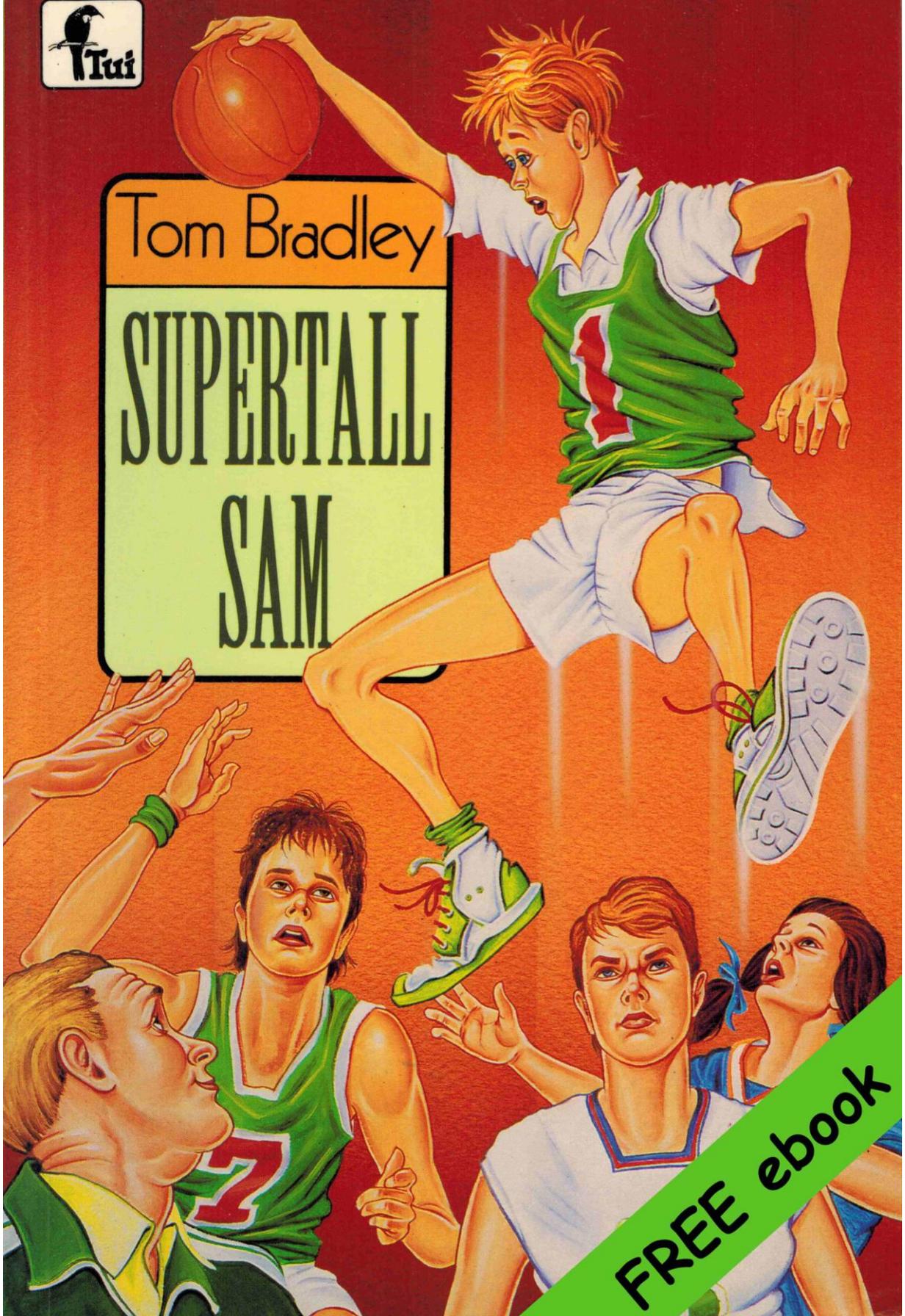




Tom Bradley

SUPERTALL

SAM



FREE ebook

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What the critics said about ‘Supertall Sam’

- “A definite 10/10. I recommend this book” (Wairarapa Times-Age)
- “Fast and funny reading” (The Dominion)
- “A good-natured story of a gangling adolescent ... [Bradley] sketches appealing characters” (Sunday Times)

What this story is about

Sam Browne, a teenager, stands out from the crowd – and he hates it!

It’s not his fault he’s the fastest growing boy in school. He knocks his head going through doorways, hangs over the end of his bed, and has to wear home-made clothes.

Sam would swap all his good grades for some of Roger Snell’s sporting talent.

Roger, the school’s “kid with everything”, thinks slow-moving Sam’s a joke – the perfect butt for his cruel sense of humour.

But Sam’s an optimist and when he fights back, Roger forces a showdown on the basketball court.

For Sam, it’s the moment of truth.

Chapter One

'Here's your birthday present, Sam. Sorry it's a week late.'

Thirteen year old Sam Browne looked at the flat rectangular package his older brother Mike had placed on the kitchen table.

'Go on,' said Mike. 'It won't bite you.'

'What is it?' asked their mother, Carol.

'You'll both find out when Sam opens it.'

Sam picked it up and shook it. 'It's not booby-trapped, is it?'

Mike Browne, 10 years older than Sam, slapped his forehead in mock annoyance. 'I wish I'd thought of that.'

Their father, Eddie Browne, came into the kitchen on the tail of the conversation.

'Where's the cereal? Oh, there it is. Thought of what?'

'Look,' said Carol, pointing to the table. 'Mike's got Sam a birthday present.'

'His birthday was over a week ago.'

'I've been busy,' said Mike.

'Working or playing?' asked his father.

'Both.'

'Forget Mike's social calendar,' said Carol. 'Concentrate on Sam's present.'

Sam idolised his older brother. 'Did you make this?'

'No, dummy. Last night while I was sleeping, some elves slipped into the factory and when I woke up, there it was.'

He raised his hand as if to give Sam a clip around the ear. 'Of course I made it.'

'On factory time,' said Eddie.

'Stop talking like a foreman, Dad. You know how it is. Things get a bit quiet on the midnight to dawn shift. There's not much else happening at 3am, so I thought I'd make something special for my kid brother.'

He turned his attention to Sam. 'But if you don't want it...' He reached out as if to take back the present.

'No,' said Sam. 'Of course I want it.'

'Open it then,' said his father. 'The suspense is killing me.'

'Me, too,' said Carol. 'Come on, Sam. Your father and I have to get to work, and you have to get to school.'

'And I have to get some sleep,' said Mike.

As his family watched, Sam tore the paper off the parcel. It was a flat metal object, twice the size of a car registration plate.

Sam held it up. 'What is it?'

'That's the back you're looking at,' said Mike. 'Look at the other side.'

Sam turned it over. The plate had been engraved in large letters.

BEANPOLE BROWNE.

Sam was speechless.

'You like it, huh?' asked Mike. 'It'll look great on your bedroom door.'

'Let's have a look,' said Eddie, taking it from Mike and examining his older son's workmanship.

'It's good, Mike,' said his father. 'And so it should be. After all, you learned everything you know about metal from an expert.'

'Yes, oh-great-master,' said Mike with a mock bow. 'You.'

Eddie and Mike both worked at Metal-Makers, a local steelworks.

It was Carol who noticed that Sam seemed to have gone into a trance. 'What is it, Sam?'

Sam hadn't spoken since he'd unwrapped the parcel. Now he slammed the plate down on the laminated table. 'I hate it!'

Mike spun around and faced his younger brother. 'You ungrateful...'

His father cut in. 'Don't say it, Mike.'

He turned to Sam. 'And you watch your temper. I'm surprised at you. I know how much work your brother must have put into this, and this is all the thanks he gets.'

Sam jumped up from the table, sending the kitchen chair flying.

'You don't understand,' he said. 'No one understands. I don't want to be Beanpole Browne. I don't want to be tall. It's not fair. Why do I have to be different? Why can't I be like everyone else?'

With that, Sam raced out of the kitchen.

They all heard his big feet charging up the narrow staircase and the sound of his door being thrown open.

It was followed by a yell of pain.

Mike flinched. 'Ouch! He's got to remember to duck going through doorways.'

'That poor boy,' said Carol. 'If he's done that once, he's done it a hundred times lately.'

As they listened, Sam's bedroom door slammed with a vibration that shook the dishes on the table.'

'It's not easy when the teenage hormones start jumping,' said Mike.

'I don't think I can remember back that far,' said Eddie.

'It's hard enough being a teenager,' said Carol, 'without towering above everybody else.'

Sam Browne was going through a growth spurt. From being only average height for the first 12 years of his life, he'd shot up so much in the last few months, he was now the tallest

boy in his school.

Carol began clearing away the dishes and stacking them in the sink. Eddie started to help, but then glanced at his watch.

'Look at the time,' he said. 'I've got to get going. I can't afford to be late.'

'Bosses should be able to set their own hours,' said Mike.

'Thanks for the vote of confidence, son, but foreman's as high as I'll ever go. And we have to set a good example.'

He headed for the door then paused. Lifting the lid of the chest freezer, he took out a pre-packed lunch, then another one.

'Two lunches?' mouthed Mike, behind his mother's back.

'Shush,' said Eddie.

'Who are you telling to shush, Eddie Browne?' asked Carol, turning around. 'And what are you trying to hide? Is that a second lunch?'

'I get hungry.'

'You were born hungry,' she said, patting her husband's stomach.

Eddie sucked in his expanding waistline. 'I'm still the man I used to be.'

'No, dear, you're almost *twice* the man you used to be.'

'Don't forget the team meeting tomorrow,' Eddie said to Mike, changing the subject.

Mike was the top points scorer for the Metal-Makers Movers, one of the top teams in a local business league.

'Don't worry, Coach,' Mike told his father. 'I'll be there.'

Satisfied with the answer, Eddie slammed the door behind him and was gone.

Carol threw the last of the dishes in the sink and gathered up her coat and uniform.

'It's late night at the supermarket,' she said, 'so I won't be home for supper. You three will have to feed yourselves.'

'Sure, Mum, if I wake up. I'm ready to sleep for a week.'

Carol touched Mike's arm. 'Make sure Sam gets off to school, will you? The mood he's in, he might not come out of his room. He's too good a student to skip school.'

'Just as well one of your kids is bright,' said Mike with a grin.

Carol kissed her eldest son on the cheek and headed for the door. 'You shouldn't say things like that.'

'Why? My school reports always said I was born to play, not study. Exactly the opposite of Sam's.'

'You two are just different.'

'From different planets when it comes to brains.'

As his mother hurried out the front door, Mike climbed the narrow staircase and stopped

outside Sam's door. The wooden panels vibrated with the sound of an electric guitar.

Mike waited for the first break then thumped hard on the door.

'Open up!'

'Go away. Leave me alone.' Sam cranked up the amplifier.

'This is an emergency. An ambulance has just pulled up at the gate, looking for a very tall boy with a bandaged head.'

'I don't know any tall boys. And I don't want to.'

Mike changed tack. 'If you don't open up, I'm going to call the police. You've got some poor defenceless animal in there, and you're trying to strangle it.'

The twanging stopped. Mike heard the bedsprings groan as his brother got up and came to the door and opened it a fraction.

'I told you to go away,' said Sam.

'Not until you go to school,' said his brother, pushing his foot into the opening.

'I'm not going today.'

'Yes, you are,' said Mike, shouldering his way into the room.

He was shorter than Sam, but a lot heavier and built like an athlete.

'Even if I have to carry you.'

'I'd like to see you try,' said Sam, stepping back, his muscles tensed and his fists clenched.

'Nah,' said Mike, 'you're right. It wouldn't work. If I slung you over my shoulder, you're such a long streak your head would drag on the ground.'

The tension in the room disappeared as Sam started to laugh. Despite his quick temper, a laugh was never far away.

He flopped back on his bed. At least most of him flopped on the bed. Since his growth spurt, his feet hung out over the end.

'We've got to get you a longer bed,' said Mike.

'Why? It wouldn't fit in this pokey little room.'

'You're lucky to have a room of your own. A lot of kids don't.'

'I'm not a kid. Why can't I have your room?'

'You can when I leave home.'

'When will that be?'

'When I can afford it,' said Mike. 'Living at home isn't perfect, but it's cheap.'

He picked up Sam's guitar and plucked a few notes. 'You're getting better.'

Sam had delivered newspapers for a year to earn enough money to buy the guitar.

He took it off his older brother and strummed a few chords. 'I practise hard enough.'

'The whole family knows that. In fact, the whole street knows.'

Sam put down the guitar. 'Sorry, Mike.'

'About what?'

'The present.'

'Yeah, well, maybe it wasn't such a good idea,' said Mike. 'That name, Beanpole Browne, just came to me during the night.'

'Like a bad dream,' said Sam. 'Maybe too much pickle on your sandwiches?'

Mike burst out laughing.

'What are you going to do with it?' asked Sam.

'The plate? I dunno. Probably melt it down and try again. But I won't give up. I'll go through every sandwich topping in the fridge, and every combination, until the right name pops into my head.'

'Or you're as sick as a dog.'

'I'm like Dad,' said Mike. 'Cast iron stomach.'

'At least Beanpole Browne is better than some of the names the kids at school call me.'

'Who?'

'Roger Snell's the worst.'

'Ignore him. He's a spoilt brat.'

'But he's good at everything.'

