

## **Second Chances**

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### **Author's Thoughts**

Writing this book was a challenge. I studied the behaviors and words of “tweens” for quite some time to pinpoint the direction I wanted to take with this book. I thought about how I felt about certain things that happened when I was in elementary school, the hurtful words people said and how people interpreted those words. I thought about friendships and how everyone needs a friend who believes they rock, no matter what. No matter how “out there” they seem. Everyone is important and amazing in some way, shape, or form.

Growing up is hard. It certainly was for me, anyhow. I was not well-liked for some reason. It still hurts as an adult at times. Sometimes people feel they have to say the right words, wear the right clothes, or like the right things. Yet honestly, what is “right”? People have always wondered. Or are there different types of “rights” and people just don't realize it?

When I wrote this book, I wanted to come up with believable characters. I tell my students all the time that so much has to go into “forming” a character.

I chose some names of people I knew or names I just liked in general. Or I thought really hard and tried to put a name with the “face” I saw in my mind. When I thought of someone brilliant, above

his peers, and mindful, I thought of the name “Seth”. “Dillon” was a name I chose for character who turned out to have a lot of personality, someone with broad interests.

I had to create antagonists (people who are against the main character) and also those types of characters who the reader does not like at the beginning of the story, but connects with by the end. Patrick, of course, is the antagonist. Authors sometimes create characters that do not change at all or change just slightly. Dillon is the character who changes a great deal, yet I made how and why he changes very unpredictable until a certain point in the story. Ryan also changes, but mainly because of the “second chance” he was given.

Why didn't I make this a straight-through realistic fiction story? Why did I add that streak of fantasy? I had to add that bit because it gets the reader to think about how things can change a great deal if you think things through- the words you say and your actions.

## Chapter One

September 29, 2006

It was a typical Thursday at Wadesboro Elementary School, so typical that it blended into every other day I had ever spent at school. Mrs. Wilkins was my second-grade teacher, and she was always really considerate to us, no matter how traumatic a situation we caused. However, things would change completely that day, particularly between my best friend Seth Morgan and me.

Seth was not the typical second grade boy. He had dark brown hair and thick glasses. He was also a lot smaller than the rest of the boys in our class. It seemed as if every boy towered at least a foot over him. His voice was also very high and possessed a nasal quality. Yet what made him stand out even more was that he was a complete brainiac for his age, reading on at least a fifth grade level. While everyone toiled through *Horrible Harry* and *Time Warp Trio* books, he would sit and read books way beyond his age. His favorite of all was *Johnny Tremain*. He could multiply and divide really well, and he was fascinated with science. When he grew up, he wanted to become a crypto zoologist, while I was completely fascinated at the time with becoming a race car driver. Yet even though Seth and I seemed incredibly different, we possessed a lot of similarities. We met through our fathers before kindergarten because they both worked in carpentry. They got around to talking when my dad mentioned that I was already reading, and Seth's dad chuckled, mentioning that he had been reading just before he turned four. We then met of course, and the rest was history.

However on that fateful Thursday, we were on the swings, discussing the rules of chess. Seth enjoyed playing with his father, and I appreciated a lot of what he did, even though I was not as

brilliant. All of a sudden, Dillon Randall and Patrick Delmar came marching up to us. Patrick grabbed at Seth's glasses and vengefully snapped them in half. Dillon then followed Patrick and knocked Seth out of the swing with great force. Seth began bawling his eyes out, and the two boys persisted even more. I just sat there, appalled on the inside but not displaying much emotion on the outside. I was speechless. Suddenly Dillon swung on his heels and blurted out to me, "Are you actually going to keep hanging out with this dork?"

My mouth was as dry as the Sahara Desert, and if they would have poked me in any way, I probably would have bawled my eyes out. Seth's eyes were brimming with tears, glancing pleadingly in my direction. He may have been thinking, *Please, set them straight*, yet I was numb from head to toe. I did not want to be in Seth's predicament and a crowd began surrounding us (as well as Mrs. Wilkins), so I blurted out the first thing my preposterous mind told me to say- "No, Dillon. I am not going to be his friend anymore."

It was like Pandora's Box had opened at that moment. Seth was devastated with his mouth hanging open. His lip with quivering and he began shaking from head to toe. I was even more devastated that I betrayed him. Yet I could never take that moment back; I *had* to move on. Dillon and Patrick were beaming with delight that I had caused harm to my best friend. A few particularly mean kids, one named Jordan and another named Brent, began clapping. Seth then ran for his life.

Mrs. Wilkins broke up the fight and hauled the two instigators down to the front office on their heels. Seth was escorted by a girl named Emily to the guidance office. She was a kind, quiet spirit who cared about everyone in her class. She consoled him while I sat in the swing like a complete fool. An extremely introverted boy

named Jonathan than looked at me and snarled, “Good going. *You hurt your best friend.*” He then disappeared when another second grade teacher, Ms. Morrow, gathered our class to bring us inside. I followed reluctantly, struck, eventually out to become sort of an outcast.

The thing was, we boys had so much to hide. I really wanted to tell Seth that I was sorry, but over time, that desire faded. Dillon was also really intelligent, though he never wanted to admit it to everybody. He had seemed fine up until that point, back in kindergarten and first grade. Patrick was the instigator of all, very harsh and controlling of all his friends. Nobody wanted to have him on their bad side, though perhaps Patrick also had something to hide.

It would be almost by fate that this entire crowd reunited for fourth grade. Our somewhat unfortunate teacher, Mrs. Farley, had Seth, Dillon, Patrick, Emily, Jonathan, Jordan, and myself on her roster. I am sure she was half mortified at first and asking the front office to remove at least one of the two bullies from her class. Yet everything progressed, and at Open House, I was staring at Mrs. Farley’s fourth grade class list including all our names.

### **Describing the People in My Life**

Me- Ryan Barrow

DOB- December 7, 1998

Height- 4’7”

Favorite Subject- Writing

Family- David (a 46-year old carpenter), Susan (a 41-year old nurse), and one extremely annoying sibling, Maggie (Margaret), who is entering second grade.

Generally, I am an intelligent person who makes the honor roll. I cannot exactly label myself as a “genius”, but I have never made a grade below a B. I have belonged to the Boy Scouts since first grade and played on a local soccer team since second grade. In all honesty, I do not have an abundance of close friends. Probably the closest I have are Anthony and Connor, my 8- and 11-year old neighbors. At school, my favorite subject is writing. I guess I can say that writing stories is exciting; I especially enjoy sketching comic books and coming up with interesting plots. When I grow up, I hope to become a lawyer because from time to time, I try to argue myself out of situations. My mother tells me I am quite persuasive.

I am not all that introverted, yet I am certainly not extroverted, either. I blend into the woodwork. At lunch, I sit where there is an open space and 75% of the time speak with whoever is seated near me, unless it is Seth or Patrick. In those instances, I am silent, resilient, or both.

Most of the time, my teachers like me, though I am not the “Teacher’s Pet”. I do what I am supposed to at school and have never caused a huge problem besides that one day out on the playground. There is never a day I have not completed my homework.

I know not everyone at school likes me, and it is because of what happened with Seth. They think I must have crossed over to the other side that day. Jonathan gets all strange around me and has sort

of formed an alliance with Seth. Patrick sneers in my direction with whatever opportunity he has, and Dillon can either be hot or cold. Around Patrick, of course he is cold. Without Patrick, he is decent, though I know it would be awful for him to be seen talking to me. So we don't talk. The girls really don't talk to me, either. Maybe out of the entire class, a boy named Matthew is the most decent, yet we don't go over one another's houses or anything.

I am mean at times, also. It's sort of like a defense mechanism. It's only towards Seth. Well, I am vocally rude towards him because I don't want him to think we are ever going to be friends again. It's not like an entire conversation; it's a few sporadic utterances. I am inwardly rude towards Patrick, but I would never say anything to him because I don't want to have a confrontation all my own.

That's basically the extent of my life as of the beginning of fourth grade.

### **The Ex-Best Friend- Seth Morgan**

DOB- February 2, 1999

Height- 4'5"

Favorite Subject- Science

Family- David (a 45-year old carpenter), and... that's it. His mother passed away when he was in kindergarten. I remember her a little bit.

At Open House in August, Seth was particularly introverted. However, something had changed a great deal about him. He actually looked great, though I would never admit it to him. He had

ditched the old glasses for sleek new ones that made him look a lot different. He also had a completely different haircut where his hair stuck out a little bit on the top. However, I was annoyed by him because he resided on his own alternate universe. By fourth grade, we *despised* the living daylights out of one another. Immediately our fathers spotted one another and of course they talked (because their long-term friendship did not end over us), but we looked away from one another the entire time.

Seth did well in school from the beginning of fourth grade. People either thought he was great or a complete outcast. He ruled at multiplication, earning A's on all his tests. He was one of the only students to do that in our class. Now that he was in fourth grade and not second, he was probably reading books on about a high school level. One day I spotted him reading Shakespeare, which frightened the wits out of me. I also spotted him on another occasion scanning his father's old science textbooks from college when he was eating lunch. He and Jonathan actually became great friends, it seemed, because they were always talking and laughing together.

A few times, he caught me rolling my eyes at him, and another time, I said something to him along the lines of, "One day, I'll probably catch you reading the longest book ever written in existence." I also snickered at him if he did not respond to a math question correctly in class. However, I think Seth did not care about the way in which I treated him anymore because he never uttered a word to me despite what I did to him.

### **Seth's Replacement Friend- Jonathan Connell**

DOB- April 17, 1999

Height- 4'8"

Favorite Subject- Science

Family- I know his dad is a veterinarian and his mom is a dentist. He also has two older siblings in high school. They all seem very intelligent.

I do not know how to explain Jonathan.

Extremely quiet. Cannot disturb a mouse. Secretive. However, very open around Seth.

I do not believe that Jonathan has ever been a fan of me.

He's always been a straight-A student, I know that much.

I also do not know much about his friendship with Seth. Are they as close as the two of us once were? I don't know. Does he like Science *as much as* Seth? Again, I don't know. He's not exactly one of those boys who everyone talks to, and I think that delights Seth because apparently he understands his alternate universe.

### **The Bully to Fear- Patrick Delmar**

DOB- September 6, 1998

Height- 5'2"

Favorite Subject- I don't know if he enjoys any subject, in all honesty.

Family- At least a loud-mouthed mother and screaming little brother, who actually isn't so little. I believe he is a year younger than my

sister. I think his name is Tyler, and he's almost as tall as a third grader.

Patrick has always been very tall and foreboding. In kindergarten, he was in the class next door, yet he would steal other kids' lunches and make them cry. He also is outstanding at shoving his way to get to the front of the line.

I do not know if he has any extremely close friends. Everyone believes that he and Dillon are close friends, but I have always been a little unsure of whether they are true friends. Dillon has always been different from Patrick, yet he doesn't separate from him. Patrick is bossy, loud, and in competitive football. He is not the most intelligent in the class, yet he is not a poor student, either. He controls whoever is around him, unless that person is strong. Dillon is not that strong, though he is certainly capable of being stronger.

Patrick has never really said that much to me. It's good at times to blend into the woodwork because you don't stand out and therefore nobody has a reason to be rude. However, I have never really said much to him, either.

### **The Passive Bully- Dillon Randall**

DOB- November 7, 1998

Height- 4'7"

Favorite Subject- He seems to be an amazing writer because he writes in his journal a lot during writing class.

Family- I have seen his parents. They seem very eccentric. His father has some tattoos. I don't know what he or his mother does for a living. He also has a brother who is probably about to go into kindergarten (or pre-kindergarten). I think his name is Brock or something along those lines. He's either three or four.

Dillon, as I have mentioned, has always stood in Patrick's shadow, at least since first grade. I don't know how it all started, but I guess they were both looking for a friend and things just happened. Yet for as much as Patrick doesn't seem to like school, Dillon seems to enjoy it. He has always enjoyed writing for the most part, and I see him sketching sometimes when we are at lunch. However, I've never seen what he sketches.

I don't know if he's always made the honor roll. It's like he doesn't always want people to know he's smart, yet have a feeling he is. I know he passes his multiplication tests because he sits near me, but he keeps the fact he does pretty well to himself.

He's good at sports, probably better than me. However, he's not a braggart about it on his own. Yet when Patrick goes on about something like sports, he nods and blurts out, "*Yeah*, I know. We're going to knock them into the ground." It's like Patrick rules the conversation and he tells him what he wants to hear.

We've never really talked. Honestly, I don't think he wants to talk to me, but whatever. If he's fake around Patrick, then he'd probably be fake around me, also.

## Chapter Two

September 29, 2008

"Argggg," I grumbled as soon as my alarm clock went off at 6:20 a.m. The song that played on the radio was Dance to the Music. My eyelids fluttered open and I glanced at my orange polo shirt hanging with my dark blue khakis. Sometimes my mother hung outfits to save time in the morning because from time to time, I don't roll out of bed until 6:57 and have to be on the bus by 7:20, which is a consistent rush-rush-rush.

Immediately I made my way to the shower because I knew soon that Maggie would be pestering me to get out of the bathroom. I was aware this would be one of those rushed mornings because she had constructed this diorama for her advanced second grade class. So that meant that our mother was driving us in because Maggie was worried about hauling her project on the bus.

The shower only lasted about five minutes, though. The water simply would not stay hot, so I stepped out of the cold shower in exhaustion. I then went to brush my teeth, and barely any toothpaste was left in the tube. My mother always tries to get me to roll the tube, yet I've never been able to master that. Eventually everything was handled and I was in the outfit with the orange polo, yet I didn't seem to have the greatest of luck so far.

Breakfast was French toast with fruit, and the French toast seemed to have an ice chunk in it after I heated it up, so I had to re-heat it. Maggie was up by 6:45 and was particularly whiny that morning. When we got in the car, this particularly annoying country song was on the radio. We were also stuck behind a bus of middle school students that kept making stops, so that was making my mom

agitated. By the time I got to school, I saw these words on the board-  
DON'T FORGET- MULTIPLICATION TEST ON 7's TIMES  
TABLES TODAY.

*Shoot, I forgot!* My mind thought in exhaustion. *Ah, I guess I'll pass it because I've always at least gotten a C on my weekly tests.* So immediately the multiplication test was the last thing on my mind.

Dillon was actually the second person in the classroom, and today, he decided to talk. It was nobody but us. "Hey, um, Ryan, I am sort of curious. I am doing some skateboarding tricks after school. Do you like skateboarding?"

I had never skateboarded a day in my life. "Eh, it's okay, I guess. I've done an Ollie before. I've also tried a reverse Ollie."

"I don't know too many people to ask from school, but I know I don't live too far from you. Would you like to come along?"

I paused for a moment. "Why are you talking to me?" I blurted out.

He also paused. "Seems cool, I guess, and I don't know who to ask."

I then ventured a little far, in my opinion. "Why don't you ask Patrick?" I asked.

He flinched for a moment. "Patrick always has football practice, and he's not so much into skateboarding. So you want to come along?"

I shrugged. "Sounds good, I guess," I responded. "We've never done anything together before."

"Maybe it would be cool to know you a little better," he answered.

"Maybe," I echoed.

I don't know how much he remembered the incident from second grade, and hopefully he was being genuine, not lulling me with trickery. I decided to trust him and act as if I had skateboarded before that afternoon.

Other people in our class then began trickling in. Eventually, Seth made it through the door and shuffled to his seat. He read the words "multiplication test" on the board and began doing some longer multiplication problems at his desk. How he knew such a plethora of facts as fast as he did, I don't know, but I remember staring down at the multiplication table that morning in my notebook and being confused between  $6 \times 7$  and  $7 \times 7$ .  $6 \times 7$  was 42.  $7 \times 7$  was 49. Yet my mind kept convincing me that  $7 \times 7$  was 42. The only facts I knew for sure were  $7 \times 1$ ,  $7 \times 2$ ,  $7 \times 3$ ,  $7 \times 4$ ,  $7 \times 5$ ,  $7 \times 10$ , and  $7 \times 11$ . The middle ones I was perplexed about, and that was four facts, so I was at least out to get an 80 percent. Oh, and  $7 \times 12$  startled me completely, so that brought me down to at least 75 percent. I also flip out over tests, so I am sure I wouldn't even get a 75 percent at that rate.

Another nightmarish event occurred at around 12:00 that afternoon. Mrs. Farley had to pair everyone up for a science assignment that would be due that Friday. Our class was studying the human body, which certainly was exciting, but she told us that we could not choose our partners. "I want you to work with someone different," she began, "because in the working world, you don't get to choose your partners. What you'll have to do is trace your partner's body. Then you'll sketch different bones inside the shape."

Okay, the project didn't seem so bad at first. I guess Dillon would not be the worst partner to have. Matthew was also fine, and there were other cool boys in our class. Any boy would have done besides Patrick or Seth. Even Jonathan would be an all right partner, though it wouldn't be all that fun. Yet when she announced that I was partners with Seth, we both turned this awful shade of pimento. When she saw my face, she bore her eyes into me like I was the most cold-hearted nine-year old she had ever encountered. It's like she knew it was pure torture for me.

She told us to get with our partners and talk about which bones we would sketch in the shape. We would have to choose about twenty-five different bones. When Seth reluctantly came over to me, I blurted out, "Well, I know we won't have to sketch a spinal column because you don't have a spine."

"Excuse me," he told me for the first time after two years of not speaking to me. "It's called *vertebrate*. The spinal column is in the nervous system."

"Well, at least we are not having to do the circulatory system because you don't have a heart," I continued, rolling my eyes.

"I don't have a heart? Then you *certainly* don't have one," he retorted back.

Seth had become quite bold in the few years we hadn't spoken.

"So who are we going to trace?" I grumbled.

"It doesn't matter," he mumbled. "Wait. I'll trace you. I don't trust you with a pencil."

"Oh, so I should trust *you* with a pencil?" I raised one eyebrow at him.

"At least then you won't have a weapon."

"Oh, please. You're so lame."

"You're lamer," he shot back.

"Isn't it more lame?" I questioned.

"Nope. The grammatically correct usage is lamer," he half argued.

"More lame."

"Lamer."

"More lame."

"More... lame," he repeated slowly, his face forming a half-smirk.

"LAMER," I nearly shouted in his face.

"I TRICKED YOU, ignoramus!" he blurted out triumphantly.

