

# Monster Boy

By David Alan Armstrong

Tommy lit out of the yard on his bike with afterburners in full throttle. He shifted to high gear on his three-speed Schwinn and cruised at top speed by the time he rounded the corner onto the boulevard. He had promised to be at Scott's house by three o'clock so they could go to the park for a game of three-flies-up. They only had an hour to play before Scott had to go to a cousin's birthday party. The cousin was turning five, and to a ten-year-old, a little kid's party was cruel and unusual punishment of the highest order. But Scott's parents insisted the whole family go. So, Tommy and Scott had limited play time, and now Tommy left his house late, thanks to his little sister's "emergency" wash-the-dog-right-now escapade, in which he got roped into being the "wrangler"—but that is a story for another day. Going to Scott's house meant an hour of freedom from chores, homework, and the smell of wet dog.

Tommy lived six blocks west of Keller Elementary. Scott lived southeast of the school by another five blocks. Though he had walked from school to Scott's house twice since they started fifth grade a month ago, he had not traveled the entire route between their houses by himself. Mom picked him up in the car both times. He planned today to ride his usual route to the school and then follow the familiar streets to Scott's house. Now that he was late, he didn't want to waste the time going the long way around. Better to make a beeline straight to Scott's. So, instead of crossing over Woodruff Avenue and turning left toward the school, Tommy stayed on Harvey Way.

This neighborhood did not look familiar, and he had not paid attention to the streets when Mom had driven. He did not recognize the names on the signs at each intersection, but he figured when he left home he would just 'recognize' Scott's street. Now, none of the streets looked anything like Scott's street. He needed to find a single tall palm tree growing from the yard of the house directly across from Scott's. Glancing south up each street as he passed, he saw no palm trees.

A little worried now that he had missed the street, Tommy turned and rode more slowly up Harvey Way, scanning each street carefully as he passed. Fretting about lost time, he forced himself to stop at a corner. *Don't panic. You can figure this out. Just think. I still don't get why Mom won't let me have a phone.* He pictured himself walking with Scott. They had left the school, walked three short blocks along Harvey Way, turned right, and walked...*two blocks!* That

was it! Scott's street was not directly off of Harvey Way. Tommy had to go another long block south before he would get to Scott's street.

Relief washed over him. He wasn't lost. He just needed to pick a street, go south a block, and then start looking for the palm tree again. He'd be at Scott's in no time.

He looked up a quiet, tree-lined road with green front yards, driveways, and stucco houses just like his. He jumped on his bike and started pedaling.

He picked up speed and confidence as he reached the midpoint in the block. Approaching a gray stucco house with white trim, his eye caught a movement on the shaded front porch. A tall figure in a dark blue t-shirt and jeans leaped from the top step, landed on the cement walkway, and ran toward the street. A blood-curdling scream tore the air as the monster gnashed his teeth and stared directly at Tommy with wild, bloodshot eyes. A hideous snarl screwed up the wild face. The creature rushed at Tommy, who braked hard to avoid crashing into it. The screaming banshee pulled up just short of colliding with Tommy's bike, and with flailing arms and stamping feet, roared, "What're you doing on my street, punk?"

The shriek nearly knocked Tommy over. Fighting to keep his balance, he stared directly into those crazy, hate-filled eyes, saw the red blood stain smeared around the snarling mouth, the vicious bare teeth, the neck muscles straining with rage. Tommy's heart leaped into his mouth, and his vision blurred around the edges as his eyes focused on the hideous face. He could only keep his feet on the pedals and force the bike to inch forward.

"I'm going to kill you!" the creature roared.

Tommy pressed harder on the pedals, and the bike steadied and picked up speed. A quick glance over his shoulder showed the monster now in the middle of the street, clenched fist shaking in rage. "I'm going to kill you! You hear me, punk? If you ever come on my street again, if I ever see you, I'll rip your arms off and beat you with the bloody stumps. You hear me?"

The hysterical screaming faded as Tommy gained speed and opened the distance between him and the horrible thing that wanted to eat him. Pedaling harder than he had ever pedaled in his life, he rounded the corner at the end of the street and streaked through two intersections before his legs would let him slow down. The rushing wind dried the tears on his checks. When he came to a stop, his hands trembled, and his knees threatened to give way. He scrunched his eyes closed to try to block out the horrific face, but he couldn't make the image go away. Wild eyes haunted him, the stained mouth shrieked at him, and the wild-haired creature towered over him. Tommy gasped for breath until his chest stopped heaving. He looked back, afraid the terrible figure might emerge around the corner and run after him. The creature didn't show himself. Tommy figured he was safe.

Now, though, he really was lost. How far had he ridden? Which direction was the school? Which way to Scott's house? He didn't dare turn around and approach the terrifying street-of-death again. His best bet was to go straight home. *I may have to call Scott and tell him I couldn't make it. I'm in no shape to play ball now anyway.* If he could just ride until he hit Woodruff Avenue, he would have his bearings and could make it the rest of the way home. He

pedaled slowly west for two blocks until the green Woodruff sign came into view at the next intersection.

Fifteen minutes later, he parked his bike in the garage. “Did you have fun?” Mom called out as he hurried through the house. He could not force himself to answer. Instead, he shut his door, dropped on his bed, and tried to erase the whole horrible memory. Still, the death mask loomed behind his eyes, and the shrieks rang in his ears until he finally fell asleep. He completely forgot about calling Scott.

The next morning being Monday, Tommy got up, dressed, ate a bowl of Cap’n Crunch, brushed his teeth, and waited impatiently by the door for his little sister. If she didn’t show up in less than a minute, the other kids on the block would walk on without them, and he would have to walk with his second-grade sister the whole way to school. He shuddered at the thought. With only seconds to spare, Mom appeared with Sis in the living room doorway, still pulling a brush through her long, dark hair. “You two have a good day at school,” Mom said with no hint of a smile. Apparently, the morning prep routine for Sis had been more arduous than usual. “And don’t dawdle on the way. I don’t want to sign any more tardy slips.”

Sis trudged to the front door, flashed a mischievous smile at Tommy, and stepped out onto the porch. Tommy pulled the door shut behind them just as a gaggle of kids rambled along the sidewalk in front of the house. He jumped from the top step onto the walkway and trotted to catch up with the group, motioning to Sis to hurry up or get left behind. Relieved to be in the pack and not stranded with his sister, he joined the noisy banter for the six-block excursion to the school yard.

The group met the elderly crossing guard and swarmed across the street onto the playground. Tommy broke ranks and headed straight for the slamball court, where he knew Scott waited for him. He spotted his blond-haired friend in the “king’s square,” the place of honor achieved by beating everyone else on the court and advancing one square at a time. Tommy and Scott battled each other to gain and then defend the king’s square at practically every recess and lunch period. No one in the fifth grade could beat them.

Tommy stood just outside the circular outer boundary of the court and waited. Scott got “out” only when he *intentionally* missed the ball or punched it over the line into one of the other squares—only when he wanted a rest. Tommy hoped his friend would throw the game so they could talk for a minute, but Scott stayed in it to win until the bell rang. One of the other boys gathered up the ball, and Scott trotted over to Tommy.

“What happened yesterday? Where were you?” Scott asked as the two headed toward the door in the middle of the two-story, mustard yellow school building. Kids funneled into the door from all directions with deafening chatter.

