

FREAK OF THE WEEK

CHAPTER 1

Clay Ashby ducked over behind a couple of seventh grade girls when he saw Nikki Kendricks up ahead in the hall with her usual crowd around her, but it was too late.

“Hey, everybody. Look at Clay Ash-a-by. He limps so b-ad-ly he looks just like my granddaddy.”

Everybody around Clay started laughing. Clay imagined stuffing snow in his mouth till his cheeks were big snowballs, but his face still got hot as he slid his eyes over to where Nikki leaned against the wall.

Nikki's hair was yanked back in a ponytail, and she was wearing jeans and a baggy Dodger sweatshirt. She looked cute. Everybody in sixth grade thought so. Maybe everybody in the whole middle school.

For one thing, she had that little smile on her face as if she knew everybody's secrets, and she kept the other kids laughing with her chants. Clay used to laugh too, but that was before she started rhyming things with his name.

Now he forced up the corners of his mouth to show he was a good sport and thought about somebody dumping a bucket of ice water over his head. As he headed down the hall to his next class, he tried to walk straight and smooth, but he felt like a lopsided giraffe.

No matter how much he tried to hide it, the limp was just there, part of him the same as his brown eyes and sandy blonde hair. Grownups were always telling him that was just how God made him and that there were plenty of worse problems than having one leg shorter than the other one. They said he shouldn't worry about the way he had to wear a special shoe. Especially one that didn't look all that much different from a regular shoe. And so what if he had a little limp. Nobody would notice.

None of them had to go to school with Nikki Kendricks. Nikki noticed everything and made sure everybody else noticed too.

The laughter was dying away when Jeff Hampstead stuck his foot out in front of Clay and tripped him. Clay did a belly flop on the tile floor. His books and papers flew everywhere, and the kids in the hall started laughing again.

Clay jumped up and began picking up his stuff. When he reached for his Language Arts book, an eighth grader he didn't even know snatched it away from him and pitched it across to another eighth grader. The kids howled.

Mrs. Byrd, the art teacher, popped out of her classroom. “Stop this nonsense at once and get to class. And stop using that book for a football.” She frowned at Clay as he yanked the book away from the eighth grader.

“Yes, ma'am,” Clay mumbled and started down the hall.

His tormenter followed, her voice softer now, but her words just as sharp. “Clumsy Clay went down the hall. Clumsy Clay had a great fall. Clumsy Clay's just clumsy, that's all.”

Clay wished he could sink down in a hole somewhere and hide out awhile. Since no hole opened up, he had to make do with his Language Arts classroom which didn't help a lot since Nikki was in that class too. She followed him through the door. The kids filing in after her were still giggling.

Marcie Green slid into the seat behind Clay and leaned up to talk in his ear. "Don't let her get to you, Clay. She just wants to be the center of attention." Marcie glared across the room at Nikki who smiled sweetly back at her.

Clay half expected Marcie to jump up and storm across the room to tell Nikki off. Marcie was okay, but she was always getting in a twist over something. Last week she'd been on the rampage about a story in one of her science magazines. Polar bears dying and icebergs melting. The week before that she'd grabbed anybody who would listen to tell them they better take care of the earth and that included cleaning up after other people if they had to. She'd roped Clay and some others into picking up the litter on the school grounds, even the ancient cigarette butts under the football bleachers. According to Marcie, they took a hundred years or something like that to disintegrate. Some of them looked like they might have been there almost that long.

Clay didn't want to be her next cause. She'd be hanging posters in the hall telling kids not to make fun of him just because he was clumsy.

Of course he hadn't really been clumsy. He was tripped. Clay looked at Jeff Hampstead a couple of seats behind Nikki. Jeff was staring at her as if she was an ice cream sundae or something. Clay would get even. Jeff was no Nikki.

Clay got his chance in PE class that very afternoon. Mrs. Rooks was looking like she might have already seen one middle school kid too many when they arrived in the gym for last period. So she pointed toward the slightly lopsided volleyballs and told them to play dodge ball. Beside him, Marcie groaned, but Clay grinned. His limp didn't slow him down in dodge ball because he never had to run flat out. And when he got to throw the ball, his aim was on the mark nine times out of ten.

Mrs. Rooks divided them up into two teams and went over the basic rules just in case some kid from outer space might have slipped into her class and didn't know them already. You were out if you got hit by the ball or ran out of bounds. If you caught the ball, the person who threw it was out. Absolutely no head shots were allowed.

Clay's grin got bigger when he and Jeff Hampstead ended up on opposite sides. Clay managed to get the ball early on with plenty of targets on the other team. Marcie was already out because instead of dodging she actually ran right into the ball just to get it over with.

Clay ran along the front line faking throws at the other team. Nikki ran along in front of him, daring him to get her.

