

MEETING HENRY GREENFIELD



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Chapter One:

Eat it



“I’m sorry, I’m really sorry,” Alex whimpered.

“What did you just say?”

Alex looked up at the large boy staring down at him. He was a giant among a sea of tiny and fragile adolescents. “I’m...I’m sorry.”

The gawking students on the basketball court didn’t move an inch.

“Eat it,” the boy grunted.

Alex knew there was no choice; there was no question what had to be done. The insignificant role he played as a sixth-grade student at Timpleville Public School was extremely



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small. He was at the bottom of the pyramid. He had to do whatever an eighth-grade student told him to do. It was just a matter of wrapping his mind around it. “You really want me to put this in my mouth?”

The boy rubbed the thick peach fuzz on his chin and chuckled, “I want you to swallow it.”

The crowd of kids whispered and pointed, anxiously waiting to see what Alex was going to do next.

“Really?”

Alex wasn't sure why he was questioning it. It was suicide to actually think he could get out of it, especially when the threat was coming from someone who was once suspended for beating up the school mascot.

“Do it now, or else.”

Alex shook his head and sighed. If only he had got on the bus. If only he had just shut his mouth and moved on.

If only...

If only he didn't step in and stop Henry Greenfield from having a gigantic worm shoved down his throat.

Alex looked down at the concrete. There it was, squirming about along the cracks in the cement trying desperately to escape.

“You knocked it out of my hand...it's no good to me now,” the boy said. “Eat it.”



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Alex slowly picked up the worm and lifted it up to his mouth. It danced about between his fingers, unaware it was about to be sucked down the throat of a helpless klutz who clearly should have minded his own business.

“This isn't happening, this isn't happening,” Alex muttered.

Its slimy body squished against the tips of his fingers. Alex opened his mouth and lowered it toward his tongue.

No one said a thing.

Not a single student moved a muscle.

Alex closed his eyes. He wanted to be somewhere else...anywhere but there. He wondered why he always managed to find himself in the worst possible predicaments. He wondered what unfortunate series of events led to this very moment...the lowest and most humiliating point in Alex Thomas' tiny life.

First Day

Alex wasn't always a 'trouble-finder'. Up until that year his life was quite safe and normal. But when his brother graduated from the eighth grade and his best friend, Finley, moved away, Alex suddenly found himself starting a new year in grade six, vulnerable and totally alone.

The school was no longer a safe place.

Timpleville was now different.

Everything was different.

“I'm sorry for making you late, it was all my fault. It will never happen again,” mumbled Alex as he sat at the front of the school bus that morning.



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“Um, okay,” replied a little girl stepping past him.

“Louder!” shouted the bus driver.

“I’m sorry for making you late, it was all my fault. It will never happen again,” Alex repeated.

“Better.”

Somehow, in a matter of twenty-four hours, Alex’s life had turned completely upside down.

First of all, Alex had a hard time wrapping his head around going back to school. The summer was just too hard to forget. There were just too many pleasant, relaxing, lazy, fun, happy memories that were difficult to give up. Starting school in September was like jumping into ice water, head first...with a fifty-two inch TV tied to your feet.

Second, Alex barely slept a wink the night before. He sat with Finley at school every day last year at lunch. They traded sandwiches and chocolate puddings. They finished each other’s sentences.

And now, he was gone.

To Boston.

“I’m sorry for making you late, it was all my fault. It won’t happen again.”

“Whatever,” replied Ryan Samson kicking Alex’s shin.

Third, Alex spent way too much energy trying to convince his parents to homeschool him this year. He argued with them practically the entire night...at least until about 10:30. All he got from his convincing argument and desperate cries was a lunch bag filled with leftover pepperoni



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pizza. It was like expecting to get an iPad for Christmas and receiving a twelve-pack of fruity colored underwear.

“I’m sorry for making you late. It was all my fault. It will never happen again.”

Finally, because of all the stress Alex endured over the last twenty-four hours, he was extremely late for the bus that morning. What was worse was the mean bus driver, Mr. ‘Crusty’ Grayson decided to make Alex apologize to every student who got picked up.

The day had barely started and already Alex Thomas wanted to cry.

Meeting Henry Greenfield

After the painful bus journey, Alex finally walked into his homeroom class. Stumbling through the narrow aisles he made his way to the back of the room and sat down.

“Good morning Class, and welcome back,” Mrs. Oxford announced. She stood in the middle of the room with her long flowery dress and extra-large red framed glasses. Her jet-black hair was pulled back tightly in a bun.

Alex looked around the room.

No Finley.

No Friends.

Rudy Jerqson sat a few rows ahead of him. He knew the guy when Finley and him did lunch duty in Mrs. Humphrey’s kindergarten class last year. He was sort of funny, but had an annoying laugh. Then there was Satbir, two seats over to his right, but all he ever talked about was basketball - and his feet always smelled funny. Alex looked at the boy sitting in front of him. He had never seen him before. His giant orange hair puffed out like cotton candy.



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"I hope everyone had a wonderful summer," continued Mrs. Oxford. "Before we get started today, I would like all of you to welcome our new student to the class, Henry Greenfield."

Henry sat so tall in his seat that Alex couldn't even see the front of the class.

"Henry just moved from Red Apple Creek I believe. Isn't that right Henry?"

"Yes Ma'am, that's right," he replied. The kid could barely fit in his desk chair.

Lisa Weatherly pulled her phone out of her desk and took a picture of him. She giggled and showed Tori Backwater.

Rudy Jerqson shot up his hand. "Um, Miss? Isn't he in the wrong class?"

"No, Rudy, why would you think that?" Mrs. Oxford walked back to the front of the room.

"Well, because he's a grown-up. This is only grade six."

Mrs. Oxford shook her head and turned on the Smart-board. "He's the same age as you, Rudy."

"Oh," he replied, chewing madly on the end of his pencil. He looked at Henry and spit out bits of the eraser. "Wait til Damian Dermite gets a load of you."

Henry folded his hands on his desk. Alex wondered if Henry had heard of Damian, the school bully. The guy terrorized kids at Timpleville for years. Being invisible before school, after school, between classes and during recess was an important part of surviving the year at Timpleville. With Henry's crazy giant hair, and his purple overalls and bright pink shirt, Alex knew the big guy didn't stand a chance.

Chapter Two:

My Goal

Alex finds himself in the middle of a horrible encounter with a bully and a worm. He questions how he managed to get himself into such a predicament by thinking back to the first day of school. He recalls the miserable bus ride and the curious new boy named Henry Greenfield.



“Okay class, Lisa is going to pass out your language notebooks. Please write your name on the front and open it up to the first page. We’re going to write our first journal entry of the year.” Mrs. Oxford pulled up an image on the Smart-board of Timpleville Public School. She turned to the class, waiting for everyone to have their books and show her they were ready to start. “Your first entry is going to be about school.”

Rudy threw up his hand again. “You want us to write about school?”



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Mrs. Oxford nodded. "Yes. I want you to write down what you are hoping to achieve this year. What are your goals? What are you plans?"

Alex turned to the first page on his book and thought for a second. Mrs. Oxford walked up and down the aisles. For a short time, the class was silent. Alex thought about what he was going to write. He knew he wanted to make friends. He knew that was the most important goal for the year. He wasn't sure Mrs. Oxford cared to know that, but there was really nothing else. He wrote the date on his page and looked around the room. He wondered if there was anyone he would like to try talking to at lunch time. *Who can I share my leftover pepperoni pizza with?*

Seconds seemed like minutes.

Minutes felt like hours.

Alex started to write. *My goal this year is...*

He stretched his neck and yawned. He put his pencil down on the page again. *My goal this year is to...*

...is to.

...is to.

The clock ticked louder.

Henry's chair creaked in front of him.

Alex's mind drifted to the summer - standing knee deep in Timpleville Creek. Finley was with him. The two were catching crawfish. It could have been a Monday, or a Saturday. Each day just blended nicely into the next. Life was good.

Too good.

He placed his pencil on the page. *My goal this year is to...*



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The bell rang to end the first period. Mrs. Oxford stood beside Alex's desk. She picked up his book and looked at his journal entry. "Looks like you have some homework young man. I need this in by tomorrow." She shook her head and walked back to the front of the class. Alex dropped his head onto his desk and closed his eyes.

He needed Finley. He would know what to say. He'd give Alex a hundred goals and all of them would be perfect.

"Okay students, before I forget, I want to remind you we have a spelling test on Friday. The words will be posted tomorrow. Now, I need you all to line up at the door. We are going to get ready for gym class with Coach Mason," Mrs. Oxford announced. "He's going to be your new gym teacher this year."

Alex pulled himself up to his feet and ambled to the line at the front of the class. "Great. Gym class. My most favorite subject in the whole wide world." He dropped his shoulders and sighed. "I hate you Finley Oliver McKnight."

The line started to move out into the hall. The large, orange-haired boy turned around and smiled at Alex.

"Hello," Henry said. "What's your name?"

Alex swallowed and bit off a piece of skin from his thumb. "I don't speak English."

Henry's smile quickly faded as he turned back around.

