

CAPER GETS EVEN

or, How I Survived the Second Worst Week of My Life!

by James Gelsey

Chapter 1

My name is Caper Speigelman, and six months ago I turned eleven. Five weeks and two days later I was diagnosed with Type 1 diabetes. And while having diabetes hasn't totally been a walk in the park, it can't hold a candle to what happened to me last week. You see, that's when I found out my parents named me after a dog.

But before I get ahead of myself, let's rewind the tape to last Sunday when my Aunt Laura came over to watch me and my six year old sister, Lizzie. My parents were at a luncheon for someone my mom knows through someone's second cousin's aunt's grandmother or something. The Lizard (that's what I call her) was up in her room playing with those stupid microscopic dolls with the rubber clothes, and my aunt and I were in the family room looking through some old family pictures that she had brought over for my dad to scan into the computer.

One of the pictures fell on the floor and I picked it up. It was a picture of my parents when they were a lot younger. My dad's hair was almost all brown instead of gray and brown like it is now. And he was a lot skinnier too. What I noticed most about my mom in that picture was that she had a lot of hair. And I mean a lot of hair.

It must have been the middle of winter, because the trees in the park were bare and my parents were wearing sweaters. And my dad was holding a little white dog in his arms. It reminded me a little of the “Harry the Dirty Dog” dog, only without the black spots. I asked my aunt about it and she got a weird look on her face, like someone thumped her on the back with a two by four. She blinked a couple of times, gave the picture a real quick glance, and then went back to categorizing the pictures. I asked her again.

Without looking up at me she said, “Oh, I don’t know. Some dog your parents were watching for some friends who were out of the country. You know, even as a kid, your father was always on the lookout for needy animals. I remember one time he brought home a squirrel that he had accidentally run over on his bicycle. I mean, he didn’t run over the whole squirrel, just the tail. Don’t ask me how he managed that.”

I got the sense that she was just trying to distract me from the dog in the picture. The more I looked at it, the more I noticed how happy my parents seemed. My dad’s eyes really sparkled in the sunlight, and my mom’s whole face seemed to light up like it was glowing with this weird energy. Even the mystery dog looked happy. And that’s what made me want to find out more: there was something about that dog. When my aunt finished the story, I jumped in.

“You didn’t answer my question,” I said. “What’s with the dog?”

Maybe it was the way I asked the question. Maybe it was the look on my face. Or maybe it was because Aunt Laura knows me so well that she realized that she’d never get a minute’s peace unless she answered me. You see, my Aunt Laura and I go way back to...well, I guess to when I was born. She was the first person my folks let

babysit when I was a baby. That was when she was out of work so she visited a lot. Of course, I don't remember all this because I was like one year old, but I know from the stories (and the pictures). And when I was like two or three, I had my first sleepover at her apartment in the city. We used to do cool things when I was younger, so she and I are really close. Anyway, Aunt Laura took a deep breath—I mean, a really deep breath—and put the shoe box of pictures on the floor.

“You, nephew of mine, are that dog's namesake,” she said.

I quickly flipped through my brain's internal dictionary for the word. Namesake. Namesake. Something to do with a name. But what? Aunt Laura probably saw the confusion on my face and decided to clarify things.

“You know where your parents lived before you were born, right?” she asked.

“Hoboken,” I nodded. My parents always talked about Hoboken like it was some magical, far away land. But when I visited it with them once, all I saw was ten thousand cars trying to park in five hundred spaces. Definitely nothing magical about it.

“I used to take the bus from Manhattan once or twice a month for lunch or dinner or just to hang out with them,” she began. “So the winter before you were born, I went out there and got to their building and rang the buzzer downstairs and climbed the four flights of steps and knocked on the door. Your father opened the door a crack and a bolt of white fur shot out of the apartment and raced around my legs, like, I don't know, twenty times. Your father laughed and laughed. He bent down and swooped up the furry thing. He lifted the dog's face up to mine and said, ‘Say hello, Caper.’”

