



Chapter One

My name is James Gong and this is the story of how I became famous. Not that I *wanted* to be famous! Dad says I'm just the kind of kid who sets out for the North Pole and somehow ends up at the South Pole.

My friend Ethan says that's because I'm stubborn, and when everyone else stops, I keep going. Jay says it's because I'm too self-obsessed to notice I'm passing the North Pole. Jay pretty much lives at our house some days. (Ever since Jay's mum died, my mum has kind of taken over the job of looking after Jay.)

My sister says there probably isn't any North

Pole by the time I get there, on account of global warming.

But enough about them. Let's talk about me.

You've probably heard of me. Most people have.

My story was in the papers, and on TV even. If you saw that photo of me then you also know I'm bald-ish. Or was. My hair *is* growing back now.

But yes, I'm *that* kid. The Most Famous Kid in High School kid. Cover of *Who Magazine* kid. Kid voted most likely to have a Gigantic Impact on the World! That's who I am.

Jay says the asteroid that wiped out the dinosaurs had a Gigantic Impact on the World. I guess that's a lot to live up to.

I'm fourteen years old. Dad says I'm short for my age but I make up for it by being slow. Dad likes to kid around. Ha ha *ha*.

On a more serious note, it's Saturday, and I've got taekwondo training.

I've been doing taekwondo for four years now. (Some people, like my mum, call it Korean karate.) I'm on my *cho dan bo*, which is a red belt with a black stripe – that's the one before black. Training's hard, but the chief instructor, or *qwang jung* in Korean, just says to train harder. There are a couple of things I'd

like to tell him, but don't because as Dad says, I was 'brought up, not dragged up' (and Mr Choi would go ballistic if I answered back. He's very much a 'be seen and not heard' type of guy. Dad says, 'He's a product of his generation'. Which means, an old bloke stuck in his ways and no one will ever shift him.

'I *am* training harder, Mr Choi,' I whine. 'If I spend any more time here Mum will put out a missing person's alert.'

His eyes twitch. 'Your *dobok*, very dirty. Don't you have a washing machine?'

We have a washing machine – Amber tried cramming me in there when she couldn't get the microwave door shut. But dirty clothes don't just *magically* stick themselves in the machine, *duh*. (I know I'm 100 per cent right on this one, because Mum says it all the time.)

Long story short, I *forgot*. So clap me in irons! Throw away the key! Restrict me to less than 30 hours of video-gaming per week! Think I can't handle that?! Ha!

After sitting in the dirty clothesbasket for a week – with no Harry or Hermione to *wingardium leviosa* it to the washing machine – my uniform does

pong a bit (for all the brain-starved victims of our current education system, that's *Pong* with a P that is, P-O-N-G, not to be confused with Gong with a G). I should've sprayed them with deodorant.

According to Ethan, the only thing that smells worse than sweaty taekwondo gear left in a bag for a week is skunk spray, which skunks shoot out of their bum. It's true. Ethan went on holiday to America last summer and one day he thought he'd pat the cute little kitty-cat he found in the woods. And although it's usually Ethan who loses things, after this his parents tried to lose *him*. Luckily, he found them. Chartering an entire airplane just to fly home was a bit much though.

'I'll wash it first thing,' I promise Mr Choi. 'And iron it,' I add quickly. I gag silently as I pull my taekwondo top on. What a pong-with-a-P!

Mr Choi isn't very, um, pleased. See, I'd forgotten a camera crew was coming to film a segment of *My Life* at the hall tonight. Mr Choi reminded everyone last week to make sure their *dobok* had the club badges on, and that all members turn up neat and tidy.

My heart plummets when I see the cameras and lights. Mr Choi is going to barbecue me (slowly)

just like his favourite Korean dish (pork belly). My shoulders slump. Ethan and Jay wave to me from across the room as I join the front line of the class.

‘Shoulders back,’ Mr Choi snaps, glaring at me. ‘Make firm stance. Good. Let nothing move you from your stance. Not even your very bad smell.’

