

"The sweetness of second chances! Readers and bakers alike will root for Jackson as he writes his own recipe for happiness."

—Kate Albus, award-winning author of *Nothing Else But Miracles* and *A Place to Hang the Moon*

MARVELOUS JACKSON



LAURA ANNE BIRD



One
Oops, Sorry

Just like the day before—and the day before that—Jackson Jefferson Wilson wondered how much trouble he could get away with at school. It was a little game he liked to play, because then he could feel like a winner at *something*.

As he walked to English class, he knocked the books from the arms of a sixth grader. “Oops, sorry,” he called out.

He flicked water from the bubbler at everyone who was in line to get a drink. “Oops, sorry,” he said.

He smooshed his face against the window of the science lab and blew, puffing his cheeks out like a warped hamster. On the other side of the glass, the teacher yanked down the shade, and Jack laughed. “Oops, sorry.”

The hallway began to empty as students ducked into their classrooms, and Jack knew he would be late.

Laura Anne Bird

Miss Kibble will make her usual sad face when I walk in, but that's about it, he thought. And it doesn't matter if my report card has a tardy on it. Or fifty of them.

Ever since Jack's mom died—four hundred and seventy-two days ago, according to the running tally in his head—he hadn't cared about things like report cards or tardies. And it's not like Norm was paying attention, either. He was lost in his own head, no doubt obsessing over cheeseburgers.

With just a few seconds to go until the bell rang, Jack rounded the corner of the language arts hallway and rammed directly into a stocky, solid figure blocking his path. He flinched and jumped back when he saw who it was. Of all the kids at Evergreen, why did it have to be *Benny*?

"What the heck?" Benny yelled, shooting spittle all over his hockey jersey. "What're you trying to do, knock me over?"

Jack raked his hand through his tangled mop of brown hair. "You were standing in a stupid spot if you didn't want to be knocked over."

"Or maybe *you* were just being a klutz." Benny shoved Jack, which made Jack's backpack slide off his shoulder and thud to the floor.

How Jack wanted to punch the smirk right off Benny's pale, blotchy face! His hands automatically curled into fists, but before he could take a swing, there was a loud snuffle. Jack peered past Benny.

Marvelous Jackson

Pressed against his open locker, Theo Porter lifted his chin. It seemed as if he was trying to put on a brave face, except Jack noticed that his brown cheeks were wet.

The bell rang, and Jack felt its shrill echo all the way down in his toes.

“What’re you doing to Theo?” he hollered at Benny.

“I’m not doing anything.”

“I don’t believe you! Leave him alone. He’s just a fifth grader, and he’s half your size. Don’t be a jerk!”

Benny cackled. “Takes one to know one.” Sharp and fast, he kicked Jack in the shin.

Jack lost his balance and crumpled to the ground, landing right next to his backpack.

Theo gasped.

Benny swiveled to leave, but there was no way Jack was going to let him walk away looking so smug. He grabbed Benny’s ankle and yanked as hard as he could. “Oops, sorry.”

Benny hit the floor like a conifer cut down at Christmas. Immediately he began howling, “My toof! My toof!” He rolled onto his back, and a red river gushed from his mouth.

Oh, no, Jack thought. He and Benny had fought many times before, but no literal blood had ever been spilled. “I didn’t mean to hurt you, I swear,” he said, but Benny didn’t appear to be listening.

With a look of horror, Theo bent down and scooped up a gory little clump. “Oh my gosh, his tooth got knocked out.”

Laura Anne Bird

Jack groaned. He'd managed to get away with a lot of things since seventh grade started, but something told him this time was different.

Jellybean, what in the world are you doing?

The words came from deep inside his head, but the voice sounded just like his mom's. He hadn't heard it in so long.

Instantly, he was ashamed that she had returned to him in a moment of pure humiliation. He'd never done mean things or hurt people when she was alive. He'd fallen so low, she wouldn't even recognize him.

Sluggishly, Benny climbed to his feet and clamped a hand across his lips.

"Wait! Don't forget this!" Theo handed Benny the tooth.