With no time to recount the story of the street-of-death, Tommy answered, “I’ll tell you at recess. You won’t believe it.” Moments later, the two boys stood with the rest of their class to recite the Pledge of Allegiance, and then the school day officially got underway.

The bell rang to start first recess, and the boys slammed their books and leaped from their seats to join the kids thronging the hall and bursting out onto the playground. Tommy could hardly wait to break free of the crowd and the noise to tell his tale. The two popped through the double doors and headed straight for the slamball court.

Tommy wound up to start his death-defying story when a familiar head of shaggy brown hair loomed ahead of him in a crowd of sixth graders, stopping him dead in his tracks. His heart revved until he thought it would bust out of his chest. His mouth went dry, and sweat popped out along the hairline and the back of his neck. His muscles froze, feet riveted to the asphalt, knees trembling. The gang of sixth graders moved on, the head of brown hair swiveling from side to side as the boy bantered with his companions. Tommy recognized the silhouette. No doubt he stood a few yards from the monster boy who had tried to kill him. That inhuman creature lurked right here in his school on his playground! Tommy's stomach lurched. Literally. He knew he would throw up in front of everyone.

Thankfully, the red-eyed monster did not spot him. Tommy turned and scurried back toward the entrance to the building. Scott's voice reached his ears. "Hey, Tommy, where're you going?" But he did not break stride or turn around. If he showed his face and the creature saw him, he would be a dead man. His only hope—get inside the building and stay as far away from the sixth grade classrooms as possible.

The classroom door stood open, and he peeked inside. Mrs. Schrottenboer sat behind her desk in the front corner of the room, her head down, shuffling through papers. He couldn't go inside without raising his teacher's attention, but standing in the deserted hallway left him exposed and vulnerable. His appearance in the hall without a pass broke a major rule, and if a teacher or a hall monitor caught him loitering, he would get a detention slip. He spotted the boy's restroom just down the hall. If he could slip past the open classroom door and make it to the bathroom without being seen, he would be safe, at least for the remainder of the recess period.

A slow, stealthy walk past the door would be less detectable than a sudden rush, so stepping carefully, heel to toe on the rubber-soled sneakers, holding his breath, he padded noiselessly across the yawning doorway. Safely beyond Mrs. Schrottenboer's line of sight, he scurried to the sanctuary of the restroom. Now, he only needed to wait.

On the playground, a fifteen-minute recess period flew by in a heartbeat. Standing alone in a corner of the boy's restroom, fifteen minutes crawled like fifteen eternities. Without a phone, Tommy estimated the wait. He figured he burned up maybe four minutes heading out to the playground, encountering the killer beast, backtracking into the building, and getting into the restroom. So, eleven minutes to go. That's about the length of a scene on a TV show between commercials. If he played a segment of his favorite show in his head, he should have a good idea of when the bell would ring to end recess.

He could hardly focus on the sitcom in his head. Other thoughts interrupted. Was Scott looking for him? What if his buddy found him cowering in the bathroom? What could he say? He had planned on telling Scott about yesterday's attack of the creature from the black lagoon,

but he had second thoughts now. Ashamed of being afraid, this morning just proved his cowardice. He didn't want Scott to think he was weak. Who wants to be best friends with a kid who can't stand up for himself? If he told his dad about the incident, he would just get a lecture about being tough. He could tell Mom, but she would jump into the car and drive to the kid's house and raise all kinds of heck, which would probably just backfire and make the monster even meaner. He could tell Mrs. Schrotenboer, but this wasn't really school business. And like Mom, his teacher would probably just make things worse. No, his best bet was simply to stay away from his nemesis, keep out of sight, and give him no chance to attack. Just thinking of those wild eyes and snarling lips made Tommy's stomach do flip flops.

Another problem—the two sixth-grade classrooms were at the far end of the hall on the ground floor. Tommy's fifth-grade classroom was in the middle of the building. And the bathroom in which he hid was between the two. When recess ended, Monster Boy would pass both Tommy's classroom and the restroom to get to his class. If Tommy were in the hall when the kids came in from recess, Monster Boy would surely see him. If he stayed in the restroom until the last kids straggled into class, he would be tardy. He didn't need another tardy notice sent to his house. He devised a plan—run across the hall and to his room just as the bell rang so he could duck inside before Monster Boy entered the building. But when would the bell ring? How long had he already been standing in the bathroom? It had to be any minute now.

He resolved to stand just inside the bathroom door and wait for the bell. When he heard it, he would bolt across the hall to his classroom before anyone had a chance to come into the building. Assuming Monster Boy hung out at the far end of the playground with the other sixth graders, he would need nearly a minute to get to the building, plenty of time for Tommy to get to his desk. In case Monster Boy happened to look into Tommy's classroom as he passed, Tommy would put his head down, so the enemy wouldn't see his face.

Tommy took his position by the bathroom door and waited, his breath coming in shallow gasps as he anticipated the sprint across the hall. Surely the bell could be no more than a couple of minutes away. He tried to think of two TV commercials to judge the time, but he could not get his mind to focus on anything but Monster Boy's hideous face. Sweat slicked his palms, and his toes twitched in his shoes.

The bell shrilled throughout the building and sounded across the playground. Tommy pictured the crowds on the playground turning en masse like little robots, shuffling toward the building's double doors. He exploded through the door, dashed across the hall, and leaped into his classroom.

The teacher's head jerked up from the papers on her desk. "Tommy?"

"Hi," Tommy responded breathlessly as he darted for his desk in the middle of the first row.

Mrs. Schrotenboer pursed her lips and drew her brows down. "How did you get here so quickly? You're usually one of the last to come in."

A half dozen replies flitted through Tommy's brain before he landed on, "Just anxious to get to work." He dropped into his seat and raised the lid of this desk, pretending to rummage around for a pencil.

"Hmm." Mrs. Schrotenboer paused. "I like this change in you... I think," she said.

The other kids began entering the room, still chattering with playground excitement. "Shhh," Mrs. Schrotenboer hissed. The noise abated. Tommy dropped the lid, folded his arms across the desktop, and rested his head on his forearms. He felt a tap on his shoulder and heard Scott whisper, "Where were you?" Without lifting his head, Tommy shrugged his shoulders and remained silent.

Tommy felt safe at the moment, and so did his secret, but he didn't trust the feeling. Lunch period loomed ahead, and then afternoon recess. His stomach tied itself in knots. This was going to be a long day.

When the lunch bell rang, Tommy took his time putting the books in his desk, folding papers, and examining Mrs. Schrotenboer's insect collection until the sound of chattering voices and pounding feet in the hallway faded into silence. Scott stopped to wait for him, but Tommy waved him on, saying, "Meet you later." His friend shrugged and disappeared down the hall. Hoping he would find the building deserted, he stuck his head out the door to make sure the path had cleared and then hurried out the double doors and along the walkway to the cafeteria building. Last in line, he kept a sharp eye for the tall kid with the tousled brown hair. He scanned the entire lunch room but saw no sign of Monster Boy. Maybe the kid brought a sack lunch and ate it outside. Or maybe he had ducked under a table, just waiting for Tommy to emerge from the lunch line to attack him. The knots in Tommy's stomach wrung all the appetite out of him. The cafeteria left him too exposed. Monster Boy would find him for sure. Better skip lunch and find a safe place to hide until the lunch period ends. He dropped out of line and exited the building the way he came in.