Mrs. Farley then glared at us once more and glanced up at the clock. "Class, it's time for lunch," she announced. "Let's stop where we are now. When we get back, we can start the tracing part of the project," she heaved a sigh of relief.

We lined up, and he stood right in *front* of me. "And how much have you grown in the past two years? Negative two inches?" I muttered so only he heard.

“How much has your mentality decreased, you numb brain? Negative 100 IQ points?”

I poked him, and he all of a sudden blurted out, “Mrs. Farley. Ryan cannot keep his hands to himself.”

“Do you need to be separated, boys?” she called out.

“YES!” we both cried out pleadingly.

Seth then huffed and puffed to the back of the line. “*I despise you,*” he grumbled one last time as he walked past me.

Mrs. Farley stood with an authoritative pose. “Yet I want you two to know something right now. You *are* going to work this out. You cannot *get* out of being partners.”

We both huffed and puffed through lunch. I sat by Matthew, who rambled on about the World of Warcraft. He went on about the new land called Outland and how Ner’zhul, some dark warlord, built a series of gateways that could lead the beaten Horde to newer, unspoiled worlds. Prince Arthas was evil and Illidan, the leader of this land, lived in fear of him. Matthew was talking Greek to me because I never played the game. Yet all of a sudden, Seth decided to be extremely annoying and joined the conversation, conglomerating Matthew’s attention entirely because he had played the game before. Jonathan then joined the conversation, which totally took me out of it.

I then thought of talking about skateboarding with Dillon, yet Patrick was next to him and that probably wouldn’t have gone over too well. So I had no choice but to eat in silence.

Something quite interesting happened about twenty minutes into lunch when a girl named Holly Pacharko laughed so hard that milk shot out her nose. When everyone stared at her, her face eventually turned to a shade of crimson.

I am sure Seth was not looking forward to getting back from lunch as much as I was. The afternoon was loaded with torturous events- this project, the multiplication test, and me having to pose as a decent skateboarder.

We received white butcher block paper as soon as we got back. All the partners worked well except for us. Mrs. Farley knelt down next to us as soon as she realized we really weren’t doing so hot.

“Is there a problem?” she began.

“I don’t want to work with Seth,” I answered, shrugging half angrily.

“I don’t want to work with Ryan,” he repeated.

She then went into how we had to smooth out the problem or we both would fail. That straightened Seth up immediately, who had never received below a 95 on a report card. “Yes, ma’am,” he nodded somewhat reluctantly.

He spoke quietly. “Get down, Ryan, let me trace you, and I’ll sketch the bones after this.”

“I have to do *something,*” I replied with my face having a wretched expression.

“Yeah, write your name on it.”

“No. You can trace me and then I guess we’ll work on the sketching part together after that,” I muttered under my breath.

“All right,” he responded passively.

“Fine,” I added.

“Perfect,” he stated back with a monotone expression.

We worked in silence for fifteen minutes after that. He complained when I moved an inch or two.

When time was called, we rolled up the paper and headed back to our seats to hear we had the multiplication test in five minutes. We had our study time, so I pulled out the chart and my mind was jumbled up even more. I was worried about this project. I was even more worried about skateboarding. Half of me wanted to be cool to Dillon and I didn’t know why. The other half of me told me he hadn’t talked to me all this time and this was strange.

Mrs. Farley eventually handed out the test papers for the 7 times tables, and we had one minute. Now she gave us second chances if we really needed them, so I was okay inside. When she called “GO”, I turned over the test and my mind completely clouded over.

Here was the test-

Name- Ryan Barrow

$7 \times 4 = 28$	$7 \times 2 = 14$
$7 \times 6 = 42$	$7 \times 9 =$
$7 \times 2 = 14$	$7 \times 8 =$
$7 \times 5 =$	$7 \times 11 =$
$7 \times 3 =$	$7 \times 7 = 42$

$7 \times 1 = 7$	$7 \times 9 =$
$7 \times 8 =$	$7 \times 4 = 28$
$7 \times 3 =$	$7 \times 12 =$
$7 \times 10 =$	$7 \times 0 = 7$
$7 \times 7 = 42$	$7 \times 6 = 42$

When it was time to hand in, my face had turned a new shade- seaweed. I wasn’t feeling well at all. Plus, I wrote “42” for  $7 \times 6$  and  $7 \times 7$  because my mind was just too perplexed. Even worse, I realized a mistake as I handed in the paper-  $7 \times 0$  is NOT 7! It’s 0! I shouted “Uh, uh, uh, excuse me!” as Emily in our class collected my paper, yet she wouldn’t hand it back.

Thirty minutes later, after we did some work at our desks, I got the test back.

I got a 35%.Not even in the territory of a D.

Of course, Seth received a 100.

My eyes then darted very, very cautiously to the left. Just how smart was Dillon?

I saw the green number on there and nearly fainted. Dillon received a 95? He didn’t even sit near Seth, so I knew this was on his own merits. Yet as soon as I sensed his intelligence, he sensed that someone was looking at his grade. Quickly, the test was folded and shoved in his desk. He then peered my way. “Well, that definitely was not fun,” he told me quickly.

“No, not at all,” I responded, unsure of why he said that because he only missed one question.

“Remember after school, just head to my house. Probably 4:00 or so is good. Do you have a skateboard?” he asked.

“Uh, no, not for at least a year now-“ I blatantly lied.

“Don’t worry,” he assured me. “I have three.”

The rest of the day at school went kind of fast. Our class headed to Art at around 2:00, and again, I spotted something that Dillon was working on for a few moments before class began. All this time, he must have been working on a comic book because before him was the most incredible, intricate artwork I had ever seen! Okay, it was beyond... incredible. Yet as soon as Patrick came near him, the book was closed very quickly and he folded his arms across his chest. He seemed sort of fed up.

Seth and Jonathan were sitting together, of course, and kind of looking in my direction. I felt bitterly alone, but I eventually found someone else named Adam in our class to sit near. While we were in art class, the front office secretary called over the intercom-

“Do you have Ryan Barrow in class?”

“Yes, ma’am,” Mr. Franco, our art teacher, replied.

“Ryan will be going on Route 6 today as usual. His mom wanted to call because his sister Maggie had to go home early,” Mrs. Peters reported.

“Thank you, Mrs. Peters,” Mr. Franco politely told her. “You got all that, Ryan?”

I nodded.

“Oh, oh, oh, your sister had to go home early,” Patrick mimicked in a wimpy tone of voice. I shook my head. I didn’t want to get involved in a conversation with him. I was especially upset because Dillon snickered just to follow Patrick. I would probably bring that up later.

That day, we started a project that was pretty simple. The class was studying the artist Jasper Johns. When Mr. Franco asked the class if they knew anything about him, they had no clue what he had accomplished as an artist. Well, we learned he did a combination of abstract expressionism and pop art, whatever those were. He was both a painter and sculptor. He painted an American flag that had the first coat in enamel paint that would not dry and was covered in something called wax encaustic. So for our assignment, we had to look at some of his paintings and decide on an object we wanted to paint in his style. For some reason, I chose a skateboard and began sketching when time was called.

I happened to look at Seth, and I could not believe what I saw. He was ALSO sketching a skateboard. He had a very deliberate look on his face.

“You don’t know anything about skateboarding,” he said quietly with a wrinkled expression on his face. “Who are you trying to impress?”

“You don’t know anything about skateboarding, either,” I shot back. “And I’m not trying to impress anyone.”

“Hmm, sure, sure,” he mumbled quickly.

We didn’t do too much painting on the first day. We applied our first layer of paint and made sure our sketch was entirely done. It looked neat, and I knew it would certainly impress anyone who was

into skateboarding. I certainly considered myself a decent artist, and of course, my skateboard was not lopsided like Seth's.

Dismissal came at 3:00. By then, I felt adrenaline rushing through my veins. *How hard can it be?* I thought to myself. *I plant my feet on there and push the board forward.* I had a smug expression on my face as I headed to the bus. And to be hanging out with someone semi-popular, that was certainly an accomplishment for me. Seth was at the back of my mind.

When the bus arrived at my house, I must have entered quietly. My father was still at work, but my mom and sister were home. Normally they notice me. But as I made my way up the stairs, I heard clunking sounds from the bathroom. I was suspicious because the bathroom was entirely dark and the door was inched open about six inches. I peeked in, but when I noticed what was going on, it was too late. I heard the toilet flush.

Maggie was standing with her hands across her chest, flushing my tarantula down the toilet. I was very caught off-guard. Startled. Befuddled. Okay, I was downright angry.

"Just what are you doing?" I cried out.

"Just what I've done is flush your stupid tarantula down the toilet," she responded.

I didn't freeze for a moment. "You're supposed to be SICK! SICK people go to BED. They don't flush their brother's tarantula down the toilet!"

"What if I wasn't actually sick?" she responded in the most smug voice I have ever heard her use.

I was thoroughly disgusted by then. "You FAKED being SICK?"

"Well... uhh, I faked... no, wait, didn't fake... uhh, wait. I felt sick in a way when I was about to give my report..."

"I AM TELLING MOM," I boomed at her. "I cannot BELIEVE you! You are the WORST sister on the face of the planet!"

That's when the first thought struck. *I wish this day never happened, or it can just be redone so my sister would have never done this,* I thought to myself.

"I will NEVER forgive you, EVER!" I continued, crimson in the face. "Oh, and by the way, I am supposed to be going skateboarding, so excuse me."

That's when the second thought struck. What if I fell during skateboarding and...

- a. Broke my leg?
- b. Snapped my arm?
- c. Bruised my torso?
- d. Needed a body cast?

Yet by then my sense of reason was gone and I skedaddled as fast as I could, accusing my sister to all ends of the Earth and trying to be somewhat uhh... cool.

So after mom chastised my sister, I headed out two streets down on my bike. At least I was skilled at riding a bike- I think I probably had training wheels until first grade because I am not the

most coordinated of people. And that's where the biggest mistake of the day set in.

Okay, wait. I need to mention going to Dillon's house.

It was insane. His house looks the same as everyone else's from the front, but as soon as you step in, you first notice the walls are covered with all these music-related pictures. Massive audiences of people. People with microphones. People making peace signs at the person who was singing. Hard Rock Café decorations. Guitars. Bass drums. Huge records. Yet as I walked around for a few moments, I made a discovery- his dad was the main person in all these pictures. His dad was...

...A rock star?!

Suddenly, interrupting my thoughts, he came barreling downstairs, heaving heavy breaths. "Are you ready?" he asked quickly.

I just stood there, still in shock at the music-related memorabilia that adorned the walls of his living room/recording studio/den/whatever I was standing in. "Why is your dad in all these pictures?" I half prodded.

He turned a few shades of crimson before responding. "Well... uhh... I have to be honest, I guess.... my father... in the 1980s and 1990s, I believe... was the lead vocalist in his own rock group in California."

My mouth went dry. He was from California? His dad was famous? Why didn't he ever tell anyone about this at school?

"Why haven't you ever told anyone?" I questioned.

"No, no," he shook his head. "It's kind of embarrassing. I don't want people thinking I'm someone I'm not. I'm not... like that... umm... maybe... it's just not real cool telling people your dad was a famous enough rock star in California and then having all these people flock to you like you have something to give them, you know."

I nodded quickly. "Ahh, I get it."

"Ready?" he asked again. He still seemed embarrassed.

"Sure," I agreed it was time to start.

I don't even want to go into the gory details of what came up. It was dreadful in more than one respect. He got on the skateboard and was decent. He wasn't extremely cool at it, but he was way more advanced than me. Me, I stepped onto that... thing... for five minutes, went down a ramp at what seemed like a billion miles an hour, flipped through the air like I was some hotshot, and landed.

I don't remember the rest.

I blacked out.

I was now *officially* a fool.

It got even better than that, though I bet you are rolling your eyes at me by now and don't want to hear anything else I have to say about this dreadful excuse for a day.

I woke up in a different place. Looking outside, it was kind of dark. I was really, extremely, incredibly... sore. By then, I looked back on my day and recalled the skateboarding disaster, working with Seth in science class, talking to Seth after a two-year silent

protest, and yes... my lovely sister and the horrible things I said to her. And now, when I tried to move my body, I felt pins and needles in places. But luckily...

“Thank goodness, Ryan, you did not break a bone,” my mother started. She was stern to the point of nearly furious. She made a point of saying my name forty-eight times in the next minute, it seemed.

“Ryan,” she continued. “Ryan, you have never gotten on a skateboard in your life.”

I then heard a voice from the background. “You’ve never gotten on a skateboard? I thought you said you’ve done it before!”

It was Dillon. He hadn’t disappeared.

By then, I felt insanely sick and I noticed I wasn’t at his house or even mine. I was at Woodfield Hospital. Around me loomed his face, mom’s face, dad’s face, Maggie’s face, his dad’s face... oh, the nightmare went on and on and on.

I opened my mouth to speak but clamped it shut fast because I didn’t have anything smart to say. Finally, it came out. Something of very low intelligence. Something way too predictable. It was LAME. “I’m... sorry?” I squeaked.

“You better be sorry, Ryan,” mom boomed, “But sorry isn’t enough right now. Sorry is an understatement.”

“No, Mrs. Barrow, I am most sorry,” Dillon informed her.

“Thank you,” she told him kindly.

He then said the most hurtful thing.

“But... I don’t really want him ever coming over my house again. He lied to me, and I don’t need a friend like that right now.”

Then quite swiftly (with his family apologizing profusely), he and his family departed, and there I was... a sore, bruised, irritated 9-year old boy.

That’s when IT hit me again. Hard. I had this petty little wish.

I was bandaged up by 11:00 in the evening and brought home. I obviously wasn’t going to school the next day because I was a mummy. All I amounted to all of a sudden was a speck of dirt. I was scowling as I got in bed. My legs were propped.

Mom was still furious right before she said goodnight. “I am getting your schoolwork for the week as soon as your teacher will have it ready, and you will be doing it promptly. No video games. No television.”

I was as cantankerous as a donkey all of a sudden. “I cannot even PLAY my Wii! I cannot move! I feel like I am in a body cast!”

“Goodnight, Ryan,” she told me in a somewhat kind tone of voice, kissing me gently. She was through with me for the month by then. My dad then came in and did the same... and then it was dark.

I sat in bed for five minutes and glanced around. I wasn’t exactly tired, but I also wasn’t willing to stay up. Yet my mind raced.

*I wish I was in a movie, I thought to myself. You know, like one where I could take back my day and play it again. You know, like a replay. If you make lots and lots of mistakes, and basically if you’ve ruined your chances after that... and if your tarantula is*

*somewhere in Sewerville... I mean, this is a low day. A 1 out of a 10 if I had to rate it. Man, make it a .5...*

Suddenly, my eyelids fluttered and I was out within seconds.

Yet even though I was finally somewhat comfortable, I never knew what exactly thinking about the possible would cause for me.

### **Chapter Three**

*Oh... mannnnnn*, I thought to myself when I heard music coming from my alarm clock. Man, oh man, oh man... I must have kept my alarm set despite not going to school for the week. It has to be turned off.

Without thinking, I stood up and marched over to the alarm clock to turn it off. HA! My mind shouted. Yet in mid-thought, I looked down and saw:

- a) No bandages.
- b) No bruises.
- c) Different pajamas.

Okay, it's just a dumb dream, I thought to myself. Triumphantly, I got back in bed.

EHH-EHH-EHH-EHH-EHH! My alarm clock shouted two minutes later.

*Rats! I thought I turned that off*, I groaned in thought. *I must have pushed the two-minute snooze*. I shook my head and suddenly listened to the music that came from the clock.

*"They said, ride, Sa-l-ly, r-i-i-i-de..."* the radio suddenly blared.

Is that station all about Dance to the Music all of a sudden? I thought in exhaustion. I must be going insane. Yet as I turned around, I saw the orange polo hanging from yesterday. I could tell it was the same shirt because it had a pin-size hole at the bottom right. Along with the shirt was my dark blue khakis.

“Huh,” I mumbled quietly, grabbing towels from the hall closet so I could head to the shower before Maggie would pester me in the bathroom. Normally she got up thirty minutes after me, but I remembered yesterday that she had to be up earlier because of her diorama. Since she was up later last night, though, she probably wouldn’t wake up right away. Turning on the fan, I felt the steam of the shower penetrate the bathroom. I got in, yet the shower only lasted about five minutes. The water turned ice cold quite fast. In exhaustion, I turned off the shower and went to brush my teeth.

“Thank goodness mom got some toothpaste at the store yesterday-“ I started, yet I looked down and saw an empty tube.

“Maggie must have tricked me on this one,” I blurted out, yet when I dug through the trash and went back through the drawer, there was no evidence of a filled tube. After two minutes of fiddling around, I dealt with the empty tube and got as much toothpaste as I could out of it.

I stumbled into the kitchen by 6:50. Maggie was up and particularly annoying. She ran her mouth about her diorama project, which was strange. I then spoke up. “Mom, didn’t you get toothpaste yesterday at the store?” I asked.

“No,” she shook her head. “Actually, you’ve been asking for the past couple days. I think I am going this afternoon, actually.”

I then turned to Maggie. “And Maggie, didn’t you bring in the diorama project yesterday?”

She looked startled. “Um, no. Today.”

“Was it because you flipped out?” I asked, rubbing my eyes in exhaustion.

“Are you okay, Ryan?” she quickly asked.

“I must *not* be,” I shook my head fast and began pinching myself as hard as I could.

My mother had a really odd look on her face by then. “I think, Ryan, you need to eat this French toast as fast as you can because we need to drive your sister into school, if you remember that much.”

I then pinched myself again and let out some groaning sound. “Errrrrrrrrrrgggggggggg!” I cried.

“I’m glad you’re not pinching ME!” Maggie had this look of horror on her face by now.

“Ugh!” I moaned. “I am NOT dreaming!”

I then fumbled through my backpack quickly, found my agenda, and saw the note from yesterday had never been written. I dug through my backpack some more and found the pencil I thought I lost yesterday. Well, maybe I had lost it; I didn’t seem to know what was going on anymore.

When we got in the car, my mother turned on the country music station, just like yesterday. The same song came on as yesterday. The weather predictions were also exactly the same. I then realized the dream could not get any worse when I got out of the car, headed to the classroom, and saw DON’T FORGET-MULTIPLICATION TEST ON 7’s TIMES TABLES TODAY written on the board.

“Well, I guess I’ll study this time,” I blurted out loud.

“What, Ryan?” Mrs. Farley asked.

