like he can see what I’m thinking, and approves.

After warm-up, Coach starts the drill. “We’re working on ball control today.” He passes a ball to Mason. “Barnes, get up here.”

Suddenly, it’s like my bones are metal and the court is a giant magnet, pulling at me. All the pain shooting up my leg? I ignore it. Basketball is the mothership, and I want to beam up.

“Right hand only, move the ball side to side across the front of your body.”

Mason bounces the ball in place. If I’m reading his face correctly, he doesn’t understand the assignment.

Sweep back and forth, one hand, man. It's easy.

It takes him a second, but Mason figures it out. He moves the ball out in front of him with his right hand, arcs his hand across his body, and pushes it back toward the left.

“You got it. Good.” Coach holds a hand up, and Mason passes the ball back. He rejoins the Slammos in the circle. They take turns smacking Mason on the back. Showing their approval. *Must be nice to have friends, even if they're Slammos.*

Coach demonstrates again with his left hand. “You’ll do thirty seconds on the right, thirty seconds on the left, and then try this front to back.” He dribbles left-handed, then passes the ball between his legs. “Feel the burn, gents.” *REEEET!*

My left leg sits like dead weight, but my right leg bounces so hard in the aisle that it might detach from my body and run laps on its own. It’s agony, watching everyone work when all I can do is sit here.

This is going to be the longest eight weeks of my life.

CHAPTER



I clunk down the steps of bus 527. My brothers are fighting over who should carry my backpack, which weighs as much as both of them combined. Sarah is already halfway down the street, arm in arm with her best friend Mari.

“Hurry up, boys!” she calls back.

I’ve got a twin tugging on each arm, both of them a little too eager to help. This might be the broken metatarsal talking, but I don’t need help. I need space.

Wangler greets us at the front door and doesn’t leave my side. He even ignores the biscuit-bribing twins who dangle treats above his head.

“Hi, boy.” I scratch behind his ears, and he leans in like he knows something’s off. “You worried about me? You’re my best boy.”

The garage door rumbles, and I look at my phone to check the time. Mom and Dad should both be at work

still.

Keys jingle in the lock, then Mom's voice echoes.

"Helloo-oo? Anybody home?"

"Mommy!" Alec, Ian, and Sarah launch a full-court press. Mom takes it in stride, enveloping the three of them in a giant hug. Then, her gaze lands on me.

My Mom-radar shifts into overdrive. Something's up.

"Let's get you off your feet." Mom swoops in with precision. She leads me to the couch and works her magic. She fluffs the pillows, props up my Boot, and drapes a fuzzy blanket over me. "Do you need anything? Pain medicine?"

"I'm okay." I'm confused. I'm pretty sure Mom doesn't get many days off with her new job. I know she doesn't get sick time. "Um, no offense, but why are you home?"

"I thought you might be worn out today, so I clocked out early. I wanted to make sure you could rest." Mom brushes hair from my forehead and smiles. "I wish I could do this every day, but I can't. Rest up. You'll feel better soon." She hands me the TV remote.

I can't believe Mom took time off her new job to take care of me. The thought makes me feel warm like my insides are made of waffles.

I open the YouTube app and scroll through the thumbnails until I spot last season's Thunder highlights. Now that I'm an Oklahoma City suburb-dwell-

er, this is exactly the crash course I need. I click play.

Two minutes in, it hits me. I know why all the guys at school wear Shai Gilgeous-Alexander's jersey. He's undoubtedly the star of the show. He's at the center of everything—all the big plays, all the commentary, everything. He's like Batman. Amazing at everything. And Chet Holmgren is his Robin. Also amazing. I can't believe I've never sat down and watched them play before. Like, really watched. These guys move like superhumans. It's incredible.

I've always liked basketball, but watching these guys play, something's different. I want to study every move and learn all their secrets. I want to look like them on the court.

Mom returns with an ice-cold chocolate milk and a bowl full of cheese and crackers. "I'm going to go check on your siblings. Need anything?"

"No. Thank you." As if I could feel more spoiled.

"Oh! I almost forgot." She rushes off and returns with a shoe box. "These were in the mailbox today. Something to look forward to, huh?"

I lift the lid. Neon blue. Triple-striped. Thirteen and a half. *The shoes*. The ones everyone in gym wears. The ones I was supposed to buy with Dad. But Mom came through for me instead.

"Love you, Jonnyboy." Mom musses my hair and dashes upstairs.

I nestle into my couch cocoon. Wrangler's at my feet, shoes are beside me, and the Thunder are dominating the game. It's perfect.

For a few glorious minutes, I almost forget that my life's on pause for eight whole weeks.

CHAPTER

22



It's late. I'm already in bed, reading *Zombie Spider Apocalypse 2: The Graphic Novel*, by the time I hear Dad get home from work. Frank the Boss Zombie Spider sent his spy-spiders deep into the last remaining human city, and Thorfin, the hero, is about to make his final stand in a battle of epic proportions.

In real life, my neck prickles, sensing another battle on the horizon.

"Knock, knock." Dad opens my door. "Saw your light on. How are you feeling?"

"Fine." I close my book and lay it on my lap.

The air feels heavy. I didn't exactly leave things in a good place with Dad last night. But it's not on me to fix it. He's the one who ditched me—for a car of all things. I'm not holding my breath for some heartfelt apology.

"What'd you do in Athletics?"

“Watched everybody else run laps and play basketball.”
No thanks to you.

Dad shifts. “How’s the pain today? One to ten?”

“Better than last night,” I say. *Still sucks though.*

“Good. One day closer to being out of the boot and shooting hoops again.” He says it like it’s some big win, but it sure doesn’t feel like it.

I glance at the Boot—my personal ankle prison—sitting on the floor. Dad picks it up, inspecting it like it’s a new car part.

“This thing is heavy. Your left leg is going to look like a weightlifter’s by the time you’re done with it.”

He’s probably right, but I don’t say it.

Dad sets the Boot on the floor and looks me in the eyes. His voice shifts—serious mode. “Listen. I know you’ve been in a tough spot. Being the new kid is hard, especially in middle school. And getting hurt stinks. But feeling hurt doesn’t give you the right to take that hurt out on me, or anybody else in this family. I’m your dad. We are a team. We support each other. Do you understand?”

“Yes, sir. Sorry.” I keep my eyes down and twist my blanket tight.

“This is going to pass. You’ll be okay. Right now, just rest and heal. When you decide you want to talk, I’m here.” He stands and crosses to the door. “Goodnight, son. I love you.”

Dad can remember exactly how a million different car pieces work together, he never forgets a customer, and he remembers that Jimmy's customer's Toyota needs a transmission or whatever.

But if I need his help, he forgets. I'm not worth remembering. It's not like I'm his oldest son or anyone important. Unless I mess up. Then suddenly I exist.

Dad said we moved here so he could spend more time with his family. I thought that meant he'd actually be home. Hanging out. Shooting hoops. Turns out it just means I have to babysit more so Mom can work and Dad can spend all his time with that stupid Charger.

If that's the way it is, fine. If spending time with his family doesn't matter to him, then it doesn't matter to me, either.

I switch off my lamp, letting the darkness swallow me, and wait for sleep.

WHAT DO YOU THINK?

1. Why is Jonathan so upset that his dad doesn't show up to shoot hoops with him? How does this affect their relationship?
2. Describe Jonathan's feelings after getting injured in the garage.
3. How does Jonathan's injury impact his social and school life?
4. How do you respond when you are benched from an activity you really enjoy?

CHAPTER

23



“Coach?” I knock on Coach Robinson’s door. “I uploaded my essay. What’s my assignment for next week?”

“Great question, Spencer.” Coach leans back in his chair and folds his hands behind his head. “Come in. Let’s talk about it.”

I’ve been in Coach’s office so much this year that the blue chair might as well have my name on it. On the desk in front of me is another freshly-peeled orange. Coach takes a section and offers it to me. I shake my head.

“No, thank you.”

“Who’d you write about?” Coach pops a big piece of fruit into his mouth.

“SGA.”

“Why?”

I plant my elbows on Coach's desk. "Well, for one thing, his step-back jumper's mind-blowing. How do you defend that?"

"That's what every team wants to know, isn't it?"

Coach leans forward. "One thing I really admire about the way Shai plays is how he can throw off defenders."

"Yeah, you're right. I don't really know how he does it, but he throws people off balance."

"Yes." Coach pumps his fist in the air. "A lot of players can accelerate, right? But Shai's able to stop on a dime and stay in control. You said it right—he throws his opponents off balance."

Kind of like randomly telling someone you like potatoes when they get in your face, I guess.

Coach finishes his orange and wipes off his hands.

"Anyway. You're trying out for the team next year, right?"

My stomach sours. "Yeah, but. . . ."

"Yeah, but, what? Your foot?" Coach asks. "Bones heal. You'll be back on the court in no time." He shuffles some papers on his desk. "For next week, I want you to write about the different roles on a team."

"Roles? Like, positions?"

"Not exactly. Teams have players with different sizes and skill sets, right, and one player's role might be a shooter, and another might be a rebounder. But what

I'm talking about is deeper. I'm talking about responsibilities." Coach juts his chin toward the Thunder poster on the wall. "You've been watching OKC. As awesome as Shai is, it wouldn't work to have five SGA's on the floor together."

He continues, "Not everyone can be a superstar. The good part about basketball is that you don't need a bunch of stars. It'll actually work against the team if you do. Teams have lots of different roles, so I want you to write about them—with one paragraph specifically about a player who isn't a star, but who knows his role and plays it well."

"Okay. Sounds good, Coach."

He pulls another orange out of his desk drawer as I head for the door.

"Hey, Spencer? Where'd you get your socks?"

My face ignites, and I stop in my tracks.

"No, no. I know those guys think they're funny, but look. . . ." Coach hikes his athletic pants up. Bright white socks with the maroon and gold Arizona State sunburst logo cover his ankles. "I think they're cool. The ones with fighter jets? Where'd you get them?"

My shoulders lift a little. "My Grandad sent me them for Christmas. He says a man who'll wear bold socks will make bold choices."