'Not at growing tall,' said Mike. 'You've definitely got the edge on him there. Personally, I think Roger's jealous. I know I am. I wish I had your height.'

'Why?'

'Then I could have been a professional basketballer.'

'You think so?'

'Between you and me,' said Mike, 'no. Even if I was twice your height, there are too many guys out there with more talent.'

'But you were a champion.'

'At high school, Sam. Only at high school. I was a big fish in a little pond. Out in the big world, I'm just another little fish.'

'I'd trade places with you.'

'Let me tell you something,' said Mike. 'I'd trade places with you.'

Sam looked shocked.

'You think I'm kidding? Well I'm not. Sam, if I had half your brains, I wouldn't be knocking myself out working in that factory. Why do you think I party so hard? It's my way of escape.'

Mike glanced at his watch. 'Talking of escape, you're not going to. Not today. I promised Mum. You'll never learn anything at school if you don't turn up.'

'Sam! Are you ready?'

The voice rising up the stairs belonged to Sam's neighbour and classmate, Jenni Ross.

'He's coming!' yelled Mike. 'Get out of here, Sam, so I can get some sleep.'

Sam unfolded himself from his bed and grabbed his backpack.

'If you're awake when I come home, can we shoot a few baskets?'

'Maybe after dinner,' said Mike. 'Before then, I've got some serious sleeping to do.'

'Sam!' came Jenni's voice up the stairs. 'If you don't hurry, I'll go without you.'

'Never keep a lady waiting, Sam.'

'It's only Jenni from next door.'

'Give her a few years,' said his brother. 'Give you *both* a few years. In time you might even get to like being tall.'

'Never!' said Sam.

'Never is a long time,' said Mike.

Chapter Two

'Just before we break for the day, I have a few things to tell you.'

The speaker was Sam's teacher, Mrs Harper.

'Firstly,' she told the class, 'I have the results here from last week's tests. I know they were only a trial run for the exams, but the marks are very pleasing.'

'She's talking about me,' whispered Roger Snell, poking Sam in the ribs with a ruler.

Sam clenched his fist and spun to his right to return the gesture, but caught his teacher's eye. He checked the blow and slumped down in his seat.

It was late in the day and the class was getting restless.

'I know you're all thinking about getting home,' said the teacher, 'but I insist on quiet. Before I hand out the results, I want to acknowledge some excellent work as always by Roger, who came top...'

Roger turned in his seat and sneered at Sam.

The teacher stopped. 'Roger, are you paying attention?'

'Yes, Mrs Harper.'

'I was saying you came top, as you have all year, but this time you have to share that honour.'

Mrs Harper now had the class's full attention. Roger was normally number one at everything - in the classroom and on the sporting field. Sharing was not in his nature.

'For once, Roger,' continued the teacher, 'someone got the same high marks as you did.'

Roger's face froze. 'Who?'

'Sam,' said Mrs Harper. 'Sam came first-equal.'

Jenni, who was sitting right behind the boys, stretched out her foot and poked Roger with her toe.

She disliked Roger as much as she liked Sam.

'String-bean just got lucky,' Roger hissed at Jenni. 'It was a fluke.'

'It was the result of hard work and application on Sam's part,' said Mrs Harper, as if she'd heard what Roger said and was correcting him.

'It'll make the exams in a few weeks very interesting. If Sam continues to grow academically, the way he's growing physically, we could soon have a new top student.'

At the mention of his height, Sam slumped even further in his seat.

'Sam, do sit up,' said Mrs Harper.

Sam ignored her.

'Two more things, class,' she continued. 'The first is a reminder that all entries for next week's school sports day must be in by tomorrow.'

'More prizes for me to win,' said Roger to no one in particular. 'I wish I had some real competition.'

'Roger, are you talking to yourself or to us?' said the teacher.

'Thinking aloud, Mrs Harper,' he replied. 'Sorry.'

'The last matter concerns the school dance, which comes right after the exams. I'd like to see this class represented in some way. How many of you play instruments?'

Several hands went up.

The teacher smiled. 'I thought we could try forming our own band to do an act on the night. Tell me what instruments you play and I'll write them on the board.'

'Drums,' said Roger. 'I've been learning since I was five.'

'Wow,' said Jenni, loudly. 'Roger's been playing the drums for over *two* years.'

Even Mrs Harper couldn't suppress a grin. 'What other instruments do we have?'

'Bass guitar,' said Jenni.

The class band quickly took shape. Flute, piano, organ, two trumpets and a trombone.

'Anyone else?' asked Mrs Harper.

Roger looked at Sam. 'Hey, Bean-sprout,' he whispered, 'what about your guitar? The one you got in the Christmas cracker.'

Sam glared at him. 'I'm not ready to go public.'

'You are now,' said Roger, putting up his hand and waving it in the air.

'Mrs Harper,' he told the teacher. 'Sam plays the guitar.'

'Do you, Sam?'

'Not really.'

'He's being modest, Mrs Harper,' said Roger. 'I'm sure it's a guitar. Although his hands are so big, it's hard to tell. It could be a ukulele.'

As the class laughed, Sam slipped even further down in his seat.

'How many times do I have to tell you, Sam?' said Mrs Harper. 'Sit up straight. You'll be on the floor in a minute.'

She wrote Sam's name on the blackboard.

'I think we have our band,' she said. 'Any vocalists?'

Four more hands went up.

'Sam's got a good singing voice,' volunteered Roger. 'Or it will be good... when his voice breaks.'

This time Sam sprang up, more than sat up, and lunged at Roger.

'Boys!' said Mrs Harper sharply as she stepped between their desks. 'Sam, it's been a good day for you so far. Don't let *anything*, or *anyone*, spoil it.'

At that moment, the bell rang and the class dissolved into noise.

Mrs Harper looked at her two brightest pupils. 'I think that's what they call "saved by the bell".'

'You can do it, Sam,' said Jenni, swinging her backpack as they walked home together. 'You can be top of the class on your own if you keep working at it.'

'You sound like my parents.'

'It's true,' said Jenni. 'You can do anything if you put your mind to it. Aim high.'

'How about Roger's nose?'

'Too low,' said Jenni. 'Shoot for the stars.'

'The way I'm growing, I'll soon be able to touch them.'

'You can beat that big-mouth, Sam. It'll do him good.'

'Yeah, I'll start with the sports day.'

'That's not what I meant.'

'What did you mean?' said Sam.

'Beat him in *class*. Taking him on at sport may not be a good idea.'

'A minute ago you said I could do anything.'

'*Almost* anything.' Jenni stopped swinging her backpack and slung it over her shoulder. It gave her an extra couple of seconds to think. 'It's to do with your height.'

'Isn't everything?'

'Don't take this the wrong way, Sam. You know I'm your friend. I wouldn't hurt you for the world, but since you've had this growth spurt and grown so tall, you're a bit... uncoordinated.'

Sam stopped walking and glared down at his friend. 'What you're saying is I'm gangly. All over the place like a new born giraffe.'

'I didn't say that.'

'No,' said Sam, 'but it's what Mum and Dad say. I've heard them at night, when they think I'm asleep.'

'Maybe you were hearing things.'

'Not in that little house. I can hear every word that's said. You listen to me, Jenni. I may be tall, but I can still run and jump. School sports day is my chance to prove it. With these long legs, I'll take such huge strides I'll win every race.'

Jenni frowned. 'Sam... I don't know.'

'Well, I do. My mind's made up. I'll make my height work for me for once. Tomorrow, I'm going to put my name down for every event on sports day. I'll show you. I'll show all of you.'

With that, Sam ran off, leaving Jenni behind.

'Oh, Sam,' Jenni whispered to herself as she saw her friend disappear into the distance.

'You do run like a new born giraffe.'

It was a quiet supper that night at the Snell house, or as most people in town called it, the Snell mansion.

Roger lived with his father, David, owner of one of the town's biggest companies, Snell Transport.

'You're very quiet tonight, Roger,' said his father. 'Not like you.'

As he spoke, the Snell's live-in maid cleared away their main course and brought dessert.

'Sorry, Dad. I was thinking about school.'

'Have you had those test results yet?'

Roger hesitated. 'They were only a practice.'

'They're still a guide to how well you're doing.'

Roger toyed with his dessert and let a couple of seconds pass before answering.

'I came... top, Dad. As always. What did you expect?'

His father smiled, approvingly. 'You're my son all right. Competitive. I like that. Just remember, though, everyone gets beaten at something. Eventually.'

'It won't happen to me.'

'You keep believing that. What else is new at school?'

'Mrs Harper is putting together a class band to do a floorshow at the dance.'

'Good idea. I suppose you'll be on drums.'

'Only if I get a new drum kit.'

'Mrs Harper said that?'

'No,' said Roger. 'I did.'

'What's wrong with the drums you've got?'

'They're old.'

'How can they be old, Roger? I only bought them for you last Christmas. They cost a small fortune.'

'I can't play at the dance with that old kit. The other kids will laugh at me.'

'I doubt it. But I'll make you a deal. Are you confident you'll come top in the real exams?'

Roger nodded.

'Okay,' said his father. 'Just to keep you motivated, I'll make it worth your while. If you really want those new drums, I'll *lend* you the money.'

'*Lend* it to me?'

David Snell held up his hand. 'It's about time you started learning the value of money. For the day you take over the family transport business.'

'But why can't you just buy me...'

'And anything worth having is worth working for,' said his father. 'So, here's my offer. I'll *lend* you the money for the drums.'

'Dad, that's not fair...'

'But,' said his father, 'if you come top of your class in the exams, the drums are yours. A gift from me, for winning. Of course, if you *don't* come top...'

'What about top *equal*?'

'Top equal doesn't count. You either win or you don't. And if you don't, you have to pay me back the full amount, out of your allowance.'

Roger groaned. 'That could take me years.'

'You're exaggerating, Roger, but you get the idea. It should be all the incentive you need to work hard. Take it or leave it.'

'I've got to have those drums. Super-dick's got a new guitar.'

'Dick who?'

'Not Dick. Sam. Sam Browne. He's a big dorky kid in my class.'

'Doesn't his father work at Metal-Makers?'

Roger nodded.

'Eddie Browne,' said Roger's father. 'I know him. Coaches the Movers. His son, Mike, is the captain. Must be Sam's brother.'

David Snell was a sports fanatic and coached Snell Transport's basketball team, the Sultans, in the same business league as the Movers.

'This is more important than basketball,' said Roger.

'Nothing's more important than basketball.'

David Snell stopped when he saw the hurt look on his son's face.

'Don't take it the wrong way, son. You're important, too.'

'Then *buy* me the drums.'

'You heard my terms.'

'Can I at least borrow Joe and the limo for a couple of hours after school tomorrow?'

Joe was David Snell's personal chauffeur.

'What for?'

'I've found a shop downtown that's got the drum set I want.'

'Does that mean the deal's on?'

Roger nodded. 'Full on.'

Across town, there was a different reaction to the day's events.

'I think that's great, Sam,' said his father who was eating dinner.

Mike had woken up in time to throw together a big meal for the two of them.

Sam had said he wasn't hungry.

'Tell me again,' said Carol, sitting with her feet propped up on a chair, after her long day working at the supermarket. 'Especially the bit about coming top.'

'Top *equal*, Mum.'

'It's still top.'

Mike was getting ready to head off to the factory to start his night shift.

'We all knew you could do it, Sam,' he said, talking and eating at the same time.

'I know I told you to cook for yourselves,' said Carol, 'but I didn't intend for you two to eat us all out of house and home.'

She eyed Mike's fast shrinking plates of ham, eggs and fried bread.

'No wonder you still live at home,' she said.

'I've got to eat well, Mum,' said Mike. 'I'm in training for the basketball season.'

Carol looked at her husband. 'What's your excuse?'

'I'm in training, too,' said Eddie.

'To coach?'

'Coaching takes a lot out of you.'

'So does that sort of diet,' said Sam. 'I've read that too much high-fat food can kill you.'

'Not another lecture,' said Mike. 'You sound like one of those health warnings on TV.'

'Are you sure you want to enter everything?' Eddie asked Sam.

Mike put down his knife and fork. 'Did I miss something?'

'Sam's entering every event on sports day.'

Mike took another bite of his fried bread.

'I wish I'd thought of that when I was at school,' he said, munching as he talked.

'Running in all the girls races.'

Sam pulled a face at his brother and explained his plan.

'It's a gamble,' said Mike, wiping up egg yolk with his bread. 'I could always give you a few tips. Make your height a plus, not a minus.'

'That's what I'm planning to do.'

'I'm not convinced,' said Carol, getting up and taking a pizza out of the freezer. She threw it in the microwave. 'Anyone else want some?'

'Yes, please,' said Eddie.

'You've got to be kidding.'

'Never about food,' he told her. 'Sam, why don't you just concentrate on your school work and forget about the sports day? This year, anyway.'

'So I won't embarrass you?' said Sam.

'Embarrass who?'

'You and Mum. I've heard you talking about me at night.'

Carol sighed. 'Next house we buy will definitely have thicker walls.'

'We're still paying off this one,' protested Eddie.

Carol turned to Sam. 'Every boy gets a bit gangly when he goes through puberty. It's just part of being a teenager. Mike went through it.'

Sam's eyes widened. 'Did you, Mike?'

'I think so,' said his brother, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand.

'Use a napkin, please,' said his mother.

'Sorry, Mum,' he said, looking at his father, 'but *the butler* forgot to put one out for me when he set the table.'

