

# DREAMCATCHER



ANN CURTIN

***The next day, Jesse went to Mike's house.***

They played video games and ate pizza. Around 3 p.m., Mike's dad drove him home. He had to read three chapters of a novel for Language Arts and study for an American history test.

"Hey, Dad, I'm home," he called, slamming the door behind him.

Big Bob was sitting in the living room with Jesse's dad. Neither man looked happy.

Mark Alvarez stood and came toward his son.

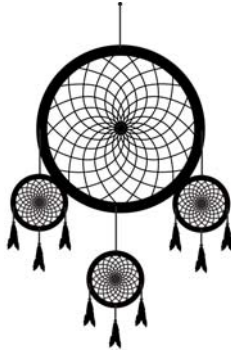
"Jesse, did you go out to the reservation to see Aaron yesterday?"

Jesse nodded. "Yesterday morning. I rode my bike."

"His father came to see me today," Big Bob told him. "Aaron's missing."



# DREAMCATCHER



A Novel By

# ANN CURTIN



*Zumaya Thresholds*

2015

*Austin TX*

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons or events is purely coincidental.

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**This book is dedicated to my mom,  
who always found space for one more  
ornament.**



## CHAPTER 1

*TWO MILES OUTSIDE THE TOWN OF RIVERTON, JESSE ALVAREZ* watched his dad wrestle their Ford pickup into a sharp left turn. Just ahead, the wrought-iron gates of Savage Ranch boasted “The Finest Horses in Wyoming.”

No rust on those gates. No squeaky hinges, either, he’d bet. Maybe Dad really had picked a winner this time.

The gates glided open so quickly, so smoothly, and so silently his dad didn’t even need to slow down. Twisting to see out the truck’s rear window, Jesse spied someone standing beside one of the tall cottonwood trees that shadowed the gates.

The man’s black hair was just long enough to brush the tops of his shoulders; a red-beaded headband stretched across his forehead. His dark eyes, even at a distance, bored into Jesse’s, slashing through the dust and gravel kicked up by the tires.

“Dad, I think we were supposed to stop at the gates,” Jesse said. The man was waving: *Come back. Come back.* “There’s a guy back there.”

Mark Alvarez shot a glance at his rearview mirror.

“What guy?”

Jesse pointed through the back window.

“That...”

The driveway was empty. The man was gone.

“Long trip got you seeing things?” Mark laughed.

Jesse exhaled loudly.

“He was there, Dad. I know what I saw.”

He had been bored during the eight-hour drive from Missoula, Montana to Riverton, but boredom now was giving way to annoyance. And not just with his dad for laughing at him.

He used the collar of his shirt to wipe a layer of sweat and dirt from his face. Just like the truck’s power steering, the air conditioner had quit on them a couple of hundred miles back. So it was either roll up the windows and swelter or keep them down and eat dust.

Jesse poked his head out the window as they continued past clean white fences and rolling green pastures where horses grazed under wide blue skies. Grays, bays, sorrels, duns, chestnuts, paints, and palominos raised their heads as the pickup’s loose fenders rattled with every bump in the road. After the truck passed, they dropped their muzzles to the grass and got back to the business of being horses.

Mark parked in front of the largest of three barns. The truck door hinges screeched as he stepped out and stretched, trying to untangle the kinks of the long drive. He gave a low whistle and shook his head in disbelief.

“When we talked on the phone, Mr. Savage said his ranch was big, but I never expected anything like this.”

Jesse climbed out of the passenger’s seat and shielded his eyes from the late-afternoon sun. Located a short distance from each other and connected by a paved road, each barn had its own parking area, paddocks, round pens, and schooling rings. They were the nicest he had seen at any of the ranches where his dad had worked, so clean and

white, with green trim, green shutters, and green doors, they shimmered in the sun. He guessed each one contained twenty stalls—ten on each side facing a center aisle.

“Are you sure we’re at the right place?” he asked. “I mean, look at this.” He was slim, yet strongly built. He tugged at the sleeves of his shirt, which left an embarrassing inch of his wrist showing; the cuffs of his jeans were a half-inch shy of his ankles.

