

PROLOGUE

There are many theories about how the universe began, but the truth is most of the theories are just that. Theories. All we know for certain is that in the beginning there was a bum.

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CHAPTER ONE
CRAPALANCHE!

Zack Freeman skied down a steep snow-covered slope on a crisp sunny winter morning, completely unaware that he was about to be engulfed by a deadly crapalanche.

Crapalanche!

The very word struck fear into the hearts of even the bravest and most experienced skiers, but not Zack Freeman.

This was not, however, because Zack Freeman was especially brave or experienced.

Far from it.

No, Zack Freeman was unafraid of crapalanches because Zack Freeman had no idea what a crapalanche was.

There was an ear-splitting crack.

An advance wave of nauseating stench.

But, incredibly, Zack Freeman was completely oblivious to even these telltale warning signs.

He was too busy arguing with his bum.*

‘Can’t we go home?’ whined his bum. ‘I’m cold!’

‘But this is fun,’ said Zack.

‘Fun for you, maybe,’ said his bum. ‘You’re not the one who has to put up with all the bruises. You’re not the one who’s wet and cold and freezing.’

‘Stop complaining!’ Zack said. ‘I’m wearing thermal undies and padded pants.’

‘I hate them,’ said his bum. ‘They make me look fat. Take them off!’

‘Don’t be stupid,’ said Zack.

‘I’m not being stupid,’ said Zack’s bum. ‘You are! Skiing is stupid. This mountain is stupid. I want to go home right now!’

‘Well, I don’t,’ said Zack.

‘Well I DO,’ said his bum. ‘And I say we go. Now!’

‘You can’t tell me what to do,’ Zack said. ‘You’re not the boss of me.’

‘Oh yeah?’ said his bum. ‘Well, you’re not the boss of me, either.’

Zack sighed.

Despite everything he and his bum had been through, they still had a lot of arguments.

The slope was gradually becoming steeper. As Zack picked up speed he heard his bum cry out in alarm.

‘Phwoar!’ said Zack. ‘Cut it out. I’m trying to concentrate!’

‘But, Zack,’ said his bum. ‘You don’t understand!’

***For those of you who are not familiar with the troubled history of Zack and his bum, check the glossary at the end of the book under the relevant entry i.e. ‘Zack’s bum’.**

‘Ha!’ said Zack. ‘I understand all right. I understand that every time we do something I want to do, you try to wreck it. Well, it’s really selfish and it’s got to—’

‘Shut up, Zack!’ interrupted his bum. ‘Crapalanche!’

‘Crap a what?’ said Zack.

‘Crapalanche!’

‘What’s a crapalanche?’ said Zack.

But his bum didn’t reply.

It didn’t need to.

The snow underneath Zack was no longer white. It had turned an ominous shade of brown.

Zack’s first thought was that his bum must be more scared than he realised. He turned around to reassure it, but what he saw almost made his heart stop.

It wasn’t just the snow around him that had turned brown.

All of the snow on the mountain had turned brown. And bearing down on him was the biggest, ugliest and brownest crapalanche in the history of big ugly brown crapalanches.

Suddenly Zack realised he had made a mistake. A big mistake. He wasn’t skiing down a mountain—he was skiing down a bumcano! And nobody, not even the bravest and most experienced skiers in the world would have been stupid enough to attempt to ski down a bumcano! Nobody, that is, except Zack Freeman.

‘Faster!’ his bum yelled. ‘Go faster!’

Zack crouched low, tucked his head down and went as fast as he dared. And then faster still.

‘Not fast enough!’ shouted his bum.

Zack turned his head. The thunderous brown mass was gaining on them.

‘Maybe we could go faster if you would give me some help,’ said Zack. ‘I did save your life you know—you owe me!’

Zack’s bum’s only response was to scream.

Zack felt the scream rip a hole through his thermal undies and padded pants. Normally he would have been annoyed, but this time he just smiled. It was exactly what he needed. The force of the scream sent him surging forward, a long way ahead of the crapalanche.

Zack heard his bum whoop with joy.

