

Chapter 1

John stood at the edge of the porch, searching for that special superhero, the one that hides within. He shivered over the day's *Post Star* and pressed his warm palms against both cheeks.

His mother's voice was muffled by the glass storm door. "What's your hurry?"

"The football game against St. Mary's is this week. I have to play."

"Aren't you forgetting something?" She opened the door and held out a tattered binder. Sketched across the cover were superheroes in a battle against ghostly villains.

"Everyone in town will be there—it's the seventy-fifth anniversary game." A few papers slipped from the folder. *Kindness* was scribbled in pencil across the top page. The weekend had passed, and his essay was still a blank piece of paper. John shuffled the assignment back into the folder. "I'm tired of being Clark Kent. This is my chance to be Superman."

Mom laid her hand on his shoulder and squeezed. "I need your help this morning." She clenched tighter.

John winced, then mustered up a smile of confidence.

She passed two brown paper bags out the door. "Stop by Mr. Varney's on your way to school."

"But Mom, I've been practicing all summer to play in this game."

"You're acting like I just handed you a bag of kryptonite."

"This is my chance to be one of the guys." John looked into her eyes. "Please, Mom!"

Her brow drooped onto the bony bridge of her nose. "The world becomes a better place when we help our neighbors."

John's feet pitter-pattered on the porch floor planks. "Varney is angry with us for raiding his garden." He tapped faster. "I'll never make it out of his house alive."

"What would Superman do?"

"But . . ." John's feet clomped to a stop. "I don't have superpowers."

"Look past yourself and show a little compassion." Mom nudged John forward with the gentle touch of her palms. "Hand me the newspaper." She glanced at the headline. "A ghost car? What will they write next?"

John grasped his neck with both hands and juttied out his tongue between his pale, bluish lips. "I might as well be dead if I don't play in the game." He rushed down the steps with both bags. "Maybe Mr. Varney will put me out of my misery."

"You've got some imagination."

His mother stepped into the house, and the hinges rasped the door close. Brittle leaves crackled and swirled above a blanket of frost as John walked across the front lawn. The bare branches of an old maple tree creaked and swayed.

"It's a twister," he said aloud to himself. The folder and two bags thumped to the ground. "I'll have to act fast."

The leaves whirled around his faded blue jeans. In true superhero fashion, John raised his arm toward the sky and dashed into the vortex. The autumn breeze calmed, and the leaves fluttered into a heap beside his feet.

"I've saved the day." John's smile of victory fell into a frown. The paper bags were camouflaged beneath the muddy brown leaves. He swept his hands from side to side. "I wish I had X-ray vision."

"Red dog, red dog!" a voice barked out from around the corner of the house.

“It’s clobber time!” another voice belted from behind a black maple tree.

Mid-yard, John was sacked with a double crackback tackle and slammed into the leaf pile. The back of his head thudded against the frozen ground as the weight of the two sixth graders crushed down on his chest.

“Get off me.” John pushed and shoved at the boys. “That was a cheap shot.”

His older brother, Tom, pressed into John’s face, nose-to-nose. “You want to be on this team or not?” he asked.

The two boys jumped to their feet and raced up William Street, laughing all the while.

“See yah, wouldn’t want to be yah!” Scott yelled back.

Tom shouted. “Don’t blow it.”

John’s teeth gnashed as he pushed up to his feet.

Scott yelled over his shoulder, “You can show us how to collect splinters with your butt.”

John pulled the bags and folder from the gritty mess and sprinted around the corner onto Oak Street. Doors rattled open, and a flurry of feet thumped down porch steps. The number of kids doubled, then tripled, eventually quadrupling into a massive pileup.

The hefty Hunter twins waddled shoulder-to-shoulder across the sidewalk. “Come on . . . move it, get out of my way.” John dropped his shoulder and rammed in between chubby Bob and Robert. “Coming through, make way.” The twins jiggled with every poke and nudge. He popped out on the other side.

Tom bounced up and pointed his finger. “Hurry up.”

Darf, another friend of Scott and Tom’s, joined the taunt. “Let’s go, bench jockey.”

Scott howled, “Pick it up.” He gestured John forward. “You don’t want to be riding the pine.”

John jumped from the curb and sprinted up the road. A dead squirrel lay freshly flattened like a pancake. Guts squeezed out from its mouth like a deflated balloon. A vomitus stench wafted down the back of John's throat. His breakfast churned in his stomach. A belch erupted, and a splash of sour stomach acid burned the roof of his mouth.

BEEEEEEEEEP! A car's horn blasted as it skidded around him.

"Yikes!" John dropped the bags to the tar.

A cigar butt tottered from the edge of the driver's lips. The man shouted across the bench seat out the passenger side window, "Are you crazy?" He pulled the stumpy stub from his mouth. "Do you want to end up like that squirrel?"

The engine rumbled, and the rusty hubcaps slowly rolled away with a gritty grind. John snatched the bags off the road and scampered into the crowd. Mark and Bruce, two teammates from the sixth grade, stood at the corner. John recklessly pushed, bumped, and flung elbow jabs.

"Ow!" Samantha screeched.