“There’s only one Savage Ranch in Wyoming, Jess. I’ve got a great feeling about this. No worries this time, okay?”

Jesse nodded, automatically brushing back the lock of brown hair that fell onto his forehead. He didn’t share his father’s optimism. He had been the new boy at the ranch, and at school, too many times before.

Mark Alvarez came around the truck, gravel crunching underfoot, and gave Jesse’s shoulders a squeeze.

“Mr. Savage is a good man, Jesse.”

“Is that his house?” Jesse pointed to the immense log home that sat on a hill overlooking the ranch. The high peaks of the Wind River Mountains dominated the skyline behind the house.

Mark nodded. “Big Bob lives there with his wife and kids. Two boys, I think.”

“Big Bob?”

“I hear everyone in Riverton knows Big Bob Savage,” Mark laughed. “Heck, I hear everyone in the state of Wyoming knows Big Bob. He said he’d be in the big barn. Let’s go find him.”

Big Bob lived up to his name. He stood 6-foot-3, and looked powerful enough to wrestle a steer to the ground. He came out of the barn in the company of a younger man and strode toward Mark and Jesse, showing a smile full of white teeth. He was fit, his face tanned and a little lined.

“Mark!” Big Bob boomed, causing the horses in a nearby round pen to swivel their ears in interest. “I see you and Jesse made it in one piece. Welcome to Savage Ranch.”



“It’s everything you said it would be...and more, Mr. Savage.”

“Oh, call me Big Bob—everyone does. Jesse...” Big Bob offered a bear-paw-sized hand. Jesse hesitated for a second before reaching to clasp it.

“Heck of a handshake you’ve got there, Jesse. Strong. Direct.” Big Bob let go of Jesse’s hand. “I’ll let you in on a little secret. I know if I want to do business with a man by the time I finish shaking his hand.”

“That fast?”

“Yep,” Big Bob said. “Dishonest men usually give themselves away. They get nervous. You can feel it. And they rarely look you in the eye. Now, you...” Big Bob pointed at him. “...I’d do business with you any day.”

Jesse smiled.

Big Bob introduced the younger man.

“This is my son Beau.”

Beau smiled and touched the brim of his hat.

“Nice to meet you both.”

“The foreman’s office is in one of the smaller barns,” Big Bob said. “Let’s take a walk down there.”

Jesse studied Beau as they walked to the stable. There was something familiar about him.

“Beau’s my right-hand man,” Big Bob said, clapping his son around the shoulders. “He’s just about running things around here now he’s back from college.”

“That’s it!” Jesse snapped his fingers. “Beau Savage! I know you! You were on the University of Wyoming rodeo team.”

“Yeah, I was.” Beau smiled again.

“Two-time national champ at bull-riding and roping. School record for sitting broncs. Everyone thought you were going to turn pro.”

Beau shrugged. “Dad needed me.”

“Yeah, but you were—are—the best.”

Beau cut a sidelong glance at Big Bob.

“There’s a big difference between being on a school team and trying to make it as a pro.”

“With the way you ride and rope, it’d be no problem,” Jesse persisted. “You’d get a sponsor so fast—they’d be lining up to put their name on your back. You’d get your own truck and trailer, and I bet a—”

“Jesse, “ his dad interrupted, using his “pay-attention-to-me” tone.

Big Bob’s cell phone rang, so he excused himself and walked off a few feet to take the call. Mark shook his head briskly.

*Okay, I get it, Jesse thought. You want me to drop the rodeo talk. But what’s the big deal?*

Big Bob snapped the phone shut.

“Nothing like a little business deal to end the day.” He looked at Beau. “Feel like driving over to John Benton’s place tomorrow morning to take a look at a few fillies?”

“Sure, no problem.”

“Great.” Big Bob rubbed his hands together. “Beau and I are going to show your dad around the ranch, Jesse. Talk about his job a little bit and give him the quick tour, since it’s getting on to dinnertime. You’re welcome to tag along if you like. Or you can stay here and introduce yourself to some of my horses. Most of them are still turned out, but a few have been brought back in for the night.”

“I’ll stay here,” Jesse said. He’d never pass on an opportunity to be around horses.

