

*Two twelve-year-old boys—
one a talented Little League
pitcher, the other a gifted
artist—become soulmates.
They help each other to
confront bullying fathers so
that they may pursue
dreams of their own making.*

Unlikely Friends

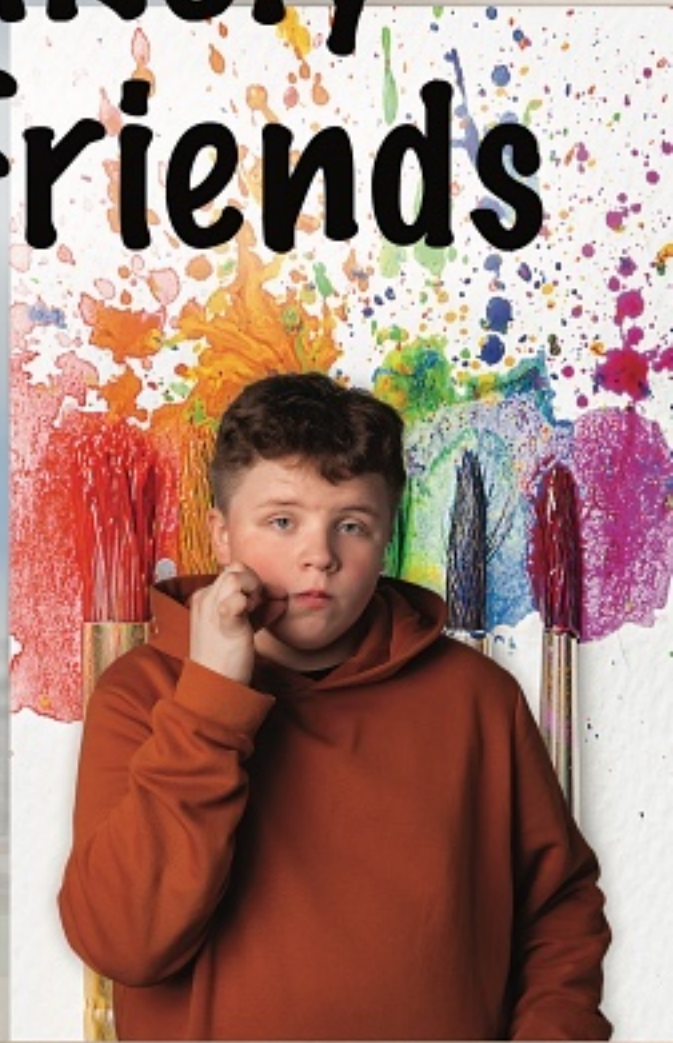
By Paul Korins

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Paul Korins

Also By Paul Korins

A Summer to Remember with Ted Williams

The Magic Typewriter

Warning Whispers

Haunting Whispers

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Print ISBN: 978-1-958878-34-7

Ebook ISBN: 979-8-88531-394-0

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Published by BookLocker.com, Inc., Trenton, Georgia.

Printed on acid-free paper.

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2023

First Edition

Chapter One

HOLDING A CUP of steamy coffee, he managed the stairs, halting on the top step. His sharp green eyes, flashing like polished gemstones, darted to the boy across the room. "So you're here. Messing with another drawing," he called, shaking his head.

Jolted, the boy straightened in his chair. A sketch pad was laying on the antique cherrywood desk that dwarfed him. He was in the "Great Room," so dubbed by his parents. It boasted a soaring cathedral ceiling and a picture window with a panoramic view of the ocean.

"Yeah...yeah, messing with another one," he murmured, feeling a flush crawl over plump cheeks. His fingers, curled around a pencil, tightened.

"Yeah, yeah," the man mimicked, his lips twisting into a sour smile, sturdy jaws hardening. He grunted, shook his head again, and hobbled past his son, stopping in front of the window. He breathed in the scene before him: the sun was climbing in a clear blue sky, its rays coloring it with soft hues of red and gold and dappling the ocean below with diamonds of silvery light.

“Beautiful day, huh, Son?” he said, his gaze holding fast. He sipped some coffee. “When I was a kid, Saturdays like this meant playing baseball until the sun went down.”

“I know, Dad,” he mumbled. The tips of his fingers were tingling, his grip on the pencil growing tighter.

When his dad finally turned to him, he saw fire in his eyes. “Don’t you have to get out of those pajamas and into your jeans and sweatshirt?”

He never gives up. He should’ve stayed in his bedroom to draw, the boy thought, looking down at his half-finished sketch: a smoky sky above a turbulent ocean, far different from the peaceful scene that had diverted his father moments ago.

