

DO NOT DUPLICATE

MUSTACHES FOR Maddie

CHAD MORRIS *and* SHELLY BROWN



FOR REVIEW ONLY

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CHAPTER 1



A Pink Mustache and Ninja Training

FACT: mustaches are hilarious. Which is why I collect them. Everything is funnier with a mustache.

At least that's what I hoped. I had a plan, but it was risky.

I overheard Cassie telling Sailor that they were going to talk about the school play at recess. I needed to be in on that conversation. After all, it might start off my amazing career as a comic. Or an actress. Or a comedic actress.

Deep breath.

They might think I was a complete weirdo. Or they might think I was hilarious and let me in on all their plans.

I reached into my pocket and looked down at my choices. The green one? Brown?

Nuh-uh.

Pink? Yeah. Pink, for sure.

Before I could change my mind, I peeled off the thin sheet of paper on the back and slapped the pink strip onto my upper lip.

Sailor happened to glance over at me through her red curls as we walked down the school hallway toward the big doors. Maybe my movement caught her attention. She did a double take. This was it. I wiggled my eyebrows for effect, but on the inside I was holding my breath.

Please laugh. Please laugh.

Sailor's eyes widened and then a giggle escaped. The giggle grew into a full-on laugh, which made her curly hair bounce. I broke out into a celebration dance that started out as a little shaky-shaky of happiness and ended in me doing the worm down the hall.

Okay. I didn't actually dance. Part of me wanted to, but the rest of me couldn't quite do it in the hall with everyone watching. Maybe if it was just Sailor, but she wasn't the one I was worried about.

Plus, the worm is really hard.

Hannah looked back too. She didn't laugh enough to show her braces, but her cheeks bobbed. Then Sailor almost snorted. If she had, maybe I really would have danced.

"Oh, hilarious," Yasmin said, quickly reaching into her pocket and pulling out her phone. Was she going to take my

picture? No one had ever taken a picture of me at school before. Well, not counting class pictures. I smiled and gave Yasmin a thumbs-up while she clicked the pic. I hoped it looked cute. But she probably didn't have any other photos of a short, twelve-year-old girl with sandy-blonde hair wearing the most beautiful pink mustache a quarter could buy.

I also had a thick green mustache and a curly brown one, but they were still in my pocket. Like I said, everything is funnier with a mustache. For example, think of a pig. They're cute and funny with their piggy snouts and curly pink tails. Now imagine one with a mustache. Yep. Funnier. Or think of a woman in a fancy dress singing opera. Now imagine a mustached woman in a fancy dress singing opera. Think of your baby brother . . . with a mustache.

I almost snorted just thinking about it. But laughing at my own jokes wasn't the best idea, especially jokes I didn't say out loud.

Three of the girls liked my mustache, but I still wanted to win one more girl over. The hardest to impress.

Cassie turned to find out why everyone was laughing and taking pictures. She had been talking to Sarah at the front of the group. Cassie is like the queen of the sixth grade. Well, the queen, the president, the fashionista, winner of the People's Choice Award—pretty much everything important. It isn't official or anything, but everyone knows it.

She wore her blonde hair long and flowy, with a few fancy

braids, the kind moms have to learn how to do by going to beauty school or by watching a lot of videos on the Internet. She also wore a glittery red sweater. Super cute, but we wouldn't expect anything less.

"Maddie! So funny," Cassie said, showing her brilliantly white teeth. "Weird, but funny."

I wanted to pump my fist in the air. The queen thought I was funny. Maybe I could work my way up to becoming the jester of the sixth grade. That would be awesome. My risky risk was paying off. Hopefully, she would let me hang out with her today.

I jogged to catch up to the other girls. All of them were taller than I was, and they seemed to walk faster, too. We opened the big black doors and walked out of Acord Elementary, glad to have at least a few minutes of freedom.

Cassie turned, this time walking completely backwards, looking at the bunch of us following her. She could even walk sassy backwards. "Okay," she said with her big, bright smile, "I need to talk with Sailor, Sarah, and Hannah."

She looked over her shoulder to make sure she was following the walking path around the school. Every recess Cassie picked who got to walk around with her. Sometimes she chose me and we talked about movies and makeup and funny jokes and boys. Well, I didn't usually do much of the talking, but it was still fun.

Some recesses I didn't get picked. Cassie didn't like it if I tried to hang out with a different group, so if I didn't get

picked, I usually chilled by the door and made up jokes to myself or invented crazy stories. Once I made up one about a cyclops who had to go on a treacherous journey to get the only contact lens big enough for his monster eye. It was pretty awesome. Well, as awesome as telling a story to yourself can be.