Everyone giggles. Several guys look at me and pinch their noses. Bunch of comedians.

I do as Mr Choi instructs and pull my left fist into my hip and place my left foot back. I try to look cool with all the cameras pointing my way. Mr Choi’s got the focus pads, holding them at different heights and distances as he calls out front kicks, side kicks and roundhouse kicks in Korean: ‘*Ap chagi. Yeop chagi. Dollyo chagi.*’ Arms and legs shoot out like pistons, connecting with the pads, *ka-thump-ka-thump-ka-thump!* He shifts the pads around faster and faster. The kicks and punches become blurs.

By the time he’s finished calling out every bit of Korean any of us know, he says ‘*Shiole!*’ and we all fall back into rest mode. Knowing Korean terminology is a major part of reaching black belt.

‘Breathe in, breathe out,’ Mr Choi says to a roomful of huffers and puffers. ‘Breathe from here,’ he says, patting his stomach.

Mr Choi is really putting us through our paces.

The camera crew tracks our moves, swooping in and out for close-ups. They've even got a tiny camera drone to get aerial shots. This is what it must feel like to be a movie star: people gawking at you because you're way cooler than they are. I wave at the camera so they know that I'm just an ordinary everyday kid, like them, but Mr Choi comes over flapping his arms at me like he's trying to do the chicken dance.

We line up in ranks. I'm back in front next to the black belts, wincing on account of the laser-bolts still shooting from Mr Choi's eyes. Skunk spray from the bum would be better. Mind you, he's probably under a lot of stress. When my dad is stressed he plays the bagpipes. In the back yard. In his boxer shorts.

I asked him once why he did that. He looked me in the eye and said, 'James, that's a million dollar question.'

And went right back to murdering cats – which is what bagpipes sound like. The dogs in the Dog Hospital seem to like it, though. Mum told him once that his music was very haunting, especially the way he butchered it. I don't think he found that funny.

Mr Choi glares at me as he takes a deep breath. It's so deep he pretty much sucks all the oxygen out of the room, which could be why I feel dizzy. Then we're doing our *poomse*, our forms. We work our way up from the white belt ranks through to black, and when we finish our form for the next grading we drop out so that only the black belts are going through their *dan* grades.

To finish off we get into some sparring. This is the fun stuff, although some of the white belts get a bit gung ho and clobber you, because they're always trying to prove themselves. It's okay for them to injure us higher ranks, but it's a disgrace for us to hurt one of them. But that's not fair. How are they going to learn, if not from our mistakes?

I get stuck with Brian Tossa. Really big guy. Two years older than me. His name is spot on – Jay says that in England a 'tosser' is the sort of kid who wears his underwear backwards (ouch!). Last week, Tossa gave green-belt Ethan a nosebleed. 'Left, right, left, left, right,' smack! A straight jab to *Ethan's* face instead of the focus pad.

'You hold focus pads too close to face,' Mr Choi admonished Ethan. Like it was Ethan's fault! That's why I'm a bit wary of Tossa. Earlier this year a

newbie cracked one of my ribs and Mr Choi said my reflexes were too slow.

Tossa makes the first move. He barrels into me and I fend him off with a defensive front kick. In the blink of an eye, he's crashed a fist into my flying foot.

He waves me forward taunting me as the pain travels up to my brain and sparks fly. The camera crew catches my gasp and rushes in for a close-up shot. Great. I'll be on television yowling like a baby as a white belt goads me not to run, *me*, a red belt *cho dan bo!* I can feel my face changing colour to match my belt.

Tossa smirks at me. He's on camera. He's going to add my stubbly scalp to his long list of victories over higher belts. He's better than a red belt. Tomorrow he'll be boasting how he beat me up on National TV. He'll pass out invitations to watch it round his place with pizza with extra pepperoni and olives on top. Truth of the matter is, he shouldn't have actually touched me – sparring is strictly non-contact. He raises one of his bushy black eyebrows Zoolander-style.