The class shuffled along the grade five and six-wing and down toward their lockers.

"That was pretty funny man." Rudy Jerqson hustled up beside Alex as they stepped into the locker bay.

"What was funny?" Alex replied



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“What you said to the big purple Ogre-Beast just now.”

“What?”

“What you said to Henry. That was funny.”

“Um...thanks,” replied Alex. Pulling out his gym bag from his locker, Alex looked back at Rudy and wondered if he was someone who he could make friends with. Who cared if he had an annoying laugh? Maybe school *would* be okay if he had a new friend. He watched Rudy pull out his gym socks from his bag and dangle them in front of Lisa Weatherly. Rudy snorted and laughed before nudging his buddy Satbir.

The more Alex thought about it the more it made sense. An idea pieced together in his tired brain. He pulled out his iPhone and shoved it in his pocket. Before closing his locker the smell of the pepperoni pizza in his lunch bag filtered through the air. Lunch was less than an hour away.

“Good morning class, and welcome to Grade Six Physical Education,” Coach Mason stood in the center of the gymnasium. A red skin-tight t-shirt clung tightly around his pecks and large biceps. The students were all seated on the floor in their green gym uniforms. “Today we are going to start the year with laps. My job is to get you into prime physical shape so that you’re ready for next year’s intermediate basketball, football, volleyball and soccer.”

As Coach Mason turned away to look for the attendance, Alex pulled out his phone and quickly typed, *The new kid hides candy in his bellybutton* on the screen. He showed it to Rudy, who giggled and secretly passed it to Ryland Black.

Ryland laughed and slipped the phone over to Belinda Wright.



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In seconds, the message was passed on to everyone in the class...everyone except Henry Greenfield.

“I want you to find a partner and take turns counting how many laps you can do in fifteen minutes,” instructed the Coach, counting the students and checking off their names on his attendance sheet. “Which one of you is Henry?”

Henry raised his hand.

Alex ducked his head down and covered his mouth. “Henry Greenfield smells!”

Some muffled snickers spilled into the gym.

Henry didn't say a word.

The Coach tapped his pencil on his clipboard. “Who was that? Henry? Who said that to you?”

Henry glanced over at Alex for a moment and then shrugged his shoulders. “I'm not sure, sir.”

“Class? Who said that? Those kinds of words are negative. This class is going to learn how to be positive. We are all about ‘Put Ups’ and not ‘Put Downs’.”

Coach Mason looked at the circle of students sitting on the gym floor. He stood with his arms crossed; his whistle was around his neck. He twirled the long black hair on his moustache.

“I think this class needs to learn about respect. I want you to look at the person to your left,” he continued. Each student looked at the person to their left. “Now look at the person to the right of you.” The class, once again, did as he said. “Class, I want you to say something positive to both of them. Do it now.”



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He blew his whistle. The class jumped and quickly noticed he was serious. Alex looked to his left and shyly mumbled something to Lisa Weatherly. He had no idea what he even said to her, but noticed that Satbir, who was sitting next to Henry didn't say a thing to him. When Coach Mason went into his office to set the gym clock, each student was told to say kind words to the person to their right. Again, Henry was ignored.

"Henry Greenfield picks his nose," Alex whispered loudly.

The Coach marched back into the gym. "I heard that! Henry, who is saying this?"

Henry looked at Alex again and shrugged. "I don't know, sir."

The Coach eyed the class one last time and blew his whistle. "Okay, the clock is set for fifteen minutes, but I'm going to now make it thirty. Now, find a partner. This will be your partner for the rest of the school year. Go."

Alex bolted up and stepped away from Lisa Weatherly. He looked over to Rudy and smiled. Rudy nodded and turned to Satbir and tapped him on the shoulder. Alex scanned the room trying to get eye contact with somebody...Ryland Black, James Knicklebuck, Nolan Whitehorse...anybody.

As the students partnered up with each other, Alex suddenly realized he had nobody. His brief moment of fame was gone. The attention, the jokes, the laughter...was for nothing. Why did his best friend have to move away?

As he chewed on his thumb in the middle of the gym, Alex felt a tap on his shoulder.

"Do you want to be my partner?"

Alex turned around.

It was Henry Greenfield.

Chapter Three:

Rudy Jerqson

As Alex thinks about his goal for the year in Mrs. Oxford's class, he begins worrying about making new friends since his best friend moved away. During gym class he decides to make fun of Henry as a way of being 'cool'. Despite his efforts, Henry still asks him to be his gym partner.



“Alex Thomas, what are you doing? Did you not hear the whistle? Run. Run!”

Alex stood beside Henry in the center of the gym. Coach Mason waved his arms about as half the class jogged around the red pylons.

“You better go,” Henry said. The side of his mouth twitched, pushing out a faint smile.

“I’ll count your laps.”



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Alex looked up at him. "Um, okay." He couldn't help but stare at the freckles scattered all around his enormous face.

"I'll talk to the Coach after class and see if you can have a different partner...if you like," Henry tucked in his gym shirt and turned away. He stepped back between the joggers and waited at the side of the gym.

"Alex Thomas!" shouted the Coach.

"Okay, okay, I'm going."

At the end of the period, Alex staggered across the gym floor. His face burned up. Salty sweat dripped down his head and into his mouth. "That was the longest thirty minutes of my life."

Rudy wiped his face with his arm and pointed at the gym office. "Check it out."

Henry stood by the gym office door. His shoulders slumped over as the Coach bounced his finger off the big kid's chest.

"That can't be good," Alex mumbled.

Rudy pushed through the gym doors with Satbir. "Looks like you're stuck with the meatloaf."

"Yeah I guess."

"He's gonna make your year a living nightmare if you're not careful."

Alex followed him into the change room, his legs wobbled like jelly. "What do you mean?"



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"He's different dude...enough said. You can't be seen with a kid like that. He can ruin you for life." He pulled off his shirt and tossed it into his gym bag. The muscles on his stomach looked like carved stone.

"Really?" Alex replied.

"Really. School ain't about getting good grades it's about making friends man. Good friends. The friends you make determine where you fit in. You know?"

Alex quickly changed his shirt and shoved it into his bag. "But what should I do?"

"Keep doing what you're doing dude. That phone thing was pretty funny. Make it clear that you don't like him, he'll get the picture. He couldn't be *that* stupid. But you better make some friends quick though...now that your buddy Finley is gone. You don't wanna be spending the year looking like a loner."

"What about you? Do you wanna hang out?"

Rudy looked at Satbir and smiled. "Maybe man...we'll see. Just be careful. Damian Dermite hunts loners."

Alex glanced around the room and changed into his jeans. The sweat on his legs stuck to the inside of the pants as he yanked them up to his waist.

Alex knew Rudy was right. Dermite was a hunter. He seemed to have a talent for sniffing out the weak and then eating them alive. Alex couldn't let that happen. It was an important time to think for himself. He needed to climb the ladder. Alex needed to make friends.

Rudy nodded to Alex and walked out of the change room.

"See ya in the cafeteria," Alex said with a squeak in his voice.

"Whatever," Rudy replied.



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Alex walked over to the sink and splashed water in his face. He knew he had his work cut out for him that year. There was no messing around. A small part of him wished he hadn't been such good friends with Finley. In a way, Finley held him back.

"He said no," announced a voice behind him.

Alex dried his face and looked back to see Henry pushing open the change room door. His hands dangled by his sides like a giant silverback Gorilla. "He said we have to be partners. Sorry."

Alex stepped away from the sink and grabbed his gym bag from the bench. A few other boys in the class were finishing up in the room. Their eyes followed Alex as he stuck out his chest and marched over to Henry. "Don't talk to me. Don't ever talk to me."

Henry lowered his head and stepped away. "I'm sorry."

Making Friends

Alex walked out of the change room and dragged his feet down the hall. His mind was flooded with the look on Henry's face after the viscous conversation they had just moments before. It was hard to be so cold...so mean, but Alex somehow knew he had no other choice. Rudy was probably right. Marks didn't really matter in the sixth grade. It's all about survival.

"Hey, watch it buddy." A large muscular boy plowed around the corner, grazing Alex's arm. "You almost hit me man."

Alex's face heated up. "I'm sorry. I'm really sorry."

"Next time, you will be sorry," the guy grunted.



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Alex marched quickly down the hall toward his locker, not daring to look back. He knew who the kid was. He knew who he almost bumped into. He just didn't want to think about it. The last thing he needed was to make a critical error like that on his first day.

"I almost died....I almost died," Alex muttered, slapping his forehead. "What was I thinking? Be smart, don't get eaten."

The smell of pizza filled the air around him as Alex walked into the grade five-six wing. He opened up his locker and for a brief moment, he felt comfort in the aroma of his mom's homemade pepperoni pizza. She made the best pizza...by far, and as he sniffed the freshly made crust, the crazy day he was having was on pause. "I can do this," he said to himself. "I can totally do this."

Alex shuffled into the cafeteria with a faint glimmer of happiness...and hope. He was starving and couldn't wait to shovel his delicious lunch into his empty stomach. At the same time, he felt like he might be able to survive the sixth grade after all. He just needed to think and be careful.

