

CHAPTER 1



Frederick Douglass Zezzmer

Question: How did I get through most of seventh grade without saying more than two words to half my classmates?

Answer: Because kids be kids, even at Benjamin Banneker College Prep, Colorado's #1 school for unusually competitive students. (That's what it says on the B-B website anyways. Except for the kids be kids part. That's 100% me.)

Other than the competition thing, B-B kids are like kids everywhere. We find our crew and stick with them. No matter what. Just like in *Lord of the Flies*. Which, for the record, I'm pretty sure was based on a true story.

Also for the record, B-B is packed with STEAMers: a.k.a., science heads, technovengers, enginerds, arts peeps,

and mathatrons. There are a bunch of sportsters too, but they're only here because their parents love B-B's academics. I'm the only visionary inventor in the middle school though. And I have a puny crew. Just me and my best friend and gadget-making assistant, Huey Linkmeyer.

We usually meet in front of the auditorium at 8:10, five minutes before morning assembly. But today . . . ugh! Everything goes wrong.

"Out you go," Pops says, clicking the door locks on his SUV.

"But it's only 7:30!" I try not to whine. Now that I'm twelve, that's not cool anymore. But come on! Who dumps their kids at school forty-five minutes early?

"When I was a wide receiver for the Broncos, I would hit the field at 5:00 A.M. every day for two hours of sprints—rain, sleet, snow or shine. Nobody made me do it. The Zezzmer winning spirit got me up," Pops blares in his *Sports Recap with Elliott "EZ" Zezzmer* podcast voice. The podcast is the latest business in a post-football empire that includes Zezzmer Sports Management, EZ Route Running Private Coaching, and Succeed through Sports Inc.

"Dig deep, son," Pops continues. "Show some of that Zezzmer grit."

Yeah, so, here's the thing. I've lived in Denver my entire life, but Pops moved away when I was a baby. He came

back six months ago with three things: a do-over family (my stepmother, Patrice, who still looks like an NFL cheerleader, and her fourteen-year-old son, T.W.), an autographed Denver Broncos jersey, and a surprise plan to reinvent my entire life before I get too stuck in my ways.

Unlike my stepbrother, who Pops adopted when he and Patrice got married three years ago, I don't have a lot of experience with Zezzmer grit. But I do recognize the look Pops gives me in the rearview. *Huge smile. Hard, dark eyes. A deep furrow between eyebrows that are as thick and black as mine.* It's the EZ stare. I read about it on the internet. When he played for the Broncos, Pops was the go-to receiver whenever the team was down. Until he wrecked his knee in his eighth season, the EZ stare meant he had made his mind up to score. He wasn't going to let anyone get in his way.

Great. I open the door a tiny bit and stick my nose through the crack. An arctic blast whacks me in the face. I swear my nose hairs start to freeze. "It's still cold!"

Pops swivels around and pushes the door wide open. College football rings from back-to-back Orange Bowls gleam on his thick, dark brown fingers. He tilts his head and gives me an EZ Zezzmer-style wink. If he knew me better, he'd know I never wink.

"It's almost fifty degrees, Doug," Pops says. "Know what? We should start running together. It'll toughen you

up before you start Elite Juniors this summer. Early morning runs will be fun. I'll talk to your mother." He gives me a little push then pulls the door closed when I'm out of the car. "Have a good day, son!

And then he's off, blazing down the road with family 2.0. They have to get all the way back across town to reach T.W.'s school, Northeast Denver High, by 8:00.

At least Patrice waves and says bye. T.W. just pouts. He's as sports-obsessed as Pops, which explains why he goes to a school with a dozen state championship trophies, and I go to a school that doesn't have one. Whenever I spend weekends with Pops, detours to B-B—to drop me off first on Mondays—always make T.W. mad. He slaps on his shades and glares at the high school part of B-B's campus the whole time he's here. T.W. has to be the worst stepbrother in history. Just another reason that I rather stay with *my* family:

Moms, and my stepdad since forever, Julius Jordan.

My fingers tingle like I've got a thousand paper cuts by the time I slog from the drop-off lane to the auditorium. My glasses are fogged up too. I could go inside—student IDs can open the auditorium doors thirty minutes before assembly—but I hang tough. I've seen enough horror movies to know that walking into an empty building alone is never a good idea.