‘Good work!’ yelled Zack as he dug his stocks wildly into the brown muck in order to pick up even more speed. The more distance he could put between himself and the crapalanche the better.

But just when Zack was starting to feel safe again, he saw it.

The end of the slope!

The edge of a cliff-face, dropping away into a deep dark ravine.

Nobody could survive a fall like that.

Nobody.

‘Reverse thrust!’ Zack yelled. ‘Reverse thrust!’

‘I can’t do that,’ said his bum. ‘It’s impossible!’

‘Can’t you at least try?’ Zack begged his bum. ‘We’re as good as dead. We have nothing to lose.’

‘Okay,’ said his bum. ‘Here goes.’

It tried.

And tried.

And tried.

But it was impossible.

‘I CAN’T DO IT!’ yelled Zack’s bum, causing him to surge forward even faster.

‘Oh no,’ said Zack as he flew over the edge of the cliff and out into thin air.

‘Oops,’ said Zack’s bum.

As Zack fell he noticed a wave of pink objects hurtling towards him at high speed.

UFBs—unidentified flying bums!

Zack gasped. He was helpless. One of the UFBs bore up hard into his stomach. Another smashed into his face. And yet another crashed into his bum.

‘Zack!’ shouted his bum. ‘Do something!’

Zack—dazed, bruised and winded—began jabbing and thrusting his stocks into the air. The unidentified flying bums were so numerous that even without looking, he was able to collect two stocks’ worth of skewered bums within moments. At this formidable display of bum-skewering the other UFBs took fright and shot off into the distance.

‘Good going, Zack!’ yelled his bum. ‘I thought we were dead for sure!’

‘We are!’ said Zack who, looking down, had noticed they were about to plunge into a raging bum-piranha infested river. ‘Prepare to drown!’

They plunged into the wild brown water with an almighty splash.

The bum-piranhas set upon them before they’d even surfaced for air. Zack felt them attack his feet, legs, stomach, chest, arms, neck and head . . . and then he had an idea.

He remembered he was still holding his stocks full of skewered UFBs. He drew them together in front of him and pushed himself on top of them, taking advantage of their natural buoyancy to create a makeshift raft.

Zack smiled.

Not only were the UFBs keeping him afloat, they were giving the bum-piranhas something to chew on while he worked out what to do next.

But he had to think fast.

‘What now?’ said his bum.

‘We need to paddle to the edge of the river,’ said Zack.

‘But it’s too wide!’ his bum said. ‘The piranhas will eat the raft before we get there!’

‘Then we’re doomed!’ said Zack, closing his eyes and feeling an immense tiredness engulf him. He couldn’t keep fighting. It was time to admit defeat. To die with at least a little dignity.

‘Why don’t we jump onto that log?’ said his bum.

Zack opened his eyes.

He couldn’t believe it.

As if by magic there was a large brown log floating beside them.

‘Good idea!’ said Zack, reaching across and dragging himself onto the log, just as the bum-piranhas finished off the last of the bum-raft.

Zack stood up, riding the log like a surfboard.

But the brown river was getting wilder and faster and there was a roaring sound in the distance that chilled Zack to his bum.

They were heading towards a giant sewagefall!

Zack tried desperately to point the log towards the bank of the river, but the log seemed to have a mind of its own.

That's when Zack realised the truth.

It did have a mind of its own. Because it wasn't a log at all—it was a poopigator! A poopigator masquerading as a log in order to trap unwary bum-fighters!

Zack cursed his own stupidity.

The oldest trick in the bum-fighter's *Bumper Book of Bums* and he'd fallen for it!

The poopigator lifted its large brown head out of the water, revealing enormous jaws full of large brown teeth, and twisted its neck around to chomp at Zack's legs. Zack jumped back. The poopigator chomped again. Zack jumped back even further. The poopigator lunged around and chomped for a third time. Zack jumped back as far along its tail as he could.

He couldn't jump back any further without falling off completely. He looked down into the river and saw the frenzied mass of bum-piranhas following close behind.

And even if he wasn't chomped in half by the poopigator or eaten by bum-piranhas, he would be killed for sure when they went over the sewagefall in front of them.

