

WHATSHISFACE

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CHAPTER ONE

MEET WHATSHISFACE

Cooper Vega is invisible.

Okay, not really. But when you're the new kid and people look right through you, it sure feels that way. Cooper is pretty much the world champion at being the new kid, since Stratford Middle is his fifth school in the past three years. He keeps his distance from the visible people on the soccer field to avoid being trampled by mistake. That's another thing about being invisible: It's your job to get out of the way.

At Stratford Middle School, the opposite of invisible is Brock Bumgartner. Right now, big Brock is poised in front of the goal, deflecting every ball that comes his way. He dives. He leaps. He flies. His hands are everywhere. He's just a blur. Nothing gets past him—especially not the compliments.

“Great save, Brock!”

“You're the man!”

“Best goalie in the state!”

Brock soaks up the praise for a while. He gets bored fast, though. “Come on, you guys. Let's play a game! The bell rings in fifteen minutes!”

They choose sides, but Brock's team ends up a man short. Many pairs of eyes scan the schoolyard, searching for an extra player.

Brock loses patience with this too. "Find somebody," he orders.

"What about Whatshisface over there?" suggests Aiden Scowcroft.

Cooper freezes. Aiden's long finger is pointing directly at him. This always comes sooner or later—the moment you become visible. Usually because they need something from you.

Brock turns around. "Whatshisface?" He looks right through Cooper.

"The new kid," Aiden persists. "The guy with the hair."

Cooper flinches, and his mop of shaggy brown hair—almost shoulder length—resettles itself. "My name is Cooper Vega," he supplies.

"All right, you're on defense," Brock tells him. "Don't mess up."

Eagerly, Cooper jogs onto the field. He's been a student at Stratford Middle School for a week and a half, and this is the first time anyone has noticed he's even alive. Changing schools every six months is standard stuff in the Vega family. Captain Vega's in the military. You go where you're sent and keep quiet about it. Cooper's used to the lifestyle, but that doesn't make it any easier. Especially in a town like

Stratford, where all the kids seem to have been together since they were old enough to walk. Cooper's happy to be included—even as Whatshisface or The New Kid. Some of the places he's been parachuted into have been welcoming and friendly. This isn't one of them.

Cooper isn't a stellar athlete to begin with, but he's especially awkward today. It's the phone—his brand-new GX-4000, the most advanced smartphone on the market. He's only had it since yesterday. It was his *sorry-we-had-to-move-you-away-from-all-your-friends-again* present. If he falls down and smashes it, he'll never forgive himself—and his parents will definitely never forgive him. The thing costs nearly twice as much as a top-of-the-line iPhone or Android. It's bigger and bulkier and feels somehow vulnerable in his pocket—like it's always on the verge of falling out.

“What are you doing, kid?” Brock's voice barks from behind Cooper. “You're just standing there! Get your head in the game!”

There's no question who the criticism is aimed at. The goalie has plenty of coaching for everybody, but all the others have names. Cooper is the only *kid*.

The shot comes out of nowhere—a booming kick on a laser trajectory at waist level. It's definitely a phone killer. As Cooper watches it approaching on a collision course with his front pocket, he understands that this is a choice between soccer glory and his GX-4000.

He makes the obvious choice. At the last second, he hurls his body out of the path of the ball, which sizzles past a flat-footed Brock into the net. The star goalie just stands there, openmouthed.

“New teams!” Brock bawls. “I’m not playing with Whatshisface!”

“We don’t want him either!” is the reply from the opposite side of the field.

“Then get me another defender. I’ll take anybody. Jolie—play defense. I don’t care if you’re a girl. You’ve got to be better than Whatshisface!”

Cooper slinks off the field. It’s bad enough to be humiliated, but why does it have to be in front of Jolie Solomon, who’s been the one bright spot in this miserable school? It would be an *honor* to be called Whatshisface by Jolie, who has never before glanced in Cooper’s general direction. She’s noticing him *now*—as the guy who made a fool of himself in a recess soccer game.

Jolie raises her arm, indicating a short cast around her wrist. “Can’t. The cast doesn’t come off till Thursday.” Then, much to Cooper’s surprise, she adds disapprovingly, “And his name *isn’t* Whatshisface! It’s—” She regards him in sudden surprise. “Sorry, I guess I never knew your name.”

“Cooper,” he tells her, following her off the field. “Cooper Vega.”

“Cooper, Cooper, party pooper,” calls a voice behind him.

“This is just great,” Brock complains. “Where are we going to find another player in—what—seven minutes?”

Cooper looks worried, but Jolie is serene. “Don’t let them get to you,” she advises. “They’re harmless. They just take their sports way too seriously. Especially Brock.”

“You seem pretty sporty,” Cooper observes, nodding toward her cast.

She shrugs. “Soccer’s a little slow for me. I like to get the blood pumping. I broke my wrist kiteboarding on Lake Stratford.”

“Kiteboarding?”

“You know—it’s a cross between parasailing and water skiing, with a little snowboard thrown in. It’s amazing how hard water is when you come down on it from thirty feet.”

Cooper sizes up his companion. She’s slim and kind of petite. Definitely not muscle-bound, or anything you would expect from an extreme athlete—not that he’s met a lot of extreme athletes. Her T-shirt *does* say SCUBA INSANITY, with a cartoon of a diver taking an underwater selfie with a giant squid.

“You dive too?” he asks.

