

HERO

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CIP

chapter one

What is a hero? Can anyone tell me?" Mrs. Walker's voice hung in the air. I studied my notes intently, searching frantically, hoping that maybe this time she wouldn't call on me.

"Sean, what do you think makes a hero?"

I sighed and sat up just a little, pretending I didn't see the expectant looks from my classmates. "He's someone brave," I said, hoping that would be enough to satisfy her. Mrs. Walker isn't bad. I mean, as far as teachers go.

She's not too old. Probably in her mid-twenties. She's funny, and she always gets pumped up for our "class discussions." The problem is that she seems to know how to rotate through the whole class and get everyone to answer at least one question every three days. That's what I've been averaging so far.

I don't like to speak up in class, and with most teachers, after the first week I might have to answer one question in a month. Most teachers are content to let the quiet types be quiet and the loud-mouth clowns or brains keep the class discussions going. Not Mrs. Walker, though. Class discussion means everybody.

"Good! Bravery is an important quality of a hero. Allyson?" She directed her attention to the other side of the room.

"But, Mrs. Walker, heroes don't have to be male!" Allyson shot me a dirty look. I sank into my seat again, while the rest of the class groaned. Allyson is known to have all the answers, even for questions no one has asked.

"True, Allyson. Heroes are both male and female. What qualities do we look for in heroes? What makes a hero? Come on, let's get a good list up here!"

"Strength," from Robert.

"Smart," from Ann.

"Courageous," from Mike.

"Good. Let's put that with brave. What else? Why are heroes special?" Mrs. Walker never quit.

"They can fly," Michelle piped up.

"They can fly? Do all heroes fly?"

Michelle, as usual, was ready to dig in and fight. "Yes. Well, maybe they don't have to fly. But they need to have some sort of superpowers."

"Ummm, I don't know about that. What do you

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think, Stacy? Do all heroes fly or have superpowers?"

"No, but it helps."

"No, they all have superpowers," Rick chimed in.

"Can you think of a hero that doesn't fly?"

"Yeah, my dad," Sam said.

Rick groaned, "That's so lame."

"Richard." Mrs. Walker cut him off with the classic I-don't-think-that's-appropriate tone of voice. "There's absolutely no reason why someone's parent can't be a hero. So if your parent can also be a hero, what makes a hero? Who's your hero, Rick?"

"Chris Saunders."

"I'm afraid I'm not familiar with Chris." Mrs. Walker looked around, waiting for someone to speak up. An uneasy quiet fell over our class. We were all familiar with Chris; we grew up with him. But it was Mrs. Walker's first year teaching at our school. No one wanted to volunteer.

"You don't have to tell me who he is," Mrs. Walker said, responding to our silence, "but tell me why he's your hero. What qualities or characteristics does he have that makes him your hero?"

I lifted my eyes and got ready for Mrs. Walker's sweeping glance. It was Rick's hero; I could have left it for him to deal with, because I knew Mrs. Walker would return for him. But I was tired of it all. I was tired of her driving to school in her nice car after having a nice dinner with her nice husband and

children the night before. Tired of knowing she had spent the evening in a well-heated, spacious house. Tired of seeing her wearing clothes every day that most of us would never be able to afford.

“Chris Saunders was killed last year when he got jumped. He was an Ice-Baby. We all liked him. He’s a hero because he was real. He was brave. He was in the eighth grade for the second time, but he could tell you everything you needed to know. He didn’t hold grudges, and he always backed his own.”

I never changed the tone of my voice. I wasn’t going for shock; I was just trying to let Mrs. Walker in on our lives. For the last two months she had been coming in here, teaching us things we didn’t need.

Mrs. Walker didn’t flinch. She turned to the blackboard and wrote “Real. Brave. Loyal. Fair.” Then she added, “Strong. Smart. Superpowers(?)”

She turned back to us. “Did I fairly summarize the qualities of a hero that we’ve discussed so far?” A general rumbling from the class seemed to satisfy her. Just as she opened her mouth to continue talking, the bell rang. We waited. “Please read pages 89–95 for Monday. There’s a good chance you’ll have a quiz.” We groaned. “Have a good weekend!”