But where to go? He had forty-five minutes to kill. *Kill or be killed.* He shuddered at the thought. He didn't want to go back into the classroom building again. A hall monitor would catch him for sure. The thought of breathing the fumes of the restroom for nearly an hour nauseated him. The janitor's shed, past the end of the main building, next to the fence—no one ever ventured to that part of the schoolyard. Technically, the shed was off limits, but he didn't want to go inside the shack, he just wanted to sit behind it in the shade.

Keeping his eye on the playground for any suspicious movement, he hurried along the sidewalk till it ended, then followed the gravel path to the shed and slipped around the corner. Out of sight of the playground, he leaned against the rough wood wall and slumped slowly to the ground. Sitting on the concrete slab, his head tilted back against the shed, provided no comfort, but at least he felt safely invisible. His stomach growled, but fear overpowered the hunger. He longed to be out on the slamball court with Scott and the other kids, but who knew where

Monster Boy might be lurking, waiting, watching, eager to pounce, knock his teeth out, break his arm. Monster Boy might even have a knife.

The sounds of the kids at play drifted into Tommy's ears, tantalizing and torturing him. Trapped like an animal, afraid to show himself, afraid to be caught, he now knew what the little brown finch must have felt like when it accidentally flew into the open back door of his house last summer. The thing fluttered wildly from room to room, banging into walls, lunging at the windows. Mom chased the bird for ten minutes with a broom trying to shoo it toward the open door. "Oh dear, the poor thing," she repeated over and over again as she swatted at it. "It's going to die of a heart attack." Tommy felt his own heart pounding now, and he wondered if he would die of a heart attack. The bird finally found its way out and disappeared. How could Tommy find his way out of this mess? What open door could he fly through?

Purgatory ended when the bell rang to end the lunch period. Figuring Monster Boy played at the far end of the playground with the rest of the sixth graders, Tommy sprinted from the shed to the classroom building to get inside before the enemy arrived. He rushed through the double doors but then had to walk agonizingly slow down the hall to his classroom—running in the halls would earn him a detention slip. He arrived first in class again, flopped into his seat, and put his head down, panting from exertion and anxiety. Sitting at her desk, Mrs. Schrottenbohr dropped a soda can into the metal trash can next to her desk. Tommy flinched at the sharp clang.

"Tommy?" Her voice registered surprise. "That's twice in a row you've come in ahead of the rest of the class. Are you all right?"

Tommy kept his head on his forearms and inhaled deeply. Tears began to sting his eyes. Desperately he wanted to tell his teacher about Monster Boy, but he couldn't tell her about his fear. He didn't want to be a chicken boy. Only chickens tattled. He had to keep it a secret until he could solve it himself. "I'm okay, just tired," he replied.

"How did the slamball tournament go today?" she asked.

"Great, just great," he said, his head still buried.

"Well, that's good," she said. She shuffled papers on her desk, and kids started coming into the room and finding their desks.

Scott nudged Tommy's shoulder as he walked up the aisle. Tommy looked up as his friend raised his hands, shrugged his shoulders, and mouthed, "What the heck?" Tommy shook his head and opened the lid of his desk to rummage for a pencil. He had to figure out an alibi. He couldn't keep dodging their regular routine without Scott getting suspicious.

When the afternoon recess bell sounded, and all the kids jumped out of their seats and headed for the door, Tommy had his excuse ready for Scott. Tommy paused at the classroom door and let the rest of the students exit, Scott fidgeting next to him like a thoroughbred ready to jump the gate. "Come on, we gotta get out there, the game'll start without us. We'll have to work all the way up to the king square from scratch. Why are you just standing here?"

"I didn't want to tell you this," Tommy began in a whisper, peering over Scott's shoulder at Mrs. Schrotenboer shuffling papers at her desk. "But I got on 'F' on my history test, so I'm not allowed to go out for recess."

"What the—" Scott practically shouted.

The teacher's head popped up.

"Shh," Tommy hissed, motioning with his hand to keep it down. "Nobody's supposed to know. I don't want people thinking I'm stupid."

"Well, they're gonna start wondering what's going on and why you're not at the game."

"Just tell them I'm doing a special project for the teacher."

"Yeah, like you're the teacher's pet," Scott said, his eyes rolling.

Tommy shook his head. "Whatever, just keep it low, ok?"

"Yeah, okay," Scott said with a shrug.

"Go on, don't worry about me. I'll catch up with you after school."

"All right." Scott bolted out the classroom door and scurried to the double doors that led to the playground. When he disappeared, Tommy ran for the shed. The suffocating strap around his chest loosened once he ensconced himself in the shadow of the little building. Monster Boy would never think to look for him here. Getting from the building to the shed and then back after recess set his nerves on edge. Exposed, practically naked, he would have to scutter down the sidewalk. But behind the shed, he felt almost as safe as being at his desk in the classroom. He could breathe free, and that felt good.

The day ended much like lunch and recess, with Tommy sitting nervously in his seat until the classroom emptied and the hall quieted.

Mrs. Schrotenbohr, eternally shuffling papers at her desk, looked up as Tommy rose from his chair. "Are you sure you're okay, Tommy?"

Tommy looked out the window at Scott waiting for him by the jungle gym. "I'm fine. No problems at all. Just needed to finish up that last little thing. Always so much to do." He painted on a smile and nodded his head.

"Well, okay, see you tomorrow," the teacher said with a faint smile.

Tommy checked up and down the hall, satisfying himself it was empty. He scrambled out to where Scott waited. At the far end of the playground, a group of bigger kids played kickball. The lady from the park across the street supervised an intramural kickball game after school on Mondays. From this distance, he couldn't tell if Monster Boy was among the players. Probably not, but just to be safe, he started to walk around the main building rather than across the playground.

"Hey, where're you going?" Scott asked.

"Home," Tommy called out over his shoulder.

"But home's that way," Scott said, pointing across the playground to the gate in the chain link fence they always used.



“I want to go a different way today,” Tommy said, still walking toward the far end of the building.

“Whatever,” Scott said, trotting to catch up. “Something’s weird.”

“You’re weird,” Tommy said and punched Scott’s shoulder.

“No, really. Something’s weird,” Scott frowned.

“Forget about it. It’s nothing. I just have to work off this ‘F’ thing.”

“You sure?”

“Yeah, no big deal. But keep it between us, right?”

“Yeah, sure,” Scott said with a shrug.

They split up at the corner of Harvey Way. Tommy felt more vulnerable alone, and he kept watch over his shoulder the whole way home. The walk seemed longer than usual. Exhausted, he trudged into the kitchen, his stomach growling angrily. Mom stood at the sink, and he asked for a sandwich.

“This close to dinner? I don’t think so, young man. You can have an apple,” Mom said.

“But I’m starving,” Tommy pleaded.

“Didn’t you eat enough lunch?”

Tommy thought fast. “They had pizza in the cafe today. I hate their pizza, so I skipped it.”

“Hmmpf.” Mom put her hands on her hips. “Well, ok, half a sandwich. I don’t want you spoiling your dinner.”

She spread peanut butter and jam on a piece of bread, folded it, and handed it to Tommy on a paper towel.

“And the apple, too?” Tommy asked.

Mom pursed her lips and rolled her eyes. “Fine, an apple too. But you’d better eat all your dinner tonight. I’m not throwing away a half plate of food.”

“Thanks, Mom.” Tommy grabbed an apple from the fridge and, with the sandwich in the other hand, trotted off to his room. Peanut butter and jam never tasted so good.

