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New kid Mitch Sloan wants to fit in, but his nerdy love of statistics and making money isn't winning him any friends in his sports-loving town...until he finds the perfect way to become Mr. Popularity. But running a football-betting ring at school eventually turns sour, and Mitch loses the only real friend he had. He'll have to win her back by using his brainpower to help the school football team—if they'll listen to the advice of a former bookie! Using the tips, truths, and stats they explore in their *New York Times* bestseller *Scorecasting*, L. Jon Wertheim and Tobias Moskowitz pack super sports savvy and important math and financial concepts into a fun and heartwarming first novel for kids.

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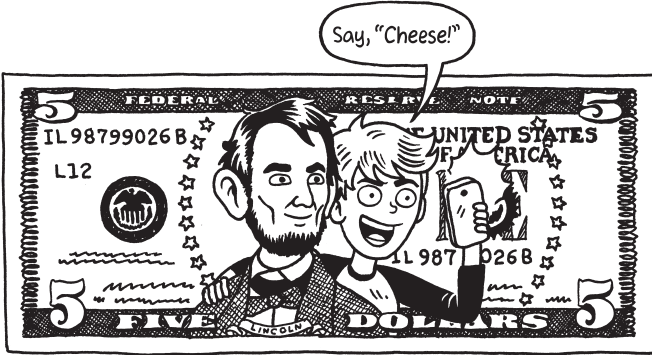
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CHAPTER 1

THE WINNER'S CURSE



Jamie Spielberger is a girl, and I do not have a crush on her. Let me repeat that: I. Do. Not. Have. A. Crush. On. Her.

She's just this kid I met when I had my nose buried in the grass in back of the middle school, after I bobbled a pass that would have been a touchdown.

"Wow, that was some catch." A sarcastic voice floated over my head. "You ever consider becoming a professional juggler?"

It was a girl's voice. I rolled over and blinked

up at her. The knees of her jeans were muddy. She was wearing her San Francisco Giants hat backward. She was also grinning and holding my hat.

"Thanks, I'm fine," I said. "No major surgery. Just a few broken bones. I'll walk it off."

"Cool." She handed me my hat and ran off for the next play. "Luke! *Luke!* I'm open, you idiot! Are you blind? If you had one more eye, you'd be a Cyclops!"

Sitting there, I laughed out loud. That was a pretty good line. And she was funny, not mean. She could also catch. When Luke finally saw her and fired off another spiral, just like the one he'd sent at me, the girl nabbed it in midair.

I found out later her name was Jamie.

She was out there most days at lunchtime, when a bunch of guys would show up in the field and start to toss the ball around. Sometimes it was just catching and passing. Some days it would turn into a real game.

I like football, even though I'm not really that good at it. My brother, Kevin, would have caught Luke's pass without blinking. One-handed, proba-

bly. But I know how to play, and I'm pretty fast, so I started hanging out around the field at lunchtime. Plus, I was trying to get to know some people. It was my first week as the new kid at Jonasburg Middle School, and I figured if I got to be friends with some of the jocks, it'd be a good start.

The person I really got to know was Jamie.

The next day, she came up to me after the lunchtime game, while we were headed back into school.

"Can I talk to you?" she asked.

Which was weird. Kind of. I mean, she was walking right next to me and talking to me right at that moment, so why did she need to ask me if she *could*? Like it was a big deal?

Wait—was it a big deal?

"Sure," I said.

"Alone."

"Um, sure. After fifth period, okay?"

I spent science class wondering what Jamie had to tell me. *Alone*. I just hoped it wasn't a boyfriend-girlfriend, *do you have a crush on me?* kind of thing.

Mrs. Wolff stood in front of the whiteboard talking about tectonic plates and earthquakes and

volcanoes—which would usually interest me. But I could barely concentrate; I was distracted wondering what Jamie needed to tell me so badly. I wanted to know, but I didn't want to know.

Maybe it'd be better if we didn't actually have a chance to talk. Maybe she'd forget about whatever it was. When the bell finally rang, I grabbed my folder and bolted out of there, trying to get to my locker before Jamie. I'm Mitch Sloan. She's Jamie Spielberg. We were assigned lockers alphabetically, so hers is right near mine, with only two Smiths and a Spander in between.

I threw my science book on one shelf and got my math book out from another. But I wasn't fast enough. I saw her out of the corner of my eye, taking a small leather notebook out of her bag. She cleared her throat just to be sure I noticed her.

"Oh, hey, Jamie," I said, trying to sound casual. "What did you want to talk to me about before?" I took a deep breath and waited for her answer.

