



THERE  
WILL  
BE  
BEARS

RYAN GEBHART

## · CHAPTER 1 ·

# I Drink Half a Liter of Prune Juice and Use the Neighbor's Toilet for Two Hours

*Country Orchard Prune Juice*, reads the label on the plastic jug in front of me. They say this thick, nasty-looking sludge is a potent laxative. Well, I'm about to drink the whole thing.

I heard somewhere that courage means being afraid of something and doing it anyway. I never thought I would be so frightened by a fruit juice, but my heart is pounding and my palms are sweaty. As far as I know, no one has ever OD'd on prunes.

Google, please don't let me down on this one.

Gramps sits across from me at the kitchen table, his fingers tapping against his own jug, checking the birdsong clock above the sink.

In fifty-four seconds, it will be six o'clock.

*Tick.*

In fifty-three seconds, the Canada goose will honk.

*Tick.*

In fifty-two seconds, Gramps and I will each be chugging a liter of prune juice to completion.

*Pruning*, Gramps calls it. Before he goes on his yearly elk hunt, he prunes so he'll be ready to face the wilderness. He says it's good for the digestive tract, puts hair on your chest, and makes you feel like a new man. And for my thirteenth birthday, Mom and Dad promised I'd get to join him this weekend. We're going to the Bridger-Teton National Forest in Wyoming, and I've been waiting for this trip all year. Not only do I get to hunt with the coolest old guy in Colorado, but this will also finally be my chance to see a grizzly bear in the flesh. I've been obsessed with them since I saw the Timothy Treadwell documentary. He lived with the bears for thirteen summers, until one finally ate him. It was so cool. But Gramps says that if I want to go, I have to prune with him.

Mom would never let me prune with Gramps — she thinks it's immature and disgusting — but Mom's not here. And what Mom doesn't know won't hurt her. It might back up the toilet, but I'll just blame that on Ashley.

“You ready, Tyson?”

This is it. And to my own surprise, I'm not that scared. The Canada goose honks, my eyes close, and I'm choking the stuff down. My eyes are watering and my throat gets tight and I'm just about to refund all over the table when Gramps gives a satisfied sigh.

"That's the stuff." He wipes his mouth with his forearm.

I can only finish half of my jug.

Now, your typical old person just drinks a small glass of prune juice with his toast and soft-boiled egg in the morning to stay regular, but Grandpa Gene is insane in the good kind of way. He wears his beat-up cowboy hat to church and sits in the front row. And he'll dance with any woman at the Rodeo Tavern. It doesn't matter if she's some hot woman in her twenties or some fatty in her fifties. He just loves to dance.

Gramps is pretty much my best friend. Well, Brighton is *technically* my best friend, but lately he's been busy with football practice and hanging out with his new girlfriend from American Civ. The last time we actually did something was in July, when we sang karaoke for his birthday. He has a game tonight, so at least I'll be able to see him then.

"Now what?" I ask, a sour aftertaste in my mouth and a purplish-brown mystery sitting low in my stomach.

With one hand against the table, Gramps hoists himself up. “We watch *Wheel of Fortune*.”

I follow him into the living room. There are still a couple of unpacked boxes from when me, Mom, Dad, and Ashley moved into his house last month. It already feels like home, all old and broken in. Heck, we’ve spent every holiday here since Ashley was born. I know everything about this house, from the crawl space in the basement to the picture of Michael Jordan slam-dunking in the bathroom.

In *the* bathroom. As in *one*.

There’s only one bathroom in Gramps’s house.

Why didn’t it occur to me before? What are we going to do?

“What time is your friend’s game tonight?” he asks. He makes a relaxed groan, deflating into his reclining chair.

“Um, what are we going to do about the bathroom situation?”

“What do you mean?”

“Who gets the bathroom?”

With a devilish grin, he says, “Whoever is faster.”

My stomach gurgles like someone just flushed a toilet. “Huh?”