No matter how many times he turned his pillow that night, the back of his head still sweat. Going back to school loomed like a specter of dread. Hiding from Monster Boy was one thing, but avoiding Scott’s questions and the teacher’s suspicions pumped his anxiety. Maybe he could fake being sick. It might work one day, but he couldn’t be sick every day for the rest of his life. He had to figure this out. He turned out the light on the nightstand and plunged into darkness. With his mind as dark as the room around him, his eyelids put on more weight than he could hold up, and sleep caught him.

On the walk to school the next morning, he let the rest of the group move ahead so he could think. He still had nothing as he passed through the playground’s chain link fence. Now he entered the danger zone. Monster Boy could be anywhere, watching for him, waiting to jump him and rip his arms off. He trotted to catch up to the knot of kids and positioned himself in the middle of the group, using them as human shields. Ten yards from the yawning double doors, he

could no longer resist the urge to break free from the sauntering bunch and run for it. He sprinted the remaining distance, ducked into the hallway, and scooted into his classroom. He opened the lid to his desk to hide his face in case Monster Boy walked by. Peeking over the edge of the lid, he glimpsed Scott striding through the door. Scott threw his hip into Tommy's shoulder as he walked up the aisle past his desk. Tommy looked up to see his friend's face twisted into a snarl. "Later," Tommy mouthed and ducked behind the lid again.

When the recess bell rang, Scott stood at Tommy's desk before he could get up. "What is wrong with you? You comin' or not?"

"I got stuff to do. I'll try to get out there as soon as I can, okay?" Tommy couldn't look his best friend in the eye.

"What stuff?" Scott said without budging.

"Just stuff," Tommy said, glancing around the room. "Go on. I'll catch up."

"You better," Scott said and headed for the door.

Tommy lingered until the sounds in the hallway died down.

"Outside, young man!" He jumped at the sound of Mrs Schrotenboer's voice behind him. "I'm leaving, and I have to close the door."

Tommy peeked up and down the hall to make sure the coast was clear before stepping out. The teacher followed and closed the door behind her. Tommy turned and headed toward the double-door exit.

"Tommy, wait." The teacher's voice came from behind him again. "Are you all right?"

"Oh, sure, just fine," he said as he stared at her shoes.

"You sure?" she said.

"Yup, all good," Tommy answered. He put on his biggest smile and looked up. He couldn't meet her eyes, but at least he could see her chin.

The teacher hesitated, one hand on her hip. "Well, all right." She turned and walked toward the teacher's lounge on the second floor near the sixth-grade classrooms.

Tommy hurried to the shady side of the janitor shed again. Scott would be hopping mad, but he couldn't help it.

Fifteen eternities later, anticipating the bell, Tommy waited by the double doors. He slipped inside as soon as he heard the clang, first in the classroom again, and assumed his heads-down posture at his desk. Apparently, Mrs. Schrotenboer did not hear him come in because she did not look up from the pile of papers on her desk. He did not see Scott come into the room. His friend must have gone up a different aisle, because he didn't stop or bump Tommy or anything.

Scott didn't come by Tommy's desk when the bell rang for lunch. Tommy waited until everyone left, then snuck out the door. A hand grabbed the back of his shirt and jerked him around. Certain that Monster Boy had figured out his class, Tommy covered his face, crouched down, and tensed his shoulders, shielding his underbelly, expecting a rain of blows to pummel him. All his hiding had been for nothing, and he would die right here in the hallway.

“What the heck is wrong with you?” came Scott’s voice. Tommy looked up between his splayed fingers to see his friend’s face—wide open eyes, raised brows, and a broad frown.

Tommy unfolded himself and dropped his hands, staring at Scott’s sneakers, unable to look his friend in the face. “I’m just . . . I mean, I’m . . . er, it’s this . . .” He stammered for an answer that would make sense without revealing the truth. Shame washed over him, threatening to drown him in humiliation. Tears sprang to his eyes, and he rubbed them with the heel of his hands, pretending to wipe dust out of them. He forced a cough to choke down the lump in his throat. This was murder, standing here with his best friend staring at him, and he could hardly control himself. He couldn’t take it anymore. He had to tell someone. As much as he hated being a chicken, if anyone would understand, it would be Scott.

“Don’t laugh, okay?” Tommy stammered, the tears still welling in his eyes.

“Laugh at what? What’s going on?” Scott’s voice echoed in the empty hall.

“Shh, not so loud.” Tommy peeked into the classroom. Mrs. Schrotenboer stared at an open book propped up on her desk. “Let’s get out of here. I know a place we can talk.”

Tommy led the way to the janitor shed, keeping a wary eye open for Monster Boy along the way. Safely in the shadow, Tommy sat down and leaned against the wooden wall. Scott plopped down next to him.

“What are we doing here?” Scott asked, his voice edgy. “This place is off limits.”

“I know. That’s why it’s safe.”

“Safe from what?”

Tommy drew a deep breath and exhaled slowly before plunging in. “Monster Boy.”

Scott frowned. “What is ‘Monster Boy’?”

“Not what. Who. He’s a sixth-grader, and he wants to kill me.”

Scott’s frown evaporated into a grin.

“You promised not to laugh!” Tommy sputtered.

“I’m not laughing. But this is a joke, right? Somebody wants to kill you?”

Tommy twisted to face his friend. “I’m serious. This big kid jumped me while I was riding to your house on Sunday. He tried to tear me off my bike and said if he ever saw me again, he’d kill me.” Tommy shuddered. “You had to be there. This guy looked vicious. I barely got away.” He clenched his fists and willed his eyes to not fill with tears.

“And that’s why you didn’t show up Sunday?” Scott’s grin melted into a frown.

“Yeah. And then, at first recess yesterday, I saw him. He was with a bunch of sixth-graders heading out to the playground. I ducked, and he didn’t see me.” Tommy dropped his head and slumped against the shed. “I’ve been hiding out ever since. I don’t wanna get beat up.” No matter how hard he tried, he couldn’t stop the tears this time, or his quivering chin.

Scott lowered his head and rubbed his jaw. Tommy knew that look—his friend was thinking. “You figure I’m chicken, right?”

Scott looked up. “No, I don’t think you’re chicken. Why’d he pick you?”

“I have no idea. I wasn’t doing anything, just riding down the street.”

“Have you told anyone about him?”

“No, just you.”

“You should tell an adult. That’s what my mom says about bullies. This kid’s a bully.”

“Well, I’m not telling anybody. I don’t want to be a tattletale *and* a chicken. Grownups will just make it worse.”

Scott nodded. “Yeah, I know what you mean. So what’re you gonna do?”

Tommy’s emotions subsided. Sharing his secret with his friend uncinched the band that had been crushing his chest. For the first time in three days, his head cleared. Still, clear did not mean genius. “I don’t know yet,” he replied.

“Hmm. Well, you can’t hide behind this shed forever.”

Tommy nodded and bit his lip. “No, I just need time to think. I gotta figure out how to stop him. He’s just so big and mean.”

Scott rubbed his chin. “If you can’t fight him, there’s gotta be something else.”

“But what?” Tommy shrugged his shoulders.

“I don’t know,” Scott said. “But, let’s at least find out who this guy is. We’ll figure something out. Tell me what he looks like, and I’ll do some investigating.”

Tommy described the wild eyes, snarling mouth, shaggy hair, and maniacal scream.