“Nothing, ma’am,” I responded, feeling pins and needles shooting up my arm. Multiplication was my vice! The 7’s times tables was particularly my vice! She then headed to the door to do her morning hall duty, and I was the only one in the room.

Dillon then came through the door. By then, I realized what had happened, though I felt like I was having an out-of-body experience. It was then as if he were reciting yesterday’s script, word-by-word. “Hey, um, Ryan, I am sort of curious. I am doing some skateboarding tricks after school. Do you like skateboarding?”

I paused for a moment. *I need to avoid that catastrophe*, I thought to myself. Maybe he would be a true friend and forgive me for not being all that great at skateboarding.

I then changed fate majorly by shaking my head. “I... can’t. My sister has a dance recital tonight. Maybe in a few days or even next week if you’d like.”

Obviously, the dance recital was also a lie. Why couldn’t I just admit to him that I was not talented in that area?

“I guess so,” he mumbled, sort of dejected.

I then went back to the script from yesterday. “Why are you talking to me?” I blurted out.

He also paused. “Seems cool, I guess, and I don’t know who to ask.”

I then ventured a little far, in my opinion. “Why don’t you ask Patrick?” I asked.

He flinched for a moment. “Patrick always has football practice, and he’s not so much into skateboarding.”

“Oh, sorry,” I responded.

He then turned away entirely and started his morning work.

People began entering the classroom, one by one. Seth entered on cue, also, and looked smug when he spotted the words “multiplication test” on the board. As if he were controlled by his actions of “yesterday”, he began completing the longer multiplication problems at his desk. I then opened my notebook and glared at the 7’s facts. 7, 14, 21, 28... my mind began to recite. *I already know those, but maybe I can better figure out the patterns*, I thought to myself.

The next three hours were somewhat dull and uneventful like before. We read, answered questions, and worked in centers. Then 12:00 approached, and I certainly knew what was coming by then. This time, I was going to be assertive.

“I want you to work with someone different,” Mrs. Farley began as before, “because in the working world, you don’t get to choose your partners. What you’ll have to do is trace your partner’s body. Then you’ll sketch different bones inside the shape.”

I raised my hand really quickly. “Uhh, Mrs. Farley, can we pick a partner that we normally don’t work with, or are you going to place us?”

“No, I am simply going to match people together on my own,” she answered.

“What if there’s people we cannot possibly work with?” I continued.

“You cannot avoid working with others in this classroom,” she responded passively. Like before, she went through all the partners and stated, “Seth and Ryan, you will be working together.”

I then began a coughing fit and pretended to hack up a lung. Seth looked utterly disgusted. “I need to go to the clinic,” I blurted out between chokes.

She paused for a few moments and then glanced at Seth. “Since you are his partner, Seth, I would like for you to walk him down to the clinic.” Not even giving him a chance to speak, she handed him a pass with both our names on it.

As soon as we headed out the door, Seth told me, “I cannot believe you at all. That was the nastiest thing you could have done.”

I then continued “choking”. “How do you know I am not really choking?” I croaked. “You cannot say I am a liar, because maybe I am not.”

“You appeared fine before she announced we were partners,” he responded in a flat tone of voice.

“Honestly, I saved you a great deal of torture,” I then stated in a normal voice.

“So you ARE lying,” he told me rudely. “You know what, MY grade needs to be spared.” He then turned around and left me in the hallway.

I then fell to the floor and put on my best show. I hacked and hacked until Mr. McManus, a fifth grade teacher, came to assist. Crocodile tears rolled down my face. Inside, I was concocting this

phenomenal plan- maybe I could get home before my sister, and I could spare the precious tarantula’s life.

So far, this day was going better than yesterday, and I could avoid the multiplication test until tomorrow. Maybe later, I could take out my iPod and listen to a podcast I downloaded from iTunes to help me learn my multiplication tables.

This fifth grade girl named Holly walked me down to the clinic. She actually believed me. It was absolutely a classic moment in my life. I realized that by putting forth my greatest acting techniques, I could avoid torture. I could manipulate the situation. I was awesome. Besides letting down Dillon, nothing else struck me. I was soon to improve the day I had yesterday.

Mom came to pick me up at 12:40. The nurse even believed me because I probably punctured a lung from coughing so much. She then decided to inform the office that my sister would be riding the bus in the afternoon.

Excellent! I would have about three hours to myself to sleep and listen to the multiplication facts on my iPod. I would over-prepare for the test and upstage Seth with my first score of a 100%. When I got to my bedroom, I decided I would sleep first, and perhaps that dinner, I could convince my father to prepare his delicious spaghetti sauce.

I sunk into the comfortable blanket on my bed, sighed that I wasn’t bruised up, and fell asleep in a flash.

I had set my clock for an hour, but when I woke up, something was terribly wrong. Soon, I would realize that I was under an incredible curse.

## Chapter Four

A voice shouted, “*Get up and dance to the music! Get ON up and DANCE to the music! All we need is a dru-m-mer... for people who only need a be-e-e-a-t...*”

I nearly smacked my forehead on the headboard of my bed. *Why is it so dark in here? I guess I slept through the night and forgot to wake up.* I rose and glanced over at the clothes that were hanging. The polo shirt was orange with a pin-size hole at the bottom, and of course, navy blue khakis hung behind the shirt.

It was a little past six in the morning, and again, Dance to the Music was playing on the radio. I guess my mother washed yesterday’s clothes and hung them back up. I grabbed the clothes and headed to the bathroom, prepared to see a full tube of toothpaste in the drawer. She promised that she would head to the store to pick up a new tube, and though I had slept through the afternoon, I am sure that she followed through with her word.

The tube was nearly empty. I then checked the water heater in the garage to see if it was working the way it should have been. I glanced at it for about five minutes and then headed up to my parents’ room.

I knocked on the door, and my father answered. He was already dressed for work like he should have been. I then decided to play the “I am all grown up now” game. “Dad, for starters, the water heater may not be working properly. And I also noticed our toothpaste is low.”

“Ahh, I’ll check the water heater this evening when I get home,” he assured me.

“Well, what do I do now?” I asked him. “That shower *may* work for five minutes, tops.”

“Try the best you can because I need to be heading out.” He put his arm around me. “Maybe later, you can help me solve the problem. We don’t need to be worrying about too much this morning.”

“Dad, when I came home from school yesterday, did mom say I fell asleep right away?”

He looked confused. “No, mom said you had some homework and you made dinner with her. I think you played a video game for about an hour, also, and did some silent reading.”

“That was the day *before* yesterday,” I assured him.

“No, I know it was yesterday,” he answered.

I then asked him one last question. “Uhh, do you know when I last wore the orange uniform shirt?”

“Last week, I think,” he told me. “I need to get to work, Ryan.” He gently pushed past me and made sure everything was set for the morning.

I had a peculiar feeling wash over me, and I had just wasted fifteen minutes. It was now about 6:35. Maggie all of a sudden came around the corner. “I have to get a shower,” she insisted. “You can just shower after me.”

I shrugged and went for a dare. “You have that project to share today, anyway.”

She nodded. “Oh, yeah!” She smiled at me, grabbed towels, and shut the bathroom door in my face.

My thoughts were confirmed- I was stuck in the dreadful day and could not escape it for some reason. I guess I can escape it if I do not play hooky in the middle of the day. I groaned and thought about how I could get through the project with Seth.

Fast forwarding to school, I was again the first person in the classroom. I thought of escaping and going to breakfast to avoid the skateboarding question, but I wanted to see if Dillon uttered the same words once again. Obviously again, he spoke not long after getting through the door.

“Hey, um, Ryan, I am sort of curious. I am doing some skateboarding tricks after school. Do you like skateboarding?”

I told him the utter and complete truth this time. “I’ll admit that I *like* skateboarding, but I don’t know how.”

He kind of bit his bottom lip and half shrugged. “I guess that’s not the worst thing in the world. Would you still like to come along?”

This time, I employed humor. “Well, if you want to see me amble down a ramp and bruise up my entire body, landing myself in the emergency room.”

“No, no,” he half chuckled. “Number one, you wouldn’t wind up in the emergency room. I wouldn’t send you down the ramp for it being your first time. But if you’d rather watch, we’ll still have fun.”

I paused for a moment. “Anyway, why are you asking me?” I blurted out.

He also paused. “Seems cool, I guess, and I don’t know who to ask.”

“Not even Patrick, I guess, because he’s into football,” I contributed.

He all of a sudden made a face. “I know, I know. He doesn’t always get everything I do. He doesn’t even know I draw comic books.” He then turned to his morning work.

*Hmm...* he admitted something to me, I thought to myself. *I guess he is genuine enough after all.* I wanted to say more, yet held back.

That morning, Mrs. Farley got to the time again where she assigned partners for the science assignment. My nerves were tight. I didn’t know how to approach the situation because obviously trying to be a lawyer with her and hacking up a lung did not work. I guess I would have to head into the situation head-on.

“I want you to work with someone different,” she began, “because in the working world, you don’t get to choose your partners. What you’ll have to do is trace your partner’s body. Then you’ll sketch different bones inside the shape.”

She went through the list of partners, and of course, I was with Seth. He looked incredibly upset, yet I just sat there like I had been zapped to stone. I lacked emotion. To add to the predictability, she began boring her eyes into mine.

“Today, I would like for you to start by choosing twenty-five different bones that you want to sketch inside the shape.”

I immediately took out a notepad. “All right,” I began quietly, “I guess we will choose the bones we will be sketching them in the shape, obviously after we have made the list.”

He was utterly and completely silent. He remained that way for five minutes.

I had tried... somewhat... to have him emerge from his shell to... somewhat... communicate with me. However again, we were failing miserably.

I then backed away from him and took the notepad to my own area. I felt dejected. All of a sudden, I saw Mrs. Farley approach him, and I heard the words escape his mouth-

“...I hate him,” he shook his head. “I don’t feel I can get a good grade working with him. He’s the one person I really can’t stand to work with.”

I listened to the conversation as I wrote down the list of bones. We didn’t have much time before lunch, yet the conversation lasted for a few more minutes. I overheard most of it.

“...Sometimes it’s good to make a choice about the people you work with,” Seth continued with Mrs. Farley. “Plus, I know he’d rather do anything than work with me. I don’t make him look cool. So please, Mrs. Farley, let me work alone.”

After listening for a few more moments, I couldn’t take it. When Mrs. Farley walked away, I called him a suck-up who had no idea about having a friend.

“I’m still going to work alone,” he grumbled. “Unless I can get in a group with a friend.”

I then had the moment where I officially messed up for the day- “You really don’t have many friends, so there isn’t much choice.”

That stopped any chance we had of working together well or leading any kind of positive conversation.

Heading into the afternoon, I did go to Dillon’s house this time, surveyed his rock-and-roll themed living room, and heard the same story again about how his father was once the lead singer of a rock band called Phished. I also found out that he was talented on percussion and teaching his son about the drums.

“I know more about drums than I do about skateboarding,” I admitted. “However, skateboarding is neat. I’ve just never really tried before.”

He then decided that we didn’t necessarily have to do skateboarding and the drums were more interesting. We had a tremendous time with the drums, yet I then ventured too far into a conversation with him-

“I don’t mean to ask this, but- how long have you been friends with Patrick?” I asked him.

He all of a sudden looked really tense. “Some time during first grade, I guess.”

“I was just wondering because I realize you get nervous or something whenever you’re talking about him. You hide the comic

book and also the multiplication tests whenever you think anyone is looking.”

Dillon all of a sudden looked somewhat pained. “It’s not really your business to know I hide my comic book when Patrick is coming. What are you, watching me or something?”

“I’m sorry, I was just wondering if you were really friends,” I continued. “Or if you’re pretending to be his friend because you’re scared.”

“It doesn’t matter,” he mumbled. “I don’t know if I am pretending to be his friend.”

I then realized I was acting like an interrogating newspaper reporter. Again, my day had not gone so well, though this time I would probably rate it a 4 out of 10. There were the decent moments—playing the drums was neat. Art class went fine. Lunch went fine, even though I pinpointed the exact time on the clock when the milk shot out of Holly’s nose.

Lying down to sleep that night, I felt that I would progress to the next day. Yet when I next heard my alarm clock beckoning for me, I realized that my wish had not been granted.

I was wrong, and something was even more wrong. I was beginning to realize that I could not escape that day until something catastrophic happened.

...So it turned out I was stuck in the same day for three more days, basically a half a week, and something kept me from proceeding to the next day. There had to have been something that was keeping me under this curse. I turned out making a list of the negative events that had happened each of these days.

On the first day, I wound up at Dillon’s house again, figuring out by mentioning Patrick, he closed up and kind of tuned me out. I tried to remedy the situation, but I couldn’t.

“I really don’t want to talk about Patrick, okay?” he asked me, his arms folded across his chest.

“Fine. We can talk about skateboarding or the drums,” I responded.

“Honestly, even *that* gets old after a while,” he grumbled back.

However while I was at his house, I found out he was a technical genius who had an entire recording studio in his house. He was a master at working with all the gadgets in the studio, and I watched in awe.

Additionally that day, I hadn’t done by best with Seth. Again, he went to Mrs. Farley and told her how I wasn’t a suitable partner for him, that he would feel better if he worked on his own. It was somewhat hilarious, considering he could not trace himself. He in my opinion was making a fool of himself. So I tried to think of a way I could persuade him to work with me the following day. Or you know, the following... repeat.

The second day was better because I found a way for Seth to work with me. When we were partnered together, I looked him straight in the eye and stated, “Look. I know we’re not the best partners she could have put together. But you know we cannot change that, correct?”

He was at a loss for words. “I... guess... not,” he half stammered.

“So we need to face reality. If you want to get an A, which I am sure you do, we need to just cut to the chase and get this project done. Let’s still put our all into it, but the quicker the work, the less time we’ll have to spend together working on it. Deal?”

He sighed. “Deal.”

I had dominated the conversation. This time, I was awesome in other respects. We worked together for a while and got a lot accomplished because we both knew quite a bit in science.

Where I messed up was not with Dillon, it was with my sister. I mentioned something to her about letting herself off and getting out of school. It wasn’t catastrophic, but I knew just not to mention my inner thoughts the last day.

Then came day three, where I pledged to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, so help me. I started off by changing the color of my shirt to red.

When I arrived at school, I studied my multiplication tables diligently. I knew exactly what the test looked like by now. I was actually getting decent with my multiplication tables with the repeated days, though I hadn’t had a weekend for a while because I had to repeat Monday seven times.

Dillon asked the question about skateboarding. I was humorous with the remark about winding up in the emergency room, and he promised I would not be doing anything astronomical my first time skateboarding. The conversation I had with him was nearly scripted by now. The only thing I did not do in the conversation with him was ask about Patrick. I did ask him why he had chosen me, and he answered as he had before, but I just responded by saying, “Well,

I guess if you’re willing to teach me, you’ll always have the chance of getting better and so will I.”

The mystery of knowing about his friendship with Patrick and why he was nasty towards Seth in second grade would hopefully come another day, as long as it came. I really wanted to know, to be honest.

Mrs. Farley of course grouped Seth and I together. Again, I started off by looking him straight in the eye and stating, “You want an A, right?”

“Obviously,” he replied.

I continued on in the kindest way I could. Our conversation was a little different than last time. “The only way for us to get an A is for you and me to work together on this. You know how Mrs. Farley is about partners. She wants to see people work together. There had to have been a reason she put you and me together.”

“I don’t know, Sherlock, what is it?” he responded sarcastically.

I had to not respond rudely to him, or else I would be that much farther away from the weekend and breaking the curse of this day.

“I know it, it’s because I hate you and you hate me,” I tried to laugh.

“And that took a rocket scientist to figure out,” he stated.

I had to turn the conversation around again. “Well, if eventually you want to be a great scientist, we need to do this simple

project together now and get an A. I know you can get an A, and I am smart enough to get one, also.”

Seth sighed. “All right, it’s a deal, though it’s a lousy deal.”

I wasn’t the sarcastic one, so I did fine during this time.

The day seemed to go right until the skateboarding part came along. Of course, Dillon had to go through the explanation of him being embarrassed his father was once a rock star in California. We then proceeded on looking at the drums, and this time, seeing everything went well, we eventually went outside to go skateboarding. Yet since we had not gotten to that part before, I had no idea what was coming, and it was not going to be good at all.

Dillon told me that of course I could watch some of his moves, so I rested on the ground next to one of his skateboards while he maneuvered the board he liked the most, one with crimson and burnt orange flames with a checkered pattern and skulls. It truly was a unique board; he actually created the design himself and his uncle was a graphic designer, so he was able to make his design a reality. It was the second form of art I had seen from him.

Yet as I have already told you, he was talented as a skateboarder, but not the most experienced. So as he barreled down the same ramp that had gotten the better of me, he soared off like a pro, yet landed on his side on top of the skateboard.

He lay there for a moment, as if paralyzed. “I’m okay, don’t worry,” he assured me. Yet as he tried to lift his body up, he let out a horrid shriek of pain.

“Are you all right?” I called, calm at first.

“Wait, wait... I am not so sure,” he muttered quietly. “Call someone from the house. I am not sure whether I will be able to get up.”

I skedaddled as quickly as I could into the house. “Mr. Randall!” I hollered. “Dillon’s hurt!”

Mr. Randall and Dillon’s younger brother Brock came rushing out to make sure he was all right, yet he wasn’t. He had to go to Woodfield Hospital. I vowed to stay with him and began to regret telling him to show me some moves. I felt like a traitor to him because it was my first time over his house.

In the back of his family’s SUV, he was tilted back in the seat next to me with pillows beneath him. He all of a sudden blurted out one of the last things I ever would have expected at that moment.

“I know you’re probably wondering why I didn’t ask Patrick. Well, things like this happen. He wouldn’t have cared enough to stay. Truth is, I need a friend.”

All of a sudden, he grimaced in slight pain, looking out the window, and I felt really sad all of a sudden. The past few years, I made him out to be this horrible person, yet he actually wasn’t. Yet at the same time, I was sad because I would probably have to do this day over again on his account, and I was getting tired of it.

He got into the emergency room quickly, and like I had been, he was bandaged up quite a bit. The nurses did some x-rays on him, and luckily, he had not broken any bones. Yet the hospital had him stay the night. I had called my mother before, yet I called her again to update. She told me that if I wanted, I could stay with him to keep him company. It was about 8:30 p.m., and he was awake, yet he was kind of gloomy.