"Nice. Your grandad sounds like my kind of guy."

I wouldn't really know what kind of guy Grandad is,

but I smile at Coach anyway. “Thanks.”

I slog my way toward the bleachers. How cool is Coach? I wonder if he would get along with Grandad. It’s hard to know. Grandad hasn’t really been around for a long time, kind of like Dad. Maybe not spending time with your kids runs in the Spencer family.

I grab a seat on the metal bleacher as Coach jogs out to start class. I’m spending so much time on the bleachers, they’re starting to feel like home.

Coach’s words echo through my mind. Everyone has a role. I stare at my Boot. Heavy. Unwanted. *What’s my role? How am I supposed to be part of the team when I can’t play?*

I have a sneaking suspicion that’s really what Coach wants me to think about. And I will think about it, because as soon as I’m able to be back on that court, I want to be ready. I want to be part of the team.

CHAPTER

24



The cafeteria line is crawling slower than usual today. To pass the time, I play a little game with myself called Clique Callout.

Band Clique is easy. Look for the kid carrying an instrument or rocking a T-shirt with some music pun—*Musicians Stay Sharp* or *I can't, I have rehearsal*.

Gamer Clique kids? Air pods in, packed lunches, and straight to the library for the wifi.

Book Clique? Heavy book bags, glasses, and camped out in the corner of the cafeteria because the Gamers own the library.

I'm not in a clique, but I can pick them out pretty well. Finally, I reach the front of the line and swipe my student ID.

Ahead of me, Liesl Williams and a couple of cheerleaders flock toward the table where Jacob Hall, the eighth-grade quarterback, and his friends sit. I call

this the A-table.

My stomach churns when I see the Sports Clique kids. The one I *should* be in. If my foot wasn't wrapped in plastic like a discounted action figure.

These kids sit at long tables near the back of the room. The basketball guys sit together (mostly from my first-period Athletics class), and clusters of football, baseball, and volleyball players sit nearby. The Slammo Club is a clique all to itself. Trey, Jaron, and Wes sit by the windows, and Mason and Lane are right next to them.

There's a whole empty table between the Slammo Club and the basketball guys. I clunk toward it and park myself smack in the middle of the table.

It's weird. Only a couple of weeks ago I didn't know who these people were, and they certainly didn't know me. Now, that's changed. Sort of. I know who they are. And they've all known each other since elementary.

I remember what that was like, knowing everybody. Before we moved, I was that guy. I had my friends. We had our spot in the cafeteria. Everything was normal. I knew my place. Here, well, that's TBD.

At least the cafeteria food is better than my old school. I am so ready to enjoy my chili dog with mac and cheese in peace. But then I hear the pitter-patter of sneakers. They stop right behind me. I turn.

Riley is standing there, smiling. "Hey, Jon."

“Hey.” A big chunk of chili falls from my hot dog, landing squarely on my Boot. “Aw man.” I swipe some napkins to clean it up. I’m pretty sure I’m incapable of doing anything remotely normal around this girl.

“So the rumors are true. You broke your foot?”

“Yeah.” *Thank you, Captain Obvious.*

“I broke my arm during cheer camp last summer. It wasn’t fun. But lots of people signed my cast, which cheered me up.” She whips out a black marker from her bag. “Can I sign yours?”

Suddenly, the conversations around us stop. I can feel the stares. In a moment of weakness, I cast a glance at the Slammo Club. Trey looks furious.

“You want to sign his boot?” Trey stands, and his crew follows his lead.

I look at Riley like *please, get out of here while you still can.*

She’s too distracted inspecting my boot. She even ignores Trey.

“Looks like it’s plastic. The marker won’t work.”

I breathe a sigh of relief. Maybe we can both get out of this unscathed.

Then, she pulls something else out of her bag. A bright, sparkling sticker pack.

Oh no.

“How about a sticker instead?” Riley asks. “A star be-

cause you're a star player."

I'm frozen. There is no coming back from this.

"So cute, Baby Socks gets a sticker!" Jaron howls with laughter. Wes too.

Trey steps forward. His eyes lock onto the sticker like it personally insulted him. "Didn't realize we were handing out participation awards today, Baby Socks."

"Uh-huh." I gulp. My appetite is completely gone.

"How's the nose, Trey?" Riley flashes him a wicked smile, waving another sticker.

Jaron and Wes lose it. Trey balls his fists, and I swear he is about to go at it with Riley. Mason, surprisingly, steps in. "Come on, guys. Let's just get out of here."

They leave, and Trey makes sure to bump my Boot as he goes. His expression is clear as day: *This isn't over yet.*

Riley carries on like nothing just happened. And somehow, it reminds me of my conversation with Coach about Shai Gilgeous-Alexander. The way he totally throws off his opponents. Riley just did that with the Slammos.

I'm not sure whether to be impressed or jealous. Riley pats the star sticker firmly on my Boot. "Cheerleaders are always on the sidelines, but it's our job to encourage and hype everyone up. Now you have a reminder that someone's rooting for you, too."

With that profound statement, she skips off to join her

friends across the cafeteria. Does she really think she's helping me? Trey already has enough reasons to come after me. I don't need her help.

Does she feel sorry for me?

I glance down at the neon star sticker—bold, standing out like it doesn't belong. Kind of like me at this school. My fingers brush the edge. I could peel it off. No one would notice. I tug at the corner. . . .

But I stop.

My hand drops.

I'll keep it. For now.

And if it bothers Trey, all the better.

CHAPTER



I swap out my sleeping socks for a pair of bright blue knee socks with a bald eagle design, tighten my Boot, and lace up my one sneaker.

Not bad, but not a baller look. You never know who you might run into at the ThrifTShopper on a Saturday. I don't think I'd survive if someone called me Baby Socks right in front of my family. It's bad enough that Trey and his friends call me it, but after the public display in the cafeteria yesterday, now it's spreading like wildfire. Kids on the bus ride home are even saying it. *The Boot's to cover his baby socks!*

"Jonathan!"

I tug my shorts down a little so they're longer on my legs. "Coming!" This will have to work. I slap my Thunder cap over my messy hair and head downstairs.

Dad left a note for Mom on the countertop. *Of course*, he had to go to work on a Saturday. He's so checked out. Maybe I should have that attitude, too.

The crew is running errands today with Mom. Which always feels as long and painful as being the last one to open your Christmas presents. I'm not thrilled about the excursion, but I'm on a new mission today. To not care about anything at all. I've spent so much time trying to say and do the right thing—at school, at home—and all I get is mocked, ignored, scolded, or hurt. Or a combination of all four. I can't count on anyone—not Mason, and certainly not Dad. Well, I can't get hurt anymore if I just don't care.

I climb into the passenger seat of Mom's minivan and pluck an old fruit leather wrapper off the seatbelt buckle. I'm about to throw it away, but instead, let it fall to the van floor. That's right. I don't care.

When Mom parks at the ThrifTShopper, she pulls out her phone. My phone buzzes thirty seconds later.

"I just sent you a list. Take one of the boys with you, please?" Mom unbuckles her seat belt and tugs on a baseball cap over her hair.

A to-do list? That's a prime opportunity to show Mom exactly how little I care. Just like Dad.

"Who gets to go with Jonathan?" Ian shouts.

"Me! I pick Jonathan!" Alec throws a cracker at Ian.

"Hey! Mom picks." Ian throws a blueberry at Alec.

Sarah sighs. "Nobody ever wants to go with me."

We haven't even left the van yet, and it's already chaos.

Perfect.

Mom whirls around in her seat. “Boys, that’s enough. On second thought, let’s stay together.”

“Or—” I say, giving Mom my best smile, “I can take all three of them.”

Triple the kids, triple the disaster.

Mom tilts her head, surprised. “Thank you, Jonathan. I have another idea. What if we see who’s the fastest shoppers—boys or girls? You and the boys versus me and Sarah?”

Alec cheers. “Boys will win!”

Ian rubs his hands together like a supervillain. “Oh, you’re going down.”

“Oh, you think so?” Sarah challenges. “We’ll see about that.”

Mom high-fives her.

We pile out of the van, and Mom gives me a quick side hug. “Thanks for offering to take all your siblings. I appreciate that.”

If she only knew.

“No problem,” I mumble, swallowing the lump of guilt in my throat. It feels kinda nice to be appreciated, but I stuff that deep down. *Stay on mission. Don’t care.*

The boys each take a mini-shopper cart, while Mom double-checks our shopping lists. “The first team to

get all their items to checkout line number one wins.”

“What do we win?” Sarah asks.

“I’ll think of something,” Mom replies. “On your mark, get set, go!”

Mom and Sarah walk as fast as their wobbly-wheeled carts will allow. The boys charge full steam into the produce section.

I need to figure out how to channel their energy into some low-key destruction, fast. Or, even better, I need to turn them loose on this store and let the chips fall where they may. Literally.

I scroll through Mom’s text: *cereal, bread, hamburger buns, bananas, strawberries, ranch dressing, taco shells, tortillas.*

“Listen up, men.” I hold a hand behind my back and press my phone to my chest the way Coach Robinson holds his clipboard. “Cereal aisle—move it!”

The boys giggle, and I scowl at them like an army drill sergeant. “Two boxes of Chocolate Snappy Puffs. Let’s go, go, go!”

They take off running, bumping displays with their carts as they go. This should be good. They’ll probably detour to candy or toys, which means I get to sit back and watch the chaos unfold.

I clunk back to the front of the store to get a cart of my own. I snag a magazine off a nearby rack and flip through it as I nudge my cart slowly forward.

Out of the corner of my eye, I see both boys whip around a corner, nearly colliding with a grocery store employee.

“Slow down, guys,” the employee says.

I move forward to intervene but stop myself. *I don't care. I don't care.*

The employee shakes his head and smiles. He's a good sport.

The boys pull up to my cart and throw the cereal in.

“Listen,” I say. “We want to win, but don't hurt anyone. Go fast, but watch out for other people. New rule: If you hit someone, it's an automatic disqualify. Got it?” They nod.