“Dude, are you sure you weren’t having some crazy nightmare?”

“Nope, he’s real, and he’s right here in our school. He’s out there on the playground right now.”

Scott grimaced. “All right. You stay out of sight. I’ll see what I can find out.” Scott got to his feet. “You don’t have anything for lunch?”

Tommy dropped his head and stared at his lap. “No. I’ll get a snack when I get home.”

“Dude, how can you do that? If I didn’t eat lunch, I’d drop dead before the last bell.”

“Yeah, well, getting killed by Monster Boy kinda spoils my appetite.”

“Gotcha’. Okay, I hope the caf is still open. I’ll get my lunch and bring you back an apple. Then I’ll do some scouting around. We’ll figure this out.”

A wide smile split Tommy’s face, the first time he had genuinely smiled since Sunday afternoon. “Thanks. You’re the best.” His face burned with embarrassment.

“No problem. See ya in a few.” Scott ducked around the corner of the shed and trotted away. He returned a few minutes later with an apple wrapped in a napkin, then disappeared again. The bell rang, and Tommy bolted from the shade and sprinted for the building, pausing only to drop the apple core into a trashcan on the way.

Back at his desk, his head on his forearms, a nudge rocked him gently. He looked up into Scott’s solemn face. “Found him,” Scott whispered, giving the thumbs-up. “Meet you at the shed at recess.”

Tommy sighed with relief as he put his head down again. With Scott’s help, he would find a way out of this disaster.

Recess began, and Scott left the classroom with the rest of the kids while Tommy stayed behind, tucked just inside the door until the hall grew quiet. Scurrying down the hall, he emerged into the sunlight and ran to the shed, where Scott waited in the shade.

"His name's Carl," Scott reported.

"You sure it's the right guy?"

"Yup, pretty sure. I talked to Matt. His brother's in sixth grade."

Tommy's chest tightened. "You didn't tell Matt about my secret, did you? I mean, he's cool and all, but I don't want my problem splashed all over the class. Ya know what I mean?"

"Nah, don't worry. I just told him I wanted to know about this big bully. Anyway, we found Matt's brother playin' kickball. I described your Monster Boy, and he knew right who I meant. Pointed him out to me playing left field, said he's a problem kid every which way. He's got detention pretty much every day. Nobody likes him, except the other guys in detention. They're a pack."

Tommy's heart leaped into his throat. He didn't have to watch out for one guy, he had to be on the lookout for a whole gang.

"Relax," Scott said. "They don't really hang out together except in detention hall."

Tommy released the air from his lungs. "Anything else?"

"According to Matt, this Carl kid has picked on other guys. So, you're not the first. He's just a mean jerk."

"But he hasn't killed anybody else?"

Scott grinned. "He's still walkin' around school, so I guess not. Or else, he's hidden the bodies real good."

Tommy smiled. "So, I'm overreacting?"

"Maybe a little. But I don't blame you. Nobody's talking about it, but if he's bullying other kids, they're all as scared as you."

"So, why am I the only one hiding behind the shed?"

"I don't know, maybe you're just the smartest. . . or the dumbest."

"Thanks a bunch."

"Just sayin'," Scott said with a shrug and a smirk.

The recess bell would ring any minute. Relief mixed with anxiety in Tommy's head. Monster Boy had a name, which made him somehow less ominous. Still, he was a mean kid, and he was terrorizing the younger grades. Tommy squared his shoulders. "Someone's gotta stop this guy."

"Yeah, good luck with that," Scott responded, shoving his hands into his pockets.

"Got any bright ideas?"

Scott raised his eyebrows. "Did you ever see the Karate Kid movie?"

Tommy nodded. "Yeah, so you think I should learn karate?"

"That's one idea," Scott said with a grin. "You could be a black belt in a couple or three years, take him out with one punch."

“Uh huh. And what do I do in the meantime, hide here all day every day?”

Scott’s grin faded. “You asked for an idea. You didn’t say it had to be a good one.”

“Sorry I wasn’t more specific. Any *good* ideas?”

Scott’s eyes scanned the shed wall. “I heard about this kid once who was being picked on, so he stuck a ripe banana in the desk of the guy who was bugging him right before Christmas break. When they came back to school two weeks later, the bully thought the rotten banana was dog poop. He screamed four-letter words all over the place and got sent to the principal’s office.”

Monster Boy’s face would explode if he found a pile of crap in his desk. The image piqued Tommy’s sense of vengeance, but it didn’t satisfy him. Still, he had to ask, “Did the kid stop being a bully?”

“I don’t know, but it’s a cool story.”

“We need something better. He’s gotta know it’s me doing it, and it’s gotta teach him a lesson.”

The jangling of the bell startled Tommy and made Scott jump. “Holy smokes! I gotta get back to the classroom before Monster Boy—”

“Talk less and run more,” Scott shouted, shoving Tommy past the corner of the shed.

Tommy scrambled to the double doors, merged into a flock of third-graders surging into the hall, and darted into class. He dropped, breathless, into his seat, having barely beat the sixth-grade crew heading for the stairs to the second floor. Did Monster Boy catch a glimpse of him ducking into the room? He put his head down but glanced up from time to time to see if a snarling face with bushy hair appeared in the doorway. The traffic in the hallway trickled away. Scott entered just as Mrs. Schrotenboer pushed her chair back to stand up. Tommy spread his hands as Scott approached and whispered, “Did you see him?”

Scott shook his head and shrugged.

It was a close call—too close. Tommy needed to keep his early warning system on red alert.

He had little time to think during the math lesson and the unending practice sheets that followed. Still, he felt confident he could come up with something brilliant, especially with Scott’s help. If the slamball champs could take on the whole fifth grade, they could take on one sixth-grade bully.

Class let out at the end of the day, and Tommy found Scott waiting by the building exit.

Scott checked the playground, gave the all-clear sign, and they sauntered towards the gate in the chain link fence. “Okay, so what’re we gonna do about Carl?”

Tommy had nothing, just shook his head. Desperation crept up on him and tied lead weights around his ankles, slowing his pace to a crawl.

Scott rubbed his jaw. “Like you said, it’s gotta be personal, and it’s gotta hit him square between the eyes. What’s a bully afraid of?”

That was no brain twister. “A bigger bully,” Tommy said.

“That’s what I was thinking,” Scott said, still polishing his jawbone. “So, this is kinda out there, but my Uncle Darren is a cop.”

“I didn’t know that.”

“Yeah, well, he’s not really a cop, he’s a security guard, but he’s got a badge, and he’s got handcuffs on his utility belt. He put them on me once. And he carries a can of pepper spray in a holster. He drives a car with a gold seal on the door and lights on top. I bet he would help. And he’s way cool. He’s like at level a hundred and forty-five in Mario Kart Tour. And you should see him smash an empty Mountain Dew can against his forehead!”

“Your uncle sounds pretty cool, but cops aren’t bullies, and your uncle isn’t a real cop,” Tommy said.

“Well, maybe not, but he sure looks like one in his uniform. To a jerk like Carl, he’d look just as scary as a real cop.”

“Hold on,” Tommy said, a light starting to dawn. “What if. . . what if your uncle pretended to arrest Monster Boy?”

“Yeah, I can see it. Handcuffs, flashing lights, a ride downtown, the whole bit. That’d scare the tar outta big bad jerk-boy.” Scott popped a grin, but then it faded. “What would Uncle Darren arrest him for?”

