

Forests of
Farallon



Ben McKinnon

To family and friends,
past, present, and future.



BELIEVE.



Chapter 1

W HACK!

"Mr. Thymes! I will not tolerate your non-compliance any longer. Remove yourself to the principal's office at once." I'm glad Ms. Kohler finally figured out how to correctly pronounce my last name, with a hard *T*, just like the word *times*, instead of how she used to say it with a soft *th*, as in thick-headed. Thick-headed, like the older boys who like to mispronounce my name just to make fun.

I slowly lift my head from my folded arms on the desk, knowing I'll meet the gaze not only of Ms. Kohler, adorned in one of her fancy skirts with matching scarf, but also of twenty freshmen all communicating one message...*you are in deep trouble now, Jeremy*. Yeah, whatever! I don't care what they think. They don't know me, they don't understand me, and there's no possible way any of them could comprehend what I've gone through these last six months. Not since...I try to kick the thought out of my mind. Thinking of Sasha's disappearance will only sink me back into the nightmare that requires neither darkness nor night. The

images conjured in my mind of Sasha beaten and abused in a dark, cold place. Those ideas interrupt my thinking without warning. But not now. Ms. Kohler helps me keep them at bay with the second slap of the yardstick.

"Mr. Thymes, at once means now!"

Over the past few months, I have worn a path in the checkered floor down the hall to the principal's office, but I no longer dread the walk. Mr. Shumway's office is one of few places where I find solitude and sometimes even a little compassion.

I make my usual stop along the way to peer through the glass of the trophy cabinet. Not that there's much to see in it—only two trophies in the school's existence, and only one of those for first place. The other is a silver trophy awarded to the wrestling team the year the school was built, nearly thirty years ago. No one mentions it, but I'm sure if people knew that there were only four teams competing that year, the trophy would mean even less than it does now.

Dad is the reason I know there were only four wrestling teams that year. He seems to know everything about those early years. Perhaps that's because his trophy is the only other one in the cabinet, the only one made of gold. Okay, so it's not real gold. The district could never afford that. It stands nearly two feet tall, emblazoned with the immortal inscription "State Champion—Cross Country—Jack Thymes." I used to dream of being state champion just like him. And I could do it, too, if I wanted to. I don't, but how cool would it be to have my picture in the cabinet next to his?

The picture—unbelievable that my dad used to look like that. So young, so thin, so confident and so...so much like me. Like me in appearance, anyway. The same short, wavy brown hair, the same blue eyes, and the same toothy, sideways smile. The smile. I haven't seen that in a while, not for at least six months. Not since everything changed. I guess the absence of cheer is one more thing the two of us have in common now.

"Mr. Thymes, I don't recall asking you to dawdle in the hallway. Perhaps you require an escort!" Her claws reach me before I have time to react, and whatever Ms. Kohler lacks in stature she more than makes up for in strength. If she'd gone to this school when it was first built, I'm

sure the second place wrestling team could have used her to turn that silver to gold. I wonder if her strength is the reason she never married. Were the men all intimidated by her? Or perhaps she found them all so weak that she didn't consider any to be her equal. I don't have time to think about her marital status now. It's all I can do to keep my toes on the ground as she one-handedly heaves me toward the main office, her cutesy scarf waving behind her like the dorsal fin of a shark.

"Mr. Shumway has a visitor," she insists to the secretary upon our arrival. "Is he in?"

Miss Douglas, the school secretary and perhaps the most soft-spoken person on the planet, opens her mouth but doesn't need to say anything. The principal's door swings wide and a heavysset, elderly man with a thin mustache and long strands of hair that stretch all the way from one side of his head to the other, appears. Though nearly all of the hairs on top of Mr. Shumway's head have long since said their final goodbyes, many of them have taken up residence on the sides of his head, forming two gray bushes that stick straight out, giving the appearance of a mad scientist after a project just exploded in his face.

"What has Jeremy done now?" he asks, guiding his dark eyes and furrowed brow toward me.

"Absolutely nothing!" responds Ms. Kohler. "He refuses to participate, doesn't bother doing homework, and won't even bring his books to class. He's a complete disruption to the other students who lose all respect for me due to his blatant obstinate behavior. I got a degree to teach, Mr. Shumway, not to babysit sleeping children."

"Have a seat in my office." Mr. Shumway shifts to the side and motions toward his open door. "I'll be right with you." I enter the office and plop down in the chair nearest the door as Mr. Shumway pulls it closed. Before it latches, I hear the beginning of the conversation, started by Mr. Shumway. "Jean, I think we need to take the boy's situation into account."

