

CHAPTER ONE

Boris is in a difficult situation, which means I am, too, but that's what happens when you're Boris Snodbuckle's best friend and number-one sidekick. Like two weeks ago when we snuck onto the roof of the school during a rainstorm to recreate Benjamin Franklin's lightning experiment. It got awkward when the police showed up, and ... well ... you get the idea.

Our current difficulties started when I suggested to Boris that we get a sip of water. Mr. Grisham, our gym teacher, had just announced a dodgeball game. Dodgeball is not kind to me. It tends to show off my lack of coordination and dread of getting smacked by a rubber ball. I hoped a bit of water would settle my nerves.

"I'm parched," I said to Boris.

We'd spent most of the class hanging out in the gym waiting for Mr. Grisham to get off his phone. He then sent us out to jog around the school a few times — for what Mr. Grisham said was track-and-field training. Boris and I went hard at it. Most everyone else walked. Boris is a bit of a fitness nut.

"Sure thing, Adrian. We might miss the first dodgeball game, though."

This was a risk I was willing to take.

"Mr. Grisham, can Adrian and I go get some water?" Boris asked.

"Okay, Buckle. Go for it. But hurry back. I want you boys in the first game," Mr. Grisham said. He offered us a wide grin, of the ear-to-ear variety. It made him look like an alligator — with a whistle around its neck.

He terrified me.

Boris put his hands on his hips. "Mr. Grisham, I know my name is kinda funny, but if you have to use a nickname, I go by the B-Ster."

I held my breath. As a gym teacher, Mr. Grisham has considerable influence among the athletic kids at Bendale Public School, and if he agreed to use the B-Ster, Boris's nickname prospects might improve.

A name like Snodbuckle practically begs for a nickname. Buckle is obvious. Unfortunately, Boris has been given some less flattering handles, such as Snod Bod, Buckle-Bottom, Snuckle-Buckle, Buckle Head and Belt Buckle. Snot-Buckle was popular in fifth grade, only to be replaced by the most hated name of all, Buckle Butt, which became all the rage last year.

My hopes were dashed when Mr. Grisham began laughing, hyena-like, for a very uncomfortable twenty seconds.

"That's a good one, Buckle," Mr. Grisham said, glancing at his phone. "Grab your water and get back here. We don't have a lot of time."

A lump formed in my throat — and a distressing gurgling feeling made itself felt in the bottom of my stomach. These were the first stages of dodgeball terror — but I kept it to myself. Boris had more important issues to deal with. As you can imagine, our classmates

took Mr. Grisham's comments as an invitation to shower Boris with insults.

Inspiration struck Robert Pinsent at just the wrong time.

"Let's call him the Smell-Ster, or maybe the Bore-Ster," he said to great laughter.

Boris is Robert's opposite. Boris has deep, dark black hair, which he wears short and brushed to the side, and is of medium height, not short but shorter than the taller seventh graders. Most remarkable are the Snodbuckle eyes, alive, intense, wise — taking everything in. For reasons unclear to me, however, his kindness, compassion, charisma and intelligence have not made Boris a popular kid at Bendale. That honor has fallen to Robert, who sits at the top of the social pecking order. He is taller than Boris, a tremendous athlete and his long, wavy blond hair and perfect white teeth are a stark contrast to Boris's sharper features. Perhaps Robert's most irritating quality is his ability to get whatever he wants — without working for it — without knowing much about anything — and with annoying consistency.

Robert recently declared his intention to run for president of the student council next month. I don't believe Robert cares about the school or his fellow students, so the reasons for his declaration escape me. I shudder to think of eighth grade with a person like him at the helm.

"How about Lob-Ster or Loch Ness Dump-Ster?" said Michael Beverley, my personal nemesis and lifelong foe. He had been riding Robert's coattails for years. He'd

recently decided to adopt the low-rider jean and baggy sweatshirt look to enhance his image as a tough kid, and as usual, he needed to add his two cents' worth.

Mr. Grisham's grin threatened to split his face in two.

"I really do need that water," I whispered to Boris.

Boris's shoulders slumped slightly. "Yeah, me too."

We left the gym to the sound of laughter ringing off the walls.

Boris held the door open for me.

"Do we have to play dodgeball every class?" he said.

"Most of the games are like target practice. I think Grisham likes to see Robert and his crew stomp us."