'I'd settle for a cook,' said Carol. 'No more frozen pizzas.'

'What's wrong with pizza?' asked Eddie.

'Not all the time,' said Sam. 'Do you know that pizzas...'

'I put the wrong name on that plate,' said Mike. 'I should have inscribed it BRAINY BROWNE. Tell you what, if you stop lecturing us, I'll shoot a few baskets with you before I go to work.'

'After all that food?' asked Carol.

'Mum's right,' said Sam. 'If you exercise too hard after a big meal, the blood is drawn away from your stomach when it should be helping digest your food, and...'

Mike cut in. 'I'm only going to shoot a few baskets, not run a marathon. You can either talk or play. What'll it be?'

Carol suddenly thought of something. 'Have you had any dinner, Sam?'

The look on his face gave him away.

'How many times have I told you,' she said, 'skipping meals won't stop you growing. You'll just get sick.'

'I'm not hungry.'

'When this pizza's ready, you're going to have a bit. You're not going to bed on an empty stomach.'

'Let's go,' said Sam to Mike. 'Want to join us, Dad?'

'I've had a hard day. I'll watch.'

'You should know by now boys,' said Carol, 'that your father is strictly an armchair athlete.'

'I'm not an armchair anything,' protested Eddie.

'Sorry,' said Carol. 'I forgot. You're not an armchair athlete. More a couch-bound coach.'

Eddie pulled in his belly. 'I don't have to prove anything. When I first met you, I was as

fit and trim as Mike.'

'I remember, dear. You were just a slip of a lad. And you can see where it slipped.'

Although it was already dark, the Browne's small backyard was lit by the glow from the porch lamp and the light on the garage wall.

Next to it hung a basketball hoop at regulation height.

'One-on-one?' asked Mike.

'Okay,' said Sam, 'first to 10 baskets wins.'

Mike looked at his watch. 'I've got to be off soon. Make it first to five.'

With Sam on defence, Mike had to dribble the ball past him and score by getting it into the hoop. Then they'd swap, and Sam would go on attack.

As they started, Eddie came out and stood on the porch and watched.

'Go,' said Mike, dribbling the ball towards Sam.

With Sam's huge spread of arms and legs, there seemed no way past, but Mike had played a lot of basketball.

Rather than going straight for the net, he drew Sam to the left, throwing him off balance.

With a side-step, he suddenly changed direction and dribbled the other way, leaving his brother flat-footed.

With two more paces, Mike was under the net.

He stretched up as far as he could go and once the ball rose above the hoop, Mike rammed it through.

'A slam dunk worthy of the pros,' yelled Eddie, but then stopped as he saw the pain on Mike's face. 'Still troubling you, huh, son?'

Mike nodded. 'I've got to remember to strap this knee, even fooling around out here.'

Eddie came over. 'Old sporting injuries are bad news.'

Mike turned to Sam. 'That's another reason to stick with the studies. Sports jocks are only as good as their knees, and mine aren't as good as they used to be. Especially the right one.'

'Sorry, Mike,' said Sam. 'Want to stop?'

Mike straightened up. 'Are you crazy? When I'm already one point ahead? Wait here.'

In a minute, Mike was back with his knee bandaged.

It was now Sam's turn to attack, and he tried to copy his older brother and draw Mike away. But when he tried to switch directions, he spilled the ball.

Mike swooped on it and without leaving the ground, flicked the ball, one handed, into the hoop.

Within minutes, Mike had his five points and Sam hadn't scored.

'Not bad,' Eddie said to Mike, 'for a man with a full stomach and a dud knee. You still

look sharp. And that first slam dunk was amazing. This should be a good season.'

'Just let me at those Sultans.'

Two years in a row, the Snell Transport Sultans and the Metal-Makers Movers had met in the business league basketball final.

'A little birdie tells me they've got their whole team back this season,' said Eddie.

'Including Joe Magan.'

David Snell's chauffeur was the Sultan's captain.

'Snell's always struck me as tough, but fair,' said Mike. 'Why does he keep that little weasel, Joe, in the team?'

'Because he wins games for them. It's hard to drop a winner.'

'It'll all be different this year,' said Mike.

'I hope so,' said Eddie. 'They've thrashed us two years in a row.'

'Cut it out, Coach,' said Mike. 'Be positive. Snell wouldn't talk to his players like that. He believes in winning. Coming in second doesn't count.'

Eddie half-smiled. 'That's why he's got a mansion, and I've got a mortgage.'

'And I've got a job to go to,' said Mike, slipping off his knee bandage and heading for the house to collect his overalls and boots.

As he passed Sam, he threw him the ball.

'Try some one-on-one with Dad. He's more your speed.'

'Pizza's ready,' called Carol from the kitchen.

'Saved by the mozzarella,' said Eddie.

Chapter Three

The next afternoon, Joe, the Snell's chauffeur, drove Roger downtown to collect the new drums.

Joe carefully packed the second bass drum into the huge boot of the company limousine. 'These things are heavy.'

'Then be careful with them.'

'If I hurt my back doing this, your Dad'll be furious. The season starts soon.'

'I suppose you want a hand.' Without any enthusiasm, Roger closed the boot lid.

'Thanks a million,' said Joe. 'This is the biggest drum kit I've ever seen. Why do you need two bass drums?'

'One for each foot.'

'Ask a silly question.'

The salesman had followed them out of the shop, carrying a side drum. As Joe flung open the back door of the limo, the two men almost collided.

'Hey,' snapped Joe, 'watch where you're going.'

'Sorry.'

Joe snatched the drum from the startled man, tossed it on the back seat, and stalked back to the shop for another load.

'What's wrong with him?' asked the salesman.

'Short fuse,' said Roger. 'You should see him on the basketball court.'

The salesman resisted further comment about Joe's temper. After all, this had been the biggest sale of the week and he didn't want to do anything to spoil it.

'They're the best drums on the market,' he told Roger. 'They'll give you a lot of pleasure.'

'I'll let you know after the dance.'

'If there's anything else I can do...?'

'You could always buy them for me,' said Roger.

The salesman looked puzzled. 'But that's all taken care of. Your father paid by phone with his credit card.'

'Only joking.'

'I will admit,' said the salesman, 'he was a little surprised at the price.'

'He's careful with his money even though he's rolling in it,' said Roger. 'That's why he's so rich.'

'I'm sorry the drum stool you wanted wasn't in stock,' said the salesman, 'but it should be here in a few days. Mind you, the one I showed you is just as good.'

'Wrong brand. I want the best or nothing.'

As the salesman returned to the shop, Joe slid the last cymbal stand on the back seat and slammed the door.

'Let's go,' he said. 'I need to be back as soon as possible.'

'What's the hurry?' asked Roger.

'Basketball practice.'

'After you drive me home and help unload these drums.'

'What did your last slave die of?'

'Disobedience,' said Roger.

David Snell made no secret that Roger would one day run the company and Joe liked his job too much to argue.

He slipped the limousine into drive and headed for the Snell mansion.

'What's the big occasion?'

'School dance,' said Roger.

'Lucky boy,' said Joe, 'having your dad buy you those fancy drums.'

'Not yet,' said Roger. 'It's only a loan.'

'You mean you have to pay for them *yourself*?'

'Only if I don't come top of the class.'

'You'll do it,' said Joe. 'You're a smart kid. And I'll bet you're like me. Too smart not to have a backup plan if anything goes wrong.'

'I'm working on one,' said Roger.

'Everyone's going to laugh at me,' said Sam.

It was the day of the school sports and the Brownes had climbed to the top of a temporary grandstand built of metal pipes and planks, erected near the finish line for the track events.

It not only gave the best view of the ground, it also overlooked the throwing circle for the discus and shot put.

'No one's going to laugh at you, Sam,' said his mother. 'I think your tracksuit looks lovely, don't you Eddie?'

'Lovely,' said Eddie, rummaging through the chilly bin of food they'd brought with them, rather than get involved in an old argument.

The Browne's budget didn't extend to expensive made-to-order clothing and, as off-the-rack tracksuits were too short in the arms and legs, Carol had made Sam something for the occasion.

'It looks homemade, Mum.'

'Takes me back to my own days here,' said Mike, changing the subject. He'd given up

his daytime sleep to come and cheer for his younger brother.

'One year I won two races,' he reminded the others, 'and set a school record for the discus, all before lunch.'

'I'm going to do even better,' said Sam.

'Just try your hardest,' said Carol.

'Stop talking like a mother and pass me the crisps,' said Eddie, who had almost finished a double-coned chocolate peanut butter ice cream. 'It's not often I can get a day off work, and I'm going to make the most of it.'

As the last of the ice cream cone disappeared into his mouth, he looked at Sam. 'And I don't want a lecture.'

Down below on the track, Jenni was getting ready to run in the last heat of the girls' 100 metres.

She waved to Sam from the starting line as she mouthed the words, "Good Luck".

'You're not on till after this race,' Mike said to Sam. 'Sit down and watch her.'

Carol looked around and jiggled in her seat. 'I'm always scared of these temporary contraptions. Do you think this one is safe?'

'Perfectly safe,' said Eddie. 'Mike and I made all the steel pipes for the frame.'

'Don't tell Mum that,' said Mike, 'or she'll really worry.'

As the Brownes watched, Jenni crouched at the start line and when the starter's gun sounded, she leapt out of the blocks.

Sam leapt to his feet, 'Come on, Jenni!' he screamed.

Jenni was compact and fast, hit the lead early, and held it for the first 50 metres.

Near the finish line she faded and was overtaken, but her second placing was enough to take her through to the semi-finals.

'Your turn, Sam,' said Mike, patting his brother on the back as the loudspeakers announced the first heat of the boys' 400 metres.

'Remember what I told you.'

Unfortunately for Sam, while he'd been sitting with his family at the top of the stand watching Jenni run, the rest of the seating had filled up and getting down was slow and awkward.

'Excuse me,' he said stepping down from plank to plank.

He tried to go over the top of a large woman in a big hat.

'Whoops,' he said as his foot caught the brim of the hat and dislodged it. 'Sorry.'

Next a can of drink went flying. Then a hotdog bit the dust.

'I'm really sorry,' said Sam.

Sam's parents watched his progress.

'Why do I have a cold feeling in the pit of my stomach?' asked Carol.

'I have the same feeling,' said Eddie, 'and it's not the ice cream.'

As Sam reached the waiting area and slipped off his tracksuit, he saw Roger walking towards him. Roger was in the second heat.

'Love the outfit, Sam,' said Roger with a sneer.

Roger's tracksuit had an expensive designer label splashed across the front.

'It's so clever the way your jacket's been made so all the pieces don't quite match,' said Roger. 'Very trendy.'

Sam clenched his fists as Roger kept talking.

'What label is it, Sam? Don't tell me it's homemade? Oh, well, I suppose it gives your mother something to do when she's not working at the supermarket.'

Sam took a threatening step towards his classmate, but Roger stepped back even faster.

'Now, now, Sam. You've got a race to run. Don't waste your energy. You'd never catch me anyway.'

Sam glared at his classmate. 'You'll get yours.'

'But not the way *you* mean,' said Roger. 'I get whatever I want. And I certainly wouldn't want those sneakers you're wearing. They don't have any labels either. They're huge. Or are those the boxes they came in?'

As Sam advanced again, Roger moved back, keeping his distance. Seeing what was happening, Jenni ran up and grabbed Sam's arm.

'Don't let him get to you,' she said. 'Concentrate on the race. You can do it, Sam.'

'You can do it, Sam,' mimicked Roger as he walked away and then reverted to his own voice, 'but not today.'

Sam was quivering with rage and Jenni could feel it as she held tightly to his arm.

'Sam, listen to me. If you go out on the track like this, you're beaten before you start.'

She pointed him in the direction of the start line. 'For the moment, that's all that matters.'

The field for the first heat settled under starter's orders.

As the gun sounded, Carol leapt to her feet, jumping up and down and yelling encouragement.

Mike glanced at his father. 'Maybe we should have reinforced this framing.'

Sam's parents were right when they described his running style as being like that of a new born giraffe.

As the field rounded the first bend, his long strides had taken him to third place, his arms and legs flailing in all directions.

'If he keeps flapping like that, he'll take off and fly to the finish line,' cried Mike.

'Or knock somebody out,' said Eddie.

By the last bend, Sam was being outrun by boys with shorter legs, but better coordination. He dropped back to fifth.

As the finish line drew closer, Sam glimpsed Roger watching and almost stumbled, but then he heard his mother screaming his name.

Giving it one last burst, Sam threw himself forward, passed the runner in front of him, and breasted the tape.

'Well done, Sam!' screamed Carol.

'Sit down,' said Eddie, 'before this stand collapses.'

'But Sam got third.'

'He got fourth,' said Eddie, 'Unfortunately, it's not good enough.'

Carol looked puzzled. 'Doesn't he get another chance?'

'Not in this event, Mum,' Mike explained. 'Only the first three runners go through to the semis.'

'It's still a good result,' Carol insisted.

'Very good,' said Eddie. 'Has anyone seen the can opener?'

While Jenni was running her way into the finals of the girls' 100 metres, Sam tried his hand at the high jump.

The school Principal, Mr Taylor was judging.

'How are you going to jump, Sam?' he asked as the contestants got ready. 'When I was competing, I always favoured the Fosbury Flop technique.'

'That sounds like Sam,' said Roger who was standing nearby. '*Flop's* his middle name.'