And it was no use asking his bum to try to thrust them into the air. The sky was full of even more UFBs than before.

The situation was not good.

In fact it stunk.



It really stunk.

‘If only you’d listened to me, we wouldn’t have gone skiing in the first place,’ said his bum. ‘We could have been sitting at home on a nice fluffy pink toilet seat cover.’

‘Well we’re not, are we,’ said Zack. ‘We’re about to die! Any last words?’

‘Yes,’ said his bum. ‘How could you have been SO DUMB?’

Zack shook his head.

After everything he and his bum had been through together—after facing and defeating some of the most dangerous and terrifying bums in the world including Stenchgantor: the Great Unwiped Bum and the Great White Bum—they had been brought undone by a common crapalanche.

The poopigator sailed over the edge of the sewagefall.

Zack caught a glimpse of the jagged rocks below.

There was only one thing left for him to do.

Zack sighed, reached down for the fluffy pink toilet seat cover he carried on his bum-fighting utility belt, wrapped it around his head and closed his eyes.



‘HOW COULD YOU HAVE BEEN SO DUMB?’ yelled the Kicker, violently shaking Zack’s shoulder.

Zack blinked under the harsh fluorescent light, trying to understand what was happening to him.

Apparently he wasn’t about to be dashed on sharp rocks, drowned in a sewagefall, eaten by a poopigator,

have the flesh stripped from his bones by bum-piranhas, attacked by UFBs or even buried in a crapalanche.

He blinked again and looked around.

He was inside a state-of-the-art bum-fighting simulator.

Buckled, belted and clamped into a black leather chair in front of a wraparound screen. The clamps had been fitted to prevent terrified rookies from escaping the simulator. Once a simulated bum-fighting program began, nobody was able to leave, no matter how scary—or how hairy—the simulated bums and challenges became.

Once again Zack marvelled at how overwhelmingly believable the environments and situations created by the simulator were. And, how overwhelmingly terrifying. They completely sucked him in every time, which of course was the whole point. To give the rookie bum-fighters at Silas Sterne's Bum-fighting Academy a chance to virtually experience the threats and challenges of bum-fighting before they actually had to do it for real.

But the fact that Zack wasn't really about to be dashed on sharp rocks, drowned in a sewage fall, have the flesh stripped from his bones by bum-piranhas, attacked by UFBs or buried in a crapalanche was no great cause for celebration.

Zack was in for something which would make any one of these possible fates infinitely preferable: another tongue-lashing from the Kicker.

This wasn't the first simulated bum-fighting episode that Zack had failed. In the three weeks he'd been at

the Academy studying for his elementary bum-fighter's certificate, Zack had died in almost every way it was possible for a bum-fighter to die. He'd been crushed in bumquakes, asphyxiated by stink-tornadoes, thrown off the backs of giant bucking blowflies, squashed by the Abuminable Brownman, run over by stampeding rhinocerarses and, most humiliating of all, gassed by a simulated replica of his own bum.

Because the shiny silver surfaces of the bum-fighting simulator acted like an echo chamber, Zack could barely understand a word the Kicker was yelling as he unlocked the clamps that held Zack in the seat. He did, however, have no trouble picking out key words and phrases such as 'HOPELESS!', 'CALL YOURSELF A BUM-FIGHTER?!' and 'GET OUT, I WANT TO TALK TO YOU!'

Zack took off his helmet.

'This is all your fault,' he whispered to his bum.

'Me?' it said. 'What did I do?'

'If you hadn't done a forward thrust instead of a reverse thrust we wouldn't have gone over the cliff in the first place!'

'True,' said his bum. 'We would have been buried in the crapalanche instead! That was a much better plan, Zack. Sorry. My mistake!'

Zack climbed out of the simulator and stepped into the classroom.

The Kicker followed. He stood and faced Zack, his hands on his hips.

'What did you think you were doing?' he roared, not waiting for a reply. 'Why have you ignored everything I've tried to teach you? We've been over the

difference between a mountain and a bumcano a hundred times! One is filled with rock and the other is filled with—'

'Yes,' said Zack, cutting in, 'I know, but . . .'

