

UNCONVENTIONAL

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J. J. Hebert



MINDSTIR MEDIA

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For the love of my life

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PART ONE

CHAPTER ONE

“The greatest and most inspiring achievements are not produced by those who conform to society’s idea of normal, but by those who courageously adopt the unconventional.” Mitch’s eyes brighten behind oval-shaped glasses, then he smiles the way he used to when I got a hit or struck someone out when I played on his Varsity team a couple months ago. “Tell me, James,” Mitch continues, “have you adopted the unconventional yet?” Grinning, Mitch takes the first step toward Robert Frost’s house, the white museum, leaving his Cadillac behind on the gravel driveway.

I follow Mitch as a shadow, and two long strides later, I’m walking alongside him. As Mitch repeats the preceding question, I feel like he’s the teacher, I’m the student, and he’s giving a pop quiz. At the rusty metal mailbox affixed atop a tree stump, Mitch stops and faces me, waiting for a reply.

I come to a halt, and instead of keeping my eyes on Mitch, I examine the mailbox to his left. **R. FROST**, painted in black, decorates the box’s side. The flag is down, the lid open a crack. “I *think* I’ve adopted the unconventional,” I say, the words ambivalent, then I turn my gaze to his aged face.

“You *think*?” Mitch’s eyes show hints of disappointment. “James, are you unconventional or not?”

I consider the question. His face blurs as I focus on the house behind him. “Yeah, sure, I’m unconventional.”

His tone is vivacious. “*Well?* Let’s hear some examples for once.”

As though I’m back in school, pondering A, B, C, and D, I choose what I believe is the correct answer: “While most kids in school were worrying about superficialities, I was working on my poetry anthology.”

“Uh-huh,” Mitch says, dissatisfied.

I see Mitch’s face clearly now. “I penned a new poem each week, instead of drinking or partying or—”

“Okay, okay. James Frost wants to be *Robert Frost*.” Mitch puts his hand in a front pocket of his khakis. “That’s all nice and sweet, but I’m looking for something deeper.”

I incline my head. Apparently, I’m failing this quiz. “Deeper? Like what?”

“Writing isn’t necessarily unconventional,” Mitch says. “In fact, most people have written poetry and quite a few have written short stories and novels. So, what is it that’s made writing an unconventional choice for you?”

“I’m not sure.”

“What have you overcome?”

I flash on Brad from Langwood High School. “Ridicule. Pessimism.”

“Care to expound upon that?” Mitch adjusts the collar of his Izod shirt.

Maybe I can pass the quiz after all. “There was this jerk in school named Brad. I can still picture him with his malevolent grin and spiky blond hair and expensive clothing and unkind eyes. He was part of the so-called *cool crowd*. The elite. . . . One day, Brad and his following sat next to me in Study Hall. I had my notebook spread open and I was writing a poem. Brad looked over and saw what I was writing and he started to laugh. Before I could close my notebook, he tore the sheet out and proceeded to read the poem aloud in an effeminate voice. Brad’s friends laughed and he called me a loser and a sissy.”

“*Then* what happened?”

I think of the poem-filled binder on the floor in Mitch's Cadillac. "I didn't let Brad steer me away from writing and—"

"You made the unconventional choice." Mitch smiles. "Very good, James." He hands out an A in his own words.

Mitch spins around, waving me forward, and begins walking toward the barn behind the house. At the barn, he points to the mountains in the distance, and together we admire the view. "Just think," Mitch says, "Robert looked upon these same peaks."

Inside the barn, we watch a slideshow about Robert Frost in Franconia, New Hampshire. One particular slide depicts Robert in a drab suit sitting in a Morris chair (an antique recliner) with a writing board across his lap, fastened to the armrests. The image doesn't leave my mind as we exit the barn and go inside the house.

My heart hammers as we walk to a Morris chair similar to the one in the photograph, and I imagine Robert sitting in it, fountain pen in hand, his face taut and ghostlike. I see him vividly: a wide nose, intense eyes under thick eyebrows, wavy, brown hair, and pouty lips. On the wooden board over his lap sits a sheet of paper, corners curled up. He jots down a few words on the sheet, stops, and holds the pen poised over the paper. Idly tapping a booted foot, he stares into the sheet for a couple of seconds, then he begins writing again. I feel as though I can reach out and touch the legend, speak to him even.