'Interesting,' said Mr Taylor as Sam cleared the bar on his first jump. 'Not quite the *Fosbury Flop*. In fact, unlike anything I've ever seen.'

Mike, who was tucking into a super-dog, had the same opinion.

'Most people go over the bar in one movement. My brother seems to go over one limb at a time. In bits.'

Carol saw sauce dripping down his chin and handed him a paper napkin.

Mike grinned at his mother. 'Please don't include one of Sam's health lectures. I'm still a growing boy.'

'At 23?'

'Look at Dad. He's still growing.'

'Only his stomach.'

Mike took another bite. 'At least I'm big enough to hand my clothes down to Sam.'

'Wide enough, yes,' said his mother. 'It's the length that's the problem. I have to be more creative every day.'

'Sam's lucky you can sew.'

'He doesn't see it that way.'

Sam's one-limb-at-a-time high jump style soon showed its limitations. It was only effective while the bar was low.

'Bad luck, Sam,' said Mr Taylor, after Sam missed his third attempt after the bar had been raised. 'At least you tried.'

'You sound like my mother,' said Sam, retrieving his tracksuit.

He watched as Roger cruised past and cleared the same height with ease.

'Nice jump, Roger,' said the principal.

He looked back at Sam who was struggling to get his feet through his tracksuit bottoms.

'Keep working on the high jump, Sam. Don't be discouraged. Just remember, practise going over the bar. *Under* doesn't count.'

Sam gave up on getting into his homemade track pants and slung them over his shoulder. Ignoring Roger's rude gesture, he wandered across to rejoin his family.

'You're doing well, Sam,' said Carol, pushing Eddie and Mike along the plank to make room for him. 'What's wrong with your pants?'

'Home-made-itis.'

'What on earth is that?' asked his mother.

'A disease that hits most homemade clothes,' said Sam. 'They don't fit properly and they look all wrong.'

Carol wouldn't hear of it. 'Your father was just saying how smart you looked.'

She turned to her husband who was halfway through a chocolate bar.

'Eddie, stop eating for a moment and tell Sam what you just said to me.'

He looked puzzled. 'I said, "pass me that chocolate bar".'

Carol shook her head. 'About the tracksuit.'

'I said it looks very... distinctive. Makes Sam stand out in the crowd.'

'Just what I don't want,' said Sam.

'I went to a lot of trouble to make it and I like it,' said Carol. 'It's not gaudy like Roger's. You wouldn't want one like that, would you?'

'Mum! What planet are you on?'

'I suppose that's teenage talk for "yes".'

Mike had heard it all before and cut in. 'What's next?'

Sam counted them off on his fingers. '200 metres. After that I've got the shot put, 800 metres, hurdles, long jump and discus.'

Carol beamed and nudged Eddie again. 'Isn't it great to be young?'

'Ask Sam.' He looked around. 'Where's that cold pizza?'

While the family watched and ate, Jenni raced the final of the 100 metres coming a creditable third.

'She's a nice girl,' said Carol to Sam. 'Are you taking her to the dance?'

Sam blushed. 'We don't take partners. We all just turn up in a group and mingle.'

He was rescued by the loudspeakers announcing the first heat of the boys' 200 metres.

Sam ran faster than he'd run in his whole life, but still came last.

The shot put was no better - he was disqualified for a foul throw.

Then, halfway through the 800 metres, there was an accident on the back straight.

'Thank goodness he's okay,' Carol said to Eddie as they watched Sam pick himself up and walk off the track.

'Which is more than can be said for those three boys he tripped,' said Eddie. 'Their parents don't look too pleased.'

'Anyway,' said Carol, 'he's faster over the shorter distances.'

'Name one,' said Eddie.

'The stairs,' said Mike. 'Especially downhill from his bedroom to the kitchen.'

Eddie nodded and took another bite of his sandwich as Sam headed for the hurdles.

Another failure.

After a day of losing, Sam was still full of confidence as he lined up for his first attempt at the long jump.

This had to be his event. He had the longest legs in the school.

He paused at the top of his run, cleared his mind of everything except what Mike had told him, and set off.

As he approached the jump line, his legs started going even faster.

He knew all he had to do was fly through the air, and land further up the sand than anybody else. Everything felt right.

He could feel the wind in his hair and the sun on his face. He could hear the roars of encouragement as he neared the take off point.

One, two, three final steps and into space. It required split-second timing and perfect coordination to leave the ground at just the right moment, pumping with the legs, balancing with the arms.

Sam suddenly remembered he'd never seen a giraffe jump. Now he knew why as he plunged head first into the sand.

The first thing he saw as he lifted his face was Roger's smirk.

'Don't tell me, Sam. You're playing charades, right? Let me guess. Burying your head in the sand. That's easy. You're an ostrich.'

Sam spat sand from his mouth and climbed to his feet. He started to reply then

discovered more sand trying to get out. He started to cough, violently.

Mrs Harper, the long jump official, ran up and started hitting him on the back.

'Don't knock his brains out,' said Roger. 'He's only got...'

Roger stopped as he saw his teacher's glare. 'I was just going to say, he's only got one more event. The discus.'

As Sam stopped coughing, Mrs Harper walked back to the pit. 'Enough talking, Roger. Jump.'

Roger casually pulled off his tracksuit, lined himself up and made his first leap. It was just short of the school record.

'That was just a warm-up,' he called to Sam as he walked back to the waiting area. 'Watch that record tumble.'

'I'd rather watch you tumble,' muttered Sam under his breath. 'Flat on your face.'

As Roger lined up for his second jump, Jenni ran up.

'I missed out in the 800,' she told Sam, 'but did you see me get third in the 100 metres? And a personal best time, too.'

She stopped as she saw Sam's eyes watering.

'I want you to be happy for me,' she told him, 'but you don't have to cry. Use this.'

She handed him a handkerchief. 'Why don't you quit? Call it a day?'

'I'm allowed two more attempts at the long jump.'

'If you try that sand eating trick again,' said Jenni, 'they'll rewrite the definition of "sandwich".'

Sam started to laugh which brought up more sand.

'See what I mean,' said Jenni.

Sam laughed some more, despite the coughing. 'I know we're all supposed to eat more roughage, but this is ridiculous.'

'Seriously, Sam, quit while you're ahead.'

'Or in my case, behind.'

'You can't be good at everything.'

'Anything would do. Like the discus.'

'You've never even thrown a discus.'

'Mike was school champ when he was here. He told me how to do it. It's all in your mind.'

'But the message has got to get down to your arms and legs.'

'Okay, I'll quit the long jump, but I'm going to throw the discus, or bust.'

Jenni sighed. 'If you're going to bust, I'd better stick around.'

'Why?'

'To pick up the pieces.'

It had been a long day of sun and fresh air and food up in the stand.

Eddie groaned. 'Can we go home? I'm feeling awful.'

'Not as awful as Sam,' said Carol. 'No one leaves till he's finished. Look, there he is. It's his last event.'

'Which is where he'll come. Last. Like every other event today.'

Carol gave Eddie a dirty look. 'He came fourth in that 400 metres heat.'

'The high point of the day,' said Sam's father. 'It's been all downhill from there. And what about the hurdles? Mike must have forgotten to tell him you're supposed to go *over* them, not through them.'

'Hey, Dad, be fair,' Mike protested.

He'd spent much of the day climbing up and down the stand to give Sam last minute tips and encouragement.

'Unfortunately, I can only *advise* him,' said Mike. 'I can't do it for him.'

'Just make sure Sam doesn't hear this negative talk,' said Carol.

She looked past Eddie to her eldest son. 'He idolises you, Mike.'

Mike grinned, sheepishly. 'He's okay himself... for a kid brother.'

'And,' continued Carol turning back to her husband, 'you should know better. You're his father.'

'I've had a long day.'

'Not as long as the day Sam's having.'

'And I'm getting a lousy headache.'

'That's the fresh air, Dad,' said Mike. 'It gets to me as well. Too much time in that factory.'

Carol crossed her arms. 'No excuses. We're not moving until Sam throws the discus.'

'At least he can't go wrong with this one,' said Mike. 'The throwing circle's got a wire cage on three sides. He can only throw in one direction. Straight out.'

'That's what you said about the shot put,' said his father. 'It didn't get out of the circle.'

Mike frowned. 'Bad technique. This should be better.'

Sam entered the throwing cage and grinned up at his parents and brother in the stand alongside the cage.

In his mind, Sam ran over the last minute instructions Mike had given him.

Gritting his teeth, he spun around and threw the discus with all his might.

It sailed further than he had ever believed possible.

Like a rocket... straight up!

Over the wire cage, over the stand, it hovered above the heads of the crowd.

Eddie put his hand over his eyes. 'Tell me this isn't happening.'

'It's happening,' yelled Mike. 'Look out!'

Faster than it had gone up, the discus crashed down.

Carol only missed being knocked out by throwing herself against Eddie.

He smashed into Mike who sent the woman next to him sprawling.

It was like a row of dominoes and, within seconds, the whole stand of pipes and planks was a mass of tumbling, shouting, cursing parents and supporters.

Sam stood, rooted to the ground in the middle of the throwing circle.

Over the curses and screams, he heard another voice. Roger's.

'Nice throw, Super-dick. If you were 10 pin bowling, they'd call it a strike. Nah, more like 10 strikes - all at once.'

Chapter Four

Eddie held the ice bag to his head. 'I shouldn't have taken the day off. I'd have been better off at work.'

'Say that again and I'll give you a real headache,' said Carol.

'That noise isn't helping,' protested Eddie.

After the disastrous sports day, Sam had run home alone and gone straight to his room.

As the rest of the family sat in the lounge, tired, bruised and sunburnt, they could hear the screeching of his guitar.

'Oh, for a house with thick walls,' said Carol.

Mike could see the good side. 'If that discus had gone as far *out*, as it did *up*, he'd have won.'

'Rubbish,' said Eddie. 'I could have done better than that and I've never thrown a discus in my life.'

'Nor had Sam,' said Mike. 'With practice, he could be great.'

Eddie pulled a face.

'Well, maybe not great,' said Mike. 'Good.'

Eddie shook his head, which made his head hurt even more.

'Let's face it,' he said. 'Sam's a terrific student, but he's hopeless at sport. Always has been. Horses for courses.'

Carol interrupted. 'Are you calling our son a horse?'

'No, I'm just saying he's on the wrong course. He's a scholar. Don't get me wrong. I couldn't be prouder. I didn't even finish high school. No one in my family ever has. Sam's going to go far.'

'Like that discus,' said Mike. 'Straight up.'

In his room, Sam pressed the steel bar on his guitar, changing the pitch of the strings making them wail. They sounded the way Sam felt.

He stood in front of the mirror, hating the long streak of teenager he saw before him.

Bending down, he cranked up the volume on his amplifier.

Now Sam's guitar really screamed, every note in tune with his brain as he pressed down even harder on the bar.

Bang! Two strings snapped under the pressure and the shock of it threw him back on his bed. The springs sagged under his weight, but then recovered.

Sam lay there, hanging over both ends, a seething mass of hurt and anger and hormones. And finally, laughter.

It was even louder than the guitar, carrying down the stairs and into the lounge.

Eddie pressed the ice bag harder into his head. 'Sounds like our baby giraffe's just

turned into a laughing hyena.'

'No, Sam. Try again.'

Mike was giving Sam some brother-to-brother basketball coaching. But the harder he tried, the worse it got.

Eddie stood on the back porch and watched.

'What do you think, Dad?' asked Mike.

'Horses,' said Eddie.

'What?' asked Sam.

'I said of course you're making progress, Sam, but exams start tomorrow. You should be studying.'

'I've been studying so hard my eyes are about to drop out. The exams aren't a problem. I'm more worried about the trials.'

It was a busy few weeks. Straight after the exams came the school dance, then the basketball trials to pick the school team.

'Try a jump shot,' suggested Mike, adjusting his knee brace before demonstrating the move.

He stood a few metres from the hoop, jumped straight into the air as high as he could go and, at the top of his jump, threw the ball into the net.

'Look out, Sultans,' said Eddie.

'You try,' said Mike, throwing the ball to Sam.

The move took two skills. Jumping and throwing and the same time. Sam couldn't do both at once.

Mike scratched his head, and turned to his father. 'What do you think, Coach?'

'If a jump shot's too difficult for you, Sam, try something simpler,' said his father.

'What about a slam dunk?' Mike suggested. 'You can use your height without having to jump and *throw* at the same time. Just jump as high as you can, and then slam the ball down into the net. Give it a try.'

Under the watchful eye of his father and brother, Sam dribbled the ball awkwardly towards the net.

When he was right underneath it, he launched himself into the air, holding the ball above his head on his outstretched arm.

Straight up, like a rocket, propelled by his long legs, with no obstacles like high-jump bars to get in his way.

As his head and the ball rose above the hoop, Sam rammed the ball down into the net and dropped back to earth, grinning from ear to ear.

Eddie and Mike's reactions were even stronger. They were rolling around, laughing.

'Sam... Sam...', spluttered his father. 'I've never seen anything like it.'

'But I got it in the net,' Sam protested, his smile fading. 'What's wrong with that?'

'Nothing,' said Mike, throwing his arm around Sam's shoulder. 'Don't take it personally. It was great. It was just a bit... different.'

'What do you mean different?' demanded Sam, stepping back and pushing away his brother's arm.