And maybe have eyes on the back of his head.

Alex puffed out his chest and gripped tightly onto his lunch bag. The cafeteria was quite large, and like last year, Alex found a table near the back corner by one of the big windows. It was a great spot. Whenever he was caught staring at someone, like the beautiful Daisy Darlington, he could always quickly look away outside.

"Pizza and Daisy...two great parts to my day." Alex closed his eyes and imagined the moment when she would walk into the cafeteria.

He couldn't wait.



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For a second, Alex felt time stand still. That important moment where his problems disappeared.

The room seemed silent.

He inhaled and slowly breathed out.

However, when he opened his eyes, Henry shuffled into the room. His massive body and ridiculous purple overalls stood out like a hippo in a hamster's cage. A lot of the kids from the other grades hadn't seen the giant kid yet and like Alex's class they pointed and whispered to each other.

A little first grader screamed, sprinting out of the cafeteria. "There's a purple Ogre-Beast in the school!"

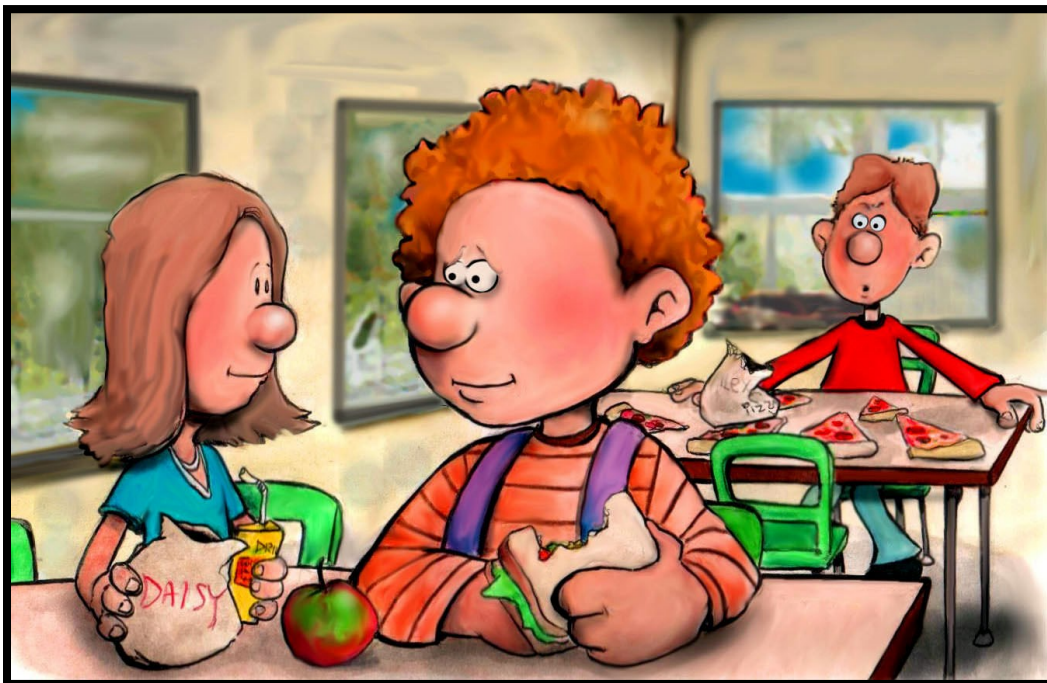
Henry sat at the table in front of Alex with his back to him. His tall frame took up half of the lunch table and his seat looked like a tiny doll's chair.

"My new gym partner," Alex mumbled. "This is all Finley's fault. What kind of person would just ditch his best friend and move to Boston? Now I'm stuck with...a giant purple monster."

Chapter Four:

Daisy

Alex seeks advice from Rudy about making friends and being cool. Alex tells Henry to leave him alone and gets himself prepared for lunch. After a brief encounter with the bully, Alex sits in the cafeteria with his pizza. As he scans the room, hoping someone will sit with him, All he can think about is being stuck with Henry Greenfield in gym class.



The sunlight from outside beamed through the large window onto the back of Henry's head, as though the world wanted to put the spotlight on him, to show everyone how strange he was.

"Why me? Why am I stuck with him? Why did it have to be me?"



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The muffled sounds of kid's voices entered back into his head. He eyed the entrance in time to see Daisy gracefully step into view with her lunch tray. Beside her, were her two closest friends, Lisa Weatherly and Darla McGregor. "Hello. I've been waiting for you." Alex rubbed his hands together. "The goddess of Timpleville, at last. Your hair looks a little different than it did last year, but I like...me likes a lot."

Alex opened up his lunch bag and pushed half a slice of pizza into his mouth. The thick sauce dribbled down the side of his face.

Daisy elegantly walked down the stairs toward the grade five-six tables. Every step she took was like an artistic movement in a classical ballet.

Alex wiped the sauce from his chin and ripped off another piece with his molars. He grabbed a couple more pieces and flopped them down in front of him.

The light from the window brightened Daisy's face, creating a warm angelic glow around her.

Alex pulled out some napkins, listening to her gentle voice tickle the insides of his ears as she talked to her friends. For a second, Alex was positive she looked directly at him. "Does she want to talk to me? Does she like the smell of my lunch?" Alex licked his teeth, cleared his throat and smiled.

"Hi Daisy, how are you?" he whispered to himself. "Would you like some pizza? It's homemade I made it just for you." He shifted his chair and leaned back. "Hi Daisy...care for a bite of my saucy pizza? No...um, Hi Daisy, wanna join me for a glorious pepperoni ride?"

As Daisy walked closer, Alex noticed some kids at his table.

"Who are you talking to?" Rudy flicked his hair back and nudged his friend Satbir.



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“Um, nobody,” mumbled Alex. He lowered his head and shoved some crust into his mouth.

“Loser,” laughed Rudy. “Were you practicing what to say to Daisy Darlington?”

“Um, no, I was...working on...a thing.”

“A thing? Whatever dude, you’re weird.” He snorted and picked a piece of pepperoni from Alex’s slice.

“I’m not weird.”

Rudy shook his head and walked with Satbir to an empty table a few rows away.

“I’m *not* weird.” Alex wiped his pizza slice where Rudy had touched and glanced back over to Daisy. Her long brown hair was like silk, perfectly placed on her head.

Her eyes glowed.

Her face glowed.

“O...M...G.” Alex sighed.

Daisy stopped at the table in front of him and put down her lunch bag. She looked over to Henry and smiled.

She was actually smiling.

At Henry.

What was worse, she sat down right beside him. Not two seats over, not on the other side of the table, but right beside Henry Greenfield.

Alex clenched the napkins and dropped them onto the table. “What? What is going on? Why is she sitting with him? She doesn’t even know him.”



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Alex shook his head and sighed. He stared at the corner of his pizza and dug his teeth into the cheesy dough. Marcos Rudyard, the captain of the boys' basketball team glanced over while Alex picked off a piece of pepperoni.

Alex dangled it in front of him, wiggling it from side to side. "Hi Marcos. Want some?"

Marcos turned up his nose. "Who are you?"

"Alex. I'm Alex. Do you want some pizza?"

"No. Don't talk to me." Marcos kicked the chair and walked past.

Alex shrugged it off and picked up his napkins, waving them at his slices, pushing the aroma out into the maze of hungry children. A couple of second grade kids watched, and slyly moved another table.

"Wow, this is soooo yummy!" Alex shouted. He lifted a slice above his head, twirled it around in circles.

Janey Blondeski, a girl who lived on his street stopped at his table. She turned up the corner of her mouth and frowned. "Um, like, are you okay?"

"Yup. Want some?"

"Like no...gross. Your hands are all over it."

Alex lowered it to his mouth and took a bite. "Holy cow, this tastes magical!"

"It's pizza," Janey replied.

"Magical!" Alex shouted. He stood up with a slice and stepped past Janey. "Your loss." He walked over to a table of fifth graders where Bradley Blunker, was sitting. "Hey neighbor!" Alex lifted his chin and stood in front of him waving the napkins at his slice. "This pizza is soooo good."



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Bradley took a swig of his milk and placed it onto the table. "What are you doing Alex?"

"I'm eating this delicious pizza. Do you want some? You can even sit with me at my table."

"No thanks." Bradley shook his head and flicked his friend Simon in the ear. "We're good."

Simon rubbed the side of his face and punched Bradley in the shoulder. "Your neighbor is weird."

Alex crumpled the napkins and dropped them on the floor. He turned around and pulled himself back to his table. He tossed his pizza into his bag and slumped down in his chair. Maybe it just wasn't the right day. Maybe he just needed more time...more ideas...more confidence. Whatever he needed, Alex was pretty sure his day wasn't going to get any better. He folded his bag and stared up at the big clock at the back of the caf. The best thing he could do was just keep his mouth shut and wait for the day to end. His brother used to always tell him, 'it's better to quit while you're ahead.'

Alex was pretty sure he wasn't ahead, but quitting was probably smart anyway.

He flopped his head down onto the table. Daisy's voice paraded through his ears. He looked over to her between his bag of pizza and juice box. Her hand was touching Henry's shoulder. The two smiled at each other, laughing and joking about something.