Tommy halted by the slamball court. “Yeah, great question. Even cool cops don’t arrest people for no good reason.”

“Yeah, guess not,” Scott said.

A phrase from a TV show he had watched last night popped into Tommy’s head. “Assault and battery.”

“Huh?”

A twinge of excitement broke through Tommy’s despair. “What if your uncle caught Monster Boy in the act?” The excitement grew. “What if he caught Carl actually beating somebody up? He could arrest him for assault and battery, read him his rights, haul him in, throw the book at him.”

Scott nodded slowly. “Okay, that makes sense. Only, who’s Carl gonna beat up, and how’s Uncle Darren gonna catch him doing it?”

Tommy took a deep breath. “Me. I’ll just have to face him, and then your uncle’ll nab him.” He swallowed the queasiness churning up into his throat. “Hopefully before Monster Boy does too much damage.”

Scott’s eyes brightened. “Oh, I get it. A sting.”

“A what?”

“You’re not the only one who watches cop shows on TV. I saw this show where the police wired this guy with a microphone and sent him into a restaurant to meet the bad guy and get him to confess. The crook got wise and pulled a gun. The police stormed in and arrested the guy on attempted murder chargers.”

“Yup, that’s what I mean. Do you think I’ll need a microphone?”

“Geez, I doubt it, as long as you can yell loud enough if something goes wrong.”

“Yeah, like if Carl pulls a gun on me.” Tommy’s stomach burned now like it was full of hot coals. Maybe this wasn’t the best plan after all.

Scott shook his head and shrugged. “Where’s he going to get a gun? Anyway, my Uncle Darren will be right there. Nothing’ll happen as long as you can duck good.”

The coals smoldered, but Tommy knew he had to do *something*. He expelled the air from his lungs. “Can you talk to your uncle tonight and get him to help?”

“Sure, no problem. So, where will you square off with Carl, and when’s the big event?”

Not on school property or on school time. No sense in risking detention or suspension on top of getting punched out. Neutral ground would be best. “I’m thinking the park—on Saturday—behind the baseball diamond backstop. There’s a whole row of bushes your uncle could hide behind.”

“Yeah, I like it.” Scott grinned. “Let’s make it high noon, like in the westerns.”

“Right. We have to get him there. Any ideas? I mean, *good* ideas?”

Scott rubbed his jaw, tilting his eyes skyward. “How about this? I’ll be the messenger. Carl’s not gunnin’ for me, so I can walk up to him at last recess on Friday and challenge him to meet you in a fair fight. I tell him he comes alone and you’ll be alone. You can settle this thing once and for all.”

Tommy stared at the ground, picturing the scene. “What if he says no?”

Scott grinned. “I’ll call him a chicken boy and get ready to run. He’ll show.”

Tommy rubbed his stomach where the fire threatened to burn a hole through his shirt. “Well, okay, I guess that’ll work. But you gotta make sure your uncle is gonna help before you say anything to Carl. I can’t fight him or he’ll kill me. Your uncle’s gotta be there.”

“No worries. I’ll make sure it’s all set. We can synchronize our watches Friday morning before we set the op in motion.”

“We’ll do what?”

Tommy shook his head, frowning. “Dude, don’t you ever watch war movies? That’s what the captain says when he tells the sergeant the plan of attack. ‘Synchronize your watches.’ The sarge says, ‘Roger that. Let’s put this op in motion.’ And the battle’s on.”

“Oh, okay, whatever. We’ll talk Friday morning before school, make sure everything is set.”

Scott gave a single nod. “Roger that.”

“So, tomorrow and Friday I’ll stay out of sight by the shed. We won’t have much of a plan if I’m dead before Saturday.”

Scott nodded as the pair left the school yard through the chain link fence. “Right, and I’ll cover for you at the slamball court so nobody gets suspicious.” They split up, and Tommy hurried home to get a sandwich and a soda to douse the fire in his stomach. Two more miserable days hiding in the shadows, but at least he had a plan. He hoped he could sleep tonight but doubted he could stop his brain from thinking about Saturday. This had to end soon or he’d have an ulcer.



Thursday's morning and lunch recesses went smoothly. No dangerous encounters, the minutes passing quiet and lonely behind the shed. Tommy had just settled into the shade for afternoon recess when a yellow kickball, the smooth leather kind used by sixth graders, rolled by.

*What's a kickball doing way over here? Maybe whoever lost it doesn't know it's here. Maybe I should toss it back into the playground.*

He stood and stepped toward the ball. His ears perked when he heard the pounding of feet, gravel crunching as someone galloped toward him. He flattened himself against the rough wooden wall, wishing with all his might the shadow would cover him and make him invisible.

The hurried feet came closer, and Tommy grew flatter against the wall. He felt naked in the shadow, unprotected, nowhere to run, nothing to hide behind. The shed changed from a barrier of safety to a trap. His brain told him to run to the other side of the shed, but his feet wouldn't move. Maybe, if he held perfectly still, the person coming for the ball would not notice him—it worked in the movies. He held his breath as the footsteps thundered around the corner of the shed.

A tall, lanky kid with bushy brown hair trotted to the fence and bent to pick up the ball. Tommy's eyes flared wide open. Of all the kids in the school who might chase down the loose ball, it had to be Monster Boy! Tommy's heart leaped inside his chest. The air in his lungs exploded, and his knees threatened to buckle. He tried to close his eyes, but he couldn't.

Every detail of the street of death rushed into his mind—the screeching voice, glaring eyes, snarling lips, clenched fists ready to tear him from his bike and beat him to the ground. Fear ripped at his pounding heart. Still, he could not tear his eyes from the monster's back.

Ball in hand, the vicious creature straightened and turned. The face, the eyes, the hair, the mouth—just as Tommy remembered him. No escape, no hiding, no invisibility cloak. Saturday's sting operation unraveled.

Tommy had to face his tormentor. Fists clenched, his whole frame tensed, ready for the impact. He may get his head beat in, but he would go down fighting. Angry heat rose in his face, and his knees no longer trembled with fear but with anticipation, ready to lunge, kick, strike with iron force. Breath came in quick, shallow pants. As soon as Monster Boy made a move, Tommy would launch into him with every ounce of strength he could muster.

The taller kid locked eyes with Tommy. One more second, one move, one flinch. . .

Monster Boy shrugged his shoulders and held out the ball. "This isn't yours, is it? I'm pretty sure it's mine. I saw it roll over here."

Tears of fury welled in Tommy's eyes. He sucked in a great breath, bracing for the next move.

"What the heck's the matter with you, kid?"

"I'm ready for you. Come on!" Tommy challenged, surprised by the power in his own voice.

Carl shook his head, turning around as if to see who was standing behind him. "Ready for what?"

Tommy mustered all his courage to stare straight into Monster Boy's eyes. But something was different. The face wasn't as he remembered it. A large bruise, blue and green, surrounded a bloodshot left eye. The left side of the big kid's face was swollen and discolored.

Monster Boy just stood there with the ball in his hands, a blank look across his battered face.

Tommy's fists relaxed as he blew out the pent-up breath. What happened to the monster who wanted to kill him? Didn't Carl recognize him?

The familiar snarl formed on Carl's lips. "What're you staring at, punk?"

Tommy tightened his fists as he raised his chin in defiance. "What happened to your face?"

Carl spit on the ground. "My old man punched my lights out. What's it to ya?"

