

A line of sleds is being pulled across a snowy, icy landscape. The sleds are connected by a rope and are moving from the top right towards the bottom left. The background is a bright, overcast sky with some snow on the ground.

**SKINNY**

**LEGG**

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# Chapter 1

**T**he sideline of a football field has to be the loneliest place in the whole known universe. I should know. I spent enough time there back in fifth grade.

Two years ago, for the tenth Saturday in a row, I stood next to Coach Decker at the forty-yard line, my fingers drumming away on my thigh pad. For three and a half quarters, I'd stuck to him like a wad of gum on the bottom of his shoe while he followed the game up and down the sidelines. Aside from a, "Hey, Spence, refill this water bottle, will you," in the middle of the second quarter, he'd hardly acknowledged my existence.

The shriek of a whistle cut through the ruckus, silencing my little drum solo. I shot Coach another glance out the corner of my eye, terrified I'd been forgotten.

"Offensive line, stay with your blocks!" he yelled to my classmates lining up behind the ball.

The four mini gridirons chalked onto Jaycee Park's yellow grass were buzzing with Grid Kid football. A 5-pump squirt from my Super Soaker in any direction would've nailed some lucky dog blocking, running, or tackling—basically having a blast.

I bent to pull up my black knee sock that had slid down around my ankle again. Could a leg be more scrawny and pathetic? My scoff made a white puff of air. My stupid calf muscle didn't even have enough bulk to keep a

sock in place, let alone to launch me across a football field. I jerked the ribbed top up over the weird purple fishnet pattern of blood vessels that glimmered through my skin, strangling the life out of that leg.

I have a rare birth defect in the veins of my left leg, so it doesn't grow as much—*Cutis Marmorata Telangiectatia Congenita*. Try saying that three times fast. Try saying it once flawlessly.

Flawless.

Flawed.

Less than.

Loser.

Mom had said to me at least a million times, “You may have a skinny leg, Spence, but you have a big brain, and a big brain will serve you much better in life than sports ever will. You're the lucky one. You'll see.”

Thing is, I didn't want a big brain. I wanted a tackle! Even more, I wanted a quarterback sack. Who cared about the smart kid? No one! The only kids who mattered at school were the fast kids, the kids that could throw a ball and score points for the team. The *athletes*. The rest of us, we were nobodies. *I* was a nobody. My skinny leg had seen to that.

Out on the field, Max snapped the ball to Nico, and Cory, our star running back, broke left. He caught Nico's pitch at a dead run. In two strides, he was past the linemen and blitzing the linebackers. I straightened up, eyes glued on Cory. He cut right, juking the cornerback, and suddenly there was nothing but fifty yards of empty space in front of him.

“Go, Cory!” I yelled, jumping up and down and sending my sock into another nosedive.

Cory was tiny. But just like a hummingbird, he was also super quick. As I watched him fly down the field, legs churning, ball tucked against his side, a fireball of jealousy formed in my gut. I'd never be in his league, never run as if shot from the barrel of a gun, never be cool like that. Not only is my left leg skinnier than the right one, it's shorter too. I don't run, I galumph.

Cory blasted into the end zone. Cheers erupted from the parents scattered along the sidelines while our team went wild, whooping and high fiving each other. Cory held the ball high above his head. His face mask couldn't

hide his Grand Canyon grin. Twenty to zero! A burst of excitement doused the jealousy burning through me, and I broke into a big grin too. We were headed for a Team Decker shutout!

The offense trotted back to the sidelines together, chatting and laughing and all piling up on Cory. They jostled me between their shoulder pads on their way to the orange Gatorade cooler, while I picked at the grass with the toe of my cleat.

“Two minutes left in the game,” yelled the high-schooler referee.

Coach briskly rubbed his hands together. “One more series, defense,” he said then waggled his fingers for us to huddle up around him. “Listen, boys. A defense’s pride is in keeping the other team from scoring. So, let’s go out in glory for our last game! What do you say!”

Everyone cheered.

“Dairy Queen Blizzards for a Team Decker shutout!”