“Okay. What's next?” Ian's panting.

“Ian, get a bottle of ranch dressing. Alec, a big bag of tortillas and taco shells.”

“On it, boss.” They jog away with squeaky carts.

I roll my cart through the produce section and grab a bunch of bananas and a box of strawberries. Only a few items to go.

A lady rounds the corner and almost bangs into my Boot.

“Excuse me.” She blushes.

I can't help but think of my first awkward day at school. *Do it! Do the meme!* That feels like so long ago

now.

Speaking of long ago, where are the boys?

Right on cue, I hear the unmistakable, metallic clang of shopping carts. It's coming from the dressings and condiments aisle.

My stomach drops. *Did I make a terrible mistake?*

I limp faster, my Boot clunking against the tile.

A woman speeds past me and clips the corner of my cart with hers "Sorry." She wipes sweat from her forehead. "You may want to avoid the next few aisles if you can. There are a couple of unsupervised kids on the loose."

Those are my unsupervised loose kids.

"I'll be careful." I square my shoulders and push the cart forward.

The fluorescent bulbs flicker overhead. From the next aisle over, something crashes, and the metal shelves quake. A bag of marshmallows thuds onto the floor next to my feet.

"You did that on purpose!" Ian shouts.

"I did not! You started it!" Alec's volume matches Ian's.

I hear the patter of tiny shoes on tile. There's a brief moment of silence, then the pattering starts again and builds speed, until—

CRASH! Thud! CLANG! Thunk thunk thunk. Patter patter patter.

“You cheated!”

“Nuh-uh, you cheated first!”

This sounds bad, like really bad. I hurry around the corner and see Alec and Ian, red-faced and sweaty, standing on opposite ends of the aisle. Between them is a war zone of absolute destruction. Scattered packets of mashed potatoes, boxes of mac and cheese, and remnants of tostada shells litter the floor. This has gone too far.

“GUYS!” I shout. But it’s too late. They’re running, pushing their carts full speed ahead, straight at each other. “GUYS! STOP!”

At the last possible second, they heave their carts at each other and jump out of the way. The metal baskets crash and ricochet into the shelves on either side.

I abandon my cart and drag my Boot to the middle of the aisle, dodging microwaveable rice pouches along the way. I grab them by the arms.

“We’re playing demo-lisshin derby.” Ian tries to pull out of my grip.

From behind me, I hear Mom.

“Have you lost your mind? Put everything back on the shelves where it was, right now.” Her voice cuts like a knife. Serious and somehow deadly calm.

Ian takes the left side of the aisle. Alec takes the right.

Together they work their way to the end, scooping up packaged foods and setting them back on the shelves. While they're restoring order, Mom pulls out her phone and starts texting.

Sarah stands beside Mom's cart, wide-eyed, and motions to me. "What happened?"

"I went *to get* bananas. They *went* bananas."

Mom rubs her temples. "Leave the carts. Let's go."

"But—the groceries," I say.

"No, Jonathan." Mom takes Alec and Ian by the hand and walks—swiftly—toward the front of the store.

Mom doesn't even leave an empty cart in the parking lot, much less an entire full cart of groceries.

As we shuffle back into the van, Mom turns to me. "I trusted you."

My ears burn. I look out the window. She trusted me.

I hear the twins sniffing in the back seat.

Well, I was definitely wrong about one thing. Not caring doesn't lead to not getting hurt. It actually just hurts everyone else too.

CHAPTER

26



I can't even remember the last time Mom got Big Mad. I think it was when Wrangler was a puppy, and he ate her favorite pair of boots. When Mom gets Big Mad, there's consequences, but it's Alec and Ian's fault, not mine.

They get in trouble a lot, whether I'm with them or not. They're little. Their kind of trouble will pass. Today it's grocery cart demolition derby, tomorrow they'll find something else. That's the way it is with little kids. They bounce right back.

It's way, way harder to bounce back from something serious, like falling down the bleachers on the first day of school, ripping your pants, or being dubbed Baby Socks for the rest of your middle school career. So, yeah. If I have to ignore some flying groceries to get Dad's attention, that's a price worth paying.

We're all dead quiet when Mom pulls into the garage.

By the time she drops her purse onto the kitchen

counter and says, "All of you, to your rooms," I've already hobbled halfway up the stairs. I grab my basketball from my closet, thud back downstairs, and head out to the driveway.

I dribble—slowly—up to the imaginary free throw line, set my one good foot, bounce the ball a few times, and shoot. The ball arcs toward the basket, drops perfectly, but clangs the rim loud. Brick. The ball rolls down the driveway and across the street.

"Need a rebound?" calls the last voice I expected to hear. It's Mason. He's a few blocks down.

What's he doing over here? I thought he wanted nothing to do with me.

Mason jogs over, scoops up the basketball, and dribbles up the driveway. Almost exactly like he did the day we moved in. I can tell he's getting better at his ball control. *Is that from Coach's drills or has he been taking notes from the Slammos?*

He passes the ball. I shift my weight into the front of my right foot to protect my left. I shoot. The ball hangs on the rim for a moment then drops into the bucket.

"Nice." He bounce passes to me, and I shoot again. Brick.

He gets my rebound and takes off for the basket himself. When Mason gets close, he does a perfect layup, bouncing the ball off the backboard into the net.

It's great just shooting hoops, but I can still feel the tension in the air.

"What are you doing here?" I ask. "I thought you were with the Slammos."

Mason shrugs. "Just happened to be walking by. Thought you might break your other foot if you ran after the ball into the street."

Is that supposed to be a joke? Is he messing with me? I can't seem to get a read on him.

"Why'd you stop Trey the other day in the cafeteria?" I ask.

Mason tosses the ball between his hands. "He was going to get us all detention."

So not to help me. Just to save his own skin. Got it.

"Okay. Well, thanks for rebounding." I motion for him to pass me the ball back.

The front door opens, and Mom walks out onto the porch.

"I didn't know you had friends coming over." Mom leans against the porch rail.

"Hi, Mrs. Spencer." Mason waves, then passes me the ball back.

"This is Mason, Mom. We were just shooting some hoops."

"You'll have to pick it up another time. I need to have

a chat with Jonathan,” Mom says, giving me a pointed look.

Not cool, Mom. Mason and I might have some stuff between us, but he still chose to walk over here. That has to mean something, right? And now she’s just going to kick him out before we’ve really had a chance to talk about anything?

“He just got here, Mom.”

“Another time,” she repeats.

“No problem.” Mason pulls his phone out of his pocket and hands it to me.

I stare at it like it’s alien tech. Why is he giving me his phone?

“Give me your number. I’ll text you,” he says.

My stomach flips. What game is Mason playing? One minute, he wants nothing to do with me. The next, we’re shooting hoops and exchanging numbers.

I look at Mason’s hinged phone in my hand and do a double-take. I can’t believe it. “You have a Kyocera flip?” No wonder he never has it out before class.

“Yeah.”

I type in my digits and pass it back to him. “I have one too. At least yours has data.”

“Yeah.” He pockets his phone and backs down the driveway.

When he's gone, I whirl around and half-whisper just in case Mason might be able to hear. "How could you do that to me? Are you trying to embarrass me? He's the only one who *might* want to be my friend, and you just ruined it!"

"If anything has been ruined, you only have one person to blame for that. Your little demolition derby game at the grocery store got way out of hand. Someone could have gotten hurt." She lowers her chin at me.

"My demolition derby game? That wasn't my game." I shift the ball into my right hand and put my left on my hip. My gut fizzes, like a pop bottle rocket ready to explode. "I asked the boys to go get stuff off your list. They did what they did. Did they tell you that was my idea? Cause it wasn't."

Mom walks to the driveway and stands between me and the basket. "You were in charge, and you were supposed to be keeping an eye on them. They made a huge mess. What would you have done if the store manager asked me to pay for all that food they damaged? Or a couple of shopping carts?"

"But the manager didn't do that." Why is she mad about things that didn't happen? Why am I responsible for *their* actions?

"That's not the point. The point is that your little brothers need supervision. They look up to you and follow your example. You're usually on top of this. Where's your head?" Her stare pins me in place.

My head. Let's see. It's still spinning, trying to keep up with all the changes and expectations and disappointments and. . .and. . .

"Whatever," I decide to say.

Not the right answer. Mom crosses her arms. "All three of you boys are grounded for a week."

My lungs deflate. "What?"

"No TV, no Xbox for a week. Your phone goes in my purse when I get home from work."

"Are you serious? How is that fair?" A crazy, desperate laugh erupts from my throat. "They mess up, and I get in trouble?" My voice rises and bounces off the garage door.

"You get in trouble because they're your responsibility." Mom's volume matches mine.

"Oh, yeah? *All* the kids are your responsibility, so how come you aren't in trouble?" Heat climbs up my neck and face.

"You need to check your attitude right now unless you want to be grounded for another week."

"What attitude?" I hold the ball in one palm and stretch my arms wide.

"You just bought yourself another week. Come inside." Mom walks to the porch and holds the front door open. "Let's go."

"Fine." I slam the ball into the pavement. It sails up

onto the roof and rolls to a stop behind the back-board. Stuck.

That makes two of us.

“I didn’t ask for any of this. I hate that we moved. I hate not having friends. The only thing I had going for me was basketball and then Dad’s toolbox broke my foot, so I can’t even play. It sucks.”

Mom closes the front door, steps in front of it, and plants her hands on her hips. “You’re far too old to throw this kind of fit because you didn’t get your way. Hand over your phone, march yourself upstairs, and think very carefully about what you need to do next.”

I yank my phone out of my pocket and press it into Mom’s outstretched palm.

She holds the door open for me and I rush into the house, letting the side of my Boot clip the wall in the hallway, even though the impact hurts.

Cool off, Mom says.

Fine. I’ll cool off so much that I’m frozen solid.

CHAPTER

27

I flop face-first onto my bed, breath rasping in my chest.

The pop bottle rocket in my gut launches, and I pound my fist into the mattress.

How could she do this? How could she ground me for what the boys did?