'No butts!' yelled the Kicker. 'You can learn to fight bums or you can make excuses but you can't do both! What's it going to be, boy?'

'I'm not making excuses,' said Zack, who was getting flustered. 'I'm trying to explain . . .'

The Kicker stepped in close towards Zack and bent down so his face was only a few centimetres from Zack's. Zack shuddered. The Kicker was frightening enough at the best of times, but up this close, he was terrifying.

'Listen, boy,' said the Kicker, 'I'm not here to listen to excuses OR explanations. I'm here to teach you how to fight bums. Understand?'

Zack bit his lip and nodded.

'It was my fault,' said Zack's bum.

'Shut up!' said the Kicker. 'I sure didn't give up my summer holidays to argue with a bum. If it was up to me you wouldn't even be here. I ought to kick you from here to the Moon!'

'Are you going to let him talk to me like that, Zack?' asked Zack's bum.

Zack trembled.

'Well?' said his bum.

'Don't talk to my bum like that,' Zack said in a barely audible whisper.

The Kicker pushed his head even closer to Zack's. So close that their noses were practically touching.

'Don't tell me what I can and can't do,' said the

Kicker. ‘Don’t forget who you are. When you’ve kicked as many bums as I have then maybe I’ll listen to you, but for now you’re not even a bum-kicker’s bootstrap. And the way you’re going, you’ll never amount to much more. Oh, sure, you might think that because you fired a harpoon into the Great White Bum and you’ve been nominated for the Bum Hunters’ Hall of Fame that you know it all, but your performance in the simulator suggests to me that you don’t know anything! You’ve been gassed, pummelled, putrefied, ambushed and sat on more times than I have ever seen any trainee bum-fighter gassed, pummelled, putrefied, ambushed and sat on in my entire life. Bum-fighting is no joking matter. You’d better get serious!’

‘I AM serious!’ replied Zack, surprised at the loudness of his voice. ‘If you’d maybe encourage me once in a while instead of picking on me all the time . . .’

‘Oh!’ said the Kicker. ‘So it’s *my* fault!’

‘I’m not saying that,’ said Zack.

‘Then what are you saying?’ asked the Kicker.

Before Zack could respond, the door opened to reveal the Smacker and Silas Sterne. Their enormous bodies seemed to fill the classroom.

Great, thought Zack. Just great. The only thing worse than being yelled at by the Kicker was being yelled at by the Kicker in front of other people. And not just other people, but two of the bravest and best bum-fighting warriors in the world.

‘What’s all the shouting about?’ said the Smacker, placing her large hands on her hips. ‘We could hear

you from the other hill. And I've got a terrible headache.'

The Kicker rolled his eyes. 'I'm just trying to explain to Zack the difference between a bumcano and a mountain.'

'Oh, that's easy,' said the Smacker. 'One is filled with rock and the other is filled with—'

'I think we're all well aware of what bumcanos are filled with,' said Silas Sterne, 'especially Zack!'

'Yes,' said Zack. 'I just didn't realise that a bumcano could look so much like a mountain.'

'Well it's about time you did,' said the Kicker.

'Take it easy, Kicker,' said the Smacker. 'Don't forget, you were a beginner once too.'

'Sure I was,' the Kicker replied. 'And so was Zack, but he's been here for three whole weeks now and he's failed the simulator every single time he's been in it.'

Zack looked at the floor.

Silas frowned, stroked his chin and studied Zack intently. 'I can't understand it,' he said. 'You showed such potential out in the field. The simulator should be a walk in the park for you.'

The Kicker snorted.

Zack shrugged. He was sick of the Kicker. He was sick of the simulator. He was sick of the Academy. He was sick of being called dumb. He was sick of *feeling* dumb. And he was sick of bum-fighting.