As the class gathered their books and moved toward the door, she motioned me to her desk.

“Yeah?”

“Sean, I wanted to thank you for sharing your input about heroes and Chris Saunders.”

I shrugged.

“I take it you were pretty close to him?”

I shrugged again.

She sighed and smiled. “Well, thank you. I hope you have a good afternoon.”

I nodded and walked out. Lee was waiting for me in the hall.

“What’d she want?”

“She thanked me for sharing in class.”

“Man, I can’t believe you said all that!”

I shrugged as I opened my locker. “Why not? It’s life. It’s time she heard about it.”

Lunch that day appeared to be a miserable lasagna made of dog food. So I spent my dollar twenty on a milk shake, fries, and potato chips instead. I believe in tasty and easily identified meals, not the ones the school serves.

Lunch was the only interesting part of the school day; it was the only time reality surfaced. You found out who was dating who, who had actually slept with who, who was dumping who, and, most importantly, who was going to kick whose butt. Today, rumor had it that Rick would be kicking my butt. It’s always fun to find out a thing like that from other people.

As a quiet person, sometimes I’ve been mistaken for a wimp. I thought I had already straightened out that wrong impression last year, but apparently

Rick needed a refresher course. I polished off my shake and went to find Rick.

Rick and I used to be friends. We had gone to school together since the second grade. People used to get us mixed up all the time, which was really weird, since we had stopped hanging out together in the fourth grade. I could never remember exactly what our original fight had been about; it seems to me it was about who was giving the better valentine card to Becky Marshall. But ever since then, we've only done one of two things: ignore each other or fight.

Somehow, from whatever the first fight had been about, things just continued out of control. In fifth grade, we'd get in shoving matches over our place in the lunch line. In seventh grade, we got into a few fights over calls made on the basketball court after school. We didn't have many classes together, but when we did, we each pretended the other was invisible. Once, a teacher tried to pair us up to work together. We sat at our desks for two class periods ignoring each other until the teacher finally assigned us new partners.

For a while, I remember missing his friendship. But then he started hanging out with guys I didn't like and he became a real jerk. Now I don't miss him. Now I almost feel sorry for him. He's so into his image of being tough and he uses so many drugs that he's almost not a real person anymore.

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I knew where he hung out; everyone's got their spot worked out by the end of the first week of school. I also knew that he'd have all his little buddies with him. That's why the gang punks always make me sick. They can't even take a leak by themselves.

Walking into the south corner, I could feel eyes on me from all directions. I'm used to it; it happens a lot when you take advice only from yourself instead of from a group. Besides, everyone could tell I was ready to call Rick's bluff.

Robert and Bryan tried to stare me down, but I knew they weren't the issue. Rick was.

"Yo, man, you got a problem?"

"That's what I'm here to ask you," I responded. "According to everyone else, I'm supposed to get my butt kicked this afternoon. You heard about it?"

"Yeah, that's right. I not only heard that, I'm pretty sure I said that."

I held my hands out to the side. "Why wait and waste time? Let's go."

"Man, you are one uppity turd. You think you're so bad. You're nothing. I'm gonna wipe the sidewalk with your face."

"Why are you talking all this crap? Why're you waiting? You're so tough, let's see it. Let's go!"

"Man, first he's got the balls to talk about Chris, and now this," Robert said, looking at the sky and shaking his head.

“Oh, that’s what got to you? And here I thought maybe you had heard about me and your sister last night...”

Rick slammed his Coke down and jumped up, eyes blazing.

I continued, “...but either way, you come see me when you’ve got something to say. You talk crap ’bout me, and I’ll just shove it back up your butt where it belongs.”

“What happens with my homies is my business, not yours to tell the teachers. And the next time you even *think* my sister’s name, I’ll kill you.”

I told him I’d never think her name; I told him exactly which of her body parts I’d think of, and that’s what finally got the fists going. I have to admit he can use his right hook fairly well. The bruise he gave me lasted a week. The security guards got there before he thought to pull his blade on me, so we were both escorted to the office.