'Very different,' said Eddie. 'I'd have to say that in all my years of watching basketball, I've never seen a slam dunk like it.'

'Nor have I,' said Mike. 'It worked, but it was like watching a puppet trying to fly. Your arms were going up, but your legs, head and body were going in all directions.'

'A one-off, totally original, no-one-could-copy-it, slam dunk,' said Eddie. 'In fact, it's so original, it needs a new name. I hereby christen it the *Sam*-dunk. Dunk it again, Sam.'

Sam did. Again and again. Time after time, he leapt, using his height to carry the ball high into the air before crashing it down through the hoop.

'I think you're finally getting it,' said Eddie. 'Try some one-on-one with Mike.'

Within seconds, it was clear that Sam's new-found skill at slam dunking hadn't extended anywhere else as Mike ran circles around him in the backyard arena.

Ten points down, Sam stopped and shook his head. 'The rest of my game still needs work, I guess. I'd better get back to my books.'

Eddie stood with Mike and watched as Sam disappeared into the house.

'For a minute there...' began Mike.

'I know what you mean,' said Eddie. 'It's not his fault he's hopeless at sport. As I keep saying, he's just the wrong horse on the wrong course. The only trouble is he's going to get his heart broken if he tries out for the school team.'

Eddie frowned. 'Even if Sam makes the squad, he'll spend his season on the bench. The school couldn't let him play. He'd cost them too many points.'

'What about his new trick?'

'The *Sam*-dunk? Strictly for an emergency.'

As Sam arrived at school the next day, Roger called him aside.

'Listen, Sam, I want to make you an offer.'

The drums had cost more than Roger's allowance could stand.

'What offer?'

'Have you got an amplifier for the dance?'

Sam shook his head. 'No, but I'll get one.'

Sam's practice amplifier was way too underpowered to use on stage.

And buying a bigger one was out of the question. He'd spent all his savings on the guitar.

'I might be able to help,' said Roger.

'You? Help me?'

'Don't get the wrong idea,' said Roger. 'I'm only doing it because we're both in the same band. I don't want you letting us down.'

'I'm not going to let anyone down.'

'Then listen,' said Roger. 'Here's my offer. I could get you a good amp for the dance.'

'No thanks. I can hire my own.'

Roger dropped his voice. 'Who said anything about hiring?'

Sam's face went blank. 'I don't understand.'

'I'm talking about buying you a good amp. To keep.'

Sam didn't know whether to laugh or get angry. 'I'm hearing things.'

'No you're not. My Dad's loaded. Don't you want some decent equipment?'

Sam thought about it. About going without. About beds that were too short and homemade clothes.

'What would I have to do?'

'Do?' asked Roger.

'Yes, do,' said Sam. 'I figure there's a catch somewhere.'

'There is one little thing.'

Roger had done his sums. Buying Sam an amp would be cheaper than repaying his father for the drums.

'All you've got to do is back off a bit,' he told Sam.

'Back off?'

'In the exams. I'm not asking you to flunk or anything. Just make sure you come in second.'

'You're asking me to throw the exams?'

'No, I'm asking you to do yourself a favour, Sam, and get rewarded for it. What do you think?'

'I *think*,' said Sam, 'that I'll... think about it.'

Mrs Harper faced the class. 'Well done, all of you. I have here the exam results. And this time, there is no tie for top place. We have a clear winner.'

Sam turned to Roger. 'Does that offer still stand?'

'What offer?' asked Roger, innocently. He'd come up with an even cheaper option.

Rather than buy Sam an amp, he'd just deny the whole thing.

'I don't know what you're talking about, Sam.'

'So you lied to me.'

'Can't you take a joke, Bean-bag?'

'Can you?'

Mrs Harper broke into a huge grin. 'The top student is... Sam Browne.'

Roger's face turned three shades of purple in the time it took for the applause to die down.

'You louse,' he snarled at Sam.

'Me?' said Sam, getting up from his desk to go forward and receive the award. 'You're the class champion at that.'

Chapter Five

'Roger?' asked Mrs Harper, as the band set up to rehearse. 'Must you fill up the whole stage like that?'

'How do you want me to fill it up?'

'Very funny.'

The new drum kit was huge and took up one whole side of the stage. As well as the double bass drums, it had every imaginable variety of side drum, plus endless tom toms and cymbals.

'Anyway, Mrs Harper, it's really Sam's fault. He keeps getting in my way.'

Mrs Harper looked at Sam and his modestly-sized hired amplifier which barely took up any room at all.

Sam looked up from tuning his guitar. 'I vote we move the drums further back.'

Roger, who'd been adjusting his new swivelling drum stool, jumped up and made a threatening gesture.

'Anyone who touches my kit gets these drumsticks.'

'Yes, please,' said Jenni. 'I love chicken.'

'Super-twit's middle name,' said Roger.

Sam ignored it. 'Let's move the drums behind the back curtain. Then no one will get scared.'

Roger nodded. 'Yeah, I do get pretty scary when I play.'

'It's not your drumming that's scary,' said Jenni. 'It's your face.'

'Class! Enough,' cried Mrs Harper. 'We have a show to rehearse and we don't have much time to get it right. Leave all the equipment exactly where it is.'

She waved several sheets of paper in the air.

'Has everyone got their copy of the arrangements? Good. We must all remember to thank Mr Gerard from the Music Department for his hard work. Let's run through the songs, in order.'

Roger gave the count for the first song. 'One, two, three, one, two, three.'

Two hours later, the class act was as ready as it was ever going to be.

Sam pointed to his ears as he turned to his teacher. 'I can't even hear myself or my guitar. Can you tell Bigfoot on the drums to ease off?'

Roger stood up and dropped his drumsticks into their holder. 'Look who's talking about big feet. At least my drumming is better than your singing. You were off key the whole rehearsal.'

Jenni, who was packing away her bass guitar, snapped the lid closed. 'Roger, the only thing out of tune around here is your brain.'

Mrs Harper sighed. 'Please remember we are performing tonight as a class. Together. United. If any of you have petty squabbles, leave them at the door.'

'I've got a better idea,' said Jenni. 'Why don't we just leave Roger at the door?'

'It looks great.' Eddie surveyed the school hall.

After rehearsal, Mrs Harper's class, and the rest of the school, had spent the afternoon decorating the hall. It was almost unrecognisable.

'It's nice to get out on a Saturday night,' said Carol. 'Even if it is only a school dance.'

Eddie was dressed in his only suit and hating it. He tried to do up the button on his jacket, but it was too tight.

'This suit has shrunk.'

'That's one excuse.'

Eddie tugged at the collar of his shirt. 'And this thing is killing me. Why did we have to dress up?'

'Because everyone gets dressed up for a school dance,' said Carol. 'Including parent helpers.'

Eddie looked at his wife. 'Doesn't this take you back a few years to when we were this young?'

Carol had spent the afternoon with a girlfriend who'd done her hair. She touched her curls. 'Janet's good, but I wish I could go to a really fancy salon, just once.'

'One day,' said Eddie.

'I know,' said Carol. 'It's on the same list as proper made-to-measure clothes for Sam, and a new suit for you. When we pay off the mortgage.'

'Hello, son,' said Eddie, as Sam slipped through the door. 'Why are you walking like a bank robber trying to get away from the scene of the crime?'

Sam straightened his bow tie then tugged down the legs of his trousers. 'These are too short.'

'They're not too short,' said his mother.

'You can see my socks.'

'I hope they haven't got holes in them.'

'No, Mum. They're new, which is more than I can say for this suit.'

The dark suit Sam was wearing for the first time was a hand-me-down from Mike who was bigger in the body, but shorter. Carol had taken in the jacket and modified the legs.

'I think those trouser cuffs work well,' she said.

Sam looked down in despair. 'Home-made-it is, Mum. Nobody wears cuffs this big.'

Carol had let down the trousers as much as possible. And then cut up the suit's

waistcoat and used that material to make false cuffs. They just touched the top of Sam's shoes.

The sleeves on the jacket were also marginal, but saved by the generously sized shirt cuffs that hung down, giving extra length.

'Nice cuff links,' said Eddie.

'I thought you'd like them,' said Carol. 'They're yours.' She turned to Sam. 'Remember to keep your jacket on.'

Before he could reply, Jenni made her entrance.

Sam almost didn't recognise her. In place of her normal jeans and sweater, she was dressed in a flowing ball gown.

'You look lovely, my dear,' said Carol. She nudged Sam. 'Doesn't she?'

Sam blushed. 'Yes.'

Jenni responded by giving Sam her biggest smile. 'You look very elegant yourself, Mr Browne.'

She turned her smile on Sam's father. 'That goes for *both* Mr Brownes. And you, Mrs Browne. If there was a prize for the best dressed family, you'd win it.'

Carol stifled a chuckle as she took her husband's arm and led him to the punch bowl. 'Aren't you pleased you got dressed up?'

The Principal, Mr Taylor, started the evening with a welcome speech. He thanked the pupils who'd decorated the hall, the parents who'd come along to supervise, and Mrs Harper for organising the floor show.

To provide most of the music, the school had hired a local disco.

As the opening bars of the first song rang across the hall, Jenni turned to Sam.

'Can I have the first dance?'

'Shouldn't I be asking you?'

'Okay. Ask me.'

'Um... can I...?' Sam stopped, took a big breath then started again. 'I mean, may I have the pleasure of...'

'Yes,' said Jenni, 'to all of those questions.' With that, she took Sam's hand and led him out onto the dance floor.

The Brownes were on door duty. 'Those two make a great couple, don't they?' Carol said to Eddie.

'Apart from the height difference.'

'Oh, Eddie, women don't worry about things like height. It's the man inside that counts. Even if the man has filled out a bit over the years.'

Eddie gave the front of his suit jacket a tug to try and close the gap a bit more. 'Sam's a

good looking boy. A real chip off the old block.'

'You can say that again,' said Carol. 'He even dances like you.'

'Sorry,' said Sam, as his elbow hit one of the other couples and sent them flying.

While he was busy with the first apology, he managed to steer Jenni into a table. 'Sorry.'

Jenni led him back to the middle of the floor. 'Concentrate, Sam.'

By the 10th "sorry", Sam was ready to go home. 'It was like this up in the stand on sports day.'

At that moment, Roger passed them, dancing with Mrs Harper. He flashed them his biggest smile.

Jenni pulled a face. 'That boy drips so much grease, I'm surprised he can stay on his feet.'

'And if I keep stomping on you, you won't have any feet left.'

'Okay, Sam,' Jenni conceded. 'Let's stop and get a glass of punch.'

Roger, who'd taken Mrs Harper over to dance with Mr Taylor, was also at the punch bowl.

'Love the suit, Sam. It's so... different to what anyone else is wearing. It's very brave of you to laugh at fashion.'

Sam lifted his glass of punch threateningly. 'What would make me laugh is you, wearing this.'

Roger smirked. 'Don't make a scene, Sam. If you make trouble, they'll throw you out. Then you'll miss the floorshow.'

Jenni touched Sam's arm. 'Captain grease-bucket is right. Don't do anything silly.'

'Too late for that advice,' said Roger. 'Just look at him. Sammy the clown.'

Sam lunged, but Roger was too quick. Using the momentum of Sam's charge, Roger gave him a shove which sent him crashing into the table holding the punch bowl.

'Sam!' screamed Carol from the other side of the hall.

'What happened?' asked Eddie.

'Your son is about to get thrown out.'

'What do you mean, *my* son?' demanded Eddie as he ran across the floor to where Sam lay in a heap.

Mr Taylor had beaten them to it. 'Well, Sam,' he demanded, looking down, 'explain yourself.'

'I saw everything, Mr Taylor,' said Roger.

'Then you tell me,' said the Principal.

As Roger went to open his mouth, he suddenly heard Jenni's voice. She kept it low so only he could hear.

‘Go on, tell Mr Taylor. And while you’re doing that, I’m going to take the axe off the fire-hose reel and chop your drum kit into a thousand pieces.’

Roger spun around and saw the look on Jenni’s face. Not taking his eyes off her, he answered the Principal’s question.

‘Nothing to explain, Mr Taylor. Sam tripped. You were at the sports day. You know how clumsy he is. It was an accident.’

The Principal surveyed the damage. The table had been shaken, but had stayed upright.

Some of the punch had slopped over the rim of the bowl, but Carol and Eddie had mopped it up and were already replacing the tablecloth.

‘Very well,’ said the Principal. ‘Not worth crying over spilt milk, or in this case, spilt punch.’

He chuckled at his own joke and Carol and Eddie joined in, out of relief as much as anything.

Mr Taylor reached down and helped Sam to his feet. ‘I hope you haven’t damaged your hands. Mrs Harper tells me you’re a talented guitarist.’

Sam brushed himself off, straightened his jacket cuffs and tie, tugged down his trouser legs as far as they would go, and forced a smile. ‘It’s easy to play well in a good band.’

‘With a great drummer,’ said Roger.

‘Where’s that axe?’ hissed Jenni.

‘Mr Taylor, parents, friends, pupils,’ said Mrs Harper, looking at her notes. ‘Have I missed anyone?’

Confident she hadn’t, she continued.

‘I’m about to invite up on stage, for your entertainment, a band drawn from one of the finest classes I’ve ever had the privilege to teach, with some of the loveliest young people I’ve ever met.’

Jenni nudged Sam. ‘She’s forgotten about Roger.’

‘I wish I could.’