“Your grandmother and I pruned twice a year. Once in

the spring, once in the fall. We watched *Wheel of Fortune* and *Jeopardy!*, and then we raced to the bathroom.”

“What does the other person do?”

“They make do. Now, hush.”

This is the most horrifying episode of *Wheel of Fortune* ever. How can people be solving puzzles at a time like this? Who cares about a new car or a ten-thousand-dollar prize?

After sixty agonizing minutes, I’ve become an overfilled water balloon hovering above a needle, ready to explode with prune juice and bad news.

I can’t make any sudden movements.

Gramps lowers the leg rest and gets into position.

We both eye the closed door at the end of the hallway.

As soon as *Jeopardy!* ends, we make a break for it, rushing for the bathroom like football players trying to recover a fumble. He stiff-arms me with his left hand, and I fall to the ground, using every muscle to hold back this cat-4 hurricane inside of me. Gramps may be bigger, but I squeeze my way underneath him and I’m just about to make it to the bathroom when —

“What the heck?” Dad stops both of us when he opens the door going to the garage.

“We were just —”

Gramps closes the bathroom door behind him. I hear the horrifying click of the lock and the bathroom fan turning on.

“Dude, you cheated!”

Dad says, “Tyson, what’s going on?”

I bolt out the front door, my butt cheeks clenched tight. Where do I do the deed? The Privetts’ house or the Castillos’ house? Who would be more offended by me barging in and tearing up their bathroom?

The Privetts.

So I run toward the Privetts’ house.

Mr. Privett looks at me all weird as he opens his front door. He can’t really help it when his turtleneck is swallowing his face like a snake with its jaw unhinged.

He says, “Ty. What can I do for you?”

Oh, man. Cat-5! I break past him and hurry for the bathroom, locking the door behind me. I drop trou and . . . dang, Mr. Privett has a pretty solid setup in here. There’s a whole stack of mags, really fruity potpourri, and this toilet paper is way better than what we have at Gramps’s place.

Now I can just sit back and relax.

He knocks. “Tyson —”

Guh. “I’ll be out in a sec.”

In here, I don't have a care in the world. In here, I can read *Better Homes and Gardens* to my heart's content.

He knocks again.

"I already told you, I'll be out in a second."

"Tyson Eugene Driggs, it's your father. You can't go barging into Mr. Privett's house."

"Sorry, Dad. I had to use the bathroom, and Gramps was using ours."

"Then you shouldn't have drunk an entire bottle of prune juice."

"I didn't."

"Don't lie to me."

"I only drank half."

There is a long pause, and I fill the silence by misting some Mountain Spring air freshener.

He says, "You and I are going to have a little discussion."

"What? Why?"

"Meet me in the kitchen at seven thirty. We'll talk then."

"I'm a little busy right now. You better reschedule for eight thirty."

"Tyson," he says, then draws out a pause. "You're not going hunting this weekend."

## • CHAPTER 2 •

### Me and Gramps Make Our Hands into Bear Claws and Growl

Dad takes a seat next to Mom at the kitchen table, looking all parental and stern. But he can't bring me down. My body hasn't felt this clean in a long time. I guess a diet consisting mostly of Fruit Roll-Ups, cereal, and pizza will back a guy up.

He says, "We need to talk about your grandfather."

I raise an eyebrow. I thought this conversation was going to be about me. "Why?"

"I don't want you pruning with him again."

"But it's good for you. Prunes are high in antioxidants and potassium."

"Your grandfather has some health issues, you know. High blood pressure, bad kidneys—"

“Yeah, but now he has a perfectly clean digestive tract.”

Mom snickers, but Dad maintains his death glare.

“And I don’t want you two hunting, either.”

“Why not?”

Mom says, “Honey, with what happened to that guy from Portland, it’s just not safe.”

“What guy from Portland?”

“This tourist was hiking near the Tetons just three days ago, and for no reason a grizzly ripped his arm off. He’s lucky he’s even alive.”

