

CHAPTER 1

“Hey Pickle!”

The words thundered off the brick walls of Whispering Falls Intermediate School, loosening a few in the process. Time stood still, almost as if someone had begun a giant game of cosmic freeze tag. Balls stopped bouncing. Swings stopped swinging. Sneakers stopped squeaking. In fact, all recess activities and shenanigans came to a screeching halt while the fourth, fifth, and sixth graders scanned the skies on an otherwise fine October day, searching for the approaching storm. Julian didn't need to look. He knew that doom clung close to the ground because that nasal voice followed by a partial eclipse of the sun could mean only one thing.

Biff.

And Julian was *not* in the mood to deal with him. Not now. Not today. Not tomorrow. Truth be told, not in a duotrigintillion years or forever, whichever came first. But not today, especially, since Julian had other insurmountable problems to worry about.

Unfortunately, the human oak tree with size-nine

shoes and breath like microwaved bacon had a different agenda. Julian's hope for an uneventful start to the day came to a screeching halt as Biff Masterson, a good head-and-a-half taller, more if you factored in the mohawk, lumbered in front of him and planted his big feet.

"Pickle, I was talking to you, Pickle. Are you deaf or something, Pickle?"

Julian figured out early on that Biff seemed to like saying the word "pickle." Or any word associated with food, for that matter. He could not understand why someone *born* to be a bully—his real name was Spike after all—would choose to go by "Biff."

"Sorry, Biff. I didn't realize you were talking to me. You said 'pickle.' And I don't know anyone by that name. So I assumed you were thinking out loud about your lunch. Or your breakfast. Or your mid-morning snack. Now if you'll excuse me," he said, stepping around the forest of one. As the new kid in school (the label applied to him more often than he would have liked), Julian had become very good—what the smart folks call "adept"—at analyzing a situation and getting out of it. The skill had served him well on many occasions, in many situations. Each school, he'd found, offered its own unique brand of bully. At Fairpark Elementary, a good day was any day he managed to avoid Mace Winshaft (apparently, his parents *really* loved *Star Wars*), who would crack walnuts by placing them against his own forehead and hitting them with a hammer, or a brick, or a Buick, or whatever might have been handy. At Brady Lower Upper

Middle School, his tormentor—what the smart folks call “nemesis”—was Maurice Evans, who owned a pet orangutan that he slept with, and wrestled with, and fought for table scraps with. (On Halloween he would send Zaius to school in his place, and no one could tell the difference.) Before that, it was Bertha Patton, who was in a league all her own.

“Your name is Newcomber,” Biff snorted, coming around like the USS *Missouri* and blocking the path yet again. Like a plant-eating dinosaur, he was slow of foot, with a brain to match. But he covered so much ground and filled so much space that getting around him required a trip, bordering on an excursion. “That sounds like cucumber. And cucumbers are just like pickles. So, you’re Pickle.”

Biff’s mouth watered a little as he said it, which disturbed Julian even more.

“No, pickles are *made from* cucumbers,” Julian said. “But not all cucumbers become pickles. Using your thinking, pencils are just like trees.”

“No, they’re not. You can’t write with a tree.”

“You know, you are absolutely right. They’re not. Hey, hold that thought for a minute. Or a second, if sixty of them is too much for you.”

Julian figured the complex math would tax Biff’s brain long enough to buy him the time he needed to end this stupid—what the smart folks call “inane”—conversation ASAP. He knew that what he was about to do would be less than wise. *Potentially catastrophic, though probably not cataclysmic*, Julian thought, using two words from this week’s spelling lesson. But

someone he read about in a history book had said something like “Desperate times call for desperate measures.” He reached into his backpack, pulled out the Extraordinary eTab, unrolled it, swiped the screen, and tapped the pulsating icon with the overcrowded clock. He heard *the* sound and saw *the* light. A moment later, Julian found himself sitting at his desk in the comfort of his classroom. Fortunately, his techno-magical appearance went unnoticed in the bustle and jostle of the mad dash to the desks in the precious seconds before the bell. He breathed a sigh of relief as he waited for Mrs. Stern to call his name.

“Spike Masterson? Spike? Tardy. Again,” she clucked, making a little tick mark on her attendance sheet.

Julian hadn’t expected that to happen. But when it came to the eTab—or any of his dad’s inventions—Julian had learned to expect the unexpected. Not to mention the unlikely, the bizarre, the absurd, the improbable, and/or the downright impossible.

“Julian Newcomber?”

“Here, Mrs. Stern.”

“Good.”

She continued on down the list and completed the roll call.

“Now, class, please open your math books and memorize pages fifty to the end.” Julian flipped to page four hundred ninety-six. “There will be a test on this material tomorrow.”

Silence clung to the classroom as twenty-four anxious souls waited to hear the magical words: “Just

kidding.” When they failed to materialize, the children’s groans rivaled those of the old school’s heating system.

Julian obediently opened his book and pretended to read, just like Mrs. Stern did when she sat at her desk and “read” her teacher’s study guide, even though she was actually sleeping with her eyes open (the snoring always gave it away). But instead of studying his multiplication tables, Julian began planning. He just needed to get through the school day and get home. Today he had a bigger problem to deal with.

He had to figure how to help himself—specifically, his twenty-year-old self—go back in time to undo a mistake that could pollute the natural timeline, rewrite history, and change the world as we know it.

No pressure.