I told her I would not mind staying with him, and his spirits were lifted when I told him I wasn't going anywhere. What was neat was that the nurses brought some comic books into the room. "Do you like Naruto?" a nurse named Tara asked when she came into the room with a short stack.

"Sure," he nodded. "I actually draw comic books. I use them as inspiration."

As soon as Tara was out, I was able to turn on some television, and some program from Nickelodeon was on called Kids Pick the President.

"I actually can draw John McCain and Barack Obama," he admitted. "The uncle I mentioned earlier, the graphic designer, is a caricature artist. He's been teaching me how to draw for as long as I remember. That's where I feel inspired to draw comic books."

"Do you want to do the same thing as him when you get older?" I asked.

"Sometimes I think yes, and sometimes I think no. For some reason, something like crime scene investigator sounds neat, maybe one that works in the labs and examines the evidence. Yet I also like the thought of being a pediatrician. I like the thought of helping kids who are sick or get hurt. Go figure," he responded, half laughing and gesturing toward his bruised body.

"My mind always changes on what I want to be, too. A few years ago, I wanted to be a race car driver."

"I remember," he told me. "We were in the same second grade class. For your birthday, you brought in the Dale Earnhardt cupcakes."

"We also had first grade together," I contributed.

"Yes, and so did Patrick. We've all been in classes together since first grade, well... except for third grade."

Silence then fell across the room. He then spoke again.

"Look, Ryan, I'm sorry. I'm actually really sorry," he told me quietly.

"What do you mean, you're sorry?" I asked, actually a little confused.

He sipped on the Sprite he had been provided for a few moments. "I am sure you don't forget that one day in second grade. The really bad day, where we were on the playground and we decided to corner you and... umm, Seth."

"That's long ago," I mumbled, shrugging my shoulders.

"Well, it's interesting, it was two years ago... today, actually. I have a lousy short term memory, but an excellent long term memory. Did you think of how things have changed since then?"

"Well, honestly, I thought you were not a good person," I admitted. "And I'm sorry for that, also."

"Did you ever talk to Seth again?" he asked.

"No, not as friends, we didn't. We actually hadn't talked for a couple years, until Mrs. Farley put us together for that science project."

“I think about it every once in a while. A person can do just one thing, and it can make a huge difference. Maybe things will change this year,” he ended quietly.

He then told me he was getting really tired and he wanted the pain to pass quickly. He also told me that maybe instead of waiting up with him that I could go to school tomorrow. He was going to be out for a few days, at least. At least his injury wasn't as insane as mine had been. He was more bruised than bandaged. He didn't look like a mummy, either.

When mom came to pick me up at the hospital with my sister, she assured me, “This is not your fault, Ryan. Nor is it his. Kids get hurt. You two were being responsible, but... things happen.”

*Things do happen*, I thought to myself on the car ride home. Looking at the street lights whizzing by and the quiet streets in my neighborhood, I began to feel exhausted. *I almost want to re-do this day to actually warn Dillon not to get on the skateboard. We'll stick to drums this next time*, I continued in thought.

As I wrapped my cadet blue and white quilt around me an hour later, after I took a warm shower, I realized again that things happen, and I resolved to do two important things- help Dillon to realize he had true friends, and be kind to Seth. It was going to take a while, but hopefully things would work out in the end for everyone (maybe except for Patrick).

Yet as I woke up the next morning, I didn't expect things to happen as they had.

## Chapter Five

It was exactly 6:39 a.m., and my mother had just taken a shower. She leaned over me gently and asked if I wanted waffles like I had yesterday. “Also, did you pick out your uniform last night after we got home?” she added.

I thought I was dreaming. My mind was exhausted. “Oh, I don't know. Don't I just have the orange polo with the hole at the bottom?” I asked.

“Why would you wear that TWICE, Ryan? I surely didn't have time to wash that after we got home,” she chortled for a moment.

I sat up slowly. “I guess I can wear another color.” I looked around the room to notice the feeling of the day was strangely peculiar.

“Well, I know it's only Tuesday, but maybe we can go out this afternoon. I think your friend is probably coming home in the next few days.”

Suddenly, I was QUITE alert. “It's *Tuesday*?” I questioned.

“You had a really long day yesterday,” she went on. “Between a whole day at school and then the skateboarding incident.”

“Yes, I'm definitely tired,” I responded, confused that I likely had moved on from the Mondays. Though Dillon had gotten hurt, somehow I escaped the day. I didn't know why. Something had still gone wrong. Now there was nothing at all that could be erased from... yesterday.

If I needed confirmation, there was a full tube of Colgate toothpaste in the bathroom. Maggie stumbled into the bathroom a few moments later and asked me who wanted to shower first. "I feel bad for your friend," she stated.

I spoke before I thought. "I feel bad for that tarantula," I half spat back.

She looked confused out of her mind. "Why would you feel bad for the tarantula?"

I then realized she had never flushed it down the toilet. "Well, because... I know you don't like it and you never have."

"Hurry up," she blurted out. "We need to get to school. I've never cared about your stupid tarantula and I never will."

Since Maggie had already presented her project, we waited at the bus stop as usual. Two boys were talking about an election in their class for the following month. "Who are we getting on our campaign?" a boy named Brian asked.

"Maybe we should get David or Hunter because lots of people like them," the other boy named Chase answered.

"Well, I certainly know it would be lame to get Mark to work with us, even though he wants to be friends with us," Brian told Chase. "He's a goody-two-shoe. He's a dork."

Chase nodded in approval. "Well, maybe we can get Mark to believe us- and vote for us- and then turn our backs on him."

Suddenly, I felt extremely lonely. Why did people have to be so cruel? Why couldn't people just accept one another? Yet then I thought of Seth and sucked in my breath.

Still, I was not all that willing to be kind to Seth.

He stared at me while we worked together in science class on the human body, and he actually talked, though the words weren't the nicest. "I heard who your new friend is," he started.

"So?" I shrugged my shoulders as I began tracing over the pencil sketches we had made with marker.

"I don't care," he grumbled. "I just heard someone say you went skateboarding."

He was talking about Dillon. "Who told you?" I dared to ask.

"Uhh... Jonathan," he muttered. "They live on the same street. He saw that he got hurt. For all I know, you probably did it."

I didn't say anything mean back. "No, that's not true," I told him quietly.

"Whatever," he grumbled again, taking another marker to trace the parts of the body. "Start writing down the names of the bones when you're ready."

We worked quietly for fifteen minutes because we did not have anything to say to one another. He seemed really jealous about what happened. There were honestly a lot of things I wanted to say back to Seth, but I couldn't. I wanted to tell him it would be quite a sight to see him on a skateboard, even though I couldn't get on and stay on for the life of me. The thing that was going through my mind, though, was that he seemed beyond upset. Not just the fact he was mean to him on the playground two years ago.

Lunch was mostly boring. A boy named Lane talked about playing kickball at recess on Friday. Everyone got really excited and

started talking about teams. Lunch wasn't too great that day, so everyone ate fast and everyone talked most of the time... except for me. I didn't have Seth. He was always sitting with Jonathan, no matter what. Obviously, Dillon was not at school. Patrick was carrying on, anyway, but at least not pestering in my direction. Jordan (the pampered princess I've mentioned like once in this book and will become more important later in the story) was blabbering about High School Musical 3. Again, lunch was boring. That is, until Emily began talking.

Emily had always been a really nice person. If you remember, she was in our second grade class. She was also really shy. "The people in our class have really big heads sometimes," she started.

"All the girls talk about is High School Musical 3," I laughed. "Do you watch that stuff?"

She shook her head. "No, I'm not really like that," she continued. "I like movies like Are We There Yet and... well, any movies about animals. You've seen Firehouse Dog, right?"

I nodded. "You like funny movies?"

"Yeah, like Night at the Museum, that's pretty funny," she told me. "Then I like movies like National Treasure, too. I really like history."

The conversation went on like that for about ten more minutes while Jordan five feet from us talked about painting her toenails fuchsia, her thoughts on the Jonas Brothers, and playing some karaoke video game, something like American Idol. It seemed like she and her loyal friends cried out "OMG" or something along the lines of it every minute.

Emily then told me the best thing. I honestly don't think she was trying to be mean because I understood where she was coming from. "I cannot stand her, I'm sorry," she admitted. "And I don't understand why people have to say OMG in the first place, and repeat it over and over again."

Talking with Emily at lunch actually made me realize that it's not always embarrassing to have a friend who isn't a boy.

The afternoon went by slowly. Math class went something like this-

Mrs. Farley- Today, we are going to start talking about division a little more. First, we're doing some simple division. Can someone tell me what 16 divided by 4 is?

Seth- (Raises hand) The answer is 4 because 4 times 4 is 16.

Mrs. Farley- Absolutely. Now could you tell me what 164 divided by 4 is?

Seth- The answer is 41 because 4 times 4 is 16-

Patrick- (Mumbling in a mean tone of voice to someone else) He already said that...

Mrs. Farley- Excuse me. Keep going, Seth.

Seth- 4 times 4 is 16, and when you add an extra 0, 40 times 4 is 160. Then there's an extra 4, which means it can go in one more time than 40, making it 41.

Truth was, Seth was a genius. Like an Einstein genius or something. His brain was wired up to explain really hard things like remainders and why rockets travel in a straight path when they are

launched. He studied physics at home. Not everyone thought he rocked because of his brain, though- some people were mean because I think they were jealous. He made us all look like we didn't have a clue, though, which was another reason why we weren't friends. I didn't need a friend people were jealous of or just didn't like at all.

To my surprise, the next few days passed without anything happening. I just didn't say much to Seth, and it seemed to work. We made it to Friday's kickball game (it was now October 3<sup>rd</sup>), and Dillon was back in school for the first time since falling off his skateboard. This is another part of the story that is very important for some reason.

The two people who picked teams were Lane and Matthew (the one who talked about the World of Warcraft at lunch Monday). Lane picked me sometime during the middle. Dillon was also chosen by Lane- he said he really wanted to play, though he may not be able to play his best. Seth was chosen last by Matthew, and Jonathan was chosen last by Lane.

Then it was action time.

The game started off with Matthew as pitcher and a boy named David as the kicker.

"Here we go," Matthew shouted out, aiming the ball towards David.

"That wasn't fair!" another boy named Devin cried out.

"All right, all right," Matthew groaned, "But that's still strike one!"

When Matthew rolled the ball the second time, David kicked it. Our team cheered, and David ran as fast as he could to first base, and then second.

Second came Dillon's turn. He looked kind of nervous. Matthew rolled out the ball slowly, and he kicked a little to the left, which caused Seth to go out there and try to get it.

"Let's go Dillon, let's go!" Jordan chanted. Dillon ran with all his might to first base, which let David run to second. Seth then finally got the ball and threw it at the field as hard as he could. It turned out striking Dillon.

"FOWL!" Lane hollered.

Seth then looked dejected. Patrick then scolded Seth, "You CANNOT throw a ball at the person you are trying to get out! You have to throw the ball at another person on the team and then have *that* person run to the person you are striking out!"

I then heard Matthew tell someone, "Choose Seth for your team, suffer the consequences."

Dillon looked a little hurt. "It didn't strike me that hard. I can still play. Also, I don't think Seth was trying to hurt me on purpose."

"Are you crazy?" a girl in our class named Lanie asked him. "I saw the look on his face!"

The game went on, anyhow, and Seth was not kicked out of the game, which was good for him (but not good for what was coming up). I went up to kick and helped score a touchdown for the team. I only ran to second base, but two others were able to finish

out. However, the person after me (Sarah) didn't kick any of the three times, which caused the teams to switch.

"We should get Seth to kick first," Matthew suggested as we switched, "Because he may get us out if a bunch of better people are behind him."

Ugh, the nerve of my classmates. Secretly I wanted to tell them to stop running their mouths, but I couldn't. Another part of me wanted to snicker or laugh along with them, but I feared repeating my day because of being mean to Seth.

"Here you go," Lane called out, letting the ball roll to Seth. The ball rolled right past him.

"Kick- the- ball!" Patrick moaned in his direction. "It came right at you!"

Lane got the ball thrown back to him from David, and then he let the ball roll again. Again, Seth missed. He tried to kick, but it rather looked like his leg was jolting than kicking the ball. A few people shook their heads.

Then the last time came. Lane let go of the ball, and Seth kicked it with all his might, letting it soar through the air at what looked like at least twenty feet. The whole class looked up, and Seth started to run to first base in astonishment. Everyone else was really shocked. He was definitely NOT out.

I was actually a little excited for him, but then I felt really sad when someone said, "It's just a fluke. Flukes happen."

I thought, though, what if Seth had really used talent and kicked the ball? It was just a quick thought, but it was certainly possible.

## Chapter Six

Another week passed, and something really important happened that I need to tell you about. It is something that is going to change the story tremendously, but has nothing to do with Seth, Dillon, or me.

Something happened with Jordan at recess.

Now, the only thing I have ever told you about Jordan Greer is that she is annoying and a primadonna. For the longest time, that's all I believed about her. It seemed like despite anything, all she cared about was High School Musical, the Jonas Brothers, Hannah Montana, Camp Rock... you get the picture. She enjoyed singing and dancing, and her friends were almost exactly the same as her.

Yet the next Friday when my class played kickball, she kicked the ball with all her might, received cheers from both teams, and fell really hard as she was running. She didn't trip because there was nothing on the ground to trip her. It was almost as if the wind got knocked out of her.

Mrs. Farley was really concerned. She was almost scared because Jordan was nearly knocked unconscious. She looked tired, and she needed to go to the clinic. Her parents then came in to pick her up, and she went home.

Jordan was out for nearly a week after that. Mrs. Farley became really quiet because her parents called to tell her why she was out. Every day, I had to look at her desk because I sat next to her. On it was her writing journal, which had a plum ribbon tied on its side and pictures of her as well as pictures her 17-year old brother Brandon made in Adobe Photoshop. It was pictures of celebrities like

Joe Jonas with her head photoshopped next to his. It was kind of humorous when you thought about it.

The following Friday after that (it was now October 17<sup>th</sup>), Mrs. Farley sat us down in front of her rocking chair, and she was very solemn.

"Jordan... will not... be able to go to school with us the whole year," she started quietly. We all looked at her with wide eyes.

Matthew raised his hand for a moment. "I don't mean to be nosy, but why, Mrs. Farley?"

She looked like she was going to cry. "I have been speaking with Jordan's mother. Since she's been going to this school since kindergarten, you may even know her."

Her friend Katie looked really concerned, almost scared.

"Jordan has leukemia," she stated simply.

"I don't mean to sound harsh, but that's cancer, right?" Matthew asked quietly. A few people gasped. Others were speechless. Tears ran down Katie's face, and all of a sudden, Seth put his hand on her shoulder. She then turned around and hugged Seth.

"P-people d-d-die from cancer, don't they?" Sarah stammered that question almost like making a statement.

Mrs. Farley nodded. "Yes. People have died from cancer. They have also survived."

Sometimes in these moments, we do not realize who we are hugging. There are no boundaries. Some people you would never

expect were there for one another. Even though it was a really sad moment, this was the first time I ever noticed Patrick's eyes could tear up like anyone else's.

Everyone sat together at lunch that day. I mean, nobody formed groups. We were just one large group. Like that one time, Emily sat next to me.

"I never thought I was a mean person," she nearly whispered to me.

"You're not mean," I shook my head.

"I said I couldn't stand Jordan, but if I knew- I don't know if I ever would have said anything like that," she went on.

"If we knew what could happen because of anything, we'd always be saying the right things," I told her, "But we don't because we don't possibly know everything."

"You're right," she nodded. "And you know what- you are a good person."

I needed to hear that. "Thanks. You are, too."

"We can make her a special card," Sarah told the table a few people down from me.

"Maybe we can write the Jonas Brothers and tell them about her," Katie thought out loud.

"We can get them to sing When You Look Me in the Eyes," Lane blurted out. He then looked at everyone at the table and realized they didn't like his joke all that much. "Sorry, sorry. I didn't mean that."

"How do you know about the Jonas Brothers and what they sing?" Sarah went on. "You listen more than you think, don't you?"

"No, I don't listen to your talking at the lunch table," Lane replied, "I listen to my third grade sister talk about them all the time."

"Like, OMG, OMG, OMG!" David added.

"All right, let's get back to business," Katie told everyone. "Seriously, what are we going to do?"

"Well, you have a one in one-millionth chance to get a response from the Jonas Brothers," David chided.

"Let's just make her a special card, cut up some magazines, and put what she likes on the outside of the card," Lanie suggested.

"I'll make it," Sarah offered. "Then we can sign it when I'm done."

By Monday, Sarah had the card for us to sign, and by Wednesday, Jordan was able to join us in school.

Just seeing her was hard because we knew things were different now. She didn't look like the Jordan we always knew. Our teacher made it the most important deal in the world to treat her like a person and not like a case because that's what she was- another one of us- no matter what she was suffering from.

She tried her hardest to smile. In front of the class, we presented her the card, and she told us something important.

“I didn’t know something like this was going on,” she started, “But I’m still Jordan, no matter what, and I may do okay. I am going to start taking this medicine- it is called chemotherapy- and I can only go to school for half-days. I have to learn a lot from home. My mom said you may be able to visit me if you want. I do not have to be in the hospital right now. Not yet.”

It was not easy for us- fourth graders- to hear something like that. Especially out of someone we had known since kindergarten. We did promise to keep an open mind, though, and to definitely make Jordan laugh whenever we had the chance. People like Lane were good for making everyone laugh.

A few days later when Jordan had left early, Mrs. Farley had us write about what we felt were our best talents and gifts. I thought about how Lane was funny and even how Dillon was a great artist. Or Seth and how he knew so much. But what was I good at? What was something I had to offer others, something that made me interesting or a good friend to someone else?

I listened to my classmates share their paragraphs as I wrote mine.

“I think I am honest with people, or I hope I am, anyway,” Lane started, “And I know I’m funny because when I tell a joke, people laugh. People listen to me, and the best thing is I listen to them, too. I am fair and try to be the most fair possible when I play sports. Hopefully people find me a good friend because of these things... err, umm, qualities.”

“I have always loved writing plays and songs so I can perform them with my friends,” Sarah read. “My friends and I get up on tables and dance to oldies music, and it makes everyone laugh.

Sometimes we pretend we have an imaginary microphone. We also love to act crazy in front of the video camera. We wear costumes that we’ve put together. I think I have a good sense of humor to act and sing with my friends.”

