AMERICAN KIDS

An excerpt from the novel by Carter Clark

Chapter One. Charlie Shore, twelve, is home babysitting his five-year-old brother Frankie, who is sick in bed.

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The house was empty except for Frankie and me. He was upstairs, sick, and I volunteered myself to stay home and keep watch over him. There are five of us Shore kids in total: Hailey, Stephanie, Mary — my three older sisters — then there's me, and then Frankie. My parents had gone on a Saturday shopping spree with my sisters, and Frankie was five at the time, so he couldn't stay home alone; I was twelve, so my parents were totally fine with letting me stay home with him.

I marched up the stairs of our two-story house and entered Frankie's room. I had to watch my step as I navigated the battlefield of G.I. Joes, Legos, and metal tanks. The metal tanks hurt more than Legos, so stepping on them was no bueno. Frankie watched from his bed on the other side of the room. Once I reached him, he thanked me for not destroying his set-up.

"Who's winning the Great Bedroom War?" I asked him.

"The Legos proved to be a worthy foe to the G.I. Joes, but they're no match," he replied.

"Ah. And who's side are the tanks on?"

"They're neutral," he said.

"Is there anything you need or want?" I asked him.

"Not really. I'm just kinda bored." I couldn't blame the kid. I would be bored out of my mind, too, if I spent the day sick in bed.

"Well, do you wanna play a game or something? I can get Monopoly out or—"

"That's too easy." Frankie is what you'd call a weird kid — no five-year-old understands life as well as Frankie; he just gets it. The last time we played Monopoly, he whooped me. The boy was wicked smaht. So, I pitched chess to him. He asked if he'd like it.

"I don't know," I told him. "But it involves a lot of strategy, and it's got a lot of moving parts." Frankie said that sounded interesting, so I went downstairs to our game cupboard to retrieve our set. I grabbed the wooden board and ziplock bag containing the pieces to match, then hiked back up to Frankie's room.

When I walked in, Frankie was finishing cleaning up the remains of his epic battle from off the floor. I took that as a sign that we'd be playing on the floor. Frankie asked how to play while I set the game up.

"Each person takes a turn moving their pieces until one person checkmates the other person's king."

"What one is the king?" I pulled the white king out of the bag, and he grabbed it from my hand to examine it. After a moment, he gave it back, and I put it on its black square. Frankie grabbed a handful of the black pieces, since I took the white king, and I explained where all the pieces went. Once all the pieces were on their correct squares, I began the process of telling him how each piece moved. He asked all of his questions and I answered. We were off to the races.

I had no clue how fast Frankie would be picking up basic strategy, so I tried Scholar's Mate, AKA, the four-move checkmate. Frankie was doomed from the start; the poor kid opened by moving his pawns out one by one. By a stroke of pure luck, Frankie hadn't yet moved any pawns to let his king escape, so once I was up again, I slid my queen across the board and took his pawn. Checkmate.

Frankie looked at the board for a second, then up at me in disbelief.

"How'd you do that so fast?" Frankie asked.

"It's called 'Scholar's Mate.' It's quite simple, and it honestly really only works well against beginners like you."

"Oh… Let's play again."

We set the pieces back up and battled it out. I tried the Scholar's Mate on Frankie again, just for the heck of it, but he saw it coming. He set up an excellent defense, and that's where I — yes, I — fell apart.

Frankie turned the tables on me and began picking my pieces off one by one with his queen. I tried to regroup and recover for a counter, but Frankie was too swift for me to get anything together. My moves were impulsive, Frankie's contemplative, and chess was a game that rewarded Frankie's way of thinking, not someone who fired off moves quickly because he thought he was elite.

The game was over before I could even strike a proper attack of my own (which would've been more Hail Mary assaults on his king.)

"Ok, now it's my turn to ask how you did that so fast."

"I don't know," he said. He spoke as if he were a bored professional wasting his time. "Wanna play another round?"

"I'd rather not get beat by my little brother again." He said that was fair, then helped me clean up.

Frankie said: “I drew a picture earlier.”

I stopped what I was doing and looked at him. He normally wasn’t the type to make that kind of statement.

“That’s nice,” I said, because honestly, I didn’t care. My dad got after me one time for telling Frankie I didn’t care about what he was telling me. He said that I shouldn’t say that I don’t care — even if I don’t. There were times when I was Frankie’s age that I would yap his ear off and he just had to pretend to care when he didn’t. That stuck with me. Frankie finished putting his pieces into the bag, then got up and walked to his closet. He pulled the white wooden door open and scavenged around the clothes and books to find his picture. He let out a victorious “A-ha!” once he found it, then handed it over to me.

The picture was well done, coming from a five-year-old, and it showed an old man standing on a beautiful beach. To the man’s left was the ocean, and to the right was a wooden cabin nestled in palm trees. It was sunny in the picture, but there was no sun; there were a few black V’s in the sky to depict seagulls. The picture was fully colored.

“Weird, huh?” Frankie said.

“Not really. I mean, the old guy in the middle is kind of weird, but everything else isn’t… In my opinion.” I still didn’t care.

“I drew it because I had a dream about it last night. I was walking down the beach when I saw the house. A second later, the man walked out. I’ve never seen him before.”

“Did he say anything to you?”

“I don’t think he knew I was there. I tried to go into his house, but I woke up before I opened the door. The weird part is, I’ve been to the beach before in other dreams.”

“You have?” What Frankie was telling me seemed like he had a heaping case of rampant imagination. He went back to his closet and fished out more drawings, and maybe I started to care a little more.

“They’re all the same beach and house, except the thing in the middle; that always changes.” I looked through his drawings. One of them had a table and a board on it that looked like a chess board. The second last page had a young girl (probably a teenager) that looked really familiar, and she was wearing a hoodie; but the last one wasn’t any weirder than it was downright creepy.

“That’s me,” I whispered. I mean, if Frankie were to draw a picture of me, that’s what I’d look like. The kid that looked like me was wearing a white shirt with pink shorts.

“I don’t know if it is,” Frankie said. “He looked exactly like you, except he was too old. He was like, eighteen or something — not twelve.”

I looked at the pictures one last time before I handed them back over to Frankie.

“You saw all of these things in dreams?” I was more interested that I ended up in one of Frankie’s dreams.

“Sure did. And none of the people seemed to notice me.”

“Have you ever tried walking around the beach to see if there was anything else?” Frankie took the drawings back from me and began to leaf through them. He didn’t answer me right away, and I could tell he wasn’t thinking of the answer. He was admiring his drawings.

“I did one time,” he said. “But it was mostly just empty beach — the house was the only thing there.”

Frankie finished looking at his art, then returned them to his closet. He came back over and instead of sitting on the floor in front of me, he crawled into bed.

“I’m kinda tired now,” he said.

“You want me to let you sleep?”

“If you want.” I grabbed the chess set and stood up. When I got to the door, I turned and looked at him, only to see that he was passed out cold.

And then I forgot about the drawings.

American Kids is available on Amazon.