“No, I don’t,” he said with a firmness that surprised him.

“What do you mean, you *don’t*, Blake?”

He took a hard swallow. “I changed my mind. I don’t want to go to those Little League tryouts. Never did. You know that, Dad.”

“You never even gave it a chance last year. But not *this* year. At twelve years old, this is your last opportunity to play. So get dressed,” he growled, working his steely jaws as he glared at his son. Suddenly, he turned on his heel and limped from the room, muttering something that Blake couldn’t decipher.

He knew he'd disappointed his father again. Bo Simpson, the once-famous high school and college athlete, a Triple A pitcher who'd shattered his leg in a motorcycle accident. It was a career-ending injury. He never made it up to the "big show," the major leagues, his 100 m.p.h. fastball now just a distant memory, faded by time.

Still holding the pencil in a fierce grip, he pounded it on his sketch pad, once, twice, three times, then heard a loud snap as it broke in two. What he'd tried to do with his bat the last time his dad took him to Jackson Park to teach the "finer points" of hitting. Breaking that pencil reminded him of that awful day on the diamond. His dad had lobbed pitch after pitch to him, but he'd whiffed on every one. After the last toss, he yelled from the mound, his face like a ripe tomato, "I can't throw it any slower, Son." With that, he attacked home plate and gave it three good whacks. But the bat held its own, solid as ever. He whipped it aside as his father approached. By the look on his face he just knew his dad wanted to see that bat laying there, busted in two by *his* son.

Then he'd salted the wound.

"You know, Blake, your sister has a better swing. Course Jordan's fifteen, so maybe in the next few years you'll get the hang of it," he said, grimacing. His expression showed he didn't believe that for one second.

That was last spring, when Blake first came to realize that he'd never be able to please his dad in anything he might accomplish.

His mind turned to Jordan. Why did she have to inherit all of their father's athletic ability? If he'd gotten even a small share of it, would he feel the same way about him that he did about Jordan?

Would he like him more?

Chapter Two

THE BOY STEPPED into the bedroom. Skimpy shades had allowed some filtered sunlight in, diluting the darkness to gray gloom. He edged toward the bed where his father was spreadeagled across a rumpled sheet, his snoring cutting like a buzz saw.

He tried to rouse him with a gentle shake of his shoulder. "Time to get up, it's late, Pop. Mom told me to come in and wake you," he whispered, the sour smell of wine on his father's breath making his nose wrinkle. No answer, so he shook harder.

"What're you doin'?" the father roared suddenly with a sweep of his arm, backhanding him.

The boy staggered back, feeling a slow burn on his cheek. "Ow!" he cried, righting himself. "Okay, don't get up. See if I care." He stumbled to the door, slamming it on his way out.

Bruno Marciano struggled upright with a groan. His overweight torso hindered the move. Pausing, he took two deep breaths and knuckled his eyes. He yanked the sheet from underneath his body, gathered it up, and tossed the bundle on the floor.

“I tried, Ma. Maybe he’ll get up, maybe he won’t. I don’t care,” Rocco said to his mother, who was holding a spatula over a saucepan, bacon and eggs crackling in it.

She turned around and studied him. “Your cheek is red, it’s swelling. Did he hit you again?”

He rubbed the bruise. “Nah, it’s nothin’. Had too much wine last night, I guess.”

She turned back to the stove, sweeping a tear away. “No, it’s something, all right. I can’t take it anymore. You can’t take it, either.”

“Don’t worry, I can take it, Ma.”

“You shouldn’t have to take it, Rocco. You’re twelve years old.”

“You’re not gonna leave him, are you?”

She shoved the spatula under an egg and plopped it onto a platter, the yolk breaking. “I destroyed it,” she said, shaking her head. “Don’t know what I’m going to do. This can’t go on. He was once a good man, he wasn’t always like this, you know.”

“I know, Ma, and it hasn’t happened for a while. It’ll be okay.”

She scooped up another egg, taking care this time. “Until it happens again.”

His father lumbered into the kitchen, hiking his wrinkled pants over his belly, then buttoning up the paint-stained shirt that hung like a drape.

“Smells good, Maria. I’m sure hungry.”

“No wonder. You didn’t eat much last night. You fell asleep on the couch. Cheap wine will do it every time.”

His face turned hard. “Don’t get started, Maria.”

Father and son seated themselves at the table in silence as Maria plunked the platter in the center of the table and joined them, spatula still in hand, eyes flaring.

Rocco pointed to the sad-looking egg that his mother had botched. “I’ll take that one, Ma.” He knew his father liked his sunny side up, the yolk unbroken until he poked it with a fork.