Dillon even stepped up to read his. “I love playing sports with my friends. I like music and think I know a lot about it. I have a good sense of humor.”

He then stopped.

I was thinking he could say so many more things about himself like how he could write a story and make anything sound amazing. He could draw something and make it look like it was alive. He could take his pencil and shade in his drawings to make them look three-dimensional. He was even okay on his skateboard but just had a bad fall that day.

Seth never went up to the front, and neither did I. But I couldn’t, considering I didn’t know what exactly I had to offer. Thing was, I had to find out.

I always tried to find out. I was well aware that I was not good on the skateboard. On the other hand, I was decent at soccer, but never got real involved with it. The stories I wrote in class were decent, but I could not see it becoming something I wanted to do for the rest of my life. I was decent at building things, as once I helped my father construct a tree house in the backyard for Maggie and me. I also was able to build a model of a fort with soldiers last year for my third grade Social Studies project. Sometimes I would take things apart and put them back together, or perhaps put together electrical circuits from light bulbs and wire. My multiplication was improving

but was mediocre at best. Still, I did not know what stood out about me, or if I blended into the woodwork.

Next Monday morning (it was now October 27<sup>h</sup>), I was standing out at the bus stop again, and I had to listen to the boys talk about their class election. Or rather I started things. I was nosy.

“Umm, I am wondering about something,” I started, “You’re having a class election, right?”

“Yeah, some people are running for class president, and they’re making stickers and writing speeches,” the boy named Chase told me.

“Who’s running?” I asked.

“Well, we’re running for president and vice-president,” Brian noted, “And then I think there are three other people in the class who are running for president and vice-president.”

“Yeah, there’s this girl running named Danielle and I originally said I was going to help her out, but then I figured out I didn’t want to do it anymore,” Chase went on. “I just told her. It was kind of boring.”

“Isn’t that kind of wrong?” I asked Chase.

“Nah, she doesn’t care,” Chase shrugged his shoulders. “She said something like *Yeah, whatever*, and frowned at me, but she’ll get over it. She should have known I was going to support someone like Brian or maybe even Ethan.”

“Did you make a promise to her?” I continued.

“I did,” he nodded, “But still, who cares? We have just a week left on this campaign, anyway. I just told her I was pulling out Friday.”

“Yeah, I hadn’t announced who was going to be my V.P. until then- and then whoa, you should have seen her face!” Brian chuckled.

I then pushed in front of them to stand at the oak tree. “You’re losers,” I grumbled. “No wait, you’re jerks. Or *maybe* a combination of losers and jerks.”

They all of a sudden stopped talking and shot daggers at me, meaning they gave me the dirtiest look of all time.

I then gulped. “It’s just- not umm, fair- to say you’ll do something and then you don’t. It... umm, hurts people. It hurts to pretend you’re someone’s friend. It’s just not right.”

Leaving them speechless, I got on the bus and began to think about many things at once. I all of a sudden began getting this massive headache. From there, a memory came into my mind. It was third grade.

“Jordan, why do you wear so much *pink*?” a girl named Marissa asked at recess.

“Seriously, you’re a freak and a snob,” someone else told her. “You probably think High School Musical and Hannah Montana are actually real,” someone else taunted.

“No wait, you probably have a room full of Barbie dolls,” Marissa kept going on.

“Actually, I DO!” Jordan nearly screamed in her face. “Is that a problem? What’s the matter with wearing pink and liking dolls? If I want to wear glittery nail polish and if *I also want* to carry a furry bag, then it’s something that only has to do with me, not you or anyone else!”

I remembered that moment all of a sudden because I had been one of the people who had laughed at her. It was like Seth-people laughed at him from time to time, and it felt good to share the same opinion as everyone else. For some reason, it made me feel stronger. It made me feel like there was some character trait about me that others liked. It made me feel that I would not have to go through moments like those.

I think something major changed about me from that moment on the bus. I wanted to be a better friend. For some reason, I really wanted to tell Seth I was sorry for being the cruelest person, but I didn’t know how. I wanted to help Dillon to get away from Patrick, but I didn’t know how. I wanted to let Jordan know she had been a good person all these years, but that was also quite hard for me. Feeling helpless, feeling extremely sad, I slumped into the seat on the bus and occupied myself with staring at the multiplication chart in my planner.

I did have to admit, I was getting better at my 7 times tables.  $7 \times 7$  was 49,  $7 \times 8$  was 56, and  $7 \times 9$  was 63. Then the 10 and 11 times tables were no-brainers. After about five minutes of staring, I realized my eyes were tricking me into thinking the squares in the times tables were getting bigger and smaller.

November turned out being hard on us. It was kind of an uneventful month, but it seemed like Patrick was getting more upset about something. The class also started growing up because of

Jordan. I know that was a lousy reason why, but some people were actually stopping before saying mean words to one another. You could tell what they were thinking, that they were prepared with some snide remark, but then made better decisions about their word choices. People started to realize that friendship meant a lot to them, but still, Seth and I were not friends. No matter what I did, he was quiet. He was around Jonathan all the time.

I watched Patrick a lot. Dillon was beginning to get distant from him, as he was becoming more my friend. At lunch, they did not even sit together. Patrick shot me really nasty looks, though he didn’t say much to me. I tried to think of why. Compared to the two of us, he was tall and weighed more. Maybe he did not feel confident about himself. I was 4’6” or 4’7” while Patrick was at least five feet tall. Patrick had the build of a football player, and he was really strong, but he had always been that way since he was in kindergarten.

I never knew much about Patrick’s talents, but Dillon certainly didn’t want him to know about his. I slowly learned that Dillon was an incredible artist, he had loads of comic books he had drawn, he enjoyed all kinds of sports, and he helped out at the animal shelter every once in a while. He really enjoyed animals, though he said he wanted to do something else when he got older. I was wondering why because Dillon was so talented that he did not want to share his talents. Did he believe that Patrick would be jealous?

I noticed a lot about my classmates and people on the bus while I was on the sidelines. No matter what, people were sometimes very mean to one another. Girls told one another how to dress. They gave random “fashion advice” to people on how they could make more friends. They may not have realized that what they were doing had no purpose. They tried telling one another what was cool and

what wasn't cool. It hurt to hear that because people like me weren't necessarily cool. I was pretty typical in my t-shirts and jeans or athletic pants. Who came up with the idea of "cool", anyway? Who originally said skateboarding shirts or shoes were cool? Who said darker jeans were cooler than lighter jeans? Who came up with the idea of tying your shoe laces a certain way? Were we a bunch of followers while we always thought we were original?

I started listening to people talking on the bus. I remember one morning where two fifth grade girls were talking. I will call them Tweedle Dee and Tweedle Dum. They seemed to even talk in the same tone of voice- raising their voice and lingering with certain words, talking fast, and cackling in a way. They kind of sounded like they had come near one of those helium machines.

"Did you see Brad yesterday? What was he wearing? Isn't he crazy or what?" Tweedle Dee asked.

"Brad knows he isn't cool, so he has to look cool in order to be accepted," Tweedle Dum sighed an exasperated breath. "But he's not."

"I cannot believe he wears those Batman and Superman t-shirts with those ratty faded jeans. Then he has on those dirty sneakers every day. Does he look in the mirror? And have you noticed his hair? It's curly in parts, then straight in others. Does he brush his hair?" Tweedle Dee spoke as quickly as possible.

"I doubt it," Tweedle Dum grumbled.

"He has potential to look better, but he is 100% clueless," Tweedle Dee finished.

I even noticed between these two that Tweedle Dee ruled what they were saying. Tweedle Dum had no opinions of her own. She just kept agreeing with Tweedle Dee. For all I knew, she did not care about what Brad was wearing.

I then slouched in my seat so they didn't think some dorky fourth grader was spying on them. But seriously, what made Tweedle Dee and Tweedle Dum better than anyone else? I thought to myself that they were pretty ordinary. They didn't look better than anyone else. Maybe they thought they could talk because they had shiny, straight blond hair and straight teeth. Maybe they thought they could be bullies because they were cheerleaders and went to the 10-11 football games. I had been to one before, and that was the only place where I had seen them besides school and the bus.

Emily had always been on my bus since kindergarten. While Tweedle Dee and Tweedle Dum were ordinary, Emily stood out because she was kind. She had long, wavy brown hair and the most amazing blue eyes. She was personally much cooler than them.

I then began to choke because I realized I was thinking about a girl.

The person next to me gave me a weird look. His name was Zach, and I think he was in the third grade. I then shot back gracefully with, "You've never seen someone choke before?"

"Get a drink of water, then," Zach murmured.

"What, from the personal water fountain on the bus?" I grumbled back.

Zach then half sneered at me. I was being a smart aleck, but I realized he was not much better.

I kept my eye on Tweedle Dee and Tweedle Dum. I realized they dressed like the other fifth grade girls and they dressed quite alike. They had on jean shorts and t-shirts. Their hair was tied with silky, long ribbons of different colors. Looking over at Emily once more, she wore a long, flowing crinkly brown skirt and a v-neck tan shirt with a beige tank top under it. She had on strings of clay beads. She looked like Mother Earth in my opinion, but I don't think she cared what anyone thought about her. She sat on the bus reading some book of poetry. That's why she always seemed kind of cool to me. She did not have to wear silky hair ribbons or cheer on Friday nights in order to be cool.

Emily was probably the most brilliant person in class after Seth, though the level of brilliance between anyone and Seth was mountainous. Seth was like a prodigy. His smarts were unusual for a fourth grader. Emily seemed to read people really well, though. She was calm 95% of the time. The teachers always trusted her. Nobody dared make fun of her. She seemed to have this presence about her that made people feel bad if they had any bad thoughts about her.

I realized in the back of my mind, though, that Emily had not always dressed like Mother Earth and this was kind of a new thing for her. She used to dress really ordinary, like when we were in second grade, but I guess now she wanted to stand out.

I didn't know much about my bus partner, Zach. I realized I had never talked to him, but he may think I am strange if I start talking to him now. Yet I was in a strange mood to start talking to him.

"So, who do you have this year?" I asked Zach.

"I have Mrs. Browning," he grumbled. "I'm in third grade."

"I thought you were in third grade," I responded.

"Is that an insult?" he mumbled, almost making his question sound like that statement.

"No, I just thought you were in third grade, and I was right," I told him, shrugging my shoulders.

"So, did you have Mrs. Browning last year?" he questioned me.

"Nope. I had Mrs. Druscell," I answered. "But my friend Dillon had Mrs. Browning."

"Who do you have this year?" he asked.

"I'm in Mrs. Farley's class," I told him.

"Well, I know for a fact I don't want Mrs. Farley. She's supposed to be really hard or something," Zach stated in a tired, rude voice, half making a face.

When the bus stopped and everyone got off, Emily smiled at me gently and murmured, "So, I wonder what we are doing in school today."

I grabbed my backpack and mumbled in her direction, "Who knows?"

I didn't think much of what Emily said, to be honest. I was looking over at this girl who I thought was a third-grader. Her name was Megan. She was not liked by her classmates at all. She was very thin and on the shorter side with glasses and straight-across bangs. It was sad to watch her at times because she worked to have friends,

and she thought she had many friends. However, she had very few *true* friends.

She was talking to a few people gathered near her, and then when she turned her back, they snickered at her. The worst thing was that Megan did not notice. What would happen when Megan noticed? You cannot be led in the wrong direction forever. You cannot be blind forever. You eventually gain sight. The right direction comes eventually.

It made me think of something I read once called “Everyone Needs a Friend”. It was true. Nobody should ever stand alone or feel nobody around them was on their side. Does anyone ever consider when people hurt, even teachers at times? No. Sometimes, it is about doing the most possible to be the bigger person, even when you are not.

I made a point to go to breakfast that morning. I stood in line with a boy named Keith who would not stop talking about Star Wars. At least his friend Kenneth was talking with him about... I guess it was a video game because they were talking about “beating” General Grievous.

It was good to watch those people who were kind. A boy, maybe first or second grade, spilled his change all over the floor at the register when he had to pay for the breakfast. The boy named Brandon knelt down behind him and helped pick up the change. The boy who spilled the change looked relieved.

Two fifth-graders were helping a custodian clean up the mess from where a small group of pre-kindergarten students had been eating. I recognized at least one; her name was Hannah. Hannah and her friend were cleaning the table off with a wet rag and

mopping the floor. It looked like they went to help out the custodian in the first place, and he definitely accepted their offer.

A few people I knew were talking with the music teacher while she was watching the kids enter and exit the cafeteria. They were talking about something important. They didn’t just say “Hello” and “Goodbye”. Some kids sometimes didn’t even say anything at all.

I sat with a few people from class during breakfast- Matthew and Lane- and they were discussing something about a video game, also. That’s something that will never change- Boys always talk about video games, and nobody will ever get in the middle of that. It’s a part of who we are. It’s sort of our second language.

Mrs. Farley was in an interesting mood that day. She seemed kind of pleasant because I think the class was starting to calm down. They were starting to think more, though of course some people were still so mean. Yet when she stated, “We are going to have a one-word contest,” we gave her a blank stare.

She didn’t let us stare at her for long, though. “I will ask you some random questions, and you can only answer the questions with one word. You’ll realize quickly that you have to think about the question for a moment to find the best word for the answer.”

We nodded.

“First example... what is the main cause of animals’ habitats being destroyed?”

The first thing that came to my mind was “human activity”, yet that was two words.

Seth raised his hand and stated, “This isn’t the main cause, but I thought of…”

“Just say the one-word answer,” Mrs. Farley smiled at him.

“Deforestation?” he responded like a question.

“Fires,” Emily responded.

“People,” Dillon continued.

I then thought how Dillon’s response was smart because people were the ones who caused fires and deforestation. Humans polluted…

“Oh! Pollution,” I blurted out.

“That’s two words,” I heard a voice state. I turned around and realized it was Patrick.

Mrs. Farley stared at him for a moment, and then continued with the second question. “Why did explorers come to the United States?”

“Fortune!” Sarah called out.

“Fame!” Lane followed.

“Riches, or maybe wealth,” I responded.

I heard a buzzing sound. “That’s… four words,” Patrick sneered.

Mrs. Farley told him if he said another word in anyone’s direction that was not related to the lesson, she would write a warning.

“I’d say… greed,” Matthew told the class. “Explorers were kind of greedy. They wanted to be the rulers of everything so they could have more money.”

The lesson was interesting. We realized we *did* have to think more. It was kind of like the game show Password. You cannot just blurt anything out. Your answer has to be the strongest word you can think of to answer the question.

Later on in the day (it was now November 21<sup>st</sup>), I realized something major at recess. Dillon decided to hang out with me, but every time he turned around, Patrick was pestering him.

“My, my, how we have turned the tables,” Patrick told him after a while.

“Leave me alone, Patrick,” Dillon frowned.

“I won’t until you hang out with me,” he grumbled.

“I refuse,” Dillon told him.

“You’ll be sorry you said that,” Patrick shot back.

Patrick disappeared after that, heading off huffing and puffing toward the basketball court. Patrick then took a basketball and literally slammed it towards the hoop. We heard a loud thud. He was stomping all over the place, as if something let off inside of him.

“For the rest of your life, there will be bullies,” I started telling Dillon.

“Since kindergarten, he’s actually made me sick to my stomach,” he told me in a quiet voice. “He had stolen my lunch and was always mean to everyone. I didn’t want to be one of his…”

victims.” We then sat on the swings, the same ones Seth and I sat on in first grade.

“You need to tell Mrs. Farley,” I suggested.

“What? And risk him pounding me down?” he shook his head and put his hands over his face. His face was crimson red. “I just want to be left alone.”

We then looked up and realized Mrs. Farley was near us. “Mrs. Farley, Dillon is feeling sick,” I blurted out. “He needs to go to the clinic.”

He glared at me. He didn’t completely know what I was getting at. He didn’t realize I was getting him in the direction of our counselor. If I would have said we were going to the character education teacher, then she probably would have asked us what was wrong. I did not want Patrick to see him talking to Mrs. Farley.

“Great. He’s going to think I’m going to the principal,” he moaned.

“You’ll see,” I responded as Mrs. Farley pulled out a blue clinic pass from her waist apron.

There was one thing Dillon did not know- the school nurse was my aunt. She would send him wherever he needed to go, and Mrs. Farley would hopefully find out much later what his actual reasons were, after Patrick would forget the incident.

As we walked toward the office, he kept telling me, “But I’m *not* sick. *I’m not sick.*”

When we walked into the clinic, he took one look at the nurse and began bawling his eyes out.

“Dillon, the nurse is my aunt,” I told him quietly. “She’ll understand how you are feeling, and she may be able to send you to talk to someone else without Patrick realizing because he saw you with a clinic pass.”

“Has there been an injury?” she asked with concern.

I explained everything while Dillon looked utterly and completely embarrassed. Finally she turned to him and stated, “You stood up for yourself, Dillon, for the first time against Patrick. You should feel proud. You cannot let a bully control you. This needs to stop. You need to be you and he needs to find his own self, also.”

She then asked if we needed to head to the counselor, and I nodded. “I think so.”

“I just want to be... me,” he blurted out in my direction. “I want to be left alone, actually. I don’t want anyone to bother me, not you, not him. I don’t want him to think I am some wimp and I have to talk to someone about it.”

“He won’t know, Dillon!” I shot at him.

“Yes, he will,” he responded. “In the back of his mind, he *will* know. He always seems to know everything.”

I thought back for a moment and realized that many people have been bullied in our school. They have never done anything about it. Some teachers did not even know what was going on. They thought everything was fine while some people even feared going to school, risking being “pushed around” (either by words or actions) by the person they feared most. Sometimes people would ask questions just to confuse people, so they could feel stronger about themselves.

I thought about Patrick for a few minutes while I headed back to the classroom from the clinic and left Dillon. As I have already mentioned, he is larger than us. Does he think someone may make fun of him for his height? Is he being mean just because he doesn't want to know what being made fun of feels like? I'm sure if he treated people with kindness that nobody would say anything to him. I'm even more positive if he became more well-known for his football or got into something else at school that someone would admire him.

I felt at that moment that he needed his opportunity to shine, too, and hopefully that time would come soon. Then Dillon could feel like he could be himself and people could finally see both of them fairly.

Bullies are labeled. Nobody sees them for anything else. No teacher really wants to have the bully, I am sure. And now I knew for certain that no kid had a real friendship with a bully, either.