‘Let’s give them a big hand!’ cried Mrs Harper.

Led by Sam and Jenni, the band ran up on stage, grabbed their instruments and ran a quick sound check.

Sam switched on his hired guitar amplifier, kicked the guitar wow-wow pedal at his feet, and played a few chords to check the guitar was still in tune.

Jenni plucked all four strings of her electric bass. The low notes rippled across the stage and made the skins on Roger’s drums vibrate.

'I can do my own check,' snarled Roger, letting fly with a fancy drum sequence in which he managed to hit everything on the huge drum kit at least twice.

Sam saw Mrs Harper starting to tap her foot with impatience. 'That's enough tuning up.'

Roger spun both sticks into the air and caught them with his fingers.

'On the count of four,' he called. 'One, two, a one two three four.'

The music was catchy. It was fun. The audience loved it.

'It's very loud,' said Eddie, holding his ears.

Carol was clapping along. 'You're a basketball coach. How can you have sensitive ears?'

'I suppose we should be thankful Sam keeps the volume down at home.'

'This is too good to watch,' said Carol, 'Let's dance.'

'This isn't our social.'

'But it's our song,' she said, leading him onto the dance floor. 'We used to dance to this when we were young.'

'Sam said they were playing all new stuff.'

'This *is* new to them,' said Carol. 'It's so old it's come back into fashion.'

Eddie grinned. 'Maybe there's hope for us yet.'

The whole room was a seething mass of dancing couples. As one song ended, another started.

Onstage, Jenni moved closer to Sam. 'Look at your parents. They're pretty lively. But where did they get all those funny dance steps?'

'I don't want to look, I'll be too embarrassed.'

'No, you won't. They're good.'

Eddie did dance like Sam, all arms and legs, but Carol had more experience than Jenni in keeping a whirlwind partner on track.

'This is fun,' said Carol, raising her voice to be heard above the band. 'Are you okay?'

Eddie mopped his brow. 'Fine.'

'Not bad for a couch-bound coach.'

As the band launched into its last number, Jenni turned to Sam. 'They're all having too much fun. They'll want us to keep going.'

'No problem,' said Sam. 'I know a bit of classic rock and roll.'

'Perfect,' said Jenni. 'We'll follow you.'

As the final song wound up, the cheers of "more, more" rang around the school hall.

'Let's get serious!' cried Sam to the band. He slipped the guitar strap off his neck and started to pull off his jacket.

Carol, who was watching, went as white as a ghost. 'Oh, no!'

As Sam's jacket hit the floor, the hall suddenly went very quiet.

Sam had completely forgotten. His shirt had no sleeves!

Unable to find a shirt that was long enough, Carol had cut the sleeves and cuffs off one of Mike's old shirts and sewn them inside the arms of Sam's suit jacket, complete with cufflinks.

For what seemed like minutes, but was really only seconds, Sam stood, fixed to the spot, realising how stupid he looked and hoping and praying the floor would open up and swallow him.

Even Roger sat still, not moving, lost for words.

Thinking fast, Jenni swung round to the band. 'Rock and roll. Key of G.'

'What?' called Roger.

'The axe!' screamed Jenni.

Roger got the message. 'On the count of four. One two three four!'

As the band started a basic rock and roll beat, Jenni leaned into Sam who was still frozen. 'You're going to die up here if you don't do something.'

Sam looked out over the sea of faces. The whole scene was a giant haze. He knew his parents were out there somewhere.

He could also hear Roger and Jenni and the rest of the band, but they seemed to be filtered through cotton wool.

The loudest sound of all was his own heart thumping. The way it was leaping about in his chest, it felt ready to jump out and start dancing round the stage.

'I'm already dead,' he hissed to Jenni.

'Maybe not,' she whispered and stepped up to the microphone.

'Don't you just love that shirt?' she asked the crowd. 'Good old Sam. Saw that stunt in an old movie and wanted to try it out tonight.'

Roger was about to let fly with a smart remark, but thought better of it when Jenni glared at him and made a chopping motion with her head.

'Thank goodness for friends,' whispered Carol under her breath.

'Isn't it the funniest thing you've ever seen?' Jenni asked the crowd, and then glared at Roger.

'Yes!' he yelled, imagining his drum kit in a million bits.

Any thoughts about it being an embarrassing mistake vanished with the crowd now on Sam's side.

'What a character!' yelled Carol, starting to applaud. 'That's my boy!'

'What do you mean *yours*?' yelled Eddie. 'He's mine too!'

Jenni dug Sam in the ribs. 'It's up to you now.'

'Hey, Sam!' yelled Roger from the side of the stage, 'my foot's going to sleep holding this beat. Start the song?'

Sam suddenly snapped out of it. Slipping his guitar strap back over his head, he grabbed the microphone.

'For my next trick...' The crowd erupted in fresh laughter. 'We're going to make the rafters rattle!'

Sam was like a wild man. He was everywhere. Arms, legs, body, guitar. Jumping up and down, grabbing the microphone, singing, howling.

Mrs Harper turned to Mr Taylor in astonishment. 'He's such a quiet boy in class.'

After 30 minutes of rock and roll, the crowd was still yelling for more but Mr Taylor pointed to his watch.

'Time to stop,' said Jenni. 'It's past midnight.'

'Just one more song,' said Sam.

'I don't know if we should,' said Jenni. 'Mr Taylor looks ready to collapse.'

'So would you,' said Sam, 'trying to rock and roll with Mrs Harper.'

He grabbed the microphone. 'For this last song, let's turn up the tempo.'

Roger ignored the Principal's frantic waving, gave the band a fast four count, and they were off.

Carol was ready to drop, but wasn't about to give up.

'If Sam can do it, we can do it.' She glanced at Eddie who was as red as a beetroot. 'Are you sure you're okay?'

'I'm great,' he replied. 'I'm through the pain barrier. I can't feel a thing. My whole body's gone numb.'

Onstage, Sam's performance was getting more frantic by the second.

'Calm down!' Jenni yelled as Sam's flailing arms and legs flashed by.

It was too late for that. Sam was in overdrive. It was time for a big finish.

'Out of my way!' he screamed and, as the rest of the band gave him room, Sam launched into something he'd seen many times on television, in film clips of old rock and rollers.

As the final bars of the song screeched out across the hall, Sam threw himself down on his knees and started to slide, his body bent over backwards, his guitar screaming.

On TV the rock guitarists slid *across* the stage. Or *towards* the audience.

Not Sam, who'd somehow got himself turned around and was now sliding straight for Roger!

'My drums!' screamed Roger as the human missile hurtled towards him. 'Stop!'

There was nothing in that hall that could have stopped Sam's momentum.

With a crash that sent the drum kit flying in every direction, Sam's head went straight through the skin of one bass drum.

A split second later, like an arrow, the neck of his guitar went through the other big drum.

Jenni was first by his side. 'Sam, Sam, are you all right?'

Grabbing a bare arm, she dragged him out of the mangled drum shell.

As people crowded around, Sam climbed unsteadily to his feet, clutching his wrist.

Carol elbowed her way through. 'Thank goodness you're still in one piece.'

She noticed his wrist. 'Let's get you home and I'll strap that up.'

Jenni picked up Sam's guitar. 'Still in one piece, except for a couple of broken strings. Which is more than you can say for this drum kit. What a mess.'

She looked around. 'Where's Roger?'

He'd slipped out the side door and was now pacing up and down in the darkness.

Roger knew if he hadn't left the hall, he would have attacked Sam and that wasn't a good idea in front of Mrs Harper and Mr Taylor.

He was also thinking about the money he still owed his father for not coming first in class. All because of Sam. And the drum repair bill from tonight. All because of Sam.

Now he started to think about ways to get even. Get his revenge...

No matter how long it took!

'Ouch!'

'Hold still.'

Eddie had gone to bed, exhausted, leaving Carol to bandage Sam's wrist.

'You won't be playing that guitar for a while. If your wrist's no better over the weekend, I'll take you to the doctor on Monday.'

'Make that Tuesday.'

'Why not Monday?'

'Basketball trials.'

'Who said basketball?' asked Mike Browne as he walked in the back door. Saturday night was his night to party.

He looked at the clock. 'Big night for all the Brownes, huh?'

'Yes, and no,' said Sam.

Carol recounted the night's drama. 'And Sam finished up with a damaged wrist.'

Mike examined it. 'Doesn't look too good.'

'I'm still going to the trials on Monday.'

'Look, Sam,' Mike began, but then stopped as he saw the look of determination in his

brother's eyes.

'Just remember,' he told his younger brother, 'if you keep playing when you're injured you can do yourself a permanent injury. That's what happened to my knee.'

'Sam won't be silly,' said his mother, 'will you, Sam?'

He didn't answer. But he'd already made up his mind.

Nothing was going to keep him out of those trials.

Chapter Six

Mr Gerard, the music teacher, doubled as the school's basketball coach.

'This is only a trial,' he told the boys. 'I want to see some basic skills. See who's ready to play and who needs a little more time.'

'He's talking about you, Stumble-bum,' Roger snarled at Sam. 'You need more time. Life in prison for what you did to my drums.'

'It was an accident,' Sam protested. 'I said I'm sorry. What else do you want?'

'Blood!' said Roger.

'Snell and Browne,' said the coach, 'as you both obviously know it all, why don't you come out here and demonstrate?'

The boys stepped forward. Mr Gerard saw the bandage on Sam's wrist. 'What's that?'

'I think it's a bandage, Mr Gerard,' said Roger.

'Don't be smart, Snell.' He stared at Sam. 'If your wrist is injured, you shouldn't be playing.'

'It's fine,' said Sam. 'Just a little accident at the dance.'

'I heard all about it,' said the coach and looked at Roger. 'I wish I'd been there to see all the fun.'

Roger fumed, but didn't show it. 'Sam's wrist is fine. What do you want us to do?'

'I know your sporting reputation, Snell,' said the coach. 'Why don't you demonstrate a few basic attacking moves? Browne, you defend.'

Sam stood under the hoop feeling very alone. One-on-one with Mike was different. Mike was his brother, and a friend.

Roger dribbled the ball away from Sam and then suddenly turned and started in at high speed.

Sam's arms went out in all directions, but instead of sidestepping, Roger ran straight into him, sending Sam flying.

'Snell! What do you think you're doing?'

'Sorry, Mr Gerard. It's early in the season. I lost control of the ball.'

'It looked deliberate to me, but I'll give you the benefit of the doubt. Are you okay, Browne?'

'Yes.' Sam got to his feet.

This time Roger approached slowly, dribbling skilfully, teasing Sam, drawing him one way then the other, but avoiding contact.

'Get on with it, Snell,' called the coach. 'We can all see how clever you are.'

'Too clever for Super-soft here,' said Roger as he led Sam across court on a hopeless chase.

'You're not going to make this team, String-bean. You may be tall, but you're useless. Hear me? Useless. You can't even catch.'

With that, Roger took the ball in one hand and threw it with all his might at Sam's face.

Unable to get out of the way in time, all Sam could do was throw up his hands to deflect the shot.

'Snell!' yelled Mr Gerard, running onto the court. 'What was that all about?'

'I was trying to shoot. He got in the way. He always...'

Mr Gerard's attention was now elsewhere. Sam was doubled over, clutching his already bandaged wrist, tears streaming down his face.

'Sam's broken a little bone.'

The doctor pushed the X-ray into the light box to let Carol see for herself. 'It's called the scaphoid. Right there.'

'It looks so small.'

'Yes, tiny. But it's a common injury with boys of his age.'

A nurse showed Sam into the surgery, his wrist now covered in plaster.

'How long do I have to wear this?'

'About six weeks,' said the doctor.

'Good,' said Sam.

'What's good about it?' asked his mother.

'The school basketball season will still be going. I'll make the team yet.'

'Sit down, Sam,' said the doctor. 'It's more complicated than that. After the plaster comes off, you'll have to go easy with it for at least another six weeks.'

Sam's face fell. 'So I'll miss the whole season.'

'There's always next year,' said Carol.

'Next year?' said Sam, not convinced. 'By then, they won't let me play.'

'Why not?' asked Carol.

'Because by then, the way I'm growing, I'll be hitting my head on the gym roof.'

'I can't believe it,' said Eddie, putting down his bowl of popcorn.

'What can't you believe?' asked Carol. 'It's all in his report card. Sam's a real scholar. Top again.'

'I wasn't talking about Sam,' said Eddie. 'I was talking about this flu.'

It was the worst flu epidemic the town had ever seen. All the Brownes had been sick in the past few weeks.

'Worst I've ever seen,' replied Carol. 'Half the staff at the supermarket are away. Mind

you, so are half the customers.'

Eddie put down his pen and paper. 'I'm stumped.'

'What are you doing?'

'Trying to work out a team for Friday's final.'

For the third year in a row, the Metal-Makers Movers would go up against the Snell Transport Sultans in the final of the local business basketball league.

Eddie scratched his head. 'Terry and Mark have just gone down with this rotten flu, and Don's looking seedy.'

Mike came into the room and threw himself on the couch. 'What a week to play the final. The only good thing is we're all in the same boat.'

The Sultans were also in trouble. The flu had been even-handed. Both teams would be below strength.

'I'm worried about having enough players to even start,' said Eddie.

'If we ask around at the factory, we're bound to find some volunteers,' said Mike.

'We'll be lucky to find five fit men still on their feet, much less five who can play basketball.'

