

GORDON KORMAN

SLEEPLESS



SCHOLASTIC PRESS
NEW YORK

Copyright © 2026 by Gordon Korman

All rights reserved. Published by Scholastic Press, an imprint of Scholastic Inc., *Publishers since 1920*. SCHOLASTIC, SCHOLASTIC PRESS, and associated logos are trademarks and/or registered trademarks of Scholastic Inc.

The publisher does not have any control over and does not assume any responsibility for author or third-party websites or their content.

No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, or used to train any artificial intelligence technologies, without written permission of the publisher. For information regarding permission, write to Scholastic Inc., Attention: Permissions Department, 557 Broadway, New York, NY 10012.

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, business establishments, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data available

ISBN 978-1-5461-2611-9

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1 26 27 28 29 30

Printed in India 197
First edition, July 2026

Book design by Elizabeth B. Parisi
Images © shutterstock.com

CHAPTER ONE

MICKY PRIMA

The cold mist machine sends a moist cloud up into my nostrils. It smells like Bigfoot's armpit but it's actually called Midnight Breeze. It's supposed to relax you and help you sleep.

"Good night!" my mother calls from downstairs.

Fat chance.

The humidifier is for my allergies. *Allergic rhinitis*, Dr. Malachi calls it. It's a medical way of saying sniffles and a never-ending trickle of gunk down the back of my throat—nothing serious, just enough to choke on.

Over the hiss of the machine, I hear the front door close. That's Mom, leaving for her night shift at Mercy Hospital. Dad's already at his second job, working the overnight hours at our local newspaper, *The Shagbark Telegraph*.

There's a scratching at my bedroom door, and I open it to admit Baldie. She's an American hairless terrier. Google it. It's a real thing. She's pretty funny-looking, with all that gray-brown skin where a coat should be. But she's the only breed I'm allowed to have because of my allergies. Hairless terriers are the most hypoallergenic dogs in the world, because there's no fur

to be allergic to. Personally, I think Baldie is kind of impressive with those stand-up pointy ears and sharp, intelligent eyes.

Baldie spends her nights in my room, because with Mom and Dad away so much at work, I'm where the action is. Plus I have snacks and she's in favor of that. I pour her out some potato chips, and while she's munching, I play video games.

She watches me for a while. Sometimes I wonder if she thinks *Mario Kart* is a really exciting TV show that's always on in my room. Then she trots over to her doggie bed in the corner, executes half a dozen turns to settle herself, and snuggles down for the night.

After about two minutes, she opens one eye to look over at me, as if to say: *Are you coming or what?*

"Don't let me stop you," I call over my shoulder. "Sweet dreams!"

That doesn't sit well with Baldie. I get a little yip of complaint.

"I'm in the middle of a game," I protest.

Baldie emits a guttural sound like an old man muttering under his breath.

In the past few weeks, I've gotten really good at *Mario Kart*. Practice makes perfect, as Dad says, and I've put in a lot of practice.

There I sit, thumbs just a blur on the controller, wiping up the competition. There's only one problem: The voices I hear coming over my headset are high-pitched and they all have accents. It may be bedtime here, but in Australia, the elementary school kids are just getting home to their consoles. Here I

am, celebrating my dominance as a gamer, but in reality, I'm probably beating a bunch of eight-year-olds.

Baldie snorts in exasperation—a very horselike sound to be coming out of a little dog.

I shut off the game. “All right, I hear you, you big bully.”

I turn out the light, throw open my comforter, and crawl into bed. Within fifteen seconds, I'm getting dog snores over the hiss of the humidifier. Those are the only sounds in the whole house. Perfect conditions for a good night's sleep.

That's where it gets complicated.

Time passes—ten minutes? An hour? A month?

I have to admit it: I have not slept in a month.

I don't mean I have trouble falling asleep. I don't mean I toss and turn in bed—although I do that too. We've all experienced that thing where you lie awake, losing your mind, for what seems like hours and suddenly it's morning so you must have slept at some point, right?

That used to be me . . . but it isn't me anymore. I have no idea why this change kicked in. When it's happening to you, you don't really believe it at first—not until it's been going on so long that you've run out of lies and excuses to tell yourself.

I don't sleep at all. Not a night. Not an hour. Not a minute. I don't half sleep; I don't catnap; I don't even doze off. I'm awake, period. That's a twenty-four-hour condition.

I reach over to my nightstand and take a sip of warm milk—yuck. There's always warm milk when you've got sleep troubles. I turn on my white-noise machine, which produces the sound of

waves washing up onshore. No, that's no good. Water noises make me have to go to the bathroom. I switch to soothing harp music. Baldie loves it. Her little tail is wagging while she sleeps.

I remain unsoothed.

I flip over onto my face, but then I'm suffocating. With my allergies, it's tough to find a good angle for breathing. Dr. Malachi says I have to keep my airways clear.

More time passes. How much? It all blends together when you're sleepless.