“And Yasmin,” Cassie said.

I liked Yasmin and was glad Cassie picked her. And not just because she took a picture of me with her phone. Yasmin and I walked most of the way home together every day. She lived a street over. She had really dark, straight hair and dark skin. She once told me to guess where she was from. I guessed India. I was so wrong. It was Ohio. But her grandparents were from Malaysia. That’s somewhere way across the ocean. I could point it out on a map, I think.

“And . . .” Cassie said.

This was it.

Please. Please.

I hoped my mustache sealed it. “Definitely Maddie.” Phew. I almost danced for real. Not only was I in, but I got a *definitely*. Behold the power of the mustache. “Even though she’s holding her arm weird again,” Cassie added.

For the love of potatoes! I had forgotten about my arm. I stretched it out quick and hoped my face didn’t turn too red. For some reason my arm liked to rest in a funny position sometimes. Cassie had pointed it out three times over the last few days. My fist would tuck in close to my chest and my elbow

would stick out behind it. It was probably because I was growing. Bodies do weird things when they grow. At least that's what they told us in that super awkward presentation at school. You know, that one your parents have to sign the permission slip for you to go to and where they talk about deodorant and your body changing. The permission slip probably asked, "Is it okay for your son or daughter to sit through the most embarrassing presentation of their lives?" And all the parents signed it.

Or maybe I held my arm weird because of the ninja training I was doing after school in the invisible dojo in my basement. That was probably it. I was almost a titanium belt. That's like twenty levels above black, and it's when you learn to break cars with your pinky finger and bust through freeways with your head. Yeah. That kind of training is intense.

Okay, I made up the ninja stuff, but it sounded pretty cool. Anyway, I straightened my arm. At least Cassie had still picked me.

But Cassie wasn't looking at me anymore. She looked at Lexi, the last girl not picked. She had only been in our school since the end of November, and now it was January, but she seemed nice enough. She looked at us through her brown hair.

"Sorry," Cassie said. She smiled nice and big, but I don't think she was smiling on the inside.

I had seen that same smile lots of times. Like all the times when she told me she was sorry but I couldn't walk with her.

I really didn't like that kind of smile. It was like it was painted on.

I took another deep breath. A thought was pounding on my brain, but I wasn't sure I should say it. I had risked a lot for this. "Wait," I finally said. And then everyone looked at me.

Gulp.

I glanced at Lexi. She was nice and probably hated being alone for recess just as much as I did. "Let's let Lexi hang out with us, too."

Silence.

Nobody said stuff like that. Cassie was in charge. Kelsi said something like that to Cassie once last year and hasn't been invited back since.

"Seriously," I said, finding some courage somewhere deep inside me. "I don't think it's fair to invite all of us and then leave her out. Plus, she's new."

Something about that felt really good. Well, it would have if I had actually done it. I wanted to, but I didn't do it. I only imagined it. Just like my celebration dance and my ninja training.

Maybe I could suggest that . . . No. Cassie might kick me out of the group. Just because I made everyone laugh with my mustache didn't mean they wouldn't drop me. And then I wouldn't be in on the plans about the play. And maybe, just maybe, my comic-actress career would be over before it even started.

I felt bad for Lexi, but I didn't say anything. I was just glad it wasn't me.

CHAPTER 2



Poison-tipped Swords, Yelling Matches, and Juliet

“Okay, girls,” Cassie said, leading us down the blacktop path around the school fields and away from Lexi. When we were younger, we played four square or tetherball or tag at recess, but not anymore. Cassie said that she was more mature and just wanted to talk.

“We need to talk about the plays,” Cassie continued. Her eyes grew bigger, and she smiled wide. Everything was more exciting when Cassie talked about it. “I just know they’re going to be amazing this year.”

We all agreed. Almost every sixth grader looked forward to the Shakespeare unit in school. Not because we were super fancy-pants kids, because we weren’t—well, Cassie wore some

pretty fancy pants, but that's not the same thing. We looked forward to the plays because we got to spend a month pretending and getting ready to put on a show.

A real show too. Not a cheesy program. Each class did scenes from different plays. They were short, a couple of minutes long, but they had sword fights and yelling matches and funny bits. And we did it during the day for the whole school and then at night for our parents. I watched it year after year, picking the different parts I would want.

We'd already studied the plots of each play we could choose from, and Mrs. Baer talked about the characters we could pick. We were going to fill out our papers with our top three choices right after recess.