“That’s fierce.”

“It’s true! The story is all over the news.”

“Whatever. Gramps has encountered bears before and it wasn’t a big deal.”

“That was a long time ago,” Dad says. “He’s seventy-seven now. You think he can outrun a bear at his age?”

“He beat me to the bathroom.”

Dad rubs his temples, then his eyes. “Maybe next year.”

That’s his way of saying we’re never going.

“Dad, you know how much this means to me.”

“Since when have you been interested in hunting?”

“I like hunting. I have all the Great American Hunter games, and Gramps has taken me to the shooting range a

bunch of times. He says I'm a really good shot. And I love nature. I got all the *Planet Earth* DVDs."

"Do you really want to kill an animal?" Mom says.

"Yeah. I do."

"Why?"

"It's those video games," Dad says in his know-it-all way. "Always shooting something."

"No! No, it's not that. It's not about killing. It's about . . . I don't know. Something else." I slouch back and mutter, "We didn't go on a trip this summer."

"What's that got to do with anything?"

Every summer all six of us would pile into Grandma's minivan and head for the west coast. My favorite trip was the one when we drove to Los Angeles, then traveled the entire Pacific Coast Highway up to San Francisco. With everyone crammed together and all tired and stinky, I felt like a bear cub in a den. When we got a flat tire, Gramps fixed it. When I wanted a slice of gas station pizza, Dad paid for it. When I got angry at Ashley for farting and blaming it on me, Mom yelled at us and Grandma laughed. I loved our vacations.

But I don't say any of that. It's not going to change their minds.

Dad goes, “It’s getting late. Don’t you have an American Civilization test tomorrow?”

“Yes.”

“Well, move along, then.”

If Gramps wants to take me hunting, then what gives Dad the right to stop him? I mean, this is Gramps’s house. He let us move in here when Dad lost his job and couldn’t keep up with the house payments and had to declare bankruptcy.

I open my American Civ book to the chapter “US–Great Britain Relations, Pre–Revolutionary War.” After I read through it, I answer the questions at the end of the chapter and get over half of them wrong.

God, I can never get the details down. What sucks is that the details are what Ms. Hoole tests us on. The doctor says it’s because of ADD or ADHD or something. He says I can’t focus and I get overexcited, and Brighton says that explains my obsession with grizzly bears and Taylor Swift.

There’s a knock on my door, which means Gramps. Mom and Dad never knock.

“Come in.”

He sits beside me on my bed, a book in his hand. “Hey, bud. Sorry I got you into trouble.”

“It’s not your fault Dad’s so lame.”

“Don’t be so hard on him.”

Now I feel kinda bad, but only for a second. “So we’re not going on our hunting trip?”

“We’re going. Yes, sir, you and I are going to get a six-point. A real trophy bull. Maybe we’ll go next weekend when your father is in a better mood.”

“Pinkie swear?” I hold out my little finger.

“I *bear swear*.”

“Huh?”

“Do this with your hands.”

He makes his hands into bear claws, and I do the same thing. He interlocks his fingers with mine and then he growls, violently shaking my hands.

“Never break a bear swear,” he says. I have no idea what it means, but I can’t stop laughing.

He hands me a worn hardcover book with a picture of a bear titled *Grizzly Bears of Northwest Wyoming*. “I found this in the attic; thought you might like to take a look. I know how much you love bears.”

A grizz shows me his teeth from the cover as he roars. They’re stained brown with the blood of the less fortunate. His eyes are soulless little black dots. He eats, and he doesn’t care what.

God, I'd give anything to see a grizz up close.

I say, "What's your best bear story?"

"I've never told it before?"

"You always said I was too young."

"Ah, well, you're thirteen now. In a lot of cultures, that's the year boys become men."

There's no way I'm a man. I mean, I've never even kissed a girl.

