A DANGEROUS GAME

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Barrington Stoke

For Neil and Elizabeth, with love

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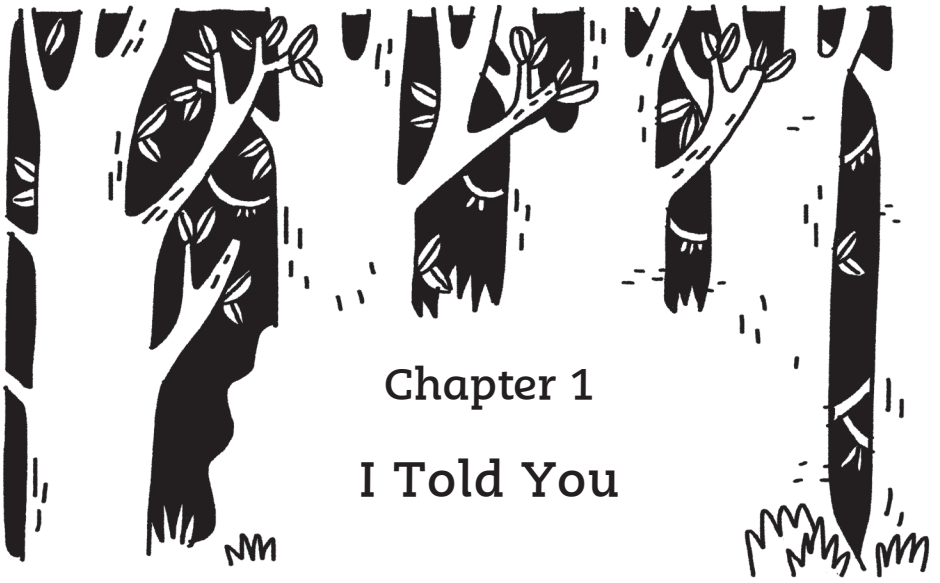
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Chapter 1

I Told You

"*Come on, Sam*," said Billy. "Show them you can do it."

The cheers and jeers of the crowd around Sam were so loud that he could only just hear his best friend Billy. Sam tried to ignore the frantic beat of his heart slamming against his ribs. He tried to ignore the deafening noise all around him. Instead, he forced himself to focus on his arms. Big mistake! The muscles in Sam's upper arms felt like they'd locked solid and caught fire!

"*Come on, Sam!*" Billy's yells were even more urgent now.

"What a wimp!" said another voice. "Look at the sweat dropping off his forehead. He's only done four press-ups and he's ready to pass out."

Sam didn't need to look up to know who'd just spoken. Brandon.

I am not *a wimp*, Sam thought. *I'll show you, maggot-face! I can do this, I know I can. I just need to* push*!* Sam tried to relax his arm muscles a tiny bit – so that they'd unlock without the rest of his body crashing to the floor.

Push!

Sam gritted his teeth so hard they felt like they'd shatter at any second. He tried to force his arms to push the rest of his body upwards. At that moment, Sam felt as if he had an adult elephant sitting on his back. His mum was

always nagging him about how skinny he was and how he needed to put on more weight to become stronger. But Sam didn't feel the least bit strong right then!

"Almost, Sam. Almost," screamed Billy. He sounded like he was about to burst a blood vessel. But Sam had never been so grateful for the sound of Billy's voice.

He could do it … *He could do it …*

He couldn't!

Sam collapsed in a heap on the gravel below him. A sharp piece of stone dug into his chin, but Sam didn't even wince. No matter how much his chin might hurt, it couldn't compare to how awful he felt inside. He'd failed.

"Oh!" The crowd around him gave a disappointed sigh – as if Sam had let them all down as well. He turned his head. Some of

them were drifting away already. Others were looking at him and shaking their heads.

"I told you he wouldn't be able to do five press-ups," Brandon sneered. "I'm surprised he could manage four."

"Shut up, Brandon," snapped Billy. "Sam did his best."

"His best isn't up to much," Brandon replied. "His best is less than my worst!"

"Leave him alone," said Billy. "He's only just got over being ill ..."

"When is he going to stop using that as an excuse for being so useless?" Brandon said, unimpressed.