Why did this have to happen today, when Mason comes over for the first time since the day we moved?

I inhale deep, then exhale. Stare at the ceiling. Wipe my face on the pillowcase.

After a little while, I smell onions and peppers sizzling on the stove, and my room is dark.

Mom knocks on my door. “Jonathan?” She comes in and sits on the edge of the bed. “What’s going on with you?”

How do I answer that question, especially when every-

thing is so mixed up?

Through the walls, I hear Alec and Ian chattering and laughing. Elementary school is so much simpler. You show up, you share, you play. Your biggest worries are whether to play chase or tetherball at recess.

Middle school is different. One embarrassing mistake—and you're *that* kid. The joke. The punchline. I almost say it out loud.

"You don't act like this," Mom says. "You're my glass-half-full guy. Positive attitude. Talk to me."

She's right. I know she's right. She knows she's right. But I don't have the words. "I'm fine, Mom."

"The way you spoke to me outside was not fine. And it won't happen again. Understood?"

Again, I inhale and exhale, and my shoulders soften. Again, she's right.

"Yes, ma'am. I'm sorry."

"Good. I love you. If you change your mind and want to talk, I'm here."

"Okay. Thanks." I wait for Mom to close the door behind her, roll over onto my side, and switch on my bedside lamp.

Even if I did want to talk, talking it out won't suddenly make Dad care more about me than his Charger. It won't make him spend more time with me or help him remember that he's got a string of broken promises.

It won't change the fact that I stand out like a walking string bean in the hallways, or that my brothers and sister have friends, and I don't. It won't unground me or magically heal my foot. Will it make a difference in the way Trey and his crew—which may or may not include Mason—treat me?

No, it won't.

In the low light, I catch a glimpse of the star sticker. The one Riley gave me. It's still there on my Boot, though it's already scuffed and beat up. I'm benched and grounded. What am I supposed to do? How am I supposed to be a star, a leader, with the odds stacked against me?

I'm not sure. Coach's assignment echoes in my head: Know your role. But what is my role? Right now, it feels like I'm just here to mess up, to fall short.

Still, maybe all these setbacks mean something. Maybe they're just one step before the breakthrough.

CHAPTER

28



I lie on my back, staring at the tiny cloud pattern on my ceiling.

This morning at breakfast, out of nowhere, Mom and Dad told us Grandad and Cassie are coming over for lunch.

We haven't seen them in years. Of all the days—why today? The day after I'm grounded. Are they trying to punish me even more? Like, am I supposed to sit there and pretend we're some big, happy family?

I remember Grandad mostly through birthday cards with bold quotes like, "A man who wears bold socks makes bold decisions," or through pairs of the loudest socks you've ever seen. But memories? Fuzzy at best. Maybe being distant is a Spencer family trait.

Wrangler barks from the living room. The doorbell rings.

Guess we're doing this.

I hobble down the stairs and wait.

“Mel! They’re here!” Dad adjusts his shirt like he’s meeting a celebrity, not his own father. He swings the door open.

“Hey, Dad. Cassie.”

“Hey, son,” Grandad says. He’s taller than I remember, but his white hair and scruffy goatee are the same. His smile is warmer than I expected.

Cassie’s thin arms are full of Burger Barn bags, flowers, and an oversized purse.

“Come in, come in,” Dad says, waving them in.

Grandad reaches forward and pulls him into a big bear hug. “Glad to see you. Thanks for having us.”

Dad pats Grandad’s back a couple of times, then hugs him for real.

Cassie steps inside and hands Mom a bouquet of bright orange daisies. “These are for you.”

Mom dabs her eyes. “They’re lovely, thank you! Let me help.” Mom relieves Cassie of a couple of Burger Barn bags and wraps an arm around her.

While Mom and Cassie head for the kitchen, Grandad and Dad start toward the couch—until Grandad spots me and stops in his tracks. “My word. Jon? Is that you?”

“Hey, Grandad.” My voice comes out flatter than I

meant.

Grandad's eyes widen. "Look at you." He stretches his arms out wide and covers me in a warm, cedar-scented hug. "You're taller than your old man now."

Somehow, when he says it, it makes me feel proud, not like a giant freak. Our moment is cut short by my siblings.

"Grandad!" Sarah squeals and storms down the stairs, with Alec and Ian on her heels. I step aside to avoid getting squished in a massive group hug.

I follow the greasy smell of Burger Barn into the kitchen. Four paper bags sit on the kids' table. I'm about to reach for one when something sweet fills the air.

Wait, is that a chocolate chip cookie?

Cassie lifts a foil pan from a bag and sets it on the countertop. She notices my stare. "Your Grandad made his legendary cookie cake."

"Grandad made this?" I lift the corner of the plastic wrap on top. Chocolatey heaven.

Cassie smiles. "He's a really good cook."

"You think he'd teach me how to make one sometime?" The words are out of my mouth before I realize it.

"I think he'd love that, sweetheart. Anytime."

“Come eat while it’s hot!” Mom calls out.

Lunch is chaos. Laughter. Clucky Nuggs and Potato Smilies flying onto plates. I don’t know how, but Grandad ordered my exact favorite: a Gobbler Burger. No bun. Extra cheese. Barbeque sauce. Did Dad tell him, or did Grandad remember?

The twins bicker over fries. Sarah rolls her eyes. Grandad’s right in the middle of all of it, laughing, making everyone feel like they belong. Like this family makes sense.

For a minute, it almost feels right.

Until Ian pushes his chair back suddenly. “Be right back. Bathroom.”

Sarah looks at him sideways. “Hurry back, or you’ll miss dessert.”

The hair on the back of my neck tingles. Mom’s words from yesterday echo in my head. *You get in trouble because they’re your responsibility.*

I don’t know what it is, but something’s fishy. I’d bet my right foot that whatever that kid is doing, it has nothing to do with the bathroom. And no way I’m getting in trouble because of him again.

“Excuse me.” I hustle from the table.

When I turn toward the hall, the first thing I notice is the empty countertop.

The cookie cake. Gone.

No way.

I pound on the bathroom door. "Ian! I know what you're doing in there."

"Occupied!"

"Dude. Come out." I jiggle the doorknob. "You're not getting away with it."

Dad rests a hand on my shoulder. "What's going on?"

"Ian took the cookie cake. Now he's busted."

"I did not! I'm using the bathroom! Make him leave me alone!"

"Ian, is this true?" Dad leans against the doorframe.

"No!"

Dad lowers his voice. "Why do you think he took the cookie to the bathroom?"

I know it sounds nuts. "Look at the evidence. One, Cassie left it on the kitchen counter. Two, Ian left the table. Three, the cookie cake is not on the counter anymore. And four, now he's in the bathroom, which is the perfect place to eat something in secret."

I smack the door again. "Nobody wants to eat bathroom cookie, so you better bring it out *right now*."

The toilet flushes and the door creaks open. "See for yourself," Ian's voice shakes.

I peer into the bathroom. No incriminating cookie

crumbs or even an empty pan. I check the cabinet and bathtub. Nothing.

Ian stands in the doorway, his lip quivering. Tears stream down his cheeks. "Happy?" He runs down the hall.

"What on earth has gotten into you?" Dad ushers me out of the bathroom and into the kitchen.

What else was I supposed to do? I'm *trying* to be responsible.

Dad scans the kitchen. "Cassie, where's the dessert?"

Conversation around the dinner table stops.

"I put it right there." Cassie stands up. "Where did it go?"

Grandad stands next to her. "Where's Wrangler?"

Mom gasps. "You don't think—"

"Melissa, the door is open!" Dad runs into the garage.

I rush after him, ignoring the sparks of pain surging up my left leg. "Wrangler! Drop it! Drop it, boy!"

Wrangler is in the corner, his face smeared with foamy drool and whipped frosting. Clenched between his jaws is a mangled, empty aluminum pan.

I put a hand on his furry back. "Drop it, buddy." The evidence clatters to the garage floor.

"Thank you, Jonathan." Dad picks up the pan. "This

guy's gonna have a horrible stomachache in about five minutes."

Mom's already calling the vet.

Ian stands in the garage doorway, his face red. "Told you it wasn't me. You didn't believe me. You thought I was a thief."

Dad opens his arms and Ian runs into them, sniffing.

Yeah, I feel a little bad about that. But you know what else hurts? When you get grounded for something someone else does. Or when someone says they'll show up but they don't.

"You tried to get me in trouble." Ian glares at me.

I didn't realize Ian cared so much about what I said or did.

"I'm sorry I hurt your feelings. I promise I wasn't trying to get you in trouble. I was trying to help you stay out of trouble." I pat Wrangler's back.

Ian snuffles again and exhales. "Okay."

"And since we're saying 'sorry,' are you going to apologize to me?" I ask. "You and Alec got me grounded for a week. I'm going to get a zero in gym this week because of you, but you don't hear me crying about it."

Ian pulls away from Dad. "I did not!"

Dad stands up. "Okay, boys, that's enough. None of us are perfect. Forgiveness is a good thing. For both of

you.”

Grandad walks over to Ian and wraps an arm around his shoulder. “Come on, bud, let’s see if we can find some ice cream in the freezer. You too, Sarah, Alec.” Grandad shuttles the kids back inside.

“Thanks.” Dad waits until the garage door closes, then turns to me. “What’s this about a zero in gym? Do I need to call Coach Robinson?” Dad sounds more worried than mad. And go figure—he’s suddenly interested in how I’m doing at school.

“No. Please don’t.” The last thing I need is for Trey and them to hear that my dad called the teacher about an assignment I couldn’t do because I’m grounded.

Before I can tell Dad to stay out of my business, Mom comes out with the car keys. “The emergency vet says we need to bring him in. Cassie says they’ll stay with the kids.”

My boy Wrangler isn’t looking so great. He’s panting so hard, his body bounces. Puddles of drool form on the floor next to his mouth.

“Mom or I will text your grandparents as soon as we know anything, okay?” Dad kneels next to Wrangler.

Great. Since Mom has my phone, I can’t even get texts about my own dog.