He looked around the classroom. The blackboard was covered with masses of complicated pictures of bums being kicked and smacked, along with hundreds of complex mathematical equations relating to the precise force with which the kicks and smacks should

be delivered, and the most effective angles to deliver them from. On the bench at the side of the classroom there was a plastic model of a bum with cutaways showing its substructure and internal workings. The walls were covered with various charts on topics such as bum-fighting safety, responsible bum ownership, appropriate bum-fighting clothing and protective gear, bum-fighting weaponry, and bum recognition charts. There was also a class set of *The Bumper Book of Bums*—the official bum-fighters’ encyclopaedia—and at the front of the room, a bust of the greatest bum hunter who ever lived: Silas Sterne.

A few short weeks ago Zack had been excited by all of this, but now it just filled him with an overwhelming sense of tiredness. The truth, Zack realised, was that he didn’t belong here. He never had. He’d been lucky, that’s all, but now it was time to go home.

The realisation hit Zack with the force of a nuclear bum.

Of course! It was so obvious! Why had it taken him until now to realise it?

It was time to settle down and forget all about run-away bums and bum-fighting. Sure, bum-fighting had its share of highs, but it seemed to Zack that it was mostly lows. Being gassed, pummelled, putrefied, ambushed and sat on wasn’t exactly his idea of fun. How could I have been so dumb? he wondered, breaking into a broad grin.

The Kicker frowned.

‘Something funny?’ he said.

‘No,’ replied Zack. ‘I’m just happy.’

The Kicker was flabbergasted.

‘Well you’d better get UNhappy and get you and your bum back into the simulator. We’re going to do this until you get it right.’

‘No,’ said Zack. ‘I don’t think we’ll be doing that.’

‘And why not?’ said the Kicker, trembling with rage.

‘Because I QUIT!’ said Zack. He unbuckled his bum-fighter’s utility belt and threw it down on the floor at the Kicker’s enormous black-booted feet.

Everybody in the room stared at the belt—with its load of toilet rolls, clothespegs, corks and deodorant cans—lying limply on the ground.

‘But Zack,’ said the Smacker, breaking the silence, ‘you can’t quit!’

‘Nobody quits the Academy!’ said the Kicker.

‘I just did,’ Zack told them, heading for the door, trying hard not to make eye contact with Silas.

‘You know what you need?’ said the Kicker, stepping forward to block Zack’s path. ‘A good kicking! That’s what!’

‘No, Kicker,’ said the Smacker, stepping forward to hold him back. ‘That won’t change his mind.’

‘I just want to kick a little bit of sense into him, that’s all,’ said the Kicker.

Zack ignored them both.

But as his fingers touched the door handle, he felt the strong grip of a hand on his shoulder. Zack turned around. The hand belonged to Silas. Zack studied the cracked skin. It was burnt, scarred and—in spite of constant handwashing—stained brown from decades of raw hand-to-bum combat.

Silas crouched down in front of Zack.

‘Zack,’ said Silas. ‘Look at me.’

Zack looked up and met his gaze.

‘I know it’s hard, Zack,’ Silas continued. ‘But you’ve got to hang in there. Without a proper understanding of the basics, you’ll never be able to reach your full potential. The best you’ll ever be is a bum-catcher. Sure, you’ll be able to smack a few bums here and kick a few bums there—maybe you’ll even wipe a few out—but bumcatchers don’t live for long in this business. I know it’s hard to believe, but sooner or later you’ll meet the wrong bum. A bum with your name on it. Or maybe you’ll make a simple mistake. To avoid that you need to know what you’re doing and why you’re doing it.’

Zack nodded, but for the first time in his life he knew exactly what he was doing and why he was doing it. He’d been flattered by Silas Sterne’s invitation to attend the Academy, and he’d given it his best shot, but the life of a bum-fighter was clearly not for him.

‘Thanks,’ said Zack. ‘Thanks for everything. But the Kicker’s right. I’m not a bum-fighter. I never was and I never will be. I just want to go home.’

‘Believe me, I know what you’re feeling, Zack,’ said Silas, taking his hand off Zack’s shoulder and standing up. He rubbed his temples and sighed. ‘It’s not an easy life for any of us, but you can’t escape your destiny.’

