

Excerpt of Face-Off  
By Stacy Juba

**Chapter One**

Nine year-old Jory McKendrick's green eyes widened. "Wow, you sure can lift a lot," he marveled as his older brother T.J. began another set of bench presses.

T.J. grinned from beneath the barbell. "You'll be keeping up with me soon enough." Grunting as he reached ten, he sat up and brushed a sweaty shirt sleeve across his forehead.

"I hope so."

T.J. gulped a few swallows from his water bottle. "Don't worry, you'll get there. You think Rome got built in a day?"

Jory looked blank. "I don't know. What's Rome?"

"A city in Italy. We'll look it up later."

"They have spaghetti there, right?"

"Among other things," T.J. said with a chuckle.

"Thomas, why aren't you studying? I thought you had a chemistry test today."

Groaning inwardly, T.J. turned to find the grim face of his father looming over him. Six feet tall, with graying chestnut hair and piercing blue eyes, Thomas Jason McKendrick was a commanding figure whose mere presence was enough to make anyone who crossed him shudder.

"Dad, it's seven o'clock in the morning. Give me a break."

Jory tried to help. "Yeah, Dad, he had to lift weights."

T.J. shook his head. Didn't little brothers know anything? "Great, Jor," he muttered.

"Oh, he had to lift weights, did he? Well surely if you had enough energy to lift weights, you had enough energy to open your chemistry textbook?"

T.J. closed his eyes for a second, and then he stood up. Though he was by no means short, he wasn't quite as tall as his father. But he was the perfect height for a hockey player. "Dad, I studied yesterday. I don't think a few minutes of cramming—"

"This is your junior year in high school. Do you know how closely colleges look at the junior year grades? Every time I see you lately you're thinking about sports. Athletics are fine as extracurricular activities, but you're not going to get into a school like Harvard if you neglect your studies."

T.J. sighed. "Dad, I don't want to go to a school like Harvard. I've told you."

"You're too young to know what you want. You have so much potential. You could go to any undergraduate school you chose, and go on to law school. But you have to put some effort into it, and lifting weights and playing sports all the time is not the way to go about it."

"Dad, come on. You don't—"

"We'll talk more about this later," his father interrupted, glancing down at his watch. "Now go get ready for school."

"But Dad—"

"I said, enough," his father cut in firmly.

Jory, who had been silent for most of the exchange, now tugged at his father's coat sleeve. "Daddy, will you play catch with me tonight?" he asked hopefully.

Mr. McKendrick reached down and ruffled his son's silky blond hair. "Sorry, Jor, I'm working late tonight. Maybe tomorrow, okay?"

"Look, I've got to get ready for school." T.J. stalked past his father and entered the bathroom across the hall.

The small blue and white tiled bathroom that T.J. shared with his fraternal twin brother, Brad, Jory, and their thirteen-year-old brother, Chris, seemed even smaller cluttered with the four boys' jumbled belongings, especially T.J.'s hair dryer, mousse, and styling gel.

Because T.J. was fussy about his appearance and always spent at least ten minutes perfecting his hair before he went out anywhere, his friends had nicknamed him G.Q. But while his vanity was a source of amusement to his friends, to his brothers it was a source of provocation.

T.J. took a quick shower and then got dressed. As he picked up his comb, he was interrupted by a loud hammering at the bathroom door. "T.J., what the heck are you doing in there? Having it washed, cut, and blow-dried? Come on."

"Brad, give me a break! I've only been in here five minutes."

"Yeah, five minutes in dog years maybe," Brad shot back.

T.J. was about to retort, when his eyes lit on his red hair dryer. Though his blond hair was only slightly damp, he pointedly switched it on.

"T.J., come on!" Brad shouted, his banging growing more insistent. T.J. let him smolder for another couple of minutes and then flipped off the hair dryer and opened the door.

Brad glared at him. "T.J., if I'm late for school today—"

"Oh, will you chill out already? Man." Smiling to himself, T.J. pushed past his brother and stomped downstairs.

The rest of his family was gathered around the dining room table, his mother and father at either end, and Chris and Jory across from each other. T.J. felt the tension in the room the second he entered, and he immediately knew the cause of it. His parents had been arguing again. He could tell from the way they were looking at anything but each other and by the redness of his mother's eyes. His anger toward his father returned, and T.J. shot him a sullen look as he circled the table and quietly slid into the chair beside Chris.