Sam wished his friend would shut up. He knew that Billy was only standing up for him, but it wasn't making him feel any better. In fact, it was just the opposite – Billy was making

him feel worse. Sam had his breath back now and scrambled to his feet. Brandon and his friends stood in a line, looking at Sam like he was something disgusting they'd just stepped in. He knew what they were thinking: he was a weed, a weakling, a waste of space. And in that moment, Sam felt that they were right.

"Are you boys planning to sleep here tonight?" the caretaker called from the school entrance. "Or will you be going home some time before I retire?"

Brandon and his friends left without looking back. And just like that, Sam was dismissed. Sam brushed the gravel off his hands, wishing they were the only part of his body that hurt.

"Never mind them," Billy said with a smile. "You did great."

"No, I didn't." Sam shook his head. "I couldn't even do five press-ups. Five rotten press-ups. My mum could do more than that!"

"It doesn't matter," Billy told Sam. "It's not important—"

"It is to me," Sam interrupted.

"You're making mountains out of molehills. It was just a silly game—"

"A silly game that I couldn't even finish," sighed Sam. "You know what? I don't blame Brandon for not liking me much. The only game I'm good for is tiddlywinks – that's what everyone thinks. I can't do anything. I don't go anywhere – I'm not even going on the school trip to Loch Lomond."

"So you didn't get your mum and dad to change their minds?" Billy asked.

"I didn't even try. What's the point?" Sam sighed. "I know what they will say."

"They might surprise you," said Billy.

"Yeah, and we might get blue snow tomorrow," Sam sniffed. And he knew which one was more likely. When they'd first been told about the school trip, Sam's mum and dad had both left a loud "*No*" ringing in his ears. Sam pursed his lips. He was fed up of spending his life watching others enjoy themselves while he sat on the sidelines. He wasn't going to do it any more. He *wasn't*.

"I'm going to ask Mum and Dad again tonight," Sam told Billy. "And this time I'm not going to take no for an answer."

"Good luck!" said Billy, his tone dry.

"Thanks," Sam replied. "I'm going to need it."

*

"You never let me do anything," Sam said to his parents that evening. "You won't let me try out for my school's athletics team. You won't

let me play football or go swimming. I wouldn't even know how to swim if Uncle John hadn't taught me. And now you won't let me go on the school trip."

Dad lowered his newspaper, and Sam saw the wrinkles on his dad's forehead deepen into a frown. "Sam, don't talk to us like that. We're doing it for your own good."

"Don't you understand?" Sam pleaded. He could feel this argument was about to end the same way they always did. "You and Mum wrap me up in so much cotton wool, I'm suffocating."

"That's not true ..." Mum protested.

"Yes, it is," said Sam. He was almost shouting now. "I might as well stay in bed all day, every day and not do anything – ever again. What's the point of me even going to school if you're just going to treat me like a baby all the time? Why don't you just keep me

chained and locked up in the attic? That way you'd know where I was and what I was doing every second of your lives."

"That's enough," Dad said. His newspaper lay forgotten on his lap.

"Sam, you're not being fair," Mum sighed. "We're only thinking of you and your health. We're not doing it on purpose, just to spoil your fun."

Sam didn't answer. What was he meant to say to that?

You might not be doing it on purpose, Mum, but you are ruining my life ...

"It's just that we have to do all we can to keep you well and out of hospital," Mum continued. "You don't want to go in again, do you? That's why we don't think the school trip to Scotland is a good idea. What if you ended up in hospital so far away from us?"

"I won't go into hospital, Mum. I promise," Sam pleaded. He didn't dare blink. His mum's face was now all blurred and swimming as unwanted tears filled his eyes. But there was no point crying – it wouldn't get him anywhere. Sam could just hear his mum now.

"*Don't run, Sam, you'll end up in hospital …*
Don't swim, Sam, you'll end up in hospital …
Don't sulk, Sam, you'll end up in hospital …
Don't cry, Sam, you'll end up in hospital …"

"I never get to do anything," Sam sniffed as he turned around to leave the sitting room. "I might as well be dead."

Sam heard his mum gasp behind him, but he kept walking. He could have turned back and said he didn't mean it, but he would be lying.