“I want to go with you, Dad. Wrangler needs me.”

“Your siblings need you too, son. I need you here with them. Try not to worry. And try to make things right

with your brother.” Dad shoots me an *I-mean-business* look. Wrangler groans and rolls onto his side. “Help me get him into the van?”

Mom pulls open the passenger side door, and I squat by Wrangler’s hind legs. “On three?”

“One, two, three.” Dad lifts Wrangler’s front half while I lift his back end—slowly, carefully, like we’re transporting a glass sculpture instead of a hundred-pound dog. I tuck a towel under his chin and stroke his head, then close the door.

Watching my best boy roll out of the driveway, I really wish I had been right.

I wish Ian had been the cookie thief after all.

CHAPTER



The streetlamp near Dad's shop flickers and splurts into light. I grab the ball and dribble-clunk down the driveway until I'm almost to the street, pivot, and take it back up to the free-throw line.

I don't think about Wrangler.

I don't think about Ian.

I don't think about being grounded, or the paper that's due Friday, or Mason, or Slammo, or the cafeteria drama.

I shoot.

The ball soars left of the net, hits the gutter above the garage, and rolls into the grass.

"You might've been a little off balance." Grandad hops off the front porch and retrieves the ball. "Try it again." He tosses the ball to me.

"Okay." I dribble slowly, square my shoulders, and fire

the ball toward the hoop. It clangs against the rim and bounces back down the driveway.

Grandad crosses the driveway, grabs the rebound, and stands next to me.

“Can I show you something?” He holds the ball in his left hand, with his right hand vertical behind it, like he’s about to shoot. “Look here. You want to follow through with your hand like this.” He sends the ball sailing gracefully into the air in a perfect arc. *Swish*. His right hand stretches up and forward. “See? You want to follow through on your shot, up and over, like you’re reaching into a cookie jar. You try.”

Grandad passes the ball my way and I line up, dribble, then get ready to shoot.

“Cookie jar,” Grandad says.

“Cookie jar.” I feel a little silly, but I shoot, follow through, and swish.

“Hey!” Grandad high-fives me. “Nice shot. My coaches at North Texas drilled this into our heads the year we won our conference championship.”

My heart skips. “Wait. You played college ball?”

Grandad smiles, remembering. “Yeah. A bit. It was a long time ago.”

Why didn’t Dad tell me about this? “Why’d you stop playing?”

“Not everybody can play in the NBA, you know. I

thought about going to play in the European league, but that was too far away from home for me. I still play for fun.” He points at the hoop. “Shoot.”

“You have to teach me everything you know.” I shoot, careful to follow through like he showed me. The ball circles the rim and bounces out. I hobble for the rebound and give him his change.

“You got it.” Grandad shoots a perfect three-pointer, complete with cookie jar follow-through. “So, your dad called with some good news. Wrangler’s going to be fine. The vet gave him some medicine, and they’re keeping him overnight to be safe. Your folks will be home soon.” A wide, crinkly grin stretches across Grandad’s face. “Great news, huh?”

I’m relieved that Wrangler’s okay, but if Mom and Dad will be home soon, I’ll have to stop shooting with Grandad. “That’s awesome news.”

Grandad’s smile fades. “Something else bothering you?”

A lot of things, actually. “It’s complicated.” I scratch the back of my neck.

Grandad nods. “Always is. Try me.”

I can’t tell Grandad how Dad blew me off for his stupid car, can I? Dad is his son. It’ll be weird. And how do I explain all the drama with the Slammos, Mason, and a cheerleader that seems to be my un-luck charm wherever I go? “I don’t know where to start.”

“You started a new school. That can be a lot.”

Oh, man. *Is that the understatement of the year or what?* I rub my nose, remembering my disastrous first day. “Yeah. It can.”

Grandad holds the basketball on his hip. “You know, my first semester at UNT was pretty rough. I was the new guy from a tiny, middle-of-nowhere town. I didn’t know anybody. Almost everybody else had been playing together for a couple of years. It was hard.”

“What’d you do?”

“I went to class, went to practice, and did the work.”

There’s gotta be more to it than that. “Well, how’d you prove yourself?”

“Sometimes the best way to prove yourself is to just be yourself and give things a little time. Get to know people, and let them get to know you. If you want to have a friend, you have to be a friend.”

I think about his words. “That’s hard to do when you’re grounded and can’t spend time with anybody. I can’t even do my paper.”

“What paper is this?” he asks.

“For Athletics. I’m supposed to watch a game and then write about the roles on a team.”

“Any team, or a basketball team?”

“Well, I mean, the class is basketball, so. . . .”

“A team’s a team. You can talk about the roles each member plays in your family, maybe compare it to a basketball team.”

I shift my weight from the Boot to my good leg. “I don’t know, Grandad. Coach is particular.” On the other hand, I’d rather turn something in than get a zero. “I’ll think about it.”

Grandad passes the ball back to me. “Well, you know him better than I do. Try not to waste too much time on doom and gloom. You’ve got too many good things to think about, huh? Like your Wrangler feeling better.”

“And the cookie jar.” I shoot with perfect follow-through. *Swish.*

“Yes! The cookie jar! Nice!” Grandad fist-bumps me. “We should head inside before your folks get home.”

“Can you come over next weekend, Grandad?”

“Anytime, bud.” He snatches up the rebound and wraps an arm around my shoulder as we head inside.

Maybe he’s right. Gloom and doom is a waste of time. I haven’t had the best attitude. I haven’t been a good friend or a good big brother. Coach’s mantra is like a megaphone in my mind: *Excellence and Accountability*. I realize now they’re meant to be lived out—not just on the court, but off it too.

CHAPTER



The gym smells like sweat and rubber soles, like always. But today, the air feels heavier. Off. Like something's about to go down.

I limp up the bleachers, my Boot clunking against the metal. Mason's already sitting with Lane and another guy from our class, Keaton. When he sees me though, he waves me over.

"Spencer," Mason calls. "Come sit with us."

I hesitate. *This is weird.* Since when does Mason want to sit with me? I scan the room for Trey, Wes, and Jaron, but it doesn't look like they're here yet.

I slog up the bleachers and slide in next to Mason.

"What gives?" he asks. "I texted you this weekend, and you never answered."

"Oh, yeah, sorry," I say. "I was grounded. Still am, actually."

“Oh. That sucks, dude.” Then, he leans in and whispers, “Look there’s something I’ve got to show you before class.” He stands. “Come on.”

“Where?” I don’t like where this is going.

Mason smacks my arm. “Chill, Jon. Just come into the hallway.”

Despite all the warnings going off in my head, I decide to follow him. Lane and Keaton stay behind, but I catch the glance they share. They know something I don’t.

Mason slows his pace to match my limp. “How’s the foot?”

“Fine.” We push through the double doors into the hallway.

That’s when I realize I’ve made the biggest mistake of my life.

Three sets of hands grab me. The gym doors slam shut behind me. Trey, Wes, and Jaron are on me, dragging me toward the lockers.

Trey tosses Mason his phone. “Start recording.”

I look at Mason, who can’t even meet my eyes. He set me up. Completely and totally set me up. Was that why he came over to shoot hoops with me on Saturday? Why he was texting me this weekend? To lure me into a false sense of security? To think that we might actually be good again?

Trey's voice booms. "Slammo fans, you're in for a treat. Special guest—Baby Socks himself."

I try to twist out of their grip, but I'm outnumbered three-to-one.

"Mason," I gasp. "You don't have to do this."

Mason shifts uncomfortably. "Trey—you made your point. Maybe we—"

"Shut up, Barnes. Newbies like Spencer need to learn their place."

My Boot scrapes against the floor. I've got no traction.

Trey leans in. "You want to be Coach's pet? The star of his team? You got another thing coming."

My back is touching the locker, and I can feel my heart in my throat. *This can't be happening. No. Not like this. Do something! Anything!*

Then, I see it. Down the hall. A flash of red hair. Riley. The preview to all my embarrassing moments. For a second, I believe I'm doomed. But then I remember the way she stood her ground in the cafeteria. The way she looked at me—actually *saw* me. She told me I was a star player when she's never even seen me play before.

I look at Trey, really look at him. For the first time, he doesn't seem that big. Just loud. Surrounded by his crew. He's not a real leader. I was wrong to let him push me around, call me Baby Socks, and take Mason over to his side.

Excellence and Accountability. I inhale deep. Plant my boot. The loud THUNK echoes in the hallway. The grip on my arms slips for half a second. It's enough.

I wrench free and pull myself to my full height.

"You think this makes you tough?" I turn on Trey.

He steps back. "What?"

"Real leaders don't need to tear others down to feel big."

Silence. Mason lowers the phone. Wes and Jaron look away.

"You want to be the number one? Then earn it."

Trey puffs out his chest. "I have earned it, right guys?"

The silence continues. None of the Slammos come to his rescue.

"Who cares what you think, Baby Socks?" Trey snaps. "What do you know, anyway?"

"I know my role. And right now, it's not to be a superstar. It's just to be a good friend—" I glance at Mason. "And a good teammate."

I close the locker behind me. "You done here, Slammo? Because I am."

Trey doesn't say a word. His face is bright red.

I walk back toward the gym. "Mason? You coming?"

Mason swallows hard. He glances at Trey, then me. He tosses Trey his phone back. Then steps toward me.

“Yeah, Jon, I’m coming.”

We leave the Slammos behind, and I finally feel like I can breathe again.

For the first time all year, I’m standing tall.

CHAPTER



How The Spencers Are Like a Basketball Team

By Jonathan Spencer

September 17th

1st Period Athletics—Coach Robinson

My make-up assignment for this week was to watch a basketball game and write about the different roles on a basketball team, what types of roles make up a high-performing team, and call out a player who knows his role and plays it well.

Unfortunately, I got grounded from all screens, so I couldn't watch basketball. At first, I thought being grounded meant I wasn't going to be able to write this paper. One night, my grandad and I were shooting hoops, and he said something about how families are teams. At first, I wasn't convinced. But the more I thought about it, the more I realized he might be right.