“We’ll be back in about thirty minutes,” Big Bob said. “Can you keep yourself busy for that long?”

“Not a problem, Mr. Savage.” Jesse said. He was eager to get inside for a look at the stock.

“Great,” Big Bob said. “Mark, let’s start with your office.”



## CHAPTER 2

*JESSE STROLLED DOWN THE CENTER AISLE OF THE BARN, NODDING* at the ranch hands busy mucking stalls, cleaning tack, and grooming horses in crossties.

“Hey, kid, lend me a hand over here, will ya?” a lanky cowboy called out to him.

“Sure,” Jesse said. “What do you need?”

“Grab hold of Belle’s halter for a minute.”

“Really?”

“You’re walking through the middle of a stable on Savage Ranch. I reckon you know your way round a horse.”

“I do.”

“Good. I gotta wrap Belle’s legs, but I left the tape in the tack room. Be right back.”

“She’s beautiful,” Jesse said, stroking the chestnut mare’s neck.

“That she is,” the cowboy said, jogging toward the tack room. “Sixteen hands of gorgeous.”

*Take your time,* Jesse thought.

The mare’s luminous liquid-brown eyes took him in, and she nickered softy. He reached up to touch her velvety

nose and was rewarded when she blew a puff of warm air onto his fingers.

Jesse was so busy with the mare it took him almost a minute to realize someone was watching him. He looked over his shoulder and saw a boy leaning against a nearby stall. The boy was blond, with ice-blue eyes that met Jesse's without blinking. A silk wild rag was tied around his neck, and his jeans were covered in dust. He held a bridle in one hand and a Stetson hat in the other.

"Hey," Jesse said, "does your dad work here, too? My dad's the new foreman. Maybe your dad will be working with mine."

The boy didn't say a word. He placed the Stetson carefully on his head so the brim shielded his eyes. He then strode past Jesse out of the barn.

"Man, what's his problem?" he asked the mare. She snorted and shook her head. "Yeah, I don't know, either."

The cowboy returned holding a roll of red Equi-Tape.

"Wanna walk her up front? There's some open crossties up there by the foreman's office."

"My dad's office," Jesse said.

"New foreman's kid, huh? Nice to meet ya. I'm Henry. You wanna visit Belle again, you just let me know."

Jesse tugged on the mare's halter to get her going. Just being close to such a fine horse made him smile.

*I'd give anything to ride her,* he thought.

He stopped the mare between a set of crossties. As he clipped the ties to the halter's rings he saw Big Bob, Beau, and his dad enter the barn.

"You're back already?" He blurted out. He wasn't ready to leave Belle yet.

Big Bob chuckled.

"I see you've met Henry. And he's put you to work."

"I don't mind," Jesse said.

"You got a nice way with horses," Henry said. "Thanks for the help."

Jesse gave the mare one last scratch behind her ears.

"You must have the nicest horses in Wyoming, Mr. Savage."

"I'm not going to disagree with that, Jesse," Big Bob said. He reached into his pocket and pulled out a key. "Here you go, Mark. The foreman's office is all yours."

"Thanks, Mr. Sav—Big Bob," Mark said. "See you bright and early tomorrow morning."

"I look forward to it, Mark. And Jesse, nice meeting you. Good luck at school tomorrow."

"Thanks. Oh, Mr. Savage? This might sound like a weird question, but do you have any Indian ranch hands?"

Big Bob and Beau exchanged looks.

"Why do you ask?"

"Jesse thought he saw someone down by the gates," Mark explained.

"I did see someone," Jesse insisted. "An Indian man."

"We've had men from the local Arapaho and Shoshone nations working here at one time or another," Big Bob said. "But the only Indian ranch hand here now is Jimmy Singing Bird, and he's loading bales of hay into that pickup behind you."

Jesse turned to see an older Indian man wearing a black T-shirt, jeans, and dusty cowboy boots. His hair was close-cropped and gray.

He shook his head.

"That's not him. He was wearing a headband with red and white beads."

Big Bob and Beau looked at each other again, this time for a little longer.

"Had a horse trainer here once who wore a headband like that," Big Bob said, "but that was over a year ago. It couldn't be him."

