

Chapter One: Zack Is Mistaken

The door to Mrs. Gizznulf's sixth-grade class creaked open with all the subtlety of a polka-dancing zombie. In response to this unexpected distraction four students gasped, seven looked over with eager excitement, three jolted awake, and eight remained asleep. Only one student attempted to block out the eerily-squeaky interruption and actually pay attention to what Mrs. Gizznulf was saying, certain it would be on an upcoming test. Seated ramrod straight in the third row two seats from the window, Zachary Rothbaum jotted down the teacher's every word with enthusiasm rarely seen in an eleven year old. Focused with laser-like intensity on his task, it took Zack a few seconds to realize anyone had entered the classroom, which was unfortunate considering he was the reason the door had been forced open twelve minutes before the lunch bell in the first place.

"I apologize for the intrusion, Mrs. Gizznulf," Nurse Hibble announced meekly, poking her head through the partly-opened doorway just as much as was absolutely necessary. "I'm afraid I must borrow Zachary Rothbaum."

Mrs. Gizznulf growled, something she tended to do when either bothered or hungry. Nurse Hibble flinched and quickly withdrew her head from the classroom. "His presence is required in the main office," she called out from the safety of the hallway.

Every head in the classroom turned toward Zack at the same time, twisting in perfect unison with the precision of a Broadway chorus line. He tried not to squirm under the undivided attention of his entire class, but having 45 eyes staring at him at once (two each for 21 students and Mrs. Gizznulf, plus Tom Gillogily's non-glass eye) caused his sweat glands to dribble irritating beads down his forehead.

Now what's she done? he thought. He held no fantasies that Nurse Hibble was here because of anything Zack had done or said or stepped in or eaten. Whatever the issue, it wouldn't be about Zack.

It would be about Sydney. As usual.

“Ahhhhh Zaaaaack. You'rrrrre wannnnnted innnn the oooofficccce,” purred Mrs. Gizznulf in a particularly thick version of her unidentifiable accent. A number of Zack's classmates whimpered and sunk lower into their seats, as the strength of her accent was known to be directly proportional to the size of the ELA teacher's irritation.

Aware the safest way to avoid her wrath was to leave the room as soon as possible, Zack closed his notebook and quickly shoved everything on his desk into his backpack. “Yes Ma'am,” he said, standing and heaving the bag over his shoulder.

He marched down the aisle of the suddenly-silent classroom and managed to leave the room without hearing the sniggers and giggles one might expect to hear during a student's march of shame. This was partially due to Zack, who was moderately popular and could hold his weight on the playground, and partially due to Mrs. Gizznulf, who had demonstrated on more than one occasion her fanatical devotion to corporal punishment.

Mrs. Gizznulf ran a tight ship.

“What's she done this time?” he asked Nurse Hibble as they marched down the hall. “Is the other kid, OK?” While each infraction was unique, most generally involved Sydney leaving some sobbing fourth grade girl holding a tissue to a bloody nose. With their father working in the city and unable to get away on short notice and Janice now in middle school, Zack was the go-to resource for an administration increasingly flustered by the irrepressible Sydney Rothbaum. So every month or so he was summoned to the office to escort his stubborn little sister off school grounds.

As they passed the faculty lounge, Zack realized Nurse Hibble had yet to respond to his question. Worried this meant his sister had done more damage than usual, he tried again. “The other girl's OK, right?”

Again silence, this time mixed with a quickening of Nurse Hibble's steps, so that Zack found himself almost jogging to keep up. Something was definitely wrong.

“Nurse Hibble?” he asked, hoping third time was the charm.

It wasn't.

She stopped in front of the door to the main office, placed a hand on the knob,

then paused and looked back at Zack. "I'm so sorry," she said. Then, as Zack's face twisted into worried confusion, she pulled the door open and ushered him inside.

Stepping in, he found Sydney sitting against the far wall, dazed and miserable. She was obviously upset, so whatever had happened must have been serious. Still, there didn't seem to be any blood on her clothes, which was a good sign.

"Sydney," he sighed. "Dad is gonna be pissed if you got in another fight."

In response, she unexpectedly buried her face in her hands and sobbed in a way he'd never seen. Internal alarm bells immediately clanged in his skull.

"Sydney, hey, I didn't mean that. It'll be OK. We'll come up with a good story, I promise. Sydney?"

A throat cleared behind him. He whipped his head around to hear the grim details from Nurse Hibble but stopped mid-whip when he caught sight of Janice standing against the wall, tears running down her face. In her arms was their youngest sister Alexa, pulled from her first grade class.

Without knowing why, Zack's stomach tightened and his tear ducts readied a deluge.

"Janice?" he asked. "What are you doing here?"

Again the throat cleared. "Thank you, Nurse Hibble, you may go."

Principal McCarthy stood in his office doorway, wearing his most serious face. Behind him stood a tall, thin, chinless woman with tears carving gullies down her cheeks.

"What's going on?" Zack asked the room. The weeping woman let out pitiful moan as Principal McCarthy stepped forward to drape an arm over Zack's shoulder.

"Mr. Rothbaum," he said in his best 'you're not going to want to hear this' voice. "I'm afraid there's been a terrible accident."