"Trade it," she said, turning the knob on her lock.

"Huh?"

"Trade it."

"Trade what?"

She looked up, frustrated, causing her necklace with a six-pointed star to swing to her shoulder. She put a hand on her hip. "Did you or didn't you get the first pick in the seventh-grade fantasy football draft?"

Whew. None of that awkward girl-boy stuff. It was a total relief. I had to wipe a stupid grin off my face.

"Yeah," I said proudly. "I got the first pick out of the ten teams, and I—"

"Trade it," she said again, cutting me off. "Everyone wants it, and they think it's more valuable than it really is. Sure, you'll get a good player. But then you won't go again until the last pick of the second round."

"So?"

"So you're better off with picks ten and eleven or picks nine and twelve than you are with picks one and twenty."

Wait. Whoa. How did she know that?

The thing is, I knew it, too. I had totally been planning to trade that first pick. Everybody wants it, so they think it's special, worth more than it is.

There's even a name for when something like this happens: the winner's curse. Which means you do whatever you can to get something you really want because you thought everybody else really wanted it, and it turns out it wasn't worth it.

But I was surprised—shocked, really—that Jamie knew about the winner's curse, too. I'd never met any other kids who understood this kind of thing.

And by the time I got my brain unstuck and my mouth working again, Jamie was already walking away down the hall, the leather notebook poking out from her back pocket.

"Thanks, Jamie," I yelled to her down the hall. "I was going to do that, anyway."



Two hours and eight minutes later—not that I was counting—the second bell rang and it was official: I had survived my first week at Jonasburg Middle School. Ever since my first week of kindergarten, I'd always felt pretty good on Friday afternoons. But this day, I was feeling extra pretty good. I'd learned

my way around the building. I hadn't gotten into any trouble with my teachers; I even liked some of them. I'd learned the names of a few other sports freaks and gotten invited to join their fantasy football league. Plus, I'd gotten the first pick in the draft.

And there was Jamie. She seemed kind of cool, and it looked like she might be interested in some of the same stuff I was, like anything having to do with football.

I like all sports, really. Football, baseball, basketball, you name it. Actually, I like talking and thinking about sports more than I like playing them. Probably because I'm much better at it. I like figuring out strategy and how to win. That's why I love fantasy sports—no dropped passes, just who to pick and who to play. But there's one other thing I like almost as much, maybe even more, and I might as well tell you up front.

I love money and business.

Okay, before you decide that this makes me a greedy kid who doesn't care about the things that really matter, let me explain.

See, most kids in my grade want to be famous

athletes or singers or actresses. That would be cool, but if you got picked last for teams as often as I have, eventually you'd give up the dream of becoming the next Derek Jeter or LeBron James. Besides, even if I could play, I'd rather *own* the Yankees or the Heat than *play* for the Yankees or the Heat.

Instead of being a sports hero, I want to be the next Warren Buffett.

The other day I wrote that in one of those first-week-of-school autobiography assignments. Kevin read it and got all confused. "Buffett? Is he, like, the guy that invented all-you-can-eat?"

"No. That's pronounced buff-fay," I told him. "This is Buff-ett. He's an investor. A financier. Probably the most successful investor of all time."

"Oh yeah?" he said, barely looking up.

"He's like a gardener, but he tries to grow money instead of flowers and plants. And he's worth more than fifty billion dollars."

"Right," said Kevin. "Because money's the most important thing in the world."

"Look at it this way," I said, trying to put it in terms Kevin would care about. "He could buy every

team in Major League Baseball and the National Football League at once. He could give every single American a hundred dollars, and he'd *still* be a billionaire. He could—"

"Okay," Kevin barked. "He's rich. I get it."

But as usual, Kevin didn't get it. "I *don't* care about being rich," I told him. "I just want to make a lot of money."

"That doesn't make any sense," he said, looking back at the TV.

"Okay," I said, sighing. "You know how when you go to the arcade, you get as many tickets as you can playing Skee-Ball and Pop-A-Shot and Whac-A-Mole and all that? You do everything you can to win. You combine tickets with your friends. You hustle like crazy. After all that, you get to the window and you trade your tickets in for some stupid keychain or some inflatable pillow you never use."

"I guess," said Kevin.

"Well, that's how I feel about money. It's not just about the stuff you can buy. It's about finding new ways to make it. Trading. Avoiding traps. It's the game of it."

Kevin looked up and studied me. "Don't you want money to get a really cool car like a Ferrari Testarossa or an electric guitar or some new clothes?" You see, Kevin's sixteen, a junior in high school, about to get his driver's license, and crazy about cars and clothes and all that junk.