A stack of stuff can happen in three seconds. Career changing stuff, my father calls it. My fists

shut like nutcrackers. ‘You’re cancelled, Tossa!’ I say, but not loud enough for anyone to hear.

Before I know it I’m up in the air, turning for a jumping spinning side kick. Tossa thinks he’s in for an easy win but my foot is like a spring-loaded piston.

THWACK! Right into Tossa’s chest.

Curtain fall, Tossa. Bet that put your underpants the right way round!

I have to admit, though, Tossa does great cinema. You know those dying scenes in movies that take, like, ten minutes? It was like that. First he staggered this way. Then he staggered that way. Then he nearly went down, but didn’t. Then at last – I was about to start selling drinks and popcorn – he dropped. *BAM!* Hit the floor like a bag full of soggy taekwondo gear.

Probably shouldn’t have kicked him *that* hard. For a moment, I’m like a deer caught in headlights. What have I *done*? I go to swat a buzzing bee overhead but it’s the camera crew’s drone camera.

The whole class goes dead silent. Mr Choi turns his head in slow motion and he squints at me with slitted eyes. As the cameras zoom in and the drone camera hovers like a helicopter over the triumphant King Kong, his face hardens, which chills me all the

way down to my toes (and makes me feel like *I've* got my underpants on backwards). I've disgraced Mr Choi's club, the entire international sport of taekwondo, and the last thousand years of Korean history.

Mr Choi kneels down beside Tossa, taps a pressure point and suddenly Tossa sits up, a dazed look on his face. Which is good. Means he's back to normal.

Then he remembers the cameras. He makes his eyes flutter and groans a few times. Spare me the melodrama, puh-lease. What a ham! Meanwhile, Ethan gives me a thumbs-up. He's still got a yellow bruised eye socket from last week.

Mr Choi helps Tossa to his feet and the class makes way for them. No one feels sorry for him. Bullies never last long at martial arts clubs – someone like me always loses their cool and clobbers them. Wish it hadn't been me, though. I like to stay in the background, out of the spotlight.

But at least the world will see how James Gong deals with bullies. *Zap-Pow-Whammo* and bye-bye Tossa. I *should* be feeling guilty, but my heart's clearly not in the right place. I make sure to pull

a long face, though, and one of the producers tells a camerawoman to zoom in for an e.c.u. (*Extreme Close-Up* in movie talk.)

Despite the fact that nobody likes Tossa, everyone claps him as he's helped to the sidelines. It's a martial arts thing.

'I'm really *really* really sorry Mr Choi,' I grovel. I'm not, of course – now that Tossa's not going to be hospitalised. But Dad says society would break down if people didn't tell a few white lies now and then.

'Control is very important,' says Mr Choi, through clenched teeth. He flicks my red belt, mercifully not noticing it's unevenly tied. 'At this rank, you need have more *control*.'

'Yes, Mr Choi.' I give him my best frog impersonation – eyes wide and mouth down-turned, like I'm wallowing in misery. I am wallowing, but not in misery. My heart is belting out a victory song. Ta-dah, ta-dah. Or something like that.

Mr Choi studies me for a moment as though he can hear Elton John's 'I'm Still Standing' beating away in my chest. He then walks off without another word. That's not good. He should probably buy

some bagpipes, otherwise I could be a *cho dan bo* for the rest of my life.

Ethan and Jay hurry over as soon as class is finished. ‘That was awesome,’ says Ethan, quickly checking Mr Choi isn’t looking before giving me a hi-five. ‘Thanks for paying him back.’

‘No worries,’ I say. Ethan’s a great friend to have. When you need a back-up, he’s there. He’s not much use, but he’s there.

Jay’s nose wrinkles. ‘What’s that disgusting smell? Smells like shat nappies . . .’

Right. Mental Note to Self: Wash uniform this month. Don’t want Bruce Whittaker calling me *Skunkbum*.