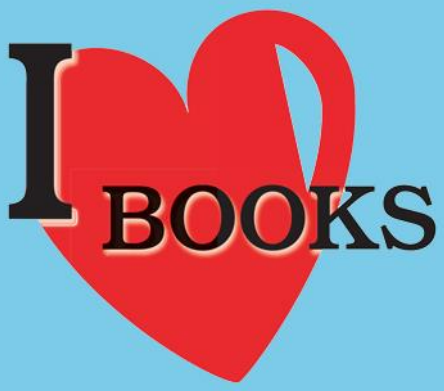


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Illustrated by

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MIDDLE SCHOOL

DOG'S BEST FRIEND

JAMES PATTERSON

AND CHRIS TEBBETTS

ILLUSTRATED BY JOMIKE TEJIDO

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LOOZER AND LEO IN:

Merry Christmas,

LOOZER!

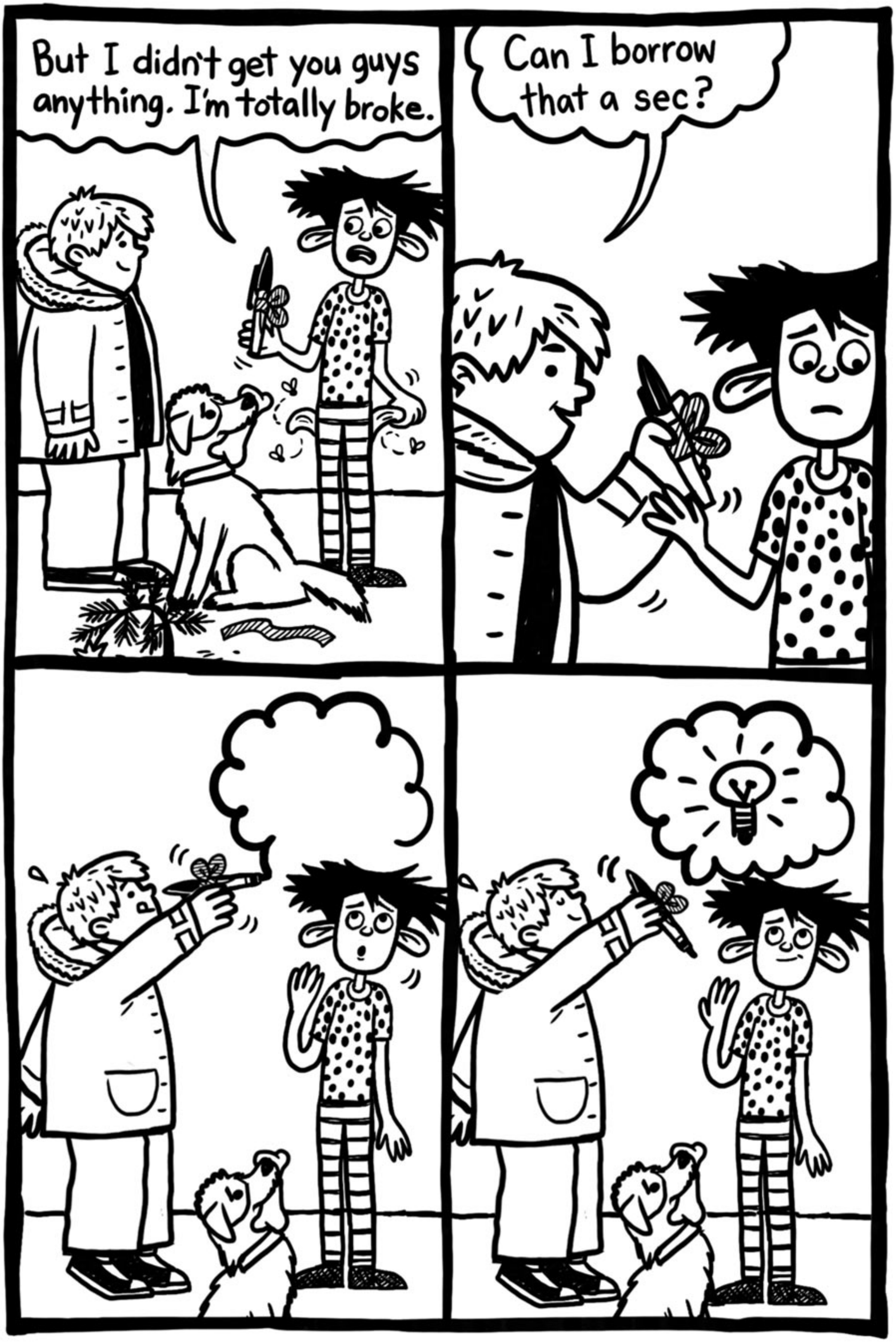
With special guest: Meatloaf!