I get out of bed and pace up and down in my room. The floorboards squeak, but there's nobody to hear it. Mom and Dad are at their night shifts and you can't disturb Baldie with an artillery cannon once she nods off.

My parents didn't always work so hard, but last year, they lost almost all our savings in a real estate deal gone bad. It's been pretty stressful for our family.

Stress—that's supposed to be one of the main causes of insomnia, which is what I have. Or maybe I don't. People with insomnia have trouble falling asleep and staying asleep, but sooner or later they do it. For me, it's more like sleep is something I used to do but don't anymore. It's annoying and it's boring and it's very, very frustrating. But as time goes by, it becomes something else too: scary.

This is just not normal. What is happening to me?

I crawl back into bed and try counting sheep. That has to be the most idiotic sleep aid of them all. First of all, it's just counting because—let's face it—there aren't any sheep. And if

there were, you'd have bigger problems than being sleepless. Shoveling comes to mind.

I guess the idea is you bore yourself to sleep. Believe me, I've tried. I've counted thousands of sheep. That's a lot of boring. It doesn't get me so much as a yawn.

I switch off the harp music and turn on the light. It doesn't disturb Baldie, who is still snoring.

"You don't have to rub it in," I mutter resentfully.

Doesn't it figure? The owner of the number-one slumber dog of Snooze Land turns out to be the sleepless guy.

At my computer, I perform the same Google searches I've been running night after night. The links pile up: *Ten Keys to Better Sleep*; *Insomnia and You*; *Relaxation and Rest*; *Thirty Tips for Thirty Winks*; *Catching Z's—a User's Guide*; *Get Your Beauty Sleep*; *Sleep Like a Baby, Baby!* . . .

These websites tell you how to sleep longer or better, but there's nothing for someone like me, who's just stopped. It's almost like I outgrew sleeping. Except nobody outgrows sleeping. Mom and Dad sleep. My grandma in Florida sleeps so much that she eats dinner at four thirty so she can be in bed by six. My dog could bring home the gold in the sleep Olympics! Characters in books, in movies and TV shows—they go to bed; they wake up. It's a natural thing! Am I the only one who doesn't?

The internet is also full of pills and elixirs you can take to help you sleep, but I wouldn't touch them. I get allergy shots every other month from Dr. Malachi, so I'm scared any new medicine might interfere with that. Besides, that stuff is

expensive and money is the one thing there's never enough of in our house.

Next, I write in my sleep journal. Yes, I keep a sleep journal—which is like a boa constrictor buying tap-dancing shoes. That's the advice Mom got from the sleep expert at her hospital. I'm supposed to keep a complete record of everything to do with me and sleeping: When I sleep. How long I sleep. Do I dream? What wakes me up? Is my room dark enough? That kind of thing.

A couple of months ago, I had stuff to write because I was dozing a little here and there. But as the problem got worse, I was left with nothing to say. I couldn't list my wake-ups because there was no sleep to wake up from.

So I started faking it. My mother expects a story, so I give her one: *Sleep three hours, bathroom, warm milk, back down till Jake Whitman disturbs whole neighborhood with motorcycle, relax into really good dream about hummingbirds.* Okay, maybe not hummingbirds. Race cars. That sounds more believable.

Believable but 100 percent baloney.

I put away the journal and take stock of myself. It's 3:45 a.m. Mom and Dad won't be home for over an hour. That's another part of the sleepless lifestyle. According to Google, the average kid sleeps eight to ten hours per night. That's so much time to fill! Oh, sure, it sounds great. You can do whatever you want—even play video games all night.

Well, I've tried it and you can't. Not eight to ten hours. I doubt even the world's biggest video-game-addicted couch potato can do that, or wants to. You can't talk to friends, or FaceTime, or

text, because everybody's asleep—everybody but you. And in my case, I can't even wake up my parents and ask them what I should do, since they're not home.

I'm stuck. Period.

I look at myself in the mirror. My face reflects exactly the despair I'm feeling inside. I get that there are people with worse problems than mine. I'm not being handcuffed to a beehive with honey poured over my head. And sleeplessness isn't a horrible disease—or at least I hope it isn't. But when just passing the time through a normal night stretches you to the limit, it's pretty miserable. And the worst part is, tomorrow you're going to have to do the whole thing over again.

The frown on my face belongs on a comic book character—an inverted U. And it doesn't help to have stick-out ears—like an Uber with both doors left wide open. No wonder Carlo Myles calls me Mouse . . . although being named Mickey certainly has something to do with it too. And look at the rest of me. Skinny as a broom handle. Yeah, I'm only twelve, but so is Carlo, and he's built like an M1 tank. He's starting linebacker on the Shagbark Middle School football team, even though he's only a seventh grader.

Carlo can do no wrong at our school, even though the only thing he's good at is knocking other people down. He probably builds a lot of muscle lifting all that food to his big mouth. He trains—and he doesn't even have whole nights to kill.

It makes me stop and think. I have more free hours than Carlo. I have more free hours than anybody. If I spend some of

them exercising, can I get to be as strong as him? Probably not, but it can't hurt to try.