Outside, in the wake of the buildings, we walk a half-mile trail through the woods, birds warbling and squirrels chattering from every corner of the path. Every now and again, we encounter plaques of Robert's poetry posted on trees along the trail. We stop at all of the plaques and read the poems. We take pictures and talk about Robert's poetry. Then, after some silence, Mitch brings up college. I roll my eyes. He says, "Well, do you think you'll ever go?"

I tell Mitch that I can't fathom being confined for another four years, under the thumbs of professors, told where to go, and when, and how to get there—wherever "there" may be. "I can't imagine becoming a collegian clone," I elaborate, picturing scores of college kids, each with a bottle to their lips, pie-eyed, neglecting consequence.

I feel ill, thinking of how contradictory I've been. Last month, I crossed paths with some acquaintances from school. They invited me to a party where we smoked some weed, and I even got laid, which was a terrible sexual experience, to say the least. Weed doesn't exactly enhance a certain piece of the male anatomy. I was like Bob Dole before the little blue pill. Afterward, the images and emotions attached to sex with Molly were almost too much to bear. I vowed to stop acting the part of cloned adolescent and inadequate presidential candidate.

I promptly severed all communication with those people and walked away intact, before I became a drug addict. Before I woke up in jail, before I impregnated someone, caught an STD, or died. I didn't get away unscathed, though. My self-esteem is shattered due to the Molly episode, and I've done something totally unconventional: I've deleted sex from my life. No sex again until marriage. I know, I'm like a walking abstinence brochure. *Don't have sex because . . .*

"Any idea what's next for you?" Mitch asks.

"I think I wanna try my hand at a novel."

"Really?" Mitch sounds both excited and surprised.

I nod. "I've been going to the library lately, and I've fallen in love with the genre of fantasy. When I read that genre, brilliant otherworldly landscapes, elves, gnomes, and giants suddenly surround me, and I'm able to escape the mundane."

Mitch says, "Good. We all need to escape sometimes."

At the end of our hike, we amble to the Cadillac, and I pull out one of my typed poems from the binder.

Mitch slants his head. "What are you doing?"

"You'll see." I wink, then walk to Robert's mailbox, a man on a mission.

Making sure no one is looking other than Mitch, I pop the poem into that venerable gray box, close the lid, lift its flag, and take a step back, coming to grips with the fact that my poem is in the same place where Robert's award-winning poetry once sat. Wherever my unstamped poem ends up, I don't care. My reason for submitting this poem is out of hope that whatever amount of lingering magic re-

mains in the mailbox, it will rub off on my writing and, eventually, on me.

When I return to the car, Mitch pats my shoulder and says, "I'm sure Robert will enjoy your poem." He pauses, then grins. "I know *I* did."

I let out a laugh. "Thanks. I hope so."

The magic of the moment makes me think of fantasy. Ideas swirl in my mind. Thoughts mushroom out of control. If I don't start writing my novel soon, I'm going to burst.

CHAPTER TWO

I've written six drafts of my fantasy adventure novel, *The Forsaken World*. Each draft is about one hundred thousand words, four hundred manuscript pages. I pay an editor, Arthur, every now and again to have a look at my work and polish it. He says I have a bright future as a novelist. I hope he's right.

My life is currently no fairytale. For a living, I mop floors, scrub toilets, and carry out other janitorial chores, having no formal education beyond high school. I still live at home with Dad. I'm twenty-one-years-old, three years removed from school, and I hope to play pretend on paper for a living someday. I guess some people consider that a pipe dream, but they just don't understand.

It's partly because of my decision to adopt Mitch's idea of unconventionality—and because of a plethora of other decisions, for sure—that ultimately I find myself in this car. We've been on the road for nearly nine hours, an eternity. My legs are cramped behind the passenger seat; the air-conditioner is busted, so I'm sweating and the back of my shirt is stuck to the leather seat; and nausea is beginning to form in my stomach, a touch of carsickness. I'm six-foot-two, long and lanky, and I'm a trapped animal. I'm trying to think of a way to get out of this cage. Maybe I'll escape at the next stoplight. I could walk the rest of the way. I'd be able to stretch my giraffe-like legs, take in some fresh air, and get the nausea under control before it takes a turn for the worse.