A team is a group of people working together to achieve a shared goal. By this definition, a family is a team. They're actually a lot like a

basketball team in many ways, so that's what this paper is about.

In basketball, some teams set a goal to win the championship. Other teams aim to place in the top twenty-five. The goal depends on the team. The same idea applies to families. Some families want to save money for a new car or a trip to the beach. Other families are all about every kid making straight A's, or keeping up with chores.

Just like it takes all the positions on a basketball team to win games, it takes all the people in a family to make the family work. We all have to show up and try our best. When we don't, things get broken.

All teams need good leaders. In basketball, that's mainly the coaches. In a family, it's the parents. The leaders need to know every player or family member's strengths and weaknesses. The leaders' role is to show their team members how to make the most of their strengths.

On the Spencer team, my parents are like the coaches and the superstars. They give us directions from the bench, like coaches.

They also lead the way on the court a lot of the time, like superstars. My mom sets up the offense, like a point guard. Dad is like a center who dunks her lob passes. They work together to point our family in the right direction.

The players' jobs aren't just to play the best they can in their position, but also to play the best they can in their important role on the team.

My little brothers, Ian and Alec, are the youngest in the family. If we were a basketball team, they'd probably spend a little more time on the bench because they're still growing. But even on the bench, they'd have a big part to play. They'd be the ones always shouting encouragement and high-fiving everybody during timeouts. They might not get much playing time, but they set the mood. The mood can make a huge difference in a tough game.

My sister Sarah and I are support players. We work hard, follow our coaches' directions, set

screens, and play tough defense. We're the older kids on Team Spencer, so we have more playing time and more is expected from us on the court right now.

If there was one superstar on our team besides Mom and Dad, I'd have to say it was my sister, Sarah. I might be the oldest, but Sarah always watches out for everyone. If she sees something that needs to be done, you can count on her to step up and do it. She's always encouraging, always ready to help, and always quick to look for solutions to a problem.

As the oldest, I have to be versatile. That's because when my parents are at work, they need me to step into their role as leader to make sure the family stays on track. I'm supposed to always know what my siblings are doing, especially when I'm watching them after school.

My parents count on me to call the right play when they're not around. When it comes down to it, that's why I got in trouble. I didn't do a great job in my role as a big brother. I kind of ignored them and didn't really spend a lot of time with them. At first, when I got in trouble, I blamed my dad, I blamed my siblings, and I pointed out

what everybody else was doing wrong except me.

The more I think about it, the more I realize that looking after my brothers and sister is about more than just keeping them alive until my parents get home. It also means being somebody they can count on, who looks for the best in them. Somebody who expects a lot out of themselves and their team and is willing to work toward excellence. That means holding myself accountable for my mistakes, just like Coach says. I don't always get it right, but that's what I will keep trying to do.

In conclusion, I think that the roles on any kind of team are unique, and every player needs to know what they are. But the most important part of being on a team is being a player who shows up every day, gives his best effort, and does the work. When everyone does that, you get a high-performing team.

So yeah, I missed watching the Thunder games this week, but maybe I didn't need the screen time. Turns out, everything I needed to learn about roles, leadership, and accountability was right here at home. When I'm back on the court, I plan to play like I know what being part of a winning team really means.

CHAPTER

32



“Coach?” I knock even though his door’s wide open.

“Come in, Spencer.” Coach hammers his desktop keyboard like he’s fighting it. “Have a seat. Orange slice?” He slides a paper plate my way.

“No, thanks. I already ate.” I drop into the plastic chair and pull out my report.

Coach glances up from his tech battle, and I desperately hope I’ve caught him in a good mood. “What’s up?” he asks.

“My assignment for this week.” I thrust my paper across the desk.

Coach waves it away. “You can just upload it to Schoolly as usual.”

“Um, I can’t. I’m grounded from screens until a week from Sunday, so I need to hand it in the old-fashioned way.”

Coach takes my paper like it's a stick of dynamite. The corners of his mouth twitch. "Ah, I'm sorry to hear that." He pulls out a yellow folder and slides my report inside. "So, which team did you watch?"

"My family."

Coach pauses. "Your family?" His head tilts at an odd angle. "Your family." He leans back in his chair.

I clench my jaw, stare at the triangle labeled HONESTY on Coach's framed Pyramid of Success™ poster, and brace myself for a "You Did Not Do This Assignment Correctly" lecture.

"Bold choice," Coach finally says. "Explain."

I shift in my seat. "Well, a team is a group of people working together toward a common goal. A basketball team works together to try to win games. A family works together toward the things that are important to them."

Coach leans forward. "The things that are important to them. Tell me more about that."

"Well, in basketball, some teams aim to win the championship. Other teams just want to win a single game. The goal depends on the team. Same thing with families. They work toward what matters to them, like saving for trips or pushing their kids to make good grades. The goal depends on the family."

"Okay. What about roles? Are those important?"

"I don't want to spoil my report, but yeah. It's actually

a lot like basketball.”

Coach smiles. “How about one spoiler?”

“Um, sure. All teams need good leaders. In basketball, that’s the coaches and the most talented or most experienced players. In a family, the parents are obviously the leaders, but the oldest sibling like me sometimes has to fill in.”

Coach nods. “Like a sixth man leading a bench unit.”

“Yes, sir. And when I’m in charge at home, I have to help my siblings do their best at their roles.”

Coach lets out a low chuckle. “My little brother’s more like the team mascot.”

I smile wide. “Everybody’s got to be something, I guess.”

Coach taps his desk. “Well, I look forward to reading this one. Speaking of showing up and doing the work, we better get moving. Can you join shooting drills today?”

My entire body is suddenly buzzing with energy. I almost feel dizzy at the thought of getting back out on the court. “Yeesh. Yesh. I mean, yes. I can do free throws. Threes. I can shoot.”

Coach smiles. “Glad to hear it. Get to class.”

“Yes, sir. Thank you.”

CHAPTER

33



I practically soar out of Coach's office.

Mason's sitting on the first bleacher, reading a *Zombie Spider Apocalypse* graphic novel. Things have been better between us since the whole almost Slammo'd incident.

"Hey. You like ZSA?" I ask as I plunk down next to him.

"Yeah." He rolls up the graphic novel and slides it into his backpack.

I hoist my right leg up, showing off my favorite sock. It's from a *Zombie Spider Apocalypse* pair that Grandad gave me. The sock is a pale sky blue with a giant green seven-legged wolf spider named Frank on both sides.

"Frank! Yes!" Mason howls.

The bell rings.

"So, when are you not grounded anymore?" Mason asks.

“Another week.”

“Okay, you want to hang out then? Shoot in the driveway or something?”

“Yeah, sounds good,” I grin. “I’ll text you.”

Coach blows the whistle, and I stand to join everyone else on the court. Mason shoots me a questioning look.

“Bet you didn’t think I’d be back on the court today.”

“Let’s go!” Mason’s smile is as big as mine.

I’m so psyched. As we jog out to center court, a few other guys fist-bump me or give me nods of approval.

Huh. Maybe they heard about the face off with Trey.

I give my full attention to Coach. I know it’s just drills, but to me, it feels like I’m stepping onto the court for a championship game. I’m running on nothing but adrenaline.

“Good morning, gentlemen.” Coach’s tone is all business. “Today, we’re doing free throws. Who can tell me why they matter?”

Lane’s hand fires up like a rocket.

Coach nods. “Drexel?”

“They put points on the board.”

“Exactly.” Coach points toward the dim scoreboard on the wall behind him. “It’s all in the name. *Free*. When

your opponent fouls you, they're giving you a free chance to put points on the board. It's just you, the ball, and the basket. How many of you can handle that kind of pressure?" Coach's gaze bores into all of us.

Coach raises the ball. "Today, you're proving it. But first, let's talk about form. If you have a solid shooting form, there's no excuse for not making these shots. Watch."

Coach dribbles to the free throw line and jump-stops into the perfect triple-threat position. His right foot's slightly ahead of his left, pointed like a laser at the hoop. "Keep it simple. Weight distributed evenly, up on the balls of your feet, resting the ball on the pads of your fingertips." He holds his left hand vertical, next to the ball. "Your guide hand is to the side, like a bookshelf. Keep your eyes focused on the space in the center of the rim." Coach bends at the knees, ready to shoot. "Here's your power—in the legs."

In one smooth, coordinated motion, Coach's legs and right elbow spring upward. The ball lifts as his hand snaps downward.

Swish.

Coach turns to us, his arm raised high but his wrist bent. "You're going to hold your follow-through until the ball hits the rim or goes through the hoop. Especially in practice. I don't care how silly you feel, you'll hold it. Just like this."

Out of the corner of my eye, I spot arms, wrists, and

hands shoot up into the air. I join in and hear Granddad's voice in my head telling me to reach into the cookie jar, and I smile.

"Looks easy, right?" Coach says.

Many of us nod.

"Well, that's because I keep my form simple and repeatable, and I've practiced this shot probably millions of times. Good free-throw shooters get that way because they're consistent. They set their feet the same way every time. Take a deep breath or dribble in the same order. The pros train for muscle memory. So when they're tired, when they're fouled, they walk up to the line, and their bodies just—boom! Deliver."

Coach picks up another ball, turns, shoots, and sinks it. "Any questions?"

Nobody says a word.

"Split into teams of five each. We'll line up one man at a time. The other guys will rebound. The man on the line has to make five free throws in a row. Every miss is three push-ups for your group. Miss big? They'll all pay. Let's see what you're made of."

Groans ripple through the gym, but my heartbeat thumps faster. I can do this.

I have to do this.

As we split into groups, Mason waves me over. "You're with us."

Our team forms up—Mason, Devon, Sam, Keaton,

and me. Devon eyes my Boot.

“You sure you’re good?”

“I’m good,” I grin. “Boot’s my secret weapon.”

Out of the corner of my eye, I spot Trey, Wes, and Jaron laughing. They’ve lowered one of the portable baskets to fifth-grader height and take turns dunking balls through it.

REEEEET!