"Nah, those are just things," I told him. "I don't need *things*." (Though owning a sports team one day would be supercool.) "Money can help you *do* stuff that no one else can," I continued. "Think of it as something you can trade with anyone for almost anything. Or you can help people who need it. Did you know Warren Buffett is giving away most of his fortune—"

"Wait," Kevin cut me off. "You mean you want to make money just so you can give it away? That's the stupidest thing I've ever heard. You're so weird." He snorted and walked out of the room laughing.



The problem is that some of the other kids in seventh grade think my hobby is weird, too. Check

that. *Most* of them think it's weird. Same with their parents. And same with *my* parents.

Mom and Dad are both artists. My mom mostly paints, and my dad is a potter. When we lived in California, they rented a small gallery where they sold their art. But both of them admit that they don't have what they call "a head for business." Actually, they brag about it. When I get going, talking about business stuff, they get impatient.

"Mitch, money's not everything," my mom says a lot. "All that talk about profit and loss, savings this, spending that. It gets—"

Kevin cut her off this time. "It gets *annoying*. Admit it, Mom."

My mom paused, clearly struggling to say the right thing. "I wasn't going to put it quite like that," she said slowly. "But let's just say I do wish you talked about money a little less sometimes, Mitch."

Annoying.

I get that a lot. Between Kevin and kids at school, I've been called that since I was born. It's one of those words people always seem to use for short people like me. Tall people might be doofy or

goofy or gawky or awkward. But how often are tall people described as "annoying"? Not very.

I used to be okay with the word "annoying" because I told myself it meant that I was smarter than the person calling me that, and that made them uncomfortable. But right before we left California, I was watching a business show on television and heard the head of a big company tell the host that one of the most important skills in business is to be able to make everyone around you feel comfortable. "You don't want to do business with someone who *annoys* you and gets under your skin," the man said. "You just don't."

Ever since, I'd been trying really hard not to annoy anybody. But sometimes it just seemed to happen.

Like Saturday morning. I woke up late and ate a bowl of Cap'n Crunch, the all-time best cereal in the history of the world, and then I rode over to my parents' shop. The store is barely a mile from our house, and I learned a shortcut that would get me there on my bike in less than eight minutes.

When I walked in, there were no customers.

Dad was sitting on a stool behind the counter, playing his guitar, not seeming to mind that he wasn't selling paintings or making any money. It was like the California gallery all over again.

"What's up?" I asked.

"Just chillin'," he said, moving the fret bar on his guitar. "Chillin' like Bob Dylan."

"Nobody says that anymore, Dad."

"Maybe not now. But it'll come back. Cool things always come back in fashion. And then you can tell your friends that I was ahead of the curve."

"Slow Saturday?" I asked, looking around the empty store.

"Understatement of the day," said my dad. "Two people came and looked at these flowerpots but decided that fifty dollars was too much money to pay."

"Too much money compared to what?" I asked.

"Not compared to anything," he said, starting to pluck his guitar strings. "Just too expensive for flowerpots, I guess."

"Maybe that's the problem," I said. "How about giving your customers a comparison so they think fifty dollars is a good price for those flowerpots?"

"Sorry, Mitch," my dad said, still not looking at me, "I don't follow."

I paused. Sometimes—okay, lots of times—people don't react so well when I try to explain stuff like this. I know it's one of the things that makes me *annoying*, but the thing is, sometimes I have good ideas. And my parents really needed to make this store work.

"People like to compare stuff," I told Dad. "Is fifty dollars a lot of money? Depends what for, right? It's cheap if you're buying, like, a plane ticket to Europe. It's expensive if you're buying something like a candy bar."

"Art isn't a candy bar, Mitch," my dad said a little too patiently. "Each piece is unique. It's not like there's a rack of my pots down at the gas station."

"Yeah, I know," I agreed. "You have your own shop, so you can create the comparisons yourself. Even better."

"I still don't follow," said Dad.

"Okay," I responded. "How about making a flowerpot that's bigger? Same design. Same color. Same shape. But just a little bigger. Charge, say, a

hundred dollars for it. Suddenly the fifty-dollar pot will actually seem like a bargain."

Dad paused. "Maybe," he eventually mumbled to himself, and then started to play a few chords again.

I sighed. It was a good idea. But the minute I tried talking to my dad about money, he only listened for about thirty seconds before tuning me out.

And you know what—*that* was annoying. Considering the reason why we really left California.