Carol tore herself away from her television programme. 'It's only a game. You make it sound like a war.'

'It is,' said Mike, 'and we take no prisoners. When we play the Sultans, we never do.'

The teams had already met once during the season. The Sultans had won, but only by two points.

'Things are looking desperate,' said Eddie.

'You could play, Dad.'

Carol interrupted. 'Your father's had his exercise for the year. The school dance.'

'Very funny,' said Eddie, 'but it doesn't solve my problem.'

'I could always play for you,' said Sam, remembering to duck as he came through the doorway.

'Nice try, Sam,' said his father, 'but we couldn't give you a game, even if we wanted to.'

Sam missed it, but Carol caught the glance that passed between Eddie and Mike. The glance spoke volumes. There was no way Sam would get a game for the Movers.

Eddie continued. 'It's nothing personal, Sam. It's just that outsiders can't play.'

'I'm not an outsider. I'm your son.'

'But you don't work for Metal-Makers. Unless both coaches agreed, it would be out of the question.'

With the plaster off his arm, and the waiting period over, Sam desperately wanted a game of basketball. Any game. And the school season had finished, with Roger the top

points scorer.

'Well I'll take my gear along, anyway,' said Sam. 'If you need me on Friday night, I'll play.'

With that, he ducked back through the doorway and bounded up to his room.

Eddie shook his head. 'I'd swear he's grown some more since breakfast.'

Mike looked at his parents. 'How did you two produce such a giant?'

'He's not a giant,' said Carol. 'You make him sound like King Kong.'

'Not King Kong,' said Mike. 'With those feet, he's more like Godzilla.'

David Snell threw the report card down on the leather topped desk in his study. 'I don't believe this.'

Roger had come second. Again. 'Bean-sprout just got lucky, Dad.'

'Isn't he the kid who broke his wrist?'

'With a little bit of help.'

'The only thing it's helped is his marks. Probably did him a favour. Rather than play sport all day and goof off, he must have spent time studying. Which is more than I can say for you.'

Roger shrugged. 'I'll do better next time.'

'You bet your life you will. You know what you need? More discipline. If you're going to take over this company one day, you need to start learning good habits. You need a job.'

Roger went pale. 'No, I don't. I already get an allowance.'

'Not anymore,' said his father. 'From today, any money you earn will be in the form of wages. Real wages you'll earn by working in the mailroom every day after school. Office boy. Sweeping the floor. Licking stamps. Help you pay me back for those drums.'

'But... but...' Rogers spluttered.

'Save your spit for licking stamps.'

Chapter Seven

For everyone, Friday night came around in a flash.

The Metal-Makers and Snell Transport basketball teams had a lot of support from family and friends. But with the flu epidemic still raging in town, the local YMCA auditorium was only half full.

In the Movers dressing room, Eddie looked grim as he addressed his team.

'What a disaster. Only five fit players. Well, four and a half. How're you feeling, Don?'

Don kept his head down. 'Like death warmed up. But don't worry. I'll play. But I don't know if I'll last the whole game.'

Mike adjusted his knee brace. 'Rules say we need five on court. We've got those. But we need a minimum of seven in the squad. Where do we find two more players for the subs bench?'

'I'll be a sub,' said Sam, waving his arms in the air. 'I've even brought my gear.'

'Sam's just joking,' Eddie told the team.

'No I'm not...' said Sam.

'Be quiet,' said his father. 'If you start making a nuisance of yourself, I'll send you out to sit with your mother. I've got enough problems as it is.'

Mike flexed his dodgy knee. 'Me, too. I sure hope this knee holds out.'

They were interrupted by a knock on the door. It was David Snell, the coach of the Sultans.

'Can I have a word with you, Eddie?'

As Eddie stepped out of the dressing room and into the corridor, he sensed Sam right behind him.

At the same time, he noticed Roger. 'This is turning into a father and son night.'

Snell looked at Roger. 'In our case, more like boss and office boy.'

'I don't understand,' said Eddie.

'You're not meant to,' said Snell. 'Look, we only have five fit players.'

'Same with us,' said Eddie. 'You want to call the game off? We could just share the title. Joint winners.'

Snell's eyes glazed over. 'You mean like *first equal?*' he said, glancing at Roger. 'No!'

'So what do we do?' asked Eddie. 'We both need two more players for the subs bench.'

'I've got an idea, *Boss*,' Roger said to his father. 'You two coaches could sit on the bench.'

Both men snorted.

'I haven't played for years,' said Snell. 'But if it saves the game... What do you think, Eddie?'

Sam started to laugh. 'Dad, you'd better ask Mum.'

Eddie's glare stopped him. 'No. Absolutely not. And we'd still be one player short.'

'Hey,' said Roger. 'Sam and I could be subs.'

'Yeah!' cried Sam. 'I said I could do it.'

'But league rules say players must work for the company,' said Eddie.

'No problem,' said Roger. 'I already work for Dad after school.'

'Well, Sam doesn't work for Metal-Makers,' said Eddie.

'But,' said Snell, 'the rules also say that if both coaches agree, they can waive that rule.'

I say we should let Sam play.'

'I *hate* the idea,' said Eddie.

'Look, said Snell. 'If our team can find seven players, and your team *can't*, we win. By default.'

Eddie frowned. 'It's just that Sam... Sam isn't...'

He stopped as he saw the hurt look in Sam's eyes.

'Isn't what?' Roger hissed. 'Good enough?'

Sam's father was cornered.

'Okay,' he said to Snell, 'both boys can be subs. But let's also agree that we'll only go to the bench if a player is sick, injured, or sent off.'

'No way,' said Roger, 'I want to...'

'Deal,' Snell told Eddie, cutting Roger off. 'Neither of *us* is exactly match fit.'

Eddie sucked in his stomach. 'Speak for yourself.'

'So I'm on the subs bench,' Sam said to his father, 'but I might not get a game.'

'If things work out okay,' said Eddie, '*no one* on either bench will get a game.'

Roger raced off to find team singlets and tracksuits for him and his father.

Sam also raced off to find two Movers' singlets, but only one tracksuit - for his father.

He'd come prepared with his own extra-long tracksuit and extra-big shoes.

Eddie muttered to himself and scratched his head. 'How did I get talked into this?'

Mike was shocked when he heard the plan and dragged his father aside.

'You can't do this to Sam, Dad.'

'I'm not doing anything to him, Mike. He's only a sub. He'll sit on the bench for the whole game and then he'll go home with the rest of us. And if someone's injured, *I'll* come straight on.'

'And straight off. Come on, Dad, you haven't played since before Sam was born.'

'It's like riding a bike. You never forget.'

'And just like riding a bike, the older you get, the slower you pedal.'

'You sound like your mother. What would you prefer? That I send Sam out there to be

slaughtered?’

Mike looked across to where Sam was busy trying on singlets. ‘I hope you don’t regret this.’

‘So do I,’ said his father.

The music over the loudspeakers announced the entrance of the teams for their warm ups.

Joe, Snell’s chauffeur, and the Sultans’ captain, led on his team, immaculate in bright red tracksuits, complete with team emblems. David Snell bought them new uniforms every season.

Jenni, who was sitting with Sam’s mother, spotted Roger run on and nudged Carol.

They both watched as Roger warmed up with a well executed jump shot.

‘I want to know what *he’s* doing out there,’ insisted Jenni.

‘Looking good,’ said Carol. ‘I’ve got a cold feeling in my stomach and it’s not the flu.’

Over on the other side of the court, Carol could see Mike, ready to lead on the Movers.

They looked drab compared with the Sultans and had worn the same faded green uniforms for the last two seasons.

‘Perhaps I should make new tracksuits for all of them next year,’ said Carol. ‘Look what a good job I did for Sam.’

‘They’d need sleeves,’ said Jenni.

Carol frowned at the memory of the school dance, but then something caught her eye.

‘In fact, there’s a tracksuit just like Sam’s. Same pattern. Same colour.’

‘Same boy,’ said Jenni.

‘Oh, no!’ cried Carol, as she realised what was happening.

Behind Mike and the others, Sam galloped onto the court, standing out like a beacon.

‘Tell me I’m dreaming.’

‘Nightmare city, Mrs Browne, but you’d better drop your voice. People are staring.’

Carol did. ‘I knew this cold feeling in my stomach meant trouble. The same thing happened on sports day. What’s Sam doing out there?’

‘Getting ready to commit suicide by the look of it. What’s going on?’

The voice over the public address system explained the changes.

‘Owing to the flu epidemic, and with so many players away sick tonight, both coaches will sit on the subs benches.’

Carol’s heart skipped a beat. ‘Eddie? Act as a sub? In what? A comedy?’

The voice continued. ‘And to make up the minimum number required by the rules of this league, and with the consent of both coaches, so will their sons, Roger and Sam. However, both coaches have also agreed that substitutions will *only* be made for illness, injury, or a

sending off.'

As the crowd applauded, Carol let out a sigh. 'What a relief. If we're lucky, neither Eddie or Sam will get a game.'

'What if we're unlucky?' asked Jenni.

'We could always leave town, I suppose.'

Games in the league were controlled by a referee and two umpires and consisted of two halves with a break in the middle.

'Shake hands,' the ref told the two captains as they got ready to start.

'I know this guy,' said Joe, as he shook Mike's hand. 'I've wiped the floor with him already this year. I never forget a bunny.'

Mike ignored it.

The referee didn't. 'Look you two, I don't want any trouble tonight, okay? You're here to play basketball. Remember that.'

Mike and Joe now faced each other in the centre of the court.

'Have you learned to jump yet, bunny?' Joe snarled at Mike.

'Get ready,' said the ref.

He checked to make sure the umpires were ready, then took the ball in both hands and tossed it straight up in the air for the tip off to start the game.

Mike leapt higher than Joe, got his fingertips to the ball and knocked it back to Tony, who quickly passed it down court to Don. The game was on.

Friends and supporters who'd seen the previous two finals between the teams, and the mid season clash, knew this would be a tough game. And it was.

The first half was closer than in their mid-season clash where the Sultans had taken a comfortable lead into the break. Not tonight.

This time the Movers held them in check, never letting them get more than a few points ahead before pulling them back.

In the crowd, Carol and Jenni were yelling themselves hoarse.

'Come on, Mike,' Carol screamed.

With only seconds to go on the clock before half-time, and two points behind, Mike went on the attack again, collected a lob pass from Tony, pivoted, drew an opposing player, and sidestepped around him.

'Shoot! Shoot!' yelled Jenni.

The crowd came to its feet as Mike dribbled inside the three point line and attempted a jump shot, but missed and the ball rebounded off the backboard.

Joe was right under it, but Mike was faster and this time made no mistake as he flicked the ball up and into the basket for a two pointer which tied the scores at 40-40.

As Mike's feet hit the floor, he spun around to his opposing captain. 'Not bad for a bunny, huh, Joe?'

'That's my boy!' yelled his mother.

As the half-time hooter sounded, Eddie, who'd been pacing the sideline, ran back to Sam on the substitutes bench.

'Your brother's playing the game of his life,' he said. 'It's all that backyard practise.'

'The opposition there is better,' said Sam.

Eddie ruffled Sam's hair and grinned. 'You might be right. Let's go.'

The half-time mood in the Movers dressing room was positive.

'We're matching them,' said Eddie. 'Don, are you holding up okay?'

'Just,' said Don. 'But I'm not the only one out there who's struggling. I see the Sultans have brought Charlie Wills out of retirement. He hasn't played for years.'

'We're on the way to victory,' said Eddie. 'If we can build up an early lead in the second half, we can win this.'

Mike wiped his face with a towel. 'Spoken like a sideline coach.'

'And that's where I intend to stay,' said his father with a grin. 'On the sideline. But if I *do* have to come off the bench and show you guys how to play this game...'

All the Movers roared with laughter.

'Stop the jokes, Eddie,' said Don. 'I'm feeling sick enough as it is.'

In the Sultans dressing room, the mood was the opposite. David Snell was furious.

'We've beaten these guys once already this season, and in the last two finals. Don't lose this game.'

'But isn't that what it's supposed to be?' asked Danny, a computer operator with the company. 'Just a game?'

'A game we're going to win,' said Snell. 'Now settle down and conserve your energy. I want to see a different team out there in the second half.'

As his father finished, Roger drew him outside into the corridor.

'If you're going to have a different team, Dad, you'll need a fresh player. Me.'

'Can't be done, Roger. We're only subbing for illness or injury.'

'Or if someone gets sent off.'

'That shouldn't happen.'

'Then just pull someone off,' Roger insisted. 'Pretend he's sprained his ankle or something.'

His father glared at him. 'I brought you up to be tough, but not a cheat. If we win this game, it's going to be fair and square. I don't want to hear any more about it.'

As his father stalked back into the dressing room, Roger beckoned Joe out.

'I've got to get out on that court,' he told the chauffeur.'

'How do you plan to do that?'

'Pull Charlie off. He's out of his depth.'

'Wouldn't your father come on to replace him?'

'No, I'm a better player than Dad, and he really wants to win.'

Roger explained his plan to Joe. 'Can you do it?'

'Sure. Charlie owes me a favour. Wait here.'

Joe was soon back with the Sultans player.

'Charlie, you look sick to me,' said Joe.

'No, just a bit puffed, but I'm fine.'

'Keep your voice down,' said Joe. 'Listen. This flu's real nasty. It's going to hit you hard any second. Very hard.'