Fights were routine for both of us, although this was the first one between us this year. I sat quietly, just waiting to listen to the lecture and then go home for three days’ suspension. Rick was sitting on the other side of the secretary’s desk. They never let us sit together after a fistfight. I thought that was the only smart rule our school administration enforced.

“Sean?”

I looked up into Mrs. Walker’s frowning face.

“What are you doing here?”

I jerked my thumb toward where he was sitting, arguing with the secretary. “Had a fight with Rick.”

She sighed and sat down next to me. “I’m sorry to hear that. Would you like to talk about it?”

“Nothing to talk about. He was talking crap. I put it back in its place. That’s all.”

She just watched me. She didn’t say anything at all, just looked at me with these big sad eyes.

“What? It’s no big deal. I just get a three-day vacation. It’s happened before, and it’ll happen again.”

“Why?”

“What?”

“Why? Why has it happened and why do you think it will happen again?”

I stared at her. Was she serious? But I knew she was. So why didn’t I have a good, quick answer? If it was such a stupid question, why couldn’t I answer it?

“Sean, I have something I want to tell you. And I think I want to ask you to just listen; don’t respond verbally.” She paused and took a breath. “I see many things in you, Sean. I see a lot of confusion, a lot of anger, loneliness, fear, intelligence, and stubbornness. And for whatever reason, each one seems to run your life on different days. What scares me is that in the last two weeks, I’ve seen just the anger and stubbornness. I don’t know what’s going on in your life outside of my classroom right

now, but if you ever need somebody to talk to, I'm in the building by seven every morning, and I stay at least until three-thirty."

I looked at her and nodded because it seemed like she needed a response of some kind. I hoped she didn't think I would actually talk to her about my life.

"You are an extremely bright person, Sean. And I know that sometimes school doesn't always seem important. But if you don't use your brains along the way, you lose touch with what you've got. I hope that you make the decision to stay with school, and stay serious about it. It's not an easy decision to make. But I truly believe that you will go far in life if you make that choice."

She was talking like I had a choice to be in school! I was only fifteen; I was stuck in school for another year. There were no choices in my life. They had already been made for me.

"So I hope you'll keep all of that in mind. You won't be in class for the next week while we're working on our hero papers. That just means you'll have to put a little more effort into it. I want you to write a paper for me, two pages, in ink, about who your hero is and why. Why do you look up to him or her? Why is she or he respected? What makes him different?" She stood up. "The paper will be due when you get back. I think you know that grades come out in two weeks. This paper is worth a hundred points, and right now

you've got a C-. A good paper may bring you up to a B, but a bad one will drag you down to a D. And if you don't turn one in, you won't pass this term. And don't forget that doing daily journal entries is a part of our class this semester. Just because you won't be in class doesn't excuse you from the assignment. Your entries can be 'free' entries, about anything you want to write. Now, do you have any questions about the assignment?"

I shook my head. I had a question, but it had nothing to do with the assignment. She seemed to think I was getting suspended for a week. Didn't they tell first-year teachers anything? Three days' suspension for a fight; you only get a week if any weapons were used.

"This is a good time to start making some important decisions, Sean," she said. I didn't look up.

"Rick, Sean, come on into my office." Dr. Bushel, the assistant principal stuck his head around the door. "Oh, Mrs. Walker, excuse me. Did you need anything?"

"Oh, no," she said with a smile. "I was just chatting with Sean and letting him know about the next assignment. I'll try to talk to Rick before he leaves for the day."

Dr. Bushel closed the door behind us and sat down at his desk. "Sorry it took so long, guys, but I had to talk to your parents for a while before I called you in here."

I looked at Rick, and he was looking at me. This was as new to him as it was to me. Normally Dr. Bushel talked to us before calling our parents.