‘But that’s just it!’ Zack told him. ‘I don’t have a destiny. I got lucky, that’s all.’

‘Don’t underestimate yourself, Zack,’ said Silas, staring into Zack’s eyes. ‘You can go if you wish, but you’ll be back.’

‘You’re wrong,’ said Zack, tearing his eyes away from the Bum Hunter’s stare. He turned and opened the door.

‘Come back here!’ yelled the Kicker from the other end of the room. ‘That’s an order!’

Zack didn’t reply.

His bum, however, did.

But not in English.

Zack’s eyes began to water. He slammed the door behind him and ran down the steps.

He wasn’t sure how the Kicker might react to a provocation like that, and he didn’t want to be around to find out.

He heard the door open behind him.

‘You should have got rid of that bum when you had the chance, boy!’ yelled the Kicker.

Zack just kept running.

‘Come on,’ he said to his bum. ‘We’re going home.’



After a while, when he was a safe distance from the Kicker, Zack slowed down.

He was hot.

He wiped his brow and shielded his eyes against the midday sun.

The Academy was deserted. Normally at this time of day the place would have been teeming with rookie bum-fighters—the crème de la crème of the Junior Bum-fighters’ League—but it was summer and they had all gone home for the holidays, leaving only the

Kicker, the Smacker, Silas Sterne and his daughter Eleanor on duty.

The Academy was spread across two hills and boasted a commanding view of the surrounding countryside, making it virtually impregnable against surprise bum attacks. Silas Sterne had started the Academy—which he liked to call his ‘ranch’—with the small fortune he’d amassed from the many bum-hunting bounties he’d collected over his long career. He lived in a two-storey mansion on top of one of the hills. On the other hill there was a small open-air chapel and cemetery where some of the finest bum-fighters in the history of bum-fighting were buried, including Silas Sterne’s wife.

Zack walked on, between the two hills and past the yard where they broke in the dangerous wild bums that Silas would often bring back from his travels. Past the rodeo ring where the best and bravest of the recruits would try to ride them without getting bucked off, blasted off or, worst of all, sat upon. Past the Smackatorium and the Kickatorium, the two enclosed gymnasiums where the finer points of smacking and kicking bums were taught. Past the Kissatorium, which, since they’d been unable to secure a replacement for the Kisser, was in the process of being demolished to make way for a bank of high-powered handwashing units.

Zack smiled as he remembered the first and most important rule of bum-fighting: always wash your hands afterwards. At least he’d learnt something, he thought.

He walked past the laboratory where Eleanor

conducted her research and created the silicon replacement bums which were standard issue for all bum-fighting trainees, except for Zack who had a special exemption to retain his own bum in recognition of the fact that they were a team. On he went, past the dining hall and finally across to the little rows of domed cabins that housed the trainees.

Just as Zack was about to walk up the steps to his cabin, he heard Eleanor calling out behind him.

He turned to see her running across the yard, his utility belt in her hands. She reached the bottom of the stairs, breathless from her run, and held the belt out towards him.

‘I found your belt,’ she said. ‘It was in the bin outside the classroom.’

Zack nodded, but made no attempt to take it from her. ‘Thanks, Eleanor,’ he said, ‘but I won’t be needing it anymore.’

Eleanor frowned. ‘What do you mean you won’t be needing it?’

‘It’s just a kid’s toy,’ said Zack, avoiding the question. ‘You said so yourself.’

Eleanor looked embarrassed. ‘Yes, when I first saw it,’ she admitted. ‘But that was before I saw how well it worked. Even I wear one now. Look!’

Eleanor lifted her shirt slightly to reveal an identical bum-fighter’s utility belt complete with wooden clothespegs, a roll of toilet paper, a fluffy pink toilet seat cover, a small rolled-up net, a row of corks, a set of sewing needles, a box of matches, a tennis racquet, a cake of soap and a large gold buckle inscribed with the words ‘BE BOLD. BE BRAVE. BE FREE.’

Zack smiled. I'll soon be free all right, he thought. Free of all this bum-fighting nonsense.

