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**DAVID
KLASS
THE
BRAVES**



PUFFIN BOOKS

PROLOGUE

I don't know how the legend started that Lawndale High School is haunted. I never believed it. First of all, I don't believe in ghosts and the supernatural. And even if I did, I've got to think visitors from some spiritual realm could find a more exciting place to hang out than the narrow halls and drab rooms of my suburban high school.

But you know how these suburban legends hang around. They get passed on from class to class, year to year. And just when they're losing steam and ready to completely fade out, somebody sees something, or hears a mysterious noise—a groan or a scream or chains being dragged—and the old myth has new life.

There's nothing at all special about Lawndale High. It was built thirty years ago, on a flat site near swampy land that borders Overpeck Creek. I admit that when the wind blows through the reeds of the swamp, it sounds like someone is sucking in a long breath of dry air over sharp teeth. But that's

just the way swamps sound. And at night, during summer storms, I myself have seen flashes of lightning make irregular, improbable, downright creepy images flicker across the concrete walls of our school. But lightning storms are always creepy.

There's nothing special about me either, by the way. I'm not a brilliant student. Except for biology, which for some reason I do reasonably well at, my grades are mediocre. I'm a good athlete, but not exceptional. I think I'm a nice guy, but no doubt you could find a nicer one without looking too hard. I'd like to do something unusual or special with my life, but I seem to be lacking in the motivation and ambition department. I could probably get into a halfway decent college, but I'm not even going to apply—I've had enough sitting in classrooms for a while. So my future plans and prospects don't seem too bright. This is the story of a not very special guy beginning his senior year at a not very special high school that could probably be anywhere in America but happens to be in a small town in northern New Jersey.

Hundreds of years ago, the Leni-Lenape Indians roamed this part of New Jersey. One legend holds that our school was built on an old Indian burial ground, and that's why our sports teams are called the Lawndale Braves. The ghostly images and screams in the night are the spirits of long-dead Indians, outraged that their final resting place should have been violated to build the Lawndale High School, not to mention the football field, the soccer field, and the hard-surface tennis courts that stand at the edge of the creek.

Another variation of the legend says that a battle was fought on this site during the Revolutionary War, between George Washington's army and the British. The ghostly screams people claim to hear are actually echoes of the death agonies of American soldiers—really just boys our own age—who were bravely fighting for independence. Our sports teams are called the Braves to honor their brave final sacrifice.

Now, it is a historical fact that Washington's army did pass through Lawndale, retreating from General Howe. There are historical markers on Broad Avenue to show the route Washington's troops took, and Mr. Muldowney, our history teacher, has sketched the major campaigns of 1776 on a blackboard. But no one has ever, to my knowledge, demonstrated that any significant battle took place within our town limits.

So I think it's all a load of bunk. Every place that's not special has to make something up to pretend it is special and unique. There's a legend about a hill in New Jersey that you can drive your car to, turn off the engine, put the car in neutral, and the car will go uphill, defying gravity. There's a legend about a river in Hackensack that's so polluted with chemicals you can drop a roll of film in and the pictures will develop themselves. Sheer hooey. I don't believe any of this nonsense.

What I do believe is what I see and hear and feel each and every day. I see a normal, slightly shabby school, populated by eight hundred students, a hundred and fifty of whom are bused in. We study algebra and Dickens, flirt and fight, hang out and

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try to act tough, or slink along and try to hide, and generally muddle our way through the years between fourteen and eighteen.

That's all I see. And, when you think about it, that's plenty scary enough. Even scarier than ghosts and screams in the night, in its own unmysterious way.

i

The first word of the arrival of the Phenom blew into our school on a Tuesday with an October rainstorm.

Soccer practice ended just as the downpour started, and the twenty members of our team sprinted off the field with thunder crashing above us, and sharp harpoons of lightning forking out across the suddenly dark autumn sky. The rain went from a few isolated drops to a cold thudding cascade in about five seconds flat, and by the time we made it to the school and squeezed in through the basement entrance, in our dripping uniforms and muddy shoes, we were as wet as a soccer team can be.

I spotted Kristine in the basement hallway, near the band room, trying to not look like she was waiting for me. I tried to not look like I saw her not looking at me. I lagged behind the team and then, as they hurried noisily into the locker room for hot showers and dry towels, I made a detour toward her.

Kris and I lived across the street from each other, and I'd

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been friends with her ever since I could walk. But in the last six months our friendship had suddenly gotten very weird, and I wasn't sure whether it was me or her. Lately, when I talked to her, I couldn't figure out whether she was flirting with me or if I was reading it into everything she said. Some days I was certain she wanted me to ask her out on a date. Other days I was equally sure she considered me just an old pal from the same block who she could joke around with. The only thing I was clear about was that my old neighbor who I used to play tag with and chase around our backyards with a water pistol had grown up into a fun and very pretty girl with long sandy brown hair and sparkling hazel eyes.

"Hey, K," I said.

"You're a mess," Kris said back. Now, that's not normally a flattering comment, but she said it with a smile.

"Thanks," I said. "I don't know if you noticed, but there's a monsoon going on outside."

"Don't drip on me, Joe."

"It's okay," I told her. "It's not sweat or anything. It's just good, clean rain."

