

One
Late Again



I should have said yes when Nick offered me a ride home. By the time I saw Mom's blue van, the field was dark and street lights dotted the parking lot. Shivering, I zipped up my jacket and packed my soccer gear.

Coach waved when he saw Mom pull up.

I was the last kid to leave. I jogged to the van and threw my soccer bag on the floor.

"Sorry we're late, Ben," Mom said as she turned down the radio. "We had some Hanuk-

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kah shopping to do and Grandpa was tired so I took him home before coming for you.”

I just shrugged. What was I supposed to say? I wanted to say that I am sick and tired of waiting in the freezing cold while my coach keeps checking his watch. “Late” had become a way of life since Grandpa came to stay. Grandpa is my dad’s dad. Mom and Dad had been asking Grandpa to move in with us since Grandma died two years ago, and now he was here for good. I thought it would be great when Mom quit her job at the bank so she could be home. Boy, was I wrong about that!

“Daddy’s making latkes tonight! He’s practicing for Hanukkah!” my sister Mandy shouted.

“That’s great, Munchkin,” I said, clicking the seat belt around my waist. When I was Mandy’s age I got excited about Hannukah, too. I still liked the potato latkes, and all of the presents, of course. But I turned ten on my last birthday, and that’s a little too old to get wound

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up about silly kid songs and plastic dreidel decorations. Besides, we only get our big presents at the end of the holiday. The first few days we get stupid stuff like pencils.

“So, how was practice?” Mom asked.

“Okay. Coach told us we made the finals for league championship.” I stared out the van window.

Mom stopped the van at a red light. “That’s terrific news. Why don’t you sound more excited?”

I shook my head. “We don’t stand a chance. We’re playing the Bulldogs. One of their defenders is this huge kid named Travis. Everyone calls him Travis the Tank. He’s fierce and he’s fearless. We’re going to get killed.”

“Just do your best, Ben. I’m sure it will be fine. The Eagles have had a great season,” Mom said.

She didn’t get it. I worked hard all season to become a starter. We made it to the finals, and now I was about to be destroyed by Tank.

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Mom said, “We have a lot to do this week,” as if she hadn’t heard a thing I said about soccer.

“Soccer is silly,” Mandy said as she patted the tutu she was wearing over her jeans. “Ballet is better.”

“Yeah, no kidding. You wear that pink tutu twenty-four seven. We all know you like ballet.”

Mandy scrunched up her face. “Mommy, Ben is being mean.”

“I’m not being mean,” I said. “You do wear that thing all the time.”

Mandy crossed her arms over her chest.

Mom said, “Kids, please. It’s been a long day. Let’s just enjoy a quiet ride home.”

I really didn’t want to fight with a five-year-old, or Mom for that matter. The van suddenly felt stuffy. I opened the window a little to let in a sliver of cold air so I could breathe again.

For the rest of the ride home Mandy sang

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“I Have a Little Dreidel” at least ten times, each verse louder than the one before.

When Mom finally pulled into our driveway, I couldn't wait to bolt out of the van.