Eleanor smiled back at Zack and held out Zack's belt. When he didn't take it, she frowned. 'Well,' she said, 'do you want it or not?'

Zack shook his head. 'Not,' he said. 'I'm going home.'

'Home?' said Eleanor. 'For the holidays?'

'No,' said Zack. 'For good. I've quit.'

'What did you say?' said Eleanor, looking shocked.

'I quit!' said Zack.

'Quit?' said Eleanor.

'Quit!' said Zack.

'You're joking, right?' said Eleanor.

'No,' Zack said. 'I'm not joking. I'm quitting.'

'But you're a bum-fighter!' said Eleanor. 'Bum-fighters don't quit!'

'I'm not a bum-fighter,' said Zack quietly, 'and I never will be.'

He turned and entered his sparsely furnished cabin. There was a bed and a locker and, apart from a pair of standard-issue bum-fighter's boots, that was all. He reached up on top of his locker, pulled down his bum-fighter's backpack and dropped it onto his bed.

'You can run, but you can't hide,' Eleanor said, coming into the cabin.

'What's that supposed to mean?' said Zack, unzipping his backpack.

'You know what it means,' said Eleanor. 'You're a bum-fighter, Zack, whether you like it or not.'

Zack shook his head. 'I'm no bum-fighter,' he said,

‘and you know it. And so does the Kicker. I get killed in the bum-fighting simulator every time!’

‘Well what did you expect?’ said Eleanor, losing patience with Zack. ‘You think you can just waltz in here, pick up a few fancy tricks and waltz out again? Bum-fighting is hard, Zack. You’re going to make mistakes. We all did! Even the Kicker!’

‘Well, you wouldn’t know it, the way he carries on!’ said Zack. He opened his locker and pulled out his pyjamas. ‘He makes me feel like an idiot.’

‘It’s just his manner,’ said Eleanor. ‘And I know he’s been even more irritable than usual the last couple of weeks. But don’t take it so personally.’

‘How else can I take it?’ said Zack, shoving his pyjamas into his pack. ‘He told me I should have gotten rid of my bum.’

‘Well, he’s wrong,’ Eleanor said. ‘I had doubts about your bum at first too, but you make a good team. You’ve got a great advantage over the rest of us.’

‘Not that great,’ said Zack. ‘We can’t even complete a single simulated E-mission!’

‘But you defeated the Great White Bum,’ said Eleanor. ‘How do you explain that?’

Zack swung his backpack onto his back and turned to Eleanor. ‘Luck,’ he said. ‘Just dumb luck. That’s all. Anyway, if having your own bum is such an advantage, why don’t you get yours back?’

‘Impossible,’ said Eleanor sadly. ‘After the Great White Bum killed my mother I vowed revenge. As soon as I was old enough I took the sacred bum-fighter’s oath, cut my bum loose and replaced it with

a false one. That was years ago, Zack. I've got no idea where it is now.'

There was an awkward silence as Eleanor stared at Zack.

Zack, feeling very uncomfortable, stuffed a couple of anti-bum energy bars and a bottle of water into his pack and then shut his locker door. 'Well,' he said, zipping up his jacket. 'I guess I'll be seeing you.'

Eleanor didn't respond.

Zack shrugged, stepped around her and headed towards the door, but Eleanor spun around and blocked his exit.

'Don't go,' she said. 'Don't throw it all away.'

'I have to go,' said Zack. 'It's obvious I haven't got what it takes.'

'You've got exactly what it takes, Zack,' said Eleanor, getting mad. 'But you give up too easily! You're a quitter, Zack Freeman!'

'Well that's a relief!' said Zack. 'At least I'm good at something. I don't suppose you could give me a lift to my gran's house?'

Eleanor stared at him, her eyes burning. 'I'll do no such thing!' she hissed.

'Fine,' said Zack. 'Then I'll walk!' He pushed past her and stomped down the steps of the cabin, willing himself not to look back.

'I never did like this place, to tell you the truth,' said his bum as they passed through the front gates. 'Good riddance, I say.'

'You know,' Zack said, 'for once I agree with you.'