"I don't want to get wet with just good, clean rain. Keep away. You're flooding the hallway."

There was, in fact, a small puddle forming around my feet. I stepped back. "What's up?" I asked her.

"What do you mean what's up?"

"Why were you here waiting for me?"

"What makes you think I was waiting for you?" Kris asked. "Band practice just ended."

"And you're standing outside the guys' locker room."

"Coincidence," she said. "This happens to be the way I walk from the band room to my locker. But since I'm here and you're here, I'll give you a hot tip, Mr. Soccer Team Captain. Unless you've already heard."

"Heard what?"

"Oh, so you haven't heard?" She sounded genuinely amused.

"Kris, for the second time, heard what?" I was getting exasperated.

"Congratulations," she said. "Your soccer team just got a whole lot better."

It was very strange, but even when she seemed to be saying something very directly, I couldn't understand her at all. "What are you talking about?" I asked.

"In fact," she said, "I think you guys might actually have a chance in the league play-offs."

"We've always had a chance."

"No, I saw you play on Sunday." She didn't need to tell me this. I had spotted Kris and some of her friends in the stands. I had been surprised and glad to see her there, and I wondered at the time if she had come to watch a soccer game in general, or me in particular. "No offense," she said, "but you guys looked pretty awful. In fact, you were awful because you had no offense."

"We had a bad game," I muttered.

"Joe, it's not your fault. You played great, but the rest of your team is a disaster."

I didn't say anything, because I didn't want to agree with her, but I couldn't deny it. Being the captain and best player on a barely mediocre team is no fun.

"But now you have a chance of making the league play-offs," Kris said. "If not the state play-offs. If not the world play-offs. This is your lucky day, Joe. By the way, are there world play-offs in high school soccer?"

I stepped closer to her. "If you don't tell me what you're talking about by the count of three, I'm gonna shake my wet hair all over you."

"You wouldn't dare."

"One," I said.

"And this is the thanks I get for waiting outside your stupid locker room to give you a hot tip? That's it. I'm out of here."

I blocked her way. "Two," I said.

"Joe, you wouldn't dare."

"I'm warming up my neck muscles," I told her. "I hope that blouse dries quickly."

I have a big mop of curly black hair and it holds a lot of water. I think she saw that I was really about to shake it out all over her.

"Okay," she said. "I guess you haven't heard about the new kid."

"What new kid?"

"The new kid who just transferred to our school."

"No. But so what? Kids leave. Kids come."

"Yeah, but they don't usually come from Brazil to New Jersey."

I felt my pulse quicken. "For your information, not all kids from Brazil play soccer," I told her.

"For your information, this one does," she said. "Or at least that's what I heard Mrs. Simmons telling Mr. Hart."

Mrs. Simmons is our head guidance counselor. Among her other duties, she helps new students get adjusted. It made sense that she might know something about some new transfer student. Mr. Hart is our athletic director. If Mrs. Simmons found out about a talented new athlete, it made sense that she would tell Mr. Hart. But, of course, I was still playing it cool. "For your information, not all students from Brazil, even if they play a little soccer, are any good," I told her.

"True," she said. And she paused. Again, that wicked smile. "And he doesn't look like a jock. He's not real muscular . . . and he's not as big as you."

"You've seen this guy?"

"He's in my calculus class. His name's Silva. Antonio Silva. He's real cute. Great hair. Even better eyes. He speaks real good English." She paused. It was a long pause. Her sparkling hazel eyes laughed at me. "And I hear he played for Brazil," she finally said.

"Don't you mean he played in Brazil?"

"No," she said, "for Brazil. I hear he was on the Brazilian national youth team or something. In fact, I think he was one of their leading scorers."

I just stood there. The blood stopped running through my veins, which is understandable because my heart stopped beating, and I believe my lungs also stopped pumping air. Everything just froze.

I guess Kris saw that her news had turned me into a statue,

incapable of responding, so she kept talking. “Isn’t Brazil the best soccer country in the world?” she asked. “I mean, don’t they keep winning the World Cup, if that’s what it’s called? And he was one of the best young players in the whole country. I think he was a striker. Isn’t that what they call the people who stay in front and score all the goals? Except on your team, where the strikers don’t score any goals. Anyway, now he’s at our school. So don’t you think, Mr. Soccer Captain of a mediocre team with no offense, that you might want to check him out . . .”

But Kris never got to finish what she was saying, because I had disappeared down the hallway to find Antonio Silva.

2

The morning after I heard about the Phenom, I saw him for the first time, in a fight.

The bell for homeroom hadn’t rung yet, so the hallways were still full of kids getting stuff out of their lockers and talking. But there’s one part of our school complex that faces the swamps—the West Annex, we call it—that’s kind of isolated. The gym and athletic department offices take up the entire ground floor of the West Annex. The chemistry and physics labs and science supply rooms are on the second floor, with a few rows of student lockers stuck in like an afterthought.

I was in the West Annex only because I had dropped a couple of practice jerseys off in the athletic office for Coach Collins. I was jogging back, heading for my homeroom in the main building, when a scared-looking sophomore came running down the stairs from the second floor, tripped over his own feet, stumbled down the last three or four steps, and crashed right into me.