

Time Freeze

Chapter 4

Over the next few days, Petra starts acting like one of the detectives in the crime thrillers and “whodunits” I love. I’m sure she’s been searching my bedroom and one afternoon I find her head halfway inside the laundry basket.

“What are you doing?” I ask.

“Looking for a hat,” she replies.

I don’t believe her.

I think she’s onto me.

But I am keeping the disc very close to me. In the day, I keep it in my trouser pocket. When I’m asleep, I keep it under my pillow.

ONLY ONE TIME FREEZE LEFT, it keeps reminding me.

I’m aware of that. All I have to do is make it through the spelling bee and collect my prize. Is my conscience troubled by what I’m planning to do? Yes but not enough to stop me.

“Feeling confident about the bee?” Petra asks me at the weekend. “I haven’t exactly seen you practising. In fact I can’t remember the last time you looked in a dictionary.”

“It’s all up here,” I reply, pointing to my brain.

“Yeah right,” she says, her face full of doubt and suspicion. “Anything interesting you’re hiding in your trouser pockets?”

I ignore her but my heart thumps in my chest.

The day of the spelling bee comes round. Mum is going to pick us up straight after school. I place a mini dictionary in my school bag at morning break. I will hide this somewhere outside the hall where the spelling bee is taking place. When I activate the freeze, I’ll sprint out and grab the dictionary.



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I'm worried that Petra will try and search my trouser pockets before the actual event, so during afternoon break I put the green disc in my pencil case. Everyone is allowed to take a pencil case inside the hall. If someone at the hall checks my pencil case and sees the disc, I'll just say it's a watch.

I am nervous on the journey to the town hall. Will my plan work? "Of course it will," I tell myself.

"Worried that I'm going to beat you?" smirks Petra.

"You're the one who should be worried," I reply edgily.

"Stop being so competitive," says Mum from the front seat. "You should be supporting each other."

"In the place we call the real world, that's not going to happen," says Petra. For once, I agree with her.

We get to the town hall and Mum parks. There are loads of kids with their parents hurrying inside. We are pointed in the direction of the main hall. I say I need the toilet and hurry off to hide my school bag with its dictionary behind a pile of boxes.

"All ready?" asks Mum when I return.

I nod.

"I'm sorry, parents aren't allowed inside the hall," says a woman in a grey suit.

So Mum says goodbye and Petra and I walk into the hall. Loads of desks are set out in rows. Each one has a participant's name on it. Petra and I find our places. We are sitting next to each other across an aisle.

I am about to open my pencil case to get a pen when the woman in the grey suit walks over to me. "We want everyone to use these pens," she says, handing me one from a large tin. No problem. I will open my pencil case at the end to get the disc.

There is now someone sitting at every desk.

A man with a beard goes over the rules (no talking, no dictionaries) and then it begins. He reads out a series of words. The first ten are easy. The next ten are reasonable. The last ten are hard, with the last five being close to impossible.

But that doesn't matter.

I have my system.

Everything's cool.

I will be crowned champion shortly and collect my medal and cash sum...

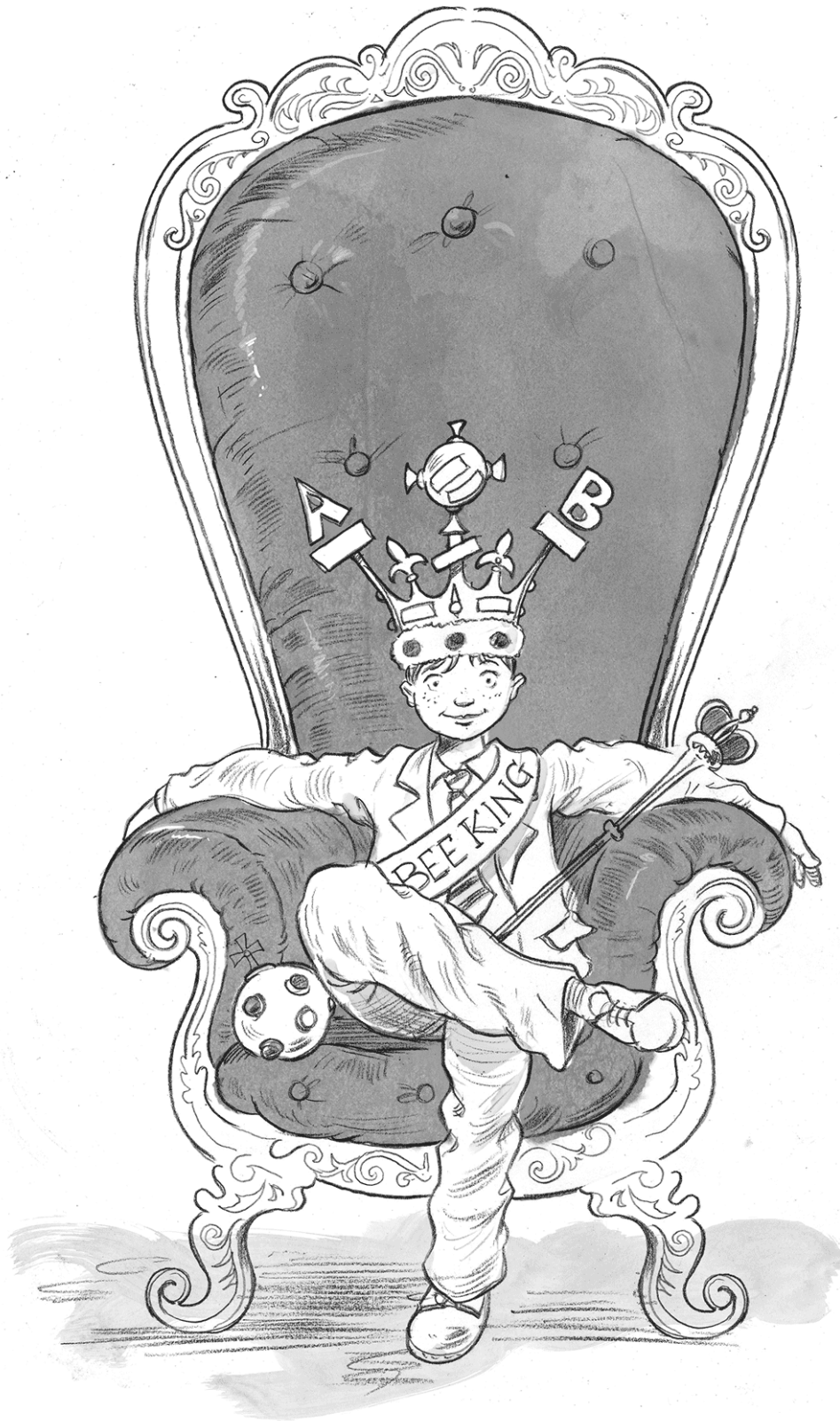
"And that concludes the spelling bee," says the bearded man. "You have one minute to check your spellings."

This is it. The moment I've been waiting for. I flick open my pencil case and pull a face. Where's the green disc? I search for it frantically but I can't find it. I put it in my case at last break; I know I did.

And then I hear a click from beside me and swing my head to face Petra. She is grinning at me and holding something green in her hand.

I look at her in horror and see the identical pencil case on her desk. And that's when it hits me. She must have followed me and switched pencil cases between afternoon break and the end of the day.

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Her finger hovers over the "GO" button of the green disc.

"No!" I mouth.

NO!

But she presses it.

I try and reach out to her but suddenly I can feel my entire body freezing...