

THE ALMOST EPIC SQUAD

**MUCUS
MAYHEM**

Kevin Sylvester

Illustrations by Britt Wilson

Scholastic Canada Ltd.

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Mexico City New Delhi Hong Kong Buenos Aires

*To my kid Baz, who has helped me research this book
for years! Achoo! And their sibster, Erin, who has
helped us pick the most equitable tissues.*

— K.S.

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Scholastic Inc.

557 Broadway, New York, NY 10012, USA

Scholastic Australia Pty Limited

PO Box 579, Gosford, NSW 2250, Australia

Scholastic New Zealand Limited

Private Bag 94407, Botany, Manukau 2163, New Zealand

Scholastic Children's Books

Euston House, 24 Eversholt Street, London NW1 1DB, UK

www.scholastic.ca

Library and Archives Canada Cataloguing in Publication

Sylvester, Kevin, author

Mucus mayhem / Kevin Sylvester ; illustrated by Britt Wilson.

(The almost epic squad)

Issued in print and electronic formats.

ISBN 978-1-4431-5779-7 (hardcover).--ISBN 978-1-4431-5780-3 (ebook)

I. Wilson, Britt, 1986-, illustrator II. Title.

PS8637.Y42M83 2018

jC813'.6

C2018-901939-5

C2018-901940-9

Illustrations and hand lettering by Britt Wilson.

Cover background image © Piotrurakau/Getty Images.

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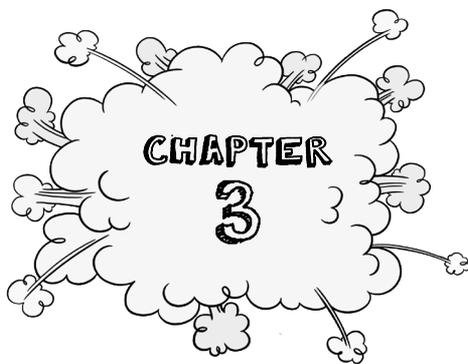
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6 5 4 3 2 1 Printed in Canada 114 18 19 20 21 22 23





CHAPTER 3

GREEPED OUT

Garvia Greep has been my babysitter pretty much from the day I was born. Nurse Nussbaum — the one who my parents tell me was nice, and who also then inconveniently blew up — apparently assigned Greep to keep an eye on me as soon as I started coughing. Then Nussbaum croaks and, the way the Grim Greepier tells it, the contract never got cancelled. So she's kept an eye on me ever since. Both eyes, actually. All. The. Time.

When I was young she'd take care of me when my parents were at work, or sick. Normal, right? But then, even after I turned ten, she'd just keep showing up, helping around the house, putting me to bed and reading bedtime stories.

And no *Goodnight Moon* for me. She brought her own kids' books, like, written and illustrated by her. They were always about wicked witches or murderous beasts who were "misunderstood," even when they were eating kittens or rampaging through villages of cute bunnies. I'm not making that up. Scary books: *Goldilox and Bagels*, *Unicorn on the Cob*.

And then, when I'd wake up with the inevitable nightmare, she'd be watching me. Not checking on me to make sure I was okay either. It was as if she'd been waiting for me like the hungry wolf in her book *The Three Little Pigs in a Blanket*. One night I woke up and she was hovering over me with a stethoscope and a measuring tape.

Now, upstairs, she called again: "Jessiekins? Happy birthday! Where are you hiding, you little scamp?"

I tried to stay as still as possible. Maybe she'd think I was asleep. But no such luck. That woman was like a human bloodhound. "I have a present for you," she sang. "I just bet you are downstairs."

I turned up the volume on the game, just as a Battle Goat trampled onto the screen. Easy win. Five hundred points.

Suddenly, my nose began to run. What was her present? A down pillow? No. She was wearing some kind of pungent perfume, and as it wafted ahead of

her down the stairs, it triggered all of my allergies. It was like roses, lilacs, rosemary and burnt rubber. She hadn't ever worn that before. Or had she but I'd never been able to smell it?

My head was swimming. But then my nose completely jammed and I began my tissue tango — nose, tissue, garbage basket. Or, more accurately, floor. Nose. Tissue. Floor. Repeat. Cha-cha-cha.

I felt her clammy hand on my shoulder. "Pause the game, sweetie. Let's talk!" Her voice sounded sickly sweet, like a snake trying to do a Taylor Swift imitation.

I paused the game and turned to look at her. Her face was so close I could feel her breath. That wolfy hunger was back in her eyes as they swept over me. "You look awake . . . I mean older!" she said. "Anything else . . . different?" She winked.

"Um . . . I let out a really good belch this morning. Spelled almost half the alphabet."

She stood up straight but kept the crocodile smile plastered on her face. "Still my funny little Jessiekins. Here." She handed me a wrapped package. It was obviously a book. Despite myself, I groaned, certain it was going to be a new copy of *Little Dead Riding Hood*. I hesitated over the pink wrapping paper, my least favourite colour.