Paige, a fourth grader from John's class, placed her hands on her hips in a huff. She shouted at the back of his head, "Hey, watch where you're going."

"I am. They're right over there." John made several tactical maneuvers through the crowd.

"Boys have no manners." Samantha stomped her foot.

John continued to push his way through.

"I'm going to tell my brother on you." The chatter of the crowd quieted to little more than a murmur, and Samantha's threat rang out loud and clear. "You better apologize right now."

John's voice echoed back through the now silent kids. "Sorry, Sam."

“That’s a boy’s name!” Samantha’s cheeks puffed red as a cherry, then deflated into a twisted, witchy scowl. “I’m definitely telling.”

John ducked behind several boys and hid. Samantha’s brother was a good foot taller than John and easily weighed fifty pounds more. He was the biggest kid at the school.

Chapter 2

John slithered between the mob of students hidden from Samantha and tapped the boys' shoulders.

"Nice hairdo." Mark's shirt rolled upward, and his belly jiggled with laughter.

"You got sacked in the leaf pile again." Bruce snickered. "How many times are you going to fall for that trick?"

Mark took a knee and grappled the zipper open, then shuffled through the bag with a grimace of concentration. With his shoulder deep into the bag, his face lit up with glee. A beat-up pigskin rose from the depths, and he waved it in the air. "Nothing like a little game of fumblelina to warm up for practice."

The crossing guard stood in the middle of the street. Between her ruby-red lips perched a tin whistle. Her shoulders rose, and she drew in a long, deep breath. *FWEEEEEE*.

The football was stripped from Mark's hands. Bruce jetted past the crossing guard and sprinted up the middle of the street toward school.

"The street is out of bounds. You know the rules," Mark said.

Laughter echoed back as Bruce raced past several parked cars. "No flag, no penalty."

"Get him," John whooped, and the two boys charged out onto the road.

FWEEEEEE. "No running in the street!" The crossing guard pointed to the curb. "Get back on the sidewalk, now." *FWEEEEEE*.

Bruce stopped after several blocks, and sweat tumbled off the tip of his nose, splatting on the leather football. The ball slid down over his ribs and came to a rest below his waist. "Woo—"

WHAM!

Scott drove his left shoulder dead center into Bruce's lower back. The crash rocketed the football from the boy's hand as he flipped feet over head. It thumped to the ground and came to a rest next to the front porch of a white house.

"Red Dog!" Darf mounted the second blitz of attack.

A group of second graders parted from the crowd, and Tom charged. "Hog Pile!"

Like torpedoes launched from an aircraft carrier, the two boys dropped from the air and exploded on target.

"Get off me," Bruce moaned.

The demolition duo of John and Mark parted the onlookers, and the bombardment continued with a double slam impact. Bones cracked from the bottom of the stack. John wrestled his head from the stank of Darf's armpit. A pair of black patent leather shoes accented by sky-blue bobbysocks skipped across the lawn and climbed to the top of the heap.

Cassie sat with her legs crossed, dressed in a white cotton sweater and a pleated yellow skirt. She had a gentle smile and waved her princess wave out at the students. The crowd erupted into a cheer. John glanced up to the top of the pile at his fourth-grade classmate with a smile. The heap of bodies held Scott prisoner as he gazed up at Cassie with a snarl.

"You're crushing me," Bruce moaned from the bottom of the pile. "Get off!"

The mound of bodies quaked, and the whole stack rumbled into a human avalanche. Cassie made a clean escape as the boys tumbled across the grass, which was littered with fallen leaves.

A body rose from the scrambled wreckage. "What was that about?" Scott towered a good half-foot over Cassie.

"I thought I'd join you guys." Cassie curtsied with a smirk across her face.

“Football is a guy’s game.” He reached down and tugged Bruce to his feet.

“When’s the last time you guys won?” Cassie’s smirk dropped into a scowl.

“My dad was in sixth grade the last time our school beat St. Mary’s.” Darf crawled to his knees and brushed the leaves from his sweatshirt.

A smile worked its way across Cassie’s face. “Sounds like you guys need a girl on the team.”

Bruce yanked Scott’s sleeve. “Forget about her, let’s get to practice.”

“Hey, where’s the football?” Mark peered at Bruce’s empty hands.

A monstrous shadow loomed across the lawn, swallowing Mark and stopping at John’s feet. At the other end, a behemoth of a boy stood with the football clutched in his hand. *Calling Samantha Sam may get me a punch in the nose*, John thought as he searched for an escape route.

Samantha had spied John’s retreat and marched to the front of the crowd. Several friends closed tight around her slender body and shut down any possible getaway. “Told yah.” She crossed her arms and stood tall.

The first step of the porch creaked under Moose’s huge body. The football waved over the top of his head, and the volume of voices from the crowd rumbled. The two made eye contact, and John’s jaw fell to his chest as the mob grumbled to silence. “Now wait a minute, Moose, I can explain. You see . . .”

The hinges groaned as the front door slowly opened to a black hole of emptiness behind Moose. The dark void reminded John of a mythical place, where people and things would disappear forever. His thoughts were swallowed by fear, his imagination blocked of any superpowers. Moose was the least of his worries.