“As I told you both before, there was some new legislation passed this summer. It allows schools to expel students with chronic behavioral problems. In the first two months of this year, Rick, you’ve been suspended three times, and Sean twice. And that’s not including what happened last year. So, we are now at step three on a five-step program for both of you. I have a behavior contract for each of you to sign. Step four is having your parents come to school with you for a week of classes. Step five is expulsion for one calendar year.”

Suddenly I realized that Mrs. Walker had known this was coming. That’s why she had been talking about making the choice to continue coming to school.

“Are we being suspended for a week this time?” I asked. Rick rolled his eyes at me.

“Three days hasn’t gotten the message through to either of you, so we’ll see if five will help. Three days of out-of-school suspension and two days of in-house. Richard, your mom will be here to pick you up in half an hour; go wait in the office for her. And make sure you come in before school tomorrow to get your makeup work from the teachers.”

“Can’t I just go get them now?”

“No, your teachers have other classes right now. You can come get them before school tomorrow, or

you can wait till you come back for in-house. Those are your only two options.”

“But Mrs. Walker has her planning period right now.”

Dr. Bushel jotted down a quick note. “Give this to Ms. Jones. If she can find Mrs. Walker, and if Mrs. Walker has time, she can come talk to you in the office.”

Rick left. Dr. Bushel just looked at me.

“Are you gonna make me wait here until you quit trying to get ahold of my mom, or are you gonna let me go?”

Dr. Bushel looked like he was in pain. “I’ve already talked to your father.”

Even though I didn’t want to, I felt myself tensing up all over. I hadn’t even spoken to my father in the last two years. What right did this idiot have to contact him?

“Oh yeah?”

Dr. Bushel nodded. “I explained our current situation with the behavior contract. I also told him that your mother has been either unavailable or unable to assist us in your discipline for the past few months, and that that was my reason for calling him.”

He watched me for a few seconds, trying to gauge my reaction. I was doing everything I could not to react, but I was breathing hard, almost like I had been running.

“Your father was very concerned. He’ll be here

in two hours to talk. You can wait in the detention room until then.”

I couldn't believe it. My father was coming here. I couldn't even think.

I was crunched in a ball, doing everything in the world to stay invisible. If anyone had asked me at the time, I would have happily agreed to take an overdose of anything. That may sound strange, to be ready to accept death when you're not even six years old, but even then I knew it would be better than what was coming.

They were fighting again. Nothing new there. And I'm not sure I really minded their fighting. I mean, I didn't like it, but I liked it a lot better than what happened if it was a bad enough fight to make him leave. When the fights were really bad, he would leave for anywhere from three hours to three days or three weeks.

I don't know if they fought before I was five or what those fights were about, but by the time I was five, it was my father's opinion that my mother 1) needed to quit smoking, 2) needed to quit drinking, 3) needed to lose weight, 4) needed to either get a job or at least keep the house clean, and a whole bunch of other things that I can't even remember now. It was my mother's opinion, at least while my father was there, that he needed to either take the stick out of his butt or go take a flying leap.

As soon as he left, though, her story changed. Suddenly, everything was my fault. Her drinking,

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smoking, weight, and even her state of apathy. So if I had made her life miserable, she saw no reason not to make my life a living hell.

The last time he left, the time he didn't come back until he had the divorce papers for her to sign, I couldn't leave the house for two weeks. Even then, some of the bruises were still visible. And my pinkie finger will never straighten out now. She couldn't take me to the hospital to get it set because they'd ask questions. So she wrapped it for me a couple of days later, when she had finally calmed down. But the bump's still there.

After the divorce was final, I'd still see him every month for a while. I liked being with him a lot. But I dreaded coming home. It was like being shoved back into the dark cave of a mad grizzly. I ended up dreading my days with him too. He never understood, always pretended not to believe me when I'd tell him about Mom.

And worst of all, he kept taking me back to her.

“Sean?”

I wrenched myself out of my memories. Ms. Jones was telling me to go back to Dr. Bushel's office.

I stopped outside the office. I couldn't go in there. My father had moved from out of state to a city an hour away two months ago. I couldn't believe how quickly he had gotten here. He must

have dropped everything at work. I knew Mom still had contact with him, at least in the form of the checks he sent every month, but I hadn't seen him. Why, then, did he suddenly show up?