Cassie surveyed all of us and then looked at Hannah. "I think Hannah should be that fairy queen," she said. "So definitely put that down as your first choice."

Hannah nodded. "I would love that." The fairy queen was in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. That sounded like a pretty fantastic part, but I wasn't sure Hannah remembered what happened in the play. The fairy queen has a spell put on her and falls in love with a guy with a donkey head. Yep. A donkey head. Hilarious, right? The only thing better would be a guy with a donkey head and a mustache.

I choked down a laugh just thinking about it. But it would have been pretty funny if my *he-he-he* would have slipped out as a *he-haw-he*. Get it? Donkey head. He-*haw*-he. Yeah, Cassie

probably wouldn't have thought it was funny either. Good thing I kept that one to myself.

"In fact," Cassie said, "you might want to put the fairy queen down for all three choices. Then they'll know you *really* want it." Cassie turned to the rest of us. "No one else put the fairy queen down as one of your three choices, that way Hannah will definitely get it." Everyone agreed, but Sailor nodded slower.

I wanted to ask her if she wanted the part, but everyone was still listening to Cassie.

"And Yasmin," Cassie said. "What should you be?"

"Hero," Sarah suggested.

Yep, there was a girl named Hero in one of the plays. But her name was seriously misleading; she wasn't actually a hero. She didn't sword fight a bad guy, or lead soldiers into war, or use magic to turn the villain's noggin into a donkey's head with a mustache. She just looked pretty and was nice and a guy fell in love with her. And when he was being a jerk, she pretended to be dead. That was it. Again, not really much of a hero.

"I was thinking of auditioning for Juliet," Yasmin said. I could tell from her eyes and bouncy walk that she was pretty excited about that part. A lot of the girls wanted to be Juliet. When the community theater closed down a few years ago, they gave the school a bunch of costumes. Juliet's was the best costume, and super pretty. A light-blue dress, long and flowy, with puffy sleeves and a big sparkly necklace. Plus, she was the

most famous part of all of Shakespeare's plays. Everyone's heard of her. Her lines were kinda lovey, and she didn't say much that was funny, but it would still be really fun.

"No," Cassie said, shaking her head. "I don't think Juliet's right for you. What about the nice sister in *Taming of the Shrew*? Bianca. She's pretty and that one boy super wants to marry her."

That part would be okay, but it wasn't Juliet.

"Why don't you think Yasmin should be Juliet?" I asked. "I think it's a great idea." I did think it would be a great idea. Yasmin was smart and could memorize her lines. Plus, she was probably good on stage. I mean, she was pretty fun when we walked home together.

But, like with Lexi, I didn't really ask even though I thought maybe I should. I don't know why. Sometimes I don't say what I think I should.

One by one, Cassie went through the group, giving advice on what to write down. Sailor wanted Juliet too, but Cassie didn't think it was right for her, either. We were passing the school again. We had walked around once and were starting our second time. I saw Lexi sitting alone against the doors to the school, waiting for recess to be over.

My heart flopped a little. Been there. Lots of times.

I wished I would have said something about Lexi. Of course it wouldn't have done much good. Cassie didn't always

include everyone, but we all liked her, and she really could be nice. She was just picky sometimes.

“Maddie,” Cassie said. “Do you know what part would be great for you?”

I took another deep breath. I had an idea, and I thought I’d try it. “All I care about is that I get to rock a mustache,” I said and raised my pink mustache to my lip. I had been thinking up that line for the last half lap.

I don’t know why I could talk about mustaches but not ask if Lexi could join us or if Yasmin could be Juliet. They were just different.

Thankfully, everyone laughed again.

Well, everyone except Cassie.

“I like it,” Yasmin said. “Maybe Hamlet. He gets to do an awesome sword fight with poison-tipped swords.”

“You could be the fairy king,” Sailor said.

“No,” Cassie said. “Maddie can’t be a boy in the play.”

I wanted to disagree. We learned that in Shakespeare’s day, boys used to play the girls’ parts, so it would only be fair if I could put on a mustache and play a boy’s part.

“I think you should be Juliet’s nurse,” Cassie said. “Then we could be together.”

The nurse? I didn’t want to be the nurse. The nurse was a funny enough character in the real play, but she was only in one of the two *Romeo and Juliet* scenes we were doing, and she only had two or three lines. And they weren’t even good. She

just kept calling for Juliet to come inside and stop flirting. Of course she said it all Shakespeare-style, like “Forsooth, Juliet, get thine self backeth inside thine house. Thou art boy-crazy.”