“Let’s go, gentlemen!” Coach booms across the court. “Hawkins, Oakes, Matthews, get that basket up to regulation height or I’m adding push-ups to your tab.”

While they scramble, Devon steps up to the line. He rolls his shoulders back twice, dribbles three times, focuses, and shoots. Brick.

“Dang!” Devon’s shoulders slouch.

“You got this, Dev,” I say.

He misses his second shot but makes the last three. That’s six push-ups so far. Mason’s next. He sinks four out of five. Keaton bricks three. I’m the last one to shoot, and we’re up to eighteen push-ups.

My palms sweat as Mason passes the ball to me.

The gym goes quiet. Trey leans against the wall, smirking.

Focus. Keep it simple.

I step up to the line. Put my right foot forward.
Breathe. I dribble twice with my left hand, three times
with my right. Spin the ball in my hands and concen-
trate on the net.

Inhale deep.

Bend my knees.

“Any day now!” Jaron shouts from the sidelines.

Convert it to fuel, I remind myself.

I shoot.

Arms up, snap my wrist, follow through. Hold it.

Swish.

Yes! That’s one. Four to go.

Mason claps. “Let’s go, J!”

Right foot. Breathe. Dribble twice left, three times
right. Spin. Net. Breathe. Shoot. Follow through.
Hold it. *Swish.* Three more.

I know Mason, Devon, and the rest of the guys are
fist-pumping, cheering, shouting. But it sounds far
away, like it’s coming from a TV in another room.
All I hear is the blood pounding in my ears, the ball
smacking the court. All I see is the space in the center
of the net.

Same routine. *Swish.*

I hold my hand up for the next ball, and Mason fires it

over.

Swish.

One more.

“Hey, Baby Socks!” Trey’s voice cuts through my focus.
“Don’t choke!”

I close my eyes. His words echo in my brain, reminding me of all my failures since that awful first day.

Come on, Jonathan. Your team is counting on you.

I shift my focus to Mason, who mouths, You got this.

He’s right. I dribble. Focus. Shoot.

The ball arcs. Time slows.

Swish.

“That’s five!” Mason shouts. He and the guys rush me, chanting, “Jon-a-than! Jon-a-than!” In a flash, almost the whole class surrounds me, like we just won the Olympics or something. Trey’s jaw drops, and I savor the moment.

Across the gym, Coach flashes me a thumbs up and then blasts his whistle. “Back to center court, gentlemen. Line up in your groups for push-ups. Let’s go, let’s go!”

We line up, and Coach paces in front of us.

“Oakes, how many are your group doing?” Coach points to Jaron.

"Twenty-seven." Jaron elbows Wes like it's his fault.

Around the room, guys call out some crazy numbers—twenty-four, thirty, thirty-six—and then Coach gets to our group. "Spencer? You hit all five?"

"Yes, sir."

"Anybody else in here hit all five?" Coach scans the room. Nobody raises their hand.

"How many push-ups for your group?"

"Eighteen."

"Not today. The group that hit the most free throws is excused from push-ups. You five can hit the locker room. Good work."

A massive groan rolls through the rest of the class, but our group strolls out of the gym. I'm about to turn down into the locker room hallway when I hear Coach's voice.

"Spencer, a word?" He jogs over to me, clipboard in hand. "Nice shooting today. I noticed your cookie jar follow through."

He's heard about the cookie jar?

"Thanks, Coach. My grandad taught me that."

"Such a shame you're going to miss a lot of the basketball work this semester. I can tell you've been working a little at home?"

I can't help it—I grin with my entire face. "A little. I

wish it was more, but yeah. I play when I can.”

“I wanted to put something on your radar for next summer.” He pulls a flier from his clipboard. “There’s a basketball camp you might be interested in. One full week, intensive training, lots of fun. We usually get one of the Thunder out to lead some drills. I think you should give it a look. Tell your folks if they have any questions they can call me.”

Coach wants me to go to basketball camp? One of the Thunder will be there? I’m so stoked I can barely keep a straight face. “Thanks, Coach. I will.”

“Sure thing.” Coach *t* the whistle and shouts across the gym. “I don’t hear counting, gentlemen. Do we need to start over?”

The whole class groans, but I couldn’t be more stoked. I catch up to Mason.

“Dude, you owned it out there.”

“Thanks.”

Best day in gym, ever.

CHAPTER

34

I swing my backpack over one shoulder. The adrenaline buzz is fading. The gym win felt huge—but for some reason, it's not complete.

As I head out into the hallway to get to my next class, I hear a familiar voice that stops me dead in my tracks.

“Hey, Jon!”

Riley.

I can't help but laugh. She's witnessed every one of my worst moments since I started at this school, yet somehow, she missed the ONE good moment in my entire Collins career so far. Figures.

“What's so funny? Did I miss something?” she asks.

“Yeah, actually, for once you missed something you *should* have seen,” I say.

“What happened?”

“I made five straight free throws during drills today.”

She smiles. "What did I tell you? Star player!"

Her words hit me, and I feel a lump form in my throat. "Hey, thanks for what you said in the cafeteria the other week. I didn't appreciate it at the time, but I do now."

"Anytime." She adjusts her backpack. "Well, gotta run to class. Catch you later, Jon."

Her shoes squeak against the floor as she bounces off. I have no doubt in my mind that I will catch her later. Only, it doesn't feel so ominous or annoying now. In fact, I'm looking forward to it.

CHAPTER

35



“Sarah, where’s the chalk?” I yank open the junk drawer, rummaging through expired coupons, packs of gum, and a screwdriver that’s been there since we moved in.

“Coming!” Sarah plows downstairs in her floppy pink hat and oversized sunglasses, clutching a pail of chunky sidewalk chalk like it’s treasure.

“You ready, guys?” I bounce the basketball against the kitchen tile.

“Ready!” Alec and Ian race to the door, nearly taking out Wrangler in the process.

In the driveway, we all take our positions. Me and the boys near the basketball hoop, Sarah on the edge of the sidewalk, and Wrangler on the front porch.

“I go first!” Ian takes the ball and stands directly beneath the basket. He holds the ball granny-style, swings it between his legs three times, then flings the

ball straight up through the net. “Weeee-haaaaa!” The ball clips the rim and bounces down the driveway. “Aw.”

“Does he get an ‘H’?” Sarah tosses the ball to me.

“Only if he makes the shot and Alec misses.”

“But it went through the net.” Ian stomps on the pavement.

“The ball’s gotta go *down* through the net. Good try though.” I pat him on the back, then pass to Alec. “Your turn, buddy.”

Alec paces across the driveway, studying all his options.

“Today, Alec.” Sarah scrawls his name in big block letters on the sidewalk.

Alec settles on an ambitious spot near the end of the driveway and shoots. The ball has a perfect arc but falls way short.

Alec hangs his head in disappointment.

I collect the ball, hobble to his side, and ruffle his hair. “Great try! You really went for it.” *He tried his best. That counts for something.*

My turn.

I line up in free throw range and show the boys my form. “I hold the ball with my fingertips, like this, see? One hand here to guide, elbows in, and—shoot.”

The ball arcs toward the basket and drops perfectly through the net. *Swish.*

“Nice shot.” Dad’s voice cuts through the air.

My stomach drops. *How long has he been watching?*

He crosses the street from his shop to our driveway. His baseball cap is turned backward, like always. Grease stains mark his coveralls.

The twins each grab hold of one of his legs, and he lumbers forward slowly.

“We’re playing Horse. Want to play?” Ian asks.

“He’s probably gotta get back to work, bud.” That’s always the story, right? Why would today be any different?

The garage door growls open. Mom’s van pulls in, blasting some old 90s pop song.

Both of them are home early? Something’s off. That, or I’ve been transported to a parallel universe where my parents suddenly have more time for us.

“Everybody’s here!” The twins skip toward the house.

We file into the kitchen. Dad’s already pulling out a pitcher of lemonade. Mom drops her purse onto the counter, her face lit with something between excitement and nerves.

Mom nudges Dad. “Is it done?”

Dad nods. “Hey gang, family meeting.”

Family meeting? My stomach drops. The last time we had one of those was when Dad told us we were moving. I brace myself for the worst.

“What is it?” Sarah asks.

The boys slide into their seats at the kitchen table.

Dad scans our faces. “I wanted to tell all of you at the same time. You remember how your brother broke his foot, right?”

“He dropped tools on it.” Sarah winces. “Ouch.”

I grip the basketball tight in my hands. *Oh, I remember.*

“Yes, while he was helping me fix the Charger,” Dad explains.

“Dad’s been working hard on it for a long time, after work or before work.” Mom leans on Dad’s shoulder—gazing at him like he’s a hero and not the absent promise-breaker he’s been for weeks.

“I finished fixing it.” Dad smiles at Mom. “And today, I sold it.”

“You. . . sold it?” The basketball slips from my fingers and thuds against the floor.

“Yep. It wasn’t worth millions, but we got enough to catch up a bit. And more importantly—” He gestures to Mom, who pulls out a stack of colorful brochures. “We’re setting aside the rest for you kids. Camps. Classes. Activities. Whatever you want.”

Mom spreads the brochures across the table. Smiling faces. Soccer camps. Art workshops. “You can each pick something you’d like to explore.” Her eyes shine.

I look around the table at my siblings—*are they really buying this?*

Sarah claps, and the boys start fighting over a brochure.

Me? All I can do is stare.

Dad sold the car? The thing he spent hours working on, always with an excuse why he couldn’t play or show up for me? Why now?

“What’s the catch?” The words slip out before I can stop them.

Dad looks at me, confused. “No catch, son. I thought you’d be happy.”

Should I be? I guess I’m happy he’ll finally stop pestering me to work on it with him, but I know he’ll find something else—some other thing that will consume his time.

I don’t want his money to go to some camp. I want him to be around, that’s all.

Can’t he see that?

“Everything okay, Jon?” Dad asks, his brows furrowing in concern.

“No, it’s not.” I scoop up my basketball and storm

off to my room, not even bothering to ask if I can be excused.