“Not that much anymore,” she replies. “My dad won’t let me go in where there are sharks. He’s so overprotective. I also rock climb, zip-line, ski jump, bungee, and do parkour. I’ll try normal things too—roller coasters aren’t that boring, so long as they’re really vertical. I’m also into drama. I

want to be an actress when I grow up. Either that or an astronaut.”

For Cooper, it’s almost as bad as getting thrown out of the soccer game to find out how little he has in common with this girl.

“We just moved here three weeks ago,” he says to keep the conversation going. “My dad’s military. He’s stationed at Fort Bensonhurst.”

Jolie points off in the distance. “You can just make out the tower from here. Over there—in between those two hills. Our school is built on top of the third hill, so you can see for miles around. There should be a good spot to BASE jump around here, but believe me, I’ve checked. Nothing.”

Cooper is shocked. “But you wouldn’t actually do that, right?”

“I wish. My parents won’t let me have a parachute till I’m eighteen. What’s the point of living in Three Hills if you can’t use the altitude?”

“Three Hills?” Cooper repeats.

“That used to be what the town was called—you know, before The Wolf moved in.”

Cooper laughs. “Now you’ve really got me confused. Who’s The Wolf?”

“Somerset Wolfson—one of the richest men in America. Surely you’ve noticed his estate? His mansion is the biggest building in town.” She walks him to the south side of the

playground. “See all that? Every inch of it is his. That’s the house. And that other building is the museum.”

Cooper gazes out over the vast property, which seems to take up the entire south end of town. It looks like a national park, with gleaming marble buildings, rolling lawns, glittering ponds, sumptuous flower beds, and handsome groves of trees.

No question: This is a man with a *ton* of money.

“Why does he have his own museum?” Cooper asks.

“He’s a Shakespeare nut,” Jolie explains. “He has the biggest private collection in the world. That’s the only reason he moved here thirty years ago—he needed a good spot to put up a custom-made gallery for all the old books and documents and artifacts. Everything is so old that it has to go in special climate-controlled cases. Plus, he needs security. It’s worth so much money that even a billionaire can’t afford to lose it.”

Upon closer inspection, Cooper can see that the greenery has been strategically placed to hide a heavy stone wall and a high security gate.

“Mr. Wolfson must really love Shakespeare,” he comments.

“Tell me about it! Back in the day, he refused to buy the property unless Three Hills agreed to change its name to Stratford—that was Shakespeare’s hometown in England. It was hard times back when he made the offer, and the town needed the cash, so they agreed. My parents remember it. It

was a huge deal for the locals. A lot of people are still ticked off at The Wolf for using his money to push us around.”

Cooper takes his new phone out of his pocket and begins tapping at the screen, searching for the camera app. He’s still getting used to its practically countless functions.

Jolie is impressed. “Wow, is that a GX-4000? I’ve heard about them, but I’ve never seen one.”

“It’s the latest bribe,” he tells her. “Every time we have to move, my parents get my sister and me something great to make up for it.” He frames a panoramic shot of the mansion and museum. “Something to send my friends back in Colorado.” As he reaches to take the picture, the image on the screen dissolves into multicolored snow. There’s an angry tone, and the phone powers itself off.

“Oops,” Cooper says, embarrassed. “I’m new at this. I must have ziggged when I should have zagged.”

“My phone is kind of buggy too,” Jolie says sympathetically. “Of course, that might be from the time it fell out of my pocket on top of that rock-climbing wall. But it works—sometimes.”

“Mine’s brand-new, so it should work all the time.” The GX-4000 powers up again with a series of beeps and an odd whistling that sounds like nothing Cooper’s ever heard coming from an electronic device. He points the lens at the Wolfson property.

“Wait!” Jolie leans into the frame, beaming and holding up two V-for-victory signs.

Okay, she's blocking the museum and at least half of the mansion, but who cares about that? For a picture of Stratford to send to the old neighborhood, this is perfect. Maybe the guys will think she's his girlfriend. What do they know? They're in Colorado.

He takes the shot. A faint blue spark jumps from the screen to his finger.

"Ow!" The phone drops from his hand onto the grass.

"Wow," Jolie comments. "Your phone really *is* buggier than mine."

Cooper stoops to pick it up. "No problem. It's all in one piece. Now, this time, if you stand a little to the left—"

He's interrupted by the school bell.

"Gotta go. See you in class." She joins the stampede for the building.

Cooper hangs back, scrolling through pages of unfamiliar apps in search of the photo library. One entry, it says.

Well, what do you know? he thinks. *This overpriced, overcomplicated gizmo actually took a real picture.*

He taps the icon and examines it. There are the other two hills in the distance, the sprawling Wolfson place in front of them. And there's Jolie—her outline, anyway. You can see her arms and the two V-for-victory signs. But the rest of her is hidden behind a silver-gray shimmer of distortion right in the middle of the photograph. It might as well be a picture of Godzilla—if Godzilla had fingers.

Of course. The phone you get for ninety-nine cents at Walmart takes pictures just fine, but this magnificent piece of technology sticks a silver blob in front of the only part of the photograph that's worth taking.

The second bell rings—the late one. Not only is he Whatshisface; he's on the verge of becoming Whatshisface with a detention.

Cooper stuffs the phone back in his pocket and runs to join the last of the stragglers at the door.

As a military kid, he's gotten used to a lot of towns—some good, some bad, some in between. But this place gives him an uneasy feeling.