Okay, maybe I made up that bit.

Wait. What had Cassie said? Then we’d be together? Why would we be . . . ? My brain finally figured it out. Cassie wanted to be Juliet. Was that why she was recommending what everyone else should write down? Was she trying to make it more likely that she would get the part she wanted? No. She was probably just being helpful.

“Maybe the nurse would be okay,” I said. Why did I say that? I didn’t want to be the nurse. Then again, it *would* be fun to be in a scene with Cassie. With the way she moved and talked, always drawing everyone’s attention, it would probably be the best scene of all of them.

Cassie pulled her sparkly pink phone from her pocket. Not only was it cute, but it was one of the newest, fastest phones out there. “The bell is about to ring.” I guess she had checked the time. “Let’s run in and fill out our papers. I bet if we turn them in first, we get first choice.”

All the girls ran. Cassie was in the front, her hair bouncing as she moved.

I ran too but couldn’t keep up. I was the slowest and the trippiest of probably everyone in my grade. Maybe I was so clumsy because my legs were growing. I think the teacher might have mentioned that in the awkward class. Or maybe I

was really a centaur from some fantasyland, but I was cursed to stay in a human form because I was the princess centaur destined to overthrow the maniacal wizard who had a face like a boar and who had taken over my world. Since I'd been in human form for so long, my legs were getting a little slow.

Yep. Centaur legs don't like being human legs for long. It was kind of like my left hand. I just hoped I could remove the curse soon, because if my clumsiness started to bother Cassie like my arm did, maybe I wouldn't get picked anymore—even with my mustaches. Then I might end up like Lexi again, alone during recess.

I was the last of the girls to get into the classroom. Cassie and the others gathered by the in-box on Mrs. Baer's desk to turn in their preferences. I looked at my paper. I wanted to quickly write down "Hamlet," "Katherine," and "Juliet," but that would mess things up.

"Can I see what you wrote?" I heard Cassie ask Hannah before she dropped her paper in the box.

"Fairy Queen for all three," Hannah said, showing Cassie her paper.

Cassie celebrated and gave Hannah a hug.

Oh, no. My insides rolled. Cassie was probably going to ask to see my paper too. I quickly scribbled down three names:

1. Juliet's nurse
2. Katherine
3. Hamlet

I didn't put Juliet's nurse for all three, but if I put it at number one, I'd get it. I doubt anyone else was trying to get that part.

I didn't even wait for Cassie to ask. I showed my paper to her as soon as I walked over to Mrs. Baer's desk.

She beamed. "I'm so excited," she said. "It's going to be fantastic." She passed me as she went back to her seat. She had already dropped her paper of her top three choices in the box.

I looked at my sheet again. It would be fun to be in a scene with Cassie, but . . . I wrinkled the corner of the paper and looked around the room. Lexi had finished her list and was walking back to her desk. She saw me, and then looked to the floor.

I glanced back at Cassie. She was happily talking with Devin and flipping her hair. I took out my pencil and erased part of my first answer. Now it only said "Juliet" for my first choice.

I didn't just imagine it. I really did it. *And* I turned it in.

CHAPTER 3



Nothing to Worry About

“This Halloween I want to be Frankenstein so I can eat people’s brains,” Emery, one of my twin brothers, said. Yep, twin brothers. Emery and Ethan are eight, and identical. Have you ever noticed how many twins in movies are evil troublemakers? Well, there’s a reason. My brothers are crazy and probably evil.

I’m just kidding. Kind of.

“Frankenstein doesn’t eat brains,” Ethan said. “That’s zombies.” They both have high-pitched voices and speak really fast. They kind of sound like hyper chipmunks. Evil hyper chipmunks.

“Oh, yeah,” Emery admitted.

“Unless it’s a zombie Frankenstein,” Ethan said, rising out of his chair, his eyes wide. He pushed aside the plate of meat loaf and potatoes in front of him for a moment.

“Awesome. I’m so glad I thought of it.”

“No, you didn’t. I did.”

“Boys,” my mom said, her voice raised to be heard above the chipmunk chatter. “Eat your dinner and stop talking about the undead at the table. It’s gross.” She had a point. Plus we were eating ground beef.

My mom’s fun, funny, and looks young for her age. My dad says she has a baby face, but that’s stupid. Can you imagine a full-grown mom with a baby’s face? Weird.

I took a bite of my baked potato. I think we can probably all agree that potatoes are the best food ever. They should be an essential part of every meal. It’s like they are sent straight from heaven by angels with amazing taste buds. Mashed, baked, French fried, and even sweet potatoes . . . I love them all.