## Chapter Seven

I will not go into what happened that afternoon, because Dillon and I did not talk for a little while. He sat with Matthew and the other boys at lunch for almost a week. I sat alone, though I blended in.

Our guidance teacher had a great idea when we went to specials with her one day in December. We wore these signs on our heads, and people had to role-play, treating us like what the paper said. For example, one person's paper said "caring" while another person's paper said "fearful". Either a person had a positive or negative word on them, though they had no idea what the words said themselves. They just watched how people reacted to them.

Some people handled it fine. Still, some people didn't take it seriously. That didn't stop any of our teachers from trying.

Eventually, Dillon was all right. He apologized and told me it would take probably a very long time for him to stop being friends with Patrick, though that was what he wanted to do. At least he eventually told Mrs. Farley, knowing I did the right thing and he had been bullied all this time. Mrs. Farley told us she had a plan for improving our class.

Something else really good happened. We went to City Hall with a kindergarten class to decorate the city's Christmas tree. That forced us to be role models. Mrs. Farley told us that we needed to give the kindergarteners at least one compliment throughout the day, about how they were being kind to their friends, trying their best to decorate the tree, or something along those lines. We also had to guide them across the street to the park near City Hall.

We learned it was important to give compliments to the younger students at our school because they needed good role models. They needed people who thought they mattered. They didn't need the older kids to look down on them. Not long after that trip, we saw a kindergarten teacher who was trying to tell her class to not do something, but they went on anyway. Ms. Morrow looked mortified as her students pulled on the artwork that hung outside the art room, tearing randomly at the bulletin board. She told them to step away, but one student turned to her and stated, "I don't care. So what? It doesn't matter to me. It's not mine."

We just stared at the girl. We did not dare say "That girl must get in a lot of trouble in her class," but we were thinking of her hateful words toward someone who was just trying to be helpful to her, someone was just trying to get her to grow as a person, but she was not listening.

It made me think back to when we were younger and how our teacher told us to pick up our messes in the classroom. There were kids like this one boy named Steven (who moved away last year) who looked at the teacher, shrugged his shoulders, and answered, "But it's not *my* garbage, so I don't have to pick it up."

It was like the time Emily dropped her box of crayons in first grade and how Patrick refused to help her. He kept saying to our teacher, Mrs. Brown, "*Why do I have to do this? But it's not my crayon box!*" I remember the tantrum, almost word-for-word and action-for-action.

Not everyone grows up, sadly, or becomes a better person. Sometimes the people who were mean as kids are still cruel as parents. If you ever watch in the grocery store, you may see someone

shout, "But it's not my problem! Get away from me! Go solve your own problems!"

Thing was, the person on the other side didn't know how to solve his or her problems, so the person was left standing without a clue.

Things like this makes me realize- and hopefully other kids- that people's feelings matter and things can improve greatly if you try to treat people like equals. If you take some time, if you consider people's feelings, if you maybe even give a second chance, then things can get better.

In gym class the following week, we did something really interesting- the human knot. We- in small groups- had to start out by holding hands, and then we had to twist ourselves into a knot. The groups were then in a contest against one another to unravel the "knot". Gradually, the groups got larger and larger. At the end, two groups of ten people were "knotted" and problem-solving together to unravel themselves.

We also heard a lot about Jordan, and we saw her every once in a while, once every couple of weeks for maybe an hour. She was really sick, but very hopeful she would be all right. Her immune system was weak, but she still came in to see us because we meant a lot to her. Her mom was always with her. It was sad because sometimes when you look at someone, you don't realize what happens inside of them. Jordan had cancer of the blood, and because of that, her energy had lessened greatly. She seemed so exhausted.

When the New Year came, everyone came back worn out, but willing to do better. Jordan was a huge topic because when everyone went home for winter vacation, nobody heard much about

her. It was good to see people were interested in finding ways to help, and they wanted to write her encouraging notes. Even people like Marissa in the other class who made fun of her last year wrote her a note, I think.

I did not know how much things were going to change in such a short period of time. Something mysterious happened in our class in February.

There was this art contest where people had to submit a piece of their artwork for judging. It was a county-wide contest. One student would win for each grade level at the school and then go against every other school winner in the county to take the top prize in each grade level. On February 23<sup>rd</sup>, the class was quiet as an announcement was made over the intercom.

“Good afternoon, students!” Mrs. Andrews (one of the front office secretaries) announced. “We have a very important announcement.”

The class got quiet. “We have the results from the school art contest. We actually had the most entries ever this school year. The people who have been chosen to go on to the next level of the county art awards are... Matthew Daroucher from kindergarten, Sarah Schilling from first grade, Heather D’Angelo from second grade, Willie Mull from third grade, Dillon Randall from fourth grade, and Lena Cummings from fifth grade!” Mrs. Peters (our other secretary) finished.

The entire class cheered as loudly as they could for Dillon, but he was actually really pale. “Congratulations!” Mrs. Farley exclaimed, not noticing how his face looked at that moment. People may have thought he was just being humble.

I found out the truth of why he was so pale not too long after the announcement. He stated to me quietly, “I... umm, didn’t... enter... the contest.”

There was a moment of stone-cold silence. “*What?*” I responded.

He looked mortified. “*Did you?*”

“No way,” I answered. “I wouldn’t do that to you.”

Mrs. Andrews literally flew through our classroom door later that afternoon, right before dismissal. She handed Dillon a manila envelope. “This was your entry, Dillon,” she told him, “Your artwork is truly astounding. I cannot express how amazing it is in words.”

“But-“ he started quietly.

However, she went on to say, “If you win for all the fourth graders in the county, then you can win \$250.00 and have your artwork displayed in City Hall. You have a *very* good chance. You need to put five pieces of artwork together by Friday, though, and then turn in the portfolio so the people on the committee can make the decision.”

Opening the envelope, Dillon saw an entry that had been typed on the computer. His name was on the sheet along with his birth date... and even words he supposedly had written himself. Then the artwork in there was very familiar to him. He stared in silence as Mrs. Andrews quickly left the room.

“It’s a torn-out page from my comic book! A page I wanted to throw away! My character Vindom did not look right in this

sketch!" he cried out. "But I put it in the recycling bin in this classroom- who took it out?"

"Maybe it was the custodian," I told him innocently. We were both unsuspecting because we had no idea who would have taken his artwork out of the bin.

"And the custodian knows my birthday? The custodian knows my address? The custodian may know my name, but she doesn't know anything else about me!" he cried.

"Maybe it was Mrs. Farley," I suggested.

"I honestly think she would have told me first," he responded quickly. "I really think it was someone else."

"Could it have been your mother? Your father?" I kept suggesting.

He shook his head. "No," he told me. "I think I know who it was. No, I *do* know who it was." But then he was really quiet. He refused to say another word.

The secretary in the front office then called for dismissal, and Dillon grabbed his backpack quickly enough because he had to go. "See you tomorrow," I told him.

"See you tomorrow," he replied.

As the weeks went on, though, Dillon never found out who entered him in the contest. He thought he knew, though he would not say anything to me. Nobody admitted anything to him. Yet still, of course, he put together his portfolio for Friday. He turned out showing me five very unique pieces of artwork. One was a sketch of a very beautiful woman. I couldn't place where I knew the face, yet

in the back of my mind, I recognized the face. She looked like she was around thirty or so.

"For some reason, I love this portrait," I told him. "Did you model this after someone?"

He hesitated for a moment. "...No. It was just a random sketch of a woman."

His other four pieces of artwork were all different. One was a collage of a skateboard with different magazine cutouts that filled the shape. Another was a perspective sketch of a tunnel. The tunnel even had graffiti written on it. Someone was also skateboarding off the side of the tunnel, and the design of the skateboard had tiny detailed stickers on it, saying "Element" and "Curve". He also included a different page from his comic book of Vindom and a painting of a group of soldiers on a battlefield, complete with tufts of smoke and a fading sunset.

"Your artwork is beyond amazing," I reassured him. "I have a feeling you may win."

"I guess we'll have to wait and see," he remarked. "I am actually glad the person entered my comic book page now."

"Good," I grinned. "Sometimes I guess people have to do things without saying. Yet I'll admit again, it was not me."

"Truly, it inspired me to draw and let a lot of people know about my art," he said quietly.

From not too far behind us, I felt a set of us looking at us, kind eyes, but the eyes soon turned away and we never knew who was staring.

Soon, all these people started coming up to him, asking to look at his sketchbook. The following Friday, he had even brought his sketchbook to recess, so everyone was excited. “Okay,” he agreed when many people asked him to draw.

“How are you able to do that?” a girl named Hannah asked. “I can barely even draw a stick person.”

“Where do you come up with the idea for your comics?” a boy named Nick continued.

“I guess I’d have to say my dreams at times... video games... everyday life... fantasy books,” Dillon shrugged, half grinning.

“Do you draw dragons?” another person went on.

“I *can* draw dragons,” he nodded. “But it’s not something I do all the time.”

Emily was nearby and laughed. “Well, Dillon, is there anything you cannot draw?”

He joked for a moment. “Your face,” he told her quickly. He then made a mock serious face and watched her look at him in an unsure way. “Seriously, I’m kidding!”

He then answered truthfully. “I’ve never been good at drawing some animals, yet I train myself to draw different things. I try to pay attention to small details. Like if I am drawing an outside scene, I think of whether it is windy outside or if the sky is clear or overcast. How bright is the sun shining?”

He all of a sudden looked extremely elated. He couldn’t stop talking about his art. Finally, Jordan came near us with her mom and asked, “Dillon, could you draw a portrait of me?”

“Of course,” he accepted immediately.

He then opened to a new page in his sketchbook, advised her to sit, and started sketching a basic oval shape. From there, the photograph came to life. By the time he was done, the portrait was astounding. He really paid attention to the details of her face. Everyone’s mouths were hanging open.

By the time he was done with the portrait, he had to have been surrounded by at least twenty people. When I looked up, I saw Patrick on the outskirts of the crowd, looking lonely and jealous. Yet, he was watching, and not exactly in an angry way.

Good reports started to come about Jordan not long after that. Our class had actually come up with some fundraisers for her, and the greatest of all was when we held a talent show in the cafeteria. Dillon helped sell art, and classmates both danced and sang for the audience. Her friends got three brothers to sing a Jonas Brothers song. Our class made a few thousand dollars in honor of our friend.

On March 13<sup>th</sup>, the greatest news came, that a bone marrow match had been made for Jordan only after six months of having leukemia. A 10 out of 10 donor had been found for her. After we found that out, our entire school sponsored a Saturday event where people signed up to donate bone marrow for anyone else across the country who suffered from leukemia. Our class was able to research about leukemia and see that only about 30% of people who suffer find matches within her families. Jordan’s mom, who worked very

hard for her, helped her to find a donor in Georgia, which was not far from us at all.

Of course, that did not mean Jordan would be healthy right away. She would still suffer, and it would not be done immediately. It would be a few weeks until she would head down to Georgia.

We learned from Jordan's family that it had been a disgraceful time. Her house was filled with all kinds of medications. She was for the most part homeschooled, more so after November, and Mrs. Farley was visiting her house at least three or four times a week to help her out. She had to keep her distance, too. I could see sadness wearing away at our teacher as time went on.

Gratefully, she had almost a full chance of a full recovery. Just to think she wouldn't be leaving us, most likely, was the greatest feeling. It's hard to lose someone who you have known for a while.

Jordan had also lost her hair over the six months. She was always known for her hair before having leukemia, but now that didn't matter. There was so much more to Jordan than her long, wavy hair.

That made me think back to Tweedle Dee and Tweedle Dum, who were so much into the way they looked. They'd turn to one another on the bus and ask, "Is any of my hair sticking up? Is it messy? Do I need to brush it again?"

People care more about their hair than they should. Boys complain a lot when their mothers make them cut their hair, but it's inevitable. Our mothers, I guess, want us to look nice. Girls care about whether their hair is sticking up in the wrong places or if it looks just the littlest bit messy. I never really understood that.

People also complain about pictures of themselves, that their facial expressions look strange or they don't photograph well. But someone like Jordan didn't care, even though her face had filled out a great deal because of the medicine. Jordan had always been thin, but now her cheeks had puffed out. She looked different, but nobody treated her like she was different.

I don't think people were being Jordan's friend because they felt bad for her. She was always strong-willed and never would want pity from anyone. I think people just started to realize that all the people they know in their lives matter.

People who goofed off more in the past started listening to Mrs. Farley more, and Dillon gradually became this person who was almost always excited. The class learned the rest about him, about his good grades and how he was good at sports. He still chose me over everyone else, though, as the main person he hung out with. We raced each other at recess, shared sketches, and traded snacks at lunch if he got something I wanted and I had something he wanted. It felt good to have a friend again.

Even Seth was doing fine. He was still quiet to me, though he was not angry at me anymore. I knew all of a sudden that we would talk sometime.

Patrick kept his distance from Dillon. I started to think that he may have really wanted to be his friend. He always seemed to be alone, but he was not mean to him because he knew Dillon had more friends than before. He had people who supported him.

Mrs. Farley actually began to have fun with our class. It was really hard for her at the beginning of the year. People like Patrick and Dillon were talked about among the teachers at the end of

second grade and all through last year, though I guess something about Mrs. Farley was really strong. We admired her.

We had a really neat science experiment where we had to make rubber band propelled cars out of cardboard and some other materials. Again, Mrs. Farley matched up partners, and this time, Dillon was with Seth.

Neither of them made excuses or rolled their eyes; they just worked together.

Seth was kind of clumsy at times, and Dillon had to warn him fast about one thing. The rubber band was about to shoot off their car. "Tape it more so you don't strike yourself," Dillon warned him.

Seth actually half laughed while he taped.

Thinking back six months before, the two of them never would have gone this far in the experiment. Dillon would have actually been stuck up about it. Seth would have whined or been completely shy. He would probably be at Mrs. Farley's side in seconds.

But now Seth was telling him back, "Straighten it out, or the thing will flip in the other direction!" Yet it was in a half-laughing voice.

We kept doing all these amazing science experiments. Probably the greatest was the rocket experiment. Mrs. Farley's husband was a science teacher at the middle school, and he actually took the day off to bring in his air-compressed rocket launching machine. This time, we were allowed to choose our partners, but

nobody was really doing the "me-you" pointing thing. People just kind of drifted to other people.

The rockets launched at least 200 feet into the air. We had to wear safety goggles, so we looked strange, but when Lanie told Sarah she looked like a bug, everyone laughed, even Mrs. Farley. I realized she was a person who enjoyed teaching, and somehow, she turned her classes around every year.

We had our field day a few weeks after that. Our class was split into two teams, and we had to do all kinds of competitions against one another. Some competitions were typical like three-legged races. Yet the best part of all was when we had a contest where a person had to lay down, hold a one-liter soda bottle on his or her forehead, and another person had to pour water in the small opening from a bucket of water. Many of us got soaked because the contest was far from easy. In the long run, both teams almost tied by how much water poured into each liter bottle.

Dillon and Seth did not talk again in that time, but I realized both of them had changed. Dillon was not rude to anyone, and nobody seemed to have remembered when he was a bully. Those things had passed now. Seth seemed to accept more people, and more people seemed to accept him. He worked fine with most everyone in class, even me if we had to partner up.

Something would soon happen, though, that would change everything. Nothing would ever be the same, no matter what was done.

Dillon invited me over his house to spend the night. He wanted to play video games and ride around a bit on his rip stick. It

was great, of course, that he had two and I was better on that than the skateboard.

Yet later that evening, Dillon wanted to play Call of Duty 4 with me. At first, he thought he had it in his room. He got down and quickly looked through his desk cabinet where he kept all his games. He then drew in a breath. “Wait, I think it’s in the computer room,” he sighed.

“You know what, I’ll get it because you have to get everything hooked back up,” I told him. “Isn’t the computer room right up the stairs?”

“Yeah,” he responded, “It’ll probably be on the desk because my dad was looking at it when he was using my mom’s laptop. He took a few of the games because he went online and checked out other war games for me. I think you’ll see it fast.”

“I’ll be right back,” I told him. I turned left and then right, heading up the short flight of stairs. The computer room was not hard to find at all because there were just three rooms on the third floor. The other two doors went to the attic and a bathroom.

I turned the knob to the door and turned on the light. When their family had moved into the house, his dad had transformed part of the attic into a study. It seemed like a really comfortable room with a futon, and pictures were on the walls.

It was not hard to find the video game because it was right on the desk with the others. I was kind of clueless about everything in the room until I spotted a picture by the door.

It was a picture of two women together. One was his mom, and the other woman was very familiar to me. I then realized why I

felt so comfortable around his mom when I first met her. It was the woman he had sketched for the art contest.

The other person in the photo was Seth’s mom. I hadn’t seen her since kindergarten, but I remembered her. Also, there was her obituary in the frame-

*Denise Morgan, 32, passed away December 30, 2004. She is survived by her parents, Daniel and Linda Murphy, her husband, David, son, Seth, sisters, Lena Andrews and Nadine Randall, one niece, Danielle Andrews, and two nephews, Dillon and Brock Randall. She moved to this area in 2000, as she was from Eaton Rapids, Michigan. She was a dental assistant and volunteered countless hours with Habitat for Humanity. She touched the hearts of many and had the ability to make anyone smile. She especially had a passion for animals...*

I had stopped reading a few moments before the part where it said she had a passion for animals. All I saw was nephew and Dillon’s name. I then glanced at the picture again, and it was certainly Seth’s mom. Looking back again, “nephew” meant that Dillon and Seth were cousins.

But it couldn’t be, because they never talked. Dillon obviously did not like Seth. He was mean to him since the second grade. How could they possibly be cousins?

I then heard a door open from the second floor. “Hey!” the voice called out. “Did you find it?”

“Y-yeah,” I stammered. “I found the game.”

“Well, what *were* you doing up there? I thought the room swallowed you alive!” he told me. He started walking up the stairs and saw the look on my face.

I must have had this look of horror on my face because he was quiet, really quiet. He then stepped into the computer room. “Oh,” he said quietly, “Of all things you possibly could have seen, you had to see that.”

He then told me to put Call of Duty back on the desk for a few minutes and sit down on the futon. He looked at a bookshelf for a moment and pulled out a photo album. “I have to be really careful with this because it means a lot to my mom,” he told me in a quiet voice.

I was still silent.

He then flipped until he was almost to the back of the photo album. There was a letter in there. “Okay,” he sighed. He handed the album to me.