"What'd he look like?" Beau asked.

"He was a young guy, and his hair was long. It went down below his shoulders."

“The Wind River Reservation is just outside our gates,” Big Bob said. “I reckon we just had ourselves a visitor. Happens all the time. A lot of men come our way looking for work.”



## CHAPTER 3

*MARK AND JESSE LEFT THE STABLE AND STARTED BACK TO* their truck.

“Did you have a good time looking around?” Mark asked. “Are you as impressed as I am with Savage Ranch?”

“Yeah,” Jesse said, “how could I not be? Temperature-controlled stalls, automatic waterers, mats in the center aisles...The horses here aren’t like any I’ve been around before, either. They’re sleek and glossy, like movie stars. You can’t stop staring at them. Even the ranch horses are amazing. Oh, and I met some kid. Wouldn’t talk to me.”

“Shy, maybe?”

Jesse considered this.

“No,” he decided, “something else.”

“What do you think about Big Bob?”

“Well, you sure can tell he’s the boss. But he’s nice. I like him.”

“I like him, too,” Mark said. “He’s not like any boss I’ve had before. He’s the first to see me as a foreman.”

“That’s so cool you’ve got your own office. Cool about Beau being here, too. I remember hearing on the radio how

he was all set to turn pro and join the Wyoming state team. Wonder why he didn't?"

"I guess that's between Big Bob and Beau," Mark said. "I kind of get the feeling that, nice as he is, what Big Bob wants, Big Bob gets."

"Yeah, I got that, too. So, where's the bunkhouse?"

A wide grin spread across his father's face.

"Ranch hands live in a bunkhouse. The foreman gets his own house."

"We have a house?" Jesse paused with the truck door halfway open and stared at his father. "No way."

"Get in."

They took a narrow dirt road past the stables. Around a small bend, through a cluster of pine and cottonwood trees, Jesse saw a small white-shingled house. It was private and peaceful; mule deer grazed along the edge of the woods, and the only noise came from the birds in the trees and a stream gurgling behind the house.

"Feeds into the Shoshone River," Mark said with a nod toward the stream.

The house couldn't compare to the one owned by the Savage family, but Jesse was still amazed he and his dad would have it to themselves. He dashed up onto the front porch.

"Door's open," he called.

Mark Alvarez bounded up and followed Jesse through the front door. The house was neat and clean and nicely, although not expensively, furnished right down to sheets on the beds, towels in the bathroom, and silverware and dishes in the kitchen. A good thing, too, since what little the Alvarez men owned fit in their truck.

The house had a living room with a stone fireplace, a kitchen big enough to eat in, one large bathroom, and two bedrooms. Large area rugs with a Western design covered the hardwood floors. And the place was immaculate. The



kitchen counter and sink gleamed, and there wasn't a speck of dust on the couch, floor, or any of the end tables.

Jesse wandered over to the fridge and swung the door open. It was packed with food.

"Wow. Where'd all this come from?" He pulled out a glass pitcher for a closer look. "Someone even made iced tea for us. Think it was Mrs. Savage?"

"I do," Mark said. "She must be a thoughtful woman."

The cabinets and the bread drawer were also full.

"You know, I'm suddenly hungry," Jesse said.

"Me, too," Mark said. He rifled through the boxes, bottles, and cans in the cabinets. "Let's do something easy, like spaghetti. I'm bushed from the drive."

They worked together, boiling water for the pasta and setting the table.

"That smells good." Mark leaned in to smell the sauce Jesse was stirring on the stove.

"It's from a jar." Jesse spoke quietly. "Not like Mom's homemade sauce." He tapped the spoon against the rim of the pot and laid it on the counter. "I dream about Mom sometimes. She's in the kitchen making her spaghetti sauce, and she calls me to come and taste it. I run and run, but the hallway just gets longer. I always wake up without finding her."

"I know you miss her."

"She'd like this house, don't you think?" Jesse asked. "I bet she'd come visit us if she knew we had a house."

"Next time she calls, you can tell her all about it."

Jesse nodded and went to the cabinet to grab some glasses. He didn't mention his mom again. He'd learned a long time ago that pestering his dad wouldn't get him everything he wanted.



