

Chapter Nine



SPECIALS

Monday - Fried Rice	\$3.00
Tuesday - Fried Lice (collected fresh each day)	\$3.00
Wednesday - Fried Mice (collected fresh each night)	\$3.00
Thursday - Fried Chicken Drumsticks (free grease)	\$3.00
Friday - Fried Day	\$3.00

THE TUCKSHOP KID

At the start of lunch I remember that Kayla wants to talk to me, and I know exactly where to find her. I sneak up to the tuckshop line and poke her in the back.

She turns and smiles, then looks down. 'Matt, there's something I want to ask you ...'

Butterflies start flying around my gut again. My gut has actually got a bit smaller in the last week, but it can still fit a lot of butterflies.

'You know how you've been winning chocolate milks for people, like Marcus, Jasmine, Eric and Mrs Spencer?' she says.

'And you!'

She shakes her head. 'No, that was an accident. I offered to put your rubbish in the bin and it just *happened* to win!'

I raise an eyebrow. 'Whatever!'

'Well, anyway, I want to make you a deal!'

Here we go. I wonder how much it's going to cost me this time.

'If you can win me a chocolate milk today, I'll let you ask me a question. And there's a very good chance that I'll say yes.'

I wonder what the heck she's talking about. A free chocolate milk for the right to ask a question? Big woop!

Then it hits me. Surely she doesn't mean . . .

'Anything?' I ask.

'Anything. Well, almost anything.'

She looks into my eyes and the butterflies fly faster

Pat Flynn

and harder, crashing against the walls of my stomach like they're trying to perform a jailbreak. When I was at the shopping centre yesterday, I noticed a movie that I'd like to see. It doesn't even have heaps of killing in it, so Kayla might like it as well. But is this what she means?

I shake her hand. 'You've got a deal! There's only one way to find out.'

She hands me money and says to order her the special while she finds us a table.

Finds us a table?

The butterflies start coming up my throat.

Jan's away, so there's only one line leading to Mrs Dwyer. When I finally make it to the front, I order a chicken and salad sandwich, a banana, a chocolate milk, and the special – which is deep-fried chicken drumsticks.

Mrs Dwyer gives me a scowl. 'Do you really need so much food, Matthew? It's not good for you.'

'It's not all for me.'

She makes a 'humph' sound like she doesn't believe me. I can't really blame her – I used to eat this much all the time. And then she says something strange. 'Seeing Jan's not here, don't expect any boosts to your self-esteem.'

I have no idea what she means, but I don't bother asking for an explanation. I'm in a hurry to take lunch back to Kayla's and my table. Kayla's and my table. I reckon I could get used to saying that.

My heart sinks when I see Kayla sitting next to Tasha.

THE TUCKSHOP KID

I stand beside them, not knowing what to do.

Tasha gives me the evil eye. 'Get lost, fat Matt'

'I can't. I know this school too well,' I say.

'I'm going to have lunch with my friend Matthew now,' Kayla says to Tasha. 'Okay?'

It takes Tasha a few seconds to realise she's not invited, and when the penny drops so does her bottom lip. She rolls her eyes and walks off.

Kayla and I eat slowly and talk fast, which may seem normal to most kids, but to me it's not. Even though I've had some damn fine lunches, it's always been all about the food. This is different. Kayla tells me about her annoying little brother who amputated one of her Barbie doll's arms, and I tell Kayla about my mum's fruit cake that even a bird wouldn't eat. We laugh together.

'Do you feel bad about getting diabetes?' she asks.

Marcus walks past and gives me a friendly slap on the shoulder. As I nod to him, I notice boys pushing and shoving each other in the handball line.

I look back at Kayla. 'I think it's the best thing that's ever happened to me.'

I hand her the chocolate milk but she slides it back.

'I'll drink the free one,' she says. 'That's the deal!'

'I don't need it!'

'Share?'

'Okay.'

As we get close to finishing, I realise how much my life has changed in a week. Even though she can't cook

THE TUCKSHOP KID

much, I now have a semi-normal mum, I can run three laps of the oval without passing out, and I'm having lunch with a girl. I'm starting to think that maybe, just maybe, I deserve all this.

I take the last gulp and get ready for greatness. But when I look at the bottom I don't see anything. I look again. There's nothing but a white piece of cardboard and tiny bits of milk in the corners, ready to be spilt.