"Can't hit me, Clumsy Clay. Not if you try all day."

He faked toward Nikki who practically fell down dodging the throw that never came. Then Clay whirled and blasted Jeff Hampstead full in the face. The ball made a nice loud pop when it hit.

Clay started apologizing right away as Jeff held his nose with one hand and pointed at Clay with the other. "You did that on purpose." He sounded like a mouse with a cold, and all the kids laughed.

Clay tried to look sorry as he headed toward the bleachers to sit out the rest of the game. A head hit automatically disqualified him.

"Stop caterwauling, Jeff," Mrs. Rooks said. "You're not bleeding or anything."

“But I feel dizzy,” Jeff whined.

A few kids out on the gym floor laughed and began spinning around. Clay pressed his lips together to keep from smiling. This was working out even better than he'd hoped.

“Cut it out, people.” Mrs. Rooks used her no nonsense voice. “Jeff, catch a breather on the bleachers, and the rest of you finish the game.” She threw the ball hard to Nikki. “You throw, Kendricks.”

As the kids began running out on the court again, Jeff held his nose like he thought it might fall off and walked toward the bleachers. Clay wanted to stick his foot out to trip Jeff when he walked past him, but he settled for a grin to let Jeff know they were even.

Mrs. Rooks must have seen the grin because she yelled, “Over here, Ashby.”

Clay dragged his built-up shoe a little as he walked over to her and tried to look genuinely contrite again. If she sent him to the principal's office, his parents would ground him for months.

He hung his head a little and said, “I'm sorry, Mrs. Rooks. I didn't aim to hit him so hard.” That might have been the truth. He hadn't really thought about how hard he was throwing.

“I don't want to hear it, Ashby. You aimed at his nose.”

Clay peeked up her before staring back down at his feet. “Are you going to send me to the office?”

“No. Do five laps around the gym.”

“Now?” Clay looked up at her and then at the kids still playing dodge ball. They'd forget all about their game and just watch him clunking around the gym.

Mrs. Rooks tightened her mouth and nodded. “Now.”

“I'd rather go to the office.”

“I'll bet you would,” she said. “But that's not what I've told you to do.”

“But I can't run. My shoe's too heavy.”

“One more word and it'll be ten laps.” Mrs. Rooks raised her eyebrows and waited.

Clay shut his mouth. Mrs. Rooks meant what she said. All the kids knew that.

He wished the walls of the gym would crash down on him as he started around the sidelines in a jog, a jerky turkey jog. The gym went quiet, and all he could hear was the slap of his shoes against the floor. Even that didn't sound normal since his built-up shoe banged harder than the other shoe. Clay heard Nikki laugh and half expected her to chase him around the gym with a new chant, maybe something about a wimp with a limp. Then Mrs. Rooks was yelling at them to start playing again.

When Clay got around to where Jeff was stretched out on the bleachers he gave him plenty of room so Jeff couldn't trip him again. But he wasn't too far away to hear Jeff whisper, “Freak.”

“You're the freak,” Clay wanted to yell back, but he was too out of breath. Besides, Jeff might look like a clown with his swollen, red nose, but not a freak. What did a freak look like? Clay didn't want to think about that as he kept lurching around the gym. His heart pounded inside his chest. He hoped he was having a heart attack, but no such luck. He had to keep running. Eventually after what seemed like days, he finished the fifth lap.

Mrs. Rooks was waiting for him on the sidelines. “I told you to run, not walk, Ashby.”

It took him a minute to get enough breath to say, “I was running. I just can't go very fast. Because of my leg.”

“It's not your leg that's the problem.” She gave him a look before she turned back to watch the dodge ball game. Nikki was still out there with about four other kids on each team.

Clay collapsed on the bottom bleacher.

“What I can't understand is why you went for Hampstead and not Kendricks.” Mrs. Rooks sounded almost as if she were talking to herself as she kept her eyes on the other kids.

How could Mrs. Rooks understand? She wasn't out in the halls between classes. She didn't have to worry about whether anybody liked her. Clay was the one who had to slide along the walls hoping nobody would notice him when what he really wanted was to be one of the kids who split the air in the halls when they walked between classes. Like Nikki did. And Nikki's bunch followed right in her wake. Nobody messed with them.

That's what Clay wanted—to be part of that bunch. He'd sort of been trailing along with Nikki's group a couple of weeks ago when she suddenly noticed him. That hadn't been good. She started coming up with all kinds of words to rhyme with Clay. But the chant this afternoon had been the worst yet. Now no telling what she could come up with after the way he'd hobbled around the gym five times with everybody watching.

And what did Mrs. Rooks mean? That his leg wasn't his problem? What did she know? She wasn't lopsided with one leg shorter than the other. She wasn't a freak.