After dinner, Mark rubbed his full belly and stood up.

“Better unpack,” he said. “You take the big bedroom, Jess. I’m going to get you a desk for your schoolwork. We’ll pick up some new jeans and school clothes, too. You’re already growing out of everything I just bought.”

“Okay, Dad.”

He went into his new bedroom and flopped backwards onto the bed. He could hear the stream through the closed window. It was a comforting sound, and it made him feel sleepy...

Blinking hard, Jesse sat up; daylight was fading, but it was still too early to go to bed. He stared at the bare walls and thought about his rolled-up rodeo posters out in the truck. Experience had taught him he wouldn’t stick around long enough to bother putting any personal touches on his bedroom. He wanted to believe—and he already felt—that this time would be different.

For now, though, the walls would remain bare, and the posters would remain rolled up in the back of the truck.

He wandered over to the window, pulled up the shade...

And stared into the same dark eyes he had seen earlier when they’d passed through the gates of Savage Ranch. The young Indian man stood a short distance away on the stream bank. In the second or so it took for Jesse to think about calling his dad, the man vanished. Again.



## CHAPTER 4

*JESSE JUMPED OFF THE BUS IN FRONT OF HIS NEW MIDDLE* school early the next morning with the same old questions running through his mind: Where will I sit? Will anyone talk to me? Will I fit in? This was not the first time he had changed schools after the year had begun. No matter how many times he did it, it didn't get any easier.

After a quick stop in the office to get his class schedule, he joined the crowd of kids jostling for space in the hallway. Teenage voices, locker doors clanging shut, and PA announcements bombarded his ears. Most kids ignored him, but some stared. He found his first-period classroom, took a deep breath, and walked in.

He grabbed the first empty seat he saw and pulled his notebook out of his backpack. So far, so good. He sat back and relaxed a little.

A girl walked over and stood right in front of him. The headband holding back her long white-blond hair matched the deep blue of her eyes. She smiled with perfect white teeth.

Jesse smiled back.

“You’re new,” she said.

He could only nod. Sometimes his brain and his mouth wouldn’t work at the same time when he was near a girl he thought was pretty.

“What’s your name?”

“Um...Jesse...Yeah, Jesse.” For a moment, he wasn’t sure. But, hey, if this girl wanted to talk to him, maybe another new school wouldn’t be so bad.

“You’re in my seat, Jesse,” the girl said.

“Oh, right...right...sorry.” He leapt up, his face flushing at the sound of laughter ringing in his ears.

“Oh, snap!” a girl seated behind Jesse said. “Lexi, you are so mean! Hassling the new kid.”

“Like you don’t throw a fit if someone even looks at *your* seat.” Lexi rolled her eyes. She slid into the chair and started to unpack her books without another glance at Jesse.

He stood awkwardly by the door as the rest of the class filed in and took their seats. He pretended to be interested in his schedule, but how long could you stare at the same piece of paper without looking stupid?

The teacher, Miss Miller, came into the classroom as the first-period bell rang. Stragglers were now flying down the hallway, hoping to get to class before the doors closed and they were marked tardy. Miss Miller smiled at Jesse and motioned for him to stand with her at the front of the room.

“Class,” she said, loudly enough to get her students’ attention, “we have a new student joining us.” She placed a hand on Jesse’s shoulder. “This is Jesse Alvarez.”

Jesse stole a glance at Lexi; she was turning the pages of her binder, not even paying attention.

“Why don’t you tell us a little something about yourself, Jesse,” Miss Miller continued. “Help us get to know you.”

“Well...um...we just moved here from Montana,” Jesse stammered. He didn’t like being on display.

“What brings your family to Wyoming?” Miss Miller asked.

“My dad got a new job.”

“Well, I look forward to meeting your parents.”

“No, ma’am. I mean, it’s just me and my dad. Just my dad.” Jesse frowned. Did he really have to stand up here and talk about such private family matters?

“Thank you for sharing that with us, Jesse,” Miss Miller said. “Let’s find you a seat and begin class.”