I'm full of it. I'm not bold enough to throw this door open at a spotlight and jump out. It's not going to happen. I'm not Tom Cruise in one of his action movies; I wouldn't land gracefully on the pavement, hair unruffled. I look over at my best friend, Sam, who's sitting in the seat to my left. His forehead glistens with sweat but he doesn't appear uncomfortable. He has much more foot room than I do because his father, the driver, was considerate enough to bring his seat up a bit when we began our trip in New Hampshire, unlike Sam's mother, the person perched in front of me. Sam is also shorter than me. When we stand side by side, we look like DeVito and Schwarzenegger in that movie. *What's it called? Not the one where Arnold's pregnant. The other one . . .* Sam's height works to his advantage in this case. He's in First Class and I'm in Coach.

Our destination is Pennsylvania but it feels like we're traveling the world. Here I am, a modern day Columbus, save the ship and mythic persona. So far, Sam and I have discussed music, movies, and other superficial topics—and, of course, we've cracked countless jokes. At the moment, he and I are silent in our own worlds. His parents, on the other hand, are talking about politics, mostly regarding their respect for Bush and their unwavering faith in the Republican Party. A couple minutes ago, they discussed religion, their love for Jesus, and their belief based on Biblical prophecy that these are the End Times. Before that, the topic was work. And prior to work, they chatted about Sam's high school years, the whirling blur of events.

A hush finally falls over the car and I look out my window, swallowing hard. I feel like an awful person. Why can't I be completely happy for Sam? My self-centered side experiences no feelings of joy, no unspeakable elation. I think about what Sam has said numerous times: *I don't belong in New Hampshire . . . I need to leave and start over with a clean slate . . .* Here is his big chance. College. Part of me, the selfless side, does rejoice for his dream. Sadly, at the moment, that side pales in comparison to the other.

I close my eyes, trying to keep the queasiness at bay, and imagine him in his new life, the people he will meet, new girls and new

friends. Sam is the last of my friends to leave for college, all the others having set off on journeys of their own.

“So, James, when are we going to take *you* to college?”

His mother’s voice rouses me from my thoughts. I open my eyes and turn away from the window. I speak to her headrest. “College isn’t for me, you know?”

“Yeah, okay, James. Whatever you say,” she says, unconvinced.

Sam’s father looks at me in the rearview mirror. “Weren’t you writing a book? How’s that going?” His tone telegraphs skepticism. I know he doesn’t really care about my novel. As far as he’s concerned, I tinker with words and nothing is going to come of it. He’s probably never seen magic in his life. People like that, the play-it-safers, feel threatened by the unconventional. They share an idea that if magic didn’t happen for them, it can’t happen for anyone else.

He continues to stare at my sallow face. Judging by his knotted brow, I suspect it bothers him that I haven’t answered yet. A portion of me waits for him to say that I’m wasting my time with the idea that I will ever be published.

I focus on his reflection, those tufty eyebrows and his lined forehead, and finally respond, “Yeah, a sample’s sent off to publishers in New York and a bunch of agencies. I’m waiting to hear back. Hopefully I’ll get some good news.” I can’t see his eyes, but I notice him nod.

“What is it about your novel that’ll make people want to read it? It’s fantasy, right?” Sam’s mother joins the conversation, cynical.

I jump into defensive mode but respond devoid of anger. “I think people will read it because it’s fresh. There isn’t anything quite like it.”

Sam watches and listens. It bothers me that even though he’s read excerpts of my novel, and claims he really digs my work, he says nothing to his parents now to assure them that I have talent and I haven’t squandered my time.

Sam’s father shifts his hand on the steering wheel. “But what happens if the book doesn’t do well?” He glances up into the mirror. “*Then* what are you going to do?” His eyebrows lift, then drop back

into place. “I mean, it’s a tough business to get into. Thousands of books are published. Your odds aren’t good that you’ll sell millions of copies.” His eyes settle on the road. “You don’t want to become a starving artist, do you?”