All it takes is time—and I've got plenty of that.

Baldie is awake on her dog bed, peering quizzically up at me. That's the problem with having a smart dog. You always feel like you're being evaluated and somehow you just don't measure up.

"I know it's a dumb idea," I snap. "Have you got a better one?"

I trade my pajamas for shorts and a T-shirt, kick into sneakers, and head downstairs. Baldie follows me, but she keeps glancing in the direction of the steps, my room, and her abandoned dog bed.

"Nobody's forcing you to come along," I tell her. "You can go back up there and sack out." I try to keep the jealousy out of my voice.

As if to make a point, she yawns in my face.

It feels weird to step outside at four o'clock in the morning. The neighborhood is dark and deserted. There are no cars, no people. Just the standard moths and mosquitoes. To them, I must look like an all-you-can-eat buffet.

Baldie shoots me a "Woof?" What is this change in routine? Night and dark mean sleep, not wandering the neighborhood.

I start jogging along the street. It takes about ten steps for me to remember why I don't do this. I hate it. It's like gym class minus the guy with the clipboard and the whistle. Baldie trots gamely along beside me. She's not quite sold on this night

mission. But running around feels a lot like playing, and she's always up for that.

I'm out of breath before the end of the first block. I stop in my tracks, bent double, sucking air. Baldie doesn't have this problem and disappears into the gloom. I try to call her back, but I have no wind. After a few minutes, she shows up on her own. And . . . is that an impatient expression on her pointy face?

"What?" I pant aloud. "No ambulance?"

I almost give up, but one thing turns me around. According to my phone, I've been running for a grand total of forty-five seconds. Me—the guy with multiple hours to fill every night—can't even manage a full minute.

I start again, slower this time, but steady. The fatigue comes back, but now I'm expecting it.

Keep running, I exhort myself.

Baldie adjusts her pace to match mine. That dog might really be smarter than me. Which is kind of humiliating when you think about it.

I fight through the pain. It's not that I don't want to stop. I don't let myself.

No matter what, just keeping putting one foot in front of the other.

Before long, sweat is streaming down my face, stinging my eyes. My breath is on fire. But my feet keep moving. It isn't athleticism, because for sure I don't have any of that. It's pure stubbornness that keeps me going—that and the fact that I refuse to lose to a twenty-pound dog.

I don't let up until my timer hits twenty minutes. Only then do I allow myself to slow to a walk and start for home. Baldie is keeping her distance because droplets of sweat are showering off me. I'm as wet as if somebody had dunked me in the river.

My feet hurt too—I wonder if I'm outgrowing these sneakers. My entire body aches, but I'm kind of pleased with myself. I set a goal and I followed it, even if it was painful.

Baldie has her second wind and doesn't want to go back inside the house. She's had a taste of leash-free night activity and she wants more. She picks up her Frisbee from the lawn and pokes me in the shin with it.

"No," I tell her firmly. "I'm too tired."

But as I let myself back into the house, I realize I'm not tired—not even a little bit. Exhausted—yes. Wiped out—absolutely. But sleep-wise, I'm wide awake. No drowsiness, no heavy eyes, no headache. I check my phone. It's almost five in the morning. So it's not just that I *can't* sleep; I don't *need* to sleep.

I jump in the shower, get back in pajamas, and crawl into bed. Not for sleeping, obviously. I hear Dad's key in the lock. He usually gets home from his night shift around now, and he always peeks through my door to make sure all's well with me.

So I fake it and my father sees what he expects to see—a sleeping kid. Baldie, the traitor, is bouncing off the walls by now, hoping for a new playmate since I'm out of commission.

“Shhh!” Dad admonishes. “Don’t wake Mickey. He needs his sleep.”

I almost choke on that one, but I disguise it with a fake snore.

Eventually, it’s time to “wake up” and get ready for school. I eat two giant bowls of cereal for breakfast. Running gives a guy an appetite.

Mom raises both eyebrows. “Nobody likes cornflakes that much!”

I grin sheepishly. “Maybe I’m going through a growth spurt.”

I spend so much time stuffing my face that I almost miss the bus. I have to run to catch it, nearly tripping over Baldie, who is sacked out by the front door. She opens one eye and casts me a baleful look, as if to ask, *Just what is the difference between bedtime and playtime in this house?*

God bless America, I wish I knew.

I sprint up the block and sneak in through the doors of the bus as they’re folding shut. I scramble up the steps just in time to meet the spitball that bounces off the center of my forehead.

“Hey, Mouse!”

Carlo—he’s as accurate with his projectiles as he is with his bone-crushing tackles. Plus his spitballs are always extra juicy. Ugh.

I experience a brief, wild impulse to get right in Carlo’s face and make him pay for treating me like a punching bag. I’ve never done anything like that before. Maybe I’m thinking of

my run last night. If I can make myself do that, who knows what else I might be capable of?

The feeling passes and I take the first open seat. Good thing too. Carlo probably would have killed me.

He's right. I'm a mouse.