We all cheered again.

“Bruggeman!”

My head snapped up. Coach was looking right at me.

“All in for this series.”

My heart made a rabbitty leap.

“Defensive end. Watch for the sweep to your side, okay,” he barked.

I jerked a nod at coach then stole a quick look at my dad who’d been prowling along the sidelines the whole game. Football’s in my DNA. Apparently, Dad was some big high school football god back when dinosaurs roamed the earth. He likes to brag how his picture still hangs in his high school locker room. He played defensive end on “the most feared D-line in Montana high school football history” and has a State Championship trophy to prove it.

Then there’s my brother, Chase. At six foot two, two hundred pounds of muscle, he’s a starting defensive end for his high school’s football team. I have his team roster with all the players dressed out in their green and gold jerseys and looking fierce tacked to my bedroom wall. They all have such thick necks.

Jaw set, Dad gave me a fist pump in the air.

“Go, Spence!” Mom hollered from her lawn chair as she reached for her camera.

I pulled on my helmet, and my world shrank. Wiggling in my mouth guard, I headed out onto the field. I wore a specially made lift in my shoe to help even me out. But even with the extra inch, I still ran like a three-legged dog.

I lined up just to the outside of their tight end and got into my stance. My heart beat high and suffocating up in my throat. I pulled in a steady breath while I waited for the snap. *Come my way, come my way*, I chanted in my head.

“Hut!”

In a flash, the ball was in the quarterback’s hands. He dropped back as if to pass, then threw a quick power-toss to the tailback. The tailback went left, stumbled against one of his O-linemen, bounced off him, then reversed direction and swept back toward my side. I ran as hard as I could to the outside.

In seconds he was so close I could hear the breath huffing out his nostrils, could see the Black Mamba look in his eyes. Just three more steps and our paths would intersect. No way would I let him get around my end. He was all mine!

I put on a burst of speed.

His wind ruffled the little hairs on my arms as he blew right by me. With a gasp, I whipped around. *Pull him down from behind!* thumped my heart. My arms shot out and dove for his legs.

You know those slow-motion scenes from cartoons where the character’s voices get all stretched-out and deep? I swear that happened to the world as the ground rose up to meet me. I made a final, desperate grab.

Air—that’s all I caught before pancaking myself on the turf.

Whoops and cheers from the opposite side of the field broke through the pounding in my ears. I slowly lifted my head. I pulled the grass out of my face mask while I watched the rest of my team chase the runner all the way to the goal line. To my horror, my eyes filled with tears. I blinked three times, and they were gone.

After the game, Cory's mom handed out snacks while the parents chatted. I had zero interest in the snack line—less than zero, actually—so, I skipped it and slunk toward the Gatorade cooler where we'd all dropped our pads.

"Graham Crackers suck," I heard Nico say as I passed the picnic table where he sat with Max. "Wish that gimp wouldn't've ruined it for us."

Max gave a snort of disgust. "My sister could've made that tackle."

Hot lava rushed to my face. I dragged the hood of my sweatshirt up over my head and hunkered into it.

"Wish he wouldn't have come out for football at all," Nico scoffed.

Max crushed his empty juice box. "Too bad they gotta let everyone be on a team that wants to play," he said, shooting it into the nearby trash can. "It's a stupid rule."

Their words hit me like kicks and punches. I forced myself not to break into a run.

"Yeah," Nico grumbled, "the *stupidest*. Losers shouldn't get to play. They bring the rest of us down."

I suddenly felt like puking. I snatched my pads and helmet off the grass, then made a beeline for our Suburban, chin planted on my chest to avoid an outright sprint; barely seeing, barely hearing, barely not imploding.

Mom and Dad caught up with me halfway to the car. As we hustled across the park, the cold November wind kicked up with a fury, swirling leaves into mini tornados, slapping trash against tree trunks and car tires, and washing us in a wave of grit.

When we got to the Suburban, Mom reached out a hand and smoothed my hair. "You want to go get something to eat somewhere? Mexican maybe? Spicy salsa," she cajoled.