I lower my head and look at the floor. What does he want to hear from me? *Yes, you’re right, Mr. Nuggett. It’s a tough business to get into. I should give up. I should conform to society’s idea of normal by following in your son’s footsteps and going to college. It’s the only way. The conventional way.* I release a barely audible sigh. What I want to say is—*Odds are based on averages, and I’m not average.*

Sam’s mother clears her throat. “I guess you could always fall back on your father’s company,” she says. “I suppose that’s all right as a last resort.” She chuckles; her husband follows suit; Sam remains silent, afraid of defying his parents.

I don’t respond to her familiar sardonic witticism. The thought of working for Dad’s janitorial company for the remainder of my life churns my stomach.

CHAPTER THREE

We arrive at Sam's college and we're greeted in the parking lot by an upperclassman. He shakes my hand. We exchange names. His name is Fred, and he asks if I'm Sam's brother. He wants to know if I'm going to attend college with Sam. I tell Fred that Sam and I aren't brothers and I won't be taking classes here.

Fred puts a hand on his hip. "What college do you go to?" he asks, falsely interested.

I feel my face flush. "I don't go to college," I say. With a piece of luggage in my hand, I lean against the back bumper of the car. This is my least favorite part about meeting people.

"Oh, then you work?" Fred asks, slipping his hand into a front pocket.

I can feel him judging me. "Yeah, I work." Three words. I have no desire to socialize with him. I glance at Sam, who stands to my right with bags in his hands. Behind him, his parents stand proudly, speaking quietly to one another. Then I bring my eyes to Fred again. I know it's wrong to judge a book by its cover or in this case, a person by his appearance, but I judge anyway. Fred is wearing Gucci sunglasses, a sparkling silver necklace, diamond studded earrings, and designer clothing that would take me weeks to pay for. *Surely, I think, there's no way this guy paid for all of these possessions on his own. Daddy and Mommy had to have assisted.* I want to ask Fred if he knows what work is, but out of respect for Sam, feeling that Fred may

be some bigwig on campus, and also because I know I'm hypocritical for judging him as I think he judged me, I bite my tongue. Maybe he does work. Or maybe he leeches off his parents. I can't be sure either way.

"Well, what do you do?" Fred looks on me through dark lenses.

"I'm a brother, a friend, a son . . ." I pause to let it sink in. "And what do I do for work? Is that what you're asking?" I see him nod. "I work for my dad's company," I say, awaiting more prying questions.

"What kinda company is that?" Fred asks.

"The R.O.T.C.," I say. As always, I smile without revealing my decayed, disgraceful teeth. I've never been to a dentist and only recently—roughly three years ago—started to take care of my set. Flossing, brushing twice daily, once in the morning and once before bed, and swishing with mouthwash that sets my cheeks and gums on fire. I've been doing everything in my power to keep from losing these brown Chiclets, but I fear no amount of maintenance can reverse the damage already done. I find it humiliating that I may have to wear dentures before the age of thirty. Or walk around toothless is more likely; I can't afford a visit to the dentist, never mind false teeth.

Fred's forehead creases. He wakes from silence. "R.O.T.C.? Doesn't that have something to do with the Army?"

Smiling, I shift my attention to Sam. I languidly wink at him. Then I throw a stare in Fred's direction. "The Royal Order of Toilet Cleaners. Haven't heard of 'em?" I watch Fred, imagining the confused eyes underneath his dark lenses. "I do janitorial work, to put it bluntly."

Sam lets out a nervous laugh and looks at me with widened eyes. Sam isn't part of my bloodline, but he might as well be my brother. I can tell he wants me to shut up. I'm embarrassing him, so I refrain from any more clever jokes. That's a shame, too, because it's fun toying with Fred, the Gucci man.

Without cracking a smile or saying a word, Fred lifts the sunglasses from his face and sets them on his head. He looks up at me as though I've rolled around in manure. Because of my job as janitor, Fred—a fine representation of society—wants me to be or believes

me to be an uneducated imbecile whose only lot in life is to clean up after the white-collar population of America. I'm assuming things, possibly; assumptions are, I admit, one of my flaws. I want to tell Fred that I'm not an idiot and I'm not a slave and education isn't only about a piece of fancy paper.