Robert's crew also included Wong, tall, broad-chested, always wearing a backward baseball cap and the fastest kid in school; Henson, a rather large, muscular boy for his age, as in twelfth-grade large, who I suspected might already be shaving; and Daniels, the shortest of the group, with wild red hair, a face full of freckles and a venomous personality. Together they were the best athletes in seventh grade, and Mr. Grisham often grouped them into one team.

"And did you see those guys hogging the swings again at recess?" Boris continued. "The little kids couldn't get near them. They've totally taken them over — almost every day. Mr. Hurley was on yard duty and I told him, but he said he was too busy working on his musical. I tried to talk to the Principal about it three times this week. He keeps saying he'll talk to me later."

I was hardly surprised Mr. Hurley couldn't help. He was the head of the drama department, and for most of the year he'd been working on what he told us was

going to be the most revolutionary, exciting, fantastic, magnificent play in the history of theater. I believe the working title is *Genghis Khan and Flipity-Dipity Rabbit — The Musical*.

The Principal's inaction was more distressing. Lately it's been very difficult to make an appointment with him to discuss serious school matters. Only last week he'd said, "Snodbuckle, seventh grade is over in three months. Then you just have to get through eighth grade and we're done. Let's say goodbye at your graduation and leave it at that."

It's impossible to know exactly when Boris and the Principal's relationship went off the rails. If pressed, I'd say it began in second grade when Boris was in his circus phase and tried to ride down the main school stairs on his unicycle. Boris never blamed him for his broken arm, but apparently the Principal got into some trouble with the school board and the insurance company, and since then he's remained convinced Boris is trying to ruin his career.

Nothing could be further from the truth. Admittedly, there have been a few incidents that have contributed to the Principal's aversion to Boris's company ... but back to the matter at hand.

Boris waved at the fountain for me to go first. "I don't wanna sound like a whiner, but things are messed up at Bendale. How many indoor recesses are we gonna have? It's almost two or three a week. We spend so much time in those classrooms, I think my head's gonna explode.

"I've been at Bendale for almost seven years," he continued, "and every year's the same. No running in

the schoolyard; we can't play in the field if it rains or if there's snow, as if we'll drown or freeze to death. Other than Ms. Crimpet, who practically does everything herself — and I guess Mr. Hurley, who does the school play — the teachers don't run any extracurriculars. The teachers give us detentions all the time. Nothing gets better. I'm sick of it."

I let him have his turn at the fountain.

School is more a question of survival for me than it is for Boris. Never having achieved what you would call "popularity" — or made what you would call "friends," except for Boris — I do not usually worry about those types of issues. He was right, though — about all of it, and especially about Ms. Crimpet. She helped with the Science Club, the school play, the Science Fair, the volleyball team, the Green Goblins Environmental Club, the cross-country team, the junior choir ... and I heard she was organizing the Kids for a Better Tomorrow Society.

That was about it for activities at Bendale.

"It's always been like this, hasn't it?" I asked.

"Well, it's not the way it should be. Why can't Bendale change? We have one more year here. I don't wanna waste it — life's too short. We gotta do something," he said.

"I guess ... but what?"

It wasn't a particularly helpful question, but it was all I could offer.

Boris took a final slurp. "Don't know, Adrian. But something. Nothing we've tried has worked. Remember Operation Toy Drive or Operation Healthy Eats?"

Both were excellent examples. In sixth grade, Boris tried to organize a toy drive at Christmas to help needy families. We collected a straw, two broken coffee mugs and a soccer ball — with a hole in it. But the low point might have been when Boris and I protested against the cafeteria’s selling fried food. We were pelted with french fries, hot dogs and burgers.

We made our way back to the gym. The door hadn’t closed completely. “Not everything is bad,” I said. “At least we won’t have to push the door open.”

I have a tendency to be overly serious. Boris has encouraged me to try to make the occasional humorous comment. I’m not sure I hit the mark this time. Boris raised his eyebrows and pursed his lips, but I didn’t get the kind of reaction that typically follows any joke from Robert or Michael ... or anyone else.

“We have to do something,” Boris muttered. “We can’t leave Bendale like this.”

Boris was in full deep-thinking mode, so I kept quiet and let him ponder — and for the briefest of moments let myself believe that maybe — just maybe — Boris would figure out a solution.

Because if Boris Snodbuckle can’t solve a problem — that problem can’t be solved.