"I don't get it. You're not even in the same class as that ugly beast." Alex inched his lunch bag over slightly. Daisy brushed her hair back and delicately sipped from her pink water bottle. "What are you talking about? That's supposed to be me sitting there, talking, giggling, laughing, touching my shoulder...not him." Alex banged his head on the table. "Hi Daisy, why



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are you talking to this giant freak? Do you feel sorry for him? Are you trying to make me jealous? It's working.”

Since moving to Timpleville a couple years ago, Alex had promised himself that he would one day talk to Daisy. The goal was more of a long term plan, but he spent most mornings on the bus ride to school imagining how the conversation would go. He figured it would likely be another year or so before he would commit to the big event, but maybe it was better to bite the bullet and just go for it.

His brother used to tell him that as well.

Or was it Finley?

Maybe he had a goal after all. Maybe Mrs. Oxford would understand that his mission that year was to talk to Daisy Darlington.

“You’re so funny Henry.” Daisy’s voice slipped through the buzz of conversations still filling the cafeteria.

Henry’s giant head vibrated as he laughed about something.

Alex ripped strips of paper off his lunch bag and flicked them on the floor. He stood up and marched over to her. His heart pounded hard against his chest. Standing directly behind her, he cleared his throat.

“Um....uh....um.” The blood rushed out of his head. “Um...ah.”

Daisy pulled her hair to the side and lifted her head up to Alex. “Hi Alex.” Her piercing blue eyes sparkled in the light.



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Alex took a big breath and opened his mouth again. "Um...um." A white haze coated his vision. His body wavered from side to side. "Um." Alex stepped back, and hustled over to his table and ducked down behind his pizza bag. He closed his eyes and clenched his fists.

Laughter bounced around the cafeteria.

The blood returned to his head, heating up his face.

He opened his eyes, plucking off strips from the napkins.

His neck trembled.

His hands trembled.

His right eye twitched.

"Henry Greenfield," he muttered, rising up to his feet. He reached into his lunch bag and weaved through the leftover slices of pizza and pulled out the biggest piece. Sauce dripped down the side of his hand as he stomped over to Daisy's table. He lifted the thick cheesy, pepperoni crust high above his head and tossed it straight into the back of Henry's giant orange head.

Chapter Five:

The Office

Alex's pizza plan completely falls apart and to top it off, Henry Greenfield eats his lunch with the prettiest girl in the sixth grade, Daisy Darlington. Frustrated, Alex tosses his pizza at Henry.



Alex pushed through the main office doors and stomped past the secretary. He grunted and dropped down in front of Principal Gordon's door.

Coach Mason knocked on the office door and signaled for Mr. Gordon to come out. "You're in a lot of trouble young man."

"But he started it." Alex folded his arms.

"What are you talking about? I watched you. That boy didn't do anything."



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Coach Mason rubbed his moustache and snapped his fingers. "Gotta go. Good luck kid."

While Alex sat outside the office waiting for the big boss to arrive, he thought about what he had done. He knew he should feel bad, but he didn't, not one little bit.

"Nice move hot shot," Rudy poked his head into the main office. "What were you thinking?"

"Leave me alone," Alex picked up a kids magazine on the table and buried his nose into the pages.

"Suck it up buttercup. If you're gonna commit the crime, you better do the time."

Alex turned the page to an article about wheelchair basketball. "You know what's weird?"

"What?" Rudy replied.

"Henry didn't react to anything I did to him. Like, when I was bugging him this morning in gym class, he didn't tell on me. And, when I told him off in the change room, he just apologized. I don't get it. What's up with him? I'm trying my best to be mean to him, but he's...being nice back. And...when I threw that pizza at him...he...he just looked at me. He wiped the sauce from this head and just looked at me. It was almost as though he felt sorry for me or something..."

Alex lowered the magazine, hoping Rudy would understand his pain. He hoped he would see how tough it has been for him to make friends and ditch Henry at the same time.

But Rudy wasn't there.

Once again, Alex was alone.

"I talk to myself waaay too much."



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Principal Gordon opened his office door and coughed. He snapped his fingers and waved Alex in.

“Sit down.”

Alex sat down, peeling the skin away from his thumb. Above him, hanging from the walls, was a collection of animal heads. A stuffed gray wolf hung above Mr. Gordon's desk. Its empty yellow eyes glared down at Alex.

“I'm sorry...I shouldn't have thrown that pizza.” Alex said.

Principal Gordon sat down at his desk. He had a coffee in one hand and a big jelly doughnut on the table. He grabbed a pen and a piece of paper. “Name?”

“Alex.”

“Last name?”

“Thomas.”

Principal Gordon wrote Alex's name on the paper.

“Your brother is James, no?” He put the pen down and looked back at Alex, taking a sip from his big *Number One Daddy* Mug. “He was at this school last year I believe.”

“Yes sir,” Alex ripped more skin off his thumb. “But he's at Timpleville High now.”

“Hmm. He was a good student. I never had him in here.”

“Of course not. My brother is perfect,” Alex spit the skin out of his mouth and on to the floor. “And I'm not.”

Principal Gordon placed the mug down on the table. He twiddled his thumbs, breathing loudly through his large nostrils. He scratched his beard and then picked up his big powdery doughnut, lifting it slowly up to his mouth. “Do you see this doughnut?”



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Alex raised his eyebrow and nodded. "Uh-huh."

"On the outside, this doughnut looks all nice...and perfect. Do you agree?"

Alex nodded again. "I guess."

"Look carefully at this doughnut, because I want you to think of it as...as...life. Are you following me here? Do you understand what I'm saying?"

Alex tilted his head. "Not really."

Principal Gordon leaned in, holding the doughnut closer to Alex. "I'm using a metaphor here...have you heard of a metaphor? What grade are you in? Come on...follow me here."

"Okay."

Mr. Gordon cleared his throat and continued. "This doughnut is your life...your perfect little life. And as you grow, and move forward in time, people start taking little pieces out of your life...like this." He took a small bite and swallowed it. "And suddenly your life looks different...it changes."

"I'm not getting this, sir." Alex glanced up at the wolf on the wall.

"The doughnut...it's your life." Mr. Gordon licked the corner of his mouth. "And if you're not careful, people might take big bites out of it...and if you don't make smart choices, you might suddenly explode!" The principal squeezed the doughnut, squirting out the jam. "Oh God! My eyes!"

Alex jumped back as jam shot out in all directions. "Are you alright sir?"

"My eyes! My eyes!" Blinded by red sauce, Mr. Gordon darted up from his seat. "Where's the tissues. I need tissues!" He flailed his arms around wildly, knocking over a bookshelf and launching his coffee mug across the room. Stepping into the garbage can, he



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slipped backwards, bashing his head against the wall behind his desk. The stuffed wolf slipped off the hook and cannonballed down on to his head.

“Do you need any help sir?”

“I’m fine, I’m just fine.” Mr. Gordon staggered back up to his feet. “I’ll talk to you another time. Go and sit in detention for the rest of the day. If you do this again you’ll be suspended.”

Alex stepped out of his office and shut the door behind him.

“Young man? Are you there? Did you hear me? You will be suspended if you do this again. Young man?”

Alex dragged his feet past the secretary and stepped out into the hallway. “My life is a jelly doughnut. Great, just great.”

When school let out that day Alex slipped out of the detention room and hurried to his locker. Practically the entire school had seen him throw the pizza at Henry and get sent down to the Principal’s office. Dayna Bird and Hayley Judeson stopped at their lockers and watched Alex drag himself through the hallway. Garth Noblestein pointed and giggled.

Alex felt just like Henry Greenfield.

“A . . . lex got in trou . . . ble!” Rudy Jerqson punched Alex on the arm as he passed him in the hall.

“I’m really starting to hate that guy.” Alex held his breath and pulled his backpack out of his locker. It was only a matter of minutes before he was on the bus and headed home to safety.

However, a strange feeling crept inside him.

Something wasn’t right.



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Pushing through the front doors of the school, Alex noticed a group of kids gathered in a circle by the basketball court.

Faint chanting and yelling drifted into the afternoon air.

Alex knew something was wrong. But he also knew that in his little 'jelly-doughnut-sorta life' he should just ignore the commotion and jump in line to get ready to catch his bus home.

But he couldn't.