"I see," Fred says finally, looking me up and down. I think he means "I see" literally. He can see that I do janitorial work. I'm not wearing anything fancy over my thin frame—ratty jeans, a tee shirt—and I haven't done anything to my mop of ash-blond hair, so I probably fit his image of a janitor. He turns to Sam, dismissing me, and says, "Let's get you moved in." I watch as Fred takes Sam away.

* * *

Sam and his parents are at an assembly on campus for college newcomers. Darkness fell over the campus about ten minutes ago and I'm sitting in silence at the wooden desk in Sam's dorm room, his new home, staring into space. I've known Sam for seven years, give or take. For the first four or so, while we were neighbors, we hung out almost every day. Memories swirl through my mind: Sam and I play wiffle ball and flag football in his backyard with the local kids; he and I build forts outdoors; talk about girls; discuss life, the future; we laugh together; cry together; and grow together.

With a sinking heart, I lean back in the chair. I will miss Sam Nuggett. I stand and scan the room, noticing posters on a far wall that once decorated the walls at his house. The posters look foreign in this environment.

I think of Donovan, my other best friend, and the sickening feeling I discovered when he left for college last year. I didn't go with him to see him off, but I went to his lake house to say "see you later" before he left; I didn't want to say goodbye because, as I've heard, that's something you only say to someone you are never going to see again. I hugged him and didn't want to let go, didn't want him to leave. Of course, he left anyways. But I couldn't blame him, just as I can't fault Sam for leaving. Our paths are different.

I turn away from those posters and sigh. I get tired of being emotional, so I look for a diversion and find Sam's laptop perched on his bed. I grab it up and swipe my forefinger over the touchpad to bring the laptop out of hibernation. I know he won't mind. I sit on the bed, check my e-mail, then sign in on MySpace.com, an online community where I registered last week. I bring up my page on the screen and read over the About Me section, the part I filled out: *Hey. The name's James Frost. I'm from New Hampshire, and I hope to one day get published. I like baseball (played varsity both junior and senior year), football (mostly enjoy watching it), and writing.*

Most people on MySpace give a hint about their occupation and some come right out and mention the job title—and details of their job—on their profile, but no way will I reveal my job to the world. *Hey. The name's James Frost. I'm from New Hampshire, and I hope to one day get published. I work for my dad's janitorial company, and I can be seen scrubbing toilets with an oversized toothbrush.* I chuckle to myself. There are some things about me that strangers don't need to know.

I sign in on AOL Instant Messenger; instant messaging addicts refer to the program as AIM. A message pops onto the screen at once: *Hey James, how ya doin'?* It was sent by Erica, a girl who I dated for a period of about three weeks. Our little fling ended a couple days ago. Even after the alarms went off in my head telling me that we weren't a good match, I still stayed with her until it got to the point where I couldn't trust her anymore. There's an old proverb that I came across: *Where there is no trust, there is no love.* I thought of that line when I broke up with her in Dad's living room. I told her that she had lied to me too many times, and that the trust was gone. After she graced me with a dozen or so consecutive f-yous, she stormed out of the house and sped away. I ate ice cream and threw a solitary party. *Bye-bye, Wicked Witch.*

I focus on the laptop's screen, on the message box that I think of canceling. I don't initially want to respond to her, especially because of the things she said to me before she left Dad's house that day, but I start to think: *Who am I gonna hang out with when I'm home? Dono-*

van's gone. Sam's gone. Everyone's gone. Except . . . I poise my fingers over the keys, then type: *Hey*.

"Hey, man."

Sam's voice rips my attention from the laptop. I look up and see him, DeVito-like, brown hair instead of baldness, standing alone in the doorway.

"Hey." I sit the laptop on the sheets, the screen aimed toward him. "How did it go? Meet anyone cool?"

He comes in and sits next to me. "You wouldn't believe the girls here, man. They're so hot." He smiles. "It'll be a good year." His eyebrows dance.

