

"A PERFECT BOOK." —*The New York Times Book Review*

# The Janitor's Boy

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*Author of the million-copy best-seller FRINDLE*



## Chapter 1

# The Perfect Crime

Jack Rankin had a particularly sensitive nose. As he walked into school in the morning, sometimes he would pause in the entryway and pull in a snoot-load of air from the flow rushing out the door. Instantly he could tell what the cafeteria lunch would be, right down to whether the Jell-O was strawberry or orange. He could tell if the school secretary was wearing perfume, and whether there was an open box of doughnuts on the table in the teachers room on the second floor.

On this particular Monday morning Jack's nose was on high alert. He was working on a special project—a bubble gum project. Today's activity was the result of about a week's worth of research and planning.

Days ago, Jack had begun the project by secretly examining the bottoms of desks and tables all over the school, trying to decide exactly which kind of discarded gum was the most unpleasant.

After he conducted his first few sniff tests, he didn't even have to look underneath a table or a chair to tell if there was gum. The scent of the stuff followed him from class to class. He had gum on the brain. He smelled gum everywhere—on the bus, in the halls, passing a locker, walking into a classroom.

Jack finally chose watermelon Bubblicious. It had to be the smelliest gum in the universe. Even weeks after being stuck under a chair or table, that sickly sweet smell and distinctive crimson color were unmistakable. And Bubblicious, any flavor of it, was definitely the stickiest gum available. By Jack's calculations, it was more than three times stickier than Bazooka.

The final stage of Jack's gum caper began in today's third-period gym class. Mr. Sargent had them outside in the cool October air, running wind sprints to prepare for a timed mile next week. By the end of the period Jack had four pieces of gum in his mouth, chewed to maximum stickiness. The smell of it almost overpowered him.

Carefully steering a wide path around Mr. Sargent, he went to his locker before the next class. He spat the chewed gum into a sandwich bag he had brought from home. The bag had two



or three tablespoons of water in it to keep the gum from sticking to the plastic.

Jack sealed the bag, stuffed it into his pocket, and immediately jammed another two pieces of gum into his mouth and started to chew.

He processed those two pieces plus two more during science, managed to chew up another four pieces during lunch period, and even finished one piece during math—quite an accomplishment in Mrs. Lambert's classroom.

By the time he got to music, he had thirteen chewed pieces of gum in a plastic bag in the pocket of his jeans—all warm and soft and sticky.

Monday-afternoon music class was the ideal crime scene. The room had four levels, stair-stepping down toward the front. The seats were never assigned, and Mr. Pike always made kids fill the class from the front of the room backward. By walking in the door just as the echo of the bell was fading, Jack was guaranteed a seat in the back row. He sat directly behind Jed Ellis, also known as Giant Jed. With no effort at all he was completely hidden from Mr. Pike.

The only other person in the back row was Kerry Loomis, sitting six seats away. She was hiding too, hunched over a notebook, trying to finish some homework. Jack had half a crush on Kerry. On a



# It was the **PERFECT CRIME**

Unfortunately, it also led to the perfect punishment. When Jack Rankin gets busted for defacing a school desk with a huge wad of disgusting, watermelon bubble gum, the principal sentences him to three weeks of after-school gum cleanup for the chief custodian. The problem is, Jack's anger at the chief custodian was the reason for his gum project in the first place. The chief custodian happens to be Jack's dad.

But doing time in the school basement after hours reveals some pretty surprising things: about the school, about Jack's father, and about Jack himself.


★ "A memorable novel." —*Publishers Weekly*, starred review

"This taut mystery gets to the heart of every parent-child relationship." —*Dads Magazine*

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