Tommy summoned the image of a demon even more hateful and vicious than Monster Boy and tried to plaster the picture over his own father's face. It didn't fit. No matter how mad Dad might have gotten at him, Tommy couldn't imagine his dad's fist hurtling toward his face. "Your dad hit you?"

"Yeah, so what? He does it all the time. I got some licks in too. You got a problem?"

Tommy shook his head, the tension dissolving in his chest. "No, no problem, I guess."

"So, I'm takin' my ball." Carl started to walk away.

"Hey," Tommy called. "What did your teacher say about your dad hitting you?"

Carl turned and grinned. "Nothing. I told her I got into a fight with a junior high kid. I gave her the old line, 'Ya shoulda seen the other guy.'" He started off, then stopped and looked at Tommy. "What're you doin' here anyway? The shed's off limits. You're gonna get in trouble if a teacher catches ya here."

Tommy looked around and shrugged his shoulders. "Just getting some shade, I guess."

"Whatever, punk," Carl said. "Your funeral." Then he trotted past the shed and out of sight.

Rocking back against the wall, Tommy shook his head. His arms fell limp. Knees buckling, he plopped onto the gravel. What just happened? He had faced the monster, and. . . nothing. The enemy didn't even recognize him. *Have I been hiding for no reason? Skipping lunch and missing slamball for nothing? The jerk tried to kill me four days ago, and he doesn't even remember?*

Heat crept into Tommy's face and burned the tops of his ears. *I hate him! I could pound him into the ground for what he's done to me!* His breath caught, and he clenched his fists, raging power flowing into arms and legs. *I should chase that punk down and rip his face off!*

Jumping up, he shook with rage. *I gotta punch something.* He drew his fist to throw it against the shed wall but stopped himself—he wanted to punch Carl, not the wall. The shack would probably break his hand anyway. Someone had already broken Monster Boy's face. Tommy took a deep breath to dull the anger raging in his soul. *Yeah, actually, Monster Boy looked pretty bad. Still, the bully's got to be stopped. No one deserved to be driven like a rabbit into a hole.*

Tommy jumped when the bell rang. He started to run toward the building but caught himself. He didn't need to run anymore. He was free! Inhaling deeply, he savored the fresh fall air—fear-free air. He sauntered to the double doors, paying no attention to who might be

approaching from the playground. The anger faded into the clear afternoon sun, the thought of going back to the slamball court rose from the ashes.

The rest of the afternoon sailed by. At the last bell, Tommy rose to meet Scott, who grinned, giving the thumbs-up. "It's all set for Saturday. Uncle Darren will be there. He'll be on his lunch break, though. So, it's gotta be quick."

Tommy nodded but said nothing. The joy he expected didn't materialize. If Carl didn't remember him, the revenge would be . . . incomplete. He followed his friend outside.

"What's up?" Scott asked.

"I'm thinking," Tommy replied, looking away.

Scott stopped. "You're not chickening out, are you?" His face puckered into frown.

"No, it's not that. I hate that kid more than ever. It's just. . . well, I saw him today."

Scott's eyes flew open. "Dude, did he see *you*?"

"Yeah, he did. I even talked to him."

"You what?" Scott grabbed Tommy's shoulder and stared into his face.

"Funny thing is, he doesn't know who I am. I don't think he remembers a thing about Sunday."

"You're kidding!"

"Nope. In fact, he looks like he got his brains knocked out. I'm surprised he can remember anything." Tommy wanted to grin at his own joke, but it didn't feel so funny after he said it.

"You mean, somebody else got to him?"

"He said his dad hit him. His face was all black and blue, and his eye looked like it was going to fall out."

Scott blew air through his lips. "Wow. That's like. . . I don't know. My mom would say it's karma."

The two ambled toward the exit. "I don't know what karma is," Tommy said, "but he got beat pretty bad. I can't imagine my dad beating me up." A weight pressed on his chest.

"Me neither. But then, we're not Carl. His dad must be really rough," Scott said, rubbing his chin.

Tommy nodded. "Yup. I'm glad I'm not that kid for a bunch of reasons." They emerged from the building and sauntered toward the gate.

"So, are we still on for Saturday or not? What do you want to do?" Scott asked.

"I want to think some more," Tommy replied.

"Okay, you think all you want, but I gotta know before last recess tomorrow. I don't wanna start something we aren't gonna finish, and I don't want to waste my uncle's time. He's doing us a favor, ya know."

"Yeah, yeah, I'll figure it out. I just need to make sure we're doing the right thing."

"Well, it seems like the right thing to me, but you're the one who's gotta decide. Just don't leave me hanging." Scott punched Tommy's shoulder.

“No worries.” They exited the gate and parted for their homes. Tommy plodded slowly, the wheels turning in his head.

“Hey, Mom!” Tommy called out as he pushed the front door closed.

“In the kitchen, sweetie.” Mom stood at the sink peeling potatoes. A sandwich and an apple waited on the table, a glass of orange juice next to them.

Tommy sat down and chomped a bite of sandwich. “So, Mom, I’ve got a question,” he began.

“Don’t talk with your mouth full,” Mom said without turning.

He washed the bite down with a swig of juice and started again. “I have a question.”

“That’s better. Go ahead, I’m listening.” Mom reached for another potato.

Tommy had to phrase this just right so as not to reveal too much. “There’s a big kid at school—a sixth grader—who picks on smaller kids.” He paused for a reaction.

“Yes?” Mom replied, shoving the peeled potato under the faucet and plopping it into the pot on the counter.

Tommy pressed forward. “He’s really mean, this sixth grader. He likes to scare kids and threaten to kill them.”

Mom grabbed a towel and turned around. “What do you mean, he threatens to kill them?” she said, frowning.

“Well, maybe not really kill them, but beat them up, break their arms, bash their heads in, that kind of stuff.”

Mom’s mouth formed an O, and her eyes opened wide. “That’s terrible! A bully like that shouldn’t be allowed in the school. Someone should talk to that boy’s parents.”

“I don’t think his parents would listen,” Tommy responded, shaking his head. “And if someone ratted on him, I think he’d just get meaner.”

Mom paused as she folded the towel and laid it on the counter. “Has this bully been picking on you?” Her eyes locked onto Tommy’s.

“Oh, no, not me,” Tommy said, snatching another bite of sandwich and carefully studying the apple to avoid Mom’s gaze.

“I see,” Mom said. “He terrorizes *other* kids, friends of yours perhaps?”

Tommy swallowed. “Yeah, friends.”

Mom took a deep breath and let it out slowly. “So, you said you have a question.”

“Right. So, what makes a kid like that so mean?”

Mom folded her arms and leaned against the counter. “Well, sweetie, I think most bullies are mean because they’ve been bullied themselves. When they can’t beat the bullies in their own lives, they bully others who are smaller and weaker.”

Carl’s black and blue face flashed into Tommy’s mind. “Do you think Dad would ever punch me out?”

Mom's eyes flew open. "Heavens, no! What a question! Why would you ever think your father would do such a thing?"

"I think Carl's dad beats him up."

"Is that the bully's name—Carl?"

Tommy nodded.

"And why do you think his father beats him?"

"He has a really bad black eye, and he said his dad did it."

Mom's hand flew to her mouth. "Oh, my!"

"So, do you think Carl's dad is a bully?"

"Hmmpf." Mom puffed out her breath and put her hand on her hip. "If what you say is true, it certainly sounds like it."