Merry Christmas, Meatloaf!

Ruff!

Merry Christmas, Loozer!

A new pen! Just what I wanted!


But I didn't get you guys anything. I'm totally broke.
Can I borrow that a sec?

Hey, I know what I can do!

Cover your eyes. No peeking!

Scribble, scribble,

Scribble...

Okay, you can look now!

Scribble, scribble, scribble...

Wow!

Ruff!

Now watch this!

ON

A hoverboard! Just what I wanted!

ON

hoverrr...

ON

hoverrr...

ON

ON

Merry Christmas, everyone!

And a happy....

Whoosh!

Whoosh!

new yeeeeearrrrrrr



CHAPTER 1

NOT-SO-MERRY CHRISTMAS

I slammed my sketchbook closed. Usually drawing comics made me feel better, but not today. It was Christmas morning, and even Loozer was having a better time than I was.

As for Leo, well…I can explain about him later.

I didn't exactly get a hoverboard and a ski trip under the tree that morning. Instead, I got some school clothes and two new books from Mom. Also a coupon from my sister, Georgia, for one turn unloading the dishwasher, and a "Christmas hug" from Grandma Dotty. Grandma said she was still working on her gifts.

The other thing I didn't get was a WormHole Premium Multi-Platform GameBox. That's what I *really* wanted, but I would have had a

better chance asking Santa for the Empire State Building. Those WormHoles were *expensive*, and we weren't exactly rolling in dough that Christmas.

Still, I would have given my big toe for one of those systems. They could run games from all the other major brands, plus their own titles, which were the best ones out there, by far. That thing could practically clean your room and do your homework for you, it was *that* cool.

Not that I was obsessed or anything.

Well, okay, maybe a little bit.

But none of that was the *real* bummer.

"All right, I've got to get going," Mom said. It was only eleven in the morning, but she was putting on her coat to go to work. Yeah, that's right. On Christmas. The Madison Hotel was paying really good money for waitresses in their banquet hall that day, and Mom couldn't afford to say no.

"I'll make it up to you guys," she said. "I'm off all day tomorrow and we'll have a real Christmas dinner then."

What were we going to say? It's not like Mom

wanted to work on Christmas. She was just looking out for us. The least we could do was act like it was no big deal.

"That sounds awesome!" I said.

"It'll be like having two Christmases!" Grandma said.

"Yeah!" Georgia said. "No problem, Mom."



I think she actually bought it too. And we might have pulled it off, if I hadn't opened my big mouth one more time. See, I have this bad habit of taking things a little too far sometimes.

Or a lot too far.

"Don't worry about it, Mom," I said. "Who needs Christmas, anyway? Not us!"

Yeah, right. Like any kid who celebrates Christmas was going to say *that*.

That's when Mom stopped buttoning her coat. She gave me this weird smile and her eyes got kind of watery.

"I'll be right back," she said. "I, um…forgot my keys."

Then she went into the bathroom and closed the door behind her. (FYI, Mom doesn't keep her keys in the bathroom.) She'd been spending a lot of time in there ever since she and my Learning Skills teacher, Mr. Fanucci, decided to stop dating after a while. I'll admit it kind of skeeved me out that they were seeing each other, but I'd one thousand times rather see them kissing than to see my mom sad.

"Way to go, big mouth," Georgia said.

4

"But…" I said. "I didn't mean to—"

"Yeah, you never do, Rafe," she said. Even Grandma was looking at me like I'd just taken the world's cruddiest Christmas and managed to make it even cruddier.

Which I guess I had.

Leave it to me.

So basically, that was strike one. I'll tell you about strike two in a minute. But the point is, my little Christmas disaster was the beginning of everything else that happened that winter.

I'm talking about how I got in hot water with Mom, almost lost my best friend (the furry one), launched my very own business empire, survived the Great Dog War of January, and learned a little magic along the way.

Which may not be where you thought this was going, but it totally is.

Read on, my friend.