

## Chapter One

It was the first day of school, and Jack had a new locker. He only had to hear the combination once to memorize it, but he still had trouble opening the door.

Finally it gave.

It was empty. It was supposed to be empty, because it was the first day, but the emptiness was the same as the emptiness in his chest. Another year of school. He liked middle school, but last year he started here at George Takei High and he was a freshman and didn't know anyone. There were three older boys who wanted to be his friends and they would invite him to the convenience store to buy potato chips so they could go to the park and eat them together, but once Jack got the potato chips they all got separated.

Now that his locker was in the new place he was all turned around and didn't know how to get to his first class.

"You want some help?"

He looked up. It was a girl he'd never seen before. Her voice was like Bambi's mother.

"You okay?"

What happened? He was thinking how he had to be in class.... Now the hallways were getting empty and one of the bells had rung, and he was sitting in the center of papers that formed an asteroid belt with him as the star.

Then he remembered: Some time ago—usually he knew exactly how long ago something happened, but the girl confused him—his binder had slipped from his hand and broken open, sending every sheet flying up and then floating to the ground. He'd shrieked in delight; he was inside a snow globe.

"Here." The girl bent down on one knee, pulled his binder toward herself and snapped it closed to keep the few remaining pages safe. "Let's get you together."

She collected the yellow dividers, and then began to gather the loose filler paper. "H'm." She squinted. "Is this from last year?"

"I guess so."

"Oh-kay." Her hair was the color of the pumpkin ice cream that would be back in Safeway on October 12<sup>th</sup>. But faces were mostly useless to him. He would sometimes notice something like missing front teeth. But it took a long time before he could recognize a person by their face.

"This is all homework," she said, holding some papers up. "So it *has* to be from last year, right?" She sounded like he'd played a joke on her and it was a funny joke.

"Uh... yeah."

His mother had given him a new backpack for sophomore year but he had put a lot of stuff from his old backpack in. She had thrown the old backpack away but he'd found it in the trash before the garbage truck came and now it was in his closet.

The girl put the homework in a pile and smoothed the edges. "Well, I guess that's one way to do it."

He heard each word and he knew what each word meant, he just didn't know exactly what they meant together. Jack's own language was complex and nuanced, but it was an unspoken language in the same way that some languages were unwritten. He'd had to learn English the way some of the other kids

learned French or Korean in those immersion programs. At sixteen, he spoke and understood fairly well—but it was still his second language, and so much of what he thought didn't translate into it.

In English, the name for his problem was Asperger's Syndrome. People like therapists and his mom and even his dad told him he shouldn't feel bad about it, but he didn't see how they could know that it was like being on the track field when everyone was passing you for the second time. They called that "being lapped."

"What if we separated the old stuff into one part? So you could put your new stuff from today in a new part? And we wrote down the name of the class on the dividers? On the white tabs, you know?"

"Yeah, good idea."

"I tell you what." The girl rose from her squat. "We're both going to be late if we don't hurry. What if I helped you organize your binder after school?"

"Yeah, good idea." *Why do I say such stupid things? No wonder everyone thinks I'm stupid. What could I say now to make her know how much I think inside?*

"I'll meet you back here, then." She wriggled into her own backpack. "See? This is my locker." She tapped the metal door that was at her shoulder level. "I'm Ashleigh, by the way."

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Damn cupcakes. Damn bake sales. Why didn't they just have the kids sell blood?

Not their *own* blood. I wasn't a monster. Just a bit overwhelmed at the moment.

I was running in four-inch heels, because 1) I always wore four heels and 2) the rear end of my mini-van was sticking dangerously over the edge of a driveway curb cut. I had to hope that I could drop off the cupcakes and return before the enraged homeowner got DPT to tow my car to the bourn from which no cars returned for less than \$500.

Who the *fuck* has a bake sale the first day of school?

I hadn't baked the cupcakes. I had a job, two kids and no husband. Also I hated doing anything that involved the stove, or a mixing bowl—or silverware, for that matter. I did not have money to throw at problems, yet here I was, bringing a \$40 box of cupcakes that would retail for \$28, all to keep up the illusion that Jack's mother (me) was a cheerful participant in the ongoing community life at George Takei High.

*Oomph.*

Suddenly my hands and knees were on the pavement. I felt the sting of violated skin. One heel had caught on a bulge in the sidewalk.

In the next half-second I saw that the bakery box had flown from my hands and landed face down. A black stain was already forming on the side. I could almost hear the frosting squish.