

# Chapter One

“Buddy? Can you come down and set the table please?”

Buddy.

He was really starting to hate being called Buddy.

His real name was Benjamin. Ben. A name that described someone who had lots of friends.

Who was good at sports. Who was brave and exciting and not afraid of anything.

But Buddy? Buddy was...forgettable.

Buddy was clumsy and afraid of the dark.

When it came down to it, Buddy was pretty sure he wasn't very interesting at all.

But his brother had started calling him Buddy when he was a baby. It stuck. No one called him anything else.

"Buddy!"

"Yeah! I'm coming." Buddy stumbled down the hall toward the kitchen and nearly crashed into his brother.

"Careful there, Buddy." His brother had just come out of his room, rubbing his eyes and pushing his hair out of his face. Buddy grinned. The nickname didn't sound as bad coming from his Ryan. It sounded more like he was calling him "pal."

"Sorry," Buddy mumbled happily. He always happy to see his brother. Ryan was five years older and five times cooler than he'd ever be. Buddy glanced into his brother's room, which was crammed with a drum kit and several guitars. There was a motorcycle jacket thrown on the floor, and a pair of boots that were about twice the size of Buddy's own sneakers. Everything about his brother was cool. As far as Buddy was concerned, Ryan was a rock star.

And he wanted to be just like him.

Ryan grabbed him and pulled him in for a hug.

"Want to throw the ball after breakfast?" he asked.

"Yeah! Definitely."

He knew he was lucky to have such a great brother. His friend Jimmy had an older brother who rarely said a word to him unless it was "Get out of the way" or "Stop bothering me." And his

friend Stephanie's older sister was no better. Jimmy and Steph thought Ryan was cool too.

Buddy grabbed plates for himself, Ryan and his mom and set the table. On weekends when his mom was home, she liked to make big breakfasts of bacon and eggs. Or pancakes. Today it was waffles with fruit salad you could scoop onto the waffle. Buddy didn't. He liked his waffles drowning in syrup.

"What do you have planned today?" his mom asked, sitting down and sipping her tea.

"We're going to play some catch," Buddy said. "Right, Ry?"

"Yep. Right after I've loaded up on waffles."

"I love how close you two are," his mom said, smiling.

"Yeah, yeah. We secretly can't stand each other, Mom. We just keep it well hidden. Right?" Ryan winked at Buddy.

Buddy laughed. "Definitely. I can't stand him." He stood up to clear his plate and ducked as Ryan fake-punched him playfully on the arm. "You stay there and finish your tea," he told his mom. "We'll clean up."

"How did I get so lucky? I have the best boys in the world."

Buddy smiled too. Because he thought he had the best family too. It had just been him, Ryan and his mom for as long as he could remember, and Ryan was more of a dad to him than his own father had been. Buddy put on his baseball cap—the one Ryan had worn when he'd pitched a no-hitter the previous season—and picked up his glove from the kitchen counter.

"Are you ready?" he asked Ryan.

"Ready as I'll ever be, Buddy." His brother put an arm around him and pulled him outside.

## Chapter Two

The ball flew through the air and landed in Buddy's glove with a satisfying *WHAP*. He pulled it out and threw it back to his brother. He loved it when they played catch. He might not be good at sports, but catch was easy.

"Good throw!" Ryan called out from the other end of the yard. "Hey, did you hear about Tommy Bracco?"

"No." Buddy caught the ball again and sent it back. "Is that the kid who got in trouble for setting off fireworks in school?"

"No." Ryan laughed and caught the ball easily. "And that didn't really happen. That's one thing you learn in high school. Half the things kids say they did, they didn't really do."

"Then why do they say it?" Buddy asked. Kids bragged about stuff all the time in middle school, but no one had ever claimed something as big as fireworks at school.

"Because they want people to think they're cool." His brother made a spectacular catch behind his back and sent the ball flying back to Buddy.

"They all think *you're* cool," Buddy said. He jumped for the ball but missed. He landed heavily in the grass. "And you don't make up stuff like that."

His brother came over and sat beside him. He picked up a blade of grass and held it between his

fingers. He blew on it, making a loud whistling sound.

Buddy picked up a piece of grass and blew on it too. But it didn't make a sound. His fingers just ended up all covered in spit. He wiped his hands on his pants.

"No. But some kids like making stuff up. It makes them feel more important."

"So what happened with Tommy Bracco?" Buddy asked.

"He told a bunch of kids that he snuck into Funland and spent the night there."

"Are you serious?" Buddy was paying attention now. Funland was the local theme park, and it was one of his favorite places to hang out with his friends. It had really awesome rides and games you could play to win things like stuffed animals or basketballs. Ryan had won a giant stuffed cob of corn one year—it was still sitting in the corner of Buddy's room. Buddy liked the bumper cars best. He

had lined up to go on the roller coaster the previous year but couldn't make himself get on it. It was huge! He'd never been able to talk himself into going inside the haunted house either. The music and screams coming from it made the hair on the back of his neck stand up. Jimmy and Steph told him the screams were recorded, and he didn't have to be scared. But there were people inside who'd been hired to scare everyone who came through. Buddy knew that on top of the recorded screams were the actual ones of terrified kids being scarred for life.

"He said he walked around looking for the ghost and went through the haunted house and ate caramel popcorn all night."

"But don't they have security guards? Why didn't he get caught?"

"That's what I asked. And he didn't have an answer."

"What does that mean?" Buddy was practically leaning into Ryan's lap, waiting for the details.

“It means he was lying.”

“He didn’t sneak in?” Buddy’s eyes were huge.

“Nah. You’d have to be pretty smart to get around the security guards and cameras and everything. And if you got proof of the ghost, you’d be a legend. And Tommy Bracco is definitely not a legend. I am pretty sure he made it all up.”

Buddy nodded.

Ryan looked at his phone. “You okay if I go hang with the gang for a bit? They’re on their way over.”

Ryan meant his bandmates. They were okay, but they mostly ignored Buddy.

“Yeah, sure. Can I come watch you practice later?”

“Sure.” Ryan was up and inside the house before Buddy could haul himself to his feet. Maybe Jimmy and Steph wanted to come over and read comics or something. He was dying to tell them

about Tommy Bracco. There was no danger of anyone ever calling Buddy a legend. But at least he’d never make a story up to fool people.