"It's not one of *my* books," she said, guessing my

thoughts. “It’s a diary. You know. Every teen girl needs one to chronicle her . . . changes.”

“Changes?” I blurted, despite myself. *Idiot!* Free advice: never ask adults what they mean by stuff like that!

Luckily, Greep avoided the obvious and kept it vague. “It’s a time of many . . . transformations and . . . developments.” She began to raise her hands to demonstrate some example of what *that* meant.

“Okay. TMI,” I said quickly. I noisily opened the present. The diary looked just like a diary. Flowers on the outside, of course, and about a hundred lined pages inside.

“Thanks,” I said. “It’s kind of heavy for a book, though, isn’t it?”

She smiled. “Heavy-duty paper. Only the very best for my little Jessiekins.” She handed me a fancy-looking pen — heavy, metal, with my name inscribed in silver along the side. “And this is for writing down your innermost thoughts and dreams . . . and plans.”

“Wow,” I said. It was actually pretty nice.

I was about to say thanks again, a new record for me and the Greeper, when my computer buzzed. I turned to look. It wasn’t the game. There was a call coming through.

“It’s Dr. Fassbinder,” I said, turning back around. But Greep was rushing up the stairs, waving at me

frantically. "I just remembered I have an appointment," she said. "Happy birthday!" Then she was gone.

The computer buzzed again. I answered and Fassbinder's face filled the screen. His chin rested on his hand. His eyes lazily searched me out on his own screen. He looked tired.

"Hello, Jess. Happy birthday." Then he began asking me the standard questions. How was I feeling, blah blah. I answered them as quickly as I could, between blowing my nose and tossing the tissues over my shoulder. A nice little pile was forming back there.

Then the weird questions started again.

"Any flying?"

"No."

"Any ability to move things with your mind?"

"No."

"Any super strength?"

"Seriously? I can barely walk up the stairs without losing my breath."

"I'll take that as a no." He sighed. Then he seemed to see the Mount Everest of tissues for the first time.

"Don't you have someone to clean up that stuff?"

"Like a home version of a school janitor?" I laughed. "I wish."

Then, bit by bit, Dr. F.'s eyes started to seriously bug out. "Is-is-is-is- that a-a-a-a- . . ." he spat out.

“Is what a what? You feeling okay, Doc?”

He seemed unable to answer. He pointed. Not at me, but behind me. Had Garvia come back? RigaTony? Then I heard a sound, like someone or *something* shuffling. I turned around slowly and froze.

The pile of tissues was moving. Like an iceberg on the ocean, the top of the pile seemed to float above the back of the couch. It reached the arm and turned. And just like an iceberg, there was a lot more than the tip. You see, the pile wasn't moving on its own.

There was a small man pushing it. He was wearing a janitor's uniform. But he, and the uniform, were sort of glossy green and see-through. Like a rancid gummy bear. He stopped, gave me a little salute, then resumed pushing Mount Snotrag past the TV and toward the wall.

“AH!” I jumped away so fast I fell on my controller. Fassbinder's face disappeared from the screen with a blip.

The janitor grew and grew as he came in contact with more of my, and I apologize for this image, nose-goo-packed tissues. Once he reached the far end of the room, he was almost as tall as me.

He grabbed a garbage bag from somewhere behind the TV and threw all the tissues inside. Then he looked around the room, which was spotless again.

He slapped his hands together in the universal sign for “job well done” and climbed into the bag. He was getting smaller but his arms, as they shrank, tied the bag closed. There was a gurgling noise and the bag went still.



There might have been other things going on around me, but I was oblivious. At some point I noticed my computer ringing and ringing. Dr. F. trying to reconnect. I wasn't ready to talk to him. Not yet.

I slipped off the couch and tiptoed over to the bag. I nudged it. Nothing moved, but the bag jiggled and sloshed, like if someone had spilled a jumbo root beer in the bottom. Gross. Where had that thing come from? I closed my eyes and tried to remember what had happened before the green man appeared. I'd been talking to Dr. F. He'd asked me if I had a cleaner. I'd said, "I wish." Then, boom. Some goopy green guy starts cleaning up the room.

No way. Was that what happened yesterday too? I quickly grabbed a tissue, blew my nose, and threw the tissue onto the floor. “I wish I had a janitor,” I said. But the tissue just sat on the floor staring back at me, indifferent and unresponsive.

I tried a couple more times — I mean, I needed to blow my nose anyway — but still nothing. Dr. F. continued to ring and ring. I climbed back over to the couch and clicked on “Answer” and the screen came to life. A white mouse’s head filled the screen. The mouse, and I swear this happened, turned around and said, “She’s back,” then disappeared. Dr. F.’s face reappeared with the biggest grin I’ve ever seen.

“Doc. What happened?”

“Jess. I think your mucus just cleaned your basement. I hoped this day would come.”

There was a gasp from someone at the top of the basement stairs, then hurried footsteps on the floor above followed by the bang of the front door closing.