"And you think that's why Monster Boy—I mean Carl—is a bully?"

"I wouldn't be surprised," Mom answered with a look that told Tommy to be careful about how he continued.

He worked on his sandwich, chewing leisurely and sipping juice between bites.

Mom waited, arms folded, while he finished. Tommy picked up the apple and rolled the stem between his thumb and forefinger, stalling, not sure if he should say more.

"Tommy, do you have more to tell me about Carl?" Mom's gaze skewered him with 'the look' he knew he could not escape.

Still fiddling with the apple, Tommy said, "Is it wrong to get back at a kid who's picking on you—I mean, picking on your friend?"

"Do you mean to get revenge?"

Tommy nodded. "Yeah, I guess so. How else do you stop a bully unless you give them a taste of their own medicine?"

Mom's eyes softened. "If he has a black eye, don't you think he's already had a taste?"

Tommy sighed. "I suppose so. But what if he won't stop?"

Mom turned back to the sink and picked up a potato. "What do *you* think?"

Tommy didn't expect to have the question thrown back at him. He offered the first thing that came to mind. "You could tell on him, get him in trouble. But like I said, it probably wouldn't work."

"You may be right," Mom responded as she peeled the potato. "Telling might not only make it worse for your friends, it might make things worse for Carl. Any other ideas?"

"I don't know. That's why I asked *you*."

"If you were being bullied and were so afraid that you felt like picking on other kids, what would make you feel better?"

*Monster Boy is afraid?* Tommy recalled the relief he felt when he finally confided in Scott. "Maybe talking to a friend?"

"Maybe. Do you know anyone who could be Carl's friend?"

Tommy puffed out his cheeks and expelled air. “That’s a tough one. I don’t think very many people like Carl. Even the other guys in detention hall don’t hang out with him.”

Mom picked up another potato.

“I can’t think of anyone. Wait a minute... Me? No way!” Just like Mom to come up with a wild idea to turn everything upside down. To start with, what sixth grader wants a fifth grader for a friend? And Monster Boy—even the kids who like him don’t like him. Mom can’t possibly think I’m going to be his friend.

Mom shrugged and dropped the potato into the pot. “Too bad. He might be a nice boy, if someone just gave him the chance. There’s good in everybody.” Mom picked up a potato and shaved off the peel.

Tommy took the apple to his room, but he couldn’t eat it. His stomach twisted at the thought that Monster Boy needed a friend.

At dinner he picked at his food and skipped dessert. That night, sleep flew out the window as Carl’s face intruded into his thoughts.

Tommy waited for Scott at the gate the next morning. “It’s off,” he said.

Scott frowned. “What do you mean?”

“The sting is off. It’s no good. I don’t want to arrest Monster Boy.”

“Dude, you can’t back down now. Uncle Darren is raring to go. He’s ready to kick Carl’s butt into next week.”

Tommy shook his head. “Carl’s got enough trouble without a mall cop hassling him.”

Tim pouted. “So, now what?”

Tommy pushed through the gate. “I’ve been thinking—you don’t beat a mean kid by being meaner.”

“So, we just let Monster Boy pick off the rest of the fifth grade, one by one?”

“No, I have a better idea.”

“Shoot him on sight?” Scott grinned.

Tommy rolled his eyes. “No. But I’m going to miss slamball at recess again. I’ll talk to you at lunch and tell you how it goes.”

“How what goes?”

“I’ll tell you at lunch,” Tommy replied. The tardy bell blasted, urging them into a quicker step into the classroom.

The English lesson dragged on forever, yet the recess bell surprised him. Tommy froze in his seat as the last kid bounded out of the room. *Come on, get up. You can do this.*

“Tommy.” He had not heard Mrs. Schrottenboer approach. “Are you going outside?”

Tommy unknotted his fingers and pushed himself up.

“Is everything all right? You haven’t been yourself all week.”

“I’m fine.” He forced a smile but couldn’t get his cheeks to move.

“If you need to see the school nurse—”

“Nope, I’m good, just got something to do.” His stomach lurched.

She considered him for a moment. “Well, whatever it is, I’m sure it’ll work out. Things always do.”

“Yes, ma’am.” He depended on it.

Tommy trudged to the far corner of the playground, keeping his eyes on the ground and rehearsing his speech. He wasn’t sure what he feared more, getting punched in the face or laughed at. The part of the plan he hadn’t thought through was how to approach Monster Boy. He couldn’t very well sidle up to the guy while he stood in the outfield waiting for a fly, and if Carl was up to kick, Tommy couldn’t just call time out and wave him over for a chat. He let out a sigh of relief when he saw Carl by himself leaning against the fence.

A gulp choked his sigh—this could get really awkward. Tommy stopped five feet from Carl. The boy didn’t look up, but Tommy could see the black eye shrouded by shaggy brown hair. Close enough to talk but far enough to duck and run. Tommy clenched his teeth and considered running before Monster Boy spotted him. He gave his head a quick shake, knowing he would never work up enough courage to try this again if he backed down now.

“Hey.”

Carl’s head jerked up, his eyes big with surprise but no recognition.

“You remember me?” Tommy asked.

Carl squinted. “The kid by the shed?”

“Yeah. Is that it?” Tommy stood his ground, encouraged that the bigger kid didn’t immediately pounce on him.

“What else you want from me, punk?” Carl sneered.

Tommy relaxed, but only slightly. “You don’t remember me from Sunday?”

“Nah, why should I?”

“You don’t remember a kid on a bike on your street in front of your house?”

“I seen lots of kids on bikes. I run ‘em all off. What’s the big deal?”

“Doesn’t matter, I guess.” Tommy blew air through his lips to release the tension in his chest. So, Carl jumps every kid that rides by his house? He ought to post a sign in his yard—Equal Opportunity Bully. Wimps Beware! *I’m such an idiot.*

Tommy wanted to walk away, but his talk with Mom stuck in his head. “Your dad really did that to you?” he asked, pointing at his eye.

Carl nodded.

“That sucks. I’m sorry.” That was the sum and substance of Tommy’s prepared remarks. Whatever happened next was on the fly.

“So, what do you care?”

“It’s just not right, that’s all.”

“Yeah, ain’t right, but it is what it is.”

Tommy rubbed his palms on his jeans. “Well, anyway, my friend Tim and me are going to meet up at the park tomorrow to play three-flies-up. We could use a third so we could have a pitcher. You want to come?”

Carl’s mouth dropped open. “What do ya mean?”

The rest of the fear drained through Tommy’s feet. “Just what I said. You want to play ball tomorrow?”

“What the—” Carl stared at the ground, then shrugged. “I suppose so. Why not? My ol’ man will be home tomorrow, might be good to be someplace else.”

Tommy nodded. “Meet us at noon at the ball diamond?”

“Sure, okay.” A faint smile crept into Carl’s features, not much different from a snarl with that black eye hanging over it, but still recognizable. “So, who’s the other kid?”

“Tim Mattz.”

“Never heard of him.”

“That’s okay, he’s heard of you.” Tommy grinned.

“So, what, I’m famous?” Carl matched the grin.

“Not exactly.”

“So, see ya tomorrow.” Carl gave a quick nod, the cool-guy equivalent of a wave.

Tommy turned.

“Hey,” Carl called. “Why me?”

Tommy said the first thing that came to mind. “Someone told me you might be good.”