"So my best bear story? Well, that's gotta be when my hunting guide Brendan Rien and I were out tracking an elk herd back in, uh . . . 2003. The timber got too thick for the horses, so we tied them to a tree and moved on foot. We didn't get no elk that morning, but when we returned, you wouldn't believe it—all that was left of our horses were two heads dangling from the ropes, still tied to the trees."

"Whoa. What happened?"

"A grizz happened."

"He ate *two* horses? What?"

He shakes his head. "It was a she. About ten yards away, we saw two piles of dirt. There was blood everywhere and it stank like you wouldn't believe. She buried their bodies. I mean, can you imagine the strength it would take? Digging holes for two horses?"

"But why would she bury them?"

“She was waiting for them to spoil. Grizzly bears like their meat rotten.”

A chill falls down my body and freezes up my stomach. I just got an all-too-real picture in my head of rotting horses and I can't get it out.

“That's bold,” I say, like I have no problem with rotting bodies or dirt puddled with horse blood. But I have to think of something else. I try to force a picture of that new girl in choir class, but the image of a horse's head is stuck in my brain.

I fake a laugh and say, “You know, she wouldn't have had to kill the horses if there'd been a pizza place around.”

Gramps shakes his head. “You really like pizza, don't you?”

“You really like The Weather Channel. No judge.”

“You're going to learn quite a bit. This is why I hunt out of the Tetons every year.”

“Dad says you have to watch your blood pressure.”

“I've been hunting elk, deer, and black bear ever since I was thirteen. I don't have to watch nothing.”

“You've been hunting since you were my age?”

“Yup. Your great-grandfather first took me to the Tetons when I was thirteen. And he was thirteen when his father

took him. It's a family tradition — all men hunt and field-dress an elk when they turn thirteen."

"Did Dad?"

"Well, he killed an elk, a sad-looking four-point no bigger than a mule deer. But he left the field dressing to me."

"No way! Dad went *hunting*? How come he never told me?"

Gramps laughs. "There's a lot of responsibility that comes with killing an animal. More than your father could handle."

"I can handle it."

"He couldn't stand the sight of blood."

"That's 'cause Dad's weak."

He smiles. "Looks like you missed your friend's game. Did you ask him how it went?"

"Brighton isn't answering his phone, and the Internet's down. I'll just talk to him at school tomorrow."

"Nah, let's go see him now."

"Really?"

"Yeah, I'll drive you. I should have told you not to make other plans when pruning."

"But what about Dad?"

"He already went to bed."

I slide on my shoes. Whatever health problem Gramps has, it can't be that bad. He's the same guy he's always been. Still hunting elk, still pruning, and he doesn't treat me like a child the way Mom and Dad do.

I say, "And then maybe we could order a pizza."

Gramps shakes his head. "We'll make a man out of you yet."

## • CHAPTER 3 •

### It Turns Out My Best Friend Is Actually a Yamhole

I follow Gramps down the staircase. He bought this house with Grandma the year Ashley was born and the rest of us were living on the other end of town. Sure, all the other homes in the neighborhood are nicer and newer, but it's like someone took a cookie cutter and baked the exact same two-story cube a hundred times over.

Gramps's house has a soul. The pine trees in his front yard are huge, while all the neighbors just have saplings being held up by twine and metal rods. Some yards have sod that didn't take, and now there are all these patches of yellow grass everywhere.

I close the door and head to Gramps's pickup.

Gramps dials the radio knob to 96.9—KBCR Big Country Radio—and they're playing Willie Nelson

and Merle Haggard singing one of Grandma's favorite songs.

I slouch back and imagine wearing Gramps's cowboy hat, driving in my pickup through the canyon to work another day at Henry Feed and Tractor Supply in Hayden. One arm rests on the windowsill, and I eat a Fruit Roll-Up my old lady packed, because she knows how I think Fruit Roll-Ups are the cat's pajamas, as Grandma would say.