Kayla laughs and grabs the carton, but I don't wait for her to find out that I'm a loser. As quick as a fat kid can, I get up and walk away.

Chapter Ten



SNACKS

Chips - salt and vinegar, barbeque, wood	\$1.20
Jelly Cups	\$0.80
Fruit Cups	\$0.80
Butter Cups	\$0.80
Cheese Sticks	\$0.50
Liquorice Sticks	\$0.15
Pogo Sticks	\$80.00
Le Snack (French)	\$0.75
El Snacko (Spanish)	\$0.75
The Snack (English)	\$0.75
Abitetoeatmate (Aussie)	\$0.75
Nutella	\$0.60
Utella	\$0.60
Itella	\$0.60
Webothtella	\$0.60

THE TUCKSHOP KID

I sit under a tree and think. Actually I say to myself *Why me?* over and over again. When I get sick of that I try to figure out what went wrong. I win six chocolate milks in a row. Six. And then the one time I actually need to win, the one time I get close to having something really good happen to me, I lose. Mum always says that everything happens for a reason, that it's fate. All I can say is, if fate walked up to me right now, I'd kick her in the shin.

Even the tuckshop lady was mean to me. 'Seeing Jan's not here, don't expect any boosts to your self-esteem,' Mrs Dwyer said. What the heck is that supposed to mean?

Suddenly, it hits me like a backhander. When I bought chocolate milks from Jan, I won. She's away and I lose. Perhaps it wasn't fate that let me win, but Jan? Perhaps she somehow knows which milk cartons are winners and gives them to me? But why?

Don't expect any boosts to your self-esteem. That phrase goes round and round in my head like a kebab. It occurs to me that Jan must have done it to make me feel better, 'cause I'm flabby and have no friends. Even Jan the tuckshop lady feels sorry for me, her best customer.

A wave of anger flashes through my giant gut. I hate Jan and Kayla. At least Mrs Dwyer, Withers and the new kid are honest; Jan and Kayla pretend to care but really they look down on me like everyone else. They just act nice to make themselves feel better.

THE TUCKSHOP KID

'Hey, marathon man?'

It's the new kid and Withers. I really don't need this right now.

'Keep training and you might make it to the Olympics,' says the new kid. 'I heard they're bringing in a new sport called downhill rolling.'

I don't bother answering. It's not worth it. Though if they came within grabbing distance I'd crush them into human dust.

'What's wrong?' says the new kid. 'Have you eaten your own tongue?'

I look at Withers. He hasn't laughed or said anything yet, which isn't like the new him.

'Go on,' says the new kid, 'do it.' He's looking at Withers too.

Withers just stands there.

'He deserves it,' says the new kid. 'Remember what he did to you?'

Withers takes a quick step forward and throws. He doesn't chuck it full pelt – in our younger days Craig and I used to hurl rocks at plovers and I know how hard he can let one go – but nevertheless the stone stings when it smacks my leg.

I don't yelp or react, though. There's no point. I just say quietly to Withers, 'We used to be mates. Remember?'

He doesn't answer.

'Who'd want to be friends with you?' says the new kid. They walk off.

Pat Flynn

A red mark grows on my leg, like I'm being dabbed by an invisible painter. But as it swells, the anger that I had a minute ago begins to fade, until I realise that I don't hate Kayla and Jan after all. I don't even hate Withers; I understand him too well.

Lunch is nearly over so I have to hurry. Apologising is never easy, but it's my only option. Trying to explain why I walked off will be trickier, but I'm hoping to think of something.

I turn a corner and see her back. Of all people, she's talking to Tasha, who's munching on a liquorice stick. *Great*, I think. Still, there's no time to lose.

'I hate him!' Kayla says.

I stop. Kayla hasn't seen me, though I think Tasha has. She has a nasty little smirk on her face.

'He's so pathetic it makes me sick,' Kayla continues.

Tasha looks over Kayla's shoulder at me and nods, smirking even more. Her lips are stained black from the liquorice; she looks like a devil worshipper.

'He's an ugly blob,' Kayla says, her words hitting me where it hurts.

Once again I walk away from Kayla, and this time I'm not coming back. Not this lunchtime, not ever.