*Dear Denise,*

*You were an incredible sister, and I could not feel worse about your life ending so early. You were just 32 years old- and here, you have two younger sisters who always looked up to you and adored you. At this time, I am 28 and Lena is 30. When I look at this letter over time, I'll always remember who I was when I wrote this letter. We both have two amazing boys in kindergarten.*

*However, I don't know if I will be able to tell Dillon about the pain in which we suffered, not until he is older. He just thinks I was in the hospital for a few days. Honestly, I don't know if he understands what happened to you. He's only six years old, and I*

*want to protect him. When the man in the pickup truck hit our car that dark night, I cannot believe I survived. I really wish you had because I am sure you wish you could see Seth grow up. I think he'll make a huge difference in this world because he is brilliant...*

Suddenly, I heard crying, real hard crying that normally doesn't come out of a ten-year old boy. “Seth and I never talked again after that. I was always really shy, actually. He became really sad, and eventually I think he became jealous of me because I still had *my* mom. Then I met Patrick and became a bully.”

“I remember when Seth's mom died,” I mumbled. “But I didn't get what happened. Now I know, and I think I understand what happened between you guys. Does your mom ever talk to them?”

“Every once in a while,” he told me. “When I was mean to him in second grade, his dad came in to school, and my parents had to, also. They had to sit us down in the front office. They tried to help us, but I kept saying I couldn't stand him. He just kept on crying. I was mad. And worse, I didn't want him to have a best friend. My aunt had died, and it only made us hate each other.”

It was really quiet after that. “I'm sorry,” was all I could say.

“Then I didn't want you looking at the pictures of my dad because he *was* a famous drummer. We had to leave California and find a small town. My aunt helped us out a lot. My dad never had good friends when we lived there, and we left so we could make good friends and be normal people.”

It was not too long until Dillon's mom heard noise coming from the computer room. When she opened the door, she saw two

really solemn boys sitting on the futon. We talked for a while, and then she suggested we call Seth's dad and see if we could invite Seth over.

"Can you do it, mom?" Dillon asked.

She nodded. "Sure." She then stepped out of the room.

Five minutes later, she told us, "Seth's dad let me talk to him, and he said he can come over."

We just sat there in silence. It did not take Seth long to come over the house. Silence was even more stone-cold than ever when we heard people walking up the stairs to the computer room.

## Chapter Eight

Seth Morgan all of a sudden looked older, wiser, and certainly cool. He had grown so much since the beginning of fourth grade, inside and out. He had always been smaller than most everyone in our classes, though I realized he was getting a lot taller. He wore plaid shorts and a worn surfing t-shirt. Before I may have thought he was looking like a poser in that outfit, but he looked comfortable and I put that thought aside.

"I never told you that I really like your new glasses," I said quietly as he sat down across from us. I had said maybe fifty words to him since second grade, most of them mean, so I felt strange. Maybe saying that would make him feel better, though, and not everyone looked good wearing glasses. For some reason, though, his glasses were awesome.

Seth looked over at me with an extremely sad expression on his face. "This year, I felt really bad when you started hanging out with Dillon. He's always been cooler than me. He is a better artist than I am, by far." He glanced over at his cousin and gave him a half-approving smile regarding his art.

"When we were little, like when he first moved here, he would zoom down his driveway on his roller skates, and I would always be falling. He took the training wheels off his bike before I did. People came to his birthday parties. I even came, but everyone comes to birthday parties in kindergarten and first grade. I never felt close to him, though. It was like... he was up here, and I was somewhere in the middle," he finished.

Dillon then spoke. “Well, at least you *had* a true friend. Mine weren’t true friends. They only liked me because I was into these things like skateboarding.”

Seth then added quickly, “Well, I knew for certain Patrick wasn’t a true friend. You would come near someone, and he would... monopolize you. He hurt you, and that hurt me even more.”

“Bullies certainly do that,” Dillon told him. “But I learned one day that I couldn’t be around him anymore.”

Seth then looked at him again. “I want to tell you something that I hope you will never forget. That one day in second grade changed my life. It was actually the loneliest, saddest day of my life so far. I did not know who to trust anymore, but I certainly did not trust you. Did you really want to hurt me, or was it Patrick?”

“At the time, I was jealous of you... okay, extremely jealous. Ryan is a true friend, and I even knew that back then, but I learned that more this year. But I don’t think in the long run, I actually wanted to hurt you in any way,” he responded.

Dillon drew a deep breath. “Sometimes, people get scared. They don’t know what to do in that time, so they think fast. They push, they shove, they holler. People want to follow who they think is the bigger person so they don’t actually feel smaller when they really are. But you know what, too, we were seven. We were in the second grade. We were still growing.”

“Maybe it wouldn’t have hurt as badly if it wasn’t my cousin who pushed me off the swing,” Seth told him. “I’ll tell you when it hurt the most- when I thought I would never have a best friend again. Ryan was never afraid to be my friend. He was brave. We knew each

other since we were little. We were always together. He made me feel cool, like I could be anyone, like I could do anything.”

“Maybe if I would have thought twice,” Dillon told him calmly, “I wouldn’t have done it. Maybe my mind would have realized that I was wrong. I didn’t want to hurt you.”

“And I didn’t want to hurt you, either, especially when I stole and submitted your artwork for the contest,” Seth stated. “But I realized something major. I wanted to change your life. I did not want to see you hold back from who you truly are. You are the type of person who everyone can like and appreciate. Someone who does not let you be that person is not a true friend. No friend should ever be jealous. I have noticed that more about Ryan, too. He is a true friend to you... and actually, to me. I don’t think either of you ever would have tried to make this better, here... tonight, if you didn’t have truth in you.”

Dillon closed his eyes for a moment. “It did not take me long to realize you submitted me for the contest. Honestly, there was nobody else who could have done it. At first, I was angry, but now I can win a major award for something I truly enjoy. Because of that, Seth, I thank you. I actually thank you a lot.”

“I never would have guessed you two were cousins,” I told them quietly, “But now, with everyone knowing, what do we do?”

“Actually,” Dillon started, “I want us to all be better people. This year, we have learned about classmates who have had to change because they did not have any other choice. Our class learned about standing up for one another. We learned what being a friend is. But now, we must do the right thing.”

A smile crept slowly across Seth's face. "You want us to be friends?" he asked.

We both nodded at the same time in Seth's direction.

All of a sudden, I knew why I had to repeat that one specific day several times over. Sometimes, people do not take the time to think about their actions or their words. People are extremely cruel without even realizing it. I am sure I had been plenty of times and I took the easy route out, but now knowing that I could have two amazing friends was 90 times better than the deal I originally had. I could have just stayed away from Seth or acted fake around Dillon, but that one day taught me that being true to myself and others is the greatest thing I can do.

"This is one of the greatest things that could have happened," Seth assured us. "And Dillon, I need to show you something that may very much surprise you. We need to go outside, though."

We headed outside through the garage, and he grabbed one of Dillon's skateboards. Dillon looked unsure for a moment. "What are you doing?" he asked warily.

"Sit down," he told us after he opened the garage door. We sat on Dillon's father's workbench. "I have to prove to you that I can do things like this after all."

Inside I had no idea what would happen, but as soon as I watched Seth moving around on a skateboard, I was appalled. He was better than both of us combined. When he was done, we were speechless. "I've practiced a little in the past year, actually," he grinned.

"You just did an Ollie and reverse Ollie," Dillon told him in amazement. "But something about that makes me respect you all the more."

"I'll never be able to acquire your artistic talent, though," Seth responded. "Ever."

The three of us turned out playing video games soon after that and spending the evening together. We also discussed a little about the album Dillon had taken out. I learned that my two closest friends actually shared more interests than I ever realized. The following day, we headed out to the beach, stopping at a science museum along the way. We had the greatest time together enduring a "hurricane" in a "Hurricane Chamber" and positioning ourselves on a bed of needles. There was even a room with a "green screen" where we could place ourselves in different scenes and be a weather meteorologist. The best parts of the museum were the walk-through human heart and the virtual roller coaster simulator.

Seth was particularly elated because he felt like he had more family to be around than just his dad. That was 90% of his life, and probably the other 10% was school. Friends had never come over to his house, and he never visited anyone, either. He and Jonathan never had that kind of friendship, though maybe soon they too would have the chance. Perhaps all of us would have the opportunity to be friends, after everyone understood our situation. A huge part of me did not want Jonathan to miss out, though he never gave anyone to chance to get to know him well.

The following Monday, we let everyone in on the truth. We actually needed to talk to everyone for a few minutes. Mrs. Farley was as appalled as anyone else, honestly. Patrick was the most appalled by the way his face looked, but soon, people understood.

We worked on an insane science project over the course of the next few weeks. Seth constructed three trebuchet catapults with three different lengths of mechanical arms. It was truly the work of a genius and was likely beyond anything he- or probably most any fourth grader in history- had ever done. Each trebuchet was constructed out of wood and stood at least three feet tall.

The results of the county art contest came a few weeks after that. All the students from the county who were honored were called to the high school's auditorium. Seth, Dillon, and I invited Jonathan to be with us. Dillon's parents were there along with Seth's dad.

Glistening trophies stood tall on a rectangular table on the stage. There were door prizes for the people who had attended. The mayor was there as well as the teachers and families of each student who was honored.

Mrs. Farley was ecstatic to see us at the ceremony. "I could not be any more proud of you," she told Dillon.

Finally, when the end of the program came and everyone received a certificate, the mayor prepared himself to announce those who would receive the top honors. "It was a tough decision because our county is full of amazing artists," he began. "We will start with kindergarten and work up to announce who will win the fifth grade honor. The first person to receive an honor tonight is kindergarten student Andrew Miller. Andrew attends Middleton Elementary School."

When he got around to announce the fourth grade student who would receive the honor, I looked out into the audience for just a moment and realized that someone had come I hadn't expected to see. It was Patrick.

"Something amazes me greatly about the fourth grade student who is receiving the honor this evening," the mayor began. "First, I am going to have the student come up, and his name is Dillon Randall."

Seth and I then cheered as loudly as we could. Dillon's mom raised her eyebrows for a moment, though she looked like she could have started laughing.

"Dillon certainly included five amazing pieces of artwork in his portfolio, but the one that stood out the most was the sketch of his aunt," the mayor began.

"His aunt?" Seth asked me quietly, tilting his head to one side.

"Dillon's aunt passed away when he was in kindergarten. She had gotten into a tragic car accident. He wrote along with this submission that someone in his life, his cousin, inspired him to sketch something that could help him to remember her, something that he could one day have," the mayor finished.

Suddenly, the sketch of Seth's mom was revealed, and Seth's mouth hung open. I guess he had never told Seth that he had sketched her. He did not even know if he was going to take the top honor. Looking over at Seth, though, he looked appalled, but in a way that showed respect. He knew things would be even more different now than they had before.

When Dillon returned to the audience, Seth immediately told him how incredible he was. When Patrick came near us, we tensed at first, but he eventually stated, "I just wanted to come and congratulate you. You are a... phenomenal artist, Dillon. I want you to continue to be a good friend to those around you."

Dillon's artwork turned out being displayed at City Hall, of course, and it was also photographed to be in the newspaper. He gained even more confidence, but it never made him feel better than anyone else. Dillon was humble.

Seth also went on to win the science fair at the county level for his astounding project, which gave him a whole new level of confidence as well. We were his cheering section, of course, as he was finally recognized for his scientific talents. Even a few judges walked up to him, telling them they were beyond honored to have been a part of his success.

Amazing enough, things would soon get even better.

## Chapter Nine

Disclaimer with this chapter- I had to include this one in my journal. There was no other way. People do things together to bond with one another. People go neat places, like on field trips, and that's what our class happened to do. There were other times in our class where we began to feel closer to one another, too, which I'll explain.

Just one week later, Mrs. Farley had the most amazing events planned for our class. Since there were just three weeks left to the school year, we were going to have a late-night Read-A-Thon and an overnight field trip to "America's Oldest City", St. Augustine, two weeks in a row.

The Read-A-Thon excited all of us. We were planning to dress in our pajamas and have all kinds of contests throughout the night. It would be ending at midnight. When it happened, Mrs. Farley made sure we had a book to start the night. She told us we needed to start reading for about twenty minutes before our first main event. Mrs. Farley made it well-known it was an individual reading event with chapter books at the beginning of the night- nobody dare asked to read something else in that time.

Dillon looked over at Seth after about ten minutes and whispered, "What are you reading, Seth?"

Seth responded without hesitation, "*How to Conquer the World in Twelve Days.*"

Dillon frowned, knew he was kidding, and took the book from his hands for a moment. "No way... you're reading *Great Expectations*? Could you possibly be serious? Why is the print so small? Why is the book so thick? Which grade level is that for?"

“It’s for high school,” Seth nodded as he delved back into his book.

Dillon turned his book again, “I’m reading... *Tales of a Fourth-Grade Nothing*,” he stated simply.

Likewise, I was reading *Diary of a Wimpy Kid*. Honestly, the books Dillon and I were reading kind of went with our personalities while Seth was reading something that was ten leagues above us.

After a while, we had an Accelerated Reader contest. The computer lab was open so we could earn points into the night. Someone who was once Mrs. Farley’s intern was watching the students who went into the room to take the tests. After just four more hours, Mrs. Farley printed up the results. At 11:30, she made the announcement that we had earned 800 points as a class, all in one evening.

Seth and I continued to make our friendship better again. The following day, we did something I had never done with him before- played soccer. I realized that things were much different than before. He was willing to run and enjoy himself more. He was not the timid, shy boy he was in second grade at all. I really had a blast hanging out with him as a fourth grader, as he often liked to tell jokes. He was actually a lot like his cousin, which I never noticed before they were related.

My dad and his dad were excited to see that we could be friends again. *They* even felt they could be better friends again.

One week later, we headed to St. Augustine, the oldest city in the entire United States. Living a few hours west from the city, most of us had never been there. We lived in northern Florida, not far from our state’s capital, Tallahassee. A few people in our class had

not even seen the Atlantic Ocean, so we knew that we were in for a great time.

Mrs. Farley’s brother lived in St. Augustine, so she had been there many times before. She was even able to plan an overnight trip because her brother was the manager of one of the hotels near the sites. She informed us of many things before the trip, that Ponce de Leon named our state “La Florida” (the land of flowers) in 1513 and the city was founded in 1565 by another Spanish explorer, Pedro Menendez. The main fort, the Castillo de San Marcos, is the longest standing fort in the United States, constructed of a really hard rock that has helped it to stand as long as it has. The lighthouse is the longest standing lighthouse, also, and then there are so many other places that make St. Augustine an amazing place to visit.

We started out the day by meeting at school at 6:00 in the morning. Our bus was air-conditioned with plush seating. For the most part, we were really quiet that morning, and a lot of the girls fell asleep out of exhaustion. Even after a while, Seth heard snoring from behind. Dillon’s mom had come, so Dillon grabbed her camera and snuck back two rows to take a photo of Sarah.

Sarah was appalled by the flash. “*What was that?*” she blurted out in a quipped voice, though Dillon was back to his seat with the camera by then. He smirked, forcing himself not to laugh.

One movie was playing while we were on the trip- College Road Trip. When the movie got to the part with the skydiving, Seth turned to me and stated, “I’ve got to try that.”

“That’s absolutely crazy,” I responded.

“Or bungee jumping,” Seth added. “Could you imagine- your two legs attached to a cord, you swishing up and down through the air?”

“You’ve lost your marbles since second grade,” I told him.

We arrived in St. Augustine at around 9:00, first pulling into the bus loop to walk into the visitor’s center. It was large in there, with a gift shop and even a large recreation of a Spanish galleon. On the wall, brochures galore waited for us. Emily began grabbing brochures as soon as she had the chance. “We’re going here- and here- and here!” she cried out, spinning around. She was not necessarily talking to anyone.

We only turned out spending fifteen minutes in the visitor’s center, however, because we headed to the hotel. Jonathan and his dad were sharing a room with Seth, Dillon, and me. His dad opted for the extra cot, so we well knew he would be uncomfortable. However, Seth told him a few moments later he would take the cot so Jonathan’s dad could have one of the comfortable beds.

The room was comfortable, clean, and pretty small, but there was a great pool not far from our room. We also had cable and pay-for-view television, though we probably would not be able to use it.

The first thing our class did was head back to the visitor’s center so we could wait for the trolley tour. The trolley zoomed up pretty fast, and we were certain to take out our cameras because we would be seeing all these places like the oldest house in the nation and a huge college that used to be a hotel that Henry Flagler built.

The person who drove the trolley told us all kinds of new facts to think about! Thomas Edison helped Henry Flagler. Martin Luther King gave a speech at a small church in a place named

Lincolnvill, not far from all the sights in St. Augustine. An entire church had been moved. Our class was listening to all the neat facts. The trolley even stopped so we could take a class photo in front of the oldest house, which was named the Gonzalez-Alvarez house. Sarah’s last name was Alvarez, so we certainly made fun of her for a few minutes about it.

After the tour, we were able to walk down St. George Street, where many of the shops and restaurants were in St. Augustine. Our group for the most part stuck together. Holly discovered a shop where chocolate fudge was made right at the shop. Amazed, we followed her in.

“Oh... my... goodness!” Holly cried out.

“It’s more like OMG!” Sarah moaned. “This place is amazing!” The two of them were toiling over everything on display, from the chunks of fudge, chocolate covered apples, flavors of ice cream, and other delicious treats.

“*Chocolate covered pretzels!*” Holly wailed. “How can I *possibly* make a choice?”

I was thinking the same thing, but when I saw Seth order a rocky road ice cream cone, I was pretty much convinced. I wanted to have a chocolate chip cookie dough ice cream cone. By the time we were out of there, we were marveling over our treats. Dripping in chocolate fudge, my ice cream cone was phenomenal!

“Come on!” Dillon called out after about five minutes. “We need to head into one of those gift shops!”

We found this gift shop crammed with all kinds of exciting items. There were these bins filled with pencil sharpeners that looked

like cannons, a display of hemp necklaces with shells, bags with coquina rock in it (the strong rock used to build the fort), and stuffed animals. Then of course, there were t-shirts and postcards like any typical souvenir shop. The back of the shop had books, and not far from that area was a display of shells.

Seth twirled the postcard racks, marveling over the pictures of the fort, lighthouse, and other sites in the city. "Come see this, Ryan!" he called out. "The lighthouse was built in 1845! It is 165 feet tall and has 219 steps. I like postcards because they always include tidbits of interesting information on the back."