"Get a life, Wilson," Benny mumbled from behind his fingers. He staggered away, in the direction of the school office.

Jack stared at the ceiling, trying to swallow the bile and regret that had filled his mouth.

Theo stood over him and held out a small hand. "Do you need help?" he asked.

Jack ignored Theo's hand. "What was Benny doing to you?"

"He was bugging me about my project for Science Club."

"He's not even *in* Science Club. Why would he care what you're doing?"

Marvelous Jackson

“I’m researching squid and crayfish, and I got an awesome jar of preserved specimens as a birthday present. Benny has to do an experiment for biology class, and I guess he was trying to rip off my idea.” Theo shrugged, as if he knew his ideas were great and therefore worth stealing. “Why’d you stick up for me, anyway? You didn’t have to do that.”

“Yes, I did.” Jack closed his eyes and remembered how Theo, Lola, and Clare had rescued him the summer before—even after he’d bothered them mercilessly for more than two months.

Lola was Theo’s big sister, and Jack was sure she still despised him for all the rude things he’d said to them. Clare was their best friend from Chicago, and by accident, Jack had shot her little dog with a BB gun. As if that wasn’t bad enough, he’d gone and clunked his head on his dad’s fishing boat and plunged into Lake Lyons. He would’ve sunk to the very bottom if Theo, Lola, and Clare hadn’t teamed up to pull him out like a pitiful, rubbery noodle.

“You saved my life,” Jack reminded Theo.

“Fair enough,” Theo replied and held out his hand once more.

This time, Jack took it, but he made a point to draw up his own body weight. He didn’t need Theo toppling over, too. “Benny’s right. I *am* a jerk.”

Theo pushed his thick tortoiseshell glasses up the bridge of his nose. His chestnut eyes looked enormous as he blinked.

Laura Anne Bird

Deep down, Jack hoped that Theo would disagree with what Benny had said, but Theo only blinked again.

Jack had to face the truth. Since his mom died, he'd turned into someone he didn't understand or even *like*. Sure, his downfall had started during the saddest time of his life, but he'd let it go on too long. He could see how far he'd strayed from the kid his mom had loved so much.

He struggled to catch his breath. It felt like he was drowning in the lake all over again.

"Jackson Jefferson Wilson!" Principal Engel bellowed from the other end of the hallway. It sounded like he was in a very bad mood. "Stirring up trouble once again, I see!"

"I didn't stir up anything," Jack said. "Benny started it."

"Benny may have started it, but you took it too far."

"But—"

"I've already called your father. He'll be joining us as soon as he can get here. We'll meet in my office."

"I just want to go to English class," Jack whined. He realized, for the first time, how *sick* he was of going to Principal Engel's office. He'd been there so many times, he knew the location of every pencil and potted plant.

"And *I* just want Benny's tooth back in his mouth where it belongs." A vein throbbed visibly across Principal Engel's forehead.

"Well, so do I!" Jack reached out and smacked the nearby row of lockers in frustration. The sting on his palm was instant. It felt like he'd been burned.

Marvelous Jackson

“Oh, no!” Theo exclaimed. “My experiment—”

His jar of preserved sea creatures trembled on the top shelf of his open locker.

Then it shifted.

And it fell.

Jack lunged, trying to catch the jar, but it slipped through his fingers as if it were smothered in bacon grease. It shattered, sending stinky formaldehyde, dead critters, and shards of glass rolling across Jack’s tennis shoes. He glanced at Theo’s pinched face. “I’m so sorry. I didn’t mean to do that.”

“It’s fine,” Theo said, but Jack knew he was just trying to be nice. “I can figure out something else for Science Club.”

“But it was your birthday present . . .” Jack choked back his shame and nausea.

“You’re going to have to clean up that mess, young man,” Principal Engel said, shaking his head at Jack. “We’ll get you some paper towels and a broom, and then we’ll sit down with your dad and have a nice long talk.”

Jack wiped his nose with the back of his hand as Theo gave him a look of unmistakable pity. He wished desperately to hear from his mom again—*You’ve got this, Jellybean!*—but no encouragement was offered.

I’m on my own, he thought.

It was time to face the music.