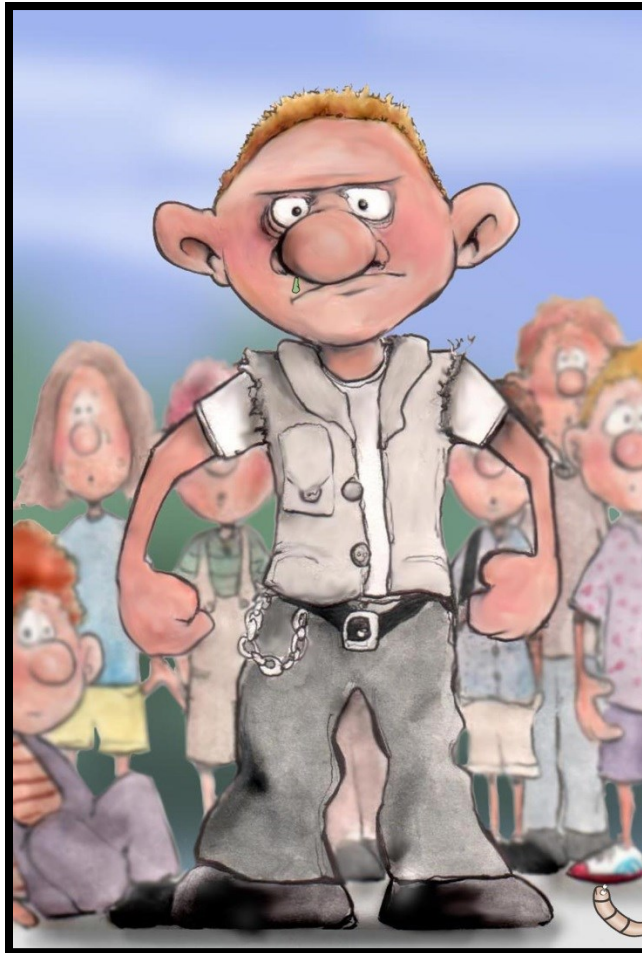
Alex lacked the ability to fight curiosity.

He had to see what was happening.

Chapter Six

Meeting Damian Dermite

Alex is caught throwing pizza at Henry and is sent the office. He is warned by the Principal that if he throws food at anyone again he will be suspended.



A boy's voiced echoed out around the yard. "Eat it"

Another boy's voice responded. "Put it in his ear!"



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Alex crept closer to the large circle. He peeked through the crowd of kids. Backpacks, and arms blocked his view.

He pushed further in.

A large scruffy kid appeared in the center of the circle.

A lump formed in Alex's chest and pushed up into his throat.

Alex knew him.

Everyone knew him.

There he was - Damian Dermite, the most feared bully at Timpleville Public School...the eighth grader who nearly bit off Alex's head in the hall earlier that day. Seeing Damian torture kids and attract a crowd was normal. Last year it happened at least three times a month.

What was strange this time however, was seeing who he was torturing.

Lying on the concrete court, with Damian hovering over top of him, was Henry Greenfield.

"Eat it!" Damian shouted. He dangled a worm over Henry's face.

Alex bit the nail on his thumb and stepped closer.

Austin Drake pumped his fists and leaned into the circle. He was one of Damian's sidekicks. Alex steered clear of him for the simple reason he was associated with the Terror of Timpleville. "Do it Damian...put it in his mouth!"

The crowd of kids inched forward.

Rudy tugged on Alex's backpack and stepped in beside him. "Hey man, looks like you're not the only one who has a problem with the orange-headed freak."



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“Shut your mouth.” Alex pushed Rudy to the side and forced his way closer to the front. All of the horrible things Alex had done that day to Henry came rushing back to him. “What have I done?”

Damian lowered the worm closer to Henry's mouth. He shook his head from side to side. His arms twisted and turned under the weight of Damian's heavy boots. Henry shifted his body, kicking his legs about helplessly. His eyes scanned the crowd. For a second, Henry's gaze stopped at Alex. There was so much pain and fear in Henry's eyes.

“Drop it in his mouth!” Damian's other partner in crime, Jared Del Porto stood on the other side of the circle. He crouched down, tormenting Henry with a verbal ground attack.

“This is nuts. Did I do this?” Alex scratched his head.

“Yes you did.” Rudy patted him on the back.

Alex dropped his head. He'd managed to turn the entire school against the big guy from Red Apple Creek.

Everyone, except Daisy Darlington.

“Will you please leave him alone?” Daisy cried. “What did he ever do to you?”

She slipped through the crowd on the opposite side of the circle. Tears poured from her eyes.

“Daisy,” Alex mumbled to himself.

“Stop it!” she shouted. “He didn't do anything!” She stepped into the circle and pushed Damian's arm.

Damian didn't budge. He grinned and wiggled the worm in between his fingers.



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“Where are the teachers? Why aren’t the teachers coming?” Alex stood on his toes and looked back at the school. He noticed his bus had pulled up to the front. His neighbor, Bradley Blunker was first in line. Maybe the best plan was to just walk away. There was nothing he could do anyway. Who would dare step into the circle and stop the crazed machine.

But as he stood there watching Damian play around with the worm, squeezing Henry’s nose, another lump built up in his chest - a different lump.

More like a knot.

Alex stepped closer, eyeing the worm dangling between Damian’s gigantic fingers.

“What are you doing?” Rudy tugged on Alex’s backpack again.

Alex grit his teeth and yanked Rudy’s hand away. The chanting faded. The voices stopped. All Alex could think about was Henry and the fat squirming worm. Alex needed to fix it. He needed to make things right.

“Let go of that worm!” Alex shouted, swatting Damian’s hand.

The worm bounced out of Damian’s fingers, soared through the air and plopped down onto the concrete.

A wave of gasps filled the air as the shocked spectators looked on.

Damian looked down at the worm, wriggling about on the ground. A vein appeared above his right eye. He lifted his long muscular arm and pointed his finger out toward Alex. He opened his mouth and growled. “You.”



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The Problem Begins

When Alex was five years-old he saw a car drive off the Backwater Bridge in Orchard Meadows. He was riding his bike with his brother James. The two of them watched the car crash into the water and turn upside down. He saw the people inside bouncing around clawing at the windows and doors. What stood out the most was the look on the face of a young boy in the back seat. His panicked face glanced briefly over to Alex, up on the roadside. As the car tumbled about in the water, it slowly dipped under the surface.

For years Alex wished he could have done something. He wondered if his brother felt the same. For some reason, Henry Greenfield reminded him of that little boy.

As his mind wandered back to the scene on the basketball court Alex felt the hair on his arms stand on end.

Damian rose to his feet, he slowly turned to Alex. He rubbed the stubbly peach fuzz on his chin. A twisted scar stretched around his crooked nose. Behind him, Henry rolled onto his knees and crawled into the maze of children. Daisy rushed over to Henry, wrapping her around his giant body.

“You just made a big mistake buddy.” Damian cracked his knuckles and stretched his thick neck. Flies hovered over his stringy blonde hair.

“I’m sorry.” Alex’s lower lip twitched and trembled.

“Sorry? Sorry? You’re not sorry.”

“Yes...yes I am.”



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Damian reached down and picked up the worm from the ground. He held it carefully between his fingers, watching it wiggle and turnabout. Damian's beady eyes turned to Alex. The muscles along his chiseled jaw moved apart, forming a crooked grin. "Eat it."

Alex held his breath.

"Pardon?" The final chapter in his day had arrived. He couldn't believe the crazy series of events that led up to that moment. The moment where he would be standing in front of the most feared kid in the school, the mascot bully who terrified children at Timpleville since he was in the fourth grade. "I didn't hear what you said. It sounded like you wanted me to eat that worm."

"I did. Eat it."

Standing in the center of the circle, surrounded by hundreds of waiting onlookers, Alex focused on the fat worm in front of him. The thought seemed unthinkable. "I'm not hungry."

"I don't care. Eat it."

Alex looked out at the blur of faces. He knew at some point a teacher would come out and break it up. Someone had to have seen the ridiculous number of pathetic followers gathered around the basketball court. Weren't there any parents out there? Austin and Jared stepped behind Damian and folded their arms. Rudy stood on the other side of the circle, holding his phone up over his head snapping pictures of the big event.

Alex shook his head and focused back on Damian. However, something strange caught his eye.

Chapter Seven:

The Monster

At the end of the day, Alex finds Henry being forced by Damian Dermite to eat a worm. When Alex sees Daisy crying, he steps in and tries to save Henry. However, Damian isn't so forgiving and tells Alex to eat the worm.



A weird-looking object appeared to be hanging from Damian's nose.

"What are you looking at?" Damian barked.

Alex focused again. He was positive he was seeing things right. Damian Dermite had a very unappetizing blob of green mucus protruding from his left nostril.

A smirk grew uncontrollably onto Alex's face.



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“What are you grinning at?” Damian pulled the worm back and grunted.

“Um...well, it's hard to say.” Alex looked down at the ground, forcing his mouth to stay as rigid and firm as possible.

“I said, what are you grinning at?”

“Well, let me think about that for a second.” Alex had played the moment in his head before, the moment where he would be facing Damian. He figured it was bound to happen one day. In normal circumstances, Alex would be a complete mess, and looking for the nearest escape route. But, he didn't imagine the lord of fear would actually have issues with cleaning his own nose.

“I'm talking to you,” said Damian.

Alex pinched his arm and bit his lip, but he couldn't block the image out of his head. Little bursts of air slipped out of his mouth.

Damian tossed the worm to the ground and clenched his fists. “What's your problem man? Look at me.”

Seconds seemed like hours as the two stood toe to toe. Damian leaned forward, sticking his nose into Alex's line of sight. The green glob slipped further out of his nostril. Like a tennis ball on a string, it swayed from side to side.

Alex tightened his face and closed his eyes. He couldn't look at it.