We pull into Bright's driveway, and the light is on in his bedroom, just above the garage. With Gramps waiting in the truck, I ring the doorbell. Chloe starts barking.

Bright's mom answers the door, and Chloe rushes out to snort at my ankles, wagging her tail. Her eyeballs bug out of her smashed pug face, making her look like a mouse caught in a trap.

"Tyson, hello. What are you doing over here so late?" His mom sounds so formal, with her thick British accent. Bright was born in England and moved to Colorado in the first grade, but the only time he sounds remotely British anymore is when he laughs.

"Is Brighton home?"

"Let me fetch him."

It sounds like he trips and comes tumbling down the staircase. But he appears in one piece, wearing a green

polo and expensive jeans. Or as I like to call them, his fancy pants.

“Hey, Ty.” He coaxes Chloe into the house and closes the door behind him. “What’s up?”

“I just wanted to see how your game went. Did you win?”

He scratches at his buzzed head. Bright and his teammates shaved their heads at the beginning of the season as some good-luck thing. He looks so much older without his shaggy hair.

“Nah, we lost.”

“What was the score?”

“Thirty-one to thirty-three.”

“Hey, at least it was close. Did you kick any field goals?”

“A twenty-five yarder and a nineteen yarder.”

“Twenty-five yards? Good job, football bear.”

He makes a little grin. “I missed the third kick from fifteen yards and lost us the game.”

“It happens. So, hey, me and my gramps aren’t going hunting until next weekend. You want to hang out tomorrow afternoon? It’s supposed to snow. Maybe we could go sledding at Snowshoe.”

He shakes his head, eyes to the ground. “I might be going skiing with some of the guys on the team.”

“Oh,” I say. I get this feeling in my chest. It’s like a pain,

but not really. I mean, I've seen this coming since summer. Bright's becoming one of the popular guys.

I can already imagine him going to parties and "forgetting" to invite me, and then the next day in the halls, kids will come up to him saying stuff I won't understand. I'll ask Bright what they're talking about, and he'll say, "*Oh, it's nothing. You had to be there.*"

Pretty soon I'm going to be just some other kid he nods at in American Civ. Pretty soon I'm going to go from having one friend to having zero friends.

It feels like something is pushing up against my rib cage.

"That's cool," I say. "And sorry I couldn't make it to your game tonight. Something came up."

"What's that?"

"I was taking a dump at the neighbor's house." I'm trying so hard not to cry, because Bright making new friends is a stupid reason to cry. It's not like anyone died. I'm just being all emotional. So I laugh instead. "I drank a bunch of prune juice with my gramps, and dude, have you ever tried that stuff? It works."

He's not even paying attention. He's just checking his phone.

"Who are you talking to?" I say.

"Mika."

“Mikachu!” I say in my Pikachu voice, and Bright barely smiles. “What’s she saying?”

“She’s just talking about how Amanda Morgan brought this ridiculous sign to the game for Nico.”

“Oh.”

He laughs. “You had to be there.”

A bolt of panic strikes me.

“I’ll see your next game,” I say. “I promise.”

“I should probably get back to studying for Hoole’s test. See ya later, Ty.” And then he goes inside and locks the door.

I get back in the truck.

“Is everything okay?” Gramps asks.

“Whatever.” I turn to him and say, “Let’s go over to the water tower.”

“Maybe it’s best if we went back home. It’s getting late.”

I slouch in my seat, my teeth clenched. I’m funner than the football kids, but after all these years, why doesn’t Bright know that?

Driving down the street, Gramps says, “Okay, just this one time.”

He flicks his turn signal and takes a right onto Shady Lane, toward the hills, the warehouses, the highway, and the old water tower.

# There Will Be Bears

Ryan Gebhart

“Fully developed characters, complex and realistic relationships (especially between Tyson and Gramps), and Tyson’s spot-on narrative voice—which balances faux bravado, risqué humor, and real emotional pain—make this story stand out.” – *Publishers Weekly* (starred review)

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