I had the mortifying urge to burrow my face in the crook of her neck and bawl. I shrugged away from her, embarrassed to be treated like a baby. "No thanks, not hungry," I muttered, throwing open the door. I tossed my pads onto the seat and climbed in. All I wanted was to go home and disappear—

Disappear into the pages of a book.



## Chapter 2

**A**t the first step upon the cold surface, Buck's feet sank into a white mushy something very like mud. He sprang back with a snort. More of this white stuff was falling through the air. He shook himself, but more of it fell upon him. He sniffed it curiously, then licked some up on his tongue. It bit like fire, and the next instant was gone. This puzzled him. He tried it again, with the same result. The onlookers laughed uproariously, and he felt ashamed, he knew not why, for it was his first snow."

"We've gotta leave in ten minutes, Spence!"

Mom's voice reached underneath my bedroom door and jerked me back from the wilds of Alaska. Groaning, I flopped over onto my belly and buried my face in my pillow. Now that Grid Kid football was over, Mom made me swim on a club team. I *despised* swim team. I despised it more than putting my coat on over a long sleeve T-shirt and having the inside sleeve roll up to my elbow, watching the 5th grade puberty video with the girls, bran cereal (get a job, bran cereal!), and burning my tongue on hot chocolate combined. Like Nemo, I have a bum fin and am about as worthless at swimming as I am at running.

"Exercise is as good for your mood as it is for your body," Mom had said to me at least a million times. "It chases away all the little black rain clouds in your head."

I growled into my pillow and pummeled it with a fist. Sometimes my mom drove me crazy! Why did she make me torture myself? I'd had it with team sports. I wanted to walk Team Sports to the end of the plank at sword point, poke it in the back, then watch it step off into shark-infested waters and a bloody demise. I let out another muffled growl. If only Mom would let me stay home and read *The Call of the Wild*. Life hurt a lot less all alone in my room with a book.

*The Call of the Wild*. A little thrill buzzed through me. I flipped back over and ran my thumb across the glossy gray and white Siberian Husky on the cover, then poked my nose into the pages and inhaled.

Reading was the best part of my life. When I cracked open a book, my neon sadness instantly faded to a dim glow in the back of my mind. Actually, everything faded into the background. Books didn't judge me or demand anything of me—besides returning them to the library on time, of course. And they'd never let me down—except for *Where the Red Fern Grows*. Now there was a downer if there ever was one. And *Bridge to Terabithia* too, come to think of it—though once in a while it was nice to be sad about something other than me for a change. For a while, books made me something different, something better. Besides my dad, books were my best friends.

Last week I'd checked out *The Call of the Wild* by Jack London at school. Once I'd gotten a taste of the first chapter, I scarfed up the whole story in one big bite. It was candy for my mind. I didn't want to swim dumb laps. I wanted to lay on my bed and breathe the cold Alaskan air and listen to the Huskies howl while I reread the adventures of the dog named Buck who was stolen from his family in California and sold into the life of a sled dog. No other story had grabbed hold of me and wouldn't let go like this one had. I couldn't get enough of Buck's fight for survival in the Alaskan wilderness. Not nearly enough.

"Let's go!" Mom hollered.

I rolled my head and cast a sour look at my mesh swim bag. "Yeah, yeah," I muttered under my breath as I rocked out of the dent in my mattress.

That afternoon, sled dog fantasies fueled my thirty laps up and down the pool. I barely even noticed when Maggie, a girl two grades under me and half my size, lapped me on the breaststroke. Okay, fine. Twice; the little humanoid lapped me twice, and if you're thinking things couldn't get much worse than that, you're wrong.



11:37 a.m. the next day found me sitting at the end of a crowded cold-lunch table in the school cafeteria swamped in the buzz of a hundred voices. I was arranging the contents of my insulated lunch bag in front of me—PB&J, baby carrots, single-size pack of Sour Cream & Onion Pringles (rated 3rd tastiest in a blind taste test of 16 different Pringles flavors), and bottle of Sunny-D—when a shove to my shoulder sent juice splashing all over my “Never Trust an Atom—They Make Everything Up” T-shirt.