But the image was still there, flapping about, bobbing back and forth.

Alex couldn't hold it anymore. “You've got a little green monster coming out of your nose!” He pointed straight at Damian's face and burst into fits of laughter.

Damian jumped back and hid his face, brushing the green blob off with his sleeve.



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Laughter erupted from the curious spectators as Alex swiftly reached back into his school bag. He stood tall, watching Damian shuffle about trying to clean his face. In his school bag, Alex felt about for his leftover lunch. He unzipped his lunch cooler and grabbed one of his crusty slices of saucy pepperoni pizzas. He lifted it up into the air...watching, waiting.

Damian wiped the final bits off with his fingers. He closed his hands and flexed his arms.

Alex lunged forward. Whipping his arm around he let go of the large piece of homemade sticky pizza, and watched it hurdle right into Damian Dermite's stunned face.

Trouble

According to Mr. Gordon's metaphor, the big powdery jelly doughnut exploded.

Clearly there were too many bites taken out of Alex's life that day.

Behind him, the crowd of kids stepped aside, making way for Principal Gordon. His tall bony frame marched along the basketball court like a Sergeant ready to discipline his troops. He stopped in front of Alex and the pizza victim, Damian.

Principal Gordon stroked his beard. "What is going on here?" They both lowered their heads, rubbing their shoes through the dirt and grit on the concrete. "Damian," he barked, "why do you have a pepperoni pizza on your face?"

Damian looked up at Principal Gordon as bits of sauce and pepperoni fell to the ground.

"Well sir, I was minding my own business over here on the basketball court when Alex came over and tossed this pepperoni pizza in my face." Damian flicked bits onto the concrete and smiled.



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Mr. Gordon lowered his head and glared at Alex over his glasses. "Is that right? You threw pizza at this young man?"

Students filtered away, slipping back into the regular end of day routines as if nothing had happened. Bradley Blunker shuffled forward in his line by the parking lot, disappearing as he stepped onto the bus. Alex closed his eyes for a second, imagining himself sitting in his seat, fourth from the back, on his way home to freedom.

"Young man? Are you listening?"

Alex opened his eyes again, and looked back up at Mr. Gordon. "Yes sir, I threw pizza at him."

"You know what this means, don't you?"

Alex nodded. "Yes sir."

Mr. Gordon looked at Damian. He picked a piece of pepperoni off his forehead and sucked it back into his mouth. "Get out of here. Go clean yourself up."

Damian eyed Alex one last time. He stepped off the basketball court and headed back to the parking lot.

Mr. Gordon straightened his tie and fixed his glasses. "I will call your parents. You are suspended for one day. Go catch your bus. Go on. Get out of here."

"Yes sir," Alex replied.

On the bus ride home Alex wanted to hide. He wanted to slip under the seats and disappear.

"I can't believe you threw pizza at Damian Dermite." Bradley tapped him on the shoulder. "You might as well switch schools tomorrow."



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Mr. Grayson peered through his rear-view mirror and growled. "Quiet!"

Alex sunk lower in his seat and stared out the window.

The day couldn't end fast enough. Maybe he *should* change schools. Maybe he could skip a few grades and go to High School with his brother. At least he would be able to protect him.

Walking home down their street, the fear of facing his parents began to grow. Alex was worried he would never be allowed to eat pepperoni pizza again. He was worried he would never be allowed to do *anything* again.

"Are you going to be alright Alex?" Bradley asked as he turned up his driveway.

"No," replied Alex. "Not even close."

Alex finally stepped into his house, half expecting his mother to be standing at the front entrance, ready to rip his head off and send him to his room for the rest of his life.

But no one was there.

Alex slipped through the kitchen and into the hallway.

Silence.

He tip-toed up the stairs avoiding the loose floorboards. He carefully opened his bedroom door and flopped down onto his bed.

Freedom.

At last.

He pulled his phone out of his pocket and checked his messages.

No messages.

There were never any messages.

Alex rolled over and buried his face into his pillow.



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Images of Damian, covered in pizza flashed inside his head. Principal Gordon appeared, looking over his glasses, pointing his finger at Alex's chest, repeating the words, 'suspended' over and over.

It was like being sentenced to death.

Alex wasn't sure how long he laid in his bed, but long enough for the light of the moon to be reflecting into his room.

"How did this day go so horribly wrong?"

A knock on his door quickly pulled Alex out of his miserable daze. He reached over and turned on his lamp. It had to be his mom. She was usually the one who played the bad cop. Alex's dad was too nice. He was strict, but didn't have the stern voice that was needed to make a child want to shrink to the size of a pea and roll between the cracks of the floorboards to wait out the rest of its pathetic, meaningless life.

Another knock came to the door.

Alex knew what was about to happen. It obviously wasn't the first time he was knee deep in trouble. Over the summer, during a three-legged race at the Timpleville Fair, Alex thought it would be funny to pull down Lisa Weatherly's pants while she was tied to Ryan Samson. The problem was Alex didn't realize Lisa was in the Bouncy Castle at the time. He quickly learned that Lisa Weatherly looked incredibly similar to Mrs. Sternly, the wife of Timpleville's most respected Mayor.

But Alex was never suspended. It was the summer. He was just grounded for a week and had to pick up litter each day at the City Hall.



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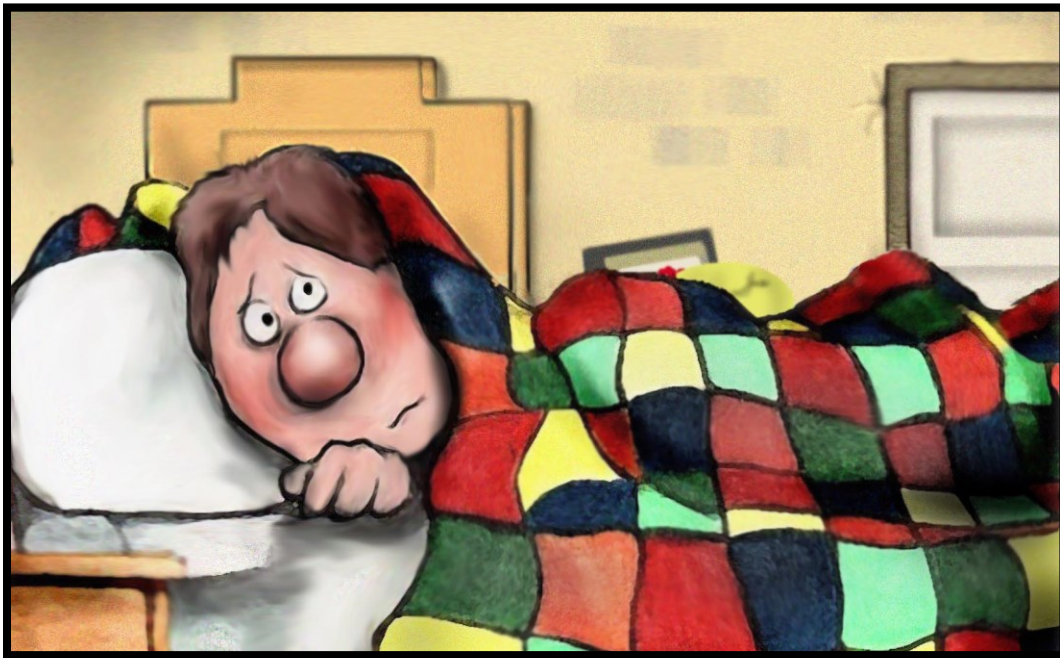
However, Alex was pretty sure that this time his punishment was going to be ten times worse.

He figured he would never be allowed to eat pizza again, watch television again, go out and play again, ride his bike again, walk, talk, smile...or breathe again. He just knew what he had done was going to change the rest of his entire life forever.

Chapter Eight:

James

Despite warnings from the Principal, Alex throws his left over pizza at Damian and gets suspended. Expecting to be grounded by his parents, he hides in his bedroom and waits the inevitable.



“Alex, can I come in?” His brother’s voice muffled through the door.

Alex sat up in his bed. “James?”

“Yeah. Can I come in?”

“Um, what’s the password?”



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"You're not eight anymore doofus." Alex's brother opened the door and walked into the room. He grabbed the desk chair by the window and pulled it over to the bed. "Hey bro. You okay?"

"No," Alex replied.

James turned the chair around and leaned forward against the backrest. "What's going on with you? Heard ya had a rough day?"

Alex grabbed his pillow and tucked it under his arms. "What do you care?"

"I don't."

"Then why are you asking?"

"I was kidding, idiot. What happened today?"

"I got suspended." The sounds of dishes clanking in the sink downstairs echoed up through the floor. Alex looked at the clock on his wall. His stomach told him he missed dinner, but he wasn't in the mood to eat anything. He folded his pillow and squeezed it. "I miss Finley."

"Finley was a dork."

"No he wasn't, he was my best friend. I could tell him anything. I could tell him secrets and he would never tell no one."

James picked at the wood on the end of the chair. "Big deal. You can tell me secrets. You can tell me anything."

"Go away," Alex mumbled.

"What?"