The door opened in front of me. Dr. Bushel looked at me in a strange way. "It's easier to be invited in if you at least knock and let us know you're out here," he said. "I was just coming to see if you were trying to skip out on us."

I wanted to make a stinging remark, but I couldn't think of anything to say. All I could think was that my father was probably sitting to the right of the door, in the chair I couldn't see.

I wondered if he looked the same. Was the black hair he had given me starting to show any gray? Were those Parker brown eyes still behind the John Lennon glasses he used to wear?

Taking a deep breath, I stepped into the room, and just like that, the moment passed and all the questions were answered.

He wasn't sitting. Instead, he was leaning against the wall with his arms crossed. The last time I had seen him, we had spent a Saturday afternoon in the park and he was wearing cut-off jeans and an old, faded T-shirt that I had given him for his birthday. Now he was in a sharp business suit that looked collected and orderly even though he had loosened his tie. The silver streaks that were starting to show at his temples only increased the

calm, commanding atmosphere that had always prevented me from getting close to him.

He looked at me and I knew—the new glasses didn't hide the blank eyes well enough. He wasn't here for me. He was here only because the school had called, because he had to be.

"Okay. Daddy's here now," I said sarcastically. "Now may I go home and enjoy my vacation?"

My father didn't say anything. He just continued to look at me with those blank eyes.

"No, Sean, there are some matters we still need to discuss," Dr. Bushel said.

"Like what? I've been suspended for five days, three out, two in. And when I come back, I had better be a good boy, or Mommy and Daddy will have to come to school with me. And then, if I still want to be a bad boy, I may never have to come back to this stinking hole again. Did I miss anything?"

"What matters to you, Sean?"

"Huh?"

"I've been watching you, ever since you got here as a seventh grader. You were fine your first year. Last year, you were in trouble a lot, especially in the spring. So far this year, you seem to be planning to pick up where you left off last year. You act like you don't care about anything, but I know that can't be true. I'd like to know what matters to you."

I just looked at him. What did he think I was,

stupid? Like I'm going to tell him what matters to me. Then he'd just take it away from me.

My father sighed. "I'm afraid I can't offer much help here. These problems all seem to have started when I moved."

"Oh, don't flatter yourself. You had no idea what I was doing even before you moved."

My father raised an eyebrow. He hadn't stopped looking at me since the moment my foot came through the door. But he hadn't spoken to me. He was only talking to Dr. Bushel.

"I understand the difficulty in reaching his mother. The only times I know she's still functioning are when she cashes the check. She's never home when I call, and she doesn't return calls. That, combined with Sean's behavior, makes me believe he's not getting much guidance at home."

"That's the conclusion I had come to as well," Dr. Bushel agreed. "The question that remains, then, is what to do about it."

"I'd like to help, but without her cooperation, there's not much I can do. I haven't been able to reach either of them even to arrange a short visit. This is the first time I've seen Sean since moving back to the area a couple of months ago. The last time I dropped in uninvited, she called the cops on me. I can't run that risk again. My clients wouldn't want to work with someone who has a police record, regardless of the reason."

"If I were to call—" Dr. Bushel began.

I turned around and started toward the door.

“Where do you think you’re going?” a voice asked sharply. Dr. Bushel’s voice, not my father’s.

“Well, y’all are just talkin’ about me, so I don’t need to be here. I think I’ll just go home.”

“Sit down!” Dr. Bushel commanded.

I reached for the doorknob.

“Sean, we’re not done here,” Dr. Bushel said, raising his voice even more.

I stepped into the long empty hallway, and moved toward the door.

“Young man, get back here!” Dr. Bushel nearly shouted.

Halfway down the hall, I heard my father. “Sean, you’re not making this any easier!”

Ha! Why should I make anything any easier for him? He could have—no, he should have—just stayed away. I didn’t need him.

When I opened the door, I was blinded by the deceiving sunlight. It was cold.