“Hey, *loser*,” sneered a voice at my back, “you owe me. You cost me a Blizzard on Saturday.”

While I scrambled for a napkin, a hand reached around me and snatched the Pringles from my food lineup. “Hey!” I snapped, shooting a glance over my shoulder just in time to catch Nico’s ugly smirk before he turned and walked away.

Fuming, I stabbed him in the back with my eyes as he swaggered toward the athlete’s table. *Nico The Mosquito*. The thought was such a good one, it came with a snort. Nico definitely had a lot in common with the biggest jerk of the insect world. Annoying. Noxious. Mean. Even an entomologist, the biggest insect-lover, would slap a mosquito without thinking twice.

As he squeezed himself in next to Cory, I conjured a mental Pixar short of a winged and six-legged Nico sticking his long proboscis into my bare bum and sucking my blood until he was so fat he exploded like a water balloon. That made me feel a little better.

But the good feeling didn’t last because the next day Nico snagged my Pringles again on his way past my cold-lunch table. “Knock it off!” I

snapped, swatting at his hand and missing by a mile.

“What are you going to do about it, gimp?” he scoffed. “Chase me down and take them back?” Knees spread wide, he started clomping his feet up and down and flopping his bent arms around like an imbecile.

My face burned like a marshmallow held too close to a campfire. I shot a quick, panicked glance around the table. A bunch of people had turned to watch, food held suspended in mid-air. Across from me, a girl named Hazel snickered behind her Cheetos bag, and it was like every sound in the cafeteria stopped but that one. An excruciating second passed, followed by another. Then all two hundred kids were on their feet, pointing at me, and shrieking with laughter.

*Flawed. Failure. Less than. Loser.* Heart pounding, I blinked hard to chase away the daymare, then dropped my gaze to my PB&J as the normal cafeteria buzz rolled back over me. I let out a shaky breath.

“Didn’t think so, freak.” Nico scoffed. “Too bad though, ‘cause everyone loves a good laugh.” Then he sauntered away, the crunch of Pringles trailing behind him.

The rest of the afternoon, I felt like poo on a shoe. For the first time ever, the clock on the classroom wall was way more interesting than a chemical vs. physical changes of matter lesson in science or even a subject-verb agreement game during English. I wished I could put a saddle on the minute hand and spur it into a gallop. I couldn’t get to my bedroom, and *The Call of the Wild*, fast enough. Then I’d read myself to smithereens.



The next morning, my body felt so heavy I could hardly drag myself up the stairs. When I shuffled into the kitchen, Mom looked up from the griddle and nearly blinded me with a smile. “Good morning.”

I scowled. What the heck was so good about it? Not this horrible stomachache I’d woken up with. Not Mom’s whole-grain, mashed banana,

and walnut pancakes. *Gag*. And definitely not the fact it was another school day.

I rubbed her smile from my eyes. “I’m going to eat hot lunch today.”

Mom flipped a pancake then gave me the side-eye. “You hate hot lunch.”

“No, I don’t,” I snapped, crossing my fingers behind my back.

“Spencer . . .” Mom said my name in her “where were you the night of the murder” voice.

“The menu says pizza today. I *love* pizza.” I widened my eyes and nodded for effect. Crust made from recycled shoe boxes. Lumpy, green cheese. Grease so deep on top you needed a scuba mask to eat it. *Ugh. I’d rather eat a rat carcass.*

“Okay . . .” Mom said in her “I believe you as far as I can throw you” voice, but I went to school with money in my backpack.

At lunch that day, I sat at the far end of the hot lunch table nearest the aide’s table and within smelling distance of the fumes that wafted from the toxic sludge in the bottom of the garbage barrels. Nico didn’t find me, and by the end of the school year, I swear that spot bore a permanent imprint of my butt cheeks from hiding out there every day.

Too bad avoiding the Mosquito wouldn’t prove as easy as greasy pizza.

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