“Yo, Doug!” Huey roars around the corner at 7:55. When I texted that I had to come to school early, Huey convinced his mom to bring him early too. He looks like he ran all the way from his car. His face is almost as red as his hair.

Now that he’s here, I slap my student ID against the card reader, shove the door open with my pathetic, half-frozen hands and barrel into the lobby. I’ve never been so glad to be inside in my life.

You’d think with three hundred empty chairs to choose from, Huey and I would have a tough decision to make, but nope. We always sit in the same seats and the same row for morning assembly. Seat 1 and seat 2, row JJ. It’s the designated neutral zone between the bigger crews. We sink into our chairs, then do the short version of our secret shake: two fist bumps, a finger snap, high five, low five, hand slap on the Black side (me) and the White side (him), two elbow taps, a forehead bomp, and a nod.

“Dude, it’s the first day after spring break. Why’d we have to get here so early?” Huey asks. He says *we* even though I’m the one who didn’t have a choice.

I roll my eyes. “Blame T.W. His school counselor called on Saturday and told Pops and Patrice to come in early today. It’s probably some huge mess with his grades again.”

Huey squints at me. “Being around your dad and T.W. is aging you, man.” He jabs a thumb at my Afro. “I think your hair’s going grey!” He snorts. “Did you at least make progress with”—he checks to make sure nobody snuck in the auditorium in the last two seconds—“Operation DazzleYee?”

“I wish.” Figuring out how to impress our principal, Dr. Yee, is my top priority this term. But having the best grades in my class, doing a ton of extra credit, and presenting one of my best inventions—the DougApp Virtual Buddy personal assistant and homework helper—at the science fair haven’t budged the needle yet.

If I’m going to be the first middle schooler ever picked to represent B-B at Rocky Mountain GadgetCon, Operation DazzleYee has to be huge. I was supposed to spend last weekend making a surefire plan. Guess who held me back.

“Don’t let it bug you,” Huey says. “Jest bests stress.”

I stare at him. “Jest bests stress? What does that even mean?”

Huey shrugs. “I dunno. Be happy instead of freaked out, maybe? It’s one of the things Grandpa used to say.” He pulls a deck of cards from his shirt pocket and slaps it on the armrest. He’s always practicing new tricks to show residents at Porch View, the assisted living center where his grandfather used to stay. Huey’s so good that

the manager at Porch View wants him to do a big show for everybody. Huey keeps saying no, because he has chronic stage fright. The only people he's comfortable performing for are the senior citizens on his grandfather's old floor, and me.

I cut the deck the way he taught me. First time in half. Second time in thirds. Third time in quarters. Then I turn away, shuffle the deck, and pluck out a card. It's the ten of clubs. I sneak the card back and snag a different one. Card #2 is the jack of diamonds.

"Jack of diamonds," Huey says the second I turn back. "And the first card you pulled was the ten of clubs." He blinks. "Was I close?"

I catch myself mid-eye roll. Huey hardly ever makes a mistake. But he still panics at the big finish. "I wasn't close, was I?" His eyebrows twitch. "Where did I mess up? Gimme a sec. I'll take notes."

"If by close you mean nailed it, then yeah. You were close." I rub my hands together. I'm ready for another trick, but it's already after 8:00. Other kids and teachers start piling in. Huey grabs the deck and shoves it in his pocket before anyone gets near.

We bored-clap as LaVontay Scott, a sixth-grade ballet prodigy, and the other arts peeps pirouette and fa-la-la to the seats closest to the stage. LaVontay does a bunch of leaping high kicks that he obviously practiced during

spring break. Not to be outdone, Spike Weatherly starts singing opera or whatnot.

“I feel your pain about the weekend!” Huey has to shout because Charlotte Kendsierski and Spike have started having a major talent throwdown. She plays air drums and sings country; Spike dumps opera for beat-box and rap.

“My parents are”—Huey makes air quotes—“discussing their living arrangements again.” He makes a face. “Do you know how weird it is to have your first mom and first dad talk about getting back together when they’ve already married other people—twice?”

“Nope.” No worries there. “My parents are never, ever getting back together.”

We hoist our knees to avoid getting trampled as the serious STEM kids pollinate the chairs behind the arts peeps and the sportsters swarm the back rows. Almost everybody has the post-spring break blues so they’re still half asleep. But a few of the mathatrons are having some kind of verbal algebra tournament. They hurl half-finished equations at each other like spears.