Dillon really liked the pencil sharpeners. "I need one of those cannon sharpeners," he told me.

The girls had followed us in and were fascinated by the wide variety of stuffed animals. "I think we should all get the stuffed turtles," Lanie told her group.

"*What if I don't like turtles?*" Holly wailed again.

"Well, what if *I* do?" Lanie pouted.

"Then go and buy a turtle, but I don't have to necessarily get one, also," Holly murmured.

We did not spend much more time at that store and were able to walk all the way down to where the cathedral was. We peered in for a moment and admired the intricate artwork on the ceiling. "I would bet this church is also one of the oldest in the United States," Seth told me quietly.

We found a shop with all kinds of interesting t-shirts and small souvenirs. Dillon found a shirt that actually had a cartoon

skateboarder on it. After that, we purchased a few more postcards from another store and headed over to our tour at the Castillo de San Marcos.

By then, it was about noon, and after our tour, we would be meeting back at the hotel for lunch. The hotel was only about five minutes away, though, so we wouldn't be using the bus too much throughout the day.

The Castillo de San Marcos was probably one of the greatest sites I had ever visited. The re-enactors were dressed like Spanish warriors, launching cannonballs on the terreplain of the fort. The fort was actually cold inside a little and smelled musty, but it was interesting. The neatest part inside the fort was this crawlspace that led to... nowhere in particular. Jonathan got down on his hands and knees like a commando, coming back out with a blank expression on his face. "Go in there," he told us quickly.

We got down on our hands and knees, and when we were out on the other side, we were in an empty, musty chamber with nothing to really look at. Not far from there, though, there was a man with a display of old medicines from that time period, and we were fascinated. We were also fascinated by the hard beds the soldiers were forced to sleep on. "I honestly could not imagine sleeping on something so stiff," Jonathan went on.

The terreplain of the fort was of course the best part. The cannon launching was very loud! It was so loud that all of us were half covering our ears. A huge crowd had gathered, and everyone was in awe of how the re-enactors made everything seem so real, like we were back in that time period.

“I wonder if I could have a picture of myself in a cannon,” Dillon joked.

“Those cannons are *way* too small for you to fit in!” I told him, mock-punching him.

By 1:00, we were walking back towards the hotel to be there by 1:20 at the latest. Our bus then took us out to a pizza restaurant on St. Augustine Beach not too far from the Alligator Farm, where we would spend the rest of the afternoon before heading to the beach for a class game of volleyball. Seth had purchased a book about the ghosts of St. Augustine, which completely put him into his own reading world as usual. Dillon was fiddling with the batteries of his Nintendo DS. The bus driver had turned on the oldies station for the fifteen-minute drive. It was an uneventful, kind of quiet, kind of boring ride.

The pizza turned out to be delicious. The people in our class sat at two long tables, and the parents sat at the booths surrounding us. Brad in our class (who I haven't really mentioned at all) was eating slices of pizza left and right. He was like a bottomless pit. On the other hand, Seth had always been a picky eater and stopped after two slices.

“I wonder if we could have a... belching contest,” Dillon blurted out after drinking from his glass of root beer.

Seth shot him a look of warning and then let out a quick belch. Dillon let out a longer belch in response. I widened my eyes and covered my face that I was eating next to two cousins who had completely lost their minds.

Mrs. Farley then walked by, and while Dillon was in the midst of having the contest against Seth, he turned around, saw her standing inches from him, and choked on his soda.

Seth then began laughing hysterically. “Serves you right!” he exclaimed, but moments later, soda began shooting out his nose.

Dillon's mom then came into the area for a few moments, and they both straightened in their seats. Both he and Seth had poker faces on, though, trying hard not to laugh any harder with the soda in front of them. They were certainly reading one another's minds.

The pizza was devoured ten minutes later, or possibly five because we were starving. Everyone then applied some sunscreen before heading out to the Alligator Farm because they would be outside for quite some time.

Not long after we were there, we saw a bird show called the Rainforest Review where a few classmates of ours- Thomas and Lanie- got to participate. We were all able to get really close to the birds and then walk through areas where we were surrounded by komodo dragons, albino alligators, wading birds, and all kinds of exotic birds. An hour or so later, an alligator feeding was on the schedule at the center of the area. The alligators devoured their food in moments, and it was almost disgusting to watch. The alligators had beyond incredible strength.

It was amazing seeing Dillon and Seth acting goofy around one another. Both had that kind of personality, but Dillon was always too afraid and Seth had always been too shy. They went over to this fake alligator prop and took a crazy picture like the alligator was biting their heads off. Seth's face was the most dramatic of all, one of sheer terror.

We continued on to the beach and played a class game of volleyball. I had never watched Seth play volleyball, but he had talent. He was better than both Dillon and me. We were shooting unsure looks at one another at how to spike the ball properly. Dillon even spiked the ball straight up in the air, better than I could have done, but it landed back at him twice. I had not even spiked the ball that time.

After that, the class had twenty minutes to collect seashells and spend time at the ocean before having a barbecue under the beach pavilion. Emily of course had her tote bag prepared and started collecting shells of all colors and sizes. A few classmates were splashing one another, seeing who could get the most drenched. Even at one moment, Mrs. Farley walked by while Matthew was splashing water at Lane, and she had to dodge them. She had her expensive camera, and it certainly would have been bad if it had gotten soaked.

The barbecue was amazing. A few parents had gone over to the grocery store and had purchased hamburgers and hot dogs. Along with those foods, we had beans, chips, and pickles. Then of course we had even more soda, and I had to shoot warning glances at Seth and Dillon when they winked at one another. I would dodge them if they were preparing for yet another belching contest!

As the sky got darker and we headed back to the bus to go to the hotel, we noticed the lens in the lighthouse was shining brightly. The sunset was amazing, and we were all calm. As soon as we got back to the hotel, we would be in the pool, hopefully not annoying anyone at the hotel. I could not imagine going down for some quiet family vacation, heading to the pool, and seeing it was bombarded by loud, obnoxious ten-year olds.

However, we were well-behaved at the pool. Mrs. Farley did warn us that there were other people staying at the hotel besides us. We were generally quiet. After a few minutes of being at the pool, though, I saw Sarah sitting at the edge quietly, crying just a bit. As soon as she looked up and saw I was standing there, she tried her hardest to stop, but she couldn't do it.

"I am sorry," she told me quietly, "But it's really hard not to have Jordan here with me. At home, we always race in the pool. Or we raced. We always have contests. She's truly a great swimmer. I cannot believe she cannot be here with us and enjoy the trip."

I nodded. "I know," I consoled, "It's hard to not have your best friend, especially when you are used to being around that person. You know what's important, though? She'll always be your friend, no matter what happens. She's a strong person. She's determined that she is going to get better."

"You know what? I bet so many people who have cancer are determined they will survive, but then they don't," she said in a sad voice. "That's something I don't want to think about at all."

"Sadly, Sarah, everyone dies. They die at different times, whether old or young. But Jordan's chance of dying is not as high as it was if she had not gotten the bone marrow transplant. I read there are people all over who wait to find the right match for so long, for years, not just six months like Jordan."

She then stopped crying. "I should be okay. Thanks for talking with me."

We would also head to the lighthouse, Ripley's Believe it or Not, and go on a walking tour of the city the following day. The trip was an important part of my fourth grade year because it proved to

me that I was forgiven and I had in turn forgiven people. It was proof that our class was finally getting along well.

## Chapter Ten

Dillon's first complete comic book debuted right after the trip. His character Vindom was a dragon rider, a magician-warrior who was an elf who helped maintain peace with the assistance of his dragon. Dillon's book was incredible because his detail showed the shining silvery oval of skin located on the hand that marked who was a rider and who was not. I noticed how much he was into books like *Eragon* and *Dragon Rider*. For another fundraiser in Jordan's honor, he sold 300 5-page comic books for \$5.00 each.

We learned she was doing better, but we also learned we have to be patient. It would take quite some time to completely overcome the leukemia. However, the fundraisers helped her family to have more money for them and their other two children besides Jordan. Our class got letters that they were able to stay in their house and spend their money on groceries because Jordan's mom had quit her job not long after she realized Jordan had leukemia.

With not much time left in the school year, we had to write a short paper about how we became better people over our fourth grade year. We had the option of sharing it with our class or keeping it to ourselves, but the greatest thing is that Seth really wanted to go first.

"This year has been great," Seth began. "There are so many people I would like to thank. First, I thank Mrs. Farley for never giving up on us. Thank you for always caring. I also thank Jonathan because he was a great friend this whole school year. The next person I thank is Dillon because there are many people out there who are cousins and never talk to one another. I thank him for giving me a chance to be around him. But most of all, I thank Ryan because he could have given up our friendship completely. It was that way for a

long time. However, we forgave each other, and we were able to move on to be better friends than we ever were before. This is the first time in my whole life, though, that I can say that I feel accepted.”

Emily went to the front. “I know I’ll never be perfect, but I’ve learned about being a friend. I’ve been able to become friends with people I never thought I would have. I feel sorry about anything I said about Jordan before we learned she had leukemia because we had never been friends before. I had stereotyped her. I have learned you have to be true to yourself before you are true to anyone else, that you have to be the person you say you are.”

I went next, reading from my paper with as much confidence as possible. “I learned that you have to give people chances and you cannot make decisions too fast without considering what can possibly happen. Everyone has talents, and you have to give people the chance to appreciate them. Sometimes people want to be your friend for some reason. You cannot pretend to like what they do if you are not good at it, but if that person is a true friend, he will teach you how to become better at it. Even if you are not good at the same thing, a true friend will be okay with that. I learned that friendship is all about forgiving and being honest.”

Other people spoke, and finally Dillon went last. “Sometimes you feel afraid about the person you are becoming. People think you are someone different than you actually are. But you also think to yourself- who wants to be different? Some people don’t accept those people who are different, and people are afraid of being on the ‘other side’. That person was me. I’ve been drawing since I was four years old- good, detailed drawings- and I kept that talent hidden. I also didn’t draw attention to the fact I could do other things. Sometimes people don’t want to be the center of attention

because people get mad and jealous at times at those who are. But thinking back to this whole year, I have become a better person. I went from having one friend to still having that friend in a new way and many more friends. I was able to talk to my cousin again and bring the friendship he had with one of his friends back together. I was able to use art to touch his life, also. It wasn’t easy, promise me, but maybe knowing people cared made it easier. The biggest thing is to never give up, to stand up for what is right, and to use your passion for something good.”

We finally had our pancake breakfast and end of the year awards ceremony.

Mrs. Farley’s face was glowing, and our class was looking up at her in admiration. She was a kind, determined person, and very intelligent. We cheered as hard as we could for her. She then proceeded on calling up those who had gotten A’s for the entire year. Emily, Lanie, Jonathan, and Seth were the four students who had not gotten any B’s at all.

This time was different for Seth because his name was followed by erupting applause. I looked back out at the audience and saw his dad sitting next to Dillon’s mom and dad, beaming with joy. They had never sat together before. Their grandmother was with them, and their family truly looked proud. I had seen his grandmother numerous times before at award ceremonies, but alone and kind of sad. I guess they could not be near one another before because of all that had happened.

Dillon and I were pretty typical, on the Honor Roll, but it was still something to very much be proud. Again, I looked back at their expansive family, smiling away, and my family, applauding excitedly. Mrs. Farley then proceeded to give the last of her awards-

and the biggest one of all- the student who had grown the most in fourth grade.

“It was actually very difficult to choose who would receive this award this year because I’ve had a class that has become the most amazing I have ever had. They’ve learned to work together and to value one another. Yet I do have someone, and that is... Ryan Barrow.”

I honestly expected to hear someone else’s name. But... *my* name? Why me? How could I possibly be the person who had grown the most in her class?

I then headed onto the stage and stood at her side as she read, “Ryan has become one of the most respectful, accepting people in my entire class, someone who knows the true meaning of friendship. He is an honest, helpful person who really wants to see his friends succeed. It’s amazing, his friends earned honors recently, one receiving an art award and the other receiving a science award, and he was cheering for them on the sidelines. Yet now it is his time to be in the spotlight.” She turned to me and finished in a calm, sad voice, “Congratulations, Ryan.”

The audience’s cheers erupted. I did have to admit it felt good. Not long after that, the awards were over and my family came up to me to congratulate me. Well, perhaps except for my sister. She was Maggie. She was eight. I was ten. What do you expect? She, of course, was on a high horse.

“You got a B, *you got a B*,” Maggie sang joyfully, gloating to eternity, “...While I had the Principal’s List!”

“You better watch out, I am going to be a fifth-grader while *you*.” I informed her.

I was about to say something along the lines of “are going to be a measly third-grader”, but I held back because saying something mean back to her wasn’t going to teach her anything.

“You WHAT? ...I’m WHAT?” Maggie looked up at me, almost eye-to-eye. Sadly, I was going on to the fifth grade, but she was only a few inches shorter than me. Somehow, she shot up this year, and I really didn’t a whole lot.

“You are going to do a great job in third grade,” I sighed.

Maggie shot up one eyebrow in my direction and nodded in an unsure way. “That’s not what you meant to say, and I *know* it, Ryan Barrow,” she proclaimed in her snotty high-pitched bird voice.

I headed through the cafeteria, and suddenly Emily walked up to me, smiling in a bittersweet way. “I have some sad news to share with you, and I haven’t told anyone, but we’ve become better friends this year and you need to know. I am moving to Ohio over the summer. We won’t be seeing each other next year.”

I suddenly felt extremely sad, but I didn’t want to show that it hurt as much as it did that she was moving. “Just stay yourself, Emily. You’ve always been a really good friend to everyone.”

“I cannot believe today’s my last day,” she said quietly. She then stopped, thought for a moment, and asked, “You know what drives me crazy?”

I gave her a strange look. “*Tell* me what drives you crazy.”

“...It’s hilarious how people say that fourth graders go on *dates*,” she suddenly wrinkled her face. “Seriously! Where do fourth

graders go on dates? Do they head to McDonald's to share the six-piece chicken nugget meal?"

"Please don't change, Emily," I told her one last time. "You'll find friends wherever you go, and it's because you're true to yourself. You're honest, and people like that."

I then located Seth and Dillon. Seth was holding numerous awards, from his science trophy to his principal's list trophy to a few certificates. On top of that, he had two medallions around his neck. Dillon was giving Seth a mused look, asking, "So, Seth, are you going to graduate from high school soon? Are you going to be one of those people we read about in the newspaper who graduate from college by the time they are 12?"

"Nah, I don't want to go ahead with life too fast," Seth shrugged. "I'd rather see you become well-known for your art than me becoming some prodigy in the news. It's not like I taught myself Mozart's songs on the piano when I was three."

"No, you just did two-digit by two-digit multiplication by the time you were five," Dillon responded. "That's pretty minor, though, in the grand scheme of things. Oh, yeah, it's not a big deal, either, that you had some chemistry lab set up in your bedroom when you were six. I didn't even know what chemistry was, let alone multiplication... or science, really. You were even Albert Einstein for Halloween once. You are growing up to be a genius... an evil genius, conquering the world with some masterful plan."

"At least you could go to Skate Night and not fall every time you tried to skate," Seth told him. "I *still* cannot roller skate! Being a genius is really not too much of a big deal."

"Hey, you proved you can get on a skateboard!" Dillon went on. "Not everyone can do that."

Jonathan turned around from the refreshment table and shouted through muffled bites, "I cannot skate, either! Join the club!" He was stuffing himself with cookies and brownies. I even realize he had changed in fourth grade. He always seemed so proper before.

Jonathan realized we were staring at him, and he stopped, flailing his arms in the air. "I'm getting HYPERRRRRR on this foooooood!"

"Well, I still don't completely know what chemistry is," Dillon shrugged. "What did that Einstein guy do, anyway? What made him so important? And I know for sure I don't understand those dusty books you read of your dad's every once in a while."

My family then came over and congratulated them. Maggie was twirling her hair like a second-grader and making strange contorted faces at Dillon and Seth. This huge part of me wanted to kick her leg for what she was doing, but it wasn't right.

Maggie then dragged me over to the refreshment table and told me that she would eat three brownies without mom or dad looking.

"They'll know as soon as you start jumping all over the back seat," I told her.

"*But...!* It'll be too late! I would have already eaten the brownies!" she exclaimed. Thankfully, though, my parents were next to us a few moments later, letting us get one brownie each.

“Thank goodness,” I told them. “If you hadn’t come, she would have snuck at least two- or maybe three- without you realizing!”

As my family and I were walking back to the classroom, I saw Tweedle Dee and Tweedle Dum out of the corner of my eye. They were wearing the fifth grade graduation t-shirts. It would be the last day I would see them for a while.

“Uh,” I croaked suddenly in their direction. “You’re fifth-graders, right? Don’t you ride my bus?”

“We don’t pay attention to who is on our bus,” Tweedle Dum put her hands on her hips, kind of glaring down at me.

“And *yeah*, we’re *fifth-graders*,” Tweedle Dee told me back in a condescending voice. “Look at our shirts, anyway, because it says which grade we are in. What does us being fifth-graders matter to you?”

“I just wanted to congratulate you,” I told them boldly.

“Uh, thanks,” Tweedle Dee and Tweedle Dum responded dryly. “Uh...bye.”

As I walked forward toward Mrs. Farley’s room, I heard strange muffled laughter behind me. *Some people never change*, I thought to myself. Yet their time will come.

I was going to ask what their names were so I could stop thinking of them as Tweedle Dum and Tweedle Dee, but it really didn’t matter anymore.

Dillon and Seth rushed up behind me. “Hey!” Dillon shouted. “Are you going to leave us without saying goodbye?”

“No,” I told him. “I’m just gathering my things and signing out my books to Mrs. Farley.”

“We’ll be waiting for you!” Seth told me.

“You’ll know where I am. There’s nowhere else for me to go,” I told them.

As I grabbed the last of my supplies from fourth grade and signed out my books, I thought to myself that without that one wish, maybe things would not be the way they are right now. Because of that one wish, I learned to be honest to Dillon, kind to Seth, and forgiving to everyone. Like Mrs. Farley believed, I indeed was the person who had changed the most, appreciating all I had in my life.

Well, *maybe* except for my sister Maggie, but we could probably work on that. Hmm, perhaps, just perhaps, I could make one more wish...

... Nah.