Charlie frowned. 'Do you mean...?'

'Yes,' said Joe. 'Can you make it look convincing?'

'Are you calling in a favour?'

Joe nodded.

'Good,' said Charlie. 'I've been looking for an excuse to stop.'

'But it's our secret,' Joe told him.

'You got it.' Charlie felt his forehead. 'Wow. I'm suddenly burning up. My vision's getting blurred. Gotta tell the coach!'

'Thanks, Joe,' said Roger as Charlie left. 'One day, when I'm running the company...'

'You'll still have me carrying your drum kit. But tell me this. Why are you so desperate to play?'

'Revenge!'

A look of understanding passed over Joe's face. 'And once you're on, we'll see what we can do to get Sam on.'

'I'm licking stamps and sweeping floors because of that long streak. I owe him one.'

'Wasn't wrecking his wrist enough?'

'That was just pain. This time, all his family and friends are here. I want to humiliate him so bad he'll wish he'd been born a midget.'

Eddie came back into the Movers dressing room. 'Snell's substituting that friend of Don's.'

Don, who was sitting in the corner, lifted his head. 'Who, Charlie?'

'Suddenly come down with the flu.'

'Charlie's never had a day off sick in his whole life,' said Don. 'Healthiest guy I've ever

met.'

'Not anymore.'

'Who's coming on?' asked Mike. 'Snell?'

'Snell junior,' said Eddie.

'Trouble,' said Mike.

'Let's just say our chances were better with Charlie out there.'

But even with Roger on, Mike was on fire, scoring two 3-pointers as the Movers ran up a 10 point lead.

David Snell called a time-out which stopped the clock while he talked to his team.

Roger took the chance to pull Joe aside. 'Time to take old Pea-brain's big brother out of the game.'

'What if Sam's father comes on to replace him?'

'No way,' said Roger. 'He's more out of condition than my old man.'

'Why do I have to do all the dirty work?'

'Because one day I'll be your boss.'

'Okay,' said Joe, as the game got ready to restart. 'Watch how a pro does it.'

'Foul!' screamed Carol, jumping to her feet. 'That's my son he just fouled!'

Mike lay on the court clutching his knee, brought down by a brutal charge from the Sultans' captain.

'Honest, Ref,' said Joe. 'The court's covered in sweat. My shoes slipped. It was an accident.'

'I've been watching you,' said the ref. 'Another stunt like that and you're off. Got it?'

'Sure, Ref,' said Joe, turning and walking away. He winked at Roger as he passed.

Sam started unzipping his tracksuit top. 'Don't worry, Mike. I'm ready to come on.'

'Not yet,' said Eddie coming over and unzipping his own tracksuit.

Out on court, Mike managed to balance on one leg long enough to make the two free throws he'd earned.

Each free shot was worth one point, but he was struggling for balance and only managed to sink one out of two before hobbling off.

The Movers now led by 11 points.

As the game got ready to restart, Roger caught Joe's attention again and pointed to Don who was looking very green and getting slower by the minute.

'That one's struggling,' Roger whispered. 'If you take him out as well, Sam will *have* to come on.'

'The ref's watching me like a hawk,' protested Joe. 'I'll be sent off this time for sure.'

'But I won't forget the favour.'

'I know,' said Joe. 'When you're running the company.'

As the game restarted, all Carol's worst nightmares began to come true. Eddie had been out of basketball for too long.

Overweight, and out of condition, he quickly became the weak link in the Movers' chain, fumbling passes and missing shots he should have sunk.

From being 11 points behind, and with Roger sinking two 3-pointers, the Sultans were soon back in the lead, 70-69.

Joe finally got his chance to knock Don out of the game and, as Don caught the ball down the Sultans' end, Joe went straight in like a bulldozer.

'Foul!' screamed the crowd.

'That's it,' the ref told Joe. 'Your game's over. You're off.'

David Snell glared as he came off the bench to replace his chauffeur. 'I'm surprised at you. That was uncalled for. Play it hard, but play it fair.'

'But, Boss, Roger said...'

Snell nodded and beckoned Roger across. 'I've told you how I feel about cheating.'

Roger started to protest, but his father held up his hand. 'Save your breath. That pile of stamps you have to lick just got bigger. And your wages just came down.'

As Don hobbled to the free throw line, Sam jumped up off the bench, but Mike's hand held him back.

'Sorry, Sam, if Don comes off, I'm going back on.'

'But, you can't, Mike. *I'm* the sub.'

Eddie jogged over. 'You're only back on as long as the knee holds up, Mike. Agreed?'

Sam looked in horror at his father and brother. 'This is so *unfair!* You can't *do* this to me.'

While they argued, Don stood up just long enough to sink both free throws, before collapsing and being helped off.

The Movers now had a one point advantage, 71-70.

'Look,' Sam's father explained, 'We need Mike back out there. He's the only one who can win this for us.'

Sam was still upset. 'You're shaming me. In front of everybody.'

'Listen, son,' said Eddie. 'I promise, if anyone else comes off, you're on.'

Sam didn't wait to hear any more. Turning, he ran from the arena.

Eddie turned to Mike. 'Are you sure we're doing the right thing?'

'It's the lesser of two evils, Dad. Just look at Roger's face. He's like a lion waiting for the kill. And I'm not about to throw my kid brother in the lion's den.'

The ref came over. 'If you've finished your family conference, can we continue the

game?’

Jenni had seen what was coming and cut Sam off by the exit in the foyer. The noise from inside told her the game had restarted.

Sam’s eyes were wet. He kicked the door. ‘Go away. Leave me alone.’

‘I’m not going anywhere, Sam Browne.’

‘I’m going to die of shame.’

‘You might die from a lot of things, but shame isn’t one of them.’

‘My own father and brother.’

‘They’re protecting you,’ said Jenni.

‘I don’t need protecting.’

‘You’re so close to the forest, you can’t see the wood for the trees. Come to think of it, you *are* one of the trees.’

Sam smiled, despite his misery.

Jenni pulled out a handkerchief. ‘Here. Add this to your collection.’

‘I’m going home.’

‘No you’re not. You’re a sub for the Movers and you’ve got to be ready to play.’

‘Jenni, they’ll never let me on that court.’

Suddenly, Eddie came crashing into the foyer. ‘Sam, get back in there. Mike’s knee’s gone again. You’re on.’

Sam ran into the stadium in a daze. He’d dreamed of such a moment. Playing for the Movers. The dream quickly evaporated.

‘Wake up, Drain-pipe,’ snarled Roger. ‘Prepare to suffer.’

For the second time that night, Sam wished he could die as Roger began to run rings around him.

With less than a minute left on the clock, and the Sultans still one point behind, Danny passed the ball to David Snell who dribbled it down court.

Eddie stood in his way. The two out-of-condition fathers faced each other.

‘Who’s stupid idea was this?’ puffed Snell.

‘Roger’s,’ puffed Eddie.

‘That boy’s just got another pay cut.’

Roger’s waving arms caught his father’s eye. Snell threw the ball over Eddie’s head, and Roger caught it cleanly.

Sidestepping Sam, he shot it straight into the basket for a 2 pointer.

The score was now 72-71 to the Sultans, with time almost up.

Eddie called another time-out and the officials stopped the clock as the Movers went into a huddle.

'We're going to try something we do at home in the backyard,' he told them. 'Sam, get yourself down near the Sultans net. Whoever has the ball, pass it to Sam.'

The rest of the Movers started to protest, but Eddie stopped them. 'This move works in our backyard. Trust me.'

At the restart, Sam took off down court. The Sultans ignored him. He was obviously no threat.

Tony threw the ball to Eddie. There was a wall of Sultan players in front of him, but Eddie could still see Sam towering above them.

With a heave, he tossed the ball as hard as he could in the direction of his youngest son.

'What's that husband of mine doing?' cried Carol.

'Looking for a miracle,' yelled Jenni.

Sam's long arms shot straight up and snatched at the ball and fumbled the pass. And, as the ball slipped out of his hands, Roger charged into him and sent him flying.

'Foul!' cried the crowd, rising to its feet.

'Another one like that,' the ref told Roger, 'and you're off as well.'

He handed the ball to Sam. 'Two free throws.'

'If Sam sinks both we're back in the lead,' said Carol, hardly daring to breathe.

Sam missed the first one.

'Never mind,' said Carol. 'If he sinks this one, we'll at least be level.'

'Spoken like a mother,' said Jenni.

Sam missed the second shot as well. Still 72-71 to the Sultans and now only a few seconds left on the clock.

'Loser,' Roger hissed at Sam.

Eddie called another time-out. 'Listen. We still need two points to win, but we only have time for one more play.'

'What'll it be this time?' asked Tony.

'Similar to last time.'

'Fumbles and all?'

'Catching's not Sam's strong point.'

'What is?' asked Tony as Sam turned bright red with embarrassment.

'One change,' said Eddie. 'We don't *pass* the ball to Sam. We take it up court and *hand* it to him.'

'And they'll just stand back and let us?' asked Tony.

'They won't be expecting it.'

'I can believe that,' said Tony.

As the Movers took up their positions, Eddie jogged past Sam and patted him on the shoulder.

'You can do this, son. I know you can. Just imagine you're in the backyard.'

Mike was now sitting with his mother and Jenni, his knee tightly strapped.

'What's Eddie up to now?' asked Carol.

'Some backyard tactics,' said Mike. 'Same as last time.'

'But Sam dropped the ball last time.'

'He does that in the backyard as well.'

'Then what's the point?' asked Carol.

'Horses,' said Mike. 'Just watch.'

As the game restarted, the Movers won the ball and, with the seconds ticking down on the clock, Eddie passed to Tony and then moved up court.

Snell challenged Tony, who offloaded the ball.

Two more passes and the ball was back with Eddie, who dribbled straight for Sam, near the Sultans' goal.

The Sultans had already seen Eddie and his youngest son in action and underestimated the threat.

Which left Sam unmarked.

Roger suddenly realised the danger and charged towards him, but too late.

Sam arrived under the net at the same time as his father who thrust the ball into his hands. 'Sam-dunk!'

Like a rocket lifting off the launch pad, Sam rose into the air.

Straight up, the ball on the end of his arm, even though his body and legs were flailing in different directions, like a demented puppet.

As he climbed, it was like the night of the dance where time seemed to stand still.

Sam could hear the voices of his mother, father, brother, Roger, Jenni, but, again, they seemed filtered through cotton wool.

All Sam knew was that his head was now above the hoop.

And so was the ball which he stuffed down into the net.

As Sam's body fell back to earth, he could see below him the look of total disbelief on Roger's face.

And, as his feet hit the ground, the final hooter sounded.

The cheering told the story.

The Movers had won!

Chapter Eight

Carol put the cake down on the table.

'A family celebration. Three members of the winning team from the same family.'

'Did you bake this, Mum?' asked Sam.

'No, but they're a big seller at the supermarket.'

Eddie held out his plate.

'Wait your turn,' said Carol, cutting the first slice and laying it on Sam's plate. 'For the new basketball star in the family.'

'The only one in the family at the moment,' said Mike, tapping the plaster around his knee.

'What do you mean, the only star?' said Eddie. 'What about me?'

'I wish I'd had a video camera at the game,' said Carol. 'You wouldn't ask that question.'

'It doesn't matter,' said Eddie, holding out his plate again. 'I'm retiring. One game was enough. Well, half a game. I proved my point.'

'You not only proved it, you've still got it,' said Carol, pointing to his stomach with the knife.

'A *big* bit, please,' said Eddie.

'I'm retiring, too,' said Sam.

Carol stopped the cake knife in mid-slice. 'You're what?'

'Retiring from basketball,' said Sam. 'While I'm ahead. And athletics as well. I'm not cut out to be a sports star.'

A look of relief passed across Eddie's face.

'Horses,' he muttered under his breath.

Mike suddenly jumped up from the table. 'I knew I'd forgotten something.'

Grabbing his walking stick, he hobbled off to his bedroom.

'That was nice of Mr Snell to pay for Mike's operation,' said Eddie.

Carol nodded. 'I think he felt guilty about the way Joe and Roger behaved.'

Sam grinned. 'Poor old Roger. He's too busy to bother me anymore. He's working such long hours at the office.'

Mike limped back into the room with a parcel. He laid it on the table in front of Sam. 'A very, very late birthday present.'

Sam looked up at him. 'Something you made?'

'Yep.'

Sam pulled off the paper. Like the earlier present which Sam had rejected, it was a piece of flat metal, twice the size of a car registration plate. Mike had come up with a new inscription.

SUPERTALL SAM.

Carol glanced nervously at Eddie. Sam just stared at the plate.

Mike was already having second thoughts.

'Sorry,' he said, 'honestly, I've been racking my brains for months for a new name. I got this idea while I was lying in hospital after the operation. Maybe it needs more work.'

'No!' said Sam, leaping up from the table. 'It's perfect.'

His face broke into a huge smile. 'Supertall.' He let the word roll around his mouth.

'Supertall. That's me! I'm going to hang this on my bedroom door right away.'

He threw back his chair, and bounded for the stairs.

The family heard his big feet charging up the narrow staircase and the sound of his door being thrown open.

It was followed by an even louder yell of pain.

'How much longer is it going to take that kid brother of mine to learn to duck?' asked Mike.

'Don't be hard on him,' said Carol. 'He's only 13.'

'Spoken like a mother,' said Eddie. 'Can I have my piece of cake now?'

The End