"Good morning, T. J.," his mother murmured. Forcing a smile, she passed him a plate stacked with lightly browned pancakes.

"T.J., will you drive me down to David's house after school today?" Chris asked. "We want to go down to the rink and practice our wrist shots."

"I can't, at least not right after school. I've got cross-country practice today. I could take you around four, though." T.J. forked a couple of pancakes onto his plate.

"I don't know; that wouldn't give me and Dave much practice time. Maybe Brad can take me. You're going into work with Patti today, right, Mom, so the car will be here?"

"Yes, the car will be here, but I think Brad has soccer practice today," his mother reminded him.

"Oh, yeah," Chris said.

"If you go, can I come too?" Jory asked.

"You? You're just a little kid," Chris scoffed.

"So? I play hockey too."

"So I don't want you following me around the whole time," Chris retorted.

"Christopher, what if your older brothers had said that to you when you were Jory's age?" his mother asked. "Who would have introduced you to hockey in the first place?"

"Actually," T.J. commented, grinning, "we did say that to him. The kid just doesn't know how to take a hint."

Chris grinned too. "But I was never that pesty, was I?" He gestured toward Jory.

"You were worse. Compared to you, Jory is nothing."

"Hey, quit talking about me like I'm not here," Jory protested.

"Now, where have *you* been?" Mr. McKendrick asked a few minutes later, as Brad swaggered into the room and took his seat next to Jory.

"I was out jogging," he replied, picking up the orange juice carton and pouring himself a glassful.

As his father smiled, T.J. shook his head. "How many miles today?" Mr. McKendrick asked.

"One and a half. I kind of overslept a little," Brad explained.

Suddenly, the telephone shrilled and Mrs. McKendrick went into the living room to answer it. She returned a moment later and gestured to her husband. "It's Bob."

Mr. McKendrick pushed back his chair. "I'll take it in the study."

"Who's Bob?" Jory asked as his parents left the room.

"Dad's partner," T.J. replied, gazing after his parents.

"Hey, Brad, do you have soccer practice today?" Chris asked.

"Why? What do you want me to do?" Brad asked suspiciously.

"Drive me to Dave's house? Mom said she's not taking the car to work."

Brad nodded slowly. "Yeah, I guess. What are you doing at Dave's?"

"Walking down to the rink. I'm gonna help Dave with his wrist shot," Chris said.

"Why? Doesn't he want to improve it?"

Chris glared at him.

Brad grinned. "Just kidding. Meet me at the house around three, and then look for me at the rink later. Maybe I'll give you guys a lift home while I'm there."

"Really? Are you going to be there too?"

"Yeah, I was thinking about taking Jory." He turned to his younger brother and saw that his eyes had lit up with excitement. "Hey, how about it, Jor? You want to show me your stuff?"

"Yeah," Jory said eagerly.

A horn suddenly blared outside, and Brad rose and threw on his blue and white Bayview High jacket. "Later."

As Brad disappeared out the door, T.J. glanced up at the clock. It was already seven-thirty, and his mother hadn't come out to drive his younger brothers to the bus stop.

"Listen, guys, I think I'd better take you to the bus today, or you're going to miss it. So go get your books and stuff, okay?"

"How about dropping us off at the movies instead?" Chris asked.

"How about you go get your homework?"

"Well, I would," Chris told him, scrambling to his feet, "except I didn't exactly do it yet."

"Forget it, just hurry up or I'm going to be late for school. How about you, Jory? You got your homework?" T.J. pulled his red and white varsity jacket off the back of his chair and put it on.

Jory nodded and held up a paper covered with scrawled fractions.

"All right, let's split."

The three brothers went out to T.J.'s pride and joy, the second-hand Buick that he had worked two summers as a camp counselor to pay for. It was a silvery blue with a leather interior, a great sound system, and a black and gold bumper sticker on the back that read BOSTON BRUINS #1.

T.J. arrived at the bus stop in the nick of time, just as the mustard yellow vehicle was turning around the corner. After hustling his brothers out of the car, he shifted into drive and headed toward school. T.J. pulled into the student parking lot with perfect timing, just two minutes before the first bell was scheduled to ring.

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