

## CHAPTER 3: The Snowman

**A**fter Mom told me she had cancer last Thanksgiving, I went back to the family room but she stayed in the bedroom. I didn't see her for the rest of the night. I could hear her sniffing later that night when I went to bed, and she didn't have a cold. My mom is brave and strong and pretty, and she's a hard worker. She's a substitute teacher and sometimes she even teaches at my school. She's a fair and caring and enthusiastic and popular person and I'm really lucky she's my mom.

When she and I had that talk on the bed, my dad and my little brother stayed in the family room and didn't say anything. They just kept watching the game. When I came back out to the family room they still didn't say anything, like they had lost the ability to speak. Not that either of them talk that much anyway. They just kept watching the game even though it wasn't a very good one.

I think Dad already knew Mom was sick, maybe not this sick, but he knew something was wrong. Trevor must have known too because he stayed in the family room when I went to talk to Mom and when I came out he looked concerned but not surprised. He didn't even ask me what was wrong. And he's two years younger than me. Like I said, Trevor's more like my dad, he doesn't say too much but I know he feels things. I'm close to my dad, and to Trevor, but my mom and I have a



sort of special bond.

When I went back out to the family room I was sort of in a daze and I just sat there for a few minutes not talking and not watching or even listening to the game. After about fifteen minutes I got up and left. I didn't tell Dad or Trevor or Mom where I was going but they all knew I was upset so they didn't bug me. They let me go, which normally wouldn't happen.

I felt numb as I walked out of the house. The thing is, I was just finally accepting the fact that my grampa was really gone, and now I had to face the fact that my mom might leave me too. And as much as I loved Grampa Jack, this news was even harder to take. I was mad and sad and scared at the same time. I didn't know what to do, so I just put on my coat, walked outside, picked my bike up off the front lawn and took off down our sidewalk.

After a few minutes outside I wasn't numb anymore, it was too cold for that. I didn't know where to go so I just rode around the neighborhood for a while. The streets were mostly plowed, but there was still quite a bit of snow on the ground from the storm we had two days before. No one was out because it was Thanksgiving. You could smell turkey cooking everywhere and there were extra cars parked in the driveways and on the streets that must have belonged to extra family members and friends who were visiting the neighbors for the holiday, but outside it was quiet and it freaked me out. It was like a scary movie. Holidays get weird when you're by yourself.

So I started riding away from the neighborhood, and before I knew it I was miles from home. I eventually found myself down at the Little League baseball park, a place where I've always felt comfortable and happy. The ballpark, or "The Yard" as some of the guys like to call it, is a few miles away from my house across a couple of busy streets and then down a steep, twisty gravel road with lots of tall trees and thick brush on both sides and over some railroad tracks. It's my favorite place to be in the spring and summer, but as I found out last Thanksgiving it's different in the winter.



## SNOWMAN ON THE PITCHER'S MOUND

As I rode up to the field where I had played so many baseball games and had so much fun, I realized how different baseball fields are in the winter. The place reminded me of a stray dog. It looked sad and lonely and in need of attention. The bases were gone, except home plate, which is permanent, and the concession stands were all closed and padlocked. All the chalk lines on the first and third baselines and the batter's box and the on-deck circle were gone, there were no numbers on the scoreboard, and there were weeds, big gnarly ones in center field and in the dugouts. Some of the weeds were almost as tall as the little eight-year-olds who play two fields down.

But the weirdest part about being down at the Little League field that day was seeing a snowman on the pitcher's mound. It just didn't seem right that a snowman was standing on the spot where I used to pitch. I couldn't even see the rubber on the mound because of that stupid snowman. And I usually like snowmen. It just felt wrong. I've been a pitcher since my first year in Little League when I was eight, and if there is one time and place where I feel the happiest and the most in control and confident about everything, it's when I am standing on the pitcher's mound during a game. That's when I feel most like myself. But that day when I went to The Yard, it was the total opposite. It was like I had no control, like everyone and everything was turning its back on me, even that snowman.

What a lousy Thanksgiving this turned out to be, I thought to myself. There I was, alone and freezing at The Yard, a place where I always had so much fun. I didn't feel like I had much to be thankful for. I just kept thinking about Mom. I wanted to scream but I didn't in case someone was watching, which they probably weren't. I felt sad and mad and helpless and I was scared that another person I cared about was sick and might die and I was angry that there was nothing I could do to change that. I actually felt sick to my stomach.

Even though I was shivering a little, I kept sitting there on my bike for at least an hour, balancing myself by sticking my gloved fingers through the fence and holding on. As I breathed in the cold air and



breathed out the steam, I stared at the snowman for a long time, and I know I shouldn't have been mad at him, but I was. As I stared at his charcoal eyes I thought about all the people who were probably still watching the football game in their warm houses and about that piece of pumpkin pie I really wanted. And then I realized that from The Yard you can hear the cars passing by on the interstate, which isn't that close, it's up the hill and through some trees.

You can hear the interstate from my house, too, if the window is open like it is tonight. The cars at The Yard that day sounded just like they do tonight. I could hear them easily. But until last Thanksgiving Day I didn't know you could hear the cars on the interstate at all from the baseball fields, because you can't in the spring and summer. There's way too much noise and activity. There's too much life.

In spring and summer The Yard comes alive with tournaments and banners and announcements on the loudspeakers behind and above home plate and Sno-Kones and kids and parents and hot dogs and mustard and bubble gum everywhere and you can hear the bubbles popping and the umps yelling "Stee-ri-ke" and "Batter up" and the coaches and parents yelling at the umps and the kids chanting "Hey, batter, batter... swing!"

But in the winter The Yard is like a cemetery. The difference is people actually go to the cemetery in the winter to pay their respects. No one goes to The Yard in the winter to pay any respects. Some kids play in the snow there, that's how that snowman got there, but it's just a vacant lot in the winter, it isn't a ballpark. When you look out at a baseball field with a snowman on the pitcher's mound and weeds in the outfield it's just depressing. It doesn't seem like there will ever be baseball and good times again.