"I said go away. You left me too. I got no one at school now. My life is over. I have nothing. Go get mom, let's get this over with. Tell her to take away my TV privileges, take away



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play time, take away my phone, take my bike, lock me in my room, and never give me pepperoni pizza ever, ever, ever, again. I don't care anymore."

"Woo woo...settle down man, it ain't that bad."

The smell of meatloaf and gravy drifted into the room. Somehow the last three or four hours had turned into a blur. He wished time could stand still for just a moment, enough for him to sneak downstairs and stuff his face with dinner and pie. "It *is* bad. Very bad."

James shook his head. "No it ain't."

"What are you talking about?"

"Well, Ma sent me in here, because....well...she thought I could help."

"And, I don't want your help."

"Then I guess you don't care to know who stopped by earlier, while you were sulking up here and feeling sorry for yourself."

Alex let go of his pillow. "Who?"

"I guess you'll have to find out tomorrow."

"Who? Who stopped by?"

"You're just gonna have to wait..."

Alex whipped the pillow at James. "Tell me!"

James stood up and snatched the pillow from the ground. He tossed back on Alex's bed and strutted toward the door. "Sorry bro...better if you hear it from the horse's mouth."

"The what?"

"I'm gonna go have some pie and ice cream. Enjoy sulking." James stepped out into the hallway and closed the door behind him.



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Alex pulled his plaid blanket over his head and buried himself back into his pillow again.

Breakfast

The next morning, Alex woke to his alarm clock, blasting in his ear. For a second, he thought summer was still part of his everyday routine and he was simply late for his daily excursion with Finley along Timpleville Creek.

But as he slid the alarm off, the overwhelming realization hit him.

Alex had the day off.

Alex was suspended.

James whipped open the door and tossed a dirty sock at him. "Enjoy your day off!"

Alex jumped out of bed and raced to the door. "Who's coming over today?"

James smiled and shut the door. "I forget."

"James!" Alex rushed out into the hall and chased him down the stairs. He skipped over the last railing and slid into the kitchen along the tiled floor.

Sitting at the breakfast table, with their toast and marmalade was Mr. and Mrs. Thomas. Alex regained his balance and faced his parents. His socks were half off his feet, and his pajamas were twisted and stretched.

James grabbed his lunch bag from the counter and slipped on his shoes. "Later all."

The sound of the door slamming rang in Alex's ears. He was finally alone with them.

The parents.



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His body tightened. His shoulders lifted. He knew what was coming. To avoid it was pointless. Maybe James really was trying to help out.

"I'm sorry," Alex said, finally. "I'm sorry for everything. I didn't mean to get suspended."

Mr. Thomas bit into his toast and sipped his tea. "Sit down."

Images of Mr. Gordon popped into his mind. He hated lectures. Why did adults think that lecturing children will teach them something? All it does it make them feel bad.

"Okay." Alex sat down and tucked in his chair. His mom poured a glass of orange juice for him and placed it on the table.

"Alex," his dad began.

"Yes?"

"What's your goal this year?"

Drips of condensation trickled down Alex's glass of OJ. He rubbed his fingers over it, making streaks along the sides. Mrs. Oxford asked him the same question. Why was it so important to have a goal?

"I don't know," Alex replied.

Alex's dad put his toast down and leaned forward. A potent after shave polluted the air around them. A little piece of tissue paper clung to a blood spot on his chin. "What do you mean you don't know?"

His mom reached out for Mr. Thomas' hand and held it tight. "I got this," she said.

"Alex, there's something I would like to share with you." She looked at Mr. Thomas and nodded.

Alex's dad leaned back and reached for his toast.



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“What?” Alex asked, folding his arms.

“When I was your age, I went through some difficult times.”

Alex dropped his head onto the table. “No, no, no, please don’t tell me the story about how you had pimples all over your face.”

“No. I’m not.”

Mr. Thomas stood up and poured the rest of his tea into the sink. “Alex, listen to your mother.”

“Okay, okay, I just never really saw the good in that pimple story.”

Mrs. Thomas stirred her tea. The spoon clanked along the sides of the cup. “When I was about your age, I loved being the center of attention. I loved showing off in front of my friends, dancing, singing or chasing boys. It was the only way I knew how to be, until a new girl arrived one day. Suddenly all of the attention that I wanted to have on me was suddenly on her.

Everyone wanted to get to know the new girl. She made me really mad. In fact, I despised her.”

Alex unfolded his arms and pulled his chair in. “What happened?”

“Well, I stomped around the playground each day picking on her, calling her names, tripping her. I wanted everyone else to hate her too.”

Alex sipped his drink, letting an ice cube slip into his mouth. “Wow, you were actually that mean?”

“Yup. But in the end, I realized how ridiculous I was, because I ended up making myself look foolish. I became a bully. It was horrible actually.”

“What did you do?”



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“I wrote her a note, apologizing for all the mean things I said to her. After that, we became best friends.”

Alex rolled the ice cube around in his mouth. “Really?”

“No. I never wrote her that note and I never became friends with her. I wished I did, because I really admired her. I just didn’t have the courage to apologize.”

Mr. Thomas walked toward the side door and peered out the window. He looked in the mirror by the calendar on the wall and fixed his tie.

Alex spit the ice cube back into his glass. “Wait a second. How did you know to tell me that story?”

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Chapter Nine:

Shocked

James reveals that someone stopped by the house to visit Alex, but he won't tell him who. When Alex finally exits his room, he fears the wrath of his parents for being suspended. Instead, Alex's mom shares an important story from her childhood.



Mr. Thomas sat down on the bench and put on his polished black shoes. He grabbed his briefcase and walked over to Mrs. Thomas. He kissed her on the nose and then rubbed Alex's head. "Gotta go kiddo."



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Mrs. Thomas stood up and placed her half drank tea on the counter. "Have a great day Hun."

Alex threw his hands up over his head. "What? What did the Principal say? I don't get it."

"You too." Mr. Thomas opened the side door and stepped out into the garage.

Mrs. Thomas turned on the tap and dumped dish soap into the sink. "The Principal said you were suspended."

"That's it? Did he at least tell you why? Like, I mean, did he tell you my side of the story?" Alex pushed his glass away and buried his face into his hands. "It's because I'm a kid, isn't it? No one ever cares about what the poor innocent little kid has to say."

"Alex," his mother began. The buzz from the garage door opening vibrated the floor.

"No, it's true. I got suspended because I threw pizza at a bully. Does anyone care to know why?"

"Alex."

"No one cares. James thinks my problems are a joke, and you and dad just act like it's no big deal. Well it *is* a big deal!"

"I realize that."

A knock at the front door, brought Alex up to his feet. He dragged his chair out from under him and dumped the rest of his orange juice in the sink. "Yup, poor old little insignificant Alexander Thomas. No one seems to notice that my best friend is gone, and everyone at school hates me." He marched into the hallway - in his red and blue superman pajama-bottoms and his



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old 'fitting-in' t-shirt. "Maybe I should just move - or better yet, run away. Maybe then, someone might notice I have problems."

The light from the sun trickled in through the frosted glass of the front door. A dark silhouette of a person stood on the other side. Alex wondered if his neighbor Bradley was stopping by to check on him. The two usually walked to the end of the street together to catch the bus.

Alex unlocked the front door and pulled it open. The sun blasted into his eyes. He rubbed them for a second and peered out to see who was at the door.

"Good morning."

Alex dug his fingers into the corners of his eyes, flicking out any goop that was trapped in there from the night before. The facial features of a girl gradually came into focus. For a second, he wondered if he was still upstairs in bed, sound asleep.

"Daisy?" He had to be. Why would the prettiest girl in Timpleville be knocking on his door?

"Are you okay?" She folded her hands in front of her.

"Yeah, I'm okay." He couldn't remember the last time he stood so close to her. He could even smell her perfume...or shampoo. Whatever it was, she smelled like a candy store.

Her fingernails were painted with little ladybugs - each one was different. Little freckles scattered around the knuckles on her hands. "I just wanted to thank you for sticking up for my stepbrother yesterday."

"Your stepbrother? Henry is your stepbrother?"



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"Yeah." Daisy turned her head toward a light breeze from the road, pushing her hair back in place. "His mom married my dad this summer."

"Oh, um...I didn't know."

"Yeah, it's weird having another mom."

"I bet." Alex had never seen Daisy outside of school before. He used to ride his bike around with Finley and go past her house every now and then, but he never saw her.

"Anyway, I was totally freaked out that Henry would get picked on this year because of his size. For some reason kids think they can tease him because he looks so different. That's what happened at his old school in Red Apple Creek. I don't get why they do it... all it does is make Henry feel like garbage."

Alex swallowed and bit the inside of his cheek. "I hear ya."

"When that Neanderthal, Damian Dermite, was picking on him yesterday after school I thought that Henry was going to have to go through the same troubles again this year. But when you stepped in and stuck up for him, it was just so....so awesome."

A small white butterfly fluttered in between the two, before landing on the iron railing along the porch. She brushed her hair again to the side with her hands and smiled.

"I...I didn't mean to throw that pizza at him," said Alex, shoving his hands into his superman pj-pockets.