I can't help but feel a little jealous. Sam has thousands of girls to choose from, and who do I have? Erica. The Wicked Witch. *Yippeee*. "That's good, Sam. Maybe you'll get lucky."

His smile grows. "Maybe."

I fold my hands over my legs. "Pretty good odds, I'd say."

He notices the laptop on the other side of me. His eyes light up, and he raises an eyebrow. "Why are you talking to her, man?"

I shoot him a serious look. Sorrow tugs at my heart. "Once I leave this place, who else do I have? What do you expect of me? Am I supposed to talk to my walls or paint a face on a volleyball and talk to that?"

Sam puts a hand on my shoulder. "You can talk to me. Plus, you have your dad."

"Don't make promises you can't keep," I say.

Sam appears baffled. "What do you mean? We'll still talk."

I cross my arms. "I know how it goes. It happens the same every time someone goes away." I look down at the carpet, dirt and paper scraps strewn over the surface, a janitor's nightmare. "They give me the we'll-stay-in-touch speech, but then their new life kicks in and they don't have time for me anymore. I become last on the priority list, and whatever we had fades." I think of my relatives in Nevada—Mom and Sis, brother-in-law and niece, and I feel an explosion of anger as I flash on how this occurred: the divorce between my mother and father, the segregation in our family, miles between us hindering

our communication, awkward phone calls once or twice every few months.

After a couple seconds of pondering, stiff in his upright position, Sam says, "But that doesn't have to happen to us." His voice discloses his concern. "We're like family, like brothers."

I veil my sadness with a smile. "I know." I hold out arms to hug my brother. "Let's do this now, so we don't have to later."

I hear the *ding* of an incoming message on the laptop as he wraps his arms around me. I ignore that sound. This takes precedence. "I love you, man."

"Love you too." His voice cracks. "See you later."

A sickening feeling swells in my stomach. I hold on tightly, not wanting to let go. Grief crashes down on my heart like thunder, or maybe like a large river wave teeming with flesh-eating piranhas.

* * *

We're on our way home, Sam's parents and I, the radio on a station with talk only, and we drive by New York City. I stare out the window, thinking about the publishers and literary agencies. Their businesses are situated among those countless glimmering lights, the kaleidoscope of colors in the distance.

I imagine I'm a fly on the wall and I see an editor laugh and cry and smile as she reads my novel at her teakwood desk. I'm invisible in an agent's office and he, the literary expert, can't put my novel down; the elegant prose and genius plot magnetize him. Every agent I observe wants to represent my work. They expect a six-figure deal. Predict it'll become a best seller. I see myself at Dad's house, walking straight to my landline phone. The answering machine blinks twelve. I listen to the messages. *The publishers and agencies love me. They really love me.*

I rest my head against the window, my reverie twisting. I see Sam socialize with his new friends. He wears an exuberant smile. Around every corner, he meets a new girl. He's not in New Hamp-

shire anymore. He's starting over with a clean slate. His dream has come true.

I half-smile, feeling simultaneously pleased and miserable; satisfied because Sam got what he wanted and awful because of his departure. My buddy of all those years is no longer just a couple towns away.

I think of my own dream, wonder if it'll come true, if I'll get to start over fresh like Sam. I close my eyes and pray, pleading with the Maker. *Please, I need to get published. Please, I don't want to be alone.*

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Photo © JLeigh

J. J. Hebert is a writer. Surprising, huh? He has written fifty-two novels, including the immensely successful, award-winning *Willard's Heart*. J. J.'s also an archaeologist, and he recently unearthed an ancient religious scroll in Jerusalem that, in time, will prove absolutely nothing about anything important. He presently resides in Yemen, where he enjoys being the richest man in the land.

Of course, the aforementioned isn't true (except for the "J. J. Hebert is a writer" part), but you found it entertaining, right? Perhaps just a little funny?

Honestly: *Unconventional* is J. J. Hebert's debut. Currently, he lives alone in New England, home to some of the greatest sports teams in the world (for now), where he's at work on his next novel.

You can visit J. J. on his Web sites: www.jjhebert.net and www.jjhebertblog.com.