At that point, Aunt Laura stopped talking and bit her lower lip. Looking back, I think she wanted to give me a minute to absorb what she said. Or maybe she thought I

trying to figure out the rest of the story. You know, some sort of a funny ending or a creepy twist. But no, that was it.

“Caper, do you understand what I just told you?” she asked.

I nodded.

“That winter there was this one surprise mega-snowfall in March. The snow came up to my thighs. So you can imagine how hard it was for a lot of people, much less little dogs, to get around. Everyone was cooped up for like three days, and that dog needed to run in a serious way. But when your father took him downstairs to go out after that snowfall, the dog bolted out the front door, slid on a patch of ice, and skidded out into the street where he...”

“What happened?” I asked, hoping now to get the ending Aunt Laura probably thought I was waiting for all along.

“A snow plow came by and sort of scooped him up with the snow and pushed him into an enormous snow drift,” Aunt Laura said. “Your father dug him out and rushed him to the vet, but it wasn’t any good. Two of his legs were broken, and the vet said he wouldn’t make it.”

I slowly nodded and made my best “Yes, yes, I understand, that’s awfully sad” face. But I really didn’t think it was sad. I played out the scene in my mind and it became a cartoon with a snow plow launching a little dog hundreds of miles through the air until it landed in Alaska with a plop.

Aunt Laura turned away and wiped her right eye. I learned when I was little that she could only cry with her right eye. For some reason, her left eye couldn’t make

tears, which I used to think meant that the left side of her face couldn't feel sad. I called her right eye her crying eye.

"A few months later your folks found the house here," she said. "And that November you were born." She looked at me some more and sighed. "I know I'm going to pay for this, but I may as well tell you everything. In that picture, your parents knew your mom was pregnant with you. Later on, they bragged that they already had your name picked out. But after you were born, they changed their mind and decided to go with Caper."

Aunt Laura smiled, but then her smile dissolved and she fixed me in her "I'm serious now" gaze.

"Caper, you have to promise me something," she said. Her voice sounded a little funny, like someone was pinching it as it came out of her mouth. And the words that came out in that funny way really surprised me.

"You're not supposed to know this," she said. "I mean, if you were, I'm sure your parents would have told you already. They haven't told you already, have they?"

I shook my head.

"I'm sorry, Caper," Aunt Laura continued. "I'm sure your parents will tell you themselves one day, but until they do, you have to promise not to tell them that I told you."

I measured her words and what she wanted me to do. I certainly didn't want to get her in trouble with my parents. After all, she told me something about me that they never did. On the other hand, how could they *not* tell me something like that?

“Please, Caper, you have to double triple quadruple million times promise not say anything about this,” Aunt Laura begged. “Your parents will be super mad at me if they find out.” I think she was beginning to get desperate.

“Okay,” I said as casually as I could. I didn’t want Aunt Laura to feel any worse than she already did. And I certainly didn’t want her to get in trouble on my account. After all, it wasn’t her fault my parents never told me where my name really came from. So I didn’t say anything else about it, not even when my folks came home. I could tell Aunt Laura was a little nervous, but I kept my promise to her.

But when I went to bed that night, I couldn’t get the image of that little white dog out of my head. It haunted me all that night. I had a dream about the dog going to school in my clothes while I stayed home, locked in the closet wearing a giant onesie and a dog collar. Everyone was calling him “Caper,” and when they opened the closet, my parents called me “Spot” and “Butchie Boy.” Lizzie was there calling, “Here, puppypuppypuppy.” And Serena Kingsley—this girl in my class—was there too, but I don’t remember what she called me because I was so embarrassed about the onesie.

The next morning I woke up panting and all sweaty. My mother said it was because my blood sugar went wacky during the night. But I knew the real reason: it was that little white dog. That twisted little mutt that stole my parents’ heart before I was born and laughed at me from the snow-plowed grave he’s lying in. In that moment I made up my mind. The only way to free myself from that canine horror was to get even with my parents for NAMING ME AFTER THEIR STUPID DOG!

All I needed was a plan.