“You know how Grandpa taught me a new set of card tricks every time one of my original parents got married?” Huey says. “I counted them up this weekend after my parents told me their news.” He shakes his head. “I know a lot of card tricks, man. I have six parents to manage,

counting the steps. They stress me out. Nobody's got it as bad as me in the parent department."

"Wanna bet?" I didn't expect to compete in *Whose Parents Are Worse?* when I came to school this morning, but this is B-B. Most of us compete in everything. There must be something in the air.

"At least all of your folks have always been around," I remind him. I tick off points on my hand, starting with my thumb. "One: Pops got hurt right after I was born. Two: He didn't get the coaching job he wanted so he flew to LA faster than Superman to be a commentator on ESPN. Three: He said he left us behind because Moms was finishing graduate school and I was in day care, but I think it's really because we would've been in the way. Four: He was only supposed to be gone a year or two, but 'new opportunities' kept coming up. And five: He shows up at my twelfth birthday party and acts like being gone most of my life doesn't matter. Then he tries to take over!" I make a fist and pump the air. Boom. I'm the winner.

"Not so fast, man." Huey's probably the only kid at B-B who doesn't like serious contests, but this is just us. It's safe. He's obviously getting into this game. He makes his own fist. "First off, you lose a point because your pops was here in spirit. You always got birthday and holiday gifts. And you said your mom always got a check on the first of the month to help take care of you."

Huey drops his little finger and waggles the remaining four digits at me before starting to count his parent grievances on his other hand. “Now for me. One: All of the grownups in my family still act like parents, even after they get divorced. Two: They hardly agree on anything. Three: They each have, like, three thousand rules—and they’re all different. And four, I have to schlep my stuff to a different house every other week. I’m just a regular kid, Doug. Trying to keep track of what I’m supposed to do where is hard.” He does jazz hands. “It’s a tie, dude!”

“You forgot about Pops’s online classes.” I smirk. Pops figures if he can fast-learn a bunch of sports-related businesses after spending most of his career on the field, he can fast-learn hands-on parenting. He’s taking classes by some guy named Greg G. at The Power Parenting Group. Thanks to Greg G., Pops has opinions about everything. *What I eat. When I sleep. Where I live and go to school. What I’m going to be when I grow up.* The list goes on and on. It wasn’t bad when he lived in LA. But now he has a fancy new house in a Denver suburb called Highlands Ranch. He’s forty minutes from my home in Park Hill—an older neighborhood in the middle of the city—but he’s still close enough to want to oversee everything.

He doesn’t care that Moms raised me her way for most of my life. Or that she got remarried when I was two. Nothing makes Pops launch into his “There are no

ex-parents, only ex-spouses” speech faster than when people think Julius is my original dad, because we have the same Afro (his is shorter), the same black glasses (his are thicker), the same smirky laugh (mine is smirkier), and we both like tech. Julius has been around for as long as I can remember, but that doesn’t stop Pops from pressing me to be less like Julius and more like him. Greg G. says kids can only have one dad.

Huey’s face falls. Greg G.’s online classes are the tie-breaker. Not that it’s a prize I actually want or anything, but award the winning point in the Headaches from Parents Olympics to me.

“Sorry to rub it in, but there’s more.” I pause for effect. “Pops wants me to do Elite Juniors sports camp this summer. He announced it at dinner last night.”

“No way! Doesn’t he know GadgetCon is this summer?!”

“He doesn’t care. You know how he is. Pops says inventing is a hobby. He wants me to focus on sports.”

It doesn’t matter that winning GadgetCon before I turn thirteen is part of my fifty-seven-step strategy to become the World’s Greatest Inventor. Or that individuals can’t enter GadgetCon: contestants have to be nominated by their schools.

“Pops says there’s no guarantee Dr. Yee will choose me for GadgetCon. But since his company is sponsoring Elite

Juniors this year, getting into summer sports camp is a sure thing. He says I should be grateful for ”—I make air quotes—“this amazing opportunity.”

I can count on Moms to put her foot down about me changing schools, or playing tackle football, or spending more time on sports than I spend studying, but even she doesn't get how important GadgetCon is. She says Pops and I need to find common ground and learn to compromise. Translation: It's up to me to change Pops's mind about GadgetCon.

When it comes to Elite Juniors sports camp, I can't just say no.