



CHAPTER 1

BLACK BARON RULES

"Go, Black Baron!" I yelled.

The Baron raced across the concrete. He was almost home. We were almost champions. Again!

Then he stopped. My heart hit my shoes. Bugsy was catching up.

Man, what was wrong with the Baron? He could beat Buggy with his feelers tied behind his back any day.

"Go, Black Baron!" yelled Jimbo.

I leant forward and hissed, "I'll call the exterminator if you don't hurry up." I didn't mean it, of course. I wouldn't hurt Black Baron for anything.

He must have heard me above the noise of the crowd. He waved one black feeler, like a victory salute, then scuttled forward, running way too fast for the out-of-form Buggy. A huge roar went up as the Baron crossed the finishing line, a red chalk line drawn across the bottom of Rick's driveway.

"Way to go, Black Baron," I yelled, punching the air.

**BLACK
BARON
RULZ**
GO BLACK BARON!

Jimbo and I slapped our hands together in a triumphant high five. Mitch thumped me on the back, nearly dislodging my eyeballs. Col grabbed my shoulders and shook me, rattling my teeth. They always did that when Black Baron won a race.

"Jake, that's one champion cockroach," Mitch said.

Rick wagged a finger at me. "Bugsy will take him next time," he promised.

Yeah, right! Who was he trying to kid? Black Baron and Bugsy had raced six times and the record was six to zip the Baron's way. "Yeah," I sneered. "Him and what army?"

I scooped up Black Baron and slipped him into my jacket pocket. He liked it in there. It was dark and warm.

"I gotta go," I said. It was almost dinnertime – for me, anyway. The others had already eaten and were free for the night. My family ate late. We had to wait for Dad to close the deli at 7 pm.

Jimbo gave me his "bummer" look – raised eyebrows and a scrunched-up nose.

I shrugged then headed off, smiling to myself.

Black Baron had won another race, making his record seventeen in a row. He was unbeatable! And it was the end of the school term. No more school for two whole weeks. Heaven!

On the way home I stroked my jacket pocket and gave Black Baron my manager's speech. "Great race, mate. You're in fantastic form. No one can beat you. You're the champ."

An old lady walked past and eyeballed me, like I was some sort of weirdo who talked to himself. I responded with a big, toothy grin. She clutched her handbag and darted along the footpath, like she'd suddenly remembered that she was late for Bingo.

When I got home, I headed straight to my bedroom. I reached under my bed and dragged out an old shoebox. But it wasn't just any old shoebox. It was a mansion fit for a racing legend.

I removed the lid then coaxed the Baron from my pocket. He sat on my finger and looked around. Seeing his Home Sweet Home, he jumped in and settled down for a well-earned rest. As usual, I gave

him his favourite treat: a few potato crisps. I ate the rest of the packet.

Black Baron was my second racing cockroach. Pharlap had been my first. He'd shown a lot of promise but he didn't have the guts and dedication of the Baron.

But I'll never know what could have been with Pharlap – he'd met an untimely end. We'd been dog-sitting the pooch next door. Fluffy. What a name! She should have been called Killer or Fang or Jaws the way she disposed of Pharlap with one snap of that steel-trap mouth.

What sort of manager lets his star become dog food ... then dog poop? I still cringe at the memory.

And I couldn't utter a word about the killing to my parents or Mrs Saddler, Fluffy/Killer's owner. I never let on about the racing or what was in the shoebox under my bed. My parents would freak. They own a deli, and Dad's always going on about hygiene, germs and stuff. Bugs, especially cockroaches, drive him nuts. He chases them, stomps on them, flattens

them with newspapers and sprays them with deadly poisons.

Mum doesn't like crawling critters either. She doesn't scream or yell, like some mothers. She quietly hunts them down and, being the fastest hand in the west with the insect spray, finishes them off without breaking a sweat.

I shudder when I think of them finding Black Baron.

And it isn't just bugs that turn my parents psycho. Mum is a cleaning machine. Seriously! It's her job. She used to work in the deli with Dad, but when business slowed down, she got a job as a cleaner at the local hospital.

She's always on at me about my bedroom. It's the only place in the house with a bit of clutter and mess. It's an oasis in a desert. But she wants to turn my room into an operating theatre at the hospital, all sterile-like.

Last month, I walked into my bedroom and saw Mum's bum sticking out from under my bed. Then I heard a sound that sent a chill through my body.

Mum was humming. She always hums when she's on a cleaning mission. That day she was bashing out the theme from the movie *Mission: Impossible*.

I dashed over to see what she was doing and nearly choked on my tongue when I saw her trying to reach the old shoebox.

"What ... what are you doing?" I gasped.

Her reply was muffled. "Cleaning your mess."

"But you can't," I said.

Mum dragged herself out from under my bed.

I let out a long, deep breath. The shoebox was safe, at least for the moment.

Mum had dirt on her nose, cobwebs hanging from her hair and dust balls on her chest. She rubbed her forehead, adding a fresh smear of dirt. "If you cleaned your bedroom, I wouldn't have to."

I don't understand why anyone has to clean my bedroom. I like mess. And I'm sure that mess likes me the way it seems to gravitate towards me.

But I knew better than to argue with Mum when she was in one of her moods. I tried to look sorry even

though I felt more like a fish that had been smacked in the head with a baseball bat. "You're right. You shouldn't have to clean my bedroom. I'll do it, I promise, every week."

I had to make that promise. I had to keep her away from Black Baron.

Maybe I gave in too easily because Mum's eyebrows drew together and she gave me this squinty-eyed look, like she had a pain in her head. More like a pain in the neck! Me!

"If you don't clean your bedroom," she said very slowly, as if I didn't understand English, "I'll come in and start chucking stuff out. I don't care what it is. Out it goes. And don't bother asking for a new one."

I nodded, even though I thought she was being ridiculous. Mums don't throw away good stuff, not when it costs *good* money.

So I cleaned my bedroom every week. Okay, I wasn't going to win any awards for being Cleaner of the Year. At least I did it – for a while.



But you know how it is? You're good for a short time, while the threat is fresh in your mind, but then it wears off and you lose interest.

Maybe it was my enthusiasm for the holidays. Maybe it was my sense of freedom. Or maybe it was because I didn't believe she was serious, so I didn't think I had anything to worry about. In any case, cleaning was the furthest thing from my mind when I

headed to Jimbo's house on the first Saturday of the school break.

I should have taken Black Baron with me. I would have taken him with me if I'd known he was in danger.

If only I'd kept my promise.