"I understand that, Bruce, but I have tolerated his behavior as long as possible and am past the point of..." The door's seal cuts off the dialog.

I'm not sure how much time passes before the principal returns to his office. Enough to have a somewhat lengthy conversation, all about

how to handle me, the misfit student, I guess. I wasn't always this way. Though I only looked forward to earth science, I knew how to do enough to please the teachers. My report cards consistently showed B's with the occasional A or C. I don't know why I put so much effort into it...what good are grades?

Sitting here in silence gives me occasion to reabsorb the unusual décor of Mr. Shumway's office. It differs greatly from the other offices. Most of them are filled with neatly organized books, plaques, maps, and other educational stuff. Those things, if present at all in this office, aren't readily visible. Instead, there's a basketball hoop on the window above his seat, a dartboard on the wall above my head, and plastered all over are posters of beasts, real and mythical. This is one of the reasons I feel more comfortable in this office. Here I can pretend I'm somewhere else. No, not just somewhere else, but someone else, too.

The only thing I dislike about Mr. Shumway is the fact that he may have been a factor in Mr. Santana's rehire to his current position at the district offices. That was the compromise, I guess. Put him in an office where he won't have direct contact with students, but keeps his job. In my opinion, after what he did, he should rot in jail.

Mr. Shumway returns to his lair, closes the door behind him, and sighs. He says nothing to me at first, but crosses the room and parks in his deep-backed chair, the leather groaning as it gives way under his significant weight. The chair and the dark wooden desk are probably the only principal-like items in the room. The bell rings as he adjusts himself. Through the window behind him, I see buses lined up and ready to fill their seats with my peers. Some kids, mostly other freshmen, run toward them to get first pick of the sterile green seats. The parking lot beyond the buses is filled with the vehicles of students and teachers. The sight of an older blue pickup truck among them makes me frown.

My scan of the blacktop through the window lands on Mr. Shumway's concerned expression. "When can we expect a change for the better, Jeremy? We should really stop meeting under these circumstances."

"I don't know," I say. "I don't care anymore." I probably wouldn't have responded to the question if any other teacher asked, but Mr. Shumway has stuck his neck out for me and deserves an honest answer. Unfortunately for him, that's as honest as it gets. I really don't know

when my life will change, or when I will feel like participating in anything again. Maybe never.

"We all sympathize with you," he says genuinely after several moments of silence. "I even understand your lack of motivation. I can't imagine the horrors you and your family have endured."

You got that right, I think to myself as he continues.

"We just want to do whatever we can to bring back the fun and exuberant young man hiding inside you. I hope you know you aren't the only one in this school who misses Sasha. I wish I could bring her back. She was a wonderful young woman who meant a lot to all of us."

And there it is—the word that stings the most: *was*. She *was* a wonderful young woman. No! It can't be true. Despite the evidence, I refuse to believe she's gone. I need my big sister. Too smart and beautiful and...if she isn't gone, then it isn't my fault. If I'd only gone with her that day after school, like she asked me to. If I had been with her, then he couldn't have...I hide my face in my hands, pinching my eyebrows as hard as I can, fighting off the flood of tears ready to break through.

"Can I leave now?"

"Jeremy, I want you to continue seeing Miss Arnold during your reading hour twice a week. She can help you cope with...these issues."

Miss Arnold. Miss 'love the sound of my own voice' would be a more appropriate name for her. She assaults my personal space with useless and boring phrases like "acceptance brings closure," "grieving period," and "shared feelings are the gates to healing." The funny thing is that she actually seems to enjoy our sessions even though I sometimes don't say a word. She can't possibly think she's getting through to me. I think she just likes to rehearse some of the all-important knowledge she picked up from her newly minted psychology degree. As the full-time home economics teacher, she doesn't get that opportunity often. She doesn't care about me; she just prefers sharing her *psycho* knowledge to beating kids over the head with a rolling pin. I have skipped her sessions entirely this week.

"Will you give her a chance to help you?" Mr. Shumway peers into my soul.

I realize there is only one answer to his question that will allow me to

go. "I'll try. Can I leave?" During school hours, I wouldn't mind staying in this office a while longer, but school has let out.

"You're dismissed."

I force my way upstream through the halls like a salmon in spawning season. The bell rang nearly five minutes ago, so I have to act quickly. If I don't follow the routine, I'll have big problems. I pass right by my locker, my usual first stop, but I wasn't going to do homework anyway. I'm short on time, and I have to pick up Daniel from the special ed room.