“Miss Miller! Miss Miller!” The voice came from the second row next to the windows. A small boy with shiny jet-black hair waved his hand frantically in the air. “Jesse can sit in back of me. There’s an empty desk behind mine. See? No one’s sat there since Ryan moved to Cheyenne.”

“No one *wants* to sit there,” a boy in the back of the room called out. A few kids snickered.

“That’s a great idea, Aaron,” Miss Miller said.

“Aw, Aaron’s got a friend now, “ the same boy said. Loud laughter broke out across the class.

“That’s enough, Luke,” Miss Miller said sharply.

Jesse slid into his new seat, opened his notebook, and pulled out his pencil. Aaron turned around and grinned at him.

“Hi!” he said. “I’m Aaron Little Elk. Aren’t these great seats, right by the window? I love sitting by the window. There’s always something to see...”

The boy yammered on as if he weren’t in a classroom and didn’t have a teacher standing in front of him. Jesse heard whispers and muffled laughter start up again.

He interrupted Aaron’s monologue.

“Yeah, maybe you should turn around now.”

He wanted less attention from his new classmates, not more.

The corners of Aaron’s mouth turned down. He slumped in his seat.

Jesse leaned over his desk. He'd regretted his words as soon as he had said them. He didn't want to hurt Aaron. He knew what it was like to be taunted in school, and he hoped he hadn't made Aaron feel the same way.

"I just don't want you to get in trouble for talking because of me," he whispered. He had noticed the desk in front of Aaron was empty, too. Didn't this kid have *any* friends?

"It's all right." Aaron waved Jesse's apology away with one hand. "Reuben says I talk so much I even talk in my sleep!"

"Who's Reu—"

"Boys and girls," Miss Miller called over the whispering voices around the room, "please do your warm-up quietly while I take roll."

Aaron turned around to face the front. Notebooks and binders were opened, and the sound of pencils scratching on paper replaced the whispers. Jesse sighed in relief and looked at the board at the front of the room. The warm-up was a math problem. Okay, he could handle this. Math and science were his favorite subjects. He knew they would be important if he wanted to become a veterinarian.

He tuned out the sound of Miss Miller taking roll while he concentrated on the math problem. There would be time later to learn names. Only when he finished did he sit back and listen to the end of the roll call.

"Jamison Robey."

"Here."

"Carla Sanderson."

"Here."

"Cade Savage."

Jesse sat straight up in his seat. Savage? He scanned the room until he found himself looking into the same ice-blue eyes he had seen yesterday in the barn at Savage Ranch.

"Here," Cade Savage said, returning Jesse's gaze.

So, the unfriendly boy was not the son of a ranch hand, but the son of the boss. Jesse smiled and nodded. Cade Savage curled his lip and turned away.

*I still don't get it, Jesse thought. What is his problem?*



## CHAPTER 5

*GRIPPING HIS BROWN-BAG LUNCH AND THE PINT OF CHOCOLATE* milk he had just purchased, Jesse carefully scanned the cafeteria for an available seat. No way did he want to give an encore of this morning's embarrassing performance of grabbing the first empty seat he saw.

Cade Savage's table was out, and not just because it was already packed with boys. Jesse recognized them—the popular kids. It wasn't something he had to be told; it was something any kid in any school would know.

Cade and his friends sat like they owned the air around them. Their boisterous laughter could be heard across the entire cafeteria. They talked loudly, not caring who heard them. They took "basketball shots" at the trashcans with their crumpled-up bags and empty milk and juice cartons, not even bothering to get up and retrieve the trash when they missed. They were totally locked onto each other. No one else in the cafeteria mattered.

Already ten minutes late to lunch because he'd forgotten the last number of his new locker combination then couldn't find the cafeteria, Jesse wanted a seat fast.



He noticed a table against the wall that had a few empty seats; one of the boys sitting there caught his eye and nodded. Jesse had started over when, out of the corner of his eye, he saw an arm frantically waving at him.

It was Aaron Little Elk.

“Over here! New boy... Jesse! I saved you a seat!”

A seat? There wasn't one other kid sitting at that table. Jesse continued toward the table by the wall, thinking Aaron would give up and quiet down.

He didn't. He yelled Jesse's name louder and waved both of his arms in the air. By now, every kid in the lunchroom was staring at Jesse. He could hear the laughter coming from Cade Savage's table.