CHAPTER



I pound the ball around my room, partly because the *thud-thud-thud* noise on the carpet is super satisfying but also because dribbling helps clear my head.

Usually.

Right now, the more I dribble, the fuzzier my brain gets.

My thoughts rewind, back to the day I went looking for Dad at his shop. I had expected to find him chatting with a customer, or helping Jimmy sweep up so they could close. So he could come home like he'd said he would. But that's not what I found.

Instead, I found him alone, in an already-closed shop, tinkering with that Charger. What was so important about that piece of junk, anyway?

Thud. Thud. Thud.

He used to ask me to help him work on it all the time, like he wanted cars to be my thing too. They're not,

but I guess it was nice that Dad wanted us to have something in common. Now that he's sold it, does that mean he's giving up on me? That he doesn't want to do anything together anymore?

"Jonathan?" Dad opens the door and steps inside.

I face him. "Yeah?"

"You need to get something off your chest?" Dad leans against the wall, studying me. It's the same look he gets when he's trying to pinpoint an issue with a car.

"I don't know." I sit in my desk chair and fiddle with the pencils in my Thunder cup. "Why did you really sell the car? We worked on that together."

Dad tilts his head. "We worked on the Charger a handful of times, yeah. I never got the impression that you really enjoyed engine work. You said you'd rather shoot hoops. Am I wrong?"

I shake my head.

"I had a customer last week who saw the Charger in the back of the shop. He made me an offer—if I could get the fuel injector working—and here we are."

"So you spent every minute you could fixing that car instead of shooting hoops with me."

"I admit I've been distracted. I know I've missed out on some things."

"Some things? More like a lot of things. I needed you, Dad, and you weren't there. You chose the Charger

over me.”

Dad puts a hand on my shoulder. “I’m sorry, Jonathan,” his voice breaks a little. “I got so caught up in this project I didn’t realize the thing that I really needed to work on was right here.” His hand squeezes my shoulder tight. “My family is my priority—your Mom, your siblings, and you. If I had my way, I’d spend all my time with you guys.”

I look him in the eyes. “Even if I don’t like cars?”

“Even if you don’t like cars. J-man, I know you’re not a gearhead like me. You’re a baller.” A proud smile stretches across his face.

“Like Grandad.”

“Not like your grandad—like you. You’re becoming your own man, and I couldn’t be prouder of you. I’m excited to see where basketball takes you.”

“You’re proud of me? What for?” He’s never home to see anything I do—how can he be proud?

“Of course I’m proud of you. This move has been a huge change for everyone, but especially for you. Your siblings are young enough to take this kind of move in stride. Moving in middle school is tough.”

So he does get it.

He continues, “I was hoping that moving close to work meant that I’d have more time at home. But, instead, I’m the guy who has to cover when someone’s sick or has a family issue. I should have planned for that be-

fore we moved, but I didn't. I'm fixing it now."

My frustrations begin to fade. *Dad's owning up to his mistakes. He's been out of the game for a while, like I was, but he's showing up now.*

"You've stepped up in ways I couldn't have imagined. You've been there for your siblings day in and day out. Today, seeing you coaching your siblings was amazing. You're patient and encouraging with your brothers, and you share responsibilities with your sister. You've really started treating them differently. Leading them. Setting an example and bringing out the best in them. That means the world to me."

I sit up a little straighter. I didn't think he'd noticed any of that. Maybe I didn't give him enough credit. On our family team, he's been working behind the scenes, watching and learning about his players.

"Coach Robinson called me at work. He said you've got a lot of potential, J. A lot of natural talent and a good work ethic." Dad's face lights up. "He told me about the Junior Cougars program in January, and about a basketball camp next summer. If you want to go, Mom and I will make it happen."

"You're serious? You will?"

"That was the whole point of selling the Charger. To give you and your siblings a better opportunity to pursue your dreams, whether you want to play ball or be an astronaut. Money's tight, so I have to get creative to make it happen."

It finally clicks for me. He's been on my side this whole time. I just couldn't see it.

"And if I have to, I'll flip more cars so my kids can play basketball, or go to science club, or take music lessons. I'm here for you, and I'll always be rooting for you."

Here for me. The words mean more to me than I can say.

"Thanks, Dad."

I lean into him, and he squeezes me tight.

"Well, we've still got some light left." Dad picks up my ball. "What do you say? Play you in h-o-r-s-e?"

I thought he'd never ask.

"Oh, you're on."

CHAPTER

37



“Here! I’m open!” Ian flails his arms.

“Heads up!” Mason bounce passes to him. Ian dribbles—slowly—past Sarah’s defense. He plants his feet, bends his knees, and fires the ball as hard as he can at the bucket. The ball hits the rim.

“Air ball! Air ball!” Alec chants a little friendly fire.

Ian’s face scrunches. His fists clench. He’s teetering on the edge of tears.

“Time out!” I hustle over to him as quickly as my Boot will let me.

“Ian—remember, people are going to trash talk you a little. Take that energy and convert it to fuel. Right?”

He takes a deep breath. “Turn it to fuel.”

“Good! You’ve got this. Your form is solid—accuracy comes next.” I pat his shoulder. “Ready to play?”

“Ready!” Ian fist-bumps me and hustles to our version

of center court.

I blow the pink plastic whistle that Sarah loaned me, and the game resumes.

Sarah fires a pass to Alec, who dribbles hard toward the basket. Mason spreads his arms wide to block.

“Pass! Pass it, Alec!” Sarah runs around Ian. She’s wide open.

“Nice cut, Sarah!” I shout. “Way to move.”

But Alec hesitates. Instead of passing, he dribbles again. Rookie mistake.

I blast the whistle. “Alec, you’re traveling. Gotta pass or shoot once you stop.”

“I changed my mind,” Alec protests.

“Can’t do that.” Sarah puts a hand on his shoulder.

“Rules are rules. You’ll get it.”

Mason’s phone rings. “Hey, guys, time out—it’s my dad.” He grabs his water bottle from the porch and takes a seat.

“Halftime! I’m starving.” Alec drops the ball and runs into the house.

Guess that’s it for now. We had a good run, with Sarah drilling Mason and me (and enjoying it a little too much), then a little two-on-two with the boys. I wipe the sweat from my forehead. I should probably put my foot up soon, anyway.

Mason jogs back over. "Hey, get your dad." He has an *I know something you don't* grin, and I'm pretty sure I'm about to get an invite to spend the night. Which means we'll be watching basketball all night getting ready for Junior Cougars. We're going to be working one-on-one with high school varsity players and playing real scrimmages, and it's going to be amazing. Especially 'cause I'll be out of my Boot by then.

I find Dad in the kitchen making Alec a sandwich, singing some old tune about Alabama. I interrupt his personal jam. "Dad. Mason wants to ask you something."

Dad follows me outside.

Sarah's chalking a sunrise at the top of the driveway, while Ian tries to dribble and ride his scooter at the same time. Mason paces beneath the basket.

"Hi, Mr. Spencer. My Dad wants you to call him and put it on speaker. Is that okay?" A goofy, wide grin is plastered on Mason's face. Like the Joker, without the creepiness factor.

"Sure. Am I in trouble?" Dad dials Mr. Barnes and taps the speaker button.

"Hi, Craig," Mr. Barnes says. "How are you doing?"

"Great." Dad leans toward the speaker. "What can I do for you?"

"Here's the deal. My client gave me four tickets to the Thunder game next weekend. Do you and Jonathan

have plans?"

I look at Mason, and my jaw drops. *NO WAY*. Mason's eyes look like they're going to pop out of his head.

"Dad! Yes! Are you kidding? Please say yes! Please!" I drop to my knees dramatically. "Please!"

Mr. Barnes laughs through the phone. "It's too bad they're not excited about it."

"I know, a shame, right?" Dad helps me up off the pavement. "Thanks for thinking of us. We'd love to go."

"Great! I'll text you the details in a minute." Mr. Barnes hangs up.

Dad hugs me and high-fives Mason. "Nice of your dad to invite us, Mason. This is going to be fun!"

"We're going to a Thunder game!" Mason and I jump up and down, fist-bumping the air.

"Do you think we can get a ball or jersey signed?" I ask.

"Oh, yeah," Mason says. "I think my dad has an old jersey we can get signed."

Dad wraps an arm around my shoulder. "Which player's autograph are you going to get?"

"All of them," I say without missing a beat.

"Figured," Dad says. "They have lots of great players."

The Thunder are most definitely a great team. But right now? Nothing beats being part of Team Spencer.

THE END

WHAT DO YOU THINK?

1. In middle school, do you think it's alright to want to fit in but also stand out? How might this be difficult?

2. In Jonathan's essay to Coach Robinson, he explains the importance of being a star in your role. What does this mean to you?

3. If you were a basketball player, would you like to play for Coach Robinson? Why or why not?

4. How would you describe Jonathan's transformation from the beginning of the book to the end? What are his biggest areas of growth?

The TIP-OFF

AS IF GOING TO A NEW SCHOOL without any friends wasn't hard enough, Jonathan Spencer is at least a head taller than his sixth-grade classmates. Fitting in would be nice, but it's not an option when your every move makes you stand out.

Starting middle school is rarely easy, but a summer full of big changes has Jonathan feeling overwhelmed. There are new responsibilities at home involving his three crazy younger siblings, and Mom and Dad have new jobs and no time. Plus, the notorious school prankster Slammo prowls the halls in search of victims for his growing online empire.

But when Jonathan discovers a hidden talent, things begin to change. Learning to play basketball might be just what he needs to survive on and off the court.

PRAISE FOR THE TIP-OFF

"As the oldest in my family, I really related to Jonathan. It gets frustrating sometimes, but The Tip-Off showed me that no matter how hard things get, you can always bounce back."

– 8th Grade boy

"The Tip-Off is all about resilience, determination, and teamwork—on and off the court. I've told all my friends to read it!"

– 7th Grade girl

"I liked the mix of fast basketball action and real life — family, teamwork, and doing what's right. The Tip-Off has it all."

– 8th Grade boy