Like a king on a throne, Moose gazed over the crowd. His eyes became glued to his little sister's shivering blue lips. "You look like you've seen a ghost." Moose turned to the front door. He looked back and snubbed his nose at the crowd. "What a bunch of scaredy-cats."

The crowd retreated over the curb and into the street. Standing cemented to the sidewalk with her mouth gaping wide open, Samantha appeared unable to make any sound.

Moose dropped both hands to his sides. "What's the problem, Sam?"

Samantha pursed her lips. "Sam is a boy's name!"

Two red, demonic eyes flashed like fireballs from the darkness. A four-legged beast pounced out of the darkness and slammed onto the front porch. Its fangs flared as it let out a savage howl at the sky.

"Run for it!" Samantha screamed.

Mere seconds passed, and Oak Street was empty. The sea of children flooded the playground from the Firehouse at the far back corner of Paris Park to the glass doors of the school next to the parking lot. John dodged and weaved his way to the chain-link backstop. Out of breath, he wheezed, "Did everyone make it?"

Scott scowled. "I knew Old Man Varney would be furious."

"I told you taking his vegetables was a bad idea." Bruce sneered at John.

"But-but-but—" John stuttered.

"It was your idea." Scott pointed into his face. "We should have left Varney's vegetables in the garden. You're to blame."

"It was a good idea." Tom stepped in front of his little brother. "Varney's crop would have rotted while he was in the hospital. Those vegetables we took last week helped the food pantry feed our neighbors. What's done is done."

The morning siren towering above the fire station rang out.

“We only have ten minutes before class.” Tom walked over from the backstop. The baseball diamond covered half of the football field.

“Let’s get these third graders off the field,” Darf said.

Tom’s waved both arms out at his side, shepherding students off the field. There was safety in staying close to his brother, so John quickly joined in, herding the kids toward the flagpole next to the school entrance. The best way to get Scott’s mind off the garden raid would be to start practice.

“Okay, that’s enough room, Huddle up.” Scott squatted in the center and commanded, “Tom, run a short button hook. Darf, run a zig-zag. I’ll hit Bruce for the TD. Snap the ball on my count of two.”

A hand raised. “Uhm, guys . . .” A bump to the ribs stopped Mark.

John pulled Mark’s hand down. “What do you want me to do?”

“You can sit on the bench and gather splinters.” Bruce stepped out of the huddle. “Whose idea was it to let this fourth grader play?”

Tom moved to the tight end position. “Line up next to the center and block. Don’t let anyone rush past you.”

John took a three-point stance next to Mark and looked across the line of scrimmage at an empty field. “This should be easy enough.”

“Hey.” Mark’s hands clasped in a T-shape above his head. “I’m trying to tell you that I don’t have the football.”

“Who’s got the football?” Scott asked.

“Hey, look.” Darf pointed toward Locust Street. “There’s Moose.”

“Over here, Moose.” Mark turned to Tom. “I can’t lose that ball, it belongs to my cousin.” He waved Moose toward the group. “Dave needs it back for his varsity practice this afternoon.”

Moose’s hair was a matted mess, and sweat glistened over his brown cheeks. He walked into the huddle. “I tried to escape that scruffy, flea-bitten mutt by taking a shortcut through the backyards.”

John clung to Tom’s back—he wasn’t sure where he stood with Moose after his encounter with Samantha. “Champ doesn’t have fleas,” John mumbled, hidden behind his brother.

“I walked past that tiny shack next to Mr. Smith’s house. You know the house, it looks like a one-car garage. That witchy woman chased me through the yard.” Moose rubbed the top of his head. “She clobbered me with a broom.”

“Can’t you read?” John whispered from the tips of his toes as he peeked around Tom’s head. “There’s a big no trespassing sign.”

“I barely escaped.” Moose bent forward into the huddle and parted his hair. “Look at the size of this lump. Am I bleeding?”

Darf rubbed his hand over Moose’s thick hair. “Nope, no blood.”

“Time is running out,” Bruce said. “We need to get a couple plays off before school starts.”

A group of girls chattered and babbled behind the backstop. John’s attention left the huddle. The girls were working on a sequence of dance steps. They had gathered there for the last three practices, and most of their time was spent giggling. Today, he noticed Cassie clinging to the wired backstop, showing no interest in her friends’ cheers.

Samantha walked up to Cassie. The hem of her red and black plaid skirt rested an inch above her bony knees. A red ribbon tied Samantha's tight black curls behind her head in a bow. Her slim fingers reached out of the sleeves of her white wool sweater and clutched the cold metal. She gazed through the lattice screen at John. "I'm telling Moose."

John lowered his head back into the huddle.

"My cousin is going to kill me." Mark clawed at Moose's shirt. "You've got to go and get that ball from the old man's house."

Moose yanked his shirt from Mark's grip. "Why me?"

"Bruce fumbled the football." John sheepishly looked across the huddle. "Maybe Bruce should go?"

"I'm not afraid of that angry old man." Bruce stepped forward and repeatedly pressed his index finger against Mark's chest. "I'm not the fool that took his cousin's football."

The siren rang a second time. Classes were about to begin.