He turned on his heel and strode toward Aaron. He dropped his math book on the table, smiling in satisfaction when it landed with a bang that made Aaron flinch. He slid in across from Aaron and began, wordlessly, to eat his lunch.

“Jeez, what's with you?” Aaron asked. He wiped chocolate milk off his mouth with the back of his hand.

When Jesse didn't answer, Aaron shrugged and stuffed a chicken nugget in his mouth. He then wiped his hands on his pants.

“Want some ice cream from the snack line,” he asked Jesse, “or some chips?”

“I don't have any money.”

“Don't need any. I've got a number I punch into a little machine at the cash register. It works like magic. We can get anything we want. I never have to pay.”

Jesse knew all about the “magic” numbers. He'd had a number at his old school, a few years back in fifth grade. It had allowed him to get free breakfast and lunch in the school cafeteria. Mark Alvarez had lost his job when a horse kicked him and fractured his left leg in three places. The ranch owner had taken Jesse in while his father was in the hospital, but he couldn't pay a man who couldn't work.

Social workers had talked to Mark, bringing mounds of paperwork and offers of “assistance” and “programs.” Then the number had come in the mail. His father told him not to be embarrassed. Things would be a little rough until he could find work again, but tough times didn’t last forever.

Jesse had hated using the number.; he’d tried walking slowly to the cafeteria so he could be last in line and no one but the cashier would see him punch it in. But he couldn’t manage that every day; he usually wound up standing in the middle of the lunch line, surrounded by kids who held cash in their hands.

Aaron stood up.

“Last chance. I’m getting another ice cream.”

“No, thanks, I don’t want anything. And the snack lines are closing. Bell’s going to ring in about ten minutes.”

“Darn,” Aaron said, “now I have to wait until tomorrow to get some chips and ice cream.

“It’s not the end of the world, Aaron. Just get some snacks at home.”

“The magic number only works at school, Jesse. It can’t make snacks appear at home.” Aaron gathered his trash and left to dump it, leaving Jesse sitting at the table staring after him.



## CHAPTER 6

### *PE WAS THE LAST CLASS OF THE DAY.*

“Soccer today, guys and gals, we’re going outside,” Mr. Felton said. “Alvarez, you’re the new kid, right? Grab a uniform out of my office. Take locker number one-thirty-two.”

It took Jesse a few minutes to find both shorts and a T-shirt in his size. He ran into the locker room, where most of the boys were already on their way outside. He changed quickly, shoved his clothes and books into his locker, and sprinted out the gym door into the bright afternoon sunlight.

Mr. Felton stood in front of the class with his clipboard.

“Let’s see.” He flipped a few pages. “Luke Wilson, you’re a captain. Becky Davis, you’re a captain. If you pick a boy first, your next pick is a girl. You pick a girl first; your next pick is a boy. Got it? Go.”

Luke won the coin toss.

“Cade,” he called.

“Big surprise,” Aaron muttered.

It was Becky’s turn next.

“Jen,” she said.

Jen pumped her fist.

“Yeah!”

Becky and Jen looked strong and athletic. The idea of the competition being close spiked Jesse’s interest.

“Hey, this might be fun,” he said to Aaron.

“If you say so.” Aaron stood with both arms crossed over his chest.

Luke scanned the group of hopefuls standing before him.

“Lexi,” he called.

“Another surprise...not,” Aaron said.

Jen whispered into Becky’s ear. Becky, nodding and grinning, made her next pick.

“Jesse,” she said.

Every head swiveled toward Jesse. A low *ooh* sounded.

“Cut it out,” Mr. Felton said.

Becky and Luke picked quickly until there were only two kids left—Aaron and a tiny, pale girl named Ivy who sneezed constantly.

“Mr. Felton,” she whined, “my allergies.”

“Don’t even think about asking, Ivy,” Mr. Felton said, scribbling on his clipboard. “You’ve been to see the nurse too many times. You’ve got to start participating if you want a grade.”

Luke said, “We don’t need any more players. Becky can have Aaron and Ivy.”