Daisy looked at the ground for a second and nodded. "I know."

"I do stupid things sometimes. I don't know why."

"We all do," Daisy replied. "You know, Henry was the one who told Principal Gordon what really happened on the basketball court yesterday."



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"He did?"

"Yup. Thanks for that...I mean it. I think it was the first time he's ever had someone stick up for him."

Alex rubbed his fingers up and down the door frame. "You're welcome."

"Well, I just wanted to let you know. I kinda felt bad that you got suspended."

"Yeah, it's cool." Alex smiled. "I'll just chill today, I guess."

"That's good."

"Can you do me a favor?" Alex asked.

"Sure."

"Can you tell Henry that I'm really sorry for throwing the pizza at him...I was just having a bad day."

"Okay." Daisy pushed the hair away from her face again and nodded. "Well, I better go I guess. My dad is waiting for me in the car. Don't want to be late for school."

"Oh, okay. Sure, no problem. Thanks for stopping by."

"You're welcome." Daisy smiled and stepped away from the door.

Alex watched her as she slowly walked along the stone walk.

"Wait," Alex shouted.

Daisy stopped and turned around.

"Don't say anything. I'll tell him..."

"Oke-do-kee." Daisy flattened her pink top against her waist. She shuffled her feet on the stones, and turned back toward the driveway. Alex stepped onto the front porch, watching her disappear around the side of the garage.



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“Daisy? Daisy?” He tiptoed onto the stone walk, trying not to get his socks dirty.

“Yes?” She appeared back around the garage. “What is it?”

“Did you see Damian after...well, you know?”

Daisy took a step toward Alex. “What do you mean?”

“Did you see him?”

“Yeah.”

“Did he look....was he...”

“Yes. But don't worry. You'll be okay. You'll figure it out. He's just a big jerk.” Daisy stepped up and kissed Alex on the cheek. She pulled back and looked into Alex's eyes. “I'll see you tomorrow superman.”

Chapter Ten:

A New Friend

After getting advice from his mother, Alex gets a visit from Daisy. She thanks him for sticking up for her step-brother, Henry. At the same time, Alex begins to worry about Damian, the vengeful bully.



When Alex stepped off the bus the next day, the first person he saw was Rudy Jerqson.

Just looking at the guy irritated him. His face was shaped like a weasel's head, or maybe Alex just thought of him that way.

"You're famous dude," Rudy lifted his hand up for a high-five.



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“What are you talking about?” Alex pushed through the side doors as the morning entry bell rang out into the playground.

“Lisa Weatherly recorded the whole thing. She posted it on YouTube. Everyone in Timpleville saw you slam Damian with that pizza.”

Alex shook his head and quickened his pace. “Get lost.”

Faces of dozens and dozens of middle-graders stopped and gawked at Alex, marching down the hall. He threw his hood over his head and opened his lock. He scanned the crowd behind him and spotted Henry meandering toward him. Alex ducked his head down in his locker and pulled out a note from his pocket. He checked behind him again, and inched his head back out.

“Who are you hiding from? The Terminator? The big man on campus?” Satbir slapped him on the back.

“What? No, I’m just...I’m busy,” Alex muttered.

Rudy tossed his bag into his locker a few rows down. “What a great video man. Love the part where the pizza sauce drips down Dermite’s hair and into his ears. I gotta ask ya, what were you thinking?”

Alex fixed his hood and peeked out again at Henry. “Go away.”

Satbir leaned up against the lockers and pulled Alex’s hood back. “How was the day off?”

“Go away.” The locker bay filled with kids, bumping into each other trying to get their books ready for class. Alex checked the note in his hand and grabbed a paper bag from his



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backpack. He shoved his hooded sweater onto the top shelf and breathed in and out for a few seconds.

Like a river, he stepped into the middle of the hall and followed the flow down to his homeroom class.

“There he goes,” Rudy shouted over everyone. “Our new hero.”

Alex slipped past the teacher and dropped the note and paper bag on Henry's desk. He sat down in his seat at the back and picked the hangnail from his thumb.

When the second bell rang, the last of the students in Mrs. Oxford's class scampered in. The final student to enter was Henry Greenfield. He waddled through the narrow aisles in his somewhat normal blue jeans and crazy-loud purple sweater. He stopped at his desk and looked down at the note and bag. The classroom door closed and the noise from outside faded into a quiet buzz.

For a few seconds, the room was still.

Silent.

Alex lifted his head to see Henry reading his note. He replayed the words in his head from the night before: *Hi Henry, I'm sorry for teasing you the other day and throwing my pizza at you. Thank you for telling Principal Gordon the truth. I baked some raspberry muffins and chocolate chip rainbow oatmeal cookies with my mom and thought you might like to have some. I hope we can be friends. Alex Thomas.*

Henry opened the bag and took out a cookie. He turned around and looked at Alex.

“Is this from you?” Henry broke off a piece and took a bite.



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"I don't speak English," Alex replied. He stared at him for a second before stretching his mouth into a smile. "I'm joking."

Henry turned back around and looked at the note again. He took another bite from the cookie and shifted his large head to the side. "Thanks."

Goosebumps shuttered up and down Alex's arms. His shoulders dropped and his neck muscles relaxed. Maybe he found a new friend, maybe he didn't, but Alex knew he made the right decision. Who would have thought he would take advice from his mother?

Who would have thought he would try becoming friends with someone who lives in the same house as Daisy Darlington?

Alex closed his eyes and pictured her standing at his doorway. In a matter of twenty-four hours, so many things had changed. He tapped the side of his face where she had kissed him. The soft touch of her lips pecking his skin drifted back into his memory. He knew she had cast some strange spell over him. Sure, he'd admired her from afar. He knew he had a crush on her, but now things were different. She'd kissed him.

Daisy Darlington kissed Alex.

"Excuse me," a voice muttered in Alex's ear. He lifted his head up and let go of the hangnail on his thumb. Mrs. Oxford stood in the aisle beside him. "Do you know what your goal is this year?"

Alex shook his head. The images of Daisy evaporated in his mind. He pulled his chair in and sat up straight. "I'll get it for you, I promise."

She turned her nose up and clapped her high heels back to the front of the room. She opened up a picture on the smartboard of a Lynx, eyeing a white rabbit in the snow. "Okay class,



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today we're going to look at food chains as part of our unit on Ecosystems. Pay close attention, because the key words in this unit will be on our spelling test.

Alex pulled out his science book and wrote the date on the top page. His mind faded away from Mrs. Oxford's boring rambles. He leaned forward and tapped Henry on the back. "Psst, Henry."

Henry turned his head slightly to the side. "Yes?"

"Do you want to hang out at recess today?"

Henry's pencil stopped moving on his page. He shifted his giant shoulders around and looked at Alex. "Okay."

"We could grab a football from the gym closet or something."

"Alexander Thomas!" Mrs. Oxford folded her arms and tapped her foot on the floor.

"Will you please stop talking?"

"Sorry, Mrs. Oxford."

"Don't say sorry to me, Alex," she said flatly. "You should be apologizing to everyone else."

Alex looked around at everyone. His face burned up. The faint sound of clarinets squeaked through the walls from the music room down the hall.

"I'm sorry everyone."

His hands shook inside his desk. He wondered if adults knew how easily they could strike down a kid with such stupid consequences. It took him awhile to finally look up and see what the rest of the class was doing. He noticed Henry had his hand raised.

"Yes, Henry?" asked Mrs. Oxford.



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Henry stood up. "Miss, it was totally my fault Alex was talking. He was trying to make me feel welcome. He was sharing all the great things that I can expect to experience in this wonderful town. I am truly excited...and um, blessed to be a part of this fantastic school, and especially in this class led by such an....amazing teacher like yourself...Miss."

Mrs. Oxford fixed her hair and giggled. She placed her whiteboard marker on the desk and took off her bird-like glasses. "Um, thank you for sharing, Henry. Alex, um, that was very kind of you to make our new student feel welcome, but I would like you to pay attention now."

Alex nodded. "Yes, Mrs. Oxford."

Henry looked back at Alex, and sat down. Alex had never heard someone speak so confidently before. Even though he was such a big kid, he figured Henry was sorta shy and well...scared of people. At least it seemed that way the day before. Alex was positive a baby rabbit could hop onto his back and push him over. It was safe to say that Alex thought Henry Greenfield was sort of wimpy.

"Thanks for sticking up for me," whispered Alex.

"No problem."

Somehow, Henry's voice - his words brought a sense of closure to Alex's memorable week. Thoughts of Damian Dermite escaped his head. Rudy Jerqson voice simply turned into a distant hum.

Alex looked around the room. He knew his life wasn't perfect. He knew he still had to face the wrath of Damian...one day.

But something changed for him that morning.

Something Alex had been looking for since Finley moved to Boston.



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He took a big breath and raised his hand.

“Yes, Alex, can I help you?”

Alex stood up and nodded. “I know what my goal is this year.”

Mrs. Oxford lowered her glasses and faced Alex. “And what might that be?”

“My goal is to get to become friends with Henry Greenfield.”

The End