The silence lingered while Bruno shoveled forkful after forkful of food into his mouth, his sweaty brow furrowed in concentration. Rocco and his mother watched, their eyes widening.

Fifty pounds overweight, and still going strong, thought Rocco. *Amazing*. Of course, he wasn’t always heavy. When he fought for the middleweight championship against Jackie Grogan, fifteen years ago, he was a slick 158 pounds, as he told him many times, usually after a few glasses of wine, or a shot of whiskey and a beer to chase it down.

“Wanna go to the gym this afternoon?” Bruno growled through a half-filled mouth. “I can give you a few more tips, and then you can have a session with the speed bag. You were pretty good at it last time. Just gotta finish the painting job on McGreevey’s house this morning, then I’m free.”

Just like nothing happened, Rocco thought, rubbing his cheek.

His father looked up at him. “Oh, sorry, kid. You surprised me out of a deep sleep.”

But you didn’t surprise me, thought Rocco.

He hesitated, glancing at his mother. She was chewing slowly on a mouthful of egg and bacon, eyes still fiery. “What time...at Petronelli’s?” he asked.

“Two. I know, Little League practice in the morning, but I’m sure you’ll be free—”

“Maybe he doesn’t want to go, Bruno,” his mother cut in.

“Course he does. Right, Rocco?”

He shifted. “I guess,” he said, raking his muss of dark brown hair with his hand.

“Boys need boxing lessons. Learn how to defend themselves. What about that chubby friend of yours? I seen

him around, Bo Simpson's boy. He sure could use a good workout."

His name's Blake, and he's not a friend of mine. I just bump into him every once in a while. I don't think he'd be interested in working out. He's definitely no athlete, heard he likes to paint."

Bruno chortled. "Not houses like me, I take it."

"Right, Bruno, he's not like you at all," his mother said. "Seems like a sensitive boy."

"You sure didn't mind watchin' me in the ring, beatin' on some poor sucker, did ya, Maria? What does that say about *your* sensitive nature, huh?"

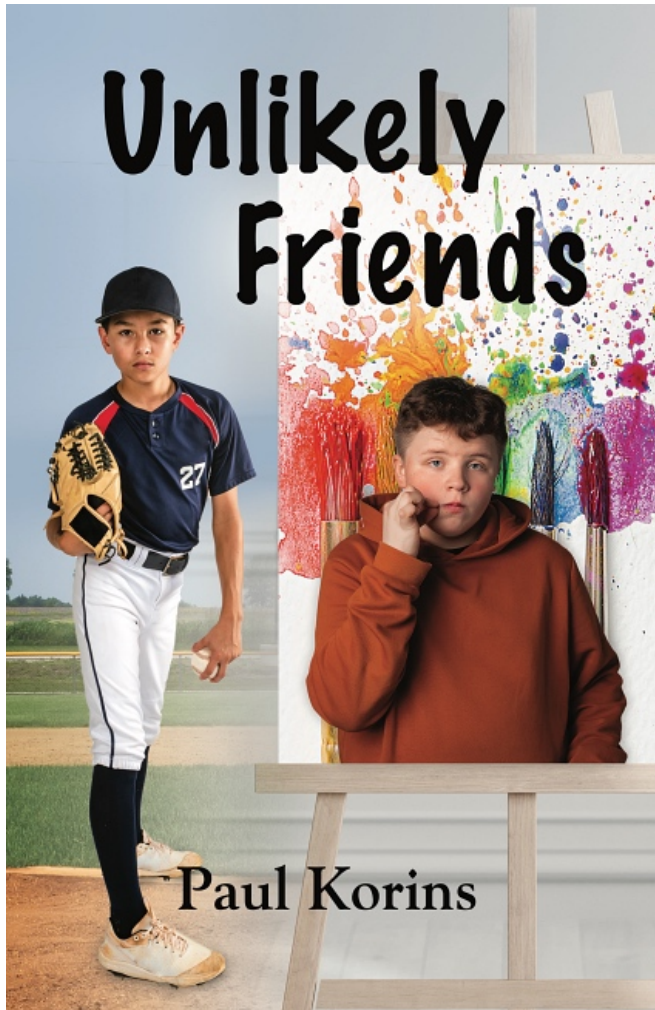
"That was a long time ago," she said softly, her round cheeks coloring to hot pink.

"Yeah, too long."

"Not so long, Bruno. You're still fighting, in one way or another."

"Whatever," he said, waving the accusation away. His eyes locked on his son, his face stony again. "I'll see you at two o'clock *sharp*, Rocco. Be there."

He nodded, squelching the impulse to glance at his mother. "Right, two...sharp."



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