“Nice try,” said Mr. Felton. “Aaron, you’re on Luke’s team. Ivy, you go to Becky’s.”

Both teams moaned, but they didn’t challenge him.

“Aaron,” Cade called as he trotted out to the midfield line to join Luke and take the ball at kickoff, “you’re slow, and you can’t kick. Everyone knows it, so, don’t argue. Get in the goal.”

“That’s a bad idea,” Lexi said, “even with extra defenders. I’ll play goalie.”

“You’re too fast to waste in the goal,” Cade countered. “We need you up front.”

Jen and Becky watched from the sideline. After a brief whispered conversation, Jen called a team huddle.

“Here’s the plan—attack, attack, attack the goal all day long.”

“What about Aaron?” Jesse asked.

“What about him?” Jen gave him a cool look. “He’s on the other team,” she said, as if explaining something to a young child.

“Yeah, yeah, I get that,” Jesse said. “I mean, why would Cade put Aaron in the goal?”

“Because,” Jen said, “Cade Savage is a butthead who doesn’t think we’ll get past his awesome defense to even get a shot on Aaron. We’re going to show him just how wrong he is. I know you and Aaron are friends—”

“I just met Aaron today,” Jesse interrupted, “so it’s not like we’re really friends.”

“That’s great,” Jen said dismissively. “Becks, you play out on the right, Jesse, you play out on the left. I’ll play center forward, and I’ll serve the ball to you two. Easy goals. Just watch the offsides.”

“Uh, what about us?” Ben Cottrell asked.

“Anyone else gets the ball, play it over to me or back to me,” Jen said. “Ivy, just wander around, or something.”

“But what do I do?” Ivy asked.

“Pick flowers, make origami butterflies out of your tissues, I don’t care. Just stay away from the ball.”

“Like I want to play this stupid game anyway,” Ivy said. “I can’t believe we get graded for this.” She split off from the group and sneezed her way out to the field.



The game was intense and close. Toward the end of class, the score was 1-0 in favor of Cade’s team. Cade had scored

his team's single goal, and so far, the team's defense *had* protected Aaron. Jesse had had a few good opportunities, but the sight of Aaron all alone in the goal made him hold back, and his shots, although strong and on target, sailed over the goal.

Jen noticed.

"Jesse," she said. "You're getting through their defense, and you've got a great shot, but you're playing it way too safe. Their defense is tiring out from protecting Aaron. They're so worried you're getting shots on Aaron they're leaving me completely alone and unmarked. Let's use that. We need a goal."

"I know," Jesse said. He wanted to win, but he didn't want to give Cade and his buddies another reason to torture Aaron.

"Look," Jen said, "let me put it this way. Do you want to lose to Cade Savage and that parade of morons he calls friends? 'Cause I know I don't."

That was all it took.

"Pass me the ball," Jesse said. "Try and put it a little ahead of me on the left so I can pick it up with my left foot."

"Will do." Jen clapped him on the back. "Hey, have some fun and mess with Cade a little bit. Run past him and get him turned facing his own goal. Then come back on sides. Like I said, they're not even marking me. I'll have plenty of time to pass you the ball."

Jesse laughed. He was beginning to like Jen, although he still found himself stealing glances at Lexi.

Jen's pass was right on the money; Jesse made sure he was back on side before she let it fly off the end of her foot. He gathered the ball and dribbled straight at Cade, who was now so off-balance he had no hope of catching Jesse. It was an out-and-out sprint for the goal before the game ended.

Out of the corner of his eye, Jesse saw Luke streaking in to challenge him; he never broke his stride. He stutter-

stepped with the ball, getting Luke to pull up and try to guess which direction he was going to take. Jesse faked to the left, went right, and dodged around Luke.

There was nobody now between Jesse and Aaron in the goal.

“Hands up!” he heard Cade shrieking. “Block the shot, Aaron!”

About thirty feet out, Jesse shifted his weight to his right leg. He threw his arms out to the side for balance then drew his left leg back and fired a shot. This time, he aimed it directly at the goal. The ball went in hard and fast.

Aaron’s eyes widened. He ducked, covering his head with his hands. The ball sailed into the back of the net, giving Jesse’s team the tying goal.

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