They were especially good after going against Cassie’s orders and putting down that I wanted Juliet. I kind of felt bad, and I kind of didn’t. And it made me hope that I really could get Juliet, but also terrified that I would.

I took another bite of potato, ignoring my meat loaf. I hate meat. It’s the worst food group ever. Nasty. I don’t like the idea of killing any animals, especially cows. Cows are cute. But I loved the idea of putting mustaches on cows and watching them chew grass really slowly.

So funny. Cow'staches.

"Yeah, let's worry about Halloween later," my dad said. "It's eight months away." My dad is bald. That's the most important thing to know about him. Well, it's the most obvious thing anyway. If you saw him, you'd want to rub his head for luck.

He's also a writer. He writes curriculum for schools, but on the side, he's been trying to get a book published for years. He's written several stories and sent them to lots of places, and he finally got a deal for his first book. I think it's pretty awesome, but he still has a few months before it comes out. He's even going to go on a tour to promote it.

I love my dad's stories. I love that we share the same kind of imagination. Telling stories and making up stuff is one of my favorite things to do with my dad.

Dad glanced at my plate. "Maddie, eat your meat loaf."

I shuddered. "Meat is disgusting."

"You're being ridiculous," my dad said.

"Yeah, you're being widiculous," Max, my littlest brother, said, smiling big. He's the only one in our family with red hair, and he's the youngest. Three years old. Plus he's adorable.

"If 'ridiculous' means 'awesome,' then yes," I said. "I'm being ridiculous."

My parents laughed. It wasn't fake laughing either. I hear adults do that a lot when kids try to be funny. But I could make my parents laugh, a really real laugh, from the belly.

“Nice job, my little comedian,” Mom said, then pointed at my plate. “Now, eat your meat loaf.”

That didn’t make me laugh.

At all.

“Dad?” Ethan asked. “When does your book come out?”

“You ask that all the time,” Christopher said.

Yep, that’s another brother—and the oldest. And you counted right. I have four brothers. Four. And no sisters. So my house was crazy and full of boys and boy stuff like soccer balls, dragon movies, and really stinky socks. And if you didn’t know, boys’ feet stink a lot more than girls’ feet. I’m sure science has proved that somewhere.

“It’s on March fourth,” Christopher said. He loved books. He spent most of his time reading, writing, or playing his trombone. Sometimes all at the same time. Just kidding. That would be really hard.

“I just forget,” Ethan said.

“I didn’t,” Emery said.

“Yes, you did.”

“No, I didn’t.” It was a high-pitched twin argument.

“Boys, calm down,” Mom said.

“You’ve got a problem with your brain,” Ethan snapped.

They could go from joking to upset really quickly.

“You’ve got a problem with your *face*,” Emery shot back. “Ugly face.” He fake-punched his twin. They weren’t supposed to hit each other, so that was the way they showed they were

really mad. I knew what was going to happen next. They'd start yelling and both would end up in time-out. That wasn't all bad. Then I could eat my potatoes in peace.

But that didn't happen.

My dad burst out laughing.

Everyone looked at him. Usually he would reprimand the twins for saying mean things to each other, not crack up.

Dad opened his mouth to say something but had to wait a few seconds before he could get the words out. "You said he had an ugly face," he said. I still didn't get why that was funny. He laughed a little more. "But you're identical twins." There was another pause. "You have the *same* face."

Laughter bubbled out of me. I mean, I got the full-on giggles until I noticed my mom looking at me.

"Maddie," she said. "You're holding your arm a little strange again. Are you sure it's alright?"

I looked down at my arm. "Oh, sorry. It just feels comfortable like this. I think it's fine." I stretched my arm out straight to show her it was okay. They had asked about it before, and I'd convinced them it was because I was growing. I didn't want to mention that I'd noticed my hand was different. A little slower to move. It was probably going to get better soon.

Dad was looking at it too. "I think we need to check it out."

"I agree," Mom said. "I'll make an appointment with the doctor."

“It feels fine,” I said. Okay, maybe I didn’t tell the whole truth, but I didn’t like all the questions. Plus, I didn’t want to go to the doctor. Going to the doctor meant that something was wrong with you. I wasn’t sick. I didn’t cough and lay in bed all day. I was fine. And instead of talking about all this stuff, I’d rather just eat potatoes, hope everything would go well with my Shakespeare part, and pray my dad wouldn’t actually make me eat my meat loaf.

“I’m glad,” Mom said. “But I’m still calling the doctor.”