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# CHAPTER 1

“I don’t believe in fairies!” Stan’s voice thundered over the jeering mob as his fist connected with the already red cheek of his opponent. The other boy was older, taller and obviously stronger but it was experience that mattered when it came to schoolyard fights and Stan had had more experience than anyone would ever want.

He was quickly able to size up any adversary and find their weakness. He had learnt to recognise the signs of a fight early and was a master at throwing the first punch and getting into the fight quickly rather than letting anyone else gain the upper hand. Stan knew that people thrust into a conflict were

emotional. Their hearts would race and their minds would slow. Someone not ready to fight would just start swinging rather than planning a punch. Stan had learnt through too many battles in the playground to take his time and keep his head. He had learnt that the first punch was always the most important, especially if it was quickly followed by a second and third.

Stan heard the roar of the crowd start to die down and knew better than his rival exactly what that meant. As the teacher approached the crowd dispersed and the older boy, red-cheeked and very sore, put his guard down and listened to the teacher's cries. Stan, knowing better, decided if he was to stop now the boy might come back and try again tomorrow. Stan was already in trouble with the teacher but had a chance for one last punch and he took it, catching the older boy off guard and sending him toppling backwards into the dirt. While Stan was considering if he should jump on top of the boy and keep going a large hand grabbed his wrist. He knew better than to resist a teacher's grip. He stopped instantly, turned and calmly looked up at the teacher, who was as red-faced as his foe.

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Pen took one look at her brother sitting outside the principal's office and knew why she had been called out of class, again. Her brother's shirt pocket was torn and he had dirt smeared down the side of his face. She glimpsed his red hands and dark hair dangling over his eyes and didn't need to look at the other boy sitting next to him to know what had happened.

"You promised," Pen said to her brother who didn't look up from the spot on the carpet that had held his gaze for the past ten minutes. She had been in this situation too many times before. The other boy would soon be facing his mother, who would at first be thankful he was okay and then be looking for someone else to blame. Stan had to deal with Pen. Their mother worked long hours and had told the school that she was no longer willing to drop everything to come down and talk to them about Stan. The school, in return, had said that the next time he was in a fight, he would be suspended.

Pen was seen as the responsible older sister. She was the one who was entrusted with the envelope from the school addressed to their mother. It was Pen who was assigned to pass on the news that Stan was getting a three-day break from school, and the playground was getting a three-day break from him.

The principal was calm but direct and spoke at Pen without giving her, or Stan, a chance to respond. She was simply told the news. Stan didn't offer any excuses and both of them knew it wouldn't help anyway.

It wasn't until after school when they were walking home that Pen finally asked, "Did he call me a name?"

Stan kicked his foot in the dirt, walking half a step behind her. "Nah, they've started calling me Princess Sparkle now. I think most of the guys have forgotten where it even started."

"So what was the fight about?" Pen said, turning around and standing in front of him, blocking his path.

Stan stopped and slowly raised his head to look at her. As their eyes met Stan shook his head and looked back at the ground.

"I don't know, he just wanted a fight and came looking for me." He pushed his sister aside and walked on.

Pen hung her head a little. Months ago she would have felt guilty and believed she was to blame for her brother being picked on, but Stan had become a bully in his own right now and she no longer felt responsible for him at all.

There wasn't another word spoken the rest of the trip home. They arrived at the front door together and realised that it was locked and the house was empty again. They didn't need to speak. This was common and they both turned around and sat on the front stoop, to wait for their mother to get home. Pen dug into her schoolbag for the packet of chips she didn't eat at lunchtime and pulled it open. Before getting a chip for herself she gave one to Stan, who took it without looking up.

Pen was always the planner of the two. Stan assumed his mother wouldn't be home either and that he would be hungry, but he had eaten most of his lunch at recess anyway. They shared the chips as the sun slowly faded in the cool winter sky.