Mentally disabled is how his teachers refer to Daniel, but other kids just call him strange. In fact, strange describes my relationship with him. I'm his physically younger, yet mentally older brother. Though he just turned eighteen, his behavior is more like that of a toddler. He needs me for many things, including to shelter him from other kids, which is why I have to pick him up right after school. My secret route through the cafeteria and girls' gym avoids almost all of the kids and spits us out next to bus 85.

"Daniel left already, Jeremy," Mrs. Makin informs me with her usual smile. "He's probably out by the bus. Could you make sure your mom gets the note I left in his backpack? It has important information about his costume for the school play. And be sure to congratulate him on being our king of capital letters," she shouts as I run down the hall. "He earned two suckers!"

The sunlight hits me as I exit the school in front of the building, causing a sneeze attack. One, two, three, four sneezes, just like normal. Well, normal for our family anyway. Entering sunlight from a dimmer area always makes us sneeze. Everyone except Dad, that is. It has to be some strange genetic trait from Mom, because no one else has these fits unless they're sick. If you catch all of us exiting the movie theater, we look like a family dying of some airborne allergen attack. Run for your lives!

My eyes adjust to the light, but I can't see Daniel anywhere. I weave through the students to bus 85, but the seat behind the driver is empty. Daniel always sits on the front row. Always. If someone is in his seat, he stands there grinding his teeth and tapping his foot, impatiently waiting for the intruder to move. I again scan the front of the school and the exiting students. Where could he...

Uh-oh.

A congregation of boys has collected just around the corner of the school. No doubt they purposely picked one of the few spots not in view of the bus duty teachers. I swallow hard on my final scan, careful to search everywhere, but still no Daniel. I have no choice but to check the group of boys. From the outskirts, I can hear talking but can't see through to the center of the crowd.

"Now watch this, guys. He will let me have anything, I tell you."

The older boys are bigger and taller than me, so I crouch to look for Daniel through their legs. Instead, I see an arm reaching down to open Daniel's backpack, an arm that can only belong to Dunstun Hill. Though Dunstun is new to our school this year, his unusually large size has helped him gather many followers. Unfortunately, his method of gaining new recruits typically involves some form of humiliation, a demonstration of his strength, or both.

Dunstun tears at the zipper on Daniel's pack and two suckers fall to the ground. In between the mass of teenage pant legs, I see him grab a sucker, unwrap it, and pick up a handful of dirt with his other hand. "Look, a sucker. Daniel, do you like suckers?"

I try to push my way through the tight crowd, but the boys elbow me back while laughing at Dunstun's teasing.

"You don't mind if I suck on it first do you, Daniel? No, I didn't think so. You like to share, right? Mmm, it's pretty good. Grape, my favorite flavor. You want some, too? Oh, you can have some, but let's put some frosting on it first." I still can't see anything but can guess from the laughter that Dunstun just decorated the sticky sucker with dirt. "And how about a loogie cherry to go on top?"

"That's disgusting," an unknown voice calls out amongst the laughter.

"Here you go, Daniel. Happy Birthday to you."

I finally break into the center of the circle, only to see Daniel with the sucker sticking out of his mouth, sucking off all of the added impurities. He seems a little puzzled as he chews on some of the dirt, but is mostly content to have his prize back. He's unable to comprehend the mocking. Half the boys are laughing and punching each other on the shoulder, while the others keep their disgusted looks trained on my brother.

"Look at the way he stares at the ground and bobs his head. What

a retard," one says to the others. People call Daniel that name all the time, and it always makes me mad. Daniel is different, not better or worse, ahead or behind, just different.

"Yep, boys," says Dunstun, "you're looking at the king of all retards!"

I begin to gather Daniel's belongings, but a powerful grip on my forearm prevents me from retrieving the remaining sucker and bag. "Look, it's the pinhead's pipsqueak of a brother."

"Let me go!"

"Let's make him eat a birthday sucker, too," the boy holding my arm suggests.

"I have a better idea," says Dunstun. "He looks like a girl to me. An ugly girl. He needs some makeup." More chuckles surface from the crowd and before I know it, I'm flanked by another boy much bigger than me. Now both arms are rendered useless and each attempt to free myself only tightens their grip.

"Anyone have any makeup to pretty up this ugly girl?"

"How about some dirt?" suggests one of the boys holding my arm. "Let's spit in it and make mud to smear on him."

"Hmm," ponders Dunstun. "I like that idea."

Mud isn't the only suggestion. "Check it out, Dun. Want some dog poo? It looks fresh."

"Perfect! Bring it over."

The bully leans in close to me, studying my face as the boy with the last idea stoops to the ground, trying to figure out how to pick up the mushy droppings without getting any on his fingers.

"Oh, yes." Dunstun returns to me. "This girl really needs some help. I think we need makeup on both cheeks and then...ah, yes, lipstick. What do you think, boys? Won't he, I mean she, look cute with some pretty brown lipstick?" He contorts his eyebrows to match his wry grin.

I won't let him do it. Without thinking, I coil my legs and thrust them both at his chest as hard as I can. He throws his hands up to thwart the blow, but he's too late. The impact sends him backward, grasping at the air with one hand and my foot with the other. My shoe is torn off as momentum carries the surprised bully into the stunned crowd and to the ground.

I hear the scuffle as he gets to his feet, but my view is blocked by

Daniel. My brother hastily waves his head and shoulders from side to side while rubbing his hands together vigorously. His voice cracks as he repeats three words. "No urt Jermy. No urt Jermy." The moment is captured in time. I face not only humiliation, but certain physical abuse. And my older, simple-minded, innocent brother is doing all he can to foil my attacker. I don't think I have ever heard him put more than three words together in a sentence, but these three are like no others.

The moment captured is instantly released as Dunstun regains control.

"Get out of the way, retard!" He lunges, sending Daniel sprawling head first into the brick wall of the school. Next he's in my face, so close I can smell his breath. The boys at my side relinquish their hold.

"I don't usually beat up little girls," he says, "but I'll make an exception for you."

"You still want the dog poo, Dun?" I hear from the boy still crouched at the ground.

"Put it in here." Dunstun tosses my shoe to his accomplice. "He's not gonna wear it. He's gonna eat it." The shoe is quickly produced. "You are one massive idiot," he says. "Even stupider than your no-brains brother." His twisted smile reappears below his narrow, penetrating eyes. "Today I'll thrash two retards."

"Kohler!" someone yells, and the group scatters.

Dunstun grabs my hair and pulls my ear to his mouth. "You won't get off that easy, scrub." He yanks my head down to my chest, opens the collar at my neck and dumps the shoe's contents down my shirt. "Here is a present to remember me. Oh, and one more thing. This doesn't end here. I'm not through with you." With that, he twirls me around and punches my lower back, squishing the fresh dog doo between shirt and skin.

In seconds, the crowd disbands and Ms. Kohler is upon me for the second time today. "I may have guessed. Why is it that I always find you at the center of trouble these days, Mr. Thymes? Get to your bus now and don't let me..." She gasps, turns toward the school entry, and yells to one of the bus duty teachers, "Get Nurse Miley right away!"

I follow her gaze. Daniel is curled in a fetal position on the ground, shaking uncontrollably, blood oozing from an open gash on his head.

Ms. Kohler kneels next to him, applying pressure to the wound with her scarf. He continues to convulse.

"Oh my, oh my!" she whispers, trying to keep the scarf on Daniel's jerking head.

Seizures are one of the characteristics brought on by Daniel's unique genetic condition. Though this isn't the first one I've witnessed, it is still difficult to watch his whole body writhe, blood running down his cheek and passing his open, but completely white eyes, his pupils having rolled up into his head. The stream of blood oozes into his gasping mouth.

I kneel next to Ms. Kohler. "Will he be okay?"

"I don't know, Jeremy. Get Nurse Miley!"

The fact that Ms. Kohler has called me by my first name for the first time ever doesn't register immediately as I leap for the school entrance. I've taken two steps when Nurse Miley and Mr. Shumway appear through the front doors. Though their walk is lively, it's still too slow. "Hurry, he's bleeding all over the place!" I screech, effectively prompting a run.

As Nurse Miley starts treating Daniel, his last words tear through my heart again: "No urt Jermy." There is no holding them back. I can't control the tears.

"Are you hurt, too, Jeremy?" asks Mr. Shumway. I don't answer. "You just hang tight here. It is going to be okay."

"Call an ambulance!" shouts Nurse Miley.

"I'm on it!" Mr. Shumway yells in return. He darts back into the building.

The brick wall of the school makes the brown slime on my back worse as I slide to a crouched position. Two questions chase each other through the jumbled mess of my mind, but never escape my lips. "Why does bad stuff keep happening to me?" and "Why is it always my fault?" A third thought